THE YELLOW IMMORTAL

ZHEN AI

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CHAPTER 1

Heating Day

I. Bai Shuang

On the twentieth of October the heat came on, and in Building 11 of the Nanshan No. 6 workers' compound the pipes announced it like a firing squad.

Bai Shuang lay in the gray half-light and listened to her building wake up. It was a sound she had slept inside for thirty-six years and she knew its vocabulary the way a musician knows an instrument. First the risers ticked, fast and nervous, metal stretching itself after eight months of cold. Then came the gurgle in the radiator under the window — her radiator had a bubble stuck in its top bend that no amount of bleeding ever fixed, so every heating day began with a sound like a man swallowing underwater. And then, at 5:40 in the morning, with the sky still black over the gangue hills, somebody three floors down turned their thermostat valve hard, and a cannon-shot of trapped water went off inside the wall above her headboard. BANG. The framed photo of her father rattled against its nail.

Down the length of the building she could hear it travel, floor by floor, unit by unit, one warm pulse knocking along the iron spine of the place. That was the thing people who weren't from here never understood about these blocks, the late-nineties penggai redevelopment towers the government had thrown up when they tore down the shantytowns — eleven thousand households moved at once, whole streets erased, and everyone rehoused into stacks of concrete boxes all plumbed into one heart. The heating wasn't a service here. It was a

circulatory system. Every radiator in every room of every apartment drank from the same boiler across town, and when it knocked, you felt it in your teeth, and so did your neighbors, and so did the old widow two floors up whose name Bai Shuang still didn't know after six years.

One artery. Everyone drinking from it. You could pretend otherwise for eight months of the year. Then the twentieth of October came.

"Shuang! Get up, your eggs are going cold, and I'm not warming them twice."

Her mother's voice came up through the floorboards, which was also part of the building's vocabulary.

In the kitchen, Ma had the radio on low — the provincial station, farm report, frost warnings — and was standing over the pot in her quilted apron, hair pinned up with two aluminum clips, moving with the deliberate economy of a woman who had been cooking breakfast in other people's kitchens since she was nine years old. On the table: millet porridge, pickled cabbage, four boiled eggs, a plate of frozen dumplings from Qingming that Ma refused to throw away because there was nothing wrong with them. There was always more food on Ma's table than there were people to eat it. This had been true even when Father was alive, even when Guo Tao was alive; the table set itself against absence, laid for the dead as much as the living.

"Eat," Ma said. "You've got cheekbones like your second aunt. Like you're starving."

"I'm fine, Ma."

"You're fine. Your father said I'm fine right up until they put the tube in his throat." She ladled porridge without looking up. "Sit."

Bai Shuang sat. Her father's photograph hung on the kitchen wall where he'd hung it himself twenty years ago — the

official portrait taken at the Xinxing mine's thirtieth anniversary, a square-faced man in a hard hat squinting against coal dust and pride, thirty-one years underground in his body by then already, though nobody had a word for what that did yet. Black lung took him slow, in the end. Four winters on oxygen, the machine humming in this same kitchen like another radiator, and then a February morning when it didn't.

Her uncle's photograph was smaller, and older, and hung lower — the way Ma always said, so he doesn't have far to look down at us. Bai Guoshun had gone down the shaft at Xinxing on the night shift of November 21st, 2009, one hundred and eight men out of five hundred and twenty-eight underground who didn't come back up, and the gas had come for him before the fire did, the way water comes before the wave. He was thirty-nine. Doudou had his eyebrows.

"Ma. Did you sleep?"

"Like a corpse," Ma said, which meant no. "There's something up in the men ding, been scratching half the night. Big rats, from the sound."

The men ding — the attic void. These buildings had pitched roofs left over from the Soviet style, and under the tiles ran a long dark crawl-space the length of the block, a tunnel of dust and old birds' nests above every bedroom ceiling on the top floor, and above the second floor only the memory of one. Every kid in Hegang had dared every other kid to go into one. Nobody ever did twice.

"I'll get poison bait tomorrow."

"Poison." Ma snorted and carried the pot to the sink. "You'll poison the bait, the rat eats the bait, dies somewhere in the wall, and then you'll smell that for a month. Your father dealt with things properly." She paused at the sink with her back to Bai Shuang, hands submerged in dishwater, and said, differently, "It wasn't scratching like rats, actually, now

I think of it. Rats go quick. This went… considerate. Like something taking its time. Walking on its toes."

"It's an empty attic full of grain sacks, Ma. Something lives there because we feed it by accident."

"Mm," said Ma, in the tone that meant she would say nothing else but was not done thinking.

Outside, the world was white smoke and iron. Bai Shuang wrapped herself to the eyes — cotton-padded coat over wool over thermal, the scarf up to her nose so each breath came pre-warmed through knit — and stepped out into a morning of −14°C that felt like walking into the sea. The cold here wasn't weather; it was a substance, it had weight and current, and it found you. It found the gap between your glove and sleeve in four seconds. It found the seam of your boots. Old-timers walked bent slightly forward, heads tucked, hands sealed in armpits, hissing air in through their teeth — sisi haha, the whole city making the same small sound of endurance.

At the gate of the compound, two boys from the block were filming something with a phone propped against a bicycle. One held a thermos. As Bai Shuang passed, he flung the boiling water upward in a flat silver arc, and the water shrieked into ice mid-air — a ghost-crystal bloom, there and gone, snow made out of steam. Po shui cheng bing. Throw water, make ice. The boys screamed laughing, played it back, did it again.

"That's it! That's the one! Post it!"

"—tag it Hegang, tag it dongbei winter— "

They didn't look up at her. Everything was content now, she thought, crossing the rutted street toward the bus stop. Even the cold was content. Even being poor enough that your breath froze was content, if you filmed it right.

The bus came wheezing. Through the window, Hegang unspooled the way it did every morning: the shuttered storefronts with hand-written numbers pasted in their glass —

chuzu, for rent, and a phone number, and the number always had a strip of tape over it because it kept changing, cheaper and cheaper — then the new towers standing two-thirds empty with their balconies full of abandoned furniture silhouettes, then the long gray flank of the old mine machinery works with weeds coming up through the loading dock, and on the hoarding around the construction site by the bridge, the municipal slogan in red characters gone pink with sun-bleach:

TRANSFORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT. GREEN HEGANG. A CITY OF THE FUTURE.

Someone had amended it in black marker, months ago: OF WHOSE? The city hadn't gotten around to painting it over. Maybe nobody minded. Maybe it was accurate.

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No. 4 Middle School stood on the slope below the old railway cut, a five-story slab of 1980s concrete with a flagpole and a yard of packed gray ice that generations of children had polished to the hardness of marble. In Bai Shuang's first year teaching here, fifteen years ago, there had been sixty-one students to a classroom, two shifts of children, morning and afternoon, because there weren't enough desks. Now Class 3 of the first year had thirty-eight students, and the school had closed its second entrance to save on heating, and the classrooms that stood empty on the fourth floor were drained and locked and smelled of chalk and stopped-up pipes.

She taught Chinese literature to teenagers who were, almost to a child, leaving. Not rudely, not rebelliously — leaving the way water leaves, the way their parents had left for work in Qingdao and Guangzhou and Tianjin, the way the mines had left. It was simply the plan, the only plan, understood so early it was barely even spoken anymore. Test out. Kao chu qu. Or civil service if the scores fell short, or the army, or a delivery

bike in a warmer city. When she assigned the essay "My Hometown," she got elegies from fourteen-year-olds. They wrote about Hegang the way you write about a grandparent in hospice: tender, factual, pre-mourned. My hometown is very cold and very quiet. In the winter you can hear the trains. My grandfather says the sparrows used to be black.

That line had stopped her for a full minute the first time she read it, three days ago, sitting at her desk in the staff room while the radiators ticked.

Before I was born, the essay went on, matter-of-fact, terrible, all the sparrows in Hegang were black from the coal dust. My grandfather says you couldn't wear a white shirt outside. Now the sparrows are gray again but most of my classmates have moved away. I think I will move away too. This is normal.

This is normal. She'd given it full marks.

Third period, silent reading. Thirty-eight heads bowed over novels, the radiator ticking at the window, the light coming down long and dusty through the east glass — and Bai Shuang, patrolling the aisle with her hands in her cardigan pockets, stopped.

Qu Xiaoyan was not reading.

The girl sat third from the back by the wall, a small, neat, quiet girl in a puffy pink coat she never took off indoors, the daughter of the taxi driver Qu Changfu — Bai Shuang remembered signing his parent-teacher form himself, his handwriting enormous and careful, like a man used to writing on clipboards. Xiaoyan's book was open to page ninety-something. Her eyes were open too. But her head was turned — not tilted, turned — toward the wall, toward the radiator pipe where it entered the plaster behind the last row, and she was looking at it the way you look at a person.

She was not blinking.

Bai Shuang counted without meaning to. Five seconds. Seven. Ten. The class rustled around them, pages turning, someone whispering, the radiator ticking its dry tick — and Xiaoyan's eyes stayed fixed on the base of the pipe, wide, wet-bright, unblinking, and her face held an expression Bai Shuang couldn't parse at first and then could, and wished she couldn't: it was attention. Absolute, animal attention, the look of a dog hearing a whistle nobody else hears. Her lips were parted. Between them, very softly, under the radiator's tick, she was making a sound. A little rolling trill, back in the throat, rising and falling. Almost like a pigeon. Almost like —

"Xiaoyan."

Nothing.

"Qu Xiaoyan."

The girl surfaced. It happened all at once — blink, swallow, shoulders dropping from wherever they'd been, the trill cutting off mid-note — and she looked up at Bai Shuang with the mild, faintly apologetic face of any kid yanked out of a daydream, and said, "Sorry, laoshi," and turned back to her book, and was, apparently, entirely fine.

"What was that?" Bai Shuang asked gently. "What were you looking at?"

Xiaoyan considered the question honestly, which somehow made it worse. "The noise," she said. "Inside the wall. It stopped."

"Radiator," said Chen Bin from the next desk, without looking up, with the sublime confidence of a thirteen-year-old boy. "Water hammer. My dad says the whole system needs replacing but the city's broke, so." He shrugged. So. The shrug of a generation that had learned early to live on top of decay, to treat the failing infrastructure of a bankrupt city the way farmers treat weather.

"Feet off the floor bars, Chen Bin."

At lunch in the staff room the young math teacher, Gao Wei, was holding forth with his mouth full. "—it's on Douyin, laoshi, I'm telling you, there's a whole challenge. Kids copying videos of dogs. There was one in Jiamusi crawled under a restaurant table on all fours for likes. Two million views." He said two million views the way an older generation said two million dollars. "It's the short videos. Twenty seconds at a time, their whole attention is trained on twenty seconds. My cousin teaches primary in Harbin, she says half her kids can't finish a paragraph— "

"So Xiaoyan's got brain rot," said old Han from the office, not unkindly. Han had taught chemistry for thirty-four years and had a diagnosis for everything, all of them environmental. "Or she's tired. Half these kids are up till two scrolling because nobody tells them to stop. Both parents working or both parents gone." He slurped his tea. "In my day we stared at walls too. We just called it boredom. There was a word for it — wu ji liu shou. Restless as the beasts on the roof ridge. Look it up, it's on the eaves of every temple in the Northeast. Five little animals sitting on a roof, going crazy with nothing to do." He laughed at his own scholarship, pleased. "Now it's phones instead of roofs. Same beasts."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Outside the staff-room window the yard glittered, hard and bright, and beyond the wall the railway cut ran straight to the horizon between its banks of cinders, and past it, small with distance, the headframe of the old Xinxing pit stood against the sky like a gallows that had outlived its courthouse.

"They should tear that thing down," Gao Wei said, following nobody's gaze in particular. "Instead of whatever they're doing with it."

"What are they doing with it?"

"You haven't heard? Dabao Liu's doing some kind of art thing out there next month. Lights and music inside the fence, projection on the headframe. He got some Beijing people to fund it. 'Industrial heritage,'" Gao Wei said, putting it in quotation marks with his voice. "He was in here before the holiday trying to get the school to bring students. Field trip. For content."

Old Han put his teacup down slowly, and his face, which lived mostly in a state of benevolent irony, was for once neither. "Over the bones?" he said. "He wants to put lights over the bones?"

"He says it's honoring—"

"In my classroom," Han said, "they teach you that the Dongshan memorial has nine thousand people in the ground, and that's just the ones they dug up. Nine thousand men traded for coal, and that was the Japanese doing the trading, and then we spent eighty years doing the trading ourselves at a slower rate, and now a fat boy who's never been down a shaft in his life wants to hang fairy lights on it so people from Beijing can drink something." He picked the cup back up. "Honoring," he said, to his tea. "En."

Bai Shuang said nothing at all. She was thinking about the tour van, which she had seen yesterday, and which she was trying very hard not to think about now.

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She walked home the long way, because the long way passed the mine.

The Xinxing colliery had stopped producing in 2016, one of the last closures, and what remained was a fenced acreage of ruin that the city couldn't demolish because it was also a grave and couldn't maintain because it was also broke. The headframe still stood — seventy meters of riveted steel, black-

red with rust — over a capped shaft plugged with concrete. The office buildings' windows were eyes knocked out. Along the fence, someone's laundry line had run for years from a fence post to a lamp standard, and even now, in November, a single frozen towel hung there, stiff as sheet metal, belonging to nobody.

Her father had worked here forty-one years. Her uncle had died here on the second level at 1:37 in the morning, gas flowing backward through the tunnels against the ventilation — Bai Shuang had needed an engineer to explain it to her, how a system built to move air one way can fail and push it the other, how the mine had filled with its own bad breath, and how the spark had come from the trolley wire, and how the men who ran toward the exit had met foremen driving them back, because sealing the shaft would save the shaft. That was the Japanese era story, actually, from Dongshan, the mass grave — but her uncle's widow had told it that way, all the eras braided together, because in this city the stories were all one story: ten go down, nine don't come back, and the company saves the company.

The tour van was there again today.

It was a hired white minibus with its hazards blinking, parked at the angle of people who know they aren't staying. Six figures in expensive coats were spread along the fence line, and Bai Shuang slowed on the far pavement, hands in pockets, and watched them work.

They worked. That was the thing. It was work, you could see it — a woman with a camera the size of a cigarette packet moved in close to the frozen towel and photographed it from three angles; a tall young man in a fisherman's-orange shell jacket held a phone up on a gimbal and walked the fence line slowly, narrating under his breath; a couple stood with their backs to the headframe, arms around each other, waiting for

someone to take their picture. All of them had the same expression, which was reverence, performed carefully, like carrying soup. Their breath plumed. Someone said "so liminal" in English, and the word floated across the road to her, foreign as a coin from another country.

Bai Shuang had grown up with this view out of every window of her childhood. She had played hide-and-seek in the transformer shed while her father's shift bell rang. She knew men whose lungs were hanging in jars in the mining museum, and women who had received a brown envelope with 102,600 yuan in it and a choice — lump sum or pension — and had stood in their kitchens unable to make the choice because making the choice was worse than the grief. This ground was the exact place where her family's whole century had happened to it.

And she watched a Beijing girl in a fifty-thousand-yuan coat kneel down in the cinders to get a better shot of the fence, framing it just so, the rusted wire filling the bottom third, the headframe soft-focus above, and heard her say to her friend, delighted, reverent, hushed: "God, it's perfect. It's like the whole town is a memorial to something, but nobody remembers to what."

And her friend said, "Post-industrial melancholia. It's so much more real than Shanghai."

Bai Shuang stood very still on the far pavement and felt something rise in her chest that had been rising for five years now, whenever this happened, which was often, which was the town's new weather. It wasn't quite anger. Anger would have been simpler. It was the specific vertigo of watching strangers fall in love with your wound — because that was what they were doing, she realized, that was the only honest word for it. They loved it. They loved the towel on the fence and the broken windows and the cheap apartments and the

dying town and the black sparrows, they loved it all with a passion its own people had never been permitted, because its own people had been too busy living in it, and the love was real, that was the devil of it, the love was sincere — and it changed nothing, and cost nothing, and fed on them exactly as they fed on it, and in six weeks most of them would be gone back to cities where the winter was a season instead of a sentence, and the ones who stayed, the ones who bought the fifty-thousand-yuan flats and posted their escape online, would learn what the love didn't cover, which was January.

The kneeling girl noticed her. Straightened up, smiling, camera lowered — polite, warm, entirely without malice, which was the worst part.

"Oh — hello! Do you live around here?" An eager step toward the curb. Behind her, the gimbal man swung round hopefully, still filming. "We're photographers. Sorry — do you mind if I ask — did you grow up near the mine? Only, we'd love to hear — like, what it felt like. When it closed."

The silence lasted two seconds. Bai Shuang heard the wind move the frozen towel on the fence; at this temperature it didn't sway, it ticked.

"What it felt like," she said.

"Yes — sorry, is that okay? We're doing a project on shrinking cities, we want to document the human side, we think stories like yours really deserve to be— " the girl's voice did something complicated around the word deserve — "seen, you know? Amplified."

Bai Shuang looked at her — young, earnest, freezing in a coat rated for fashion, lipstick perfect, eyes kind — and heard herself answer in the flattest Dongbei monotone she owned, the one she used for phone scammers:

"It felt like my uncle stopped coming home."

The smile stayed on the girl’s face while everything behind it reorganized. Somewhere behind her the gimbal man lowered his phone, one degree, then another, like a salute being reversed.

“…Oh,” said the girl. “Oh, God. I’m so — I’m so sorry, I didn’t— “

“There’s a memorial hall on the Heluo highway,” Bai Shuang said. “Glass over the bones, so you can see the wires through the eye sockets. School groups go on Fridays. Free parking.” She was already walking. “Photograph that if you want something real.”

She was half a block away before she heard the girl say to the others, quietly, wrecked, “Jesus,” and one of them say, “That’s exactly the kind of testimony we need,” and she closed her ears to it, the way you close a door on a room you can’t afford to heat.

At the corner she passed Liu Dabao’s van, parked outside the shuttered workers’ co-op store with the driver’s window down. Fatty Liu sat behind the wheel eating sunflower seeds out of a bag in his lap, spitting shells into a cup, supervising his tourists the way a shepherd supervises, and when he saw Bai Shuang his face opened into its public warmth.

“Shuang-jie!” He leaned across, all gold tooth and apology. “You look cold. Get in, I’ll run you home, the heater works, I promise— “

“No thanks, Dabao.”

“Still angry about the school thing? That wasn’t me, that was the district office, I only— “

“How much are you charging them, Dabao?” She nodded back toward the fence line, the orange jackets. “For the experience.”

“Experience!” He laughed, delighted, seed shells clicking. “Three hundred a head, and worth every fen — car, guide, tea

egg, the authentic life of the coal people. They love it, Shuang-jie. You know what they call this place on their apps? The cheapest city in China. Fifty thousand for a whole apartment! They think it's heaven." He shook his head with genuine wonder, spitting a shell. "Come to my art show next month. Ruin and Light. You'll cry, I swear. Very classy. Candles."

"Candles," Bai Shuang said. "In a methane zone."

His laugh stopped for a fraction of a second — one beat, a hitch, there and gone like the ice-flower of hot water in the air — and then it resumed, bigger than before. "Ventilated! Cer-tified! Go home, teacher, you'll catch your death." And as she walked on she heard him raise his phone, already talking to someone else, his voice sliding into the register he thought of as business, which was fluent in both directions, mocking both ways at once: "Six of them today, brother, six, and wait till you see what they're paying for the flats — no, no taste at all, that's the beauty of it, paint the hallway white, put a plant in it, they'll think they discovered it — ha! Exactly. Sheep with savings, the pair of us will die rich…"

The wind came down the railway cut from Siberia with nothing in front of it, and Bai Shuang pulled her scarf tighter and walked home into the teeth of the cheapest city in China.

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II. The Video

Doudou showed her the video at dinner.

He was thirteen, wire-thin, permanently hungry, with his uncle's heavy eyebrows and a phone fused to one hand, and he had the particular restlessness of boys in dying towns — five-and-six-beast restless, roof-ridge restless, the energy of a life planned entirely elsewhere and therefore already over. He

ate like it was a chore interrupting something important. Tonight the something important could not wait.

"Ma. Mom. You have to see this. Watch — watch, I filmed it — "

"If it' s a game— "

"It' s not a game! It was on Jiefang Road, by the fruit shop, when I was coming back from tutoring — look— "

The video was eleven seconds and it was shaky, filmed the way children film miracles, too close and then too far. Gray dusk, sodium lamps just on, the lit window of the fruit shop, a wall. And against the wall, beside a storm drain, stood a yel - low-furred animal the size of a cat but wrong for a cat — low, slinky, narrow-chested, with a blunt little muzzle and dark li - quid eyes and a tail thick as a rope. It stood on the snow. And then it stood up — rose onto its hindquarters with a smooth unfolding motion no dog or cat had, spine straightening, front paws folding in at its chest, until it stood upright against the wall like a small yellow person.

"Huangshulang," Doudou said, delighted, disgusted. "A weasel. A big one. Look, look — watch its face— "

The animal' s face was lifted toward the boy holding the camera. Toward Doudou. Even through the phone' s blur, even compressed to pixels, the directness of the gaze came through — the flat, patient, appraising stare of something that was not afraid and was not leaving. Its whiskers caught the sodium light. Its mouth was closed and its eyes were open, and in the last clear frame before the camera lurched away, its little folded paws seemed — Bai Shuang would replay this frame many times in the coming weeks, zoomed in, brightness maxed, telling herself she was checking for compression arti - facts — its paws seemed raised, slightly, outward, the way a man folds his hands to bow.

"And then what did you do?" Ma said sharply, from across the table. "Douzi. What. Did. You. Do."

"Nothing!" He flinched, grinning. "It just stood there looking at me like — like it wanted something, so I waved at it. And I did this— " he bobbed his head, a joking half-bow, the universal gesture of a kid mocking a teacher behind her back — "like ninhao — and then it dropped down and went in the drain, super fast, like water. I posted it and it already has four hundred views, and look— " he scrolled eagerly, thrusting the phone at his grandmother — "look what this comment says — "

Ma didn't take the phone. Ma had gone very still, chopsticks stopped over her bowl, and when she spoke her voice had dropped out of its usual key into something flat and old that Bai Shuang had heard maybe five times in her life, all of them connected to funerals.

"Wash your face," Ma said. "Right now. With clean water, both sides, behind the ears. And then you'll wash your mouth, and you won't wipe it on your sleeve, you'll let it dry."

"Grandma— "

"Do it."

Doudou looked at his mother. Bai Shuang looked at Ma. Something in the kitchen had shifted the way the building shifted when a truck went by on the cut — everything nominally the same, everything measurably off.

"Ma," Bai Shuang said carefully. "It's a weasel. Town's full of them since they emptied the old blocks. Rat population exploded, so— "

"Your great-grandmother kept a shrine tablet to the Yellow Lord for sixty years," Ma said. She wasn't looking at either of them; she was looking at the middle distance, at the accumulated countryside of her childhood, the village shrine, the

rules that lived underneath the language itself. “Fox, weasel, hedgehog, snake, rat — five families. You don’t kill them, you don’t curse them, you don’t answer them. They keep to themselves if you keep to yourself. But when one stands up and looks at you— “ her eyes came back to Doudou and fixed on him with sudden ferocious precision — “when one stands up on its hind legs and looks at a person, child, it is asking something. It’s asking whether you see it as a man or as a beast. And you do not answer. You look at the ground, and you walk on, and if it follows, you spit, and keep walking. Because if you tell it it’s a man, it takes that word out of your mouth like money, and the bill comes to you. Fortune. Luck. Years. Whatever it needs, that’s what it takes. That’s why the old people wouldn’t say its name at night. They’d knock on wood and say yellow master and give it a chicken head at New Year and never, ever answer it.”

Silence. The radiator ticked. Out on the railway cut, far off, a freight train moaned through the dark, hauling something south.

Doudou’s grin had died somewhere in the middle of all that, replaced by the careful blankness of a teenager recalibrating. “…It’s a video,” he said finally, but quieter. “Grandma, it’s an animal. They’re protected now. Three-Haves list. You’re not even allowed to kill them.”

“The law protects them,” Ma agreed. “That’s what worries me.”

“Ma,” Bai Shuang said, “he’s thirteen, it’s a weasel video, it has four hundred views— “

“Five hundred,” said Doudou.

“—and by Friday it’ll be buried under ten thousand dance challenges. It’s nothing.”

But that night, lying awake in the building’s evening percussion — the ticks and swallows and cannon-shots, the whole

arterial symphony of heat — Bai Shuang listened to the attic void overhead, where her mother's considerate walker had been, and heard nothing at all. Which was worse, in a way. Si‑lence in that ceiling had a texture. It had the specific quality of a room going quiet when you walk into it.

She was still awake at 1 a.m., thinking about a Beijing girl's face reorganizing behind her lipstick, when she heard, from the direction of the kitchen, her mother's voice — low, rhythmic, unhurried — speaking to someone in the dark. Not on the phone. No pauses for answers. Just a steady mutter, the cadence of an old woman laying something out plainly, patiently, for as long as it took: we're plain people, we keep our side of the wall, the boy is young, he didn't mean anything by the bow, take it from the chickens, take it from the incense, leave the child his own eyes.

Bai Shuang did not get up. She did not ask, in the morning, and Ma did not say, and the kitchen smelled faintly of burnt feathers and sulfur, like a match struck and blown out, and everyone ate their eggs.

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III. An Ran

The train from Harbin came out of the plain like a needle out of cloth, stitching snowfield to snowfield, and An Ran watched the villages go by — low houses buried to the eaves, chimney smoke standing up perfectly straight in the windless cold like columns holding up nothing — and felt her chest do the thing it did lately, a slow clench, except that this time she couldn't tell whether it was dread or relief, and suspected, as usual, that it was both, and that the difference hardly mattered anymore.

Eight months ago she had been Senior Product Designer at a Shenzhen company you have definitely heard of. She had worn the badge and drunk the free cold brew and answered mes - sages at midnight with her thumbs and sat in review meetings where her manager, seven years older and already gray at the temples, explained with a straight face that Q4 required everyone to internalize ownership, and An Ran had internal - ized it, she had owned it, she had owned the deadlines and the pivots and the 2 a.m. incident calls and the performance re - view in which she scored 3.6 out of 5 and was told, kindly, that this meant no promotion this cycle but strong potential, and she had owned the chest pains too, right up until the night she woke at 3 a.m. convinced she was dying — actual dying, heart attack, the whole presentation — and sat on the bathroom floor of her rented flat in Futian with her knees drawn up, listening to her blood, doing the arithmetic. Rent: 4,800 a month, for a room. Commute: 95 minutes each way. Remain - ing runway if she lost the job: four months. Age: 28. Diagnosis, when the hospital's machines had finished with her: nothing. Stress. Take rest. Take rest — as if rest were a pill you could pick up at the pharmacy, as if it weren't the one thing her entire life had been engineered to prevent.

Then the layoffs came — her whole team, one Tuesday, effi - cient as customs — and the severance landed like a lifeboat with a hole in it, and she'd done what her generation did with a hole-riddled lifeboat: she scrolled. And the algorithm, knowing her despair better than her mother did, served her a video of a city she had never once thought about in her life.

A young man stood in an empty apartment in the far northeast, in a padded coat, laughing, and the caption read: **I bought a home today. 58,000 yuan. Everything included.**

Fifty-eight thousand. Eighty-one hundred dollars. Less than her annual rent deposit in Shenzhen. Less than her therapist,

cumulatively. A home — the word that stood at the end of every five-year plan she'd ever failed to complete — purchasable for less than her phone and her watch put together, in a small white city on the edge of Siberia where the video said wages were low but so was everything, where the whole town had heating and nobody had a boss within a thousand kilometers, where you could, the comments insisted, finally breathe.

She'd watched forty hours of those videos in the following week. She could admit that now. The eight-day purchase diaries. The tours of ¥30,000 flats with fresh paint and mountain light. The comment sections, thousands deep, of people her age saying me next, me next, me next — an entire exhausted cohort murmuring the same dream, the dream of exiting the game rather than winning it. Her friends had said: it's a meme, it's brain rot, those cities are dying, there's nothing there. And An Ran, packing, had thought: exactly. Nothing there. No KPIs there. Nothing to fail at, nothing measuring you, nothing that wanted quarterly ownership of your actual heartbeat. A city with more homes than people. A city that couldn't hurt you because it had already happened to it.

The train slowed. Snowfields gave way to warehouse roofs, then tower blocks — pale, uniform, immense, ranks of them standing at parade rest in the cold — and then, unexpectedly soon, the platform of Hegang station, and the doors opened, and the cold came in and introduced itself.

−17°C. She'd checked three times on the train, disbelieving. It hit like a wall of water, except it burned: first breath, and the hairs in her nose stiffened; second breath, and the back of her throat tasted of metal and coal; by the time she'd walked the fifty meters of platform to the station doors her thighs were numb through two layers of leggings, and her exposed eyes ached, and the moisture of her exhalations had frosted her scarf-front into a small stiff board, and she under-

stood, with the whole surface of her skin, the difference between reading −17°C on a screen and standing inside the number.

"Anran xiaojie! Miss An Ran!"

Liu Dabao was holding a cardboard sign with her name on it, like an airport chauffeur, like a joke he was in on. She'd found him through a Xiaohongshu post — @鹤岗宝哥置业, Brother Bao Hegang Homes — his feed a cheerful blizzard of walkthroughs, price breakdowns, and thumbs-up selfies in front of tower blocks, captioned in the breathless punctuation of the platform: Another happy buyer!! Top floor, mountain views, 47k ALL IN DM me, your escape is ONE train ride away!!

"Fatty Liu," he said, pumping her hand in both of his mittened ones; he was broad and quick and gold-toothed, with the build of a man built out of good living and the eyes of a man who missed nothing, weighing her coat, her luggage, her luggage's newness, in one glance. "Cold, isn't it! Ha! You get used to it — locals say it keeps the bad people away, because bad people are lazy, ha! Come, come, the van's warm, I've got six flats lined up for you, six, all in your budget, you're going to love Number Four— "

The van smelled of sunflower seeds and air freshener shaped like a pine tree fossilized by years of service. Fatty Liu drove with his elbows and talked with his whole torso, and the tour began before the tour: "—and on your left, the new district, they built it in the boom, beautiful, hm? And empty! Ha! Don't worry, that's the opportunity. And there — the old workers' co-op, closed. Cinema, closed. You know what's not closed? My friend's hotpot place. Best guobaorou in Nanshan, I'll take you myself, on the house — well, discounted." A glance in the mirror, gold tooth flashing. "First time in the northeast, yes? Shanghai?"

"Shenzhen."

"Shenzhen! Even better. Big city girl, huh? You won't believe the prices. You'll think I'm robbing you, then you'll check the listing sites and kiss me, ha!"

The first flat was in a penggai tower from 1999, seventh floor walk-up, and the elevator had been locked since the property manager quit, and they climbed seven flights through stairwells that smelled of cold dust and cooking history, and the flat, when Fatty Liu threw the door open with a flourish, was — An Ran searched for the word and settled, privately, on honest: bare concrete walls, a steel security door, a squat toilet room, a south-facing window full of white sky, and nothing else at all. "Rough shell! You decorate! Most buyers, they like this — put your own spirit into it. Thirty-eight thousand." He watched her face. "You don't love it. Fine! Fine, this is why we look. Next!"

The second flat was occupied — technically — by an old man's remaining furniture, a whole life reduced to a wardrobe, a sewing machine, and a calendar from three years ago, and An Ran stood in the doorway feeling like a trespasser in a museum of someone's evacuation, and heard herself ask Fatty Liu, "Where did they go?" and heard him answer, breezily, "Everywhere! South, mostly. Kids' cities. Good for them, good for us, ha!" and the flat cost forty-two thousand and she didn't love it either.

Number Four was in Building 7 of the Nanshan No. 6 compound, top floor, corner unit, and the moment Fatty Liu unlocked the steel door and the cold empty rooms breathed out at her — concrete and dust and, beneath it, faintly, something else, something organic and sharp that she took at first for mouse — An Ran felt her chest do the clench again, and knew, with the sick certainty of every bad decision she had ever made, that she was going to buy it.

It was fifty-one square meters of possibility. Corner win - dows on two sides, so the light came in doubled. A balcony facing north across the rooftops toward the dark blue ridgeline where, Fatty Liu said, the old mine was — "very atmospheric, you'll see, especially at night, the lights." Fresh-ish laminate in the bedroom. A radiator in every room, cast iron, painted silver, heavy as sin. The previous owner had left, of all things, a single wall painted deep teal — an accent wall, some depar - ted stranger's one bid at beauty — and a hook above it, and a plastic flower in a vase, and An Ran stood in front of that ab - surd teal wall in her Arc'teryx shell jacket with her breath frosting indoors and felt tears arrive without warning, hot in the -cold air.

"Hey, hey!" Genuine alarm from Fatty Liu. "You don't like it, there's plenty more— "

"I love it," An Ran said, crying in a stranger's living room in a dying city at the end of the world, laughing at herself through it. "It's stupid. It's just — I had a wall like this. In Shenzhen. My rental. I painted it myself and lost the deposit." She wiped her face with her sleeve. "How much?"

"Fifty-one thousand," said Fatty Liu, "for you, today, and I'll include the agent fee, and— " he paused, and his eyes did the weighing thing again, quicker this time, a merchant's reflex so fast it was nearly invisible — "you know what, miss? Do me one favor. Film it."

"Film it?"

"Your buying journey! The young people love this. Eight days, they call the famous ones — the guy Li Hai, you know him, first one, very famous, bought in eight days. You could be — what do they say — a series! Shenzhen girl escapes to the cheapest city in China! I tag you, you tag me, everybody wins." Gold tooth. Open hands. "It costs you nothing. It

makes your flat worth more, too, when there's a story in the walls. People buy stories, miss. Walls are cheap."

Later — contract signed, thumbprints given, her life savings converted into a deed to fifty-one square meters of Heilongji‑ang — she would try to explain the feeling to her best friend over voice messages, and would land, eventually, on the truth: it was the first thing anyone had ever asked her to make content of that she actually wanted to keep. The deal was done in ninety minutes. She had spent longer choosing a phone case. And Fatty Liu drove her to the notary office with the heater blasting and bought her a tea egg from a roadside stand, unwrapping it with ceremony, and said, with what she chose to hear as tenderness: "Welcome to Hegang, miss. Cheapest city in China. Worst winters. Best people — well." A chuckle. "Some of them."

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The café was called Cloud Water, and it was the only one of its kind in the city, and An Ran loved it instantly and knew, in some chamber of herself that never fully logged off, that loving it was a costume.

It occupied the ground floor of a renovated 1980s bank on the edge of the new district — poured-concrete counter, Edison bulbs, a wall of dried flowers, a shelf of vinyl records nobody played, and a menu offering oat-milk lattes for 32 yuan. The owner, Yun-ge, was from Shanghai, or had lived in Shanghai, which amounted to the same accent; he wore a fleece vest over rolled sleeves and spoke about Hegang in the tones of a man describing a raw gemstone. "People here have no idea what they're sitting on," he told An Ran that first afternoon, steaming milk with artisanal seriousness. "The light alone. The texture. Have you been to the market? It's incredible. So raw. So real." A latte-art leaf bloomed in the cup. "Of

course,” and his voice dropped a register, confiding, weary, “the energy takes adjusting. It’s very heavy here. You can feel it — the depression, the history. I smudge the shop twice a week. Most of the locals, honestly, they don’t get it. They think we’re crazy, paying thirty yuan for coffee.” A smile, generous, rueful. “Which — fair. But that’s why we’re here, right? To elevate things. Slowly.”

Behind the counter, refilling the pastry case, worked a local girl of about seventeen — pretty, quick-handed, in a Cloud Water apron over her school-adjacent puffer jacket — and An Ran watched Yun-ge correct her the way you’d correct a child, twice, about the alignment of the croissants, and then say, warmly, “Mengmeng, remember Monday’s workshop — mindfulness practice, we discussed? You seem scattered today. Present. Try to be present.”

“Yes, Yun-ge,” said Mengmeng, present, aligning croissants at 18 yuan each, which An Ran calculated — automatically, helplessly, the spreadsheet reflex of the formerly precarious — was one hour and twenty minutes of local minimum wage, and then hated herself for calculating it, and ordered the latte anyway.

She took her laptop to the window seat. Around her, the clientele assembled itself out of the train of her own migration: two remote programmers from Hangzhou arguing amiably about mechanical keyboards; a documentary photographer shooting the steam off everyone’s cups; a girl An Ran recognized from the app — @北漂退休中, retiring from Beijing-drifting — who had posted her flat-buying series in September and whom everyone followed. They nodded to each other across the room, members of the same dispersed tribe, and the nod contained the whole vocabulary: you too, you made it out, isn’t it quiet here, can you believe the rent, no, neither could I.

An Ran opened her laptop and, instead of the freelance brief she was pretending to work on, opened her notes app, where a draft had been waiting since the train, titled:

Why I left (the honest version)

Underneath, one line: Because I could not survive being measured anymore.

She looked at it for a long time. Through the window, across the street, a local woman in a padded coat emerged from the pharmacy next door, checked the sky with the practiced squint of someone reading a weather that mattered, adjusted a facemask, and trudged off into the blue afternoon, and An Ran thought — not unkindly, not knowingly, just with the effortless centimeters of altitude her whole life had installed in her — I wonder what her version says, and then thought, probably nothing, probably she'd find the question ridiculous, and then felt the shame arrive precisely on schedule, one second behind, familiar as a commute.

She closed the note. She opened Xiaohongshu instead, drafted the post — Day 1: I bought a home for ¥51,000. Here's the honest truth about escaping to China's cheapest city

— attached the photos of the teal wall, tagged @鹤岗宝哥置业, and hit publish on her own story, her own walls, priced to move.

Thirty-two yuan for the latte. She tipped nothing, because there was no tip line. It was, she would think later, the last day the arithmetic of this town made sense to her at all.

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IV. First Night

The flat had no furniture except a camp stove, a sleeping bag, a suitcase, and a wall.

She'd bought an electric blanket that afternoon at the market — the market Yun-ge called so raw, and which was, in fact, staggering: whole frozen fish stacked like cordwood, cured sausages hanging in ropes, a grandmother selling eggs from a crate with her hands emerging from a sleeping-bag-like wrap, steam rising off vats of frying oil into air so cold it fell back down as frost-fog. An Ran had photographed everything, the light genuinely was extraordinary, and she had paid for a bag of frozen pears because a vendor insisted — thaw them in cold water, miss, they come back sweet, trust me — and she had understood approximately none of the prices and been understood in none of her questions, and the whole exchange had been conducted through pointing, laughter, and a calcu‑lator, and she had walked out warmed in a way the latte hadn't managed, and had immediately posted it captioned the most REAL place I've ever been , and had felt, briefly, absolved.

By nine the temperature outside was −19 and falling. By ten, the building had begun its concert.

She catalogued it from inside the sleeping bag, too wired to sleep, too cold to leave the blanket's perimeter, the teal wall glowing faintly gray-blue in the light of the courtyard lamp below. The radiators were cold — the boiler across town cycled down overnight, Fatty Liu had warned her, the building heats at five, miss, until then you're on your own, welcome to real life! — so what she heard was the building's skeleton cooling, contracting, settling into itself: ticks, like knuckles cracking, traveling down the risers; a long metallic groan from the wall behind the bed as some decades-old joint surrendered a few millimeters; and then, at intervals, the cannon-shot — BANG — water hammer somewhere above her, in the ceiling, in the void under the roof she hadn't known existed until Fatty Liu mentioned, offhandedly, that the top-floor units had the men

ding overhead and weren't for everyone, some people found it spooky, ha!

It didn't sound spooky. It sounded structural. It sounded like the building clearing its throat, and she'd grown up, after all, in cities that never went quiet; silence of any kind was already a drug.

It was the smell that unsettled her, later.

Sometime after one — she knew because she'd been watching her phone die, the battery percentage sliding down faster than the clock, the screen dimming like a face losing interest — the heating must have kicked in early somewhere below her, because the radiator at the window gave a metallic shudder and began, faintly, to tick with warmth. And with the warmth came a smell out of the vent.

Not mouse. Not mold. She lay still and let it identify itself: musky, dense, animal — like the reptile house at a zoo, like a fur coat in a damp closet, and underneath that something sharper, chemical, ammoniac, the sting of a neglected litter box. It came in one pulse, riding the warm air, and faded as the radiator ticked, and then came again, stronger, as if the source were closer, or breathing.

An Ran sat up in the sleeping bag.

Above her, in the void under the roof, something moved. Not the building's sounds — she knew those now, she'd been learning them for three hours, she had a taxonomy — this was different. Lighter. Quick. A skittering, a series of tiny clawed steps crossing the ceiling from the corner above her head, unhurried, considerate, pausing directly over the bed, and then — she would swear this part, later, to no one, at first — a soft chittering. Two notes, repeated. Rising and falling. Almost like a question.

Her phone lay dark on the floor, battery dead at last, and she sat in the dark in her purchased home at the edge of

Siberia and listened to the thing above her ceiling ask whatever it was asking, and did not answer, because there was no app for that, and eventually it stopped, and went away over her head toward the other corner of the building, where the empty flats were.

In the morning she would find the vent grille above the balcony door slightly ajar, its single screw lying on the floor beneath it like a fallen period. She would post the sunset, the teal wall, a triumphant selfie — Night 1 in my ¥51k home! (send heating tips) #Hegang #escape — and the likes would pour in all day, thousands of them, her biggest response ever, strangers murmuring me next, me next into her comments like a congregation.

But that first night, before sleep took her at last in the cold, she did one more thing. The idea came to her the way ideas came to her generation, fully formed and pre-captioned: she climbed out onto the balcony with the kettle she'd boiled on the camp stove, aimed her dead phone's replacement — the backup, the old SE, kept warm inside her jacket against exactly this — at the courtyard below, and flung the boiling water out into the black air.

It bloomed. Even at −19, half-formed, ragged — not the perfect crystal ghosts from the videos, which needed real cold, deep cold, cold that was still six weeks away — but a white flowering burst, a sudden tree of steam and ice hanging in the lamplight, and it was beautiful, and it was hers, and she filmed it twice.

Only later, watching the footage frame by frame in the warmth of the Cloud Water café, latte going cold beside her laptop, did she notice it: in the second clip, in the instant after the water bloomed and before the cloud dissolved, the steam held its shape a half-second too long. And in the drifting whiteness — you had to want to see it, she told herself later,

you had to want it, which was the whole problem with cameras, and with towns, and with wishes — there was a suggestion of upright shapes. Small ones. Several. Standing in the courtyard below her balcony in the falling veil of her offering, faces lifted.

She posted it anyway. The caption read: po shui cheng bing throwing water into the air at −19°! Hegang magic (watch til the end).

By the next evening it had forty thousand views, and the comments were the usual warm chorus — me next, so magical, adding to my list, what a dream — all the way down to the last one, posted at 2:13 a.m. by an account with no picture, no posts, and a username made of numbers, which said only, in the flat toneless Chinese of someone stating a traffic rule:

别理它。不理，它就饿死了。

Don’t answer it. If you don’t answer, it starves.

An Ran read it at breakfast, smiled at the weirdness of strangers, tapped like, and set the phone face-down on the table, and went back to her latte, and never saw the reply the account posted beneath her tap, three minutes later, before going silent forever:

她点了赞。

She liked it.

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CHAPTER 2

The Eight-Days People

By the middle of November the sea ice had come down out of the north — not sea ice, though old men still called it that, the Siberian high settling over the plain like a lid on a pot — and Hegang woke one Tuesday to −24°C and a silence so complete you could hear the railway cut ringing in the distance, steel contracting, singing one long thin note to nobody.

The buyers kept coming anyway.

They arrived now in a rhythm the compound had learned the way a body learns a tide: the Friday afternoon van, the Saturday morning viewings, the Sunday departures with signed contracts folded into expensive bags. Fatty Liu had streamlined the operation into something close to liturgy. There was the pickup at the station with the cardboard sign. There was the tour — old district, new district, the shuttered co-op, the atmospheric mine — narrated in his fluent double language, tender to the tourists and merciless behind glass. And there was the closing, always in some warm café or other, always with tea eggs, always with the same benediction delivered while pen hovered over contract:

Walls are cheap, miss. People buy stories.

An Ran's story was selling extremely well.

Day 12: I painted my bedroom myself and only cried twice. Forty thousand followers now. The numbers had a life of their own, compounding nightly while she slept — she would wake to find her ordinary life converted overnight into currency: the teal wall, worth three thousand likes; the frozen pears thawing in a bowl of cold water, five thousand; a video of Ma from Building 11 — she didn't even know the woman's name yet

— chipping ice off her sidewalk with a coal shovel at dawn, filmed from the balcony through the glass without asking anyone, captioned real life NPC doing morning quests , eleven thousand likes, and An Ran watched the counter climb with a feeling she had learned not to look at directly, the way you don't look at a mole that's changed shape.

She was careful now, she told herself. She asked permission. Mostly. When the grandmother two doors down had dragged her coal scuttle to the stairwell landing, bent double under it, An Ran had filmed only the scuttle. For texture, she explained to the empty stairwell, and posted it, and the top comment said this is so aesthetic, poverty core , and the second comment said my hometown , and the third comment, from another account made of numbers, said only:

别拍老人。

Don't film the old ones.

She tapped like on that one too, before she understood she was doing it — her thumb performing sincerity automatically, a reflex of agreement divorced from any act — and lay in the dark afterward listening to the void overhead, where the skittering had become regular. Every night now, shortly after the radiators ticked alive: the light clawed footsteps crossing above her bed, east corner to west corner, pausing at the midpoint. The pause lasted longer each night. Tonight, lying in the dark, she timed it. Ninety seconds. Two minutes. Whatever stood above her ceiling at the pause point stood very still, and once — she kept this between herself and the teal wall — once, directly above her pillow, something had knocked. Twice. Politely. Like a neighbor asking to borrow sugar through the floor.

She had knocked back before she was awake enough to stop herself.

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At No. 4 Middle School, the twentieth of October's strangeness had begun to reproduce.

It started with the desk. Qu Xiaoyan's desk, third from the back by the wall, which had developed a smell — faint, organic, sweetish — that the cleaning staff attributed for two weeks to lunch boxes, until the day Chen Bin, reaching across to stab Xiaoyan with a pencil in the ancient exchange of seat-mates, pulled his hand back and said, loudly, "Laoshi, there's meat in her desk."

There was meat in her desk. Under the textbooks, wrapped in tissue paper with the neatness of a squirrel, were four ham sausages and two raw chicken wings, frozen solid, arranged — this was the part Bai Shuang kept returning to later, the arrangement — arranged in a curve, like something sleeping curled.

Xiaoyan didn't cry when the class laughed. That was the first wrong thing. A fourteen-year-old girl, publicly exposed as the weird kid with rotting meat in her desk, should have dissolved. Xiaoyan watched the laughter travel around the room with her head tilted slightly, as if the laughter were weather happening to other people, and when Bai Shuang sent everyone to the yard and knelt beside her desk and asked gently, Xiaoyan, what is this? Why are you keeping food here? — the girl considered the question with that terrible honest attention and said:

"For later. When it gets colder."

"It's already cold, sweetheart."

"Not outside," Xiaoyan said, patient, as if explaining seasons to a visitor. "Inside colder. In the walls. They eat less when it's warm in the walls, but the pipes run through the walls, laoshi, so it's never really cold in the walls, so they're

always a little hungry." She smiled then — a normal smile, a child's smile, and it was the worst moment of the whole term — and added, "Don't worry. I don't give them much. Just what I don't want."

Them.

By Friday, phones had made it worse, the way phones made everything worse at the speed of light. Someone had filmed Xiaoyan during the lunch break — filmed her getting down on all fours in the empty classroom and crawling the length of the aisle under the desks, fluid and quick and utterly silent, her puffy pink coat brushing chair legs — and the video had traveled the school's group chats by the final bell, and by the weekend it had escaped the school altogether, acquiring captions, music, a name. The algorithm, which fed on anything, fed on Xiaoyan. Hamster girl. There were copies. There were imitations — of course there were imitations; there were boys in Harbin doing the crawl for views within a week, and a hashtag, and a think-piece about Gen-Z dissociation, and Gao Wei played the original in the staff room on Monday with the grim showmanship of a man saying I told you so with evidence.

"Short-video brain rot," Gao Wei said. "It's documented. There was a study — a hundred thousand people — heavy short-video users score lower on impulse control. Their brains literally— "

"She's not imitating a video," Bai Shuang said. "She was doing it before the video. I saw her in October."

"Saw her doing what?"

"Staring at the wall. Listening to something inside it." The staff room ticked around them. Old Han looked up from his tea, and for a moment his eyes and Bai Shuang's met over the steam, and neither of them said the thing, because neither of them knew yet what the thing was, only that it existed now,

sitting at the edge of the conversation like a cat that had entered the room without using the door.

At the school gate that evening, Bai Shuang walked out with Qu Changfu. He was a big man going softly to ruin — a taxi driver's posture, a widower's collar, his wife gone south to Dalian for work two years ago and calling less each month — and he listened to the account of his daughter's desk with his jaw working sideways, chewing nothing.

"I'll talk to her," he said. "Her grandma raised her superstitious, you know, before she passed. Told her all the old rules. Never answer, never look, spit and walk on. Kids forget." He tried to laugh. "Probably saw one of them weasel videos and got spooked. You know the ones — huangpizi standing up, asking questions. Kids' stuff."

"When did she start?" Bai Shuang asked. "The meat. The staring. Can you remember when?"

He thought about it with the honesty of the exhausted. "September?" he said. "Round when school started. She came back from tutoring one night — this was before the clocks changed, still light-ish — and she was white. White like paper. Said a cat had stood up on the path by the fruit shop and asked her something, and she got scared and answered wrong." He shrugged, huge and helpless. "Answered what wrong? Asked her what? She wouldn't say. Kids." He looked at Bai Shuang then, and for one second the tiredness fell off him like a coat and underneath was pure father-fear, cold as the wind off the cut. "Teacher. It's kids' stuff. Tell me it's kids' stuff."

"Get her phone away from her at night," Bai Shuang said, which was the answer available, "and let her sleep. I'll keep an eye in class."

She walked the rest of the way home rehearsing other answers, better ones, the ones you owed a man like that, and

finding none, and the compound gates came up out of the dusk with their frost fur already growing on the iron.

Old Man Guan was at the vents.

He was at the base of Building 11 on his knees in the snow in his army-green coat, eighty-something years old, tightening the single screw of a vent grille with a screwdriver worn to a sliver, and as Bai Shuang reached the steps he moved — without rising, without hurrying — to the next grille along the wall, and did that one too, and the next. Along the whole foundation of the building, at intervals of four meters, the heating system breathed in through low vents, and every single one of them stood slightly open, its screw backed out a few turns, resting loose in its thread.

"Some prank," Bai Shuang said.

"Mm." Old Man Guan drove the screw home and sat back on his heels, looking down the row of grilles disappearing into the blue snow-dusk, one after another after another, the whole length of the block. "Done to all of them. Buildings One through Nine. Did it themselves, or the wind did it, depending who you ask." He wiped the screwdriver on his sleeve and looked up at her, and she saw her father's generation looking out of his face — the flat patience, the underground calm of men who had spent forty years reading air. "You're Guodong's girl."

"I'm Guodong's girl."

"He ran the return air in Number Three gallery. I ran the intake. Between us we moved every cubic meter of that mountain for thirty years." He rose, joints by joints, and handed her the screwdriver as if passing on a tool that mattered. "Your father knew one thing better than anyone living. Air goes where the warm side pushes it. Doesn't care about walls. Doesn't care about people. You change what's warm, you change where the wind goes." He nodded down

the row of tightened grilles. "Somebody's been changing what's warm."

"In the walls," Bai Shuang said, before she could stop herself. "My student says. It's warmer in the walls."

Old Man Guan looked at her for a long moment, and then out past the rooftops, north, where the sky above the old mine glowed faintly orange with the sodium lamps of a place that employed no one anymore.

"Forty-one degrees," he said, to the sky rather than to her. "That's what the intake ran in Number Three, summer and winter, year in, year out. Warm air rising, fresh air following. The mountain breathed out of the north slope." He turned back, tucked the screwdriver away inside his coat like a relic. "Since October, on still nights, it breathes in. Your uncle's pit. The old galleries. Wind going the wrong direction, against the fans." He began to walk toward his own building, slow, deliberate. "Your father would've called that impossible. Then he'd have called it familiar." Over his shoulder, mildly, terribly: "Gas flows backward once, girl, you never trust the pipes to mean what they say again. Tighten your grilles. Keep your fires small. And teach your boy the old rules. It costs nothing to be rude to the right things."

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Doudou's cache was under the bed, and Bai Shuang found it on a Thursday, and it broke something in her quietly, the way ice breaks underfoot — one dry crack, and then the whole white sheet is sagging.

Ham sausages. Chicken wings, raw. A plastic bag of pork fat trimmed from the market, saved in careful curls. Arranged in a curve, like something sleeping curled, in the exact geometry of a fourteen-year-old girl's desk sixty meters and one school grade away.

He was at his desk when she laid it all out on his bedspread, and she watched his face while she did it, and his face did the thing Xiaoyan's face had done: nothing. Patience. Weather happening to other people.

"They're hungry," Doudou said.

"Who is hungry."

"The ones in the walls, Ma. Obviously." He said obviously the way thirteen said it, with the full contempt of reason for superstition, and then — this was the part she would carry, this flicker, this hairline crack in the arithmetic of her son — and then he blinked, and looked at the meat on his bed as if seeing it for the first time, and his face flooded with a child's horror and shame, color climbing his throat, and his voice when it came out was his own again, young and scared: "Ma. Why is there meat on my bed?"

"You tell me."

"I don't — I brought food home? For— " He stopped. Stood. Backed away one step from his own bed, from the curved arrangement, from whatever memory did or didn't live under those words. From the doorway, Ma watched in silence, and her eyes above the flour dusting her apron were old and level and completely unsurprised, and when Bai Shuang looked at her, Ma only shook her head — not here, not now, not in front of the boy — and said, briskly, in the voice she used for soup:

"Wash your hands, both of you. Douzi, come, wash your face, behind the ears, cold water. And tonight you sleep in the inside bed, by the wall, and the curtain stays open." She took the meat off the bedspread with bare hands, without disgust, carrying it flat before her like something with a right to consideration, and bore it out to the kitchen, and Bai Shuang heard, a minute later, the back-door bolt, and the slop bucket, and then the strike of a match, and a thin gray ribbon of sul-

phur smoke began to climb the stairwell, sweet and rotten-eggs and older than the city.

That night the scratching in the men ding went from Building 11's ceiling to somewhere further off — she wanted to believe it, told herself she believed it — and in the morning the sulphur smell hung in the stairwell like an argument everyone had agreed to stop having, and on the compound's WeChat group, a neighbor posted:

Anyone else's vents been opened?? Check your grilles. Something got into the Liangs' kitchen overnight, ate a whole bag of dumplings AND the fish heads, left the money on the counter untouched. Like it knew what it wanted.

Below it, the replies stacked up, one per building, then two, then five. Ours too. Ours too. Whole row of us. What is it, rats? Since when do rats leave the cash?

And at the bottom of the thread, from an account belonging to no one anyone knew, made of numbers, one comment, flat as a rule:

不是老鼠。别喂。饿死它。

Not rats. Don't feed it. Starve it.

※

CHAPTER 3

Poverty Core

The video of Ma shoveling ice hit the platform's front page on a Thursday, and by Friday night it had been seen four million times, and by Saturday morning the messages had started arriving from accounts with logos — one asking whether the "ice-shoveling grandma" was managed, one wanting usage rights for a campaign, one simply addressed to An Ran with the word collaboration and a number attached.

An Ran stared at the word for a long time.

She had filmed the clip from her balcony on impulse — the old woman chipping the courtyard pavement clear at dawn in temperatures that killed the careless, shovel rising and falling with the metronome patience of a woman who had done this for fifty winters and would do it for fifty more, breath pluming, dawn coming up gray behind her like an unpromising forecast. It was, An Ran knew even as she framed it, the best thing she had ever shot. No ring light. No caption strategy. Just an old woman fighting geology at 6 a.m., and winning, day after day, and the internet had agreed: NPC grandma, they called her, the final boss of winter, living her best life, and the remixes set her shovel-rhythm to electronic music, and someone made her face into an emoji, and the view counter climbed all weekend like something escaping.

Managed, An Ran read again. The question underneath the question was: does she have an agent? Does she take a cut? Is the old woman shoveling snow or is she content?

She typed and deleted three replies, and finally wrote: she's my neighbor. she's real. i'll ask her. And felt — this was important; she examined the feeling carefully, because

examining feelings was what she'd come to Hegang to learn how to stop doing — felt, under the small glow of being the discoverer of something pure, something that had no name yet but would keep her up that night, looking at her own reflection in the dark phone screen: the specific satisfaction of a person who has found a wild thing and made it safe to look at.

※

The budget week had been Yun-ge's idea, sort of. He'd said it at the café, in his raw-gemstone voice, gesturing at the market across the road with a portafilter: "People back home have no idea what a day actually costs here. Someone should document it. Honestly, Anran, you have the platform for it."

So: **Living on ¥500 for a Week Like a Real Local Day 1.** She planned it the way she'd planned sprints at work, with a spreadsheet and rules — thirty yuan a day for food, no taxi, heat at minimum, experience everything authentically — and she announced it to forty thousand followers with a photo of herself in her vintage wool coat holding a cloth shopping bag, captioned: "My Shenzhen friends spend this on one brunch. Here's what money feels like when your city has already lost everything. Not poverty porn — I want to understand, and I want you to understand too. "

She got the understanding part right, mostly, which was the trap.

The market really did teach you things. On eleven yuan of eggs, cabbage, and a fistful of glass noodles she cooked two meals and learned the particular arithmetic of a town where calories were insulation — where oil wasn't a style choice but fuel, where the glistening heaviness the food blogs mocked was engineering, every drop of fat a degree against the dark. She documented this insight. She documented the vendor who slipped a fifth egg into her bag and refused payment with a

flick of the wrist. She documented the queue at the pharmacy, the ice on the inside of the bus windows, her own breath freezing on her scarf in a design she called frost couture. Forty thousand people watched her learn things, and praised her humility, and said this is so much more real than Shanghai, and the praise arrived hourly like weather, and she stood in it and told herself the warm feeling was growth.

Mengmeng found her on Day Three.

The café girl materialized at the market's tofu stall with her puffer jacket and her quick hands and the direct fearless curiosity of seventeen — "You're the flat girl! From the app! You bought the corner unit in Nanshan, everyone at Cloud Water watched your videos during break" — and before An Ran had decided anything about the situation, Mengmeng had appointed herself guide, translator, and friend, because that is what you do with a lonely newcomer in a Northeastern town; hospitality there is not a service industry, it is the local weather, and it falls on you whether you're ready or not.

Mengmeng showed her which stall's frozen pears were tree-frozen versus cold-storage (tree-frozen only; my grandpa says cold-storage ones wake up wrong). Showed her how to pick sauerkraut by smell. Took her to the coal stall and made her laugh until she cried by doing impressions of Yun-ge's mindfulness voice ("Be present with the bean, Mengmeng. Feel the bean's journey"). And on Day Five, over thawed pears at Mengmeng's family kitchen table — a low table, a coal stove breathing warmth from the corner, three generations' photographs climbing the wall, a father present everywhere in image and absent everywhere else, working in Guangzhou, his New Year train ticket already pinned to the corkboard like a countdown — An Ran raised her phone.

"Just — atmosphere," she said, half-apologizing, not lowering it. "For the series."

What she filmed was gold, and she knew it while it happened, some producer-lobed part of her brain narrating shot lists over the top of genuine feeling: the grandmother ladling soup with hands like bark; the stove's iron door opening on its orange heart; Mengmeng translating her grandfather's Dongbei growl, laughing, both faces lit — authenticity, the most valuable substance on earth, flowing directly onto An Ran's sensor array. The grandmother pressed a jar of pickled cabbage into her arms at the door and would not hear of payment, and An Ran walked home through the blue evening with the jar hugged to her chest and tears freezing in her eyelashes and forty minutes of footage that would do better numbers than anything she had ever posted. Her arms burned from the jar's weight, switching it hip to hip; the brine had soaked her sleeve and left a stripe of salt along her wrist that she kept smelling without meaning to, and her mouth still wore the grease of the taste she'd been handed without asking — oil and garlic and pork sweetness, the greasiest, truest thing she'd eaten in a year, sitting on her tongue like an argument she was losing.

She cut it to ninety seconds overnight. She added subtitles, music, a title card. The caption read: Day 5: my friend shows me how a REAL Hegang family lives Their joy broke my heart. We have so much to learn. #RealChina #povertycore

Two words in that sentence were invented, and one of them did all the damage.

Mengmeng never said we're poor. What she'd said, laughing, translating her grandfather, was: he says the stove's heart burns cheaper than gas and warms truer — he thinks everything modern is a scam except the pears. What the captions and the comment sections made of the ninety seconds was another thing entirely, the thing the format de‑manded: a sad beautiful poor family, grateful and simple, so

pure it hurts, protect her smile, this is why I could never leave China's countryside, the dignity, four million views of a kitchen table that belonged to nobody in the comments at all — least of all the family, whose phone rang that week with a cousin's voice asking, careful, amused, cruel in the way family can be, whether little Mengmeng was famous now, whether the Americans had seen her stove.

And beneath the video, in the thread where someone had asked is the teen okay? does she know she's content?, a reply from an account made of numbers, toneless as ever:

她知道。她只是没被问过。

She knows. She just was never asked.

※

Bai Shuang heard about the video the way the compound heard everything: through Ma, who heard it from the Liangs, who saw it in their group chat, where a cousin in Daqing had sent it with a note: isn't this Building 11's Qin-aunty? the NPC grandma? lol.

Ma had become a meme. That sentence took Bai Shuang a full day to process, and longer to survive.

There were compilations. There were fan edits of her mother shoveling snow scored to music; there was a merchandise mockup — ICE SHOVEL GRANDMA, EST. HEGANG — on a print-on-demand site; there was a thread analyzing her technique ("the efficiency! the form!") written with the affectionate condescension of people watching a clever animal; and threaded through all of it, unmistakably, the note that Bai Shuang had spent her whole adult life hearing underneath outsiders' love for this town: how charming, that they don't know any better. At the market on Sunday, two teenagers recognized Ma and asked her — politely, delightedly, phones out — if she would do the shovel for their

camera. Ma looked at them the way she looked at weather. Then she picked up her actual shovel, cleared the pavement in front of them without one wasted motion, straightened up, and said, in dialect, kindly and finally:

"Done. Now you've seen it live. Costs more than video." And walked on, leaving the boys standing in her beautifully cleared path, laughing uncertainly, filming each other instead.

Bai Shuang found the DMs that evening. An Ran had sent Ma a digital red packet — two thousand yuan, for the video, please accept, it should be yours — into an inbox Ma did not check and could not have used; and when that sat unanswered for a week, a physical parcel: a down blanket, expensive, from a brand An Ran's followers would recognize. It arrived at the compound gate and caused the week's second crisis, because a gift of that size from a stranger was either charity or debt, and neither sat well in Building 11.

"Return it," Bai Shuang said.

"I intend to," Ma said. "But not empty-handed. Nobody returns empty-handed in a civilized county." And she spent a day at the stove, and sent the blanket back via the Liangs' grandson carrying a crate of her own pickled cabbage, jars sealed with cloth and rubber band, plus a note in her upright schoolteacher's-hand writing, addressed to the girl with the camera:

Comrade. The cabbage is yours; the blanket is not needed; the video was not mine to sell, so the money stays with you and we will consider it wages for the filming, which is fair. A request: the boy who films sparrows does not charge the sparrow rent. If you film people, eat with them first. Come eat with us. Winter is long and my daughter teaches school two streets away and believes in talking to strangers less than I do. — Qin

An Ran received the crate at her building's gate and read the note standing in the wind, and something happened in her chest that was not the old clench — something warmer and far more dangerous, the feeling of being seen accurately by a stranger who asked nothing, which no amount of followers had ever once produced.

※

The confrontation, when it came, happened at Cloud Water, over Yun-ge's counter, in front of God and the oat milk.

Bai Shuang had not planned it. She had come in from the cold needing caffeine after the assessment-period meeting from hell — the district office's third memorandum about numbers, the phrase no bad news before January still ringing in her skull along with everything she wasn't allowed yet to say aloud — and there at the window seat, laptop open, editing footage with her little cigarette-pack camera beside the cup, sat the girl with the camera, the flat girl, the NPC grandma's manager, wearing the town's misery in well-cut layers.

"You're the teacher," An Ran said, before she could stop herself — because she'd seen her in the courtyard videos, the woman collecting children from the snow; the migrant group chats spoke of her in hushed tones. "The one who— "

"And you're the girl filming my mother," Bai Shuang said.

The café went quiet in the way rooms go quiet when a temperature drops.

"My mother," Bai Shuang said, evenly, walking it forward, watching the girl's face with the same attention she gave a student who hadn't done the reading and didn't know it yet, "has shoveled that courtyard since before you were born. She clears it because the postman stopped coming to our block in 2021 and the old people need a path, and because if she

doesn’t move in the morning the cold gets into her hands by noon and she drops things for the rest of the day. There is no content in that sentence. There’s just Tuesday.” She set her coins on the counter for the cheapest tea. “Four million people watched her do it and none of them know her name, her knees, or why. You know all three now. So tell me, camera girl — what exactly did the four million get? And what exactly did she?”

The silence stretched. Behind the counter, Yun-ge polished a cup very thoroughly. An Ran looked at her own screen — at the timeline of the pear-video, frozen mid-frame on Meng-meng’s laughing grandfather — and heard the answer assemble itself honestly, which was the worst option available:

“They got… to feel something?” she said, and it came out as the question it secretly was. “They got to care about a place they’d never—look, I credit everyone, I offered the family— “

“You offered,” Bai Shuang said. “That’s lovely. Did anyone ask to be a feeling?”

She left then, tea undrunk, coins staying on the counter — and at the door she paused, because fairness was a discipline her father had drilled into her alongside the union songs, and turned back, and gave the girl the true thing, free of charge:

“For what it’s worth — your eye is good. The frame with the stove door is better than anything the provincial station has shot in a decade. That’s not the compliment you think it is.” A beat. “The camera sees true, camera girl. It’s the person behind it who decides what’s allowed to be in the frame — and what’s allowed to be a person. Learn the difference before spring, and you might turn into somebody worth the winter.”

The bell above the door clattered. An Ran sat in the ringing quiet with her footage glowing and the tea going cold, and did what her generation did with unbearable accuracy: she drafted

a post about it. A local teacher just taught me the hardest lesson of my year. Twelve hundred words, humble, reflective, perfectly calibrated. She got to the end, reread it, and understood that even her apology had a caption voice, that the caption voice went all the way down, that somewhere in Shenzhen she had mislaid the hand that worked the shutter of her own self and replaced it with an engagement dashboard — and she closed the draft unsent, unposted, unpublished, hers.

Then she opened the transfer app, and paid the market's coal-seller stall a winter's worth of coal for the grandmother at the tofu corner, anonymous, marked only from the flat girl, who ate with you — because eating with them first was going to take learning, and learning, unlike content, couldn't be rushed — and sat alone in the loud quiet of the café while outside, north past the rooftops, the old headframe stood black against the early dusk, patient as a held breath.

That night, for the first time since October, the knocking above her ceiling did not come at all.

She lay in the dark listening to the absence — the warm wall silent, the void overhead empty of its considerate feet — and discovered that she had, somewhere in the last week, begun to think of the sound as company. She fell asleep composing messages to Mengmeng — I'm sorry, I'm deleting it, come eat at my place, I'll cook badly — and woke to find them saved as drafts, unsent, and the number of her followers larger than the day before, and the frost on her window drawn in long white strokes like tally marks kept by something counting toward spring.

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CHAPTER 4

Content

The drone went up over the old Xinxing works on the last Sunday of November, in the hour when the sodium lamps came on and the cold turned from substance into architecture, and it saw everything, which was the problem.

An Ran was there because Fatty Liu had asked her — flattered her, hired her, eight hundred yuan and a featured tag — to shoot the promotional material for Ruin & Light. You have the eye, miss. The Beijing people love your angle. So she stood at the fence with the operator, a jittering art-school kid called Xiao Pang, and watched the monitor while the machine climbed into the violet air: the headframe rising seventy meters of riveted black-red, the capped shaft below it wearing its concrete plug like a sealed wellhead, the office ruins with their knocked-out eyes full of blue snow-shadow, and strung along the fence line, small and festive, the first test strings of the solstice lights.

"Gorgeous," An Ran said, and meant it, and hated how much she meant it, and filmed her own face reacting to the beauty of the ruin, because that was the grammar now: feel - ing, captured; witness, monetized; the wound framed at a pleasing angle.

Then Xiao Pang, fiddling, switched the camera to its low-light mode, and the world on the monitor turned to thermal ghost-gray, and the fence line lit up with movement.

"There," An Ran said. "What's — pause it."

They paused it. They leaned in. Along the top rail of the fence, from the gate to the far corner, the gray-on-gray showed a procession of heat-shapes: low and slinky, cat-sized, moving

west in one direction with the unhurried unanimity of commuters — and there were dozens of them. Dozens. The shapes poured along the rail in a thin bright river, spaced at even intervals, and where the river reached the shadow of the headframe it did not disperse, did not scatter the way animals scatter, but gathered, and pooled, and began, in the ghost-light of the thermal image, to rise.

One by one, the shapes sat up.

On the monitor, in the parking lot, in the falling cold, An Ran watched thirty-odd small silhouettes lift their front halves off the fence rail until they stood upright against the dark, forepaws folded, tails hanging straight, all facing the same direction — not west anymore, not along the fence. Outward. Toward the camera. Toward them.

"That's dogs," Xiao Pang said, in the voice people use for things that aren't dogs. "Stray dogs. There's, uh, there's a lot of stray dogs around industrial sites— "

"Dogs don't sit like that."

"Raccoon dogs. There's raccoon dogs in Heilongjiang, they're, like, famous for— "

"Play it," An Ran said.

He played it. For eleven seconds the drone hung in the freezing air filming thirty upright shapes standing motionless in the dark, and the shapes stood motionless in the freezing air filming, in their way, the drone; and then the drone's battery alarm chirped, and the machine tilted home, and the footage ended with a smear of violet sky.

They watched it six times in the van with the heater roaring. By the fourth viewing they had constructed a perfectly serviceable explanation — stray animals, drawn by the site's rat population, habituated, weird lighting, compression artifacts — and the explanation was even mostly true, and An Ran edited the teaser down to twelve seconds of headframe beauty

shots with the thermal segment cut to a flash-and-gone, because spooky sells, and Fatty Liu posted it at prime time with the caption:

Ruin & Light 腊月亮灯　Hegang's industrial soul, reborn. Even the locals are turning out to watch　腊月夜，老矿复活。Tickets in bio.

It did forty thousand views in a night. It might have done more, might have become merely one more pretty piece of decay-content scrolling into the feed's eternal midnight, except for the comments, which behaved like comments never behaved.

Under every repost, in every fork of the share tree, the same accounts made of numbers kept arriving — no pictures, no histories, flat toneless Chinese — and they did not argue, did not joke, did not engage the way the internet engaged. They stated. And beneath the ticket link, once, from a single account, in characters that stayed with An Ran the way a splinter stays in a finger:

你们在给它们的门挂彩灯。

You are hanging festival lanterns on their door.

She showed Fatty Liu. He scrolled through the strange comments with his gold tooth gleaming in the van's dome light, and his face did something complicated — a flicker of the hitch she'd seen once before, over the word candles — and then he laughed, loud and easy, and said: "Water armies! Competitors buying hate comments, ha! Miss, in this business, if nobody's smearing you, you're not selling anything," and he rolled up the strange comments like a window on winter, and the tickets kept selling, and the lights kept getting strung, and nobody in a position to stop it stopped it.

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The petition against the art show collected four hundred signatures in nine days, which in a shrinking city of exhausted people amounted to a riot.

Old Han wrote the cover letter himself, in fountain pen, and read it aloud in the staff room with the door shut, and it was measured and factual and devastating — the site's proximity to the memorial, the methane certifications of 2016 lapsing unrenewed, the insult of festival lighting over ground holding nine thousand men — and the district office responded within the week with a statement confirming that all safety permits were in order, issued by an office that no longer employed a safety officer, signed by a bureau whose seal had been reused from another document, and everyone in Hegang understood exactly what that meant, and the show stayed scheduled, because there was no institution left with the money or the spine to unschedule it, and the town absorbed this the way it absorbed everything now, with the shrug of the bankrupt: gu qiang bu dao — the bone either holds or it doesn't.

Bai Shuang confronted Fatty Liu outside the school gate, in front of God and the crossing guard.

"Call it off, Dabao."

"And refund four hundred tickets? Miss Shuang, the Beijing people are here already, the sound artist flew in from Berlin— "

"There's methane in those galleries that's been waiting twenty years for a spark, and you're hanging candles— "

"Ventilated!" He spread his arms, big, warm, ridiculous in his elk-patterned sweater, a man built like a stove selling tickets to a fire. "Certified! Listen — you think I don't know what's out there? My father worked the second level, Shuangjie. Twenty-one years. He was there, that night, one level down from your uncle, and he came up when a hundred and eight didn't, and it ate him alive from the inside for fifteen years —

the cough, the guilt, the cough — I grew up sleeping next to that. You think I'm doing this to dishonor them?" His voice dropped, and for once the salesman's varnish cracked all the way through, and underneath was something raw and old and horribly like grief. "Nobody looks at that fence, Shuang-jie. Nobody's looked in fifteen years except old women burning paper. The country forgot it, the province forgot it, our own kids leave so fast they don't even learn it. I'm putting lights on it. Four hundred people are going to stand in the cold and look at that headframe and feel something, and half of them will google it after, and they'll find the hundred and eight, and they'll find the nine thousand, and my father's shift bell will have been heard by somebody outside this zip code before I die. Call it what you want." He picked up his bag of sunflower seeds. "It's the only funeral this town ever got."

He walked off toward his van, and Bai Shuang stood in the road hating him with unusual thoroughness — because the speech was magnificent, and because she'd watched him build it, phrase by phrase, over years of selling tickets to other people's griefs, and because the worst thing about Fatty Liu, the thing that made him the town's perfect traitor, was that every lie he told had a truth in it, the way bait has meat in it.

Behind her, the crossing guard — a grandmother of about seventy with a red armband and a face like a walnut — spat expertly into the gutter and said, to no one, in the toneless voice of settled fact:

"He hangs lanterns on it, it'll come to the lanterns. It always liked company, that thing under the hill. That's why the old people never built houses facing the north slope." She tucked her hands back in her sleeves. "Two hundred years, the villages up there wouldn't graze goats on that side. Smart goats, stupid times."

※

Song Xiaoman had ninety-two thousand followers and a series called Retiring at Thirty, and on the first Saturday of December she went live from her renovated flat in the Gongnong district to unwrap a haul of vintage knitwear, and for the first eleven minutes it was perfect content — the un-boxing, the lamplight, the murmured prices, the little gasps — and An Ran watched it with a cup of Cloud Water's oat latte going cold, homesick for a Shanghai she had never actually liked.

At minute eleven, Xiaoman held a mohawk cardigan up to her body in the way streamers do, checking the mirror — and stopped.

She stopped mid-gesture. She stopped smiling. And she turned her head, slowly, away from the ring light, away from the mirror, toward the wall behind her desk — toward, a viewer with sharp eyes would note later, the heating riser where it entered the plaster — and she looked at it, and her eyes stopped blinking, and the chat, which had been flowing at the pace of hearts and emojis, began to notice.

um xiaoman jie? hello??? she's frozen lol stream died guys. guys look at her eyes. turn it off turn it off turn it o

For forty seconds — the recording exists, re-uploaded a hundred times before the deletions caught it, the clip everyone would come to call the Hegang ghost girl — Song Xiaoman, thirty-one years old, formerly of Hangzhou, stood in her own livestream looking at a wall, unblinking, her lips parted, her throat producing a sound the microphones rendered as a soft rising trill, almost like a pigeon, almost like a dial tone, and then she said — clearly, pleasantly, in a voice pitched slightly wrong, a semitone above its owner, the voice of someone doing an impression of Xiaoman from memory —

” It’ s warmer where we are. You should all come.”

—and the stream ended, and the clip detonated across the platforms, and by Monday morning Hegang was trending for the second time in its history: not for cheap apartments this time, but for whatever the country decided the clip was. Pos - sessed streamer. Mental breakdown. Viral marketing for a horror film. New form of seizure disorder. Brain rot, literal - ized. The explanations competed cheerfully; none of them required anything to be true.

The hipster diaspora of Hegang split along the fault line the clip exposed. Half of them leaned in — liminal king behavior, said the ironic posters; the town’ s haunted aesthetic is unmatched — and booked December flights. The other half went quiet, and packed, and listed their renovated flats at a loss, and the word that traveled their group chats, typed and retyped and finally banned by admins, was environment: the town’ s energy was heavy, the town’ s history was unre - solved, the town was, one departing designer wrote in the farewell post that got seventeen hundred sympathetic likes, fundamentally unsafe for sensitive nervous systems, and Yun- ge pinned to the Cloud Water door a handwritten sign reading NO GHOST TALK — THIS IS A SPACE OF CALM, and charged nine yuan extra for the spiced tea, and the regulars paid it, because calm was worth nine yuan in December in Hegang, calm was worth anything.

An Ran went to Xiaoman’ s flat on the Monday, because someone had to, because the group chat had devolved into speculation and flower-order links, because they had met at a flat viewing like soldiers of the same defeated army and that was, apparently, the strongest bond An Ran had left.

The door was unlocked. Inside, the flat was warm — genu - inely, deeply warm, warmer than any flat in Hegang had a right to be, the radiators on the east wall hot enough to hiss — and

rearranged. The bed had been moved to the room's center. Around it, dragged inward from the corners, the furniture formed a rough rampart, cushions and quilts packed dense against the walls' base, and in the angle between radiator and bookshelf, on a throne of folded duvets, sat Song Xiaoman, wearing the mohawk cardigan and nothing on her feet, her ankles crossed, her hands folded in her lap — composed, tidy, sane-seeming, a woman expecting guests.

"Anran!" Warm. Normal. Almost. "Sit, sit. Sorry about the mess, we've been — comfortable is more important than tidy this time of year, you know?"

"We?"

"Mm." Xiaoman's eyes were dry and bright and steady, and her blink rate was a rumor. On the desk, the laptop faced the wall. In the corner, the freezer hummed — An Ran could hear it now, over the radiator hiss, working hard — and she did not open it, because she had already understood what she would find, the same curve of careful meat, the same squirrel-neatness, and understanding it turned her stomach in a way the thermal footage never had. "You look cold," Xiaoman said kindly. "Everyone looks cold now. The pipes are getting ready. Come here by the warm wall, we saved you a spot."

"Xiaoman. Hey." An Ran crouched to her eye level, heart slamming. "It's me. It's Anran. From the viewing day, re‑member, the corner unit in Nanshan, you said I overpaid by two thousand and you were right— "

"I remember everything," Xiaoman said placidly. "That's the trouble with before." She reached out and pat‑ted An Ran's wrist with fingers that were warm, blood-warm, fever-warm, in a flat at a normal temperature. Her smile was gentle and absolutely present and aimed, An Ran realized with a lurch, not quite at her face — at a point just above her left ear, the way you look at someone standing behind the person

you’re talking to. “You shouldn’t have knocked back, you know,” Xiaoman confided. “That night. In the ceiling. It counts knocks the same as bows. But it’s all right.” A pause, and the trill rose softly in her throat, under the words, harmonizing with the radiators. “It likes you. It asked about you today.”

An Ran did not remember leaving. She remembered the stairwell, and the cold hitting like a rescue, and standing on the frozen street below with her phone in her hand, her thumb hovering over the emergency functions, the police, the hospitals, the group chat, the post button — forty thousand people would see this, forty thousand people would help — and then she thought about the comments made of numbers, and about a knock counted as a bow, and she put the phone away, and stood in the street below her friend’s warm windows, and for the first time since Shenzhen since the bathroom floor since 3:47 a.m., An Ran had absolutely no idea what to post.

※

Sun Ying kept the notebook because the computer had no field for it.

Eleven years a dispatcher, third-generation Hegang, she handled four hundred calls a shift — disputes, drunks, chest pains, the elderly fallen at home, the endless administrative sleet of a city in restructuring — and the system logged each call as an island: time, location, category, closed. The system did not do patterns. Patterns required someone to look sideways across the islands, and looking sideways was not a task, and unpaid tasks did not survive restructuring.

So: the notebook. Green cover, grid paper. Page one, November 9th, 03:12 — male juvenile, found standing in courtyard, Building 19/Huafu compound, facing north, non-

responsive, no intoxication, no injury, returned to unit by patrol, guardian notified. Page two, November 17th, 02:48 — female juvenile, different compound, same compass bearing, same posture, guardian asleep, guardian says she does this sometimes lately, is this the hamster challenge? should we take her phone? Page five: two juveniles, same night, same com - pound, standing four meters apart, facing north. Page nine: three. Page eleven: a delivery rider, nineteen, Zheng Yang, found at 04:00 in the stairwell of his own building, seated on the second-floor landing facing the wall, gloves off despite −21°C, non-responsive, hands folded in his lap; hospitalized; discharged in forty-eight hours as fully physically normal; his sister's follow-up complaint logged and closed — he has not spoken since October, please advise — advised: see psychiatry; psychiatry: see Jiamusi; Jiamusi: four-week wait.

Page fourteen, in the margin, in Sun Ying's small hand - writing, the only hypothesis permitted to exist, because it fit in a margin: All of them face north. Ask why.

She asked why at the end of December, off shift, standing in Old Man Guan's kitchen with a jar of white liquor between them, because her grandmother had known his wife, and be - cause page fourteen deserved better than a margin. Guan turned his teacup slowly on the table, north, south, north, like a man dowsing.

"North slope," he said. "Where the mountain breathes wrong." He drank, wiped his mustache. "In the mines we had a word for air that moves against design. We said the mountain had taken a notion. You respect a notion. You check your lamp, you test for gas twice, you post a man at the regu - lator." He looked at her over the jar, mild as milk. "You're posting a man at the regulator, dispatcher. It's you. There's nobody else."

"I filed a report," Sun Ying said. "Twice."

"How many pages?"

"Fourteen."

"Then it's in a drawer," said Old Man Guan, "with all the other true things this town can't afford," and poured her another drink, and out his window, north over the roofs, the sodium glow above the old headframe flickered — once, twice, in rhythm, like something practicing a signal — and neither of them pointed at it, and neither of them looked directly at it, and both of them noted it, in the manner of their professions, and said goodnight at the door like civilized people, and went to bed in a town where every heating vent in every wall breathed warm into rooms where, in the dark, something small and patient had learned that human beings, given a question asked in the right voice, will almost always answer.

Almost always.

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CHAPTER 5

The Glass Bones

On the last Friday of November, No. 4 Middle School chartered two buses and sent its first-year classes up the Heluo highway to the Dongshan memorial hall, because the curriculum said they must, and because the curriculum was one of the last documents in the city that anyone still obeyed.

Bai Shuang rode in the second bus, wedged between the emergency hatch and a boy who never stopped narrating his handheld game, and watched Hegang unspool backward through the frosted glass: the new towers, the dead co-op, the railway cut, and then the country proper — the gangue hills first, black pyramids older than her father, snow on their shoulders like dust on furniture; then the subsidence zones, fenced in rusted wire, where the ground had quietly given up holding level and whole streets stood tilted, doors agape on empty rooms, a bicycle still chained to a rack in front of a house nobody had lived in for fifteen years; then, strung along the horizon, the municipal hoardings in their faded red: **GREEN HEGANG. TRANSFORMATIVE DEVELOPMENT. A CITY OF THE FUTURE.**

"Everyone got their worksheets?" called Gao Wei from the front, with the false heartiness of a math teacher pressed into field-trip duty. "Twelve questions. This is a graded trip, people. And nobody touches the glass. Nobody breathes on the glass."

Old Han had come too, uninvited and unrefused, in his good overcoat, with his fountain pen and his cane, and for the length of the highway he lectured over the engine noise — unbothered by the groans, powered by them, the way old

teachers are — about what the children were about to see. "You'll hear the word resource today," he said. "Coal resource. Human resources. Remember, when you hear it, that resources are things you take out of the ground. The question the whole twentieth century never asked out loud is what gets taken out of whom."

Doudou, three rows back, had his phone out the window filming the subsidence fences roll by, and Bai Shuang let him, because the alternative was confiscation and because — she was honest with herself at thirty-six — because his eye was good, and the tilted streets through his lens looked like something that deserved witnesses.

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The memorial hall stood beside the old Xinxing mine office on a shoulder of ground above the sinkhole: a low granite building, cold as the hill it sat on, and the children poured off the buses into the parking lot with the shrieking relief of any children anywhere, and had to be gathered, and counted, and gathered again. Bai Shuang found herself counting automatically — thirty-eight, thirty-nine — a habit the winter had already begun to install in her, though she didn't know yet what it was rehearsal for.

The curator's name was Shen, and he was seventy-something and shaped like the doorframe of a small building, and he had the voice of a man who had said the same hard things so many times they had worn smooth as river stones. He gathered the classes at the hall's entrance, breath steaming, and looked over their heads for a moment at the white hills before he began.

"You are standing on the Dongshan coal mine," he said. "From 1931 to 1945, this ground was worked under occupation. The policy of the time was written in four characters: 以人

换煤. Trade men for coal. Men were taken from the roads, recruited by lies, bought from their villages for the price of a mule. They were fed six liang of grain a day — that's this much." He cupped his two hands together, a small bowl of air. "Half that when they were sick. There was no half of a man, so you can work out the arithmetic yourself."

He led them inside, into the warmth that wasn't — the hall was heated to a grudging twelve degrees, enough for the artifacts, not for comfort — and Bai Shuang watched the children's noise fall off them in layers, the way it does, the way it always did, the way it had for every class since 1968: first the horseplay died at the door, then the whispering, then the shuffling, and by the time they came around the last partition and into the main hall, thirty-nine thirteen-year-olds were making the sound that the building had been built to hold. Silence.

The floor was glass.

Not all of it — panels of it, thick glass set flush in the granite, and under the glass, lit from below by lights that never turned off, lay the excavated corner of the sinkhole: eighty square meters of the pit, preserved as it had been found, and the pit was made of people. They lay as they had been carted, stacked like cordwood, layer under layer under layer, and the lights made their bones yellow-white, and the whole floor was a single slow tide of them, and the room was so quiet the children could hear the ventilation hum and nothing else.

"Nine of every ten who went down," Curator Shen said, "did not come back. The saying was older than the occupation — 井口就是鬼门关，十个下去九不还 — the pithead is hell's gate; ten go down, nine don't return. But under the occupation it stopped being a saying and became a schedule." He walked them along the glass, slow, his cane clicking. "This corner alone, when they excavated in 1968 — one corner,

eighty square meters, of a pit forty meters by thirty and seven deep — this corner held a bit over a thousand. The whole pit held more. How many more, no one can say. Estimates run to nine thousand for the Dongshan grounds. Five men for every thousand tons shipped. That was the exchange rate." He let the number sit. "Your phones, your trains, the heat under your floors — the price schedule is in this room."

The children moved along the glass like people moving through a temple, and the things they saw were the things Bai Shuang had seen at their age, and her father before her: the skulls with the bullet holes. The spines bent wrong. And the wire — a single wire, strung through the eye sockets of skull after skull after skull, threading them together like the world's worst laundry, and it was the wire that always got them, that got everyone, because the mind refuses it, looks for a mistake, a display trick, and finds none.

A girl in the front row — Bai Shuang didn't know her, a second-year — asked it in a whisper, and Shen answered it the same way, because he had answered it a thousand times: "Why the wire, gong-gong?"

"So they could be counted," Shen said. "The dead were inventory. Inventory gets strung, so the count comes quick at the pit mouth. One, two, three." He looked at his own shoes a moment. "Whoever strung them that day didn't finish. There's a gap in the wire, near the north wall. The count was never completed. We leave the gap as they left it."

In the video booth at the hall's end, an old man's testimony played on a loop — Xu Yanzhang, fourteen years old in 1942, lured from his village with promises of good wages, and the recording was decades old now and the man in it had died famous and mourned, but his voice still said the thing it had always said, in dialect, flat as a ledger: they carried the living out on poles at the end, still talking, still asking to go home,

and by night the wolves had them. The children watched a minute of it each, the way you look at the sun.

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It was at the glass, on the way back toward the doors, that Bai Shuang heard the counting.

Qu Xiaoyan had drifted to the north wall — of course she had; the girl had been drifting toward walls since October, and half the school had already filed her under hamster girl and moved on — and she stood with her mittened hand pressed flat against the glass cover, looking down into the yellow-white layers, and her lips were moving. No sound carried. But Bai Shuang, passing close on the arm of a straggling line, heard the shape of it, the rising-falling cadence under the breath, and then, for two seconds, the numbers themselves:

"…九百四十一，九百四十二，九百四十三……"

She stopped. The line carried her along; she let it, and looked back once, and Xiaoyan's lips had gone still, and the girl was watching the north wall of the pit — the wire's un-finished gap, the count that was never completed — with the mild, patient attention Bai Shuang had last seen aimed at a radiator pipe.

At the doors, she caught Curator Shen's sleeve. "The corner under the glass," she said quietly. "The count. How high did it run?"

Shen looked at her for a moment, the old appraiser's flicker, weighing whether she could afford the answer. "A bit over a thousand," he said. "The excavation log says one thousand and forty-one confirmed, and then the ground water took the deeper layers past counting." He rubbed his jaw. "Why?"

"No reason," Bai Shuang said. "Thank you for what you do here."

"Someone has to keep the books," said Shen, and tapped his temple, where a man keeps them, and went back in out of the cold.

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Outside, the children were given twenty minutes in the snowfield between the hall and the fences, and the noise came back into them like blood into a numb limb — screaming, snowballs, the great collective exhale of the young leaving a heavy room — and Bai Shuang stood by the buses with Han and let them have it.

"You saw the girl counting," Han said. Not a question. He had been a chemistry teacher for thirty-four years; he missed nothing that could be measured.

"I saw her."

"Mm." Han drew on his cigarette and looked up at the hill, where the fenced ruins of the pithead stood against the gray sky, headframe black on white. "When I was a boy, the old people wouldn't graze goats on this side of the hill. Wouldn't build. Wouldn't even cut firewood, some of them. Said the ground here was already paid for." He tapped ash. "Superstition, we called it, and we were right, and it didn't matter. You can be superstitious and correct at the same time, Shuang-jie. The two conditions are not exclusive." He dropped the cigarette and set his heel on it, precisely. "Watch your students this winter. All of them. The ones who stare, the ones who count. A place this deep in debt keeps its own book-keeping, and lately— " he paused, choosing, for once, to finish a thought, "—lately I keep meeting children who've learned to count things they were never taught."

It was Doudou, of course, who saw the animal.

He came running to the fence line with his phone out, breath ragged, eyes lit with the purest scientific excitement —

"Ma! Mom! Look, LOOK, by the far fence, I got it— " — and the clip was four seconds and it was the usual miracle-filming, too far, then too shaky: the white field, the black fence line, and beyond it, out on the unmarked snow where the old gal - leries ran under the hill, a yellow shape moving low and quick. Then the shape stopped. Rose. Stood upright against the snow-glow for two full seconds, forepaws folded, facing the buses, the children, the noise —

— and dropped, and flowed along the fence, and was gone into the ground-shadow of the headframe.

"A dog," said Gao Wei comfortably, over his shoulder. "A yellow dog stood up. They do that. Put it away, Douzi, we' re boarding."

"It stood like the one on Jiefang Road," Doudou said, to the van window, to anyone. "It stood exactly like— "

"Boarding, Douzi."

On the ride down the hill, the buses grew quiet by degrees, the way they always did, the children sinking into the post-memorial silence that no teacher had ever once had to impose, and Bai Shuang watched the subsidence fences slide past — the tilted streets, the chained bicycle, the doors standing open on rooms where nobody had lived since the ground began to move — and thought about what Shen had said, and what Han had said, and about a girl' s lips moving under a breath, counting to a number no one living had ever taught her, and about the gap in the wire near the north wall, where the count stopped, and about who, in this town' s long arithmetic of the taken, had never once been tallied — and what, given a winter and an open door, a thing uncounted might do about it.

At the memorial gate, as the first bus pulled out, she looked back once. Fresh offerings stood in the snow beside the gate - posts, laid out neat: three sticks of incense, burned to the stub,

and a chicken's head, and a paper spirit-money weighted with a stone.

Nobody official maintained that gate. The memorial's budget had been cut twice since restructuring. Somebody in Dongshan — some family, some debt-holder — was still paying the old accounts, in the old currency, at the old post, in the falling snow, and had been for a long time.

The bus took the curve above the railway cut, and the hill slid out of sight behind its own black trees, and Doudou, beside her, watched the four seconds of footage loop on his phone screen, over and over, all the way home.

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CHAPTER 6

Assessment Season

Director Kang had one principle, and he stated it at every staff meeting with the serenity of a man reciting the weather: a school is a ship, and news is a hole below the waterline. He had said it for eleven years, through the consolidation of three schools into his, through the hiring freeze, through the year the boiler failed during finals and forty children wrote their essays in quilted coats and the story never once appeared in print. The ship sailed. The holes were patched from inside. Hegang No. 4 Middle School's average held, the district office sent commendations instead of auditors, and Director Kang retained, uniquely in the city's education bureau, both his building and his budget line — which made him, in the honest arithmetic of a restructuring city, not a villain but a success, and everyone aboard knew it, including the people patching.

The meeting about Wang Chuan was held on the fourth of December, in the warm office behind the auditorium where the tea was better, and Bai Shuang sat in it with her hands folded and watched the machinery work.

Wang Chuan was fourteen, repeating first-year, big for his age, quiet, the son of a welder gone to Tangshan and a mother who cleaned rooms at the coal-miners' hotel; his file contained one line of academic history (slow starter, needs encouragement) and, as of that Monday morning, one incident report written in Gao Wei's careful hand. During morning self-study, unsupervised for four minutes while Gao Wei took a call, Wang Chuan had gotten down on the floor of the classroom and crawled the length of the aisle under the desks — silent, fluid, quick — and when a boy had grabbed his hood

to stop him, Wang Chuan had turned around under the boy's hands with a speed no spine should have and bitten through the hood's drawstring an inch from his fingers, and then stood up, dusted his knees, returned to his seat, and completed thirty problems.

"He shows off for the apps," said the grade director, reading the incident report again. "This is the second crawling video this month. There was the girl— "

"There was nothing," Director Kang said mildly, "on any screen belonging to this school." He let the sentence sit exactly long enough. "There is a student whose behavior has become disruptive during assessment season. His homeroom teacher tells me his grandmother lives in Muling. In the countryside. Good air, good food, fewer… distractions." He looked around the table with his ship's-captain smile. "A family transfer. For his own benefit. The paperwork will say what paperwork says. Teacher Gao will process it this week."

"His mother works nights," Gao Wei said. His voice was carefully neutral; his pen was perfectly still. "She signed the form already?"

"The mother," said Director Kang, "wants what's best for her son. We all do." And that was the whole of the meeting, eleven minutes, tea refilled twice, and Bai Shuang walked out of it knowing two things with equal certainty: that Wang Chuan was about to vanish from every record in the city into a village with no clinic and no signal, his symptoms unobserved by anyone who might recognize them; and that she would sign nothing, say nothing, and be complicit anyway, because complicity in a ship this size is ambient — it's in the air system, it comes out of every vent.

She caught Gao Wei in the stairwell afterward, alone, and didn't soften it.

"You processed a disappearance."

"I processed a transfer." He didn't look up from buttoning his coat. "You want the alternative? I write the truth — possible conversion disorder, cluster pattern, please investigate — it goes in his file, the file goes to the district, the district calls Director Kang, Director Kang loses plausible deniability, my assessment bonus evaporates, my wife's medical debt does not, and Wang Chuan goes to his grandmother's in Muling anyway, because his mother can't fight the system either. Same outcome, plus I'm broke and he's labeled." He got the last button. "Everyone wins, Teacher Bai. That's what nobody wants to hear. Everyone wins except the truth, and the truth has never once paid a bill in this city."

"And if whatever's happening to him follows him to Muling? To some village with no one watching?"

Gao Wei paused on the stair, one flight down, and she saw the question land somewhere real — saw him actually consider it, the crawl, the drawstring, the thirty neat problems afterward.

"Then it'll be quiet there too," he said finally. "That's the whole point of villages." And he went down into the cold, and the paperwork went through on Friday, and Wang Chuan's name left the rolls of Hegang No. 4 Middle School as smoothly as a stone slides under ice, leaving no hole, because the ship had already patched it.

The patch held for eleven days. Then the grandmother phoned the school office from Muling — a neighbor's phone; she had none herself — and left a message with the secretary, who printed it and routed it, with the instinct of a survivor, to the one teacher whose file had no enemies in it. Bai Shuang read it at the staff-room desk on a Tuesday afternoon, one page in a schoolchild's careful hand:

Teacher Bai. Chuan-chuan is well. Eats everything. Does his workbooks by lamplight. Only one thing, since you asked after

his sleeping. He stands at night by the window, looking north, and does not be cold standing there. Behind our house is the old Shengli works, closed twenty years, but he says the wall by his bed is warm, like a kang. He says it sings him to sleep. He has never slept better in his life. Should I be worried? — Wang, née Liu Mei.

Bai Shuang sat with the page while the radiators ticked around her, and felt the full shape of the thing Gao Wei had built without meaning to: the paperwork hadn't misplaced a problem child. It had mailed one — stamped, sorted, and de‑livered straight into the arms of the hill, past every eyes-down rule in Hegang, to a village with no rosters, no sulphur, no grandmother who knew the old terms, where a warm wall sang a lonely boy to sleep every night with nobody watching and nobody allowed, by policy, to hear about it.

She wrote back that evening — care of the school, care of the neighbor's phone — three sentences long: Mei-yi. Worry. Keep him away from the north window after dark. If anything asks him what he sees, he answers nothing. Burn this letter. And she kept a photocopy in the drawer where the vent pho‑tographs lived, in the growing file of things the ship would never once acknowledge had happened aboard.

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The journalist called Bai Shuang's desk phone that same week, and kept calling.

Song Wen, provincial evening paper, social affairs desk — she had the gentlest predator's voice Bai Shuang had ever heard, all sympathy and patience, and she was very good: " Teacher Bai, I understand completely, you can't speak, of course. I'm only asking about the heating smells. The vents. Parents talk, you know how it is — they say three classrooms moved, they say the maintenance log blames drains, but the

vents don’t connect to drains. You’re a literature teacher. You of all people know what a metaphor that is.” Click.” Just the log, Teacher Bai. Photographs of the maintenance log. No names. You’d be protecting the children by— “

Bai Shuang stonewalled her four times, per instruction, and felt each refusal sit in her chest like swallowed river ice. On the fifth call she said, quietly, off-script, before hanging up: “When it breaks open — and it will, things this heavy don’t stay buried in a town where the ground itself shifts — call me first. Not for quotes. I’ll give you the order things happened in, so your readers don’t get it wrong.” And heard the pause on the line, and understood she’d just acquired the most dangerous thing either of them owned: an ally with a deadline.

The vent log itself had become its own genre of institutional fiction. Three entries a week now, in three rotating handwritings, each blaming dry drain traps in buildings where the nearest drain was floors away from the smell; the contractor’s invoice for the November grille-tightening had been rejected by the district as non-budgeted emergency expenditure (the district having no category for emergencies anymore, only for expenditures); and when Bai Shuang photographed the log herself, quietly, on her own phone, for no reason she could have defended to Director Kang or anyone else, she found she wasn’t surprised to discover the photographs mattered more than she could say. Sun Ying, shown them over tea at Cloud Water in the café’s brief afternoon lull, studied the pages and nodded slowly.

“Evidence of absence,” she said. “It’s the strongest kind. A log that lies is worth ten logs that go missing — a missing log proves somebody cleaned up; a lying log proves everybody knew what to clean up from.” She slid the phone back. “Keep photographing, laoshi. My notebook keeps dates;

your camera keeps deniability. Between us we're the records department of a city that's fired theirs."

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The summons came on a Wednesday, delivered with courtesy so extreme it functioned as a threat: Director Kang would value a moment of Teacher Bai's time.

He poured her tea himself, good tea, the office warm, and for four minutes discussed the weather, the assessment schedule, and her father — Guodong of Xinxing, a good man, everyone drank to him at Spring Festivals, how quickly the years went — and then set down his cup and folded his hands and became, briefly and honestly, the tired captain of a listing ship.

"Shuang-jie." Her milk-name, from her father's colleague's mouth; the room shrank around it. "I taught your uncle's boy. I carried earth at your grandfather's grave. So hear me as family and not as an administrator." He turned his teacup a quarter-turn on its saucer, north to south, and back. "Something is happening to children in this city. It began in October. It is not the internet, and it is not hysteria, and I have read the same margins in the same logs that you have." Her face must have moved, because he almost smiled. "Yes. I read too. Captains read the water." Another quarter-turn. "And here is what I know about ships. If I put this port on alert — letters home, clinics involved, journalists invited — I will have panic by Friday, assessments collapse, forty families pull their children to Jiamusi, and the province closes a school that is the last lit building in six neighborhoods. The panic kills people here. Cold kills fast when fear clears the shelves and empties the buses." He looked up. "So I am going to keep the waterline patched until assessment week ends. Eleven days. And I am asking you — as family — to hold your students

steady and your tongue steady, and I am telling you why, which is more than captains usually do."

"And after assessment week?"

"After assessment week," Director Kang said, "I will write the report myself. With my seal. And we will see whether the province still employs anyone with the rank to read it." He rose, refilled her cup unasked, the host's absolute prerogative, and walked her to the door past the wall of commendations, decades of them, framed glass catching the window light. At the threshold he stopped, and spoke without turning, in the voice of the other man inside the administrator:

"My granddaughter is in Class 3 of the second year, Shuang-jie. Third row, by the window. If she starts staring at walls, I want to know before her teachers do. Family remembers which way its debts run."

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Qu Changfu came to her building that night, and stood at the compound gate in the falling snow holding his cap in both hands like a man at a funeral, and everything about the visit was wrong before he spoke.

"She hasn't talked since Tuesday," he said. "Three days. She eats, she sleeps, she goes to school — I watch her walk there from the window — she just doesn't open her mouth. And tonight, teacher— " his breath went out white and shaking — "tonight I came home and she'd moved her bed. To the middle of the room. Away from the wall. All the furniture pushed in around it, like — like a nest, or a fort, and she's sitting in it, in the middle, on the floor, and she looks fine, she smiled at me, and teacher, the wall where her headboard used to be— " He stopped. Started again, lower. "There's a warm spot on the plaster. Hand-warm. Where her bed stood against it all these years. Warm like a body just left."

Above them, along the whole face of Building 6, the vent grilles breathed their faint silver mist into the lamplight, evenly, patiently, the building exhaling in its sleep — and Bai Shuang stood in the snow between her neighbor and his grief and thought of a boy crawling under desks toward a countryside with no witnesses, of a director counting days to the end of assessments, of a journalist with a deadline, of a dispatcher's notebook filling page by page in a drawer, of every patch on every waterline in every ship in this sinking fleet —

—and heard herself say the truest sentence of her professional life:

"We take her to Jiamusi ourselves, Changfu. Tomorrow. Before the paperwork finds out."

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CHAPTER 7

The Quiet Kids

The week the art show lights went up along the fence of the old mine, Qu Xiaoyan stopped speaking.

Not dramatically — that was what made it deniable. No scream, no collapse, no scene in the cafeteria. She simply answered fewer questions each day, as if her words were being rationed by some private economy, until the Friday when Bai Shuang called on her to read aloud and Xiaoyan stood, book open, lips moving, and produced nothing at all — no stutter, no struggle, just the smooth silent shaping of words, a fish mouthing water — and then smiled at the class, apologetic and serene, and sat down.

The school's machinery engaged exactly as designed. The class teacher filed a report; the report went to the grade director; the grade director, with the mid-year assessment three weeks out and the district office already asking why No. 4's numbers had dipped, called a meeting at which the phrase viral challenge imitation was used eleven times, and the phrase psychiatric referral was used once, quickly, and the phrase this reflects on all of us was used four times, and it was resolved that homeroom teachers would strengthen communication with parents, and that phones would be collected at the gate each morning, and that under no circumstances was anyone to contact the media, because a journalist from the provincial evening paper had already called twice about the hamster girl clip, and the school's entire institutional being now bent toward one goal: that nothing about Qu Xiaoyan should exist in any record anywhere.

There is no procedure for this, Bai Shuang thought, sitting through the meeting with her hands folded. The absence is the procedure. She raised her hand and asked, carefully, whether the school had contacted the CDC about the vent smells — three classrooms had been relocated that month for a stench of musk and ammonia that the maintenance log attributed, in three separate entries in three different handwritings, to dry drain traps, an explanation that had now been used for every drain in a building whose heating vents ran nowhere near a drain. The grade director looked at her with the flat patience of a man declining a gift he can't afford.

"Teacher Bai," he said, "the vents are being handled."

They were being handled. That same week, a contractor's crew went building to building through the school and the surrounding blocks, tightening vent screws, spraying foam into gaps, and Bai Shuang, watching them work from her classroom window, noticed what Old Man Guan had noticed: the screws they tightened were already loose, backed out a few turns, resting in their threads — every grille on the street, a whole district's foundations unscrewed with a fingertip, patiently, over weeks, from outside, by something with small hands and all winter.

She took the Qu family to Jiamusi herself.

Qu Changfu's taxi made the run in three hours through falling snow, the wipers keeping their exhausted time, Xiaoyan in the back seat between her father and her teacher, looking out the window at the white plain with her hands folded in her lap — composed, tidy, a girl being taken somewhere she had already agreed to go. At the hospital, the machinery of the rational world engaged with a hum of competence that almost made Bai Shuang weep with relief: bloodwork, MRI, EEG, a pediatric neurologist with kind eyes and a queue of forty behind her. The scans were beautiful. The scans were perfect.

Textbook, said the neurologist, tapping the gray folds of a fourteen-year-old brain on the lightbox, as if the textbook were the point. Conversion disorder, she concluded. Dissociative features. Stress-related. Possibly contagious suggestion — she'd seen clusters like it, always among adolescents, always in strained, low-status, tightly bound communities. Mass psychogenic illness, she said, and wrote it on the form, and prescribed an SSRI at a quarter dose and a follow-up in Jiamusi in six weeks, and her tiredness, when she finally looked up at Changfu and Bai Shuang, was the tiredness of a doctor whose entire specialty was the name of the wall the town was hitting. "There's nothing physically wrong with your daughter," she said gently. "Whatever is happening, she isn't faking it. These are real symptoms with a real mechanism — the mech‐anism is just each other. Reduce the shared stress. Reduce the… attention." A pause. "And keep her away from the videos. All of them."

In the car on the way home, in the blue dark of the return leg with the heater roaring and Changfu driving hunched and silent, Xiaoyan began to sing.

It came up out of her softly, under her breath, without her body changing at all — she went on looking out the window at the snow — a small looping melody in a key a semitone too high, and the words, when Bai Shuang's ear caught up with the melody, were not a pop song, were not anything from any feed. They were a work chant, a counting song, the kind miners' wives had sung at the pithead to mark shifts, a call-and-response with the response missing, and the numbers were wrong for a schoolgirl's lifetime — one cage down and the second cage waiting, three hundred lamps on the morning shift, who carries the lamp for the ninth level, who carries the lamp for the ninth — and the voice singing them was pitched sweet and childlike and utterly without age.

Changfu pulled the taxi onto the shoulder so hard the snow came off the banks in sheets. He sat with his hands welded to the wheel, watching his daughter in the mirror, and Bai Shuang watched him not turn around — watched him enforce on himself the rule his own mother had taught him, never answer, never look — and the two adults sat motionless in the front seats like passengers while behind them a fourteen-year-old girl sang a dead generation's counting song in a voice borrowed from somewhere with no heating, until the song found its missing response and supplied it herself, both sides of the call, in two voices, one of them Changfu's own dead mother's intonation so exactly that the old man made a sound like a nail coming out of wood.

Then Xiaoyan stopped. Blinked. Looked out the window and said, in her own flat adolescent voice, "Are we almost home? I'm starving."

Nobody spoke for the last forty kilometers. At the compound gate, Bai Shuang helped the girl out, and Xiaoyan patted her teacher's arm and said, "Goodnight, laoshi," and went up the stairs, and Changfu stood in the snow with his keys in his fist and said, in a voice scraped down to the frame:

"Her grandma's song. That's her grandma's song, teacher. She died when Xiaoyan was four. Nobody's sung that in this family since— " He stopped. He looked north, involuntarily, the way everyone looked north now. "What do I do?"

"Old Man Guan," Bai Shuang said. "Building 6. Tonight, if you can. And Changfu— " she caught his sleeve, and heard herself say the thing the meeting had forbidden and the doctor had hedged and the whole town was pretending not to know: "It isn't each other. Whatever the hospital says. The mechanism isn't the children. Something's using the mechanism. Something's been in the walls since October and

it's learning them, one at a time, and it learns them through — " she stopped, hearing it, the absurdity, the thing no institution had a folder for. "Through being looked at," she finished. "Through being answered. Starve it of that. That's all the medicine I have."

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The medium's name was Bai Ling — Sister White-Spirit, a stage name, a brand — and her livestream ran nightly from a back room in Harbin: red cloth on the table, three sticks of incense, a ring light, forty thousand followers, and a funnel that began with free readings and ended, prosecutors would later establish at the trial of her imitators, at ¥12,800 apprenticeships. She was a grifter. She was also, by every account that mattered later, a genuine second-generation chuma medium who had learned the trade from a real grandmother in a real village, and the tragedy of Bai Ling — the reason her clip survived, passed hand to hand like contraband after her account was deleted — was that the grift and the inheritance lived in the same body, and on the night of December 19th, watching a compilation of the Hegang clips sent by desperate parents in her chat, the inheritance took the wheel.

The compilation ran ninety seconds: the ghost-girl stream, Xiaoyan's desk, a boy in a stairwell, thermal footage from a fence. Bai Ling watched it in her professional silence, incense smoke climbing the ring light's glow — and then leaned in, and replayed eleven seconds, and went pale in the flat white light, and her chat, sensing weather, went quiet.

"This isn't performance," she said. Not her stage voice. Her other voice. "And it isn't illness. Illness doesn't count." She replayed it again, and her finger, on-screen, tracked something the parents' cameras had caught without knowing: in the corner of the ghost-girl frame, on the warm

wall beside the desk, a shadow moved against the grain of the room's other shadows, low and quick, pausing at the riser — pausing at the exact moment the girl's eyes fixed. "Look. It attends them. It sits with them while it wears them. In the old rules we had a word for a spirit that needs a host's eyes to see the world — jie yan, borrowed eyes — and we had a rule for how you treat it." She looked straight into the camera then, into forty thousand viewers, into the town forty minutes south of her, and the performance was gone entirely, and what looked out was a granddaughter of the countryside, afraid.

"You don't fight it and you don't feed it. You don't answer anything it asks, in any voice, especially the voices you love. And you find whoever it asked first — because the first answer is the contract, and the contract can be contested." A pause; the incense guttered; somewhere behind her a phone was already ringing with the sound her deleted account would never hear again. "Whoever answered first," said Bai Ling, "go and see what they took. And take it back."

The clip survived four hours before the deletion — her own doing, her lawyer would claim; the platform's policy, the platform claimed; a wave of mass reports from accounts made of numbers, the parents claimed — and in those four hours it was downloaded nine hundred times, and one of the down‑loads reached, by way of a cousin and a group chat and a grandmother, the kitchen table in Building 11, where Ma watched it twice, hands folded, and then looked at Bai Shuang across the table with an expression the daughter had never once seen on her mother's face in thirty-six years.

Ma was afraid.

"Doudou," Ma said. "September. The bow at the fruit shop. He waved, he bowed, he—" her voice did something old. "He answered first. Out of all of them, my grandson answered first, and it's been in our walls since October, and the con‑

tractor can't tighten what it unscrews." She stood, and went to the cabinet above the stove, and took down, from its wrapping of yellowed cloth, a tablet of dark wood no bigger than a hand — the household's shrine, the Yellow Lord's seat, her own mother's, unburned incense in its cup, a chicken's dried foot tied to its base with red thread gone pink with decades — and she set it on the table facing north, and put rice before it, and lighted three sticks of sulphur incense, and the smoke climbed straight in the sealed warm kitchen like a plumb line.

"Then we contest it," Ma said, in the voice of a woman laying out terms across a table, and the incense leaned, very slightly, north.

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Doudou was found at the window at three in the morning, whispering.

Bai Shuang stood in his doorway with her heart going like a pithead bell and listened to what he whispered: not words, or not words first — the trill, the rising-falling chord, patient, intimate, a boy keeping up his end of a conversation — and then, threaded through it, his own voice, small and reasonable, the negotiating voice of a thirteen-year-old: "—but she's my ma, I'm not doing that, you can't have — okay. Okay. Not her. I said not her. Do we agree? Shake on— "

She crossed the room and took his shoulders and turned him from the window, and his eyes came back from whatever they were looking at down the long north dark with a slowness that would visit her dreams for the rest of her life — surfacing, surfacing, a swimmer a long way out — and focused on her face, and filled with himself, and he burst into tears.

"Ma," he said, thirteen years old, terrified, his own. "Ma, I'm trying so hard. I'm trying so hard to hold out."

That was the night the family stopped pretending. Ma moved her bedding into the living room doorway — a sentry across the flat's single artery — and the sulphur burned nightly, and the red string went on his wrist, and the mirror faced the door, and the rules were recited at bedtime like a catechism, and Bai Shuang sat in the kitchen afterward at the table with the little dark tablet and its pink thread and its rice, and spoke aloud to it for the first time in her life, because the institutions had no folder, the hospitals had no scans, the school had no procedure, and her son was holding out alone in the dark against something that negotiated.

"I don't know what you are," she told the tablet, in the flat voice she used for phone scammers, which was, she understood dimly, its own kind of honesty, the only currency the thing respected. "I don't know if you're in the walls or under the hill or in the smoke. But you've got a hundred and eight of mine under that hill already, and you don't get the boy. Do you hear me? You don't get the boy."

The incense leaned north. Outside, at −29°C, in the dead calm, the window glass ticked once, twice — politely — like a knock.

Bai Shuang looked at the window, and lowered her eyes, and did not answer.

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CHAPTER 8

The Long Way Home

Guo Jian came home on the second of January, carrying the year's wages in his boot and a brand-new pair of sneakers for his son in his bag, and for four days the flat on Building 11 contained a family the way a stage contains one: everything true, everything arranged.

Doudou met him at the station door at a dead run — thirteen years old and sprinting through −26° like the cold was rumor — and hung off his father's neck with his heels off the ground, and Guo Jian swung him in a full circle, both of them laughing, and Bai Shuang stood back watching her men and thinking, with a tenderness that frightened her: he doesn't know yet. He'll know by tomorrow. Let him have tonight.

The boy was good. That was what she couldn't stop noticing all evening, the way you can't stop touching a sore tooth: Doudou was good that night — better than good, better than he'd been since October. He talked about school with his mouth full; he wore the new sneakers immediately, lacing them with ceremony; he produced, unprompted, a perfect imitation of Gao Wei's lecturing voice that made his father laugh until he coughed. He sat close. He asked questions about Guangzhou and listened to the answers. And every so often — between the jokes, when the talk moved on — his eyes went to the window, where the frost grew inward from the latch in slow white fingers, and returned, and nothing in his face marked the journey at all. He had gotten good at the thing his mother did professionally: performing the room while reading it.

Bai Shuang watched her son manage his father and understood that she was watching damage, and that its source was love, and that there was no one to blame, which was the cruelest architecture of all.

Guo Jian had come home heavy in other ways too. She saw it in how he set things down — carefully, always testing weight first — and in the calluses gone soft on his hands, and in the way he stood at the compound gate his first night back, looking up at the block against the stars as if pricing it. He'd been away fourteen months this stretch. Qingdao site, then the Ningbo offer hanging over him like a second moon. He bled the radiators the first morning because that was what he did, what he'd always done, the husband-ritual of a man who showed love in torque values — down on his knees at the valves with the key and an old towel, bleeding air from the iron while Doudou held the light — and the radiator under the window gave up its bubble-gurgle at last, the first time in six years, and Guo Jian sat back satisfied, and Ma looked at Bai Shuang over the teacups with an expression that said plainly: see, there's a use for him after all, which was her entire philosophy of marriage and, in fairness, not the worst one ever devised.

Then, on the third night, after dinner, over the third beer, he put the folder on the table.

Ningbo. Transfer confirmed pending family relocation — the company housing allowance doubled if dependents came before March. Indoor work. Year-round. The numbers were laid out in the company's own font: salary, allowance, the name of a school district where the middle school had a heating plant of its own and a swimming pool.

"Before you start," Guo Jian said, and his voice had the careful flatness of a man who has rehearsed past his temper, "I did the math. Not the money math. The other math." He

turned the folder to face her. "Your school closes within five years. You know it, I know it, Director Kang knows it — they're merging you into No. 2 by attrition, everyone under forty has already left your staffroom. My mother is seventy and her knees are done; she needs the south by next winter or she spends them in that kitchen. Douzi— " and here his voice did move, briefly, the weld in it showing — "Douzi is at the age where the town starts fitting kids for their exits. Test out. Ship out. He's got my head for machines and no lab in a hundred kilometers that isn't locked. I'm not asking you to abandon anything, Shuang. I'm asking which of us is protecting him and which is just — standing post at a grave."

"The grave has our dead in it."

"The grave," Guo Jian said, "has everyone's dead in it. That's what graves are. The living get houses." And then, because he was not a cruel man but an exhausted one, and exhaustion makes its own weather: "You count bones, Shuang-jie. Somebody in this family has to count tuition."

The fight, when it finally came, was quiet — the worst kind, conducted in the register couples develop for war in thin-walled buildings, all implication and load-bearing silence, and it ended the way their fights ended, with him sleeping on the sofa and her awake listening to the building tick and her mother, in the inner room, audibly awake herself and saying nothing, which was Ma's loudest tone.

It was Ma who delivered the verdict, the next morning, alone with him at the stove while the kettle worked — Bai Shuang heard it through the door, her mother's voice level as a mason's line:

"My son-in-law. Sit." A pause; the pour. "That girl stayed in this town so your father could die in his own bed instead of a rented room in Qinhuangdao, and so my tablet could face north out of a window it has known twenty years, and so that

boy would have one hand on him every night of his childhood that didn't change cities. That's the wage she drew from staying, and she paid it out to all of us hourly, and she never once sent you the bill." The slurp of tea; the long Northeastern pause that is not emptiness but pressure. "Now you're holding a folder that says the future lives in Ningbo. Maybe it does. But hear me on this one thing, boy, because I buried a mother who taught me it: when you spend those wages — and you will spend them, they're good wages — remember what they cost the woman who stayed. Debts don't vanish because you move somewhere warm. They just learn your new address."

Guo Jian came out of the kitchen looking like a man who had been correctly weighed, and found Bai Shuang in the doorway, and the two of them stood in the hall of their home with the whole winter stacked around them, and what passed between them was not forgiveness — it was too early, and both were too tired — but something rarer: mutual witness. I see what it costs you. You see what it costs me. Neither of us can afford the other's price, and neither of us is lying.

He was supposed to stay until the ninth.

But on the seventh, the site called — a pour scheduled, a foreman down with his own back, can you move, the train tickets— — and the whole family performed the ancient ceremony of the changed ticket without one word of blame, which is its own kind of love in the Northeast, where work is weather and nobody curses the sky for moving.

On the morning of the eighth, Bai Shuang walked him to the station through the blue dark, their breath pluming side by side, gloved hands not holding because holding made parting worse and both of them knew the arithmetic. At the gate he stopped, and turned, and looked up at the block — Building 11, fifth floor windows, Ma's curtain twitching farewell,

Doudou's face at the glass — and then at her, and said, awkwardly, the engineer reaching for words with tools he hadn't used in years:

"When this assessment thing breaks — whatever's going on in those walls, Shuang — you call me. Day or night. I don't care what the site's doing. You call, I come." He pulled his glove off and touched her cheek once, cold finger, warm intention. "And if I'm not there next time something falls on this family — " he stopped himself, jaw working. "Just. Call."

She watched the train take him south, standing on the platform with her son beside her, and felt the winter settle onto the two of them like snow finding a roofline. He had made her promise, at the gate, to call, day or night, if the walls did anything else; and she had promised, and meant it, and both of them had pretended, for the length of a platform, that promises were the same as presence.

Doudou watched the red tail-lights a long time. Then he said, in a voice pitched very casually, aimed very carefully at the empty rails:

"He's right about the school closing, you know. Everyone knows. Chen Bin's transferring for spring term." A shrug, elaborately loose. "那咋了。"

So what.

"That咋了," Bai Shuang agreed, taking his hand, mitten in mitten, turning them homeward into the wind.

That night — the night of the eighth, the deepest cold of the year settling over the plain like a lid — Doudou slept in the inside bed by the wall with the red string on his wrist, and Bai Shuang checked him at midnight and found him breathing easy, dreaming ordinary dreams, his new sneakers lined by the door with their tags still on.

She went to bed in a house that was warm, guarded, watched, prayed over, and entirely wrong, though no instru-

ment in it knew how to say so — and the town slept around them, ten thousand windows breathing their silver threads of heat into the dark, all of them drinking from one heart, none of them dreaming what was already awake.

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CHAPTER 9

Deep Cold

January came in like a foreclosure notice. −31°C on the second, −34 on the fifth, and on the night of the eighth the official station recorded −36.4 and the unofficial truth, in the wind-gullies behind the northern compounds, was ten degrees past that. Hegang did not slow down in such cold; it changed states. The town became a submarine. Life moved indoors, building to building along shoveled channels; faces disappeared into fur and fabric until the streets were walked by padded shapes distinguished only by gait; and the air itself acquired grain — breath-frost hanging in plumes that didn't disperse so much as fall, settling on sleeves and scarves in a fine glitter that made every pedestrian shimmer, faintly, like something seen through heat haze, except inverted: cold haze, the shimmer of mammals burning fuel to defy physics.

Phones died at fifteen minutes outdoors. This became its own folklore — the ritual of the inner pocket, the chemical heat pad taped to the case, the desperate crouch in a shop doorway breathing on the black glass. Cameras lasted less. Delivery riders learned to rotate two batteries against body heat and still lost fingertips to the season; Mengmeng, walking home from the café shift with her scarf slung fashion-low, froze the upper rim of both ears without noticing — the cold ate numb, that was its trick, flesh died silently, painlessly, reporting nothing until the rewarming, when the ears swelled and blistered purple and Yun-ge drove her to the hospital with the café's tip jar taped shut in her lap because it was the only money immediately available, and An Ran, who happened to be there, paid the deposit from her freelance account without

thinking about it, and stood in the corridor afterward shaking, not from the corridor's temperature.

"She'll keep the helix," the doctor said, showing the photos. "Cartilage's gone here and here. She's seventeen. Why was a child dressed like that in minus thirty-five?" He didn't wait for an answer, because there was only one answer, the answer of the whole season: fashion rated for ski resorts, worn as identity, in a cold that killed the careless — and An Ran went home and stood in front of her closet full of Arc'teryx and vintage wool and understood, with a clarity that felt like fever, that she had spent a year treating the town as a costume and the costume had begun billing her friends.

The rest of the town did what it had always done in the deep cold, which was become, briefly, the collective animal its architecture had always intended.

The bathhouse on Jiefang Road ran double shifts, and by seven each evening its steam-hall held half the district: old men playing chess in the humid fog with towels on their heads like field dressings, grandmothers scrubbing grandchildren on little stools, gossip moving through the vapor with the warmth of a shared bloodstream. The morning market simply moved indoors, stall after stall crammed into the co-op's lobby until it resembled a medieval market hall, everything breathing, everything steaming, frozen pears thawing in basins along one whole wall. The schools ran their assessment drills with the lights low and the radiators maxed, children writing in gloves with the fingertips cut off. And at Cloud Water, Yun-ge — who had come north chasing authenticity and found instead a siege — stopped charging for tea entirely on the days the thermo-meter broke minus thirty, and nobody thanked him aloud, and he lived on being thanked in every other currency there was.

Ma fed the tablet on the first of the month, per contract: fresh rice, three sticks of sulphur incense, and the chicken

head she'd been saving since the solstice, laid facing north on a saucer. She performed the rite without theater, an old woman doing accounts, and then stood at the kitchen window afterward longer than the task required, looking at the dark slope of the sky where the hills were.

"Douzi," she said that evening, at dinner, casually, to the boy rather than about him, "give grandma your hand."

He gave it over his bowl of guobaorou without looking up. Ma held it, small and dry and furnace-warm, and held it one second too long, and Bai Shuang watched her mother's face do nothing at all, which was how she knew.

"Warm hands," Ma said lightly, releasing it. "Good circulation. Like your grandfather." And she picked up her chopsticks and continued eating, and the boy continued eating, and under the table his other hand lay palm-up on his knee, open, the way a dog lies in front of a fire it hasn't lit.

Old Man Guan made his rounds again that first week, building to building in the blue dusk, checking grilles with his sliver of a screwdriver — and this time he didn't work alone. Word had traveled, the way it travels through compounds, grandmother to grandmother, and he had inherited crews: pensioners in army-surplus coats walking the foundations with flashlights pointed down, tightening screws, spraying foam, logging anomalies in notebooks of their own. They found what they found. Most grilles held. Here and there, one backed out again, resting easy in its thread, patient as winter — and here and there, around two or three vents in the older blocks, the snow itself had melted back in a neat circle, as if the wall had been breathing out all night.

Guan logged every one. He did not report them anywhere. There was nowhere left to report them to; he had outlived his institutions. He kept the numbers in a school notebook in his coat, and once a week Sun Ying came by for tea and copied

them into hers, two record-keepers of a bankrupt city maintaining, between them, the only census of the walls.

On the sixth of January the province announced, in the language of press releases, that consolidation review of Heilongjiang's municipal services would begin in the spring — which everyone correctly read as the sound of an axe being sharpened somewhere south — and on the seventh the railway cut froze to its ballast and the southbound Green Giant ran twenty minutes late for the first time in its electric life, and the dispatch center logged it, because in Hegang even the trains' pulse had become something a dispatcher checked like a heartbeat.

And on the eighth — the coldest night of the year, high pressure clamped down like a hand over the plain, stars in their thousands sharp enough to cut — the town went to sleep early, the way it always did on such nights, stoves banked, quilts stacked, children called in from courtyards they'd been warned off twice. In Building 11 the family slept in its stations: Doudou in the inside bed with the red string on his wrist, breathing easy; Ma across the living-room doorway, sentried, one ear on the walls; Bai Shuang last of all, lying awake a little, listening to the building tick and settle and breathe its warm silver breath into the dark.

She fell asleep counting the radiator's ticks against her son's breathing, and finding them matched, told herself she had imagined it.

Outside, under a sky of pitiless stars, six children were getting dressed.

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CHAPTER 10

The Ninth of January

They came for the children on the night of January the ninth, and the town's memory of that night would always be organized around one detail: the snow.

It hadn't snowed. High pressure, dead calm, −34°C, the kind of clear arctic night when the stars hurt and sound carries for kilometers and snow squeaks underfoot like styrofoam. And yet every parent who followed the small bare footprints out of Building 11's door and across the courtyard swore afterward, independently, in separate statements Sun Ying logged on pages thirty-one through thirty-nine, that the footprints were melted into the pavement — not pressed, melted, each one rimmed with a hairline of refrozen meltwater, as if the children had walked out of the building through a summer rain.

Ma woke first. She always woke first now; she slept like a sentry, one ear on the walls. At 2:17 she shook Bai Shuang's shoulder with a hand like a board, and the message traveled between the women without language: the house is wrong. Doudou's inside bed was empty and made — made, cornered neatly, the pillow plumped, a courtesy he had never once performed in thirteen years — his outdoor boots gone, his coat gone, the window's latch turned from outside, frost blooming around the frame in a hand-shaped burst.

The courtyard held six children.

They stood in a line facing north, spaced at even intervals, four meters apart, the spacing precise as fence posts: Doudou at fourteen, the Liangs' boy at eleven, twin girls of nine from Building 3, a sullen fifteen-year-old gamer everyone called Pao

Pao, and a small stranger of maybe seven whom none of the adults recognized, in pajamas printed with cartoon tigers. Coats over pajamas, boots unlaced, hoods down despite the cold. Their breath did not steam.

The adults came out of the buildings in quilted coats over nightclothes, and the crowd grew along the courtyard's edge — flashlights swinging, names called, a father already sobbing, someone dialing 110, Ma moving through it all with a bucket of the evening's sulphur water and a wooden spoon, banging the bucket's side in a hard irregular rhythm, shouting at the onlookers the doctrine that had already begun to spread from her kitchen outward through the compound like heat through an artery: don't grab them, don't wake them screaming, don't ANSWER them — eyes down, walk slow, take your child by the hand like you're bored, like it's nothing, like taking a kid in from the cold, which is ALL IT IS—

Bai Shuang walked out to her son.

The snow squeaked. Her flashlight beam lay on the ground ahead of her, deliberately lowered — eyes down after dark, spit at thresholds, look at nothing — and she crossed the white courtyard watching her own boots, hearing behind her the other parents falling into the pattern she could hear forming in their footsteps, hesitant, obedient, a town remembering rules older than any of its institutions. Ten meters from Doudou she smelled it: musk, dense and intimate, ammoniac above it, the smell of her own ceiling given weather and volume. Twenty meters, and the trilling began — soft, everywhere, rising from the children's throats in unison and, underneath, from somewhere else, from the storm drains, from the gaps in the foundation vents, from the whole north-running grid of the compound's warmed hollow places, a chord of small voices harmonizing at the exact pitch of the radiators' midnight tick.

Five meters. She could see his breath wasn’t steaming. None of their breath steamed. The air they exhaled came out warm — she could feel it now at the edge of her face, a faint tropical humidity rising off the line of children like the breath of a stable — warm, humid, smelling of animal and iron, as if the cold had been negotiated with, bought off, rerouted. As if each small body had become, politely, a vent.

“Doudou.” Her voice did what voices do at −34°C, came out small and dead. “Douzi. Mama’s here. Take my hand.”

His head turned. All six heads turned, in unison, the full rotation, pivoting smoothly on spines, and six pairs of eyes caught her flashlight’s spill and gave it back doubled, eye-shine, green-gold, the mirror layer at the back of the retina that human children do not have — and Bai Shuang’s knees went to ice water, and Ma’s spoon-bang rang out harder behind her, don’t look at their eyes, teacher, EYES DOWN — and she dropped her gaze to the snow, heart slamming, and spat, once, at her own threshold of frosted ground, and put out her hand into the space where her son’s hand should be, and waited.

The trilling stopped.

Warmth enclosed her fingers. Small, dry, furnace-warm fingers closed around hers, and a voice said, from directly in front of her, pitched sweet and half a tone high — her son’s voice, borrowed, held, hosted — the question. The question. The one the folklore promised and the medium had warned of and the whole winter had been rehearsing, asked now in the accent of her own household, with her own mother’s intonation, gently, curiously, the way you’d ask a tired traveler if they’d like tea:

“霜啊。你看我，像人，还是像神？”

Shuang. Do you see me as a man, or as a god?

Every rule, every instinct, every fiber of motherhood roared at once inside her skull — answer him, he's freezing, answer anything, give it what it wants, it's your SON — and behind the roar, level as Old Man Guan's kitchen, the counter-rule stood: the answer is the payment; the answer is a rope; it asks in the voice you love best precisely because that voice is the master key. Bai Shuang bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted copper. She kept her eyes on the snow, on the melted prints, on the small wet shine of each footprint already glazing in the cold. And she tightened her grip on the warm little hand, and turned, unhurried, bored, a mother collecting a child from the cold, which was all it was, and walked him back across the courtyard, eyes down, while behind her the other parents came forward one pair at a time, and the line of chil‑dren let themselves be collected, docile as sleepwalkers, humming their chord, and not one adult in that courtyard answered the question, and not one child resisted, and the strangest mercy of the whole impossible night was that none was offered: the rules held both ways. It wanted consent. It could not take.

The seventh child, the small stranger in tiger pajamas, stood unclaimed at the end of the line after every parent had come and gone. Ma approached her last, sulphur water steaming in the pail, and looked down at her for a long mo‑ment — and crossed her arms, and spat, and said, quietly, in the old way, as to an equal:

"Yours went down with Number Three gallery in '98, yellow master. We burned paper for yours same as mine. Don't you dare stand in a borrowed child and judge this compound."

The child tilted its head — farther than a neck goes — and then walked, unhurried, small tiger feet melting prints into the yard, out through the compound gate and north along the

railway cut, and the dark took it, and the trilling faded down the cut after it like a tide going out, and the courtyard stood full of weeping parents and steaming adults and six children who began, within minutes, to shiver violently and cry and ask why everyone was outside and where their coats had come from, ordinary children, restored, empty of everything except a night they would not remember — all but one.

All but Douzi, who stood at the threshold of Building 11 with his mother's hand crushed in both of his, and looked back once, north, along the cut, and said in his own voice, small and horribly lucid:

"Ma. I didn't tell them anything. I held out. But it knows things now. It knows your name-from-before. It knows Uncle Guoshun's song." His teeth chattered; his eyes were entirely his own and entirely terrified. "It says spring is coming early this year."

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Morning brought no mercy, only daylight, which is differ‑ent.

By ten, the compound's WeChat group had done what such groups do — splintered into triage, blame, and denial, three threads running simultaneously down the same screen. Whose idea were those rules, my sister-in-law says her boy remembers NOTHING— / the police took statements till noon, separately, they're treating it as six separate incidents, can you believe— / my mother says my brother did this when we were small, walked the compound in his sleep, it's LOW BLOOD SUGAR, delete this group chat if you post that video again—

There was a video. Of course there was a video; someone's uncle had filmed forty seconds from an upper window before his nerve failed, six small figures standing in their melted

circle, and by noon it existed in eleven group chats under four filenames, and by evening mothers across three districts had watched it frame by frame looking for their own children, and Sun Ying — who could do nothing about any of it, whose sys - tem had already filed each 110 call separately, six islands, no pattern — wrote page forty in the margin-space of her heart, where such things lived now: The town has begun recording itself for evidence against a defendant it refuses to name.

At the school, Director Kang convened his staff at lunchtime and achieved, with visible effort, the day' s most impressive act of administrative jiu-jitsu: the incident became a gas leak scare, the courtyard became an assembly point during evacuation, the melted footprints became salt residue from the walkways, and the memo went home to parents that evening praising the compound' s swift response to a suspected carbon monoxide event and reminding families to check their stove flues. Several families, exhausted and frightened and offered at last a category with a chimney attached, seized it with both hands. Bought explanations are the cheapest warmth going, in a bankrupt city in January; Bai Shuang watched mothers she knew to be intelligent repeat the carbon monoxide line to each other like scripture, and understood something about her hometown she had never had words for: Hegang had survived a century not by facing what happened to it but by outliving the questions, one bought category at a time.

Two days later Guo Jian called, from Qingdao, from a dormitory of eight bunks with karaoke audible through his phone.

"Can' t get away, Shuang. The site' s holding wages till the twenty-sixth, and the train tickets— "

"You haven' t come home since National Day." A silence, in which she weighed, for one long second, telling him

everything — the courtyard, the eyeshine, the borrowed voice asking its borrowed question in her kitchen doorway dark — and heard, in imagination, the sentence arrive in that bunk-house, and pictured him passing a hand over his face and saying the kind thing, the terrible kind: you're alone up there too long, Shuang. Some truths needed a body present to survive transmission. "The tickets," she said instead. "I know."

"The tickets, Shuang-jie—" A pause; the karaoke swelled; he lowered his voice to the register men use for marriages in shared rooms. "There's talk of the whole crew transferring to Ningbo. Year-round work. Indoor." The unsaid followed, as it always did, pacing the sentence like a dog: come with Doudou, leave the town, stop being the last one holding the shovel. "How's the boy?"

Bai Shuang looked through the doorway at Doudou, at the inside bed by the wall, curtain open per protocol, red string on wrist, chest rising and falling — and rising, these days, in a rhythm she timed against the radiator's tick without meaning to, matched to it, synced to it, and pulled her eyes off it.

"He's fine," she said, and heard, in her own flatness, the exact voice of her father saying I'm fine with the tube in his throat, and hated it, and said it again anyway, because the alternative was to tell the truth down a phone line into a bunkhouse, and the truth had no department either.

Afterward she sat in the dark kitchen a long time with the dead phone face-down in front of her, doing what the call had asked of her without meaning to: sitting with the fact that she had hung up on her husband's voice while it was still being itself — that the thing had needed only three seconds of borrowed warmth to make her flinch from the real one forever after. That was a cost no column tracked. Every time Guo Jian called now, part of her would be listening for the seam in the

recording — and the thing knew that too. It didn't just take your answers. It poisoned the channel afterward, so that love itself arrived pre-suspected, like everything else in a city where you checked which vent the warmth came out of.

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Sun Ying filled pages thirty-one through forty-four, and on page forty-five, in the margin where hypotheses lived, she wrote the entry that would eventually cost her a suspension and earn her, from a certain survivor generation, a kind of respect that had no practical value whatsoever:

Six minors, synchronized onset, compass-fixed posture, ambient temp −34°C, zero tissue damage, core temps normal on arrival at ER (impossible), exhaled air warm and humid (impossible), eyeshine witnessed by 11 adults independently (impossible). Filed as: mass hysteria, exposure, viral-challenge imitation, hypothermia with paradoxical undressing (x6). System accepted all categories. System has no field for 'asked the question.' Notebook remains the only institution in Hegang that remembers everything.

At the bottom of page forty-five she drew a small square, and inside the square, a smaller one, and inside that, a dot: the symbol her grandfather, a Xinxing safety officer for thirty years, had chalked on gallery walls to mark a section of air you didn't trust.

Then she drove to Old Man Guan's building and honked twice, long-short-long, the old pit signal for gas in the section, men to the surface, and watched windows light up down the block one by one, all over the compound, all over the sleeping districts, as if the sound meant something to more people than the two of them — as if the town's body remembered, in its walls, what the alarm had always meant:

Stop working. Come up. Something in the air is not ours.

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CHAPTER 11

Page Forty-Six

Sun Ying kept her grandfather's mine lamp on the windowsill of the flat above the dispatch center, and once a month, on the first quiet shift of the month, she filled it, trimmed the wick, and lit it — not for light, with the city grid humming outside, but for calibration. That was what she called it in the notebook. Calibration: the instrument checks itself against the oldest instrument in the family. Her grandfather, Sun Baolin, gas officer of the Xinxing for thirty-one years, had taught her mother to test a lamp against a known flame before trusting it in a dark place, and had died teaching it, in the sense that he died in 1998 at his post doing checks, and the family had received his lamp, his chalk stub, and a work log so meticulous that the mining museum had asked for it and been refused, because Sun Ying's mother said — and Sun Ying now said, to the museum, annually — the log isn't history. The log is a loaded weapon. You'll get it when someone's about to need it.

The lamp burned on the sill. The notebook lay open to page forty-six. Below the window, Hegang lay under January like a body under a sheet.

She had spent the day after the courtyard incident doing what she always did the day after: interviews. Eleven households, four schools' worth of parents, a pediatric ward's worth of follow-ups — and one visit that was not professional, because the sixth child in the courtyard line, the sullen fifteen-year-old gamer from Building 3 whom the district's group chats called Pao Pao, was her nephew.

Her sister Sun Qiu opened the door of the Gongnong flat already bristling. They had the same jawline and opposite philosophies: Sun Ying believed in writing things down; Sun Qiu believed, with the ferocity of a woman raising a boy alone on shift-work wages, that written things followed you — labels, files, the little administrative hooks that a poor kid never once got free of. The flat smelled of instant noodles and victory: on the screen, paused mid-match, the game her nephew was nationally ranked in the province at, the rank badge pinned like a medal to his chat profile.

"He doesn't sleepwalk," Sun Qiu said, blocking the doorway. "He's fifteen and he plays until three and he walks in his sleep like his father did, like my father did — your own grandfather walked the compound at night, Ying, don't tell me you've forgotten — it's a family thing, it's low blood sugar, it's nothing with a name, because the day it gets a name it gets a file, and the day it gets a file some teacher decides my son is the problem child, and I have watched this city eat problem children alive."

"I know," Sun Ying said. "I'm not here with forms."

"You're always here with forms. You're the form person."

"I'm the person who's read forty-one statements this week," Sun Ying said quietly, "and I'm telling you what they say, Qiu. Six kids. Same night. Same direction. No frostbite at minus thirty-four, and I have the ER printouts to prove that sentence isn't drunk. Whatever walks our boys at night, it's not low blood sugar, and it's not your father, and I need to know what Paopao saw, because he's the oldest, and the oldest ones see clearest."

The argument lasted an hour and ended in the old way, with noodles — Sun Qiu feeding her sister while refusing to concede, the Northeastern armistice — and in the end Paopao gave

his statement from behind his monitor, not turning around, in the flat voice of a boy narrating an embarrassing dream: he remembered the cold getting warm. Remembered standing in the yard with the little kids and feeling held — his word, and he flinched at it — like being in the crowd at a match, like the good kind of queue, everyone breathing together. Remembered his mother's name being called and not wanting to turn around, because turning around felt like leaving a warm room for the wind. And remembered — here he did turn, and his eyes were fifteen years old and terrified under the teenage armor — the question. Asked in the dark, in no voice he could place, maybe in his own: do you want to stay?

"What did you say?" Sun Ying asked.

"Nothing!" He was up out of the chair now, agitated, armor clattering. "I didn't say anything, I know the rules, grandma made us all learn the stupid rules, I didn't answer — I held out, auntie, I held out — but it was a good question, that's the thing nobody gets." He stood there shaking with the terrible honesty of fifteen. "It was the best offer I've had in two years."

Sun Qiu pulled her son against her shoulder like he was still small, and over the crown of his head she looked at her sister with a face stripped of all philosophy: fix this. And Sun Ying, form person, weapon-keeper, stood in the noodle-smelling warmth of the only family she had and wrote nothing down, and hated the notebook in her pocket for the first time in her life, and went back out into the cold.

At the bus stop she did the thing she did maybe twice a year: took out her wallet and looked, not at her pass, but at the photograph folded into the back pocket of it, where the leather had worn soft. A man laughing at the Harbin ice festival in 2011, breath-frozen mid-shout, a paper cup of something warm tilting in his mittened hand. Cheng Yaozu. He had

waited two winters for her to choose Dalian over dispatch, and she had stood him up at the station with a thermos of tea and an apology she'd rehearsed for a week, because somebody had to hold the night shift, and the night shift was where the city kept its broken hours, and — this was the part she had never managed to say to anyone, and so said to no one now, on a frozen bench, to a photograph — because the log was the only place she had ever sounded like herself. Cheng taught grade-school music in Dalian now. Married, children, good. She hoped it warmly and entirely, and folded him away, and caught her bus, and rode home through the sleeping districts with her palm flat over her coat pocket the whole way, like a woman guarding a wound that had healed into a shape she could carry.

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The recording experiment was Old Man Guan's idea, and it produced the closest thing to physical evidence the winter would ever allow.

They taped two recorders — her phone and Guan's ancient dictation machine — to the corridor wall of Building 19's third floor, at the edge of the warm zone, and left them running from midnight to four. The night was quiet. Nothing walked. The playback, in Guan's kitchen, sounded like nothing at all: radiator tick, wind, the hum of a drained building holding its breath. Then Guan, who had spent forty years reading instruments against his own ears, ran the tape through the mining museum's old spectrum analyzer — salvaged, cleaned, kept running on faith and parts for a decade — and the screen drew what nobody in the room could hear.

A spike. Steady, sustained, dead on nineteen cycles, rising whenever the tick of the unseen radiators quickened, falling when it slowed. A second spike at the four-hour mark, deeper,

and on the dictation machine's cheap cassette, when they wound it back and listened hard, the faintest ghost of a trill arriving in sync with the inaudible wave — as if the sound they could hear and the sound they couldn't were two shadows of one body.

"Nineteen," Guan said, tapping the screen. "You know what sits at nineteen hertz, dispatcher?" He didn't wait. "The human eye. The globe itself. Vibrate an eyeball at its own note and it smears — people see shapes at the edge of vision, grey figures, movement in empty rooms. The old ghost-story frequency. The engineers found it in a lab once, a fan running wrong, and the whole lab saw a haunting that switched off with a switch." He straightened up, and his voice went flat and professional, the intake man reading bad instruments. "Now. Small carnivores talk partly under our hearing; rats talk further under it; a colony of a few hundred, breathing and trilling in a pipe-chase the length of a city block, in a corridor shaped like an organ pipe—" he spread his hands, the gesture of a man presenting an instrument he wished he'd never learned to read. "I can't prove that thing down there is doing it on purpose. But I can tell you what a ventilation man knows: air that moves through the right-shaped hole at the right speed makes a note. And a note at the eyeball's own pitch doesn't need to possess anybody. It just needs the town dark, and cold, and quiet, and afraid — and then it stands back and lets the town's own eyes do the haunting."

Sun Ying looked at the spike for a long time. "Then here's my problem with your instrument, old man. Your note needs air moving through shaped holes. The Qu girl started counting in her head in November — I have statements — and the first unscrewed vent in this district turned up mid-month. Whatever sang her awake was already inside before the pipes

gave it a road." She tapped the printout. "And Xiaoyan's counting matched the bones at Dongshan. There's no airflow between here and that hill."

Guan was quiet for a while. When he spoke again, it was without the instrument-reader's certainty, and she understood that this, too, was calibration: an old man checking his best theory against a flame older than his lamps.

"The note is a door," he said finally. "Not the house. Doors I can measure. Where the house begins—" he switched off the analyzer, and the spike vanished, and the kitchen felt no different at all, "—your grandmother's people had better maps than mine."

Sun Ying wrote it all down. Report number three went into the system the next morning, four pages, spectrum printouts attached, and got her the meeting she'd been half expecting: a bureau office, a director with a signed photograph of himself on the wall, and a folder open in front of him containing photocopies of her own notebook pages — someone inside had fed the machine, which meant someone inside was frightened, which was information.

"Dispatcher Sun." The director's voice had the warm patience of a man about to ruin someone gently. "Your initiative is noted. Your concern for public safety is noted. Here is what else is noted: you have conducted an unauthorized pattern analysis, contacted external parties, and generated a document which, if leaked — and everything leaks, Sun, you know this — would constitute a public safety panic in a city under fiscal restructuring, at the precise moment the province is reviewing our consolidation." He slid a transfer form across the desk. Archive division. Fewer hours, less pay, no phone line. "This is not punishment. This is a man with a shovel being moved away from a hole he keeps finding. Sign."

Sun Ying looked at the form for a long moment. Then she took out her pen — and wrote, in the signature line, in her small upright hand, the two characters for her name, and beneath them, small enough to be deniable, large enough to be found: 见附页 — see attached page. There was no attached page. There was, however, now a memo in the bureau's own records, filed and dated, containing the words nineteen hertz, cluster, and courtyard incident, in an official's handwriting, which meant that when it finally broke — and it would break, holes this deep always broke their ships — there would exist one piece of paper proving the institution knew, dated before the worst of it, and it would have her name at the bottom of its provenance like a fuse.

The director would find it in spring. She hoped, professionally, that he choked.

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On the rooftop of the dispatch center that evening, with the city's lights wobbling in the cold haze below, she found her nephew waiting for her — climbed the fire-escape like the little monkey he'd been, hands in his hoodie pocket, breath steaming.

"Mom says you got transferred." He said it to the skyline, not to her. "Archive. For the notebook thing." A pause; the wind moved between buildings with a sound like long cloth. "That's garbage, auntie. You were the only one doing the actual job."

"Rules are the job," Sun Ying said. "Even the ones that eat you." She unzipped her coat, took out the green notebook, and — an act she had performed for no one in eleven years — handed it to him. "Page forty-six. Read the margin."

He read it by phone-light, lips moving. Then again. Then he looked up, and the armor was off, and underneath was the boy

who had told her the truth about a warm room in the dark: All of them face north. Ask why.

"Nobody answered the question," he said slowly. "In the yard. Any of us. So it just — let us go?" He turned the page, and another, the whole winter unspooling in her small square symbols, sections marked with the chalk-sign he recognized from the museum, from grandfather Sun Baolin's log that the family kept like a rifle. "Auntie. What happens when it stops asking nicely?"

"That," Sun Ying said, taking the notebook back, stowing it like the weapon it was, "is what page forty-seven is for."

Below them the town lay quiet, breathing heat through its walls, and north past the rooftops the old headframe stood against the stars, and neither of them looked at it directly, because they were both, by blood and training, professionals — and the last thing Sun Ying did before they went down out of the cold was tap her nephew's shoulder and teach him, one more time, with the pit-horn from the window ledge, the two-tone signal every Sun for three generations had been taught before anything else:

Long-short-long. Gas in the section. Men to the surface. Leave the tools; the tools are nothing; the air is everything.

He got it right on the first blow. He always did. That was the thing about her family's luck, she thought, climbing down into the warm loud ordinary dark of the city: it had always been good at the alarm, and terrible at the timing.

The art show was in four days.

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CHAPTER 12

Ruin & Light

The sound artist from Berlin had a name nobody could pronounce and a concept everybody could: the mountain's own voice, amplified. He had spent nine days in December recording the old Xinxing works — wind through the head-frame's lattice, water dripping in the capped shaft's inspection gallery, the hum of transformers — and from these he had built a composition to be played at the lantern ceremony through forty speakers arrayed along the fence, mixed, he explained cheerfully to anyone who asked, low. Sub-bass. Infrasonic warmth. "Nineteen hertz," he said, tapping his chest. "The resonance of the body itself. The audience won't hear it — they'll feel it. Reverence as a physical sensation. It will be like standing inside the mountain's heartbeat."

Fatty Liu signed off on it between tea eggs.

What he did not put in any ledger was the night of the technical rehearsal, four days before opening, when the crew ran the projection loop for an audience of nobody: just Fatty Liu and the operator and the empty snowfield, the archive faces climbing the riveted steel one after another after another, decades of the town's dead and gone looking down at a fat man alone in the cold. The operator found him at midnight still standing under it, seed shells untouched in his pocket, calling out frame corrections in a voice gone quiet — up half a meter, her eyes want to catch the top of the arch; that one, that's Old Jia from the co-op, angle him kinder — and when the rehearsal ended he stood a moment longer with his hands folded at his chest without noticing they were folded, and then

laughed at himself, loudly, alone, and went home to sell tick - ets.

They came from everywhere. Four hundred tickets sold out in November and there were another six hundred at the gate on the night, locals and migrants braided together in the frozen field below the north slope: schoolteachers in festival quilted coats, miners' widows with folding stools, hipsters filming the crowd filming the headframe, families with chil - dren on shoulders, Sun Ying off shift with her notebook in an inside pocket because a dispatcher learns to carry the record everywhere, Old Man Guan at the back with Bai Shuang's mother, two elders who had walked out separately and stood, by evening's end, shoulder to shoulder. Overhead, drones circled with running lights, green and red, patient as planets. Along the fence line, the test strings of December had grown into archways of red and gold festival lights, red and gold, and the headframe itself wore its projection skin: archival photo - graphs of miner faces scrolling up the riveted black steel at ten meters height, decades of the town's dead and gone looking down out of the light at four figures apiece — every family in Hegang owns one of those faces — while the crowd hushed and the Berlin composer raised his arms in his white puffer jacket like a conductor of weather.

At 17:42, sunset already an hour old, the mountain began to sing.

It was, everyone agreed afterward, beautiful. That was the trap's whole architecture: beauty first, always, beauty as bait. The wind-sounds moved speaker to speaker around the crowd like something circling; the drip of the shaft came up from underfoot somehow, from the ground itself; the transformer hum swelled until coat fabric trembled on four thousand bodies, and nineteen cycles per second walked unseen through the field touching lungs and eyeballs and the ancient

alarm bells of the inner ear, and the crowd felt what the com‑poser had promised, reverence as a physical sensation, awe with a temperature, the mountain's heartbeat wearing them like a coat —

— and somewhere under the field, in the warm dark where the pipes ran, something answered.

The dogs started it. Every dog for two kilometers, chained and kennelled and lap-borne, went off at once — not barking; screaming, the flat continuous scream-howl of animals asking to be elsewhere — and beneath the music's swell most of the crowd never heard them, but the ones who did turned toward their own districts, and turning, saw what the children saw first.

Along the top rail of the fence, between the lanterns, the yellow shapes were coming out of the ground.

Not pouring — arriving, unhurried, in ones and twos and tens, up out of culverts and foundation gaps and the snow it‑self, gathering by tens along the rail until the fence wore a moving collar of low slinking bodies flowing west toward the gate arch, and the flow reached the arch, and pooled, and rose. Sitting up. Rank after rank after rank, forepaws folding, tails hanging straight, silhouetted against the projection light with the archival miner faces scrolling across their fur — a hundred of them, three hundred, no one ever got a count, don't count them — and the ranks sat motionless against the glowing steel, facing the crowd, and began, very softly, in perfect unison with the sub-bass, to trill.

Four thousand people watched. Maybe eight hundred understood. The rest filmed.

And through the crowd, at first sparsely and then not sparsely at all, the susceptible began to stand.

It was gentle, that was the horror the survivors kept failing to convey. No seizing, no falling. They simply finished their

reactions — mid-smile, mid-sip, mid-sentence — and closed their mouths, and straightened, and turned north-by-northwest with the unhurried unanimity of iron filings, and began to walk. A hipster girl from Chengdu in a white puffer. Two teenagers from Building 3. Pao Pao the gamer, hood up — and at the field's edge, off duty, in her dispatch coat, Sun Ying recognized her nephew's walk from thirty meters away and wrote down the time instead of calling his name, because doctrine held both ways and the notebook was the only place she was allowed to scream. Song Xiaoman, serene, camera-ready. Forty of them, sixty, a hundred — later estimates diverged because the counts were impossible, because the walkers left the lit field in loose files between the folding chairs and the frozen crowd parted before them the way crowds part for bridal parties, politely, instinctively, parents lifting strollers aside with smiles fixed by courtesy, so sorry, excuse us — and the walkers converged on the maintenance gap in the fence line, the gap the contractors used, the door in the lanterns, and filed through it into the sealed ground, walking calmly toward the capped shaft with the trilling swelling around them from rail-top and drain-mouth and the dark under the snow, hundreds of small voices and a rising number of large ones, human throats joining the chord in falsetto unison, and the composer lowered his arms, and the music stopped — and stood for a moment with his hands still raised in the white light, looking at his mixing desk as if it had spoken. He had spent nine days recording the mountain's voice; he knew every layer of his own composition the way a parent knows breathing. What had just answered him was not on any track. "It's not echoing," he said, to no one, very quietly, in German-accented Chinese he didn't know he had. "It's harmonizing." And he pulled the master fader down

himself, all the way, with a steady hand that shook only at the end.

In the ringing silence the only sounds were dogs, far away, and footsteps in cinders, unhurried, receding.

Then the drones' lights swept the shaft, and four thousand people looked up at the cap of the plugged wellhead, and what follows is assembled from eleven hundred witness statements taken afterward — statements that agreed on the cold, and the lights, and the sound, and disagreed about almost everything else, which is why it stands as the truest account anyone has.

The bows were there: that much survived every retelling. Hundreds of small yellow shapes upright on the concrete, forepaws folded, dipping in waves, formally, rhythmically, so‑liciting, with the projection faces sliding over them — miners climbing the steel one after another after another. And some of the witnesses — never all of them, never the same fraction twice, never once the same witness twice in the same mood — said there were larger shapes standing among the small ones. Man-height, some said. Wrong, said others, and could not say past it. Narrow, furred, long-faced, eye-shined, standing amid the small bows like landlords among tenants. The statements cluster by where people stood: see them from the west fence and the drones' spill, and you got shadows and weasels; see them from the front rows, close, in the flicker of the strobes, and you got — in eleven separate testimonies, in almost the same words — the tall ones. Whether the crowd's collective mind built those figures out of shadow and suggestion and nineteen hertz, or whether the tall ones were simply there for whoever stood close enough to be addressed, was contested forever after; the drone footage, frame by frame, showed nothing but weasels and shadow; the footage was, Sun Ying wrote in the margin of page fifty-one, exactly the kind of proof that proves nothing, and it knows that.

Someone screamed the word. The old word, the forbidden one, full voice, a grandmother's voice cracking across the silent field:

"HUANGPIZI!" And then the field detonated into the two things a crowd can become, flight and film, and the lantern archways were torn down in the crush, and someone's strobe fired white into the panic, and in the white flicker the susceptible walkers stopped, all at once, mid-stride, at the fence gap — and turned their heads back toward the light, in unison, the full rotation — and smiled.

Xiao Lu did not run.

The gimbal man, twenty-six, the steady-hands boy who had filmed the towel on the fence and the kneeling girl's wrecked Jesus — he had come back for the solstice on his own money, he told everyone, because the project deserved a proper record — walked forward against the fleeing crowd with his camera up and level, walking smoothly, professionally, filming the walkers as they passed him, filming the shaft, filming the ranks of bows, narrating under his breath the way narrators do — this is happening, this is real, look, look at them — through the maintenance gap, onto the sealed ground, closer, closer, the last thing on his card a slow push-in on the capped well-head where the largest figure stood with its long face lifted into the projection light, mouth open, the archive faces scrolling over its fur, one miner after another after another passing across its features like souls through a throat.

The card ended there.

In the ringing dark after the stampede, the drones circled the shaft with their little green and red lights, filming ranks of bows, and the dogs of three districts screamed, and somewhere in the crowd a child asked, over and over, the only question left: where did the walkers go? — and no one answered her, because no one knew, and because answering

things had just become the most dangerous activity in Heilongjiang.

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CHAPTER 13

The Bill

Three days later, the mountain gave back what it had taken.

They found him on the third morning, in the old transformer shed, when the searchers finally followed the smell, and what the coroner wrote — exposure, hypothermia, time of death within two hours of the event, he never even tried to shelter, there was a shed with a door — was less than half of what the searchers carried out with them and never managed to say aloud: that the boy knelt facing the shaft, hands folded at his chest in a formal two-handed bow, lips faintly curved, eyes wide open and dust-dry, and that the fine gray ash in his airways was coal dust, from galleries that had been sealed and still for eight years.

The town's institutions responded with everything they had, which was categories.

Mass psychogenic illness, said the provincial CDC team, flown in when the clips crossed some threshold of virality, and their report was not wrong — the walkers' bloodwork was clean, their scans were clean, the mechanism was, as at Tanganyika and Le Roy, each other plus stress plus suggestion — and the report's authors, to their credit, appended a page of honest bewilderment about the compass alignment, the eyeshine testimony, the melted footprints, and the fact that ninety-one susceptible individuals had walked calmly into a fenced methane zone in −26°C and every single one had been recovered alive except the man who walked in unpossessed, filming, of his own free will.

Rodent infestation of derelict industrial site, said the district office, whose seal was now reused from so many docu-

ments it had developed a ghost-double impression, and contracted a pest-control company out of Jiamusi at a price the bankrupt city found by not paying something else. The crew went in at dawn with gas masks and ultrasonic repellers and poison bait stations, twelve men, professional, unionized, briefed. They came out in eleven minutes.

They did not run. That was the detail the foreman's statement turned over and over, like a stone with something under it. They walked out fast but they walked, in step, silent, and stacked their equipment neatly by the gate, and quit — all twelve, on the spot, forfeiting the contract, the call-out fee, everything. In the van afterward, the youngest of them told his sister, who told a group chat, which reached Sun Ying's notebook by nightfall, the sum of what needed saying:

"The floor was moving. All of it. All the way down the galleries, both sides, as far as the lamps went — moving slow, like grain in a sack, like the floor had fur — and it wasn't afraid of the light, boss says nothing's not afraid of light — and it wasn't attacking. That's the thing. It was watching. Everything down there stopped work and turned around to watch us, thousands of eyes, all patient, all— " the young man's voice failed and restarted. "All polite. Like shopkeepers. Like they were waiting to see if we'd brought a question."

Fatty Liu stood at the gate of the ruin for two days after, in his elk sweater, hatless in −25°, watching the utility crews cut power to the lantern strings he'd financed. He did not spin. That was how Bai Shuang knew the man underneath had finally surfaced: the salesman was gone entirely, and what remained was a son of the second level, forty-six years old, watching the town take down his father's funeral decorations.

She found him at dusk on the second day, sitting on a frost-furred bollard with a bottle of baijiu thawing inside his coat, and she sat down next to him because twenty years ago she had sat next to him on this exact wall while their fathers' shift bell rang, and some debts predate betrayal.

"I did the math," Fatty Liu said, without preamble, eyes on the dark headframe. "You know what I was doing, all these years? Buying flats from people leaving a graveyard and selling them to people who think it's a park." He drank, handed the bottle over; she drank, handed it back; the ceremony of the wall. "Two hundred grand in debt, Shuang-jie. Sixteen flats. And every viewing, I told them the story — the mine, the dis‑aster, the brave little town — and the story was true, that's the filth of it, I never once had to lie, I just — priced it." His voice stayed level the way broken things are level. "My dad came up that night with his lamp half-full and a hundred and eight of his workmates still down, and he cried every Lunar New Year till he died, and I hated this town for what it did to him, and I sold it, piece by piece, to people who loved it wrong." He looked at her then, and his eyes were his own, and terrible. "And the worst part, teacher — the part I'll burn for — is that the thing under the hill and I had the same business model. It hangs lanterns on the wound and waits for somebody to answer."

"No," Bai Shuang said.

He looked at her.

"It doesn't hang lanterns," she said. "It unscrews the vents and waits to be invited. You hung the lanterns. Which means," and she took the bottle, and stood, and looked north past him at the glowing dead compound where forty-odd of the town's children lay stacked in the warm dark breathing as one animal — "you're not the same as it, Dabao. You just worked for the same master by accident. And masters

change.” She held out her hand. “Get up. The boiler plant’s pressure alarms have been ringing since Tuesday, the coldest fortnight of the year starts Friday, and there’s a man in Building 6 who says the whole heating grid and the old mine galleries share more ductwork than any living engineer remembers — and you,” she said, pulling him upright, “owe this town sixteen flats’ worth of labor, and you know every duct, every riser, every sealed doorway in Nanshan, because you’ve been selling them for five years.”

Fatty Liu looked at her hand, then at the headframe, then north, toward the lit cake of Building 19.

“What do you need,” he said.

“Everything,” said Bai Shuang. “Start with your vans.”

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CHAPTER 14

Hive

By the second week of January, the taken could be counted by anyone with the patience to stand at a window after midnight, and the town had nothing left but patience.

Forty-three, Sun Ying's notebook made it, cross-referenced against school rolls and the hospital's strange-ward admissions and the group chats' anxious tallies: thirty-one local, twelve of the migrants, ages seven to thirty-four, spread through six districts like sparks from one fire. By day they were almost bearable — muted, docile, present at meals, wrong mainly at the margins: the blink rate, the warm hands, the food preferences sliding from cooked toward raw, the way they sat facing north at tables, all of them, everywhere, a compass alignment no one commented on because commenting had become harder than adjusting. By night they moved. Doors unlatched themselves or were latched by careful small hands; boots went missing from racks and returned wet-melted at the toes; and through the sleeping streets, from compound to compound, along the shoveled channels and the railway cut, the taken walked — never alone, never speaking, always north-by-northwest, converging.

Ma called it going to the fold. She had heard her grandmother use the word for sheep. The image was exact and no one who followed it wanted it to be.

Bai Shuang followed her son on the eighteenth of January, because he had begun leaving the inside bed without unmaking it now, the courtesy failing, the borrowing going deeper, and because the notebook logic — Sun Ying had shown her pages, sworn her to the margin — pointed to a destination,

Building 19 of the old Huafu compound, a block drained of residents since the water main failure of ‘19, all units empty, all heating nominally shut down, and yet, on the thermal camera of a utility surveyor who owed Old Man Guan a favor, glowing on its middle floors like a lit cake.

She dressed for the cold the way you dress for surgery: lay - ers checked, layers doubled. Thermos of ginger tea against her sternum. Sulphur sticks, matches, red string, the needle kit Ma had assembled and shown her three times — sterilized sewing needles, the philtrum point below the nose demonstrated on a doll, there, where the midline dips, one pierce, quick, and speak the name, the milk-name, the name from before words — all of it absurd and all of it carried, because the institutions had no kit.

Doudou left at 1:20. He walked well — steady, economical, arms loose, breath pluming white in the starlight until it didn’ t, and the not-pluming was worse than anything, watching her son’ s exhalations simply fail to appear in −29°C air, the warm-air trick, the vent-trick, the borrowed furnace. She kept fifty meters and a flashlight beam on the ground, per doctrine, and followed the melted prints up the cut, past the shuttered market, through the gap in the Huafu perimeter fence that every child in the district had used for a decade.

Building 19 breathed warmth at her through its broken doorway like the mouth of a cave in winter.

Inside, the stairwell glowed. Not with light — with temper - ature. Frost furred the lower steps, and then the frost simply stopped at the second landing as if drawn to a line, and above the line the concrete glistened damp, and the air smelled of animal and iron and, beneath that, of soup — of broth, of marrow, of the deep-home smell of a pot that has been on the fire for days — and the sound came down the stairwell like weather: the chord. Hundreds of throats’ worth of softness

folded into one continuous tone, rising, falling, patient, and threaded through it, unmistakable now, the tick of radiators — except Building 19's radiators had been drained three winters ago, and the ticking, she understood with her scalp tightening, was not plumbing.

It was percussion, in flesh. It was the building's new pulse.

She climbed with her eyes lowered to the wet gleaming steps, doctrine holding her gaze down even here, especially here, and at the third-floor landing the stairwell opened into the central hall of the block, and Bai Shuang raised her eyes for one second — one, only to orient, she would tell herself forever, only to find her son —

—and saw the fold.

They filled the hall's far end like cargo, like cordwood, like the photographs from Dongshan she had been taken to see at ten years old and had never entirely stopped dreaming: layered. Stacked. The taken lay against the warm riser wall in ranks, heads on haunches, children tucked against older children, the migrants woven among the local kids with the indiscriminate democracy of the cold, coats zipped over neighbors, small bodies fitted into the angles of larger ones, and the whole mass of them — forty-three souls plus the ones the notebook hadn't found — rose and fell on one shared breath, slow, tidal, synchronized to the radiator-tick that was not plumbing, and along the tops of the stacks, in the creases between sleepers, in the angles of elbows and hoods, the yellow bodies lay distributed like embers banked in a grate: woven in, threaded through the human pile, one warm system, one organism assembled out of a dying town's two warring tribes and one ancient hunger, breathing as a single animal in the dark.

Her son slept in the third rank, mid-stack, cheek against the quilted shoulder of Song Xiaoman — the streamer, the ghost-

girl, thirty-one years old and serene as a madonna with a stranger’s child against her collarbone — and neither of them stirred as Bai Shuang came across the floor with her boots melting prints into the damp concrete.

Something spoke from the dark of the hall.

It used her childhood name — the milk-name, the name-from-before-words, Shuang-shuang, which no living person outside this family used — and it used it in her mother’s intonation, and it came from everywhere at once, from the stacks, from the walls, from the warm dark above the ceiling tiles where the void ran the length of the block, gentle, curious, hospitable, the question she had dodged once in a courtyard now asked with the intimacy of a thing that had been listening to her kitchen for a season:

“霜霜。你看我，像人，还是像神？”

Shuangshuang. Your friend is cold, and the wall is warm, and we have kept him safe all winter. Do you see us as men, or as gods?

It had learned. God, it had learned — the second asking came wrapped in reasoning now, in comfort, in the offer of a chair and a bowl, the grammar of hospitality, because it had listened to a season of kitchens and it knew how consent was built in the Northeast: you don’t seize, you offer; you feed the guest before you ask the price. Bai Shuang stood in the warm dark with her son’s mittened hand three steps away and the question hanging in the air like incense smoke, and every cell in her body voted to say yes — a god, obviously, whatever you want, give me my boy.

She bit her cheek to blood. Eyes to the floor. Spit, at the threshold of the stack, a mouthful, deliberate, rude, the oldest insult and the oldest refusal — man has his breath; the demon has hers; the channels stay separate — and reached down, and lifted her son out of the fold.

Nothing stopped her.

The stacks breathed. The chord continued, softer, unhurried, unoffended — it could afford patience; it had the whole town's winter in reserve — and small yellow heads turned on the warm wall to watch her go, tracking her without motion, and Douzi's weight settled against her shoulder ordinary-heavy, vent-warm, humming the chord in his sleep, and she carried him down the frosted stairs and out into the killing starlight, and did not put him down for six hundred meters.

At the compound gate Ma was waiting with the pail and the spoon, and took one look, and said the thing Bai Shuang was carrying too heavily to say:

"It let you take him."

"I know."

"It let you." Ma's face in the lamplight was stone doing arithmetic. "Because you didn't answer. Or because taking one back costs it nothing — a finger's worth of warmth against the whole hand it holds." She looked north, where Building 19's middle floors glowed faintly through its broken windows, a lit cake in a dead compound. "Or because," she said, very quietly, "it's nearly done counting, and it no longer minds being seen."

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An Ran found the colony because her ceiling was warm.

She had known, in the way you know a diagnosis you haven't collected — the musk riding every warm cycle, the skittering timetable, the knock she had knocked back, the vent screw lying on the floor since October like a fallen period — and knowing had stayed deniable for exactly as long as her followers' comments stayed deniable, one system of not-looking feeding another. But the ceiling above her bed now radiated heat like a sleeping animal's flank; the stain spread

in continents; at night the tick above her pillow matched her own pulse until she could not find the border between them; and on the twenty-second of January, after the utility surveyor's thermal photos began moving through the migrant group chats captioned check your ceilings, An Ran climbed onto her table with a screwdriver and her phone's backup camera taped to a broom handle, and opened the grille.

Warmth rolled over her face, thick, organic, breath-like.

She pushed the phone-camera up through the hole into the void, angled it, and looked at the little screen, and the little screen looked back into the men ding of Building 7, top floor, corner unit, fifty-one thousand yuan, story included.

The attic ran the length of the block, a tunnel of rafter and dust and pipe — and the pipe was the heart of it: the hot-water main, the artery, passing through the void fat as a torso and furred, both sides, for as far as the camera's light reached, with fur. Yellow-brown, dense, layered pelts packed against the warm iron in ranks, bodies coiled along the heat line flanks touching flanks, hundreds of them, a colony the length of a city block draped over the building's single warm vein and drinking from it — and the sound on the little speaker as she filmed, the chord, rose and fell in time with the radiator ticks downstairs, with her own pulse, and the camera light found faces: turning toward it, one by one, easy as sleepers surfacing, dozens of small sharp muzzles lifting out of the fur, eyes catching the lens and doubling it, eyeshine in ranks, and the nearest weasel — arm's-length close on the screen, close enough that she could see the whiskers silvered with dust, the folded paws, the direct flat patient appraisal she had first met in a courtyard video in October — the nearest weasel looked into her camera for three seconds.

Then it bowed.

Slow, deliberate, formal, forepaws folding, head dipping, holding the pose — the solicitation she knew from folklore posts and Ma's catechism and Xiaoman's warm hand — and behind it down the length of the artery, rank by rank by rank, the bowed heads dipped too, one after another after another, a wave of small formal courtesies traveling away into the dark of the ceiling, the whole colony saluting her, the tenant, the subscriber, the girl with forty thousand followers, and An Ran understood, all at once, standing on a table in her purchased home with her arms shaking, what the winter had been for. Not haunting. Recruitment. Not hunger — husbandry. Every video shared, every view tallied, every me next typed under her posts had been grain through the hatch; the town had spent a year making itself famous and the fame had been feed, and the algorithm had been the trap's spring, and the thing in her ceiling had ridden the town's own longing, its screens, its loneliness, its six-month night, from burrow to boiler to bloodstream — and now it stood upright in the warm dark by the hundreds, bowing to her, patient as landlords, waiting for one word, one nod, one reflex of courtesy, to make her its guarantor, its doorway, its Shuangshuang, its first citizen.

She lowered the phone. She climbed down off the table with her eyes on the floor. She spat at the baseboard, twice, hands shaking so hard she missed.

Then she packed a bag, and knocked — with her knuckles, deliberately, loudly, on the ceiling hatch three times, not a bow, not an answer, a tenant's complaint — and said aloud, in the flattest voice she owned, to the warm dark above her home:

"You're subletting. I'm calling the landlord."

And she went downstairs through the freezing stairwell to Building 11, to the apartment with the sulphur smell and the dark tablet and the woman who had stopped pretending, and

hammered on the door until Ma opened it, and said, "I know what's in the walls. All of it. And I know how it got in." She held up her phone, the bowing ranks still playing on the screen. "We made it strong. My people. The watchers, the posters, the me-next people — we fed it a city's worth of wanting. So you need us." Her voice cracked, and she let it. "Tell me what the rules are. I'll make sure everyone I can reach follows every one of them. That's the least — that's all I've got, but it's a lot of people, and it's attention, and attention is what it eats."

Ma looked at her for a long moment — at the vintage coat, the frost in the girl's lashes, the phone held out like evidence and like confession — and stepped aside to let her in out of the cold, which was, in the Northeast, the beginning of every alliance and the only sacrament the old country had never once refused anyone.

Behind her, breathless from three flights of stairs with a crate of canteen containers balanced on one arm, came Mengmeng — Yun-ge had sent hot food for what he'd heard was happening in this flat, and had sent the one person who knew every door in Nanshan by heart. "I'm not going anywhere," she said, setting the crates down, ears' pink curls bare under the stairwell light. "Whatever the rules are, I already know them. Yun-ge taught me without noticing." She looked around the kitchen — the tablet, the maps, the needle kit — and rolled up her sleeves. "Put me to work."

"Sit," Ma said. "Douzi's asleep. Shuang's at the table with maps." A pause, and the ghost of a grim smile. "You're just in time for the war council, daughter. Bring the kettle."

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CHAPTER 15

Backwards Air

The Hongyang boiler plant in Liaoyang had failed on the twenty-fifth of a December once, and frozen an entire city for fifty hours, and the engineers who studied that failure — there was one at Hegang's thermal company, a Jiamusi Technical man named Wei who had written his thesis on it — had spent years telling anyone who would listen that the lesson of Liaoyang was not boilers fail but systems that fail once keep failing: the first break weakens every joint downstream, and the cold finds the weakness, and the cascade begins. Nobody had listened, because listening cost money the city did not have, and so at 03:40 on the morning of January the twenty-sixth, when the number three boiler's water-wall tube let go under maximum load and the plant's pressure spiked and blew a DN400 main at the Xing'an Road junction, Hegang began to learn the Liaoyang curriculum firsthand.

The heat did not go out all at once. That was the fiendish part. It went out directionally — whole districts holding temperature while others sank toward zero degrees indoors within hours — because the failing loop shed load in chunks, valves slamming district by district, and the repair crews, half the staffing level of a decade ago, chased the breaks through the dark in a blizzard of their own steam. And in the walls of the town, along forty kilometers of cooling pipe, the winter colony felt its artery begin to die.

They came out of the walls at dusk.

Not everywhere; that was never its way. Patternlessly, deniably, roughly a third of the affected buildings, as if only some stacks were colonized or some thresholds crossed: Building 7

in Nanshan No. 6 compound, where An Ran's ceiling emptied between six and seven p.m. in a rustling river of fur flowing down inside the walls; the Liangs' kitchen in Building 3, where a family found nine weasels sitting in a silent row around their cold hearth like a jury; the school's relocated fourth floor; the Cloud Water café, where Yun-ge arrived at dawn to find his dried-flower wall occupied and every cup on the shelves turned mouth-outward, arranged, with terrible tidiness, facing the room. The migrants' group chats filled with footage — shaking-phone videos of small yellow shapes flowing along skirting boards, standing up behind radiators, bowing from windowsills at fleeing tenants — and the clips told a story the posters could not yet read: the colony was not invading. The colony was being evicted. It moved with the de-liberateness of a tenant with nowhere else to go, carrying nothing, asking nothing yet, and where it arrived, the human residents left, and the flats stood warm-less and empty and full of eyes, and by midnight of the first day the town had a new category of refugee and no word for it.

The word arrived at Ma's kitchen table, brought by Old Man Guan, who spread a hand-drawn map across the oilcloth while the wind walked around the building looking for ways in.

"Understand what you're looking at," Guan said. His finger traced the map: the boiler plant, the arterial mains, the districts' heating loops — and then, beneath them, in dashed lines, older, branching wider, running out north under the railway cut to the mass of the hill: the mine galleries. Number Three. Number Five. The second level. The sealed workings of eight decades, drawn from memory by the last living ventila-tion man of the Xinxing. "Nineteen sixty-two. The district heat was built by miners, off-shift, using mine surveying, through mine country. When they rerouted in '84 they

didn’t plug the old crossings — they capped them and forgot them, because capping was cheap and forgetting was free.” His finger tapped junctions marked with his own private symbols. “There are seventeen crossings still open between the living grid and the dead mountain. Heat’s been leaking into those galleries for forty years — a trickle, a breath, enough to keep a hibernating something alive through winters no wild weasel should survive.” He looked up, around the table: Bai Shuang, Fatty Liu with his sleeves rolled, Sun Ying with her notebook, An Ran with her phone face-down by her bowl like a renounced weapon, and Ma at the head, the tablet before her, incense climbing its plumb line. “And now the living grid is dying, and the dead mountain’s tenants are coming up the crossings into our walls, because we built them a warm road and never posted a sentry.”

“So we seal them,” Fatty Liu said. “Seventeen crossings. I know contractors— “

“With what crew? In what cold? And sealing traps whatever’s inside the crossings when the foam sets — you’d brick a hundred of them into the walls of this town forever, and they don’t die, teacher’s boy, you’ve seen that they don’t die— “ Guan’s hand flattened on the map. “You don’t seal a mine that’s breathing wrong. You fix the airflow. We have fans. The plant has forced-draft fans big enough to move a city’s worth of air, and the crews are already in the plant fighting for the boilers. Give me one fan, one crossing — the Number Five adit, the widest — and three days of power I’ll tell you how to steal from the broken loop without killing anybody’s radiators, and I’ll do what the mountain did in ‘09.” His finger slid down the dashed lines, against their grain, north to south. “I’ll push the warm down the throat of the galleries. Warm air, smoke, sulphur — the whole grammar of out. Drive the colony ahead of the

breath, back down its own road, into the deep sections, the cold sections, the ones even it won't den in. And then— " he looked at Ma, and it was the look of one professional to another, the last courtesy of the town's two surviving knowledge systems — "and then your family seals it the other way. With rules. With firecrackers and chicken blood and whatever else your grandmother's grandmother used, because concrete stops a body and nothing on this earth stops a debt except terms."

Silence, but for the wind and the incense.

"The cost," Ma said quietly. "Say the cost, old man. There's always a cost."

"Three days," Guan said. "Three days of diverted heat. The east districts go cold — truly cold, zero indoors, stove-heated only. The elderly will die of it. Some of them. Maybe dozens, if we're slow, if the blizzard comes early." He didn't soften it; he was too old to soften things and too honest to try. "That's the arithmetic. A town's warmth against its children. I've seen the mine make that trade twice with men, and I've hated it both times, and I'm telling you it's the trade."

Ma closed her eyes. When she opened them she was looking at the tablet, at the pink thread, at the north wall.

"My mother starved three winters so her children wouldn't owe that hill one grain of rice," she said. "Light the fan."

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The siege of Building 11 happened on the second night, and it was fought with kitchen things.

The east districts went cold at noon — a shudder through every radiator in town as the valves turned, and a sound Bai Shuang would remember on her deathbed: four thousand

apartments exhaling, one long disappointed sigh of cooling iron. By nightfall indoor thermometers read eleven degrees and falling, families stacked into single rooms around coal stoves and electric heaters the grid kept browning out, and the compound's WeChat group became a triage desk run by Sun Ying between dispatch shifts: who had stoves, who had elders, who had oxygen machines, who had guests.

Because the guests had come at dark. Down the walls of the freezing east side, out of every vent and riser gap, the evicted colony flowed — and it flowed toward warmth, toward the buildings the diverted loop still fed, toward Building 11, which stood at the border of the cold zone like a lit house on a drowned coast. They came through the foundation vents Old Man Guan had screwed shut in November — unscrewed again, of course, patiently, weeks ago — and up inside the walls, and the family heard the difference immediately: not the old considerate patrolling but a crowd, a stream, clawed feet in the thousands moving through the cavities like water in a burst pipe, and the musk rolled into the rooms ahead of them, thick as fog, and Douzi sat up in the inside bed with his eyes already shining and said, in a voice half his own, "They're knocking."

Ma took command of the flat the way she had taken command of kitchens for fifty years.

Vinegar in bowls on every sill. Sulphur sticks lit and planted at each vent mouth, smoke leaning inward like a fleet of tiny flags refusing the wind. Pots and lids distributed, a rhythm assigned — bang, rest, bang-bang, the arrhythmic assault that made the walls flinch, that broke the tick, that gave the chord nowhere to set its beat — and at the door threshold, laid in a line, the year's accumulated arsenal: dried chili, coarse salt, a rooster's foot from the market, and the needle kit open on a folded cloth, sterilized over the stove flame by Bai Shuang with

hands she kept steady by reciting the milk-names of everyone she had ever loved.

They came at the bathroom vent first — the warmest stack now that the flat's own pipes ran lukewarm — and the grille bowed outward once, twice, and a paw came through the slats, small and black-shod and horribly dexterous, feeling along the edge for the screws that weren't there, and Ma hit the grille with the wooden spoon, one crack like a rifle, and spoke to it in the old voice, the terms-voice:

"This house is paid! Four generations paid! You have your hill and we have our walls, yellow master, and the channels are separate — man has his breath, the demon has hers — GO BACK DOWN!"

Silence, in the ducts. Then, from everywhere at once, softly, patient as shopkeepers, the trill rose — hundreds of throats, in the walls, under the floor, above the ceiling — and the night's real siege began: hour after hour, probing rushes at vents and door bottoms and the balcony drain, met with smoke and noise and vinegar and terms, the family rotating on watch while the indoor temperature fell past eight degrees past six, and the flat filled with smoke and sulfur and the smell of fear, and through it all Doudou sat on the inside bed with the red string cutting his wrist and his hands over his ears, rocking, holding out, whispering the catechism to himself — don't answer don't answer don't — until near midnight, when Bai Shuang pulled his blanket back to check the string and found, curled in the warm cave of his bedding against his stomach, three of them.

Yellow, sleek, sleeping. Trusting. Arranged against her son's ribs in a curve, like something loved.

He hadn't opened the window. He hadn't done anything. They had come up through his wall — his wall, his stack, his particular borrowed warmth, the address the season had

taught them — and dened against him as against a radiator, and he had lay awake all night, rigid, arms lifted off his own body, whispering don't answer don't answer so he wouldn't wake them and wouldn't speak to them and wouldn't, couldn't, be kind — thirteen years old, holding out, hosting, and Bai Shuang stood over the bed with the wooden spoon raised and understood that she could no longer tell, in the dark, in this war, where the enemy slept and where her son did.

She lowered the spoon.

"Ma," she called, evenly, and her voice held. "Kettle. And the cage from the balcony."

They evicted the three gently — oven mitts, a wire cage, Ma murmuring terms at arm's length, not yours, not yours, this one's mine, my milk bought this bed — and carried the cage down and opened it at the compound gate facing north, and the three poured away into the dark like spilled gold, unrushed even in flight, and Douzi watched them go from the window with an expression his mother chose, that night, not to name: grief. Plain grief. The grief of a boy whose bed had been the only warm place in a cold world for somebody, even somebody like that.

"He hasn't fallen," Ma said behind her, quietly. "Mark it, daughter. He hosted them and never answered. Whatever the hill thinks it's buying with that boy — it hasn't closed the sale." She put her hand briefly on Bai Shuang's shoulder, iron and flour. "Neither has it given up. Sleep in shifts."

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At 04:00, at the Number Five adit, Old Man Guan started the fan.

He and Wei the engineer and Fatty Liu's vans of volunteers had spent the previous day rigging it: a forced-draft fan the

size of a bus mouth, siphoned power, sheet-metal ducting rammed into the adit's throat and sealed with foam and quilts and frozen earth, and at its intake, in steel drums, the fuel of the operation — damp coal smudge, sulphur, dried chili husks by the sack, and, on Ma's instruction, delivered without explanation and obeyed without question, a bucket of rooster blood. The old grammar. Smoke and terms.

Guan threw the switch himself. The fan coughed, caught, and began to breathe into the mountain — and the mountain, for the first time since October, breathed back the way it was told.

Down the dead galleries the warm reek rolled, filling the crossings, filling Number Five and Number Three, pushing through the seventeen forgotten doors of 1962, rising through the walls of Nanshan and Gongnong and Dongshan, reversing forty years of leakage in a night — and in the walls of the town the stream of claws slowed, paused, turned. Bai Shuang, on her watch shift at the bathroom vent, heard it happen: the crowd-sound in the cavities reversed direction, a long rustling withdrawal, tide going out through the building's bones, and the trill faded down the stack, down and down, north and down, and by dawn the musk was thinning, and the vents stood quiet, and out at the ruin, the drone that someone flew at first light — against everyone's instruction, because someone always films — recorded a sight that stayed on hard drives through everything that followed:

A river. A river of yellow pouring south-to-north across the snowfield below the headframe, hundreds wide, flowing home into the dark of the adit with the smoke rising pale above it, and at the river's head, at its very front, one shape that stood taller than the rest, walking upright at ceremony pace, pausing once at the adit's mouth to turn and sit and face the town — facing, the footage showed when stabilized and enhanced, fa-

cing precisely, across four kilometers of frozen city, Building 11.

It bowed. Once. Deep. Formal. A promise of return, or a bill presented, or a landlord's courtesy to a sitting tenant; the frame held it a moment, forepaws folded, muzzle dipped, projection-light blue with dawn —

— and went down into the hill with its people, and the fan breathed warm behind it, and Old Man Guan stood at the switch with his hand on the lever and tears freezing in the seams of his face, and said, to the mountain, in the voice of the intake man of Number Three gallery, the words every miner of his generation had said going down and coming up, the oldest terms there were:

"That's the lot. All accounted for. Mind the lamps."

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CHAPTER 16

The Last Train

The videos always got out. That was the age they lived in: you could unscrew every vent in the district, but someone's cousin had the clip, and the clip had cousins, and by the first week of February the outside world had finished deciding what Hegang was this season. Not the cheapest city in China. Not the hipster utopia. The possessed city. Cable news ran the drone footage with chyrons about mass psychogenic illness; a streaming company optioned a series; two more CDC planes landed at Jiamusi; and the province, which had spent a decade forgetting Hegang existed, discovered it could not afford to be seen forgetting now.

What the institutions built, with the materials at hand, was an evacuation.

Affected individuals to be relocated for observation and treatment, read the notice, printed and posted and photographed and shared before the paste dried: the forty-three taken, plus their guardians if desired, to be transported to the psychiatric facility at Jiamusi, where — the notice did not say cages, because no notice ever says cages, but every family in the Northeast had a grandmother's story about Jiamusi in the old style, and what the notice did say was for their safety and the safety of the public, which the town heard perfectly. The walkers were docile, portable, insured against nothing. The walkers were the town's shame made ambulatory. The province wanted the footage to stop having Hegang in it.

Sun Ying was ordered to compile the manifest. She compiled it — forty-three names, spelled correctly, each with guardian contacts, medical notes, and, in the remarks column

of every single row, in the flat administrative language of a dispatcher who had learned exactly how much truth fits in a form: Subject responds to name. Subject responds to milk-name. Do not permit subjects to ask questions of transport staff. Brief staff: do not answer.

The roads closed on the eleventh. A Siberian low the meteorologists called a once-in-a-decade event parked itself over the plain and began, with mechanical patience, to erase Heilongjiang: horizontal snow, wind hardening to forty kilometers an hour, visibility falling to a white scream. The highway to Jiamusi shut within hours — the same documented kill-switch that had stranded fifteen thousand tourists once before — and the buses turned back, and everything, all the refugees and all the fear, funneled as it always funneled, onto the one electrified thread south: the Green Giant EMU, two cars requisitioned, standing at Hegang station with its lights on in the whiteout like a lamp in a drowned world.

They gathered on the platform in the shrieking dark: families with bundled cases, guardians clutching transfer papers, and the forty-three, quiet, warm-handed, arranged by some instinct none of them admitted along the platform's edge in a line that faced, with terrible neatness, north. They hummed, low, under the wind. The sound carried further than it should have. People waiting near them drifted up-platform without noticing they were drifting.

Bai Shuang came to see the train off, and stood a long time at the ticket window before she bought nothing, because the argument had already happened at the kitchen table and happened again inside her every hour: Jiamusi has doctors. Jiamusi has walls that hold. You're keeping him out of pride. And opposite that, older than argument: the medium's deleted words, find who answered first; the contract can be contested — and Ma's iron certainty that you did not hand

the hill's collateral to strangers with forms. In the end it was Douzi himself who settled it, lucid at breakfast, holding out, hollow-eyed: "If I go on the train, Ma, who holds my string? They'll be kind to me there. Kind isn't the same as mine." He looked at his hands. "Grandma said contest it. I want to be home when it loses."

An Ran came to the station to put other people's children on it.

She had become, over the fortnight since the war council, something none of her followers would have recognized: a logistics woman. It was the skill set nobody knew she had — Shenzhen product management, it turned out, meant you could run a relief pipeline out of a dying city's group chats — and she ran one: coal for stoves, sulphur sticks sourced from three counties, vinegar by the crate, the quiet-watch rosters, the canteen Yun-ge now operated out of Cloud Water serving free guobaorou to anyone who sat down, which was most of the town on cold evenings, eating the too-oily food and being warmed by it twice. Twelve of the migrant families were on the manifest; she had talked nine of them into going — there's no shame in it, the winter lost, go where it's warm — and she walked the platform with the transfer papers getting signatures, and it was while she knelt to zip a stranger's child's coat that the small figure in tiger pajamas stepped off the stair at the far end of the platform.

No adult had brought it. No manifest held it. It stood at the edge of the light in its cartoon tigers, barefoot on the snow-swept concrete, and the wind bent around it, and one by one — Sun Ying saw it first, then the guards, then the whole platform, a wave of stillness rolling outward from the stair — the forty-three stopped humming, and turned, all together, faces north-end of the platform, and looked at the child.

It raised one small hand. Folded the paws. Bowed.

And the forty-three bowed back, forty-three deep, in a wave that traveled down the line like wind through wheat, formal, silent, perfect — and the station master, a railway man thirty years, crossed himself with his lantern hand without knowing he did it, and the loudspeaker crackled the boarding call, and the child in tiger pajamas walked, unhurried, barefoot, up the gangway last of all, and no one stopped it, because stopping it would have been a kind of answering, and because some part of the collective animal of the town wanted, shamefully, gladly, to see it go.

Nineteen of the forty-three went up the gangway that night — the families who had run out of every other idea, guardians clutching transfer papers like boarding passes out of a burning country. The other twenty-four stood their ground along the platform edge, and the police sent to persuade them found themselves being reasoned with.

"Madam. The notice says relocation is for their own— "

"I've had a notice like that in the family already," said a small grandmother in a man's padded coat, holding her boy by the hood like a shopping bag. The boy stood quiet under her hand, facing north the way they all did now, patient as luggage. "1959. My mother's sister, coughing blood, and a notice came saying Jiamusi had doctors, Jiamusi had walls that hold. They wrote to us in the spring. You want to write to me in the spring, young man?"

"Nobody's writing to anyone— "

"Then nobody's going. There. Settled."

The young cop keyed his radio twice and got the blizzard's own voice on the channel, and stood in the wind being looked at — one conscientious man against a front of grandmothers, every one of them armed with a Jiamusi story and none of them carrying any shame about deploying it.

"You." The small grandmother's eye found An Ran at the platform's edge, transfer papers still warm in her pocket from other people's signatures. "You talked that young mother aboard. The one with the boy on her back."

"She wanted— "

"She wanted her son warm. I want mine mine." The grandmother's grip didn't shift on the hood. "Go put somebody's child on your train, girl, and leave mine standing on the platform where the town can see him."

The blizzard shut the highways behind the buses within the hour, which settled the argument for everyone: you cannot compel what you cannot transport. The province got its footage of a compassionate evacuation. The town kept its children. Both sides understood exactly what had happened, and both filed it under the only category the winter had left.

The doors sealed. Through the glass, in the third car, the small figure sat facing backward, so that it could watch the station as the train pulled out, and its head turned, smoothly, keeping the platform in view long past the angle any neck — any human neck — maintains, until the snow took the red taillights, and the platform's loudspeakers played their tinny farewell chime to no one, and the wind moved in behind the train and began erasing the tracks.

An Ran stood beside Bai Shuang in the falling white, both of them watching the place where the rails had been.

"I put twelve on that train," An Ran said. Her voice was strange to her, scraped. "I told them it was the brave thing."

"It was the sane thing."

"It was the convenient thing." She turned up her collar. "My people, we're connoisseurs of exits. We romanticize leaving so hard we forget it's mostly just — being somewhere else while something happens without you." She looked at the erased track, and the erased platform, and the town glowing

dimly northward through the blur. “I’m done romanticizing exits, laoshi. Teach me the home-team plays.”

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Fatty Liu missed the train on purpose, and it killed him, and the town will argue about whether it should have until there is no town to argue.

He was at the station earlier that evening with six vans — his own, his brother-in-law’s, four hired at ruinous rates from a Jiamusi firm, drivers mutinous, fees doubled for weather — running the last ferry loop between the outlying compounds and the station, because the blizzard had cut Dongshan Workers’ Village off entirely: a knot of streets on the old mine’s eastern flank where the plows didn’t reach and the residents were the oldest in the city, the generation that had never left, including, at Number 14, the Wangs — Wang Yufen, seventy-eight, and her bedridden husband — who had refused evacuation twice on principle and whose grandson, eleven, had begun walking in his sleep a week ago, north.

The vans made four runs through worsening white. On the fifth, the radio said the village road had drifted shut behind the last van, and the station master came out into the doorway to meet him, lantern up, a railway man thirty years who had already watched the white eat half his platforms.

“You’re not going back.”

“I’ve got chains. Half a tank.”

“It’s a record blizzard, Dabao. They’re saying the army column comes up the coal road at dawn — plows, troops, thermoses, the works. Nobody dies in Workers’ Village tonight that one day of patience wouldn’t save. You. Stay. Put.”

“Yufen-jie’s seventy-eight,” Fatty Liu said. “Her husband’s bedridden. And the boy’s been walking north in his sleep since Tuesday.”

"Then give me the key and I'll send a man at first light— "

"With what lantern, Zhang-shu? You've stood on this platform your whole life. How many dawns have you watched arrive late?"

The lantern wavered in the wind — from the wind, from the wind — and the station master said, in the flat voice of a man signing something, "Then take rope. Take the big torch from the office. And if the road beats you, you turn around — you don't push through. Swear it on your father."

"On my father," said Fatty Liu, and stood a moment longer with the snow smoking off his shoulders, and said, in the voice of a boy from Workers' Village whose father never once missed a shift bell:

"Army's got no key to Number 14. I do." A pause. "Yufen-jie used to feed me at her table when my old man was on nights. You don't miss the bell on people who fed you."

He went back into it alone. That was the finding of the in‑vestigation, such as it was — alone, because his hired drivers refused, honorably, and he waved them to the station with the last of the evacuated and turned the van around into the white with his hazards blinking, and the last confirmed contact was a WeChat voice message sent at 21:14 to Bai Shuang, received as static and wind and, threaded through it, steady as pit-work, his narration: "—third marker's down, taking the old coal road, higher ground — tell Wei the crossing at Number Five's drifted but the adit breathes clear, feel it on my hand, the hill's exhaling — ha! Warm side pushes it, teacher, your old man's pal was right— " and then the wind ate the rest, and the message ended, and the town waited through two days of blizzard with the fan at Number Five droning south and the temperature at −37° and Sun Ying logging, on page sixty-six, the coordinates of every rumor of headlights.

They found the van on the nineteenth, two hundred meters short of Number 14, off the coal road where the drift had beaten it, doors open, hazard relay still clicking dry clicks.

He had made the house. That was what broke the town open about it — the arithmetic of the last four hundred meters, reconstructed from the scene: Wang Yufen alive in her bed with her husband, the house heated two more days by the coal Fatty Liu had carried in sacks on his back through waist-drifts, door propped by a chair, kettle dry on a stove banked expert-low, and in the corner, wrapped in the van's floor mats and the dead man's elk sweater and every quilt the house owned, the Wangs' grandson — asleep, dreaming ordinary dreams, his sleepwalking done, the red string on his wrist tied in a knot no one in the family tied.

Fatty Liu sat upright against the stove bench, facing the door, between the family and the weather, his coat spread over the boy, his own arms folded across his chest in the posture of a man minding a shop, waiting on customers that never came. The coroner wrote exposure. The town added a line of its own, spoken at the funeral by Old Han, chemistry teacher, thirty-four years' service, who had once spat at the man's shadow:

"He sold tickets to the wound," Han said, from the podium of the workers' hall, to eight hundred people and one urn. "And then he went back into the storm for the wound's grandmother, carrying coal on his back, and he sat down between it and the child, and he did not answer the cold when it asked him anything. Comrades, I have taught the periodic table for thirty-four years, and I am here to tell you there is no element for what that was. We will have to invent one." He looked out at the faces, the hipsters' faces among the miners' widows, the café regulars among the pithead grandmothers, the whole impossible braided congregation of the last winter. "I propose we call it Dabao. Abundance. Because

he finally gave away everything, and look how rich the rest of us got."

In the glovebox of the van, frozen stiff in its leather cover, they found the ledger of Liu Dabao Real Estate Services: six - teen flats, five years of margins, and against every balance owing, in the fat careful handwriting he saved for contracts, the same two characters, entered again and again down the final page like a man paying off a debt of his own:

免了。

Forgiven. All of it.

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CHAPTER 17

Restored Service

Wei closed the last weld at 11:40 on the morning of February the seventeenth, in a trench steam-fogged by its own breath, and lay against the frozen earth of the excavation for a full minute before climbing out, listening to the repaired main hold pressure like a man listening to a child breathe through a fever.

It had taken his crew eleven days. Eleven days of working shifts the labor law did not recognize, in cold that made steel brittle and skin dishonest — two men hospitalized with frostbite, one with a burned retina from a cutting torch that spat in the wind — salvaging parts from the plant's dead sister boilers, machining a valve seat by hand because the supplier's warehouse had shipped the wrong one in 2022 and nobody had opened the crate since. Wei had not left the plant in nine of those nights. He had stopped, somewhere around day six, being an engineer executing repairs and become something older: a stoker in a folktale, feeding the heart of a town with his hands.

At 14:00 the loop was pressurized. At 15:30, district by district, the valves came open along the restored artery, and Hegang heard its own heartbeat return: tick, gurgle, knock — radiators waking all over the east side like birdsong after a silence nobody had been sure would end. By dusk, thermometers in the coldest quarters were climbing past fifteen degrees, and Yun-ge put a hand-painted sign on Cloud Water's door — FREE TEA TODAY. WE SURVIVED — and the town did something none of them could remember doing all winter: it celebrated. Out loud. In the streets. Kids laid their palms flat on

the warm iron of the compound radiators like pilgrims; old men sat on benches outside the bathhouse in the steam, coat - less at −22°, daring the century to say something; in Building 11, Ma cooked four dishes when two would have fed everyone, which was her liturgy of survival, and at seven the phone rang through the steam, and it was Guo Jian, karaoke roaring be - hind him the way it roared behind him every night of his working life.

"Warm yet?" No hello. "Just say it."

"Fifteen degrees and climbing. Douzi's been sitting on the radiator since noon like a pigeon on a wire."

"And the boy is— " A pause. Behind him a song ended mid-line.

Her stomach dropped before she could stop it — the old flinch, the seam-check, three seconds of listening for what shouldn't be there — and then the sound resolved itself: ap - plause, a chair scraping, another song starting up. A dormitory being a dormitory. Nobody asking her anything.

"Shuang?"

"Still here," she said, and heard her own voice come out level, and was grateful to him for not asking about the pause. "He's on his third bowl. Come count them yourself."

"Counting costs a train ticket."

"Then earn one."

He laughed — his real laugh, the one the karaoke had to shout over — and for once the conversation held no folder, no offer, no math. Just you're warm, you're all warm, eat something, go to bed, ordinary sentences arriving whole, each one itself, and Bai Shuang stood in her kitchen in the steam of her mother's victory stew and let herself believe, for almost four hours, that the worst was behind them.

Old Man Guan spent those four hours trying to stop it.

He went to the adit first and found what he feared: the fan's fuel drums down to sludge, his resupply requisitions lost somewhere in the same budget void that had eaten the contractor's invoice — he had been rationing the mountain's medicine for a month on assumption of weeks. Then he went to the plant, and then to the district office, carrying the argument he had carried to every level of this city since January: the crossings are still open; the colony is still in the galleries; restored mains pressure means restored leakage into the old warm road, and you are about to turn the heat back on under their den. He said the word eviction in reverse. He drew the junctions on the back of a work order. And at every desk he was met, with real sympathy and absolute immobility, by the same arithmetic: eleven elders dead in the three cold days, two more funerals scheduled, a province reviewing the city's very existence, and a director of heating services who had wept openly in his office explaining that he could not — could not, the man repeated, hitting the desk softly, like a man tapping a wall to find the stud — tell the surviving grandmothers of the east districts that their heat was being taken away again on the recommendation of a retired pipefitter, a folk medium, and a dispatcher under disciplinary transfer.

"Three days," Guan begged. "Give me three days to move fuel."

"Give me three thousand tons of diesel," the director said, "and I'll give you your three days. Get out of my office, old man. You've earned better than this conversation, and so have I."

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The warmth reached the walls by nightfall, and the walls noticed.

They noticed the way a dry field notices rain — instantly, totally, root to stone. In the restored districts the pipes sang as they filled, and inside the cavities around the pipes, eight hundred meters under everything, down the seventeen for‑gotten doors of 1962, something vast and patient felt its winter den begin, once more, to be worth having. Sun Ying, at her window above the dispatch center at midnight, heard the change before she understood it: the town's chord returning, faint at first, from below — not in the taken (the taken were diminished, scattered, twenty-four families' worth of guarded children sleeping in watched rooms) but in the walls themselves, the deep hum of a building-sized animal settling back into its bed, and she was reaching for the notebook when the first call came in on the emergency line, and then the second, and by 3 a.m. there were eleven calls, all the same report in different mouths:

The vents are breathing again. The smell is back. Something is coming up the risers.

Dawn's rollcall found Qu Xiaoyan standing in her fath‑er's yard at first light, facing north, bare-handed, unblinking, warm. Two brothers from Gongnong, found by their mother stacked against the boiler-closet door of their own flat like cordwood, breathing together. A girl of nine from the riverside blocks, standing in the snow of the schoolyard before any bus arrived, arranged to face the hill. Four relapses in one dawn — four children who had surfaced in February's thaw of the fold now receded like tide-touched sand, and Bai Ling, summoned from the canteen, took one look at the little girl's folded hands and gave the room its sentence:

"It didn't come back for them," she said. "It came back for the heat. They're just what lived in the way."

Paopao's bed was empty.

They searched all morning — the compound roofs, the net-café, the river ice, the game arcade where he was known and loved — Sun Qiu's voice going through the registers of fury into something no register was built for, Sun Ying walking the railway cut with thirty volunteers walking line abreast through the drifts like pit rescuers, because that was the only forma - tion anyone's body remembered. The drone went up at noon. It found him at 12:40, a quarter kilometer up the cut, past the last compound light, kneeling in the snow beside the rails with his face to the north and his hands folded at his chest in the formal two-handed bow, faintly smiling, frost in his lashes, coal dust — the coroner would confirm it, gray and fine and impossible, from galleries sealed eight years — in his airways.

Fifteen years old. Provincial rank in his game. His sneakers — the ones he'd badgered his mother for all December — were still boxed under his bed at home.

Nobody filmed him.

That was the detail the town told itself afterward, the proof it kept like a coin under the tongue: forty-some people stood in the trampled snow along the rail cut looking at a dead boy posed like a shopkeeper's greeting, and in a city where everything had been content since 2019, where even shoveling ice was a genre — not one phone came out of one pocket. The rules were three days old and the town observed them at its own child's funeral scale, in perfect silence, eyes lowered, while Old Man Guan waded through the drifts to the body and knelt beside it and unfolded the boy's hands gently, breaking the pose with his own, muttering terms at the cut, at the rails, at the hills — he wasn't yours, he was never yours, take your dust out of this child — and covered Paopao's face with his own scarf, which was, in the grammar of that generation, the whole eulogy.

Sun Ying wrote page ninety-four standing up, in the wind, because sitting would have taken longer.

Subject: Sun P., 15, nephew of recording officer. Found 12:40, rail cut km 2, posture consistent with incident class, airway residue consistent with site class. Prior statement on file (p.46): subject reported being asked "do you want to stay." Subject held out. Subject held out for five weeks. Cause of death per exposure; cause of exposure per restored service schedule of Feb 17. Note for whoever inherits this notebook: the town turned the heat on, and the thing in the ground sent an invoice. We paid in the wrong currency. There is no version of the ledger where this was his family's fault.

She gave the pages to no one. She took them, instead, to her sister's kitchen table — the only official who outranked every director in the city was standing at the stove not cooking anything, a pot of noodles gone cold beside her, her son's rank badge glowing on the paused match behind her, the game holding its breath mid-screen.

Sun Ying read page ninety-four aloud. All of it, flat, the wind in the window frame doing the punctuation. When it was done, Sun Qiu said:

"Read the part about him holding out."

"Qiu— "

"Read it."

" 'Subject held out. Subject held out for five weeks.' "

"And the cause. Read whose schedule."

" 'Cause of death per exposure. Cause of exposure per restored service schedule of February the seventeenth.' "

"There." Her sister didn't turn from the stove. "Your rules kept my boy polite while it ate him, Ying. That's what I'll hear at the grave — he held out, he held out. Held out for what? So this town could turn its heat back on?"

"I wrote that there was no version of the ledger— "

"I don't want it to not be his family's fault." The ladle came down on the pot rim, once, like a gavel. "I want him back. Read me the page where the ledger does that."

Sun Ying took the blow without moving, the way dispatch trains you to take the bad calls: log it, own it, keep your voice flat, and know that the grief on the line is not aimed at you — it's aimed at whoever picks up, because grief has no number to dial.

"I'm sitting with him tonight," Sun Qiu said at last, quieter. "I don't want you in the room."

"I know."

"Good." A pause; the wind; the badge glowing on the paused match. "Now eat something or get out of my kitchen."

Sun Ying took two bowls of the cold noodles anyway on her way out, and left one on the stairwell landing for the watch, and ate hers standing in the street at −31°, which was the only way she had found all week to feel anything except the ledger.

Ma, hearing of it, said only: "Rage is firewood. She can burn it; it warms nothing but her. Tell her from me — the debt goes in the book. All debts go in the book." And then Ma, who had buried a husband and a son and most of a generation, cooked for the mourning house, because somebody had to, and that was the whole of her theology.

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The second expulsion was decided at midnight in the plant's control room, and it was decided by one man, alone, in violation of everything, and it may have been the sanest act committed in Heilongjiang that winter.

Wei sat at the console with the restored loop purring its new-welded purr under his hands, and the director's refusal fresh in his ears, and Guan's map spread on the desk beside a

cold cup of tea — seventeen crossings, one fan, three days of diverted heat, the arithmetic of the cold days already written in eleven names — and he thought about what he had learned in eleven days underground in a trench: that systems do not care, that pressure finds the weakness, that the man who closes the valve is always blamed for the dark and never thanked for the water. He was forty-one years old. He had a daughter who thought the power plant was the moon. He looked at the resignation letter he had drafted on day seven and never sent, and he took out a pen, and finished it, and signed it, and dated it ahead, and put it in the drawer with the maintenance logs where procedure would find it eventually, in order.

Then he logged an unauthorized emergency pressure test on the east loop — structural integrity verification, mandatory post-repair, duration forty-eight hours, service interruption regretted — stamped it with the seal of a department that technically authorized him to do exactly that if he judged the welds suspect, and judged them suspect, in writing, at 01:20 on the nineteenth of February, and began, valve by valve, to take the heat out of the walls of Hegang a second time.

The town received the notice at dawn with a howl he would hear about for years — the same day as the funeral, the madman, the butcher — and Guan received it with a face like a man watching weather change in his favor, and had the fan breathing into the mountain by noon on the last drum of fuel, smoke and sulphur and the old grammar rolling down Num - ber Five adit, and the colony, which had come home for one night to find the beds warm and the larder restocked, was put out again into the killing cold before it could unpack — angrier this time. Everyone felt the difference. On the first expulsion it had withdrawn like a tide, deliberative, measured. This time it fought the current. The knocking ran the whole length of

Nanshan after dark — not one polite double-rap at one window but a fistfall of sound, door after door after door, building after building, twice each, insistently, the knock of a creditor who has been refused twice and is no longer performing patience — and the town stood the siege in the dark with its fires banked low and its eyes down, hour upon hour, mothers holding sons' strings, the catechism passed mouth to mouth along the frozen stairwells — don't answer don't answer don't — until well past 4 a.m., when the last of it went down the cut, and the quiet came back thin and used-up, like a bandage over a wound that both sides know will open again.

In Building 11, Ma stood at the dark window with the pail dripping in her fist, an old woman keeping watch over a streetful of held breaths, and delivered the nightly entry into whatever ledger attended her:

"Denied," she said. "Again. Entered twice now, yellow master, and marked disputed. Bring your papers next time. We keep ours."

And far south, in the canteen of Cloud Water, over the cooling stove, Bai Ling turned her teacup north to south and back, and said to the tired circle around the table — teacher, medium, grandmother, migrant, ventilation man, the chair of a dead boy standing empty against the wall because no one would move it and no one could look at it —

"The coldest hour is coming. Ten days, maybe twelve. When it comes, we pull every string he's holding, or we spend the rest of our lives paying interest." She set the cup down with a click like a needle lowered onto a record. "So rest. Boil your needles. Learn your songs. And somebody — " her eyes went to Sun Ying, who had not slept — "somebody make me a list of every true name in this town. Milk-names. Birth names. The names before words. Because in ten days, dispatcher, we're calling roll."

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CHAPTER 18

The Quiet Watch

The rules went up handwritten, on paper, because screens were its country and paper was theirs.

They appeared overnight in stairwells and shop windows and bus shelters across six districts, brush-inked by Ma's steady hand, photocopied at the school by the ream, and they read like a catechism crossed with a safety poster, because that is exactly what they were — the distilled emergency doctrine of a town at war with a creditor:

THE WINTER RULES 1. If anything asks you what you see — a voice, an animal, a phone call, your own child's face — you answer NOTHING. Not yes. Not no. Not silence-by-nodding. Eyes down. Walk on. 2. After dark, look at the ground. The ground never asked anyone a question. 3. Do not film it. Do not post it. Attention is food; we are done feeding. 4. Feed the tablets instead: rice, incense, a chicken head at New Year. Pay the old contract so it cannot claim we defaulted first. 5. If your people walk in their sleep: follow, eyes down, bring them home bored. It costs nothing to be rude to the right things. 6. We are Hegang. We have outlasted worse landlords.

Rule three was An Ran's campaign, and it was the one nobody expected the internet generation to survive.

She stood up at Cloud Water on the twentieth of February — but the standing-up was the end of something, and it hadn't felt like an ending while it happened; it had felt like losing. What nobody saw in that room was January: the four drafts she'd written and buried in her notes app, each apology cal‑ibrated softer than the last, each one reread at 3 a.m. and re‑cognized, with a nausea she could locate physically, under her

sternum, as the exact voice of a brand account. The post she did publish in December — a soft, reflective piece about learning humility from the market — and deleted forty minutes later when she caught herself checking its numbers before she'd finished being ashamed. The evening she'd walked past the pharmacy and seen frost feathering a window and thought, that light would shoot beautifully, and stopped dead on the ice with her camera half-drawn, appalled, the lens aimed at someone's grandmother's kitchen window like a gun that fired liking. She had not become a different person at Cloud Water in December, whatever Bai Shuang hoped. She had become a person who flinched — who caught the gesture mid-air, again and again, forty times, eighty times, each flinch costing more than the last — until the flinching was the only honest thing left, and on the twentieth of February she stood up on shaking patrol-sore knees and told forty people the thing she had spent a year not knowing how to say: we fed it. Then she laid out the whole ledger without flinching — her own forty thousand followers, the thermal clip, the ghost-girl video viewed four million times, every me next, every poverty-core aesthetic post, every drone flight, an entire year in which two tribes had filmed a wounded town from both sides of the same wound while something under the hill ate the attention like grain — and then she did the thing that no platform had ever taught anyone to do.

She deleted everything.

Her account, archived with a final post — a photograph of frozen pears thawing in a bowl of cold water, captioned they come back sweet — went dark at 21:00. By midnight, thirty-one of the migrants who remained had followed; by the week's end, working through Yun-ge's canteen network and Sun Ying's dispatch rosters and the school's phone tree, the de‑letion had spread through the town like the opposite of con‑

tagion: the Hegang tags emptied, the clips came down wherever hands could reach them, the ruin-teas and flat-tours and ghost compilations were taken down by their own makers, unpublishing the town's year of exposure, feed by feed, until the algorithm's index of Hegang thinned to official notices and weather reports — a city starving its own fame on purpose, going dark about itself, the first community in the history of the feed to choose invisibility over audience.

What replaced the feed was slower, and had a body.

They called it the quiet watch, because naming things plainly was part of the doctrine now — no romance, no branding, just the function said out loud. Rosters in Sun Ying's dispatch hand, taped inside stairwell doors: two walkers per compound per night, hours from last radiator cycle to first bus, duties few and strict. Escort anyone older than seventy who moved after dark. Collect sleepwalkers bored, per rule five. Carry no lights above knee height. And at all times, on all streets, in all weathers: eyes down, pace un-hurried-to-bored, mouth shut — the whole patrol performing, night after night, in the empty frozen streets, the posture of a population that could not be bothered to notice its own haunting.

An Ran volunteered for the first roster, which surprised everyone, Ma most of all.

"You especially should stay indoors," Ma told her, at the kitchen table, over the tablet with its pink thread. "You're marked, girl. Don't think I haven't wondered why that colony dened over your ceiling of every warm flat in Nan-shan."

"Because I'm the one who owes," An Ran said. It came out steadier than she felt. "That's the whole point of rosters, isn't it? The people who owe go first." And when Ma only looked at her, she set down her cup and paid out the truth she

had been carrying since December, since Xiaoman's warm hand on her wrist in a nest of duvets: "The night of my first heating day. Something knocked twice above my ceiling, politely, like a neighbor. And I was half-asleep, and I knocked back." Her voice stayed level; her hands didn't. "Xiaoman told me before she went — it counts knocks the same as bows. So somewhere in its books I've been answered-for since October, auntie. Whatever that makes me, I don't get to hide from the streets. I get to walk them."

Bai Ling, consulted, would not rule on it — not that night, not in a kitchen. "Adjudication needs the coldest hour and a clean circle," she said. "A contract contested by lamplight sticks crooked. Until then— " the medium looked at her for a long moment, reading something in her face that forty thousand followers had never found, "—until then you walk anyway. That's either courage or penance, and honestly the hill can't tell the difference, so neither should you."

So An Ran walked.

The nights taught her a city she had never once seen, though she had lived in it a year. She learned the town at walking pace, at 2 a.m., at −28°: which doorways held warmth like cupped hands (the bakery's extractor vent; the bathhouse alley), where the drifts grew fangs that took ankles, which courtyards' lamps had been allowed to die and which the pensioners secretly paid to keep burning because dark killed faster than cold. She learned the other walkers — retired miners mostly, old men of Guan's generation who had stood night shift in worse places and treated the watch as a return to form, cracking jokes at whisper-volume about the weather's lack of manners. Mengmeng walked Tuesdays and Fridays, paired with An Ran by her own demand, and turned out to be the roster's secret weapon: she knew every grandmother's door-code and every grandfather's pride, could talk a sleep-

walking elder's son through the collection drill in six sentences of fluent Dongbei, and had started teaching the pensioners at the canteen to tape heat pads inside their wrist wraps — the cold eats numb, auntie; numb is how it gets in without knocking. She said things like that now. Everyone on the watch did. The doctrine had become the town's second language, learned young, spoken flat. She learned to read the town's sleep from its windows: lit and curtained, safe; lit and bare, check tomorrow; dark with frost fern growing from the inside of the glass, knock loud, wake the household, someone may be walking.

And twice a week she ate at Ma's table afterward, steaming, half-frozen, too tired to be ashamed — because Ma had enforced the note's original terms without ever repeating them: if you film people, eat with them first had become, by winter's arithmetic, if you walk for us, eat with us always, and there were worse trades. Mengmeng was usually there too, off her canteen shift, ears healed to delicate pink curls she never covered anymore — she had stopped hiding them, she said, because hiding them was a kind of answering, agreeing with whatever the cold had tried to say about her. The two young women sat shoulder to shoulder at the table of the woman whose meme they had both, in different ways, helped make, and ate guobaorou glistening with its engineering-oil, and argued about nothing, and it was — An Ran kept waiting for the irony to arrive and it never did — the best friendship of her life, built backwards out of the worst thing she had ever done.

The encounters came, as expected, and doctrine held.

Once it was a shape on the roofline of the old cinema, upright against the snow-glow, still as a chimney; the patrol adjusted course with the boredom of professionals and it was gone between one streetlight and the next.

Once it was Mrs. Liang herself, ninety-one, found standing in her own kitchen at 3 a.m. facing north with the kettle boiling dry behind her.

"Mrs. Liang. Auntie. It's Mengmeng. From the café."

"En." The old woman didn't turn.

"You're cold, auntie. The bed's warmer."

"Is it."

Mengmeng moved past her, killed the kettle, and took her arm — gently, the way you take a kettle handle you don't want to spill — and steered her off the cold flagstones toward the inner room, and Mrs. Liang went, easily, the way they always went when nobody grabbed, and on the way to bed she said, conversationally, to the dark window:

"It asked if I was warm."

"And what did you say?"

"Nothing." A dry little laugh, like paper tearing. "I'm ninety-one, girl. It can wait for spring like everybody else."

Walked her home bored, tucked, logged.

And once, the hardest, it was one of the kept-home children, a boy of eleven from Building 9 standing at his own stairwell mouth in the blue pre-dawn, blocking the path with perfect courtesy, asking the question in the borrowed voice of An Ran's own grandmother — dead nine years, Zhejiang accent, exact — Xiaoran, love, have you eaten? Have you eaten, love?

The kindest sentence in any language, in the voice that had meant soup and safety, asking nothing but whether she'd eaten. Every cell she owned voted to say yes, nainai, I've eaten.

An Ran looked at the ground, spat at the threshold of the stairwell, and walked past her grandmother's voice into the wind, and made it around the corner before her legs shook, and wrote in her paper notebook afterward — everyone kept

paper notebooks now, the town had gone medieval about re - cords — the entry that finally told her the truth about herself:

Day 40. Shenzhen me would have answered. Shenzhen me answered everything — reviews, comments, dms, the algorithm' s questions at 3 a.m., always polite, always available. It took a haunted city to teach me the one skill my whole life never built: shutting up. Walking home. Grandmother' s voice was very good tonight. Almost good enough. Tell no one which word almost worked.

It worked, the starvation. That was the miracle nobody toasted, because it worked the way erosion works: invisibly, undeniably. Night by night the chord thinned — Sun Ying tracked it from her window on page eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety — the trilling that had ridden the town' s sleep since October grew sparser, weaker, further off, the colony back in its cold galleries, cut off from the warm walls, cut off from the endless secondhand eyes, having to reach now for what it used to merely sip. And reaching, it got careless. And getting careless, it got hungry.

And a hungry creditor, at the end of its patience, stops knocking on doors —

— and starts using the telephone.

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CHAPTER 19

The Question

The phone calls began on the twenty-third.

They came at night, to landlines and mobiles alike, caller ID scrambled into strings of digits, and the voice on the line was always someone loved: a daughter calling from Dalian she hadn't spoken to since autumn; a dead husband's cough and then his voice; Guo Jian's number from the Ningbo dormitory, karaoke behind him, except mid-sentence the karaoke would stop as if cut and the beloved tired voice would say, gently, in the pause where intimacy lives, "Shuang-jie? Before I forget — you see me, don't you? You see what I've become? Man… or god?" — and the families, drilled, wrung, weeping, hung up. They hung up on their dead and their distant and their own children's voices, night after night, because the rules held both ways and rule one had no exceptions, and Sun Ying logged the calls page after page — guardian disconnected correctly; guardian disconnected correctly; guardian failed, new onset, address noted — and the failures were few, fewer each night, a town learning rudeness like a language, and the notebook's margins filled with her small square symbols, section after section marked: air you don't trust, air you don't trust, air you don't trust.

The quiet watch built a protocol for it within two days, because that was the thing about the town's new medieval machinery: it iterated. Calls now went, wherever possible, to answered lines — an able-eared third party lifting the receiver beside the target, taking the blow meant for the weaker vessel; Sun Ying herself took eleven on shift, holding the dead of other people's families at arm's length in one ear while logging

real emergencies in the other, her notebook filling with tran‑scriptions she hated and kept, because somewhere in the transcripts' drift — the way each night's version of each loved voice was very slightly wrong in a new direction, learn‑ing, iterating, A/B-testing intimacy like a growth team — was data, and data was the only weapon the century had issued her.

The hardest nights were the ones it spent entirely on Douzi.

It had learned him best — the first answerer, the contested contract, the boy who hosted and held out — and after the fan drove the colony home, whatever linked the boy to the hill stopped needing proximity. He woke some nights standing at the window, whispering terms. He woke other nights already speaking, his mouth moving with a patience not his own, and twice — twice before the extraction could be attempted — he stood in the kitchen doorway at 3 a.m. in the blue light of the stove, and asked his mother the question in falsetto.

The first time, he used Ma's intonation. Bai Shuang, woken by the wrongness of the quiet, found her son silhouetted in the doorway, head tilted, and heard her own mother's voice come out of him, warm, wheedling, reasonable: "Shuang-shuang, it's cold, let the boy rest, why do you fight us, we kept him safe all winter when you couldn't—" and she sat on her hands and looked at the floorboards and counted her own breathing until the voice ran down like a clock.

The second time was worse. The second time it used no borrowed voice at all. It used his — thirteen years old, cracked with exhaustion, scraped hollow by a season of holding out — and it stood in the doorway in his body with his chapped hands and his heavy eyebrows knotted in genuine anguish, and it asked her straight, no theater, the way a drowning boy asks for a rope:

"Ma. Ma, I'm so tired. Look at me. Look what it's made me. Mama — do you see your son? Or do you see it?" A sob, real, his own pain used as bait, which was the cruelest engineering she had ever been subjected to. "If you can still see your son — if there's anything left you recognize — tell me. Just tell me you see me. Please. I just need to hear it."

Every rule screamed at once. Every instinct. He needs to hear it. What can one sentence cost? — and there it was, the exact door the thing had spent a winter building, the key fitted to her particular lock: love, asking permission to answer.

Bai Shuang got off the bed. She walked to the threshold of the kitchen — eyes down, boots loud on the boards, unhurried, bored — and spat, once, deliberately, across the line of the doorsill, between herself and her son. And she said nothing. And she walked past him, close enough to feel the vent-warmth rolling off his skin, close enough that her cheek almost brushed his hair, and she went and sat by the stove with her back to him, hands flat on her knees, and listened to him stand in the doorway and shake.

Then he screamed.

It was not his scream. It came out of him in the borrowed register, high and furious, the sound of a deal collapsing, of a bill refused, of a creditor denied at the door after a season of polite invoices — and it tore around the little flat breaking crockery-things in the air though nothing fell, and Ma rose from her sentry bedding with the pail of sulphur water already swinging, and the lights browned and steadied, and somewhere far north a dog began to scream in sympathy and then thought better of it.

And then it was over. Doudou folded up onto the kitchen floor, small, ordinary, human, sobbing in his own cracked voice, "I didn't say it, Ma, I didn't answer anything, I HELD OUT, I held out—" and his mother gathered him off the floor

— warm, always too warm, but hers, contested, unconverted — and Ma stood over them both with the spoon dripping, an old woman in a smoky kitchen holding the line of a siege older than cities, and said, to the walls, to the north, to whatever accounting office attended:

"Denied. Entered in your book. Next."

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Bai Ling arrived on the last train before the blizzard closed the line for good — travel-worn, unadorned, her ring light sold, her red tablecloth replaced by an army-surplus coat, forty thousand followers scattered to the winds and a prosecutor's letter pending and none of it, her face said, weighing anything against what she had seen in ninety seconds of compilation footage in October.

Ma met her at the station. Neither woman had ever seen the other; both recognized each other instantly, the way practitioners of any dying discipline do — the medium's trained stillness, the grandmother's sentry sleep — and bowed, slightly, to the ground each.

"Ninety seconds of footage," Bai Ling said, the way doctors open with the symptom. "That's all it took. Illness doesn't count — I said so in the clip, and I stand by it. Whatever you've got down there, it counts."

"I watched yours twice," Ma said, and took the girl's bag before she could object, and they walked to the canteen through the falling white arm in arm like sisters, already talking shop — the going rate for a haunting, the honest price of a rite, who still sold sulphur sticks by the crate, and whether any house in Hegang had a rooster to spare.

At Cloud Water, over the town's first honest cup of tea in months, Bai Ling heard the whole winter: the unscrewed vents, the courtyard, the fold in Building 19, the fan, the calls.

Then she put down her cup and looked at the family — the teacher, the boy asleep against his grandmother's shoulder, the migrant woman with her deleted phone, the old ventilation man dozing upright — and delivered the assessment of the only professional whose specialty was precisely this.

"The contract stands," she said. "First answer, Septem‑ber, fruit shop — the girl, not the boy; the girl answered wrong and fled, but wrong answers bind too, ask anyone who's been ruined by saying not like you. Two minors, two bindings, one household touched deepest." She turned her teacup slowly on the table, north, south. "The colony's home and starving, and a starving creditor does one of two things: forgives, or forecloses. Your old man's fan bought you until spring. When the warm weather comes and the galleries breathe on their own again, it comes back up the crossings to collect — unless the debt is discharged first." Her eyes went to Douzi, sleeping, and softened with a grief that had forty thousand followers' worth of practice hiding in it. "There's a rite. Old style, pre-electric, my grandmother ran it twice and slept a week after each time. It wants the coldest hour of the year, because the link runs thinkest when the host is coldest and the colony's attention is stretched thinnest. It wants true names, milk-names, spoken by blood. It wants grievances sung against it — the old songs, counting songs, pithead songs; it answers grievance with grievance, so you bury it in debts owed to the living until the ledger tangles." She paused, and her gaze crossed An Ran's — held there, one professional beat too long, a woman who had read forty thousand comments re‑cognizing another kind of marked account — "and it will want every side-contract on the table that night, too. All of them adjudicated. Nothing left dangling for it to grip when the main line is cut."

She paused again, and the performance was gone entirely from her voice, and what looked out was a woman raised on the old rules — afraid, and certain anyway.

"And it wants a channel. Somebody willing to hold the string during the pulling — somebody old enough that the years it takes are years they can spare." She looked at Ma. "You know that part already. Don't you."

Ma drank her tea. Outside, the last storms of February rattled the dark, and inside the canteen the stove ticked and the stew breathed and the town held its breath around them.

"Coldest hour," Ma said. "We'll need weather for that. And a needle boiled in three waters. And every grandmother this town has left, singing." She set the cup down with the small decisive click of all her life's decisions. "Go and rest, medium. School starts late tomorrow."

Above them, faint through the ceiling, from the direction of the north slope, almost lost under the wind — patient, formal, unmistakable — something knocked twice, politely, on the inside of the world.

Nobody knocked back.

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CHAPTER 20

The Needle

The coldest hour of the year arrived at 03:12 on the night of February the twenty-sixth, in the exhausted silence after the blizzard, with the sky scoured to black crystal and the thermometer at the dispatch center reading −39.6 and the town's stoves banked low by decree — every household asked to let its fires die for one hour, one hour of chosen cold so that the cold might be everywhere at once, level, democratic, thinning the link between the hill and its borrowers until the strings hung slack enough to cut.

They worked out of Cloud Water because it was central and Yun-ge refused to leave, and because a café, Bai Ling said, was as good a temple as any: what made a temple was terms and clean water. The taken were brought in through the blizzard's aftermath on sleds and in Fatty Liu's vans, driven now by his mutinous honorable drivers who had stayed in Hegang to see the thing through, and laid by twos and threes along the cushioned benches under the dried flowers, thirty-one souls recovered from the fold — the rest already freed when the colony withdrew, blinking awake in Building 19 one winter dawn asking for breakfast, the link dissolved wholesale in the young ones, the shallow ones. What remained were the deep ones. The long-held. The two contracts contested here tonight.

Qu Xiaoyan lay on the window bench with her father holding one hand and her teacher holding the other. Douzi lay in the center of the floor on quilts, inside the chalked circle Ma drew with the traditional mixture of stove ash and rooster blood while Sun Ying, deputized, stood at the door turning away everyone who tried to film and most who tried to watch.

The rite had three movements, Bai Ling said, and no script but the family's own memory.

Guo Jian arrived at 02:50 with ice in his eyebrows — a freight, a bus, the last three kilometers on foot against the wind — and Ma met him at the canteen door with the pail still in one hand and looked him over once, top to toe, the way she looked over anything that had fought the winter to reach her.

"You didn't call ahead."

"Phones don't say what they mean this week," Guo Jian said. "I do."

"En." She stepped aside, and the canteen's warmth took him like weather. "Wash your hands. He's in the circle, sleeping. When the grandmothers start, you sing, and you don't stop till the needle's out."

"What do I sing?"

"His name, however it comes. You've been saying it thir - teen years, boy." Ma picked up the pail again, already turning back to her post. "It'll know the way."

First movement: the calling of names. Blood speaks; the borrowed cannot counterfeit blood-pitch. So the mothers began — Qu Changfu's dead wife's sister for Xiaoyan, voice shaking, then steadying, singing the girl's milk-name into the old counting-song meter, little swallow, swallow-of-our-eaves, come back to your nest, the lamp is lit, who carries the lamp? Your mother carries the lamp — and across the room Guo Jian knelt at the circle's edge and sang his son home, Douzi's milk-name over and over, bean, bean, little bean, sprouted in our garden soil, his voice cracking and repairing and cracking, and the boy on the quilts began, very softly, to trill — the chord answering grievance with grievance, as promised, the falsetto rising to meet each name with a counter-name, a counter-claim: the hill kept him warm, the hill fed him, the hill has receipts—

Second movement: burying the ledger. This was the grandmothers' work, and there turned out to be nine of them in Hegang equal to it — pithead wives and shrine-keepers, Han's wife among them, walnut-faced and fearless — and they ringed the café singing the old songs full voice: counting songs and lament songs and the terrible specific grievances of a century, nine hundred lamps on the morning shift and who carried water to the ninth level, we are owed, we are owed, four hundred men down Number Three and not one bone returned to a table, we are OWED — debt piled on debt, the town's whole unpaid past sung at the colony like a summons, until the falsetto in the boys' throats tangled in it, drowning, unable to answer a hundred years of counter-claim—

—and third movement: the needle, and the string, and the price.

Bai Ling found the ball in Xiaoyan first. It moved under the skin of the girl's forearm like a bead in a bamboo tube — the old texts' exact image, the folk-surgeon's target — fleeing up toward the elbow when the singing reached a peak, and Bai Ling took the needle boiled in three waters. And here is what the procedure does not record: that when she closed her fingers around the needle, her hands were her grandmother's hands for one full second — liver-spotted, certain, pressed over a nine-year-old's fists in a mud-brick room in 1979 — and then they were her own again, and shaking, a fine rapid tremor she killed by pressing her wrist flat to the cold table edge until it passed, because the rite did not permit trembling and the debt did not permit refusing, and both things were true in the same body at the same time. She pinned it, one quick pierce at the philtrum point below the nose as the ball reached the girl's throat, and spoke the discharge aloud in the formal grammar her grandmother had used: "By this door it entered as a lie; by this door it leaves as a debt forgiven. Go

home, yellow master. The channels are separate. Man keeps his breath; the demon keeps hers." Her voice held level throughout. It cost more than the hands had.

Xiaoyan convulsed once, exhaled — a long breath that steamed, finally, ordinary mammal steam in the freezing air of the unheated café, the first honest breath she had released since December — and slept, fourteen years old, slack and heavy and hers. Her father made a sound like a nail going into wood, gently, and held her feet.

Douzi was harder. Of course he was hardest: first answerer, longest held, the contract the thing had spent a season negotiating in good faith. The ball in his arm fought the needle — dodging, doubling back, driving him arching off the quilts with strength no thirteen-year-body owned, and the grandmothers' song rose to a wall of sound around him, debt upon debt, and Guo Jian sang through tears without stopping, and it was then, at the worst of it, at the moment the needle needed its second hand and every other hand was full —

—that Ma sat down inside the circle, took her grandson's string in her left fist and the string of her own old tablet in her right, tying the two together in a knot her own mother had taught her, and said, in the terms-voice, clearly, so the whole room and whatever attended it could enter it in the books:

"Take it from me instead. I'm owed less than he is. Take the channel from the old account." A pause, iron and flour. "From my house you have always had terms. Here are tonight's."

The pulling lasted eleven minutes. No one who stood in that room ever described it fully afterward; they described pieces — the temperature dropping inside the circle though the stove was relit; the trill climbing out of the boy's mouth note by note like something being reeled hand over hand through deep water; the moment the ball surfaced visibly beneath the skin

of his throat, a moving knot the size of a pea, racing for his eye, and Bai Ling's needle catching it at the philtrum with both their hands bleeding; the smell, sudden and enormous, of musk and snow and old coal; and the boy's back bowing, and the scream that wasn't his, and the long silence, and then — small, cracked, unmistakably thirteen, coming up from a long way under like a swimmer who can finally put his feet down:

"…Ma? Why does the calendar say February?"

And Bai Shuang, who had kept doctrine all winter, who had not answered the question in any of its voices for one hundred and forty-one days, broke rule one at last, gloriously, lawfully, because the thing it guarded against was gone from the room — gathered her son off the quilts and answered everything at once: "I see you. I see YOU, bean, I see you— " and the canteen of Cloud Water, thirty-one freed sleepers and nine grandmothers and one ruined medium and a dispatcher with an untouchable notebook, came apart completely and went on being the warmest building in Heilongjiang until sunrise.

Before the needle work began, though, there was one more piece of business, and Bai Ling conducted it like the last item on a notary's list.

An Ran came forward to the circle's edge with her paper notebook held against her chest like a shield, and paid out the account she had been carrying since December: the October knock, twice, above her pillow; her own half-asleep answer; Xiaoman's warning about what knocks counted as. "I've walked the rosters forty nights on the strength of maybe," she finished, voice level. "I'd rather know before you start pulling strings. If I'm in its books — clear me or tell me, but tell me tonight."

Bai Ling heard the whole of it with her eyes closed, the way her grandmother had heard confessions of accidental answers

— a sparrow startled into speech, a child waving at a trained animal, all the small catastrophic courtesies of the living. Then she opened her eyes and rendered the ruling of her line, in the formal grammar, for whatever attended:

"An answer made in sleep is not an answer made in wak - ing. The seal requires the waking mind to know what it con - sents to; a reflex of courtesy has no mind in it, only manners. The contract is VOID for incapacity." A beat, and the dry ghost of a smile. "But void contracts leave smudges, and smudges explain a great deal — why the colony denned over her ceiling, why it asked after her by name. Residue of an al - most-deal sticks like grease." She nodded Ma forward. "Terms, then. Cleanse the smudge."

So An Ran stood at the little dark tablet while Ma boiled the water and Bai Ling spoke the old sentences, and she offered the chicken head and three sticks of sulphur incense with her own hands, and spat at her own threshold for the first time — awkwardly, like someone speaking a language learned from a phrasebook, which was exactly what it was — and renewed terms aloud: the channels are separate; I keep my walls; you keep your hill. And when it was done, Bai Ling looked up at her with the first unguarded warmth the winter had ever seen her spend: "Go home and sleep, tenant. Your ceiling is just a ceiling now."

It was. From that night the warm spot above her bed cooled to ordinary plaster, the musk faded to memory, and An Ran slept until noon in her purchased home at the edge of the world without company of any kind for the first time since October — and woke, and lay still a moment under the silent ceiling, missing it, hating that she missed it, writing the truth down in the paper notebook because that was who she was now: Note to self. Loneliness signed something once too.

Watch which doors you leave open out of wanting company. Some tenants read an open door as an invitation to move in.

The cost came due quietly, as costs do.

Ma slept a day and a night, and woke with her hair gone white at the temples where it had been iron-gray — and then gray at the crown within the week — and a tiredness in her that rest no longer touched, a slow ebb, the tide of a channel held open too long for one small body, and she waved off every alarm with the pragmatism of her whole life: "I'm seventy, daughter. I told it to take from the old account. Old accounts exist to be drawn down." She would say nothing further on the matter, ever; she doled out what remained of herself in instructions and soup through the spring, precise as a woman closing out accounts before an audit, and if Bai Shuang understood, and grieved all spring for a living woman, Ma declined to hear a word of it — except once, at the window, watching the ice go gray on the river, when she said mildly, "Your uncle got one night and no goodbye. I get a whole spring and everyone fed. In this family that's called dying rich."

The sealing was done on the second of March, at the Number Five adit, in a wind that cut like admission money.

Old Man Guan ran the operation with a ventilation man's economy: the fan reversed for one last hour, drawing breath out of the mountain and up the stack so that the galleries stood empty of their tenants' presence as far as instrument and instinct could tell; then the crossing sealed — foam and concrete, yes, but over that, per Ma, per Bai Ling, per the unbroken chain, the old layers: lime washed on the adit mouth, a rooster's foot nailed at the lintel, sulphur burned in a tin until the smoke leaned inward like a salute, firecrackers run in a line to the door and fired in sequence, the year's noise driving the year's term home. And on the frozen ground be-

fore the sealed door, Guan poured out a bottle of baijiu in a slow line, north to south, and stood bareheaded at −34° and said the words for the men of Number Three gallery, and for a gimbal operator named Xiao Lu, and for a fat boy in an elk sweater who had finally missed a shift bell for the best reason in the history of shift bells, and last, formally, into the seam of the sealed door itself, in the flat administrative tone of a man filing paperwork with a mountain:

"All accounted for. Terms renewed: you keep your hill, we keep our walls. Channels separate. Feed your own fires."

And from far inside the hill, faint, through eight hundred meters of stone and coal and settled dark, came — once, politely, unmistakable — the sound of a knock.

Nobody knocked back. They stood in the wind with their eyes lowered like professionals, and packed the tools, and went home to the thaw.

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CHAPTER 21

Thaw

The river went out on April the ninth, with a sound like artil‑lery, and half of Hegang stood on the banks to watch the ice fail — because this town had learned, over one winter, what its grandmothers always knew: that you attend breakups of large things. The ice heaved, split along its old black seams, and the whole white lid of the river moved downstream in plates the size of floors, grinding, tilting, going south with the current toward the sea it had never seen, and the crowd watched it go with their faces lifted into real warmth for the first time in six months.

Bai Shuang was there with her son beside her, and near them, in the crowd, a boy from the fold — one of the returned — put his hand into his pocket out of pure reflex, a winter's reflex, and Doudou, without looking at him, said:

"Don't."

"I wasn't— "

"You were."

The hand came back out of the pocket, empty. Nobody filmed it. Not one phone came out. They just stood in the sun, all those survivors, watching winter be carried off like fur‑niture from a repossessed flat, and the only sound was the river and, here and there, quietly, weeping.

The memorial was held at Dongshan on the twenty-sixth, Qingming, when the town sweeps its graves.

It was Sun Ying who had proposed the braiding, and the district office — which had spent the spring discovering that the notebook dispatcher knew where more bodies were bur‑ied, administratively speaking, than any living official — had

agreed with the speed of the guilty. So the names were read in two columns that spring morning, schoolchildren filing past the glass-covered bones as they did every year, but this year stopping also at the new boards beside them: the mine's own centuries first, the nine thousand unnamed led by the thou - sand-and-one of the single excavated corner, and then the hundred and eight of November 21st, 2009, uncle by uncle, work-group by work-group.

And then, without pause or hierarchy, the winter's column: Xiao Lu the gimbal man, who died filming; Liu Dabao, who died carrying coal; the eleven elders of the east districts lost to the three cold days, named one by one while their fam - ilies held the corners of their photographs; and last, because Ma had insisted on the order before she stopped insisting on anything, the debts owed us, read by Old Han in his lecturing voice so that none of it could be mistaken for elegy: the ears of Mengmeng, the silence of Xiaoyan, the year stolen from forty-three children, the fame stolen from a city that had never asked to be famous.

An Ran stood with the teachers' row, holding Bai Shuang's umbrella against a raw wind, and listened to her own tribe's crimes read into the public record in the tone of an itemized bill, and found — this surprised her; she examined it later, carefully, like the mole — that she felt neither guilt nor defensiveness anymore. Just attendance. The word she finally chose, in the journal she kept now in paper notebooks, was attendance: the practice of being present without extracting, which turned out to be the entire difference between loving a thing and consuming it, and took about a season and a catastrophe to learn.

She stayed. That was the headline of her own small story, the thing her mother in Zhejiang still described to relatives as a phase. In May she signed a lease on the ground floor of the

old co-op store — Fatty Liu's estate, administered by Sun Ying, discharged to her for back rent owed and forward rent promised — and opened, after the renovations she paid local men fair local rates to do, the thing Cloud Water could never have been: a reading room and guesthouse called 安住, Peaceful Dwelling, six beds for the few travelers still curious about the cheapest city on earth, a wall of books about the Northeast — Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu and Zheng Zhi, mining histories and dialect dictionaries, Sun Ying's photocopied pages filed under LOCAL REFERENCE, DO NOT REMOVE — and one house rule, hand-lettered by Ma's brush before her hands grew too tired, hung behind the desk where every guest would meet it:

You are welcome here. Whatever asks you questions after dark is not.

The first guest came in June, off the Harbin train, a back-packer with the Hegang tag still in his search history, and stood at the desk and read the rule twice.

"Is this a joke?"

"House rule."

"What happens after dark?"

"Nothing," An Ran said, "if you follow it. Soup's at seven, phones sleep in the drawer at nine, and if anything asks you a question — the wind, a knock, your own reflection — you don't answer it. You come find me. Deal?"

He looked at the wall of books — coal, collapse, dialect — and put his phone in the drawer himself. "Deal."

Yun-ge kept the café open too — transformed; he'd fired the espresso machine's pretensions and installed two enormous cast-iron pots, and Cloud Water now served guobaorou and dadi sanxian and bottomless tea to whoever sat down, and had become, without anyone deciding it, the town's other living room. He ate his own cooking now,

glistening oil and all. Mengmeng, ears healed to delicate pink curls she wore uncovered and unexplained, managed the counter and had opinions about everything, and was saving for a car.

Xiaoyan spoke again in May — sparingly, in her own time, a girl who would always ration her words now, spending them like someone who knew their price — and she drew. Endlessly, precisely, weasels: sitting, running, sleeping in curves, standing upright with folded paws. Her father kept every drawing. The school counselor called it processing; Old Man Guan, studying one of the sketches — the bowing figure rendered with terrible accuracy, whisker by whisker — called it, privately, keeping watch, and told Bai Shuang that in his village there had been a family like that once, drawers of the thing, generation after generation, and they had been respected and left alone, because somebody has to remember what the terms looked like.

Zheng Yang delivered bread again. He never talked about February; his sister said he never would; he tied red string around his handlebars, and the neighborhood children adored him, and that was the whole of his public file.

Song Xiaoman wrote once, in March, from Jiamusi — discharged, renting a room over a bakery, teaching stretch classes to the night-shift nurses at the psychiatric hospital because somebody had to, she said, and who better. I sleep facing whatever direction I like now, she wrote, and then, separately, lower on the card, as if it had needed its own decision: I don't stream anymore. I cook for actual people. It is completely different when they are in the room. An Ran read it aloud at Ma's table first, because Mengmeng made her, twice, and Mengmeng, ears bare, said, "She was always nice. Under the haunting." Ma said, "En," which meant the card went in the archive. And An Ran read the card four times more, alone, and

kept it pressed in her paper notebook, where the town's true archives lived.

Sun Ying kept the notebook. It ran to one hundred and twelve pages by thaw, and she had it photocopied, triple-sealed, and lodged — over the objections of everyone whose job it was to object — with the municipal archive, the mining museum, and a journalist in Harbin, with instructions that it be opened together or not at all. The final entry, dated the thirtieth of April, written at the dispatch center desk at 22:40 in her smallest margin-hand, was one the archive custodians would find and puzzle over for years:

Notebook complete. One hundred and twelve pages. For whoever inherits this: the rules fit on one hand, and the town kept them all winter — eyes down, nothing answered, terms renewed daily, which is the only way terms ever hold. The dead of this city are owed, and were paid, and the living kept the books. Nothing in Hegang asked us anything tonight. Filed under: home.

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CHAPTER 22

Full Marks

Ma died on the twenty-eighth of May, at home, in the inside bed by the wall, curtain open per protocol, with the kettle just off the boil and Douzi reading to her from his school essay — the assignment, inevitably, My Hometown — and she heard him out to the end, all four minutes of it, the boy writing now about black sparrows and heating day and a fat man who carried coal through a blizzard, and when he finished she said, "Full marks," and closed her eyes with the satisfaction of a woman whose ledger balanced, and did not open them again.

They gave her the rites whole: three days, sulphur at the vents, rice before the tablet, and at the grave — on the south slope, facing the town she'd held — Bai Shuang burned the little dark tablet itself, finally, releasing the Yellow Lord from service with terms spoken aloud: Contract complete. Four generations paid. The channels are separate, and my mother's account is closed. The smoke leaned north, once, like something acknowledging receipt — or like wind; the town had earned the right to choose either reading — and then stood straight in the still air, and went up.

At the graveside afterward, while the men filled in against the frost and Doudou laid the chicken head with great seriousness exactly where his grandmother had shown him, Bai Shuang watched Guo Jian stand apart from the mourners with his hat in his hands, shoulders shaking in the cold the way big men shake — hardly at all, all of it internal — and she was granted, unasked, the memory she had been too busy all winter to have: the swimming hole, three feet across, cut in the shallows with an inherited ice pick; Guo Jian climbing the lip

in long underwear and a grin, leaping, steam exploding off his shoulders like a struck match, bellowing warmest place in Hegang! until he swallowed river laughing. She had been furious and delighted and twenty-six years old, and he had been a madman who fought winter hand to hand and claimed victory, and she had chosen him on the spot, though she'd taken ten more years to admit it out loud. The man who fought winter had moved indoors since. But standing at his mother's grave, Bai Shuang found that he had never entirely moved out — that the leaping man was still in there, folded away like his laugh, waiting for warmer weather — and that this, alongside the sulphur smell in her mother's kitchen and the spoon hanging on its nail and forty thousand spoons like it across the north, was what the old woman had spent her whole life de‑fending. Not the town. The people inside it, still capable of leaping into holes in the ice. Full marks, thought Bai Shuang, and stood between her two men in the falling snow until the grave was done.

Douzi grew. That summer he shot up through two collar sizes and stopped sleeping with a light on, and in June he went back to the fruit shop on Jiefang Road for the first time since September, alone, on an errand, ordinary as weather — and stood a moment at the storm drain where it had happened, looking at nothing, eyes level, and then bought his mother's cucumbers and walked home whistling through his teeth, sisi haha, the old sound of endurance, repurposed at last as the sound of a boy with nowhere to be except home for dinner.

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October came around the way it comes in Heilongjiang: all at once, with frost on the morning rails and the light going to brass.

On the twentieth, at 5:40 a.m., Building 11 woke to the firing squad — risers ticking, the bubble in the radiator swallowing, a cannon-shot of water somewhere above Bai Shuang's headboard where the photo of her father rattled on its nail — and she lay in the gray half-light listening to the artery fill, floor by floor, unit by unit, one warm pulse knocking along the iron spine of the compound, and thought, not for the first time and not for the last: one heart. We all drink from one heart. And this year we know it.

At No. 4 Middle School, the vents smelled of nothing but dust and hot metal. Guan's crews had checked every grille in the district in September — tightened, foamed, logged; Fatty Liu's forgiven flats had donated the labor — and the main‑tenance log's October page carried, for the first time in in‑stitutional memory, an accurate category. Bai Shuang taped the winter rules above her classroom door, fresh-brushed, and taught her classes, and watched the yard at recess the way sentries watch, and mostly saw only children squeaking across the first ice.

Mostly.

On the last Friday of October, a first-grader from the annex caught her in the corridor — a small girl, tiger-pajama age, gap-toothed, urgent — and tugged her sleeve.

"Laoshi. Laoshi, there's a yellow cat by the fence."

"Mm?" said Bai Shuang, mid-stack of essays.

"It stands up," the girl said. "On its back legs. Like this — " she folded her small hands at her chest, dipped her head, gap-toothed and solemn. "And it looks and looks at me. Like it wants to ask me something."

The corridor went very quiet. The radiators ticked. Down the hall, Old Han paused at the stairwell door with his teacup halfway to his mouth, and did not turn around, and waited, professionally, the way you post a man at a regulator.

Bai Shuang set down the essays. She crouched to the child's height on the cold linoleum, and took the small hands in her own, and folded them gently shut, and taught her — slowly, in the exact words, the way you teach fire and roads and other old dangers — the rules. Look at the ground after dark. Never answer anything that asks what you see. If it follows you, spit, and keep walking. It costs nothing to be rude to the right things.

"And if it ever asks about your teacher," she added, rising, smiling so the child would carry the lesson lightly, all the way home and fifty years on, "you tell it nothing at all." She squeezed the small hands once. "It starves on silence. We checked."

The girl ran off to the yard, lesson and all, squeaking across the ice. Old Han raised his teacup an inch, salute between professionals. Bai Shuang gathered her essays and walked home at dusk through the blue cold of the cheapest city on earth, past the lit windows and the steaming manholes and the compound gate where the grilles breathed warm into the evening — and at the base of Building 11 she stopped, and knelt, and tightened one vent screw that had backed itself loose a quarter-turn, resting easy in its thread, patient as winter.

Then she spat, once, at the threshold — courteous, formal, unmistakable, the oldest greeting her people knew —

— and went in to feed her family, eyes down, step even, a woman minding her own walls in the dark of the north, where the hill kept its hill, and the town kept its breath, and neither ever, ever answered the other.

人有人气，妖有妖气。

Man keeps his breath. The demon keeps hers.

— THE END —

Colophon

人有人气，妖有妖气。

Ren you ren qi, yao you yao qi.

Man has his breath; the demon has hers. — a saying of the Northeast

A shrinking coal city in the deep cold. One boiler, one artery, eleven thousand households plumbed into the same heart; flats that sell for less than a phone; a winter that runs from heating day on the twentieth of October to the thaw. And a household spirit the old compound remembers by its colour.

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 YELLOW IMMORTAL · 22 sections · 54,816 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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