


# SAIENSU 2016 FIKUSHON

The background features a stylized, high-contrast illustration. On the left, there is a silhouette of a traditional Japanese building with multiple tiers and a curved roof. To the right, a large, dark crescent moon dominates the upper half of the frame. The entire scene is rendered in shades of gray and black against a black background.

TOBI HIROTAKA  
TOH ENJOE  
TAIYO FUJII

SCI-FI SOFTWARE STRAIGHT  
FROM JAPAN

EDITED BY HAIKASORU



# SAIENSU 2016 FIKUSHON

EDITED BY NICK MAMATAS AND MASUMI WASHINGTON

## **SAIENSU FIKUSHON 2016**

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Design by Adriana Crespin

### **“OVERDRIVE”**

© 2016 Toh EnJoe

From April issue of *SF Magazine*,  
by Hayakawa Publishing in 2016

### **“SEA FINGERS”**

© 2014 TOBI Hirotaka

From web magazine *Moe*,  
by Kodansha in 2014

### **“A FAIR WAR”**

© 2015 Taiyo Fujii

From the anthology *Project Itoh Tribute*,  
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## Saiensu Fikushon is Science Fiction



It's a cliché at this point to say to someone like you, dear eBook or print paper copy reader, that you are holding the future in your hands. And yet, here we all are. In the future. The future, as we here at Haikasoru have been saying, is Japanese.

*Saiensu Fikushon 2016* is the first in a series of e-first mini-anthologies bringing the best Japanese short science fiction in translation to the English-speaking world. And here is what we have:

“Overdrive” by Toh EnJoe—another thrilling and sometimes bewildering thought experiment from the Philip K. Dick citation-winning author of *Self-Reference ENGINE*.

“Sea Fingers” by TOBI Hirotaka is a . . . well, “post-apocalyptic musical novelette” might sum it up. Might.

Bringing it home is *Gene Mapper* author Taiyo Fujii, with a novella-length tribute to the late Project Itoh—“A Fair War.” This near-future piece of military SF is going to happen one day, and soon.

Good thing you're prepared now, thanks to *saiensu fikushon*.

Nick Mamatas & Masumi Washington  
—Editors, Haikasoru







## **OVERDRIVE** by Toh EnJoe

Translated by Terry Gallagher



The first person in the world to break the thought barrier was someone by the name of Ethan Hoffman.

This Ethan was not a Zen monk, or a drug habitué, or someone with a condom full of cocaine that burst in his rectum. He had no truck with either tobacco or alcohol, and his attitude at work was earnest, but he was not the sort of person who obsessed about playing by the rules.

Some say he would never have achieved what he did had he not been in the Air Force, but others say it was mere coincidence.

Ethan was not particularly intelligent, but he had boundless creativity. Like many people who were not good at expressing their thoughts in words, he had someone who played the part of his “interpreter.” And that someone’s name was Masaomi Kibi.

“What I mean is, in other words...” Ethan said one day, propping himself up on his elbow. Kibi looked up from beneath a parasol beside the shed.

"All we have to do is just...zoom...fly! Like that!"

Kibi was accustomed to these sorts of half-baked outbursts. As always, he just let it wash over him.

"You might be right," he said.

"Listen to me," Ethan said, sitting bolt upright. "These thoughts we are having right now, they have an actual speed."

Kibi rolled his eyes as if he were observing the inside of his upper eyelids. Facing the runway, he lowered his gaze.

"There is nothing to deny," he said.

"So let's just assume they have a specific speed," Ethan says. "Speed of time, speed of light, speed of thought. Thoughts seem to occur instantaneously, but that isn't true. If we have a lot of things to think about, it takes time. Even the speed of light has a limit. In this world, there is something called the 'speed of sound.'"

Kibi was lost in thought. "Hmmpf," was all he could say. "I see what you mean." He realized his own thoughts were about to catch up with Ethan's, and that made him a little crazy. Two thoughts, flying off someplace. Could the "speed of thought" have something to do with the blood circulating around in his head?

"I think this is what you're trying to say," Kibi said. "There are different kinds of speed limits. There is a 'sound barrier,' and there is a 'light barrier,' and they are different. People can break the sound barrier by building an engine that is powerful enough, and sticking it in a fuselage, but we can't say the same of the 'light barrier.' On the other side of the 'light barrier' there is ... nothing. Just like there is nothing beyond the edge of the universe."

"That's what I just said, isn't it?" complained Ethan.

But Kibi pushed back, saying, "Hang on another sec. I know what you were thinking. Let's assume that the speed of thought

keeps increasing. If that is true, what is the maximum speed of thought? Does that question even mean anything? If there is a limit, is it a definite point that we can go beyond, like sound? Or is it more like light, where, in theory, we cannot go beyond it? That's what you're thinking, right?"

"That's what I've been saying all this time!" Ethan cried, repeating his complaint.

Kibi ignored him and went on.

"If we believe that thought is dependent on some physical process, it would be normal to conclude it would be subject to physical limitations, and that it would have a maximum possible speed. We might enlarge the size of the brain, but communication between the various parts would take time. Nothing can exceed the speed of light.

"This is the same problem that computer chips are confronting as they grow more complicated. People are trying to reduce the time needed for signals to interact with one another. They can make the chip smaller, but then they run into problematical ambiguities of quantum-mechanical delivery. In case you're wondering if they couldn't just turn those quantum-mechanical ambiguities to their advantage and increase the speed of calculation, it turns out there are levels and levels in that direction too. So, in conclusion, there is a limit to the speed of thought."

Kibi finished his little speech, and looked at Ethan, who was waving hello to some new mechanics entering the shed. Ethan turned to look again at the backlit Kibi, and he squinted.

"You done yet?"

"Yeah. I'm done," Kibi said tersely.

"What evidence is there that thought is dependent on a physical function?"

The expression on Ethan's face could only be described as profoundly enigmatic.

Basically, thought-space is made of nothingness.

At the present time, this is what most people believe. We might think something is being thought, but the truth is there is nothing there. The conventional wisdom is that in thought-space, thought grows like leaves and branches. For now, that seems to be the best way for people to visualize thought.

Of course, people are free to imagine whatever they want. We might think the Sun is at the center of the solar system and the planets revolve around it, or we might just as easily believe that the Earth is at the center and the Sun revolves around it, and the other planets revolve around the Sun. It doesn't matter. When we look at electromagnetic radiation, we can observe the form of the waves directly, or we can just deal with frequency data. We just use information in the form that is easiest to understand. The form of the information does not alter the facts.

There seem to be generational preferences when it comes to the specific forms of visualizations. The truth is, we have no need to depend on our sense of sight. Thought-space can be understood in terms of hearing, or smell, or taste, or touch. It extends even to types of information that are difficult for humans to process because we lack the sensory organs to perceive them directly. This latter category may be the biggest of all. Some people are trying to raise children with the concept of thought-space, right from infancy. Some people even think they should just give birth to their children right in thought-space.

In thought-space, things that are fundamentally impossible cannot exist, but anything that can be imagined can come true. If you are wondering if everything that is not impossi-

ble is actually possible, the truth is that it is not that easy to say for sure. In thought-space, it is not a matter of possible or impossible. Instead, it is the “unimaginable” that, like a fallen tree, forms the boundary horizon—or boundary hyperplane—of thought. Basically, anything beyond that boundary cannot be understood. It cannot even be thought. At best, its silhouette can just barely be made out, like a shadow on a paper screen.



“I will intercept,” Rao said, and awaited orders. “What shall we say we are flying?”

“A streamliner,” Boyd responded, from the beyond. “Hmm.” In that case, there might not be enough speed or abstraction for an interception. The core concept of hyperthought navigation is that if you have a surprising thought, you have to construct a persuasive enough rationale to get it to the point where it needs to be. This rationale is the main driver, but if it’s too crazy, the thought will not hold together. It will break apart. On the other hand, if the motivation holds too close to the prevailing orthodoxy, there won’t be enough speed.

“What’s their next move?” Boyd asked.

“Counting. Combinatronics. It’s a classic saturation attack. What?” said Rao. “I don’t know what they are counting, though. Do you wish to break through in that direction?”

Boyd had flown into the memory, like an octopus in a cartoon-squid costume.

“Abort,” he said tersely.

Conventional attacks included “counting” and “well-ordered sets” along with “dictionary-style attacks,” but they all tended to be slow. This could not be helped. They worked like coloring in squares on graph paper, one by one. But at least

they had the advantage that there was no misfired ordinance in those dimensions. It was like getting strafed by machine-gun fire. The only way to escape was to switch dimensions—fly or go to ground—but the speed of the projectiles themselves was slow, so the defensive maneuvers were straightforward.

“Counting” happens at a speed suitable for thought-space and it has the appropriate schemes. In the simplest form of counting, prime numbers are listed in order, or the zero points of the Riemann zeta, so the fastest things ever get is about enough to stop a fly. Thrust is generated by the counting of wild ideas. Free-association word games are known for generating a surprising level of speed. Counting like “one sheep, one antelope, one goat...” was also surprisingly effective, so it could not be dismissed out of hand.

Basically, in thought-space, the advantage of mathematical structures is strength, not speed. In thought-space the power of mathematics is used to build roads that support supply lines to the troops, but it is hard to use this same strength to build the side roads to the battlefields.

A side road such as  $\sin(3x + 1)$  would be difficult enough, and in thought-space it would generate only enough energy to cause a trembling maneuver. In the context of thought-space, it is obvious that thought is maneuver and maneuver is thought. There is no distinction between the two.

If counting alone is not enough, then, what comes next? One method is to take all the newspapers that print their text in sideways rows, and take all the typeface characters they use, and jumble them up and make all the anagrams we can from them. This is called brute-force leaping navigation. It was very popular in the early days. This method has the disadvantage that the results are kind of random, making it hard to control where we end up.

Movement in thought-space is driven by the interrelations of speed and predictability. The problem is that people want both speed and control, but it's a trade-off.

"Seems to be some kind of brute-force attack. Primitive," Rao commented.

"A newbie!" Boyd replied, releasing the tension in his shoulders.

"Probably. We can't be sure until we break through, though." Rao was always wanting to break through things. He had not been in the Air Force very long.

He could not think of brute-force leaping navigation as a good way of getting around, but it is an excellent defensive tactic. It is obviously great for reaching the remote corners, and it is hard for opponents to outguess. It is not a very sophisticated technique, because it is like raining down ordinance on friend and foe alike. It might be better to exercise a little more discretion, and keep this in reserve. It is still a long way from a polished solution.

"This must be a race that just got its hands on hyperthought navigation," Boyd said to himself. Humans used to be the same way, he thought wearily, and not for the first time.

"Let's follow protocol and negotiate a cease-fire," Boyd said. He recalled the harm the human race had suffered because it had bungled the second contact, and he ordered Rao to "proceed politely, as if dealing with organelles."



"Increase the speed of thought? How are we supposed to do that?" Kibi asked, out of sheer conventionality.

"Come on, you tell me," responded Ethan, who needed Kibi as an external organ to mediate his communications with his

fellow humans. This time around, though, even Kibi could not grok Ethan's thoughts.

Increasing the speed of thought might mean vastly increasing the number of brain cells, using some kind of drug, or getting help from some kind of computer, as Kibi had already been saying repeatedly.

"Nothing as bothersome as all that," said Ethan, raising his right hand. "All we need is some kind of craft that can go fast." As he said this, he swept his right hand across the horizon.

A silence came over the two of them, finally torn asunder by a fighter accelerating down the runway where Ethan's finger was pointing.

"And where will we get such a craft?" asked Kibi, spreading his hands.

"Are you some kind of idiot?" asked Ethan, merciless. The gears of Kibi's thinking turned slowly and noisily. For the first time in his life, Kibi witnessed a person actually gnashing his teeth.

"It is made from the stuff of thought, of course! The craft, I mean," Ethan said. He pointed his index finger at his temple. "It flies in here!"

He ran his finger across his face, making the craft take off from the opposite temple.

"Like this: Zoom zoom!"

At that point, Kibi did not realize he was already flying. Neither did Ethan.

In thought-space, there is no need to conserve mass, and no need to maintain any particular number of personalities. It took a while to realize that. Twelve years, actually, in thought-space.

Very little is understood about the actual form of thought-space. Like the Earth during the Cambrian period, when there



were living things but they had no “senses,” we are simply unequipped to grasp the characteristics of thought-space. Anything can happen in thought-space, and it is said there are things that can grasp the whole picture, but humans are not yet far enough along to work that vein.

As humans understand it, thought-space is shaped like a tunnel, or a tree trunk, but in a complicated loop. It is a two-way street, not one-way. Things can go up and down, back and forth, left and right. No one knows where the point of origin is. People think of themselves as traveling along inside the tunnel, and that is fine as far as it goes, but the true structure of thought-space may be more complex than that.

The tunnel is all there is. It has no outside. The is that is just moves along. The whole thing is perennially giving birth to itself. People conjecture that there is no real isotropy, but there is no real reason to believe that.

When I say there is no outside, I mean there is not even a place that could be called “outside.” The concept of “thought-space” itself is nothing more than a metaphor, but people use it because it conveys some meaning. It’s like a mine shaft where we can go along as far as we like, but we can never know just how many dimensions the mine has. We might think of things as having a “rightness” and “leftness,” but the fact is the two go together. And that togetherness occurs completely randomly. There is not really any rational coherence to it.

The tunnel is naturally buried. If we lose our way, whether we ever find our way back to the same place again is just a matter of luck. At times the tunnel collapses, like falling asleep knowing that you were thinking of something, but unable to remember just what it was.

Dreams themselves are a form of thought—or perhaps I should say, thought itself is a kind of dream. In more than a

few cases, records of thought-space use descriptions that are expressions of dreams.

When someone is thinking, it is like extending the tunnel in some direction, a little at a time. That is how people speak of the idea of thought-space. The means of forward propulsion might obey the laws of determinism, or probability, or whimsy, or imagination, or even a perfectly ordered fantasy.

So far, that is the picture of “normal” thought-space.



The “streamliners” used by Boyd and his ilk were composed of thought. As Ethan Hoffman, the first person to successfully use hyperthought navigation, correctly perceived, there is no real trick to this navigation method. To break through individual thought-spaces, hyperthought navigation uses the same techniques as ordinary navigation, with propulsive power derived from the fuel of thought itself. This is how Boyd and his kind exist in thought-space, but Boyd also exists in real space. Right now, he is living his everyday life, as normal. Just like any other time, he should be hanging out between the runway and the shed. Boyd is Boyd imagined by Boyd, but that is just wordplay to indicate where he belongs. Boyd came from Boyd, just as Rao came from Rao. If the Boyd of the real world were to die, there is no need to worry that this other Boyd would die. And if this Boyd were to die, that is no reason for the other Boyd to die.

The streamliner is now tearing the remote regions into pieces.

By that, I mean the places where human thought never travels.

These are the places where no one’s thought ever goes, but

that does not mean there is no *there* there. The destinations of hyperthought navigation cannot be known without breaking through to them, but just because we break through to them does not necessarily mean we will comprehend the destination. Thought-space is open to all thoughts. It is open to the fishes and the amphibians and the reptiles and the birds. It is even open to microbes and bacteria and viruses. Anything with size and form has its own drive and its own navigation method. The thought-space of stones is small and hard and change-averse. It strongly resents the intrusions of others. Most of the early explorers lost their lives upon entry to the thought-space of stones, and their equipment was lost as well.

Thought-space does not have the same structure as so-called "space-time." Every era, every place, every being has its own thought-space, like a balloon. The big picture of thought-space is like all of these balloons stuffed into a warehouse. Some person's thought-space might be right next to the time before the universe existed, which might be right next to the thought-space of a single expressionless beam of radiation. All of this all tossed together, starting at one side and spreading to the other; everywhere we can think, disordered, unstructured. We can say "next to," but even that means little. Two thought-spaces might be in the same general area, but it would not be strange for there to be an infinite number of thought-spaces crammed between them. The paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise playing itself out in real life. It is not possible to form regular arrays of thought-space over a wide area. "Warehouse" is not a completely accurate metaphor. It's more like a giant washtub, or an infinite maelstrom. The interrelationships among the various thought-spaces are in constant flux. The source of their power to intermingle is unknown.

Just about anybody who thinks at all has a separate

thought-space for each thought, from moment to moment. Each of these thought-spaces is part of a chaotic, unending process of extension, collapse, and intermixing. The stretching and shrinking is an autonomous action, the jostling a natural interaction. One thing that is not possible, though, is for these thoughts to escape their own thought-space using conventional navigation. Every individual has their own “light cone” from which they can never, ever escape. That is why, until the discovery of hyperthought navigation, the structure of thought-space was completely unknowable. No one ever even thought to think about it. The idea of examining what lay outside one’s own thought-space would be like to trying to use an astronomical telescope to check on something outside the universe. The best one could hope for would be to recognize that the universe has an edge that has an actual shape.

The “frontier regions” are empty spots that exist at the edges of thought-space, or that linger inconspicuously in places closer to hand. At some point in the past they were occupied by thought, but now they are in some process of disappearing.

There are places in thought-space that have been allocated to solid objects, and these do not disappear just because the person thinking them passes away. In terms of time, the thought-space devoted to these physical objects continues to exist, from one second to the next, and so the physical thing continues to exist, defined by these interstitial connections in time. Death is nothing more than a term for the expression of the adjacency of thought-spaces. The thought-space itself is not extinguished.

The nature of the process by which “frontier regions” occur is unclear. These regions are on course for disappearance, returning to the void, but they are something distinct from the void that exists outside the realm of thought-space.

If what exists on the outside is “nothingness,” then the frontier regions are like the parentheses that separate the something from the nothing. It was recognized that these frontier regions would be a good place to apply the newly devised hyperthought navigation methods, and these regions were under regular surveillance.

Hyperthought navigation is a way of crossing from one thought-space to another. The discovery of hyperthought navigation made it possible to pass from one space-time, previously associated with a specific individual, to another. This represented an enormous challenge to, and expansion of, the very ideas of “space” and “the universe.” This is the technique/technology that enabled the creation of interstellar nations, and that was a mere spin-off of its importance.

Hyperthought navigation opened the door to travel exceeding the speed of light. For any given individual, “present” space-time and “future” space-time abut each other in the vortex. Hyperthought navigation is all that’s needed to move from the one to the other. For that specific individual, “future” space-time might be “on a star far, far away,” but hyperthought navigation means it is not impossible to get there. Hyperthought navigation brings the present and the future up close to one another, close enough to step from one to the other. This may seem like circular reasoning, but it is vital that the overall “space” of thought-space be in a constant state of upheaval. As the multitude of possible futures branch out before us, we have to be careful in our timing of which to choose. When we are in the right position, all we have to do is jump.



“Huh? What’s this? Where are we?” cried Kibi from the

front seat, knowing that Ethan was somewhere nearby.

“Where do you think we are?” came the reply, shredded by the wind. “In the vehicle. We are accelerating normally. Look, that’s the boundary of thought!”

It was like a transparent skin stretched across the course, with the electrical activity of the brain sparkling like the lights of an enormous city. It was featureless, lacking in imagination. The “city” kept shifting its position, but Kibi understood it was not a city at all. It was like staring into the eyeball of a whale as large as space itself, the surface of a waterfall dropping off the edge of the universe.

“What force is propelling us forward?” wondered Kibi.

“Once we transcend our own thoughts, we have no need of any motive force,” responded Ethan. “Goes without saying.”

There was a sudden surge in the g-forces exerting themselves on Kibi’s body—or rather, on the thoughts of which he was composed. Kibi was on the brink of an out-of-body experience. His thoughts appeared to be making their way back into his mouth.

“We seem to be the test case in our own thought experiment.”

Kibi was desperately trying to follow Ethan’s words, which were reaching him only in broken fragments.

What about thought-space? What about hyperthought navigation? And as an extra added freebie, what about travel faster than the speed of light? Mathematical structure turning into highway, switching episodes, being consumed, continuing to move, transcending, while a giant thought gives birth to the vortex, the seeds of a nascent thought timorously emerging, at the site where something once stood before it disappeared. He seemed to be chewing on some kind of thought like that, not really knowing what was what or how far it went.

“Hyperthought navigation,” said Ethan. “A way of using thought as fuel. Each thought being nothing more than a drop

of a kind of gasoline that generates an instant of our acceleration. That's all there is to hyperthought navigation. We are not using hyperthought navigation to propel ourselves. We ourselves are hyperthought navigation."

"What the fuck!" Kibi answered, and in that instant, a kind of understanding came to him, and he could sense the next surge of acceleration. He could see forms appearing on the curtain spread out before them. Kibi could tell it was the silhouettes of Rao and Boyd, and he felt another surge of acceleration. He clearly understood the acceleration they were experiencing was the kind that would never look back at the past. Kibi was heading headlong for the curtain, but the actual piercing of the curtain was absolutely not the hyperthought navigation Ethan proclaimed, the transcendence of his own thought and the entry to the thought-space of another. Rather, it was the hyperthought navigation itself, as Ethan had imagined, and its fruits, and all the possibilities that emanated from it, tearing themselves apart to shreds. That was the acceleration that brought them to hyperthought navigation. It was the realm of Ethan's thoughts that Kibi was escaping.





# SEA FINGERS by Toh Enjoe

Translated by Jim Hubbert



## 1

The table was laid out with breakfast. Rice and fried eggs. A cruet of soy sauce. The sun threw bright spots on the sauce cruet. Shizuko Uchikawa set out bowls of miso soup. Her husband, Kazushi, wolfed down mouthfuls of rice and pickled beef.

The fourteen-inch vacuum-tube TV was tuned to the usual talking head, announcing detours for water main work, schedules for fire drills, and changes in dog license regulations with his usual lurching style. He worked in the health insurance section at City Hall. Shizuko listened closely as she sat down to eat.

"And now it's time for the offshore forecast."

She looked up from her food. Kazushi sipped his soup and stared into space. The screen showed a simple map of Awazu, their square bit of terra firma. The camera closed in on the island's northeast quadrant. Little Clear signs flashed along the coast. Shizuko sighed with relief.

"I wouldn't rely on that," Kazushi said.

"At least it makes me feel better."

He stood up and climbed into his jumpsuit over a tank top and running shorts. He was fit and muscular, with a young man's body.

"Not much chance it'll act up," he said.

"I don't like the ocean. What shall we have tonight?"

"Ginger sardines."

"What, again?" Shizuko smiled. Kazushi was several years younger, and his attempts at humor were terrible, a trait she found rather sweet. "You've never eaten a fish that came out of an ocean in your life."

A meal of ginger sardines on Awazu was an impossibility.

In the entryway, she handed him the shoehorn. Two pair of shoes, large and small, sat side by side on the concrete inside the door of the little rented house. He slipped his shoes on and exchanged the shoehorn for his cloth-wrapped lunch box. The front door clattered as he slid it open. The tiny garden outside the door was awash in a blooming meadowsweet, almost dazzlingly white.

He climbed onto his bicycle. The back of his jumpsuit was stitched in orange thread: AZAWU ACOUSTIC ENGINEERING.

"Be careful of the riptides. I don't want to lose you."

"Deep-fried ham would be nice," was his answer as he pedaled off.

She cleared the table quickly, closed the gas cock, dressed for work, left the house and walked along the narrow unpaved street past one-story wooden houses enclosed by fences and hedges. She stepped out onto a paved road perhaps six yards wide, a long downslope, twisting and turning sharply. She could just glimpse the Deep here and there between the rooftops, but what mostly blocked her view was the stone gate towering

above the houses at the foot of the hill.

This specimen of Islamic architecture had been ejected from the Deep and placed high on the mountain's slope. Other than the usual odd mutations, it was identical to the Nuruosmaniye Gate, the east entrance to the Grand Bazaar in a city called Istanbul that existed once, before the world disappeared.

Shizuko knew nothing about the Grand Bazaar or the Nuruosmaniye Gate, so she was not surprised to find that the bazaar itself was utterly different from the original, nor was she mystified to see that its roof of flattened Ottoman domes was covered with green-glazed tiles like the cladding on Moroccan mosques, or that they were flanked by tapering North African minarets of sun-dried brick, or that all of these elements were themselves not quite like the originals.

Once through the gate and into the covered market, the vista was even stranger. The bazaar was divided not only into left and right wings, but into different levels. The soaring space was capacious enough for four or five stories of shops.

Shizuko climbed to the second level. This was her shortcut to the coast road.

If the Grand Bazaar had been grown as a three-dimensional beehive, it might have looked like this. The confusion of architectural styles was even more extreme inside, with jumbled clusters of hive cells serving as shop space. Shizuko passed a shop selling vegetables, another for sundries. A dry-cleaning shop, an appliance store. Along the opposite side of the street below she could see a barber's spiraling pole, and the tofu maker's wife setting out fritters on a tray. There was a rack with picture books and student magazines outside the stationery shop. The drugstore entrance was flanked by a two-foot-high green frog and a pink elephant, their heads nodding languidly on springs.

The high ceiling was pierced with openings that admitted generous amounts of light and air, giving the space an almost outdoor feel. The pavement and gutters and power poles and even the grass along the road were the same inside and out. The colonnade of enormous pillars that pierced the levels and supported the ceiling was overgrown with foliage. Branches aflame with fresh green arced between the pillars. Aezu's old town, with its gigantic structures on the mountainside overlooking the Deep, was a seamless whole.

All this was the legacy of the sea fingers.

As she emerged from the bazaar, Shizuko noticed the sign over the butcher shop. She reminded herself to buy some ham cutlets on the way home. The street sloped down from the second level and continued downward until it joined with the largest avenue in Aezu, a two-lane paved road.

She crossed the avenue and walked on in the direction of the coast.

There were only four or five kilometers of flat land between the foot of the mountains and the Deep. Shizuko was walking midway between them, but if she had stopped to look back, she would have seen densely packed layers of buildings climbing the slope. There was a white-brown sphere like a wasps' nest. A castle seemingly made of toy blocks, planted upside down. A building like a sail of metal and glass. A cluster of steeples stabbing into the sky. Buildings of different styles and eras overlapped like the scales of a fish clinging to the mountain. Had she taken time to look closer, she would have made out the Temple of the Inscriptions from Tikal, the Guggenheim Museum, the Church of Santa Clara of Querétaro, Cambodia's Banteay Srei, its sandstone walls carved with devatas, Notre Dame du Haut of Ronchamp, the Red Palace of the Potala, Wat Phra Kaew, and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Buildings

layered onto and between buildings, replicas of structures from the past, though never exact. Some looked like melting candles that had lost much of their shape. Others were architectural chimeras that had seemingly swapped DNA with other structures and styles.

The sea fingers had attacked Aezu many times. Sometimes they would throw up whole clusters of buildings from the Deep. After a gap of a few years, the next assault would begin, and more buildings would be shoved up the mountain slope, crammed against the buildings above them. The accumulated results of these disasters, like tree rings, covered the mountain that rose behind Shizuko; they *were* the mountain.

She did not like to be reminded of this. She tried her best not to look at it.



Shizuko walked until she reached the two-lane coastal road. She turned left. A bus was approaching from behind. Awazu Transport was the sole bus company on the island. The driver nodded as he passed and she followed on foot. The sea wall was on her right; to the left was the town. Traces of the sea fingers were all around her: strange buildings, streets intersecting in unsettling ways, everything the work of the fingers.

A horn tooted behind her. She turned to see a woman on a scooter smiling from behind a helmet visor. Hanae was her office mate. She dismounted and pushed her scooter to where Shizuko stood waiting, and flipped the visor up, revealing a small, sharp nose and large eyes.

"I can't stand the sun, it's so bright," she said in a husky voice, like a bartender's. "Listen, could you give me a pill?"

Shizuko took a pack out of her bag, struck a match and held

it. Hanae drew hard and blew out a stream of smoke. She started pushing the scooter along with the cigarette in her mouth.

The office was five minutes away. These five minutes to enjoy a cigarette were a daily ritual for Hanae. The building was already in sight; its seventy employees made it one of the bigger businesses on the island. Its buses linked all the major towns on Awazu.



Aezu was the largest town on the island. Perhaps eight thousand people lived there. The whole of Awazu had fewer than seventy thousand, on a spot of land said to be about half the size of Shikoku.

About half the size of Shikoku . . .

But no one knew what “Shikoku” was. Vast amounts of knowledge and information had disappeared long ago, along with the archipelago. There were oral traditions: there had been a country named Japan where the people and language of Awazu had, it was said, come from. But where this country had been, and whether or not the spot of land called Awazu was somehow related to it, no one knew.

The world that had existed until the middle of the 21st century had utterly vanished.

Some unimaginable catastrophe must have occurred, but no records remained. Exactly how long ago the cataclysm had occurred was vague and uncertain.

Like the color of the Deep.

The Deep surrounded the square island, ash-gray swells rising and falling lazily. Everyone called it “the ocean”—that was the logical name for it. But the Deep was not water. It was heavy-looking, like a fluid saturated with fine gray

powder. Anything that touched it was instantly dissolved and assimilated.

Like Shizuko's first husband.

The Deep apparently blanketed the globe from the poles to the equator. There were other worlds like Awazu, worlds with which one could communicate in a limited way on limited frequencies, bouncing signals off ancient satellites. Based on information scraped together this way, it seemed that humanity was about ten million survivors all told.

All the oceans, 99 percent of the continents, and all but a fraction of a percent or so of humanity had dissolved into the Deep.

The Deep dominated the planet completely. No one knew whether it was matter in the conventional sense. Civilization on Awazu depended on plundering what little bounty could be coaxed from it. Humanity's other 9,930,000 survivors were surely doing the same thing.

This was Shizuko's world.



Sound poured from the speakers atop the power poles. Aezu's city cable system played "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms" three times a day: in the morning, at noon, and in the early evening. The trumpet played the melody backed by strings as Shizuko and Hanae changed into slippers at the service entrance and stepped up into the office. They cleared away the copies of yesterday's paper and refreshed the water in the flower vases. They took the company seal and the cashbox from the safe and put the commuter pass forms and other supplies in the usual spots. By the time tea was made and distributed, it was three minutes before the start of business.

They sat at the counter and went to work. Calculating on abacuses. Filling in payment vouchers. Entering figures in a ledger in blue-black ink. Calculating taxes and health and pension charges, writing up wage statements. Typing up invoices and carbon copies and preparing them for mailing.

They sold commuter passes and books of bus tickets. Brought tea to the reception room. As they worked, the clock on the wall touched noon and chimed deeply. "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms" played from the loudspeaker outside.

Lunch was at one, but Shizuko paused for a short break. Clouds were gathering outside. It was a little darker than in the morning.

A sound like thunder rolled in the distance.

*I wonder if that's the ocean, she thought. I hope Kazu-san's finished his lunch.*



A sound like thunder, far off in the sky.

Kazushi thought it might have come from inland, but the throbbing of heavy machinery was so loud that he stopped paying attention. He wrapped his empty lunch box in a sheet of newspaper, put a rubber band around it, got out a cigarette and lit it with a match. Beyond the smoke rising before his nose was the beach, and beyond that, the ashen mist that served as a shield between Awazu and the Deep. He sat staring at it absent-mindedly, as he always did after lunch.

"Another meal from the loving wife. I envy you," his partner Oeki said.

"Your lunches always look pretty good to me," Kazushi answered.



"I've been married twenty-five years. My excitement level is forty times lower."

Oeki sat next to him with a grunt. He was short and thick-set, with a square face and close-cropped hair, half of which had gone gray. He was wearing the same jumpsuit and rubber boots as Kazushi.

"Smoke?" Kazushi held out his pack. Oeki drew out a cigarette with thick fingers and lit it. His lighter was metal and heavy. Oeki had culled it from the Deep himself.

They sat on the seawall and smoked, gazing at the mist without really seeing it. The hazy curtain blocked their view of the Deep. From one of Awazu's peaks, the Deep could be seen spreading to the horizon in all directions. The mist stretched up and down the coast out of sight, ringing the island completely.

The Deep broke down anything it touched and assimilated it instantly.

Why didn't Awazu disappear?

Awazu was a droplet of water on a hot frying pan. That was what Kazushi had learned in primary school. A thin layer of steam under the droplet forms a barrier with the heat from the metal surface, allowing the water to float above it with impunity. The mist was preventing contact with the Deep, contact that would otherwise dissolve Awazu. But like the droplet floating above the struggle between steam and heat in the frying pan, a violent struggle between the mist and the Deep was going on beneath Awazu.

"This struggle," Kazushi's teacher had told the class, "is a matter of vibration."

Pluck a guitar string; it vibrates. Its contours blur. This is the mist, the teacher said. It was a rough approximation, but it made the point.

A layer of steam between a drop of water and a frying pan.

Awazu was floating above a layer of some intermediate state between conventional matter and the Deep. The mist did not react to anything. A hard wind wouldn't move it. You could put your hand in it and try to wave it away, shoot flame at it, it wouldn't react—except to one specific thing.

The pounding went on without let-up.

A cluster of yellow construction vehicles surrounded a gigantic bronze statue lying on its side farther down the beach, a half-naked hero astride a rearing horse. The figure had bulging sinews and an exaggerated pose without a hint of subtlety. The horse's jaws were open wide. The hero's eyes were fixed on the heavens. The pair would originally have stood on a pedestal, but here they were lying on the sand. The statue was ridiculously large, about thirty meters long. Only a dictatorship would create something like this. Naturally there was no foundry on Awazu capable of making such a thing. But it couldn't have just floated across the Deep to Awazu.

Workers using blowtorches and operating lifting equipment with crab-like claws were slowly cutting the statue into pieces. After each piece was detached, it was loaded onto a dump truck. For the last six months, the men had worked every day without a break, "mining" the statue for metal, cutting sections out of it until it looked like a giant birdcage.

The statue had been pulled from the Deep, through the curtain of mist and onto the beach, by people like Kazushi.



Oeki tossed his cigarette butt aside and stood up. "Let's give 'em a toot."

"Riiight," Kazushi said.

A vehicle like a television production truck, but much

larger, was parked on the seawall with engine running. AZAWU ACOUSTIC ENGINEERING was painted on the side. Thick cables ran from panels in the truck to seven or eight large black boxes down on the beach. Each box was as tall as a man. They were spaced in a row on stands, facing the mist.

The two men climbed into the truck through the rear doors. The inside looked like a sound studio, with equipment crammed into every available space. Kazushi sat down at the mixing console. Through a double-pane window in the side of the truck he could see the beach, the mist, and the boxes.

"It's all yours," Oeki said.

"Riiight."

Kazushi hoisted on a pair of oddly shaped headphones that extended from his temple to his jaw. He put on a pair of black gloves that looked like carbon fiber woven with metal threads, and flipped a series of switches on the console. Sound came from the black boxes. They were old speakers that had once been part of a theater sound system, with excellent dynamic range: voices, music, effects, everything was reproduced with extreme fidelity. With enough power, they could shake the walls of a building.

Kazushi pushed the faders up. The sound was not exactly pleasant. It wasn't music; it was like gravel flowing, or thousands of ceramic tiles clattering down and breaking, or gigantic insects rubbing their wings, or a gale blowing through a bamboo forest. A constantly shifting array of sound effects boomed from the speakers in a seemingly random pattern, but nevertheless there was a kind of hidden beat, difficult to describe, like a whirlpool, or a cloud, or a wave. Kazushi kept pulling audio files from the server and feeding them into the changing mix, firing them at high volume at the mist.

The mist drew back, as though pulled by an invisible

hand, and began to undulate like a curtain moved by the wind. Kazushi's face was intent. He was focused not so much on the view out the window as on his headphones.

"That's it," Oeki said. "Listen close, now."

Kazushi was listening to the feed from high-sensitivity microphones aimed at the mist. The sounds he was sending out bounced back toward the mics, slightly altered.

Their job was to listen to those changes in the original sounds. It was like looking for a submarine by listening to a sonar ping echo. Kazushi sent commands to the speaker stands, tilting them forward and back. The mist fluttered in answer.

"I've got something," he said. He took his right hand off the fader and moved his hand and fingers in front of his chest, as though he were stroking something. His black feedback gloves, connected to his headphones, let him "touch" the acoustic return.

"I need to bring it closer before I can grab it. But . . . I feel like I'm groping around in the Deep itself."

The mist's undulations grew more regular, like waves breaking on a shore.

"Just be quiet and concentrate," Oeki said.

"No, I think I can focus better if I talk." Kazushi's fingers curled as though he were grasping a drawer handle.

"Why? Because otherwise you'll start thinking about Shizuko?"

"Mind if I step on your foot? Ah, I've got it."

A cubical object floated into view. Its outlines were uncertain, not because of the mist, but because it had not assumed its final shape.

"Yes," Oeki murmured. "See that? It's still in the Deep."

"I see it," Kazushi said.

"Bring it in like you're clawing it back with your fingers.

That's how you bring it close. Be careful, but bold too. Like making your lady come."

"Shouldn't I kind of land it, like a fish?"

With each ripple of the mist, the outlines of the cube grew sharper. It was a metal cabinet about the size of a refrigerator. Suddenly it snapped into focus, as though they were looking at it through a camera lens.

Oeki slammed a switch on the console like a hunter firing at a target. The speakers barked with a series of sharp acoustic pulses.

For an instant the curtain of mist was blown back, revealing the edge of the land and the Deep beyond. Crewmembers on the beach rushed forward with hooks and wires to drag the cabinet inland. The mist rushed in again like a curtain falling after being jerked upward.

Oeki slapped Kazushi's back. "You did good. The doctors will be very happy. New drugs aren't easy to develop."

"Man, that was tense." Kazushi rested his head on the console.

"Your technique is really coming along. Shogo couldn't have done better." Oeki cringed at his own words. "Sorry, didn't mean it that way."

"No worries. I'm used to being compared. No point in getting upset about it."



For a moment, it came back to him.

*Are you sure? Shogo was your boss.*

Shizuko's face was turned away. Her pale, naked body was pinned beneath him in the darkness, slender and supple, reaching out for him, belying her words. He touched her. She flooded

with passion and the scent of a long-forgotten ocean.

*You heard the rumors, I guess.*

... No. He tangled her legs in his own, so she couldn't move.  
Or maybe she was keeping him from moving?

*I know you did.*

Her eyes were still closed, the lids long and narrow. He licked them. She writhed beneath him.



"I guess the only way to say it is, Shogo was a piece of shit," Oeki said. His expression almost seemed to add, *I'm glad he's dead.*

"I guess."

"Everybody's happy you took his place."

"Well, let's get on with it." Kazushi sat up and stretched. "We've got a lot of back orders. Let's see . . . synthetic rubber. Listen, Oeki-san?"

"What?"

"Who in the hell figured all this out, anyway? That we could use sound waves to pull stuff from the Deep. I don't see how they came up with the idea."

"Not noticing would've been strange," Oeki said with a baffled look. "Just living here would give you the idea."

"It would?"

Oeki rolled his eyes and sighed. "That's what's been attacking us all along," he said, as if explaining something elementary. "The sea fingers. What are they, but sound?"

## 2

“All of the world’s information is perfectly preserved in the Deep at least, — I believe so.”

That was what Shizuko and her fellow students had been taught in high school.

“Look at the layers of architecture accumulated on the mountainside, all of them famous buildings as far as we can tell. At one time they stood somewhere else on the planet. Look at what acoustic engineering is bringing out of the Deep. An unimaginable amount of information is required to manufacture these things. Where else would that information come from?

“The Deep has compressed almost all of the data on Earth, and that compression is reversible. The reason it looks like a slurry of wheat flour is because it’s encoded information. Our eyes and senses can’t distinguish one object from another once they enter this state. All we see is the quiet, ash-gray slurry called the Deep. But is it really quiet? Perhaps the Deep is in a state of raging chaos that we can neither see nor hear.”

The students struggled to keep from laughing at their teacher’s breathless speculation. They mouthed the words they knew he was about to add.

“At least, I believe so.” He smiled wryly and continued. “If we could glimpse that raging reality of the Deep, we would see the sea fingers. At least, I believe so.”

The students were silent. Each of them had lost a loved one to the sea fingers.



Had that been an earth science class? Physics? No, maybe philosophy.

Shizuko put the lid on her lacquered lunch box. The smell of pickled vegetables on her lips disappeared down her throat with the tea. Mastication and digestion are reversible too, she thought. Most things were reversible, but you needed to keep a record, and that was difficult. Like keeping her memories of Shogo.

Hanae brought an aluminum ashtray. Shizuko lit up and exhaled the smoke. They spent every lunch hour at this table in the corner of the second-floor conference room.

“Did you hear something strange? I hope it doesn’t get rough.”

There was a raised dais at one end of the room for morning speeches and gatherings. There was an old pump organ too, left from the merging of two kindergartens. It was played at the first meeting of the year and for the union chorus club, and that was about all. Shizuko always played. She had been a teacher at one of the kindergartens.

“Are you worried?” Hanae asked.

“Well, of course.” Shizuko glanced toward the windows facing the Deep. Hanae watched her in profile. She seemed to be looking somewhere beyond. She always seemed to have something or someone in her heart that wasn’t here. *Then again*, Hanae thought, *maybe I’m reading too much into it.*

There was a distant pounding, like a small, far-off drum. Small and far away, but sharp and clear.

The sound grew louder. There it was again. Shizuko stood up.

“The forecast didn’t say anything,” Hanae said.

“You can’t depend on the forecast.”

“You’re right. Oh no — there it is again.”



Shizuko went to the window and put her hands on the aluminum sill. Her finger touched something.

Someone had left a ring behind.



Kazushi was listening to the same sound on his head-phones. The Deep was disturbing the atmosphere. Such events weren't unusual, nor was the nature of the sound — so far. Oeki was listening on headphones too, and nodded.

"Okay, let's get back to it," Kazushi said.

He raised the volume on the speakers and made a few fine adjustments. The mist moved forward and back, up and down.

"Searching . . . wait." He moved the faders in tiny increments.

"What is it?"

"Something's close. I didn't hear it coming."

"Can you pinch it?"

"No . . . I can't make out the shape. There's no edge yet."

"Stop. Cut the speakers."

Kazushi turned to him in surprise. When he saw Oeki's face, he understood instantly. His hands froze on the mixing board. There was a sharp metallic crack, like a giant crowbar striking stone. It wasn't coming through the headphones. A titanic sound had struck the coast.

He looked through the window in astonishment. The mist had suddenly cleared.

This was not how things had looked when they pulled in the cabinet of pharmaceuticals. There wasn't a shred of mist anywhere. The beach was visible from one end to the other—a sight to chill the heart. The barrier keeping the water drop

suspended above the frying pan had been stripped away.

He heard a faint gasp. Oeki was standing rigidly, staring with unblinking eyes. Kazushi followed his gaze.

A man stood at the edge of the Deep, staring at the truck.

He was wearing a blue jumpsuit and rubber boots. He was tall and muscular, with a long face, narrow eyes and small ears.

There was no doubt. It was Shogo.

He had died two years prior, swallowed up by one of the riptides that were common around the equinoxes. He had disappeared into the Deep.

Shogo peered right and left. He didn't look uncomfortable. He didn't appear dead. He started walking toward the truck. The microphones on the beach picked up his boots crunching the sand.

Behind him, the Deep was changing.

Slowly, languidly, part of the surface projected upward, thinning as it grew longer. The protuberance—or cord—was about as thick as a man's torso. Kazushi watched as the end bent downward under its own weight. When it contacted the beach, it dove into the sand like a worm fleeing the open air.

He looked at Shogo again. The Deep beyond was sending up more projections, too many to count now.

Oeki shook himself out of his daze and slapped Kazushi on the head. They'd lost five seconds, possibly a fatal delay. They tumbled out of the truck. The crew working on the statue was already sprinting toward the sea wall.

A hundred, two hundred—no, more projections were plunging into the sand. Incredible reverberations rose from deep beneath the beach and quickly grew louder.

The sea fingers were probing Awazu's core with sound waves. Kazushi remembered what Oeki had said: that the Deep could pull what it wanted from the land, using sound.

The sound of seven or eight pairs of pounding feet was replaced by screams as the crew disappeared into fissures on the beach. The sand around the giant statue was boiling and foaming and erupting like overheated rice porridge. The whole beach was liquefying under the tremors. The sea fingers were “playing” Awazu like an instrument, and the vibrations they generated were dissolving the physical substance of the beach, collapsing it inward. The seawall lost its underpinnings and started to sink as Kazushi and Oeki leaped down onto the landward side.

They ran for their lives. Kazushi risked a quick look behind. A cluster of huge roofs was rising above the tossing gray of the Deep. It was a Shinto shrine with buildings of different types, tangled and fused crazily. The bark roofs formed a continuous surface, like the skin of a monster. Dozens of vermilion shrine gates projected from its back like serrated spines.

The sea fingers were performing Awazu.

Pianists use air as a medium to generate sounds. The sea fingers used Awazu as a medium and changed its form freely, creating unimaginable landscapes. Until they were satisfied, the performance would continue. No one knew how to stop them. All they could do was run. Those who were slow in escaping were caught up in the vibrations and absorbed by the performance.

Bereft of support, the concrete blocks of the sea wall tumbled down like mah-jongg tiles and disappeared in the vibrations, to be encoded and compressed. The gray vibrations swallowed the seawall blocks whole and started flowing toward the town like a muddy stream, carrying the shrine with them.

The improvisation had begun.



Shizuko threw the window open. The ring clattered to the floor, but she didn't hear it. She leaned far out the window and squinted toward the Deep. *Where's Kazushi working today?* Hanae stretched her neck alongside her.

Windows were opening all over the town. People on the street stopped to listen. Everyone on Awazu knew instantly what that sound meant.

Shizuko couldn't comprehend what was happening along the coast. The beach looked like a giant undulating snake with crimson spines. A strong shock hit the building. The water main construction company across the street disappeared under a chess piece thirty meters high that buried itself in the earth.

Shizuko blinked in shocked surprise.

It was not a chess piece. The statue of a horse and its rider had been blown from the beach. It was followed quickly by a rain of heavy construction vehicles. One of them crushed a bus outside the building, but Shizuko did not pull back from the window.

"Where are they? Where are they?" Hanae's voice was trembling. She was afraid to lean out.

"I don't know," Shizuko said tonelessly. "It's happening all over."

Plumes of dust were rising among the tiled roofs of Aezu, even far from the Deep. Shizuko looked toward the steep slope above the town. The jumble of buildings, overlapping like scales, was wriggling like a living thing. Gray slurry gushed from between the scales. It was starting to flow toward the coast.

"It's happening on the mountain too. There's nowhere to run."

The fingers were dividing like tree roots, penetrating everywhere beneath Aezu. The whole town was almost floating on

the Deep. A shovel in the ground would strike the gray inferno.

No, it was worse than that. If Aezu and everyone in it were dissolved in the Deep, they would at least be encoded, perhaps to be decoded afterward. But this time the sea fingers seemed determined to perform everyone and everything. That could mean being encoded as something unimaginable.

One only had to look at the accumulation of strange structures in Aezu.

All of them were the legacy of performances by the sea fingers—buildings from all over the world, recorded as data in the Deep. But with each performance, the land and people of Aezu were changed forever.

With its insulating mist torn away, Aezu had no protection from the Deep. The sea fingers were unleashing a performance like none ever seen.



Kazushi glanced at Oeki as they ran. Shapes like branching veins exploded across the ground beneath their feet, racing like snakes across cinder block walls, up the sides of houses and wooden telephone poles painted with pitch, over living plants and the wax models of food in the window of a restaurant, and even a campaign poster. These were the sea fingers, conduits for the Deep.

“This has never happened before!” Oeki shouted. He had survived scores of sea finger attacks, but not something like this. If this entire vast network of veins were marshaled for a performance . . .

A huge shock came from below. The ground undulated like an ocean, disturbed by numberless vibrating fingers deep in the ground. Normal reality vanished instantly,

deluged by gray liquid and never-seen objects.

All they could do was try to avoid the obstacles being tossed to and fro in their path. It was as if a mountain of gravel had collapsed and was enveloping their feet. They dodged statues of bodhisattvas, spirit stones, and tombstones rising from fissures in the ground. The nose of a silver, teardrop-shaped rocket—maybe some kind of movie prop—rose out of the liquefied earth with a bubbling sound and sank out of sight again. A cluster of tanks and military vehicles fused together with rust came rolling toward them, nearly crushing them. A huge gust of wind made them duck instinctively; an orphan helicopter rotor blade went humming by, gouging the road like a buzz saw. A flaming bus sped past, full of screaming children. A skyscraper rose horizontally, like a surfacing whale. Wild laughter poured from its jagged, broken windows before it sank out of sight. Gunshots sounded like rain on a tin roof. When they stopped, the surfaces of the objects around them pouched out into the death masks of teenage girls, one for each gunshot.

People, people, people. People caught up in the end of the world wrought by the Deep. Their final moments raced by and disappeared.

The rest of Kazushi's crew were caught up in the performance as they tried to escape. Some of them split apart like peeled bananas before being transformed into something bizarre. Kazushi wasn't sure of his sanity, but he kept running in the direction of Awazu Transport.

Someone shot past him. The man was walking at a relaxed pace, yet he flashed by Kazushi, who was running for his life. The man was wearing dark blue work clothes with AZAWU ACOUSTIC ENGINEERING stitched on the back in orange thread. He turned to look at Kazushi as he passed. Their eyes met.

It was Shogo.

Kazushi reached out desperately, trying to get his hands on Shogo, but he disappeared into the vibrating gray slurry. Finally he pulled up short, gasping for breath. Then he turned and started walking resolutely back toward the Deep. Oeki walked with him.

"Did you see him?" he asked.

"Yes," Kazushi said.

"I'm with you."

"Good."



*"You heard the rumors, I guess. I know you have."*

Her voice echoing in his mind, Kazushi turned his back on his wife and walked toward the Deep.



Conical depressions were appearing all over Aezu. The ground beneath the town was liquefying everywhere simultaneously.

At Awazu Transport, the first floor and half of the second had already sunk out of sight. The ground was so liquid that the building was drifting on its foundations. Sea fingers snaked across the walls like veins on a leaf. The conference room seemed ready to collapse at any moment.

"I'm here."

"Wha—?" Shizuko started at the male voice.

"I came back for you, Shizuko."

She trembled. It was Shogo. She looked around the room but he wasn't there. Then she saw something that froze her with fear. Hanae's mouth had switched places with one of her

eyes. The voice was coming from her mouth.

"That organ brings back memories." The voice didn't invite the listener to share in the nostalgia. You could take the statement, or you could leave it. It was definitely Shogo.

"You were a kindergarten teacher when we met. Weren't you, Shi-chan?"

Shi-chan. Hearing her nickname in his mouth made her flinch.

"You play something. I'll listen."

A long, slender finger poked through the ring on the floor and spread like capillaries around Hanae's legs. Her face turned in on itself with an ugly, wet sound, like a glove being turned inside out, and became the face of Shogo. Her body became Shogo's large frame. He was wearing his work jumpsuit.

"Play. This is your husband talking."

The room was like the wheelhouse of a ship in a storm, tilting and shuddering. And now she was supposed to play the organ. There was no hint of anger or cruelty in Shogo's voice. He sounded puzzled that his wife wasn't following her lord and master's directions. If she didn't do as she was told quickly, she'd probably get a punch in the face from his hard right hand as he bellowed in anger.

It's *Shogo* all right. Shizuko remembered the sensation of blood pouring from her nose, of spitting out white tooth fragments mixed with blood, saliva and tears. She remembered how it felt on mornings when she'd had to arrange her bangs to hide a swollen eye before she went to work. Everything she'd managed to forget over the last year came rushing back as she walked reluctantly to the organ. She put her feet on the pedals and charged it with air, put her ten fingers on the keyboard. Her left little finger was stiff. It was the one Shogo had fractured.

"What're you gonna play?"



Cocky as ever, he pressed his chest against her shoulders. There'd been a scene just like this before they married. The children had gone home and Shizuko was alone in the classroom practicing when Shogo barged in. That's right . . . she'd been playing "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms." But she couldn't continue because of his arms around her shoulders. Because of his lips pressed against the nape of her neck.

But not today.

"Get back, please. I can't play like this."

She felt him flinch at her icy tone. A sudden impulse made her turn toward him. She grabbed the yellow ballpoint pen in his front pocket and plunged it into the back of his hand.

He swung his fist reflexively and struck her on the temple. She blacked out.



The sound truck's tires were half-buried in the sand, and it was covered with wormlike networks of sea fingers, but the engine was running and the power indicators were lit. A few speakers still stood facing the Deep. Kazushi and Oeki reconnected them with spare cables. The situation on the beach seemed to have stabilized, but this was no time to relax.

"You saw him, didn't you?" Kazushi said. "Was he . . . alive?"

"Nah. That was just part of the performance."

"Does the Deep . . . *want* to perform him? Why?"

"Who knows? Asking 'why' about the Deep is as dumb as you can get. It pulled out a drawer and turned it upside down, and lots fell out. One thing that fell out was Shogo, that's all."

"I guess you're right." Kazushi checked the mixing board. "Are you really right?"

"Are you saying the Deep noticed him?"

"No. I don't know."

Kazushi fell silent. He couldn't come out and say that maybe Shogo was causing what was happening. But he sensed that Oeki was worried about that very possibility. After all, he'd said *I'm with you*.

What would Shogo do next? Kazushi thought he could guess. But how could he be stopped?

He whispered. *Shizuko*.



Shizuko woke to someone calling her name. She was lying on the floor with Hanae leaning over her, shouting her name. *He's gone*, Shizuko thought. Relief welled up.

*I'm all right. I just fainted*, she tried to say with her smile as she sat up and saw the ceiling above Hanae. An eye the size of a window met hers and blinked. She screamed and shrank back. An ear as tall as a man projected from the wall. A giant mouth crossed the floor at an angle. All in relief, all parts of Shogo.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It's because I'm here."

"Don't be stupid." Hanae's voice trembled with rage. "*He's the jerk!*"

The parts of Shogo's face traveled along the wall in silence, like Shogo when he was alive. He had always preceded his violence with an unsettling silence. The Deep had captured his likeness and character perfectly.

"Don't worry," Hanae said. "Everyone knew. We pretended not to, but we did. Everyone's on your side."

"Okay." Shizuko wiped away her tears and raised her head proudly.

"I don't want to see your face again, not even one eye. Go

away, or else . . .” She made her confession in a voice of quiet menace.

“Or else I’ll have to kill you again.”

### 3

She had told Kazushi about the shears.

She’d confessed one night while they lay side by side. The long fabric shears wouldn’t fit in her apron pocket. After some thought, she sewed a pocket for them on the inside of the apron. Kazushi held her close and pictured her look of intense concentration as she sewed. The person he was cradling was capable of murder if pushed too far.

Evenings at home usually meant a beating, so she’d invited Shogo for a walk. She’d kept her apron on. *It was the apron that saved me*, she murmured, half-asleep.

She had monitored the offshore forecasts closely. She knew the riptides often occurred on late summer nights. They could come all the way to the seawall without warning before pulling back just as violently, spasmodic disturbances in the layer between Awazu and the Deep, and the Deep was right behind them. One night, when they were out walking, the riptides surged toward them, but not as far as she had hoped, far from the seawall. When she ventured surprise that the surge was so weak, Shogo had said simply, “You really are hopeless, aren’t you?”

His tone was offhand, as if he were handing her a lunch box. He wasn’t being critical, nor was he making fun of her. But it had pushed her over the line. The next thing she knew, her shears were buried in Shogo’s flank. She murmured her confession to Kazushi as if she were describing how she’d set the table.

Shogo had staggered. She kicked him off the seawall and

jumped down after him. She kept on kicking him as he groaned, rolling him over and over to where the Deep was surging, and pulled the shears out of his side just before it took him. The mist pulled back with a moaning sound and Shogo was swallowed by the Deep. She'd told the police they were walking on the beach when it came. In a sense, she had told the truth.

"And why on earth were you walking on the beach?" they had asked her. She averted her eyes and answered, "I'll leave that to your imagination."

When she was finished, Kazushi said only, "What happened to the shears?"

"I don't know," she said.

She wouldn't tell him.



The parts of Shogo's face slid across the wall and over the broken windows and out the door. As soon as they were gone, the clamor outside stopped. The sudden silence brought a new kind of fear. Shogo's assaults always came in waves. Once he was enraged, he couldn't stop his fists. It was an impulse he couldn't control.

There was a frightful rending noise. The walls and ceiling were torn away like paper. A gigantic fist crossed the sky, made of rubble and wreckage from houses and shops, power poles and signs. As the fist crossed the sky, it fell apart.

Shizuko looked through a gap in the wall. There was rubble as far as the eye could see, rising and falling like the surface of a rippling pond. The fingers were sending out rippling vibrations. The fist she'd seen had been generated by those vibrations, then crumbled slowly, rejoining the waves of rubble. The waves and whirlpools smashed against each other, and within that

movement, a giant would take shape momentarily and disappear. Shizuko knew that the hand she had seen was Shogo's. He was trying to reduce Aezu to rubble so he could be reborn.

Waves of rubble combined to make bigger waves. The waves changed shape and morphed into a gigantic arm, then two. The arms thrust toward the sky. The giant emerged slowly, raising its torso from the rubble and mud. Its face was assembled from Shogo's parts.

For the first time, Shizuko's own face was touched with despair. *Maybe I won't make it.* She'd felt like this when Shogo's daily beatings tempted her to give up hope. She almost felt nostalgic.

The rubble colossus, with only its torso out of the muck, smiled at the woman who had been its wife.

That friendly smile . . .

But Shizuko may not have even had time to register it, because the next moment she was in Shogo's palm with Hanae, her body penetrated by countless sea fingers, assaulted by violent vibrations.

They shredded her finely, without a drop of blood. Hanae and the pump organ and everything in the room dissolved and disappeared into the interstices of the rubble that was Shogo's palm.

The debris giant closed its fist tightly and started crawling slowly toward the beach. It had to reach the Deep before the performance ended.

## 4

*I hear something. Music.*

Her hearing was the first sense to come back.

Her ears opened like little lotuses.

The giant was full of the liquefied dregs of Aezu. A simple melody kept repeating. It was coming to her from the world outside. It stimulated her to reassemble herself. She had the minimum awareness she needed to hear the melody, and she had her ears. She listened to it as she might have listened to the loudspeaker outside her window as she drowsed in the middle of the day.

*I wonder what time it is. This is the third time today, so it must be five. Almost evening. Time to close up the office. I've got stop by the butcher's for some ham cutlets . . .*

Her awareness drifted as in dreams, sometimes sharpening into clarity, sometimes dissipating, but it did not disappear. She wanted to hear the melody. She wanted to go on hearing it.



"There," Kazushi murmured. He was at the mixing console. "I found her."

"Are you sure?" Oeki said. "That's unbelievable."

They had turned the speakers to face inland. Kazushi had the faders all the way up.

Shogo always depended on Shizu-san. He can't live without her. He must be trying to take her back to his world — to the encoded world, to the Deep. But I don't have to sit here and watch. All I have to do is reel her in the same way we'd reel in anything.

It wasn't as simple as that, though. The data inside the sea fingers was in a far more agitated state than the Deep itself. There was no guarantee that the sound from the speakers would even reach her. But he had a clear image of Shizuko in his mind. He knew how his target would react to sound. That

could be the key to beating Shogo.

He added another track to the changing mix of dissonance, but not from the server library. He played it himself, at the console's built-in keyboard: "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms."

He chose Pump Organ from the effects menu and fingered the keyboard awkwardly, but with feeling.

"I've got her. I won't let her go."

"Is she reacting? Can she hear you?"

"I don't know." Kazushi shook his head. His fingers kept moving. Perspiration beaded on his forehead. Did he really have a lock on her with sound? Or was he just performing his image of her?

Was there a difference?



*Who's that playing?*

Shizuko's ears were gradually bringing her back to herself. *I played this melody for someone.* Then it came, like a revelation. She remembered.

*Kazu-san. Yes, that's right. That must be who's playing. She began to seethe with frustration. He's looking for me. He wants me to hear. I've got to answer — I've got to let him know I'm here. How —?* She was desperate. *The organ! I'll answer with the organ.*

She searched. Her eyes were nowhere to be found, so she made to grope for the organ instead. Fingers, palms, and arms flowed together out of the rubble. She groped and her fingertips touched a key. There were only three keys, floating disconnected from the rest, but she pressed them again and again. Even without a melody, at least it might be a kind of signal.



“She’s answering,” Kazushi said tersely, and slowed his playing just slightly, then sped it up. The three repeated notes responded with the same tempo changes.

“She’s answering — more notes now. She’s got more keys and both of her arms.”

Kazushi could hear her playing distinctly, hear that her shoulders, neck, and the chest she would need to move her arms were working together smoothly. He knew it was Shizuko who was performing. The sea fingers were performing Shogo and Kazushi was acting on him. His intervention was freeing Shizuko.

Shogo experienced this state as pain. He couldn’t stop Shizuko, but he knew that the source of intervention was the sound truck by the beach. All he had to do was destroy it.

The giant lurched into motion, but in the next moment seemed to lose strength and toppled over.

As though the melodic line in a symphony were being passed from the strings to the brass, the sea fingers’ performance of Shogo roused itself and made a giant leap toward the beach.

The sand around the sound car started to vibrate like boiling water. Shogo’s face rose from out of the foaming sand. The giant torso emerged, also sand and rubble. The sun, low in the sky, lit the pale body red. The giant planted an arm next to the sound truck. Now all it had to do was collapse its arm, bury the truck, and everything would be over. Shogo bared his teeth and smiled.

“Too late,” Oeki said grimly.

Kazushi held the headphones against his ears and listened carefully. His fingers were off the keyboard. “You lose,” he said.



High over their heads, a giant shadow came flying, shaped like a scythe. It severed Shogo's arm at the shoulder. The arm toppled away from the truck. The giant bellowed with agony and rage.

"Shogo! You're not dealing with me anymore!" Kazushi yelled.

Another shadow moved in from the opposite direction. It sliced downward through the giant's other shoulder and into its torso before it disappeared.



Shizuko was in her living room in an apron, sitting at the low dining table. For some reason the television had been replaced by the organ from the office. *That's odd*, she thought. *Maybe I'm dreaming.* Through the glass doors facing the veranda, she could see the meadowsweet moving slowly in the breeze.

Her sewing box and old swatches of cloth were spread out on the table in front of her. She looked down to see a doll in her hand. It was simple affair, two layers of felt cut into the silhouette of a person, with cotton stuffing and stitching around the edges. A helpless, sand-colored doll. She groped in the inside pocket of her apron and drew out a long pair of fabric shears.

*You are very stoic.*

She stabbed the doll's abdomen twice with the shears, then snipped off one of its arms. The arm fell onto the tatami and crumbled like ashes of incense. She made a second cut from the other shoulder, deep into the abdomen.

*Distant thunder split the sky.*

*Almost done.*

She held the doll up straight, with the open shears between

its legs.

Snip. She cut “Shogo” in half.

The world outside the windows split in two. The room was flooded with light.

Only then did she realize it. The room and the garden outside had been in darkness. Her eyes were so adjusted that she hadn’t noticed.



Kazushi saw two titanic blades rise vertically out of the sand on either end of the giant. The blades bisected it in a single, merciless stroke.

The huge mouth opened in an O. There was a drawn-out noise like stupendous gears clashing. It was the final vibration, the sound of Shogo’s rage and Shizuko’s homicidal resolve, summed to a perfect whole.

The giant’s two halves toppled forward. The line down the center of its back where the shears had cut fell inward with a roar. The sea fingers started retreating from it rapidly, fleeing to the deep. As if this were a signal, the network of fingers across Aezu began withdrawing toward the Deep as well, wriggling like vacuum cleaner cords being reeled in with terrific speed.

Kazushi crawled from the truck and ran to where the giant had been, dodging fingers on the way.

Shizuko was standing there, in a shift ripped to tatters.



She opened the sliding glass doors to the front garden and stepped outside, still wearing her apron. The garden was now the beach. What was happening? She was astonished to see the

edge of the land exposed and touching the Deep, but even more surprised to see the figure running toward her.

It was a figure of sand and gravel. The grains adhered like a confection. It was wearing a blue jumpsuit. She knew immediately that it was Kazushi. *I'd know my husband anywhere.* She stretched out her arms and called to the sand man.



Kazushi and Oeki stopped in their tracks. They could see her, but they couldn't go farther.

To Kazushi, his wife's face seemed to be flooded with tears, but her face and the "tears" were sand. Her body was sand, the sand of the giant. His last hope was extinguished.

"Kazu-san!"

Joyfully, lovingly, his wife stretched out her arms. Kazushi didn't move. One touch and she would crumble. With the sea fingers withdrawn, it was a miracle that she could even stand there.



Shizuko shook her head in confusion. She was calling him; why wouldn't he come?

"Welcome back. I'll get the ham cutlets going."

She reached out and touched his cheek.

Her fingertips crumbled like soft chalk. Panicked, she put her hand on his cheek. It collapsed like a dry clod of mud.

She turned and looked behind her. The house she had just come out of, the living room table and its glass soy sauce cruet, were gone. There was only the body of the sand giant, split in two.

She did not understand that she had died in Shogo's palm

and that she had killed him, though it was he who had been sustaining her existence. Still, she knew something irrevocable had happened, and that it had happened to her, not Kazushi.

"You're safe," she said. Her voice sounded like sifting sand. "I'm so glad."

She stood with arms outstretched as her body crumbled. Her eyelids and lips fell in thin flakes, like flower petals. The bones of her face and her delicate clavicle peeking from her narrow shoulders, her tendons and skin, everything to the last capillary was sand. The finest structures of her body disintegrated in the midst of life. Her fleeting beauty was untouchable.

A sea finger speeding toward the Deep whipsawed against her, and the rest of her collapsed instantly. The shock from its passage threw Kazushi onto his back.

He got up and walked to where she had been standing. He ran his hands slowly through the sand again and again, but Shizuko was gone.

Out of nowhere, the curtain of mist rose along the edge of the beach, shrouding the Deep again. For a long time, Kazushi stayed there on his hands and knees, caressing the sand. Oeki stood by him, waiting until night had fallen completely.

All he found was a few keys from the keyboard.

## 5

The voice of the usual announcer came from the fourteen-inch television. The morning sun threw bright spots on the cruet. Kazushi turned off the TV and put his dishes in the sink.

A month had passed.

He was alone now. He packed his lunch and left the house. Aezu was utterly changed. His own house had been carried to

the other side of town and it took him twice as much time to get to work. He had to leave around the same time the news came on. Not only was it farther, but the streets had been twisted into strange new patterns. Aezu also had a new crop of buildings from all over the world. People changed their lives with the town's transformation. Awazu Transport cobbled together new bus routes and had things back up and running in two weeks.

Most of those swallowed by the vibrations were liberated when the performance ended, with a few irreversible changes but with memories intact. Hanae was now a little younger and taller, and was working as a bus conductor.

That was how it had always been. The sea fingers erupted every few years without fail, and no matter how restrained the performance, Aezu was always altered to some degree. That was life in Aezu, and on Awazu.

Each morning Kazushi arrived at the company garage and drove the sound truck to the coast. Now, instead of the horse and rider, the demolition crew was working on a silvery rocket with twin boosters. It was a cornucopia of rare materials and electronic parts and firmware programs.

Before each morning shift, Kazushi always played "Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms" from the speakers, synchronized with the city broadcast. No one knew he was playing it for Shizuko, except of course Oeki, who pretended not to notice this ritual. Naturally, the mist responded not at all to the music.

He played it again at five, before clocking out. Then to the public bath for a soak, shopping, and home.

The low chest of drawers in the living room served as a little shrine. There was a spray of meadowsweet, a photograph of Shizuko, and a few loose keys from the organ. He would ring the tiny gong, light a stick of incense, and set out a small

offering of rice. Then he would open a can of beer and eat the croquettes he'd picked up at the butcher shop.

Kazushi supposed that his wife was in the Deep. Everything taken by the sea fingers went into the Deep. There they were converted to data and compressed, and there they remained, somewhere in that gray vastness. A high school teacher had told him, "Nothing that goes into the deep is lost. At least, I believe so." The students knew he had lost one of his sons to a sudden riptide.

Kazushi never gave up hope. Shizuko had heard his message even as she was engulfed in Shogo. He'd helped her, but it was Shizuko who had brought herself together out of the rubble, one last time. Who could say that she'd never do it again? She'd already killed Shogo twice to gain her freedom.

*It's all right.*

That was his answer after she'd made her confession of murder. Later she had straddled him, painting him with the scent of the sea, licking his face, biting his ears. He'd gripped her thighs hard enough to leave bruises and said it again and again. *It's all right.*

As he laid his head on the pillow, he would remember how she'd howled like an animal that night. He had a vision of her voice laying waste to Awazu, the way Shogo had used the sea fingers to escape from the Deep — no, Shizuko would probably come back as a wave to wreak destruction on Awazu, millions of arms grasping millions of pairs of shears, a great roller that would break along the coast again and again, straddling the land, licking it, biting it, with a cry that might be suffering or delight, wielding her shears, making Awazu dance like confetti.

It was not a hope or a wish. It was a premonition, a simple conviction.

Each night, Kazushi Uchikawa took it with him into sleep.







## A FAIR WAR by Taiyo Fujii

Translated by Nathan A. Collins



Following the gentle clacking of a keyboard, a green speech balloon appeared from the toothy grin of a horse avatar.

[What was the name of that game? *Zhen-pan-da! Quanmin Fankong Jingying* (Observe, Judge, Fire! Counterterrorist Ops)?]

The man behind the avatar, Bateer Qiyad, occupied the desk diagonal to mine. Clicking the keys again, he added, [What, like as part of the central government? Or with a ministry, or an independent squad? Anyway, you said it came installed on your old *guanfang-shouji* (government-issued smartphone), right? Well, I've never heard of it, *Xiashi* (Corporal) Gongzheng Zhao.]

I tapped the reply button on my smartphone's screen and called up the on-screen keyboard. I entered my response with one finger.

[Don't write my full name on this. And I'm not in the service anymore, so drop the title, too.]

Bateer's reply came immediately. Ah, how I wished I were using a real keyboard.

[Sorry, that was the autocomplete. But really, I've never

heard of that game. It sounds a lot like the one my team is working on. Maybe we could get you moved up to design—I'd love to know what you think about our progress so far.]

I let go of my sweatshirt's hood to uncover the bottom half of my face and mouthed the words, "Hold on," to Bateer. He rubbed the smooth brow that identified his Mongol ancestry and mouthed back, "Shi. (Okay.)"

As I retreated back into my hood, I glanced at Bateer's desk. The man had graduated with honors from the distinguished Tsinghua University's IT program, and on his desk sat a massive OLED screen, a good meter wide, in front of which rested two mechanical-switch keyboards arranged neatly side by side.

Our company, Xefor, was a Japanese game developer based in Shanghai, with a staff that included five programmers, ten designers, seven engineers of various specialties, and ten debuggers. The programmers had it the best, and Bateer was no exception. From its perch at the edge of his desk, a purple-haired collectible figure—of no relation to our work—was sending me a smile.

I was nothing like Bateer. I faced a *tiaoshi-tai* (testing board) with forty smartphones in rows and columns for use in debugging. After graduating from junior secondary school in a colony settlement in the frontier territory of Xinjiang, I spent two years working in electronic waste reclamation, then joined the People's Liberation Army. I was grateful to my company for hiring someone like me, with only a single correspondence certificate to my name, but here I was, in 2024, my fingers swiping and tapping on glass screens as I hunted for bugs day in and day out. I couldn't help but be jealous of Bateer and the development team, who got to accomplish things while gracefully typing away at their keyboards.

My next message to Bateer was fairly long, considering the

effort the on-screen keyboard required.

[I just had a thought. Maybe you haven't heard of *Zhen-pan-da!* because we grew up in different regions. My hometown was under the administration of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps' Second Agricultural Division.]

[So you think it's because your phone was loaded with apps from a different distribution center? That's plausible. My town was under the fifth division. The second . . . that's in Haixi, right? And Haixi . . .]

Bateer stopped typing and gestured with his chin toward Aypasha Uchqun, the blond CTO, who was by the window, her hands flitting in the air, performing operations only she could see in her goggle display.

Bateer typed, [She's from that area too, but I'm not about to ask her. Let's invite the others to the chat. Everyone's going home at noon, anyway. No one's getting any work done today.]

I nodded in agreement, and Bateer gave a whistle. Where he was from, it was the kind of whistle that might be used to call back a falcon from the hunt, but here in a Shanghai office, we used it to signal everyone to the chat room without the managers knowing.

Keystrokes sounded from various corners of the office, and where there had just been the avatars of Bateer and myself were now those of our coworkers. Behind Bateer came Tongxing, of the Qiang people; Ghob Xot of the Miao; Jinzhu, also officially designated as a Miao, but who identified as Hmong; and Ningcuk, a Manchu. Almost everyone who worked at Xefor was an ethnic minority.

Our diversity resulted in a hodgepodge of unusual names, often to the amusement of others. I don't know what purpose, if any, was behind the hiring practices of the head of the company, a Japanese man named Tadao Kuma, but while those

of Han descent made up 80 percent of the people of China, in the company there were only me and Wen, who was born in a small village outside of Beijing. And both of us were debuggers who came from poor rural villages by way of the PLA. In short, this was no ordinary office. Chen was Han, too, but he was the chairman in title only, brought on because the name Chen opened doors in China that the Japanese name Kuma would not, and his visits to the office were exceedingly rare.

One by one, the avatars sent up speech balloons, saying, [*Zao shang hao.* (Good morning.)]

Once they had finished, Bateer began typing.

[Hey everyone, I want you to listen to what Zhao has to say. It's about this mobile game he played in middle school, and it involved finding people within a live video stream. It sounds a lot like what we're working on. Now, I pretty much have the coding all done, but if there's another game like ours out there, then maybe there's something we can learn from it. Whoever has a free moment, I'd like you to listen.]

Three left the chat room, but the rest replied, [*Shi.* (Okay.)] It seemed like they were all looking for something to kill the time, and I fit the bill.

Starting the next day, we had nine whole days of vacation for the Chinese New Year. A good forty of us would be heading to the Shanghai Railway Station to make our long treks back home. With that would begin *Chunyun*, the period where a hundred million people journeyed from the large coastal cities back to their hometowns. With the majority of Xefor's staff hailing from far-flung locales, the company was giving us two extra days off, one each at the head and tail of the Golden Week.

I pasted in my pre-prepared statement and sent it to the chat.

[Bateer, everyone, thank you for your time. Okay, I have a

question. Have any of you heard of a game called *Zhen-pan-da!* Quanmin Fankong Jingying? It was a mobile game installed on smartphones distributed by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, or at least their Second Agricultural Division.]

Even through the chat I could sense them tilting their heads in reaction to the unfamiliar question. Then came the speech balloons, a uniform line of, [Bu shi. (No.)] followed by, [Doesn't ring a bell,] [Nope, I don't know that one,] [Never heard of it,] and so on.

I replied, [Are you sure? You all were given HW7s when you were in lower secondary school, weren't you?]

This time, they all answered, [Shi.] Then Bateer added, [I had a green one,] and the chat filled with everyone discussing what color HW7 they had been given.

As part of a program designed to bring connectivity to every citizen, the Chinese government distributed powerful HW7 smartphones to economically depressed regions. Every single component, from the CPU to the communications chipset, from the CMOS image sensor to the OLED display, and even the operating system itself, was of 100 percent Chinese origin. The government was said to have produced over six hundred million units.

It was only after I joined the PLA's antiterrorist operations that I learned the voiceprint, fingerprint, and retinal identification security functionalities packed into that tiny case had been used by the state to gather biometric data. But when I was a kid, I was proud to own a gadget even more high-tech than what was carried by the poverty tourists who came to see our village.

[Now we're getting somewhere,] I typed. [You all had one, too. The game came preinstalled on those phones. It had a red icon, and when you tapped it, a voice said, *Zhen-pan-da!*]

Laboring with the on-screen keyboard, I explained how the game worked.

The goal of the game was to hunt down separatist terrorists in villages and towns taken from real life. Players could choose to be an intelligence officer with either the PLA or the People's Armed Police. We observed (*zhen*) cities and towns where terrorists lurked, judged (*pan*) who the terrorists were, and fired (*da*) at them with either firearms or grenades.

In the observation phase, players were to determine where the terrorists were. The screen displayed an aerial video of a populated area, complete with camera sway and grainy image artifacts, atop which were overlaid lines for streets and travel routes. Players then picked which represented suspicious activity. After doing so three times, the video would zoom into the city, and the game proceeded to the judgment phase.

The goal of this second phase was to find who were the terrorists. This view was now close enough to see individuals among the crowds, and each person was drawn with a green outline. Players simply tapped whichever person seemed suspicious. Sometimes these were men dressed for combat and carrying AK-47s; other times they could be young girls hiding a potential explosive device under their mantle or in a basket.

Once the player had identified the terrorist, the game proceeded to the firing phase.

The camera locked on to the terrorist, and crosshairs appeared on the screen. If the mission objective was to subdue the enemy, the player slid the crosshairs over the target's legs or perhaps the shoulders, and if the orders were to kill, the player would aim for the chest or head. And then the player tapped. This was the only phase of the game that required good reflexes, as the camera was unsteady, and sometimes, if the player took too long, the terrorist would notice and attempt to flee. I could

still vividly remember the realistic depictions of frightened terrorists plowing their way through crowds in frantic escape.

Players could earn new cards representing weapons and skills by logging on and by beating levels. These cards acted as upgrades to help players more effectively hunt down terrorists. Through an in-game shop, agents could buy additional cards with D-yuan, a virtual currency, but without an allowance to spend on it, I did my best to earn the free bonus cards for successful missions.

After I'd given my overview, Bateer began to type.

[Doesn't that sound just like what we're making? Maps based on aerial photography, using AI to detect and draw borders around real people. If there's another game like that, I'd like Zhao to help out as part of the design team. A player with real hands-on experience could be just what we need.]

The team voiced their assent, much to my gratification. A promotion to the design team meant a three-fold jump to my salary. Better yet, it meant no more wearing out my fingertips on all these debug units.

[Besides,] Bateer added, [Zhao was in the military. I know we already have Jinzhu, but I think it would be good to have additional military experience on the team. But I have to say, the way he describes that game, it sounds tremendously expensive to make. Zhao, didn't you say that the aerial video, the urban locations, and even the people were different every time?]

[They were. I never saw a repeat, at least. Except for the tutorial mission—that one always had the same terrorist. Had a mustache and goatee.]

[The same terrorist, huh? Do you know what kind?]

[ETIS,] I typed, short for the East Turkestan Islamic State, [like most of the rest. I guess back then they were still calling themselves the Islamic Movement.]

A sharp, scolding voice came over from the windows.

“Which one of you just mentioned ETIS in the chat?”

Aypasha Uchqun had lifted her goggles to her forehead to cast her green eyes across the office. Her dishwater-blond hair, lifted by the goggles, swayed and took on the red cast of the outside light. She looked as if she were ablaze.

I folded my hands behind my back and stood at parade rest.

“It was me, Miss Aypasha.”

“Gongzheng Zhao, log out this instant!”

Acting on reflex drilled into me by the army, I clicked my heels and stood stiffly still.

Aypasha barked in Putonghua, “Everyone, stop wasting time with that chat. Bateer, you block the chat ports on the router, and Jinzhu, I want you to give me a full report on the chat log. Do it now!”

I barely managed to stay my right hand before it automatically saluted. Then I said, “Ma’am, I’m sorry. This is entirely my fault, and not that of Bateer or the rest of the team. I invited them to the chat, and I let my guard down. It’s—”

My spine stiffened, but in a different way than it had when I was being reprimanded moments before. Searching for what caused my body to tense, I looked to Aypasha.

The backlight of her goggles’ display flickered from their perch on her smooth, pale forehead. Her hands were motionless, hovering just above the surface of her desk, her fingers spread apart as if on the keys of a keyboard. On her bracelets, which allowed her to interface with her virtual station, an LED indicator slowly pulsated, awaiting further command.

She shifted her goggles higher and gazed at me with a cock of her head. Something about the gesture made her seem Western. She wasn’t the source of my alert. She was just waiting for me to continue.



"Gongzheng Zhao," she said, "is something the matter?"

"No, I . . ."

I looked beyond her shoulder, searching for anything outside the window that could have triggered my subconscious alert.

The silver orbs tossed aloft by the Oriental Pearl Tower melted into a morning sky tinted red from heavy smog. Beyond the tower was Shanghai's prime tourist destination, the Waitan, or the Bund as foreigners called it, home to historical buildings from the age of colonialism.

Meanwhile, the sense of foreboding grew. A small dot moved through the hazy sky.

A drone?

What first had appeared as a floating dot was a small frame with two main rotors on its sides and smaller stabilization rotors to the front and back. The machine was an inexpensive model often used by authorized law enforcement and media groups for observing a fixed point. An attached liquid-filled plastic bottle was likely a supply for a catalytic fuel cell intended for long flights.

A small cylinder, sprouting from the small frame, pointed toward us. A shiver ran down my spine. This was not just a drone, but a MUCAV—a micro unmanned combat aerial vehicle.

Reflexively, I shouted, "This is Zhao—I've spotted a killbug outside the window, get down!"

I dove behind Aypasha's desk, landed palms down on the floor, and rolled against the wall below the window.

Immediately after, Wen, Jinzhu, and Aypasha rolled in beside me. The three plastered themselves to the wall, keeping their heads below the window, and waited for me to speak.

In my mind, I went back over what I saw out the window, and I knew I had been right.

A killbug was a drone used to indiscriminately kill in the name of ETIS's fight for an independent nation in the Xinjiang territory. Their small frames were fitted with AK-47 stocks and receivers made in small-scale Tibetan factories, and short, unrifled barrels capable of firing 7.62 mm rounds. Like the PLA's Bingfeng MUCAVs, the drones were killing machines equipped with internal AI capable of seeking and destroying targets by their own will.

The cheap gunpowder available to the killbugs wouldn't provide enough velocity for the bullets to penetrate reinforced concrete. If my memory was correct, the drone only carried twenty rounds. Even if it decided to expend it all in one blind volley, as long as we kept our heads below the windowsill, we would be all right.

Diving for the window had been the right course of action.

I signaled with my hands to let Wen, Jinzhu, and Aypasha know that we had a killbug outside. But when I looked across the office, I saw something that left me stunned with disbelief.

Across the office, Bateer stood, his mouth hanging open. He, and the rest of the staff, were staring in bewilderment at us four crouching beneath the windows. I began to shout, "Wodao!—" "Get down!"—but realized that they would be unfamiliar with military speak.

Plainly, I said, "Bateer, everyone, duck your heads! It's coming to the window. A killbug is out there."

A few slowly lowered their heads, but Bateer simply looked out the window with a confused expression. No, *duck first*, I thought to him, *then look*.

As I was about to speak up, a breeze came into the room. I heard two sounds: a door opening, and a voice speaking in thick Japanese.

"Good morning!"

It was Kuma, the head of the company. He picked a hell of a time to show up at work.

His stocky frame draped with a relaxed beige suit, the boss grabbed the brim of his white hat and was making a show of doffing it as his gaze landed on my signaling hand.

Now in gruff, Shanghai-accented Chinese, he said, "Outside the window?" He squinted in that direction. "That's a PLA Bingfeng—No, wait. An ETIS killbug, then? Wouldn't have thought to see one coming here."

From his breast pocket, Kuma withdrew a pink tube roughly the size of a cigar and pointed it at the window.

"You four best move away from the window, just in case. I'm gonna fry that thing."

I didn't understand what he was doing, but he said it so forcefully that we obeyed without a word, moving away from the window and ducking down even lower.

His thick thumb, with hair coming all the way down to the second knuckle, pressed against part of the tube.

The sound of the thing, like a peanut shell bursting open, sent my hair standing on end.

"Ow, ow, ow!" Kuma said with a grimace as he tossed the pink cylinder to the ground.

The tube rolled to a stop near my feet, where it sent out wisps of smoke and the acrid smell of burning plastic.

"You're not supposed to use it without gloves," Kuma explained, walking to the window next to me. He put his hands on the sill.

I picked up the smoldering pink tube. It carried a label marked YING-XIANG (BUG FUMIGANT) followed by usage instructions that extolled its effectiveness against killbugs.

I couldn't tell if it had broken naturally through use or if it had broken when Kuma dropped it. On one end, a triple-A

battery peeked out from the loosened cap. As I was inspecting the device, Kuma spoke.

"It's an EMP. Look for yourself." He gestured out the window with his chin.

I stood and followed his sightline out the window, where the killbug was gradually dropping altitude in search of a place to land.

"Its sensors are all dead," my boss explained. "CPU's probably fried, too."

"This thing, it's called a *ying-xiang*?" I asked. I pulled two triple-A batteries from the husk. "I never would have thought something with this little power could make an EMP strong enough to fry a killbug."

Kuma's eyes widened. "Well, look at you, soldier. I didn't know you talked. All I ever hear you say is *shi*."

"What? I mean, maybe three months ago, sure, but I've adjusted."

"I suppose so. No offense," Kuma said with a chuckle. His eyes followed the killbug. "Those little drones are made with cheap components. Each killbug costs about eighty dollars to make—that's what, five hundred yuan? But even their blind fire will kill people in a crowd. They can shoot through windows, and if they crash, the ammonia in their fuel cells sprays out everywhere and makes quite a stink. As far as cost-performance ratio goes, it doesn't get much better than that."

Before I could respond, someone else spoke up from behind me.

"That was . . . a killbug? It was after us?"

I turned and saw it was Bateer. His face looked ashen and blood-drained, and his eyes were wide.

"Yeah," I said. "But we're safe now."

I don't know if he just didn't hear me, but the next thing he

did was duck in a panic. Losing balance, he stumbled over his chair and toppled to the ground on the other side. Likewise, the other staff finally got around to crouching.

Kuma let out a good belly laugh.

"Calm down, everyone, it's like the soldier said. It's all right. I heard on the news that ETIS let a hundred of those loose on Shanghai. You know how they work. They just fly any which way, and they attack on the whims of their AI. It wasn't after us specifically."

Bateer stood, and after catching his breath, apologized to Kuma for losing his head.

Wen, who had made his way next to him, muttered, "That's what's scary about them. They could go after anyone."

"That's how I feel," Jinzhu said. "That's more frightening than a terrorist with a gun, or even something like the American drones that can hunt you down from far away. I know our Bingfeng are AI-controlled, too, but . . ."

They both had faced killbugs before. I nodded in agreement. "Maybe it's because they're so cheap," I said. "Just when we thought we'd taken the upper hand, those things start showing up, going around shooting at the skies and the ground and crashing to pieces whenever they feel like it. They—Oh, pardon me, ma'am."

Blond hair flashed across my eyes as Aypasha brushed past me.

She returned to her desk, lightly perching in her chair. She picked up her goggles from where she'd left them on her desk, slipped on the bracelet interfaces, and got back to work.

My eyes followed her through all this and eventually landed on the nameplate on her desk. Seeing her name, Aypasha Uchqun, spelled out on the little plaque reminded me of my first day coming to the office.

When I first saw her gently wavy, dirty-blond hair, and eyes green like intricately patterned agate, I thought Aypasha must have been recruited from America or somewhere in Europe. But then, when she spoke in such natural and cultured Putonghua, I knew immediately I had been mistaken. I quickly glanced at her nameplate to confirm my misjudgment, and saw the recognizably Uyghur surname. The family name would have come from her father, and so common was it among the Uyghurs that members of ETIS often hid behind it as an assumed name.

I grew up in a Han Chinese settlement created to usurp the land where the Uyghur people lived. As a soldier in the PLA, I aimed my rifle at those seeking Uyghur independence. I had memories of my past that could chill me. Aypasha knew all about my history, and though she never went out of her way to hold it over me, I always felt somehow at a disadvantage around her.

“Zhao, Wen, Jinzhu,” Aypasha barked at the three of us still standing idle by the windows. “Go back to work. There’s two hours left in the day. Jinzhu, get me that chat log as quickly as possible. And Wen, you still haven’t submitted yesterday’s debugging report.”

Wen said, “I’ll do it right away.” Then he frowned and voicelessly grumbled, “Who do you think you are, *Sanfei-nuzhiqing*.”

That was what the other workers called her behind her back. *Sanfei*, or the three “nots,” stood for “not a member of the communist party,” “not Chinese-educated,” (our best guess for her schooling was America), and “not Han Chinese.” *Nuzhiqing* was short for “young female intellectual.” Her orders always carried an undertone of, “I’m not a party member, and I’m a minority, and I’m a woman, but I’m more educated than you all, so you have to obey me.”

To cover up the awkward silence created by the other man’s

muttering, Jinzhu clicked her heels and said, "Understood, Miss Aypasha. I'll return to work immediately."

Aypasha nodded without looking to her, but then Kuma interposed.

"Aypasha, let's call it a day, all right? Everyone is too on edge after the killbug scare. Besides, it's only a half day today, anyway."

With a dissatisfied shrug, Aypasha said, "All right." But she continued typing on her invisible keyboard. Even her legs, in tights as they were, moved to input commands, and her elbows, too. The petite woman looked as if she were operating inside a machine.

"So formal," Kuma said to her. "Even when you're about to go home, too."

The boss shrugged, then returned to the entryway, where he had deposited a large paper sack from which he now withdrew several red mesh bags filled with cigarettes.

"Everyone," he said, "I brought you all presents to take back home for the New Year. I've also included some killbug killers. They've gotten so bad in the rural areas that blackout orders have been issued. Take them back to your fathers and mothers, and hand them out to your relatives. And the cigarettes are Chunghwas. Come on and get them."

The other workers, who'd been there longer than me, let out a cheer and gathered around Kuma.

The boss distributed the red mesh bags saying things like, "Their price has gone up again, too. Thirty bucks a carton now. Keep them safe, and hand them out."

I found it strange that he would bother admonishing them not to smoke the high-end cigarettes. These days, the only people who smoked those were party leaders. Even the ones I'd received as a retirement gift from the army I'd sold immedi-

ately. If I remembered right, I got 120 yuan for them—that was about twenty dollars. I was dwelling on those memories when someone spoke to me in smooth Beijing-dialect Mandarin.

“That’s right, this is your first New Year’s Festival with Xefor, isn’t it?”

It was Chen, the figurehead chairman. He was underdressed in a Mao-collar shirt and wool slacks and carried an overstuffed briefcase at his side.

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry, Chen, I didn’t know you were in the office.”

“I just got here. I was with *Jiuma*,” he said, mixing some Mandarin into Kuma’s name, “But I got tied up exchanging money at the bank. Speaking of which, here’s your portion.”

Chen opened his briefcase and withdrew a bundle of paper money, the sight of which almost seemed nostalgic now.

“What is that for?” I asked.

“It’s a going-away present. I haven’t counted it, but it should be 150 fen—one and a half yuan.”

The small bills had a picture of a man and a woman in Uyghur dress. They were one-fen notes. This two-centimeter-thick stack wouldn’t buy a bus ride in Shanghai, but back in my hometown, it had taken a week’s worth of work to scrape together just ten of the well-worn papers.

I’d never seen paper money so new and crisp. I took one from the stack and looked at the back. It still had a picture of a mosque.

“There are no watermarks or holograms,” Chen said, “But they’re not counterfeit.”

“I’m sure they’re not. I just hadn’t seen one in a while, and never so pristine.”

“I got them for you and Wen to use in your Han villages. I assume you heard about the currencies geared toward the



Mongol and Miao peoples that came out the year before last.”

Chen withdrew a stack of bills with the image of a horse and a falcon, next to which was vertical writing in Mongolian.

“Mr. Chen, is this coming out of our New Year’s bonus?”

“Goodness, no. I said it was a gift, didn’t I? Jiuma’s paying for it out of his own pocket.” He flashed a trustworthy grin and glanced to Kuma, adding, “He’s a great man,” then joined him in the center of the gathering and began handing out various stacks of bills one at a time.

I looked down at the money in my hand and inspected it again, and my thoughts turned skeptical.

How was a Japanese man like Kuma capable of the common generosity now nearly forgotten among the Chinese? The top-brand cigarettes, like ones that would be given out at a wedding, were perfect for handing out to the village elders and local notables. And by giving out candies and small bills to children we would enhance our parents’ stature, repairing the damage done to it by sending us from the village and lessening the local workforce.

Kuma pressed a cigarette-laden red mesh bag into my hand.

“You take one too, soldier, for your trip home. And don’t smoke them. I’m just about to head out, myself.”

“I stopped smoking when I got my job here,” I said, adding, “Where are you going, Mr. Kuma?”

“I’m taking the Qingzang railway. Aypasha is going to show me her hometown. We’ve got this long break, after all. Say, isn’t that the same line you take home?”

I nodded and explained the route I’d be taking. First, I’d be riding the Qingzang to the provincial capital of Chengdu. The first leg took a full day by steam engine. Then I’d transfer to the Chunyun Special, passing through Lanzhou on my way to the

Wudaoliang Railway Station, two more days. Waiting at the end of yet another full day of travel, this time spent jolting about in a bus through the wilderness, was my home settlement in the Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Settlement 1022. Of my nine days of New Year's vacation, eight would be spent on travel. In the military, we only got seven days of break, meaning that in the six years since leaving my village, I'd never been back once. This was to be my first homecoming.

"That's a tough journey," Kuma said with a rise of his shoulders. "Wudaoliang, you said? That's one stop after the Chuma'er River, isn't it? That's where Aypasha and I are headed."

I looked over my shoulder at her. Bateer had mentioned that she and I grew up not far from each other.

Did that mean that I'd have to spend the nearly two and a half days to Wudaoliang in the company of my superiors?

As if he had read my mind, Kuma laughed. "You've got that soldier's look on your face again, Zhao. Aypasha and I are flying as far as Lanzhou. We'll just be a little ahead of you." He waved the dangling mesh bags of cigarettes. "If we run into any mounted bandits, I'll buy them off with these."

"Mounted bandits?" I said. "I think those days are long gone. Just worry about the ETIS terrorists, all right? They've been stepping up their kidnappings of foreigners."

"They're probably gunning for ex-military people, too, so try not to look so soldierly, yeah?" Kuma donned his white, wide-brimmed hat at a rakish angle and tossed me a wink. "Let yourself go a little. Try and enjoy yourself."

I declined to tell him that he, if anything, looked like a mounted bandit.



Packed full with travelers returning to their hometowns, the Chunyun Special made the thousand-kilometer journey from Chengdu to Lanzhou and proceeded westward. At the front of my passenger car, a screen read: Elevation: 3,200 meters. Beneath, a winking readout of the outside temperature had fallen to -20°C.

What foreigners considered China proper had ended ten hours ago at the stop in Lanzhou. The train was now running through the Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the province of Qinghai, frontier land if there ever was.

A blinking icon on my smartphone indicated one missed call. While I was asleep, my father had called. I wanted to return the call, but that was nothing doing.

My cell phone had no reception, a rare occurrence these days. It seemed that Pingliuwang, the full-coverage cellular network broadcast by unmanned planes circling in the stratosphere, wasn't going to be much help for the three hundred million people traveling through the frontier for the New Year. If I had been on the American StratNet, I probably would have been able to get signal, but I could never hope to afford that.

I shifted aside the thermos I'd placed on the windowsill and peeled back a corner of the mandatory-blackout curtains.

Countless points of light pierced my eyes. The humid breaths of the passengers had condensed on the glass, each droplet a lens projecting the orange light of a sun just now beginning to rise.

I wiped the window with the sleeve of my hoodie and raised my hand to block the sun as it peeked over the mountaintops. Hanging low in the inky blue above, *Quianniu-xing* and *Zhinu-xing* twinkled, the summer stars briefly revealing themselves

in the winter morning sky, thanks to the clarity of the air so far from civilization. I was craning my neck in search of the magpie bridge connecting the two lovers when the woman seated next to me reached for the curtain.

I stopped her hand and said, "I'm sorry, do you mind if I look just a little longer?"

The woman's hand recoiled, and she took out a well-used smartphone and spoke something to it in Tibetan. After a moment, she turned the cracked glass screen my way and showed me the broken Chinese the built-in translation software had cobbled together.

[Killer bugs will come. Please close. Killing bugs are flying.]

"It's fine," I said. "During the day, their sensors can't read a darkened interior. Besides, they can't fly fast enough to keep up with a Qingzang train."

She shook her head and pressed her phone so close to my face it almost touched. Her fingerless gloves revealed purple-stained fingertips. I wondered if she'd been pushed out of her town to seek work in the cities when the Qingzang brought Han settlers in. Her smartphone was an orange HW7. She was still using the phone she'd been given nine years ago.

I pointed to the HW7, asked if I could use it, then took it and wrote.

[Okay. I'm going to go get breakfast. You can use my seat while I'm gone. Get some rest.]

I fastened the curtain shut to the Velcro-lined window frame and stepped into the aisle, which was strewn with and melded into layers of discarded sunflower seed shells and old tea leaves, and I thought back to what I'd seen on the woman's HW7.

Rather, what I hadn't seen. No *Zhen-pan-da*.



In the next car, a hard sleeper carriage divided into tiny, curtained-off compartments with facing triple bunks, I found a vacant fold-down aisle seat, where I drank tea from my thermos and watched the sunrise.

I hadn't left my seat to get breakfast.

I had left my seat because I had been reminded of my life in the village.

If the PLA recruiters had never come to the Han settlement numbered 1022, right now I'd still be in that shack, which looked like it could have been built during the Cultural Revolution, next to that creek that could be crossed in a single step, wearing a patched-together Mao suit, melting down the circuit boards of mobile phones and PCs.

With chemicals like silver nitrate and cyanide, I'd be melting the plastic, sifting out the gold and platinum and other precious metals from the boards and chips. With fingers stained violet like those of that Tibetan woman, I'd be wiping off the sludge from a piece of metal no bigger than the tip of my little finger to take to the peddler. After a week of this, I could exchange my work for ten fen.

We worked on Beijing time, a good two hours off what the local time actually was, which meant going to the work shack before the sun was rising and finishing up while there was still daylight. The tourists who came and left their electronics behind called our town *Wenge-zhen* (Cultural Revolution Town) because they mistakenly believed the village existed just as it had for seventy years, but in truth the settlement was founded through the forced relocation of rebels involved in the Tiananmen Square protests. My name, Gongzheng—meaning fair, just, equitable—carried the hopes of my father, who had shouted for

“fair justice” in Tiananmen Square.

Were I still there, the noxious fumes of melting chips and increased UV levels of the high-altitude sunlight would have turned my skin to leather, and my face aged and wrinkled, before I even hit thirty. And I’d still be using my HW7, like that woman—and still playing *Zhen-pan-da* in search of bonus D-yuan.

“It’s strange . . .” I said to myself.

When I took the Tibetan’s phone to write her a response, I checked not only her home screen, but her full app list, and *Zhen-pan-da* wasn’t there. I’d so thoroughly used my old HW7 that I could still operate it with my eyes shut. There was no chance I was mistaken. I had been so close. Finding a working copy of *Zhen-pan-da* would have meant a chance of moving up from debugger to designer.

I tipped back my thermos and the now lukewarm and bitter tea bit at my tongue. I groped beneath the fold-down seat for my backpack, opened it, and was stuffing my canteen inside when my hand brushed against the mesh bag of cigarettes, and the idea came to me. Why not trade the cigarettes for a working HW7 with *Zhen-pan-da* back at the village? The top-brand Chunghwas could fetch someone three months’ wages from a peddler.

As I moved to stand, I lifted my head up and my eyes met with those of a man behind the curtain of the next sleeping compartment down. He had a white cloth wrapped around the top of his head, and a scarf concealing the bottom half of his olive-colored face.

The man raised a pamphlet guide of the Qingzang railway to cover his eyes. The pamphlet’s cover was written in a modified Arabic script—the man was an Uyghur.

I scooted back in my chair.

It was not at all strange for a Uyghur man to be riding the Qingzang to Tibet, despite that not being their homeland. The Uyghurs of the Xinjiang region formed ETIS's power base, and as such were being forcibly resettled into various ethnic autonomous regions, like that of the Tibetan people.

ETIS first started being able to make their presence felt nine years ago, when I was in primary school. The tipping point came when the government pushed for a policy of "unified time," where even the remote minority-majority regions of China were forced to perform their economic activities on Beijing time. During a protest against the new policy in Ürümqi, the leader of ETIS's precursor, the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan, was assassinated by a PLA AI-operated Bingfeng drone.

The successors of the movement took a page from Syrian fundamentalists and renamed their group ETIS, and in a form of revenge against the state that killed their leader, they began using killbugs to perform indiscriminate acts of terror within the coastal cities.

So no, it wasn't anything unusual for a Uyghur to be riding on the Chunyun Special, and the average person had no reason to fear an Uyghur citizen.

But I was different. ETIS had been on the other end of my rifle.

On the ETIS website was a list of tens of thousands of current and former People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police service members with orders to kill on sight. My name was, of course, among them.

I had no way of knowing if the Uyghur man who averted his eyes was a member of ETIS, or a sympathizer to their cause, but I couldn't dismiss the possibility.

I ran a hand through my hair and mussed it forward, then

stood, hunching over with feigned fatigue. I slung my backpack over one shoulder, and dug my hands into my pockets. I decided to take Kuma's parting advice and "let myself go."

Dragging my feet, I stowed away the fold-down seat, then turned at the sound of a familiar metallic noise.

Dressed in olive-drab uniforms and body armor, three members of the PAP—an officer leading two soldiers who both carried ZH-05 assault rifles—were heading my way. The Qingzang railway spanned 2,000 kilometers, and the stations, the tracks, and each train car were all potential targets of terrorism, and the PAP provided security forces for the railroad service.

The metallic sound had been the soldiers' ZH-05s striking the metal fastener on their straps each time they swung the weapons.

The two soldiers, with faces hidden behind balaclavas, were the lowest rank, but when I saw the officer's insignia, I was startled. A lieutenant. For the commanding officer of a simple security detail, that was high up.

I moved to the side of the aisle to let the men by. Without acting like I was looking, I glanced at their gear.

The privates were keeping their ZH-05s with a chambered round and their thumbs positioned to flick off the safety at a moment's notice. The translucent magazines for their built-in bullpup-style 20 mm grenade launchers revealed the tell tale yellow double stripes of riot-control grenades and the pouches on their body armor kept rows of spare rifle and grenade magazines within easy reach.

Meanwhile, the ZH-05s' distinctive boxy scopes were absent, possibly to allow the soldiers to more effectively wield the weapons in these confined spaces. The soldiers were both heavily and functionally armed.



As the officer was about to pass, he stopped directly in front of me. The two soldiers moved to either side, as if protecting us, and trained their weapons down the line of curtains that extended to our left and right.

With narrow eyes, the officer looked at my face and then at the LCD screen on the back of his hand, then said in a strong voice, "Corporal Gongzheng Zhao."

Before I could ask how he knew who I was, the mention of my rank sent my back straight and my hands searching to tidy my pant seams.

The officer asked, "Why aren't you in your assigned seat?"

"I was headed to the dining car."

The lieutenant thrust his pointed chin at me and eyeballed me from head to toe. Then, in clear and exact Beijing Mandarin, he said, "Only nine months, and already you're a complete civilian. For five years, you suppressed rebels with the counter-terrorism unit in western Xinjiang. You retired from the service last May. Is that correct?"

"Shi," I answered reflexively. Meanwhile, my anger built.

He had to know that ETIS was targeting anyone with a connection to the military. That's why the two lower-rank soldiers had their faces covered. When this man not only spoke aloud my rank but that I had been in the antirebel counter-terrorism unit, he might as well have screamed, "Here's your target!" to anyone within earshot.

The soldiers seemed to have read my anger and confusion. With a haste that only another soldier would be able to notice, the privates waved their ZH-05s, and a number of curtains swished shut.

Looking satisfied, the officer gestured with his chin to the rear of the car and spoke in a phonetic code common to the PLA and the PAP.

"Let's go to carriage fifteen. They're waiting for us. Come."

"Shi . . . Car fifteen?" I asked, leaving out, *Aren't there only fourteen cars on this train?* It's not like he would've given me an answer, anyway.

"Forgive me," I said, "I'll go," then started walking.

Then, the private who was standing guard behind me said under his breath, "Sir. This train has extra cars."

As he kept a sharp eye trained down the aisle behind us, the private pointed to the display board near the gangway to the next car. It was a layout map of the Chunyun Special. Behind the fourteenth, and typically last, carriage were three extra passenger cars, each marked with symbols meaning "do not enter" and "no photography."

The soldier leaned in closer and whispered, "Number fifteen is a passenger car, but the last two are for the Qiang'gui. Do you know what that is?"

I nodded. The Qiang'gui was a pair of armored train cars, one with an engine capable of hauling enough carriages to transport two thousand soldiers and another equipped to lay down rails either for passing another train or repairing a line. Both were armed with field artillery and various types of missiles. More recently, they'd been outfitted to serve as a platform for the AI-operated MUCAV Bingfeng drones that have become a cornerstone of the counterterrorism efforts.

"Isn't that overkill? Did something happen?"

The private opened his mouth to reply, but the lieutenant, walking ahead of us, snapped, "Yun, that's enough!" Then he stopped to look at me over his shoulder and add, "Corporal Zhao. If you weren't on this train, we wouldn't have had to bring out the Qiang'gui. Do you have any idea how much danger you've forced upon the two thousand civilians on board?"

The lieutenant resumed leading the way, his anger audible

in the clicking of his heels on the floor.

What made him think anything was my fault? In search for an answer, I turned my head to the trailing soldier whose name I now knew was Yun. Behind the man and his ZH-05, a curtain swayed.



Still in procession with the lieutenant, who had introduced himself as Lie, and the two privates, Yun and Liu, I passed through the rear connecting door of what would normally be the last *yingwo* hard sleeper car.

The gangway wasn't equipped with the usual wind-blocking diaphragm. Buffeted by the seventeen-below wind, I walked across the overlapping bridge plates and into the added-on black passenger car.

When I stepped inside, I gasped.

The ceiling had a grid pattern of lights buried among intricate carvings. The side walls descended from the ceiling in an elegant curve, down which danced dragons created from countless inlaid woods of differing texture and color. The carpet was low-pile, but comfortable to walk on. I thought I could smell incense, or possibly sandalwood, but certainly expensive either way.

Even Lie, who instructed Yun and Liu to wait at the door, seemed to be enthralled by the luxurious space as he attentively trod across the carpet into the center of the room and beckoned me to join him.

When the lieutenant yelled for me, even his tone had gone softer—although maybe that was just because his subordinates were now out of his sight. "Corporal Zhao, they're in the central hall. Come."

"You said . . . hall, Lieutenant?" I said, searching for a safe

question to clear up my confusion. “What is this car for?”

“I wish you didn’t ask.” Lie swiveled his head to encompass the extravagant interior. “The commander in chief had this T-25 guest car built for making observations on Tibet, though he’s never ridden it himself. There’s a galley on each side of this hallway, and three guest rooms farther down. Emergency kits are located beside the door of each room, and if you pull up the seam in middle of the hall carpet, you can exit through the floor. Don’t forget that.”

Seeing I still wasn’t getting the point, he continued, impatience edging into his voice, “Our guests are not in need of the PAP’s protection. We’ll defend the train itself, but if anything happens, it’ll be up to you to ensure their safety.”

Lie stopped in front of a door with exquisitely inlaid stained glass and offered his wrist to the authentication terminal. When the lock clicked open, the lieutenant put his hand to the knob and said, “They’re American. They’re—” Lie stopped to take in my puzzled expression, then growled, “Don’t you know anything?”

He tugged at the bottom of his jacket, straightening his uniform, then pushed the door open and began hurling English so badly accented that even I thought it was horrible.

“Capten Jeema, I picka-up solja, you need.”

I searched my memory for what “captain” meant in my own language, found it, then heard a familiar gruff, Shanghai-accented Mandarin coming from the other side of the doorway.

“I told you Chinese was fine, Lieutenant.”

“Boss,” I said, “what are you doing here?”

It was Kuma’s voice calling out from the central hall, which occupied the full width of the train car. With a white suit on and a wide-brimmed hat on his lap, Kuma was seated, one leg crossed, upon a sofa that faced a floor-to-ceiling window. As his

foot dangled in air, his shoe caught and reflected the light from the chandelier.

A woman in an ethnic dress was occupying the next sofa over. She wore a bright red number with slits up the sides to accommodate horseback riding and black fringes decorated with beads of blue and green. Her black vest left little of her figure to the imagination, and was embroidered with something that looked like stylistic lettering. She had a shawl wrapped around her head, with several strings of beads that hung from the edges of the cloth and obscured my view of her face.

Beside the large windows rested an object nearly the size of a wild boar under a camouflage-patterned cloth that was distinctly at odds with the lavish interior of the space.

Holding the door open, Lie instructed me to go inside. I looked to him. He had said an American was inside. As I was searching for the right question, the woman called out to me.

“Zhao, you’re just in time. Did you have a good rest?”

“Miss Aypasha, is that you? What’s the matter?”

I knew it was her from her voice, but I still reflexively took a closer look at her face, partly because she hadn’t spoken in her typical cultured Putonghua, but in Beijingsese so plain it could nearly be called crude.

Behind her curtain of beads, and beneath the straightness of her nose, she parted lips the same bright red as her dress, and she leaned back in the couch and said, “Nothing’s the matter.”

“I mean . . . that outfit. Everything. What did you mean by me being just in time?”

Kuma answered. “The PAP men are about to show us what they can do. Mr. Lie, you should have a seat, too. I was hoping an officer could run me through the PAP’s equipment and procedures. In this room, there are no ranks, no formal speech, and no recordings. Could I ask you to switch off that

device on your wrist?"

Lie breathed out through his nose, then did something on his wrist-mounted device and aimed the screen at Kuma.

"Is this all right?"

"Excellent. Don't worry, I'll fill in Colonel Ma."

Kuma again invited Lie and me to sit in the side chairs, and he poured tea from a kettle on the nearby table and offered us cups.

Lie quickly attempted to help pour, but Kuma stopped him, then looked at the wall clock, and then out the window at the morning sky, where the stars had now just begun to fade from sight.

"The sun is only just starting to rise, but it's already nine. Time for everyone to start work."

Lie accepted his teacup and said, "Is it?" He tilted his head in search of the point. I set my backpack on the floor and took my tea as well, and I didn't know what Kuma was getting at either.

Aypasha made a quick motion with her left hand and a map of China, centered on our current location, appeared on the windowpane.

"That's handy," Kuma said with a chuckle, then stood and moved to the window where he sat back down on the camouflage-draped object. He pointed at the map. The rising sun outlined his hand in golden light.

Kuma put his finger on Qinghai Lake in the map's center and traced a line straight down.

"There's a question I've been wanting to ask a Chinese soldier. Right now, this train is due north of Myanmar. There, it's still 7:30. A good time for the sun to rise in February."

Lie said, "You're . . . talking about time zones?"

Kuma nodded. "I'm talking about the policy of unified time

that forbids people from working on local time. The one where people are told to take their sheep down from the mountains and to go into their fields before the sun has even risen. The attempt at assimilation that inspires resistance in the western provinces."

"Captain," Lie replied, "I don't think you fully understand our government. As far as unified time is concerned, I think it's superior to the inconvenience your government creates by shifting the time in the summer."

"True, daylight savings time is an inconvenience. Zhao, what do you think?"

I glanced to Lie, and he returned the look, said, "Just answer honestly," and gestured to Kuma with his chin.

I paused, then said, "To be frank, I think there's a lot that's inconvenient about unified time."

"Sure, maybe for the people there," Lie said in an immediate objection I had seen coming, "But it's hard to see the logic in dividing up our entire country into time zones, like the Americans do, and forcing that inconvenience upon the 90 percent of the population who live in our cities. It's not like we demand that anyone work longer hours. All they have to do is start two hours earlier. It's in accordance with the Doctrine of the Mean, is it not?"

When I gave no reply to this model of an answer, Lie turned to Kuma and added, "But why are you even bringing this up? The policy was enacted nine years ago. Almost ten. On the whole, it's going well. I'd rather we focus on preparing for ETIS's imminent attack."

"Attack?" I said, nearly springing to my feet before Kuma stayed me with his hand.

To Lie, he said, "Why bring it up? Because the unified time policy is what brings us here today. We have time before the

attack. Let's talk a little longer. I want Zhao to hear this."

What did he want me to hear?

Kuma continued, "Besides, I haven't introduced you to her yet, Lie."

The captain invited Aypasha to join us.

The woman shook her head and beads swayed. She stood with her back to the map on the window and let her black shawl down to her shoulders. Her dirty blond hair spilled out, and she aimed her eyes of green agate speckled with red at Lie and me.

The lieutenant mouthed, "She's blond—"

Kuma said to him, "This is Aypasha Uchqun. Her father was Uchqun Sayid."

Lie shifted in his seat.

Kuma laughed and said, "You recognize the name, of course. He was the leader of the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan, before they reformed as ETIS. He was killed during a demonstration against the unified time policy at a mosque in the regional capital of Ürümqi. You know the story, right, Zhao?"

After another pause, I said I did.

I recalled the history I learned in the PLA. Uchqun Sayid was among the first killed by the Bingfeng-series AI-controlled micro combat drones. I thought I'd heard something about him being a moderate, but didn't know if that was true. Whatever impression the nation had had of the Uyghur independence movement was overwritten by the indiscriminate acts of terrorism ETIS had brought into the cities.

I took time to choose my words, then pushed them out. "I didn't know he was your father. He was killed by the Bingfeng AI, right?"

"AI?" Aypasha said. "No, not by AI."

She hooked her little fingers at the bottom edge of her shawl and spread her arms, as if operating some unseen inter-



face. Behind her, the image of the map on the window shrunk and three new overlapping video images appeared.

When I spotted the pair of plain, khaki-colored bracelets on her wrists, I understood how she was controlling the images. The bracelets were the same as those she used to interact with the goggle interface of her office workstation, and were now allowing her to manipulate the glass display with her gestures.

When the video images sharpened, I gasped. There they were—the unnaturally swaying aerial view of a town, another view of a crowd, and a close-up of a man giving a speech as several targeting reticules hovered over him.

“That’s *Zhen-pan-da*!” I said. “How did you get those videos?”

“These recordings were obtained by the CIA,” Kuma answered. “And they’re not from *Zhen-pan-da*. They’re video feeds from the Bingfeng that killed Uchqun in Ürümqi nine years ago. Back then, the Bingfeng weren’t yet exclusively controlled by AI. They had operators to aim and pull the trigger.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, while Lie overlapped me, saying “Ridiculous.”

Lie continued, the surprise dropping any politeness from his manner of speech, “Bingfeng with human operators? I’ve never heard of that.”

Aypasha responded to the breach of manners with a calm smile. As I watched her reaction, I noticed that the tea saucers were rattling on the table. My knees, as if they were their own living beings, were trembling, and my feet were shaking the table.

The Bingfeng had operators. Were we—the *Zhen-pan-da* players—running the drones?

My eyes cast about the room, finally meeting with Kuma’s. He stared into me, then slowly nodded.

“I don’t know if me saying this will make you feel any

better,” Kuma said, “but when Uchqun was killed, the system was set up so that twelve different players all had to agree to fire. And by our calculations, some eighteen thousand people were killed by the players of that game.”

“Eighteen thousand . . .” I found myself once again at a loss for words.

Aypasha looked down at me. “Why should that bother you now? You took part in counterterrorist operations in the PLA and pulled the trigger in person. How many did you kill? Five? Ten? A hundred? Or enough that you’ve lost count, like so many slices of bread eaten over a lifetime?”

I shook my head, but she wasn’t wrong. I had killed. I’d killed when I went into an ETIS hideout. When I helped recapture a village that had fallen under their control. When I chased after ETIS members attempting to flee across the border. I squeezed the trigger of the ZH-05 I’d been provided and rained its 5.8 mm rounds onto the terrorists. In my five years of service, I took the lives of twelve. Of those twelve, I later learned that two had been noncombatants.

But now I was confronted with the fact that I had killed an incomparably greater number, and without knowing it, just by playing a mobile game.

As I squatted in that leaky shack, melting down computer circuits, snacking on sorghum grains, watching the faces of Uyghur folk coming into the market, feeling absolutely safe with no risk to my life whatsoever, and as one-twelfth of a killer, I erased thousands of lives.

I placed that target on soldiers wielding AKs, RPGs, and other weaponry. I chased after terrorist leaders fleeing from the mosques where they had been in prayer. I sent the Bingfeng’s bullets into the head of a girl with drugs in her eyes as she prepared to detonate her suicide bomb. These were actions

taken with intent to kill, diluted down to one-twelfth.

Something came up my throat, and I let it spill to the floor. A mixture of stomach acid and the tea I'd just drunk puddled on the luxurious carpet. On my knees now beside my backpack, I fought against the retching but failed, and kept puking up until there was nothing but gastric juices.

Kuma was saying something, but I didn't hear what it was.

It was Lie's argument that finally brought me back to my head.

"—but that can't be true," the lieutenant was saying. "Do you know how many Bingfeng can be in operation at the same time? Three hundred thousand. There's no way that could be entrusted to human control. Humans err. Humans become traumatized. We saw what the Americans put their drone pilots through, the toll that took on their psyches, and we turned to AIs so that we wouldn't make that same mistake. That's the entire basis of the Bingfeng program."

Wanting to hear how Kuma would respond, I wiped the fluid from my cheek and lifted my head. What still tried to come up I stopped in my throat, and I got back to my feet.

"He's right," I pressed. "The Bingfeng are controlled by AI. I've been with them on operations many times, and I never got any sense that someone was controlling them—" But as I said it, my voice faded, trailing into silence.

However things were now, back then, we players had been controlling them. The amount of money a simulation would have cost to produce would have been ludicrous. Aerial videos, different crowd scenes with every play . . . I had no doubt in my mind. Those had been video feeds from actual deployed Bingfeng. And the expressions on the terrorists' faces as I chased them down—those were not fake.

Kuma shifted his gaze between Lie and myself as he said,

"You're exactly right, Lie, Zhao. The Bingfeng of today are AI controlled. But that was only possible due to the thorough *tiaoshi* (debugging) of the AI's deficiencies by twenty-five hundred *Zhen-pan-da* players for the first three years of operation. Eighteen thousand was the number of those killed during the initial phase that involved human operators."

Aypasha, who had been silent until this point, looked to me and, after a beat, said, "Yes, nine years ago, the Bingfeng were controlled through that game. The people who killed my father were among the players."

She pointed to a screen where a target scope wavered over a man with a distinctive mustache and goatee. It was a face I had centered the aiming reticule over in the tutorial mission every time I acquired a new weapon.

The stomach juices I'd been holding down came up and out again.



With a blanket draped across my back, I was seated on the sofa that Kuma had been occupying. I filled my mouth with tea Aypasha poured for me, swished it around, and spat the liquid out onto the tea tray.

"Thank you," I said.

"It's the least I can do," she said, "Since you're going to be working for us after this. You should change your clothes, too."

As she roughly collected the tea set, Lie watched her, and his face went pale. The tea set must have been very expensive.

"And—" I started to say something, but didn't know what would be appropriate.

I could be one of the twelve who killed your father.

I used your father's dying moments as firing practice countless times.

Maybe I killed your friends, too—

As I kept on searching, Aypasha waved me off.

“Don’t be so depressing. You should see your face right now.” She turned up her palms and shrugged in an American-like gesture. “I don’t remember much from when I lived in Ürümqi. I didn’t even know what happened to my father until Kuma told me about it in America several years later.”

I looked up at her face. She must have been a little bit older than me. Nine years ago, she would have been in senior secondary school. Lie started to speak, likely having the same doubts.

“Forgive me, ma’am, but . . . you don’t appear to be of an age that you wouldn’t remember what happened. And I remember that for the Bingfeng operation in Ürümqi, the target—I mean, Uchqun—his family was present.”

Aypasha snorted a laugh when Lie stumbled over how he should refer to her father. “That’s what I hear,” she said, then to Kuma, “What do you think, can I tell them?”

“I don’t mind.” Kuma said, but then he gave a wave of his hand and stood. “No, wait. Let me do it. You had to live through it, I won’t make you go over it again. Besides, I still need to explain my part in all this.”

Lie said something that only made me feel more lost. “Colonel Ma already told me everything I need to know. You’re a captain in the U.S. Special Operations Command. That’s good enough for me.”

Kuma turned up the corners of his lips. “Zhao still doesn’t know any of it. Regardless, I had a different role then. I was working security for dignitaries at the UN. That’s where I met Aypasha.”

Lie shot to his feet. “You don’t mean—!”

“Hold it,” I said, finally cutting in. “The UN? You mean in New York?”

Kuma said, "Well, Lie, it certainly seems like your boys' information control is working well. Zhao doesn't even know about the attempted assassination of his own leader."

"Assassination?" I gasped, looking to Lie.

The lieutenant pursed his lips in a straight line and stared back at me. When he finally spoke, he rushed thought it.

"It's as the captain says. President Xi was to address an international conference on ethnic minorities when he was nearly killed by a suicide bomber." Then to Kuma, he asked, "Sir, what did you have to do with that?"

"I was guarding him. A delegation of minority peoples had come to meet with the president, and a young woman dressed in Uyghur clothes jumped from the line. I knew immediately that she was going to blow herself—and us—up."

"But the bomber, she's dead." Lie stiffened. "Right?"

Aypasha smirked and offered him a shrug. "Alive and well."

"There you have it," Kuma said. "As you're aware, Lie, the bombing attempt failed. I fired three shots, and one passed through the side of her stomach. It happened to miss any major blood vessels, and it happened to send the detonator flying as Aypasha collapsed."

Kuma reached for the remainder of his tea. The only noise in the hall was the rumbling of the train car jolting across the rail joints.

From her angled perch on the sofa, Aypasha seemed to be enjoying watching Lie's and my reactions. Lie was gripping his knees, and tried to meet Aypasha's eyes several times before giving it up and deciding to just stew instead.

I pushed Kuma for more details, asking, "Was ETIS behind the attempt?"

"They were. That was the first time they announced responsibility for a terror attack under that name. Right, Lie?"

Teeth grinding, the lieutenant nodded.

Kuma responded with a placating gesture. “Just hear me out a little longer, please.” He continued, “To protect the president from the explosion, I dove onto Aypasha. That’s when I noticed.”

Kuma used his forefinger to make a whirling motion around his temple. “Her eyes were unhinged. She had been made to take drugs right up to the brink of overdose. Later, at the hospital, I found out she had three kilos of C4 stitched into her stomach and was near death with or without the wound I’d inflicted. Her bones had been broken in thirty-five places, including her skull. She was so malnourished that just by diving onto her I broke three of her ribs. Her fingernails had been torn off and her eardrums ruptured. Beneath a thick layer of ethnic makeup, her skin was all bruises.”

“ETIS forced her to do it,” I said, then, correcting myself, “No, they brainwashed her?”

Kuma nodded. “After Uchqun’s death, the group changed their name to ETIS and plotted revenge. Our investigation later found that they had killed the rest of Aypasha’s family in front of her as a form of torture. She doesn’t remember it. She’d been stuffed too full of drugs for that.”

“So now, she’s . . .” Lie blinked, processing what he’d just heard. “She’s part of your USSOCOM unit that’s been dispatched on an antiterror mission, and she has her own reasons for opposing ETIS, too. At least, that’s the gist of it?”

“You can think of it that way, yes.”

Kuma scratched his head. For the first time, I noticed that a considerable amount of gray was mixed into his short hair. Then, a number of gears clicked into place.

I asked, “You were Special Operations, weren’t you?”

“You could say that,” was all Kuma said. He patted the

camouflage cloth on which he was sitting. "I think this suits me better, though. Lie, I think it's about time, isn't it?"

Lie went to read the time from his wrist device, but when he realized it was still powered off, he looked to the clock on the wall.

"Yes," the lieutenant said. "We can break off from the bait at any time."

"The bait?" I asked, and Aypasha laughed like I had said something stupid. So I said, "What was that for?"

She ignored my question and instead turned to Lie. "You're in the PAP. Shouldn't you know better? You go around saying insensitive things like 'bait,' and people aren't going to want to help you."

Lie blinked rapidly, then seemed about to say something but held his tongue.

"Come on," I said, "what's this bait?"

"The forward cars," Kuma said, narrowing his eyes at the front wall as if he could see through it. "Colonel Ma wants to use the two thousand travelers on the Chunyun Special to draw in an ETIS attack, which the PAP will ambush from the flank."

"Don't put this on us!" Lie snapped as he bolted to his feet. "Captain Kuma. You let it leak that that woman would be on this train, didn't you? We didn't bring out this Qiang'gui for the hell of it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kuma rebutted, casually deflecting Lie's anger. "All this fuss is just going to make our job harder." He gestured to me with his chin. "Anyway, it's likely Zhao who ETIS is coming for. Did Colonel Ma not tell you?"

"Why me?" I said.

"Yeah, he did, but—" Lie bit his lip shut.

"Now wait just a minute," I protested. "What's going on here?"



Lie turned away and sat back down, and Kuma spoke.

"That killbug came to our office."

"You're saying it came for me?" I asked.

"It came for the person who was typing about ETIS and trying to find a copy of *Zhen-pan-da*. They believe that *Zhen-pan-da* is the key to improving their killbugs."

Kuma withdrew a pink tube from his inside pocket and showed it to Lie, then said, "I fried its sensors as soon as I got there, but the drone's camera saw something that would have come as a surprise: Aypasha, with a former soldier—not only that, but one who had fought ETIS."

When Lie remained silent, Kuma continued, "You can guess what that must have looked like to them. Aypasha came back to China to assemble PLA soldiers, with ETIS's destruction her goal. Or not even necessarily that. The very return of Uchqun's daughter would risk exposing what the current leaders had forced her to do and threaten the illegitimacy of their takeover."

Lie started to protest, saying, "Maybe some might think that, but—"

Kuma cut him off with a snort. "It's all information from Colonel Ma's own intelligence. This isn't conjecture; it's fact. Aypasha and I were planning on staying hidden in the crowds and going into the backcountry from the station at Wudaoliang. It was Colonel Ma who redirected us to Zhao's train in order to draw out ETIS's main forces. Using the civilian travelers as a meat shield—that was his plan too."

As I listened, I felt my body tense. If what Kuma was saying was true, then an ETIS attack really was coming.

"This is trouble we didn't ask for," Kuma continued. "I was supposed to take out an armed convoy, maybe two, before meeting with mounted bandits—Ah, here's someone now."

Kuma turned up his shirtsleeves, revealing the same

khaki-colored bracelets as Aypasha was wearing. He touched at one, and I heard the click of an opening lock from the rear door that led to the next Qiang'gui carriage. The door opened, letting in the sound of footsteps and a familiar metallic clatter, which preceded a crisply uniformed warrant officer.

The officer snapped his heels together and presented Lie and Kuma with a salute.

"Captain Kuma, I'm Lieutenant Picheng Li. I'm sorry to interrupt your resting time, but our battalion of Qingzang Railway defense forces and a Bingfeng platoon will be passing through the hall. Recon spotted seven ETIS armed convoys, each with a considerable civilian presence."

"They mean to use them as cover, I'm sure," Kuma said. "Unlike their killbugs, your Bingfeng are programmed not to shoot civilians. Not bad thinking on their part. All right, where are they coming from?"

Lieutenant Li pointed out the window on the train's right-hand side and said, "They'll be splitting into seven groups, using the valleys between the hills."

I looked where the officer was pointing. Beyond the sand-covered hills, mountaintops glistened white in the morning sun. I put my face up to the window and searched for the sand clouds that would betray the convoy's movement.

In an apologetic tone, Li said, "Um . . . The first wave of killbugs will cross us in twenty minutes. We anticipate the ETIS forces will arrive another twenty minutes after."

I quickly ran the calculations in my head. A killbug's top flight speed was fifty kilometers per hour, which placed them at least fifteen kilometers away. No wonder I couldn't see them. Not that I would have preferred those things any closer.

Lie bobbed his chin at Li, who then summoned four soldiers to bring in a series of olive-colored interlocking cases,

which they set down on the carpet.

"Fifty Bingfeng, as promised," Li said. "Thirty antipersonnel, and twenty grenade-mounted antimateriel. We've already deployed two hundred and sixty Yanfeng battlefield surveillance drones. As you requested, they've all been refitted to be operated over your specified waveband, with no connection to our tactical command servers. We've also replaced their ammunition with what you provided us."

I was speaking before I was aware of it. "You're going to let my boss—I mean, an American soldier use Bingfeng?"

With a wink, Kuma said, "Just think of it as a kind of information exchange." Then he stood and pulled the camouflage cloth from where he had been sitting.

"Matie," Lie said breathlessly. For my part, I gasped, too.

Beneath the cloth were, just as Lie said, two metal horses—forms of shiny black metal crouching on the floor, with saddle-like seats on their torsos and four thin legs apiece. Armoring their bodies was a layer of fine scales coated with a greasy, snakelike sheen that created tiny scattered reflections of the morning outside. The machines appeared designed to be ridden, but had no controls or instruments for piloting them.

One of the two seats was covered in a mound of olive-colored cases.

"These are UC-01 Mastiffs," Kuma said. "They're unmanned load-bearing robots designed to work with SOCOM's third-generation 'land warrior' program—soldiers for the information age. Each can carry two hundred kilograms of equipment."

Clearly unimpressed, Lie said, "So . . . this is the antiterrorist equipment you were talking about?"

These black, gleaming machines seemed to have been built with a level of technology I'd never seen from the PLA or PAP. But compared to being given control over our Bingfeng, two

machines only capable of carrying burdens didn't seem like equal stakes.

Kuma grinned. "The Mastiffs are just one small part of it. Don't worry, Lie. I still have a little more to show you."

Moving with a grace belying his size, Kuma lifted two cases from the Mastiff's saddle, then said to Lie, "Now get going. Once everyone's through, I want you all off the train as promised."



After the last two heavily armored platoons scurried through the hall, the train slowly dropped speed and came to a stop on a curve. I put my face to the window and looked up the train, where, one by one, curtains were closing behind the passenger windows. I wondered aloud what that was about, and Kuma answered as he verified the contents of the case on his lap.

"It might work better than you'd think. The sensors on those ETIS killbugs only cover visible and infrared light. Now, we need to hurry and get ready. Aypasha, is the system online?"

"Yes. I have fifty Bingfeng and two hundred sixty Yanfeng under my control."

Aypasha was still wearing her red Uyghur dress, but she now had a pair of goggles over her eyes. With a wave of her right hand, video feeds filled the window, where they shifted and exchanged places at a bewildering pace. Most only depicted desolate wildlands, but some accompanied PAP soldiers, and others were monitoring the interiors of the other carriages. As was to be expected, the appearance of the heavily armed PAP soldiers in the passenger cars was spreading confusion and panic through the civilian travelers.

"Aypasha," Kuma said, "you can send those Yanfeng outside

the train cars. Focus on the battlefield. I want you to build a 3-D model that covers as much terrain as possible.”

“Understood,” Aypasha replied. She moved her fingers as if typing on a keyboard, and a handful of the video feeds enlarged and followed the contours of the sparse grasses and open sand and dust. Kuma watched them, one after the other, until his satisfaction spread into a smile.

Lie, seated on a sofa, finally seemed impressed as he said, “I see, you’ve made it so you can control the Bingfeng directly. Our way of leaving it all to the AI is easier, but from what I can see, your software seems highly capable. How many drones can you control at one time?”

“She can handle about two thousand,” Kuma answered.

“That means she can control every one that we have with us,” Lie said, definitely impressed now. He followed the remark by explaining to Kuma how the PAP soldiers were going to fulfill their role in the mission.

Each of the seven ETIS convoys were assigned one hundred Yanfeng for surveillance, while the Bingfeng, armed with grenades and antimateriel ACP rounds, were standing by to pin down the convoys two clicks from the train. Simultaneously, the antipersonnel Bingfeng would attack and kill every combatant.

The strategy was identical to the PLA’s. At the end, we always sent in human soldiers to mop up.

Once the PLA and PAP advanced their “zero fatalities” doctrine, the Bingfeng became an indispensable tool to any antiterrorist mission.

In muted praise, Kuma said, “No other military utilizes AI weapons as extensively as you. You have it all worked out.” His eyes shifted to the window. “It looks like it’s started.”

“Yes,” Lie said with a nod.

I looked to the window.

I thought I saw sand clouds rising above the sparse and low grasses of the hilltops, but then five separate feeds slid in from the top and bottom of the frame.

“Captain Kuma,” Aypasha announced, “I’m switching the feeds over to the battle view.”

She pointed to a stream on the right that offered a close-up of a Japanese-made pickup truck mounted with a heavy machine gun. The truck attempted to swerve away from something and exploded an instant later. The Bingfeng’s 20 mm grenade had hit its mark. Fighters bailed out from the truck bed only to be cut down by antipersonnel drones, whose bullets sent them jiggling to the ground.

The video feeds presented a montage of combatants getting killed by the Bingfeng. The rightmost picture became highlighted; on its feed, a fighter raised his AK to the camera, and blood sprayed from his chest. As he dropped, he sprayed the rifle wildly in all directions. A woman in a shawl—clearly a civilian—fell, blood spurting from places all over her body.

I frowned with my eyebrows, and Lie immediately spoke.

“Corporal, that just now was not a Bingfeng misfiring. One of the ETIS fighters shot his own human shield.”

“I know, but—” I started to say, but Kuma cut me off.

“It doesn’t feel right, does it? If the Bingfeng hadn’t shot him, she wouldn’t have died.”

Lie said, “That doesn’t sound like something an American soldier would say, when you’re the ones who pioneered the use of remotely operated robots to combat terrorism.”

“I suppose it doesn’t,” Kuma said. Then he leaned in toward the lieutenant and offered a grin. “ETIS’s cruelty knows no limits. But does that justify putting an AI in charge of killing them? I want a real answer, because I’ll be including our discus-

sions in my report to Colonel Ma.”

“That’s fine with me,” Lie said, scooting deeper into the couch. “You saw what just happened. We let the Bingfeng AI have control because they’re far better at it than human soldiers or human-operated drones. Last year alone, we ran over one thousand missions and eliminated twenty-three thousand terrorists. The number of civilians who got caught in battle and were accidentally killed by our side was a mere eight. Not even 1 percent of the number the terrorists accidentally killed. We don’t kill any more than we have to. Isn’t that far more sensible than your remote-operated machines? I don’t understand why America doesn’t follow our lead. And—” Lie glanced to Aypasha, who was immersed in her virtual interface. “—because they don’t make such errors, our Bingfeng have already resulted in a measurable erosion of ETIS’s support. The number of suicide bombings is decreasing.”

“Not so fast,” Kuma said. “You’re wrong on that point. Suicide bombings have gone down because of the Bingfeng, but not for that reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your Bingfeng are too good a weapon.” Kuma took my M4 carbine with a folded stock from the briefcase on his lap and showed it to Lie, then said, “They’re cheaper to make than this, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Lie said with a nod. He narrowed his already narrow eyes, and leaned in toward Kuma as if to focus his attention on the conversation. I listened intently too.

“ETIS still uses AKs slapped together in Tibetan workshops,” Kuma explained. “Do you know why they build killbugs? Because Bingfeng were designed to be so simple, and to be made from such commonly available parts, that they are also easy to copy. Take a hobby-grade drone, slap a gun on it,

insert some AI like that of the Bingfeng, and it'll do an alright job. ETIS might have even stolen the AI. Either way, they used the Bingfeng as a template to make their killbugs, which they now sell to terrorists all over the globe."

Kuma went on to say that we might not have heard about it because of the information control, but terrorists seeking to upset order in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia have been using killbugs and causing headaches for US, EU, UAE, and other allied militaries.

The US military considered using something like the Bingfeng themselves, but they realized that killing terrorists using the same methods the bad guys used wouldn't stop the resistance. Worse, if the terrorists decided to get revenge by unleashing their killbugs on American soil, public support for the war on terror would erode. Unlike the Bingfeng, which were designed to go on a sortie and return to base, the killbugs used fuel cells that enabled long flight times. The terrorists could set loose hundreds of the opportunistic killers and melt away into urban populations.

"In a battle against robots," Kuma explained, "the extremists' defeat is ensured the second they send human fighters into the field. ETIS and the Middle Eastern terrorist groups will catch on soon enough. Nowhere will be safe from their killbugs."

Seeing Lie's and my speechless reaction, Kuma tossed us a ghastly smile. "This is the reality the Bingfeng have brought us. It all started with Uchqun's assassination. The suicide bombings have only decreased because an eighty-dollar killing machine is far cheaper than the drugs and violence required to brainwash patsies into blowing themselves up. Your Bingfeng have changed the nature of war."

Kuma rapped the Mastiff's oily scales with the back of his finger. "If people are intent on killing in the name of some great



cause, shouldn't you want to restrict it to the battlefield? It's with that thought that the US designed this system and worked with Colonel Ma to create an opportunity for a demonstration. I was sent to China in advance of the operation to put the finishing touches on the AI under the guise of a game-development company. Of course, I had to find the right staff here, too. So, I think that covers it. Lie, I want you to observe what we're about to do."

Kuma reached into the case on his lap, pulled out a bodysuit, and unfolded it. He gestured at me with his chin to hurry up.

I opened the case at my side. Another bodysuit was folded on top of the case's contents. I took it out.

The suit was covered with the same slick scales as the Mastiff bore. The inner side was lined with wires and sensors to read muscular electrical activity.

The fabric was stretchable, but the bodysuit contained rigid pads over the chest and elbows and other key places. On the reverse of the pads, BALLISTIC PANEL: 4,600 JOULES was written in yellow stencil lettering.

This bodysuit was designed for combat.

I asked my boss, "What are you having me do?"

He looked out to the hills where the sand clouds now rose.

"I want you to come with me to take out those convoys."

"You want me to go out there? Wait just one minute. I can't do that. I left service almost a year ago now, and besides, I'm supposed to be on my way home—"

Kuma regarded me with an odd expression, then said, "I've been wondering how you could be so calm, but don't tell me—you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Your town, Wenge-zhen, is gone. Lie, why didn't you tell

him? I want an explanation.”

“My town is gone?” I asked. “What are you talking about?”

Lie averted his eyes and said only, “It’s classified.”

“Tell him now,” Kuma said, an edge of threat in his tone. “Don’t worry about Colonel Ma. I’ll explain everything to him. Besides, after this, Zhao will be sent from the country as a refugee, now that he’s been outed as a *Zhen-pan-da* player. ETIS bumped him up to the top hundred in their bounty list. If he stays in China, he won’t live six months.”

“A refugee?” I said, never having thought the word could apply to me.

Lie sat up straight in the sofa and looked me in the eye.

“Corporal Zhao, your village, Settlement 1022, also known as Wenge-zen, was removed from the administration of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, Second Agricultural Division. By PAP authority, the entire village was to be relocated to the vicinity of Lhasa. I heard that the relocation was ordered because the entire village leaked military secrets.”

“Relocated,” I repeated, trying to process what I was hearing.

“That was two days ago. I thought there had to be another reason behind it. How does an entire village leak military secrets? That just doesn’t make any sense. But, hearing what Captain Kuma had to say, the pieces came together. That mobile game, *Zhen-pan-da*, was the military secret.”

“Did this . . . did this all happen because of something I wrote in a chat?”

Lie cut me off, saying, “Please let me finish.” He looked away for a brief moment before he continued.

“Yesterday, your village was attacked by killbugs. After killing everyone inside, ETIS fighters entered the village and burned the bodies. PAP Yanfeng, sent for the preliminary inves-

tigation into moving the village, found the scene. I heard that no significant looting occurred. I tried to contact you, but—”

Reflexively, I took my smartphone from my backpack’s pocket, searched for the number of my father’s HW-7, but then I remembered—I had no reception from the Pingliuwang. I hadn’t at all since yesterday.

“I see, no reception,” Lie said. “That’s why I couldn’t reach you.”

Kuma cut in. “Lie, it was a mistake to cut off the Pingliuwang over the train—”

Now Lie. “I hadn’t any other choice. We couldn’t risk the public learning we were using a train as bait—”

Now Kuma. “Nonsense. It’s going to get out no matter what you do—”

And then I was no longer hearing them.

My village was attacked by ETIS?

No one survived. All because we’d played *Zhen-pan-da*. That game was given to us. We never asked for it. And then I mentioned it in a chat, and what—they all had to be killed, over that?

My mind replayed something my father always used to say to me. I could picture him hunched over in our Cultural Revolution-era shack, saying, “I named you Gongzheng after my hope. After what we all were seeking at Tiananmen Square. A life of fairness and freedom.”

Whenever my mother heard him going on like that, she’d say to me, “Gongzheng, you don’t have to listen to that.” Then, looking irritated, she’d toss washing soda into the pot to neutralize the waste liquids from our work, and pungent smoke would fill the room.

It was a village without a single good thing about it.

It was a village without anyone I’d even want to talk to.

It was a village I could leave for six years without a pang of homesickness.

It was a village where I had only two friends, who competed with me over the *Zhen-pan-da* high score.

And now that village was gone. So then what? What was I supposed to do about it?

Lie spoke again, and this time, I heard him.

"Corporal Zhao, you have my condolences."

I looked up at him. He was shamefaced and looking to Kuma.

"But," the lieutenant said, "the people who settled in Uyghur lands did so fully knowing that was the risk they were taking."

"Shut up!"

I was on my feet, my palms pounding against Lie's eyes. He flinched, and my fingertips formed a spear, striking home, my little finger scratching for his eye. My other hand moved to grab him by the throat and haul him to his feet when the world spun.

I felt a blow on my back. The shoulder of a suit pressed lightly against my chest, and I could taste my stomach in my breath, and I realized that Kuma had thrown me.

He really was a soldier. And one with far more experience than me. Keeping my arm pinned, he leaned into my face and said, "Corporal Zhao, come with me. Or would you rather stay here and be hunted by ETIS, with the six months you might get to live?"

"What are we going to do?"

With his free arm, Kuma reached for the case he'd given me earlier, pulled a brand new ZH-05 from the bottom, and placed it beside my face.

"You can still move, can't you?" he said. "Take the gun.

We're going to wipe the killbugs from the face of the earth."



The bobbing camera crested the hill to reveal a familiar sight—my village.

Twenty single-story houses facing a square where the national flag flew. That was Settlement 1022, through everyone called it Wenge-zhen. Beyond the houses lay a nameless creek whose waters eventually fed into the Yellow River, but for now were meager enough to be crossed in a single step. Beside the creek stood a row of workshops—small shacks with stacked sun-dried bricks for walls and corrugated metal roofs—patterned after constructions from the Cultural Revolution. It was in one such shack where my father, mother, and I had stripped precious metals from cell phone and PC components as we inhaled toxic fumes and soaked our hands in poison.

Several black columns of smoke rose from the village.

I knew immediately that they weren't from the open-air cooking pits we used to show tourists we didn't have kitchens. Neither were they coming from the workshops, but from the village square. They reminded me of the smoke that used to rise when we all got together to cook a goat in celebration of one thing or another; these were the round plumes of tallow grilling over open flame, and they rose above the rooftops and dispersed in the wind.

The picture was so clear I could almost smell the burning fat. The smoke, which had once beckoned my hungry stomach as a boy, now struck it with a quivering horror.

At the base of the smoke, in the center of the village square, were silhouettes that belonged to no beast. They were people. My father, my mother, my much older cousin. And the villagers of my father's generation. Once, they had all chanted my name

in Tiananmen Square. Now they had been doused with gasoline and set to the torch.

Atop the flagstaff, where the five stars had always waved, a black flag flew instead.

When the camera zoomed in to show the white Arabic letters amid the black of the flag, I stopped the playback in my goggles.

Had I kept it playing, the video, taken this morning from the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps' Bingfeng, would have shown soldiers turning over the corpses so the lens could capture their charred faces one by one.

I knew this because I had already watched it five times.

Meanwhile, I marched in combat boots across the empty desert toward the hills where ETIS convoys approached from the other side.

Meanwhile, in combat dress, I walked toward the battlefield that awaited three kilometers ahead.

Meanwhile, I felt the weight of the ZH-05, my familiar companion through five years of service.

Through all this, I watched the video again and again.

I synced the video back to the beginning, and was about to play it for the sixth time, when the low, powerful rumble of a compressor motor reached my ears.

The sound belonged to the engine of Kuma's US-made Mastiff.

The Mastiff was walking between Kuma and me, with Aypasha riding. Her hands moved through the air as she controlled the Bingfeng in the hills. With her goggles covering her eyes, I couldn't read her expression. Trailing about five meters behind us, the other Mastiff hauled our equipment, including our ammo and my backpack.

As Aypasha jostled in her saddle, I looked across her to

Kuma. He had his M4 carbine ready in his left hand. The unusual design of his helmet included a piece that jutted out on the right-hand side, and he wore exoskeleton-like bulletproof plating on his right side only. Between the two, he presented an odd silhouette.

In his mirror image, I had armor on my left side.

Kuma looked at me, and with concern in his voice, asked, "Don't you think that's enough?"

"Enough what?"

"You were watching the video of your hometown, weren't you?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I should have been using this time to ask about this suit."

I thought back to when I'd attacked Lie. The time that had passed since could be measured in minutes, not hours. Yet it already seemed like I had dreamt it.

"What's the matter? It's simple," Kuma said. "I'll explain it as we walk. But we have to deal with them first."

I followed his line of sight to the hills. Even with my naked eyes, I could now see where the Bingfeng were attacking the convoys. Smoke and sand clouds obscured the view, but there looked to be around a hundred people with this part of convoy. From the PAP's report, a full third were civilians acting as human shields.

But the convoy wasn't what Kuma was talking about. They were another cloud approaching us, and one less ephemeral than the sand—a killbug swarm.

"There's about twenty of them," Kuma said. "Perfect. You need to learn how to use that armor." Kuma slapped the thick plating that covered his right side. "On Aypasha's command, an incoming fire alert will appear in your goggles. When you see the red dot, you need to relax your muscles. The suit's

electrodes will stimulate your muscles and position you into a defensive stance. Here, have a look. Aypasha, I want you to brace me where Zhao can see.”

Aypasha’s right hand made a tiny twitch.

Sand swirled into the air.

The next thing I knew, ahead and to the right of Aypasha’s Mastiff, Kuma was on one knee, like a tortoise hiding in its shell. His right arm curled up to cover his head, and his exoskeleton-like plating interlocked to turn the man into an armored carapace that protected Aypasha’s Mastiff at his back. The second Mastiff had also folded its legs to cover her rear.

Kuma had moved so quickly, my eyes hadn’t been able to follow him.

From behind his shell, Kuma looked over his shoulder to me, then released his stance and stood back up. The shell neatly dismantled into separate plates covering his upper and lower arms.

Kuma shook his shoulders, letting his arms swing, and said, “Don’t forget, go loose. Otherwise you’ll open gaps in the armor, and you won’t be able to move as quickly. Once the armor locks into place, and you get in the right position, that suit will be able to shrug off even antimateriel rounds up to twenty thousand joules. The PAP’s Yanfeng are handling the incoming fire prediction and detection. Just remember, relax those muscles, got it?”

“Got it,” I said, and the next instant, a red light appeared in the middle-right of my goggles. I exhaled to try to relax my muscles, then pain shot across my body and the world around me shifted faster than I’d ever seen before.

When I realized what had happened, my arm had curled up, my knee was on the ground, and I was behind a shell. The armor’s inner side formed a display that showed the view from



the other side. It must have been somehow perfectly linked to my eye movements, because everything looked no different than it would have through a pane of glass.

"You still gave a little resistance there," Kuma said. "But you did all right. Not bad. Just don't forget to relax."

"I won't," I replied. As I stood, the shell clinked apart and returned to its normal divisions. The technology was incredible. But the whole idea seemed strange.

As I again walked on my side of the Mastiff, I voiced my concern.

"And this activates based on Miss Aypasha's decision?"

"That's right," Kuma said. "The alert appears in her goggles, and we reinforce based on her decision."

That was what I had thought.

I asked, "Why isn't it done automatically? And not just that—this whole setup has been bothering me. You also had Aypasha process the Bingfeng's imaging manually, didn't you? And what's more, why do we have to go out to the front lines in the first place? Miss Aypasha isn't even dressed for combat."

Kuma didn't answer immediately. He looked in the direction of the oncoming killbugs, then looked back to me.

"We're almost within range of the first wave. After we make it through, I'll explain. For now, I'll just tell you it's called ORGAN. Now, Aypasha, conceal us."

Aypasha made a slight flick of her hand, and the Mastiffs and Kuma melded into the pebble-strewn background. My rifle arm did the same, the pattern shifting and matching with each movement.

Each of the countless scales coating the bodysuit became elements of a picture that copied the scenery around me. I'd heard of active camouflage, but never encountered it before. On my shaded side, the camouflage elements projected powerful

and highly directional light to erase my shadow.

The technology was incredible, and yet the effect left much to be desired.

The pattern of pebbles on my arm was stretched out, distinctly popping out from the ground. Kuma's was the same way. The camouflage pattern became smaller the closer it got to our heads. It looked like viewing a pasted-on photograph from an off angle. Even more ridiculously, slightly behind us, the active-camo armor of Aypasha's Mastiff depicted its rider, while its legs and engine cover mimicked the surrounding wildlands. This presented the illusion of a woman wearing an ethnic dress who hovered off the ground.

Just as I was thinking what a nice target she'd make for the killbugs, a red light appeared in my goggles.

Caught off guard, my body reflexively tensed, which sent pain shooting through me. I forced myself to exhale and my muscles to relax, and then I was diving onto my knee in front of the Mastiff. My left arm curled up, and the armor plates clinked into a single piece.

I heard the distinctive, light rat-a-tat of the killbugs' guns, and puffs of sand kicked up from the barren ground.

I felt two forceful jolts in my armored shoulder, then heard Aypasha's voice through my bone-conduction receiver.

"Three volleys confirmed. Kuma sustained four hits. Zhao, two. No significant damage. The group of killbugs has passed."

I glanced at Kuma by my side. His armor depicted a stretched, off-perspective image of Aypasha's right-hand side. A tiny plume of smoke wafted from her chest.

The killbugs had aimed for the active camouflage's copy of the woman. Or rather, Kuma had drawn their fire to the image.

Did that have something to do with the ORGAN system Kuma mentioned? I processed that in the corner of my mind

as I searched the sky for our attackers. And I found them, about twenty of the machines, some twenty meters away, flying toward the Qingzang railway. At this range, I wouldn't miss.

Even if I didn't score a direct hit, the shockwaves of the ZH-05's 5.8 mm bullets could dislodge the plastic-bottle fuel supplies from the robots.

I lowered my armor and raised my rifle, and unleashed a full-auto burst at the departing killbugs. My magazine emptied in the span of a single breath. I ejected the mag, flipped it upside down, slapped in the attached spare, and fired another burst.

The ZH-05's small-profile buttstock fed its recoil into my shoulder, and as the sensation began to fade, I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

From my kneeling position, I'd fired at a slightly upward angle, but my bullets landed some fifty meters out, where they tossed up little sand clouds on arrival.

Not one shot had found its mark.

The rear Mastiff ambled up behind me and offered me a new magazine with its manipulator arm.

I heard Kuma say, "Hurry up and load." I looked over at the kneeling man. He was grinning in amusement.

"B-but . . . my bullets," I managed to stammer, "Th-they . . ."

I searched for an explanation. Was my rifle not sighted right? Was my posture wrong? Were the cartridges defective? No, it couldn't have been anything that simple. I'd felt the recoil, familiar and true, against my shoulder.

It was as if the bullets had decided of their own free will not to hit the targets, and had bent their trajectories on purpose.

Kuma released his shell and raised himself into a crouch, then waved his M4's muzzle ahead.

"It's fine," the captain said. "Just hurry up and reload. Two more waves of those things are coming. And don't waste any

more ammo. Let the drones go. Aypasha will give you your targets.”

I started to protest, then thought better of it. Following his orders, I discarded the empty magazine and accepted the fresh one from the Mastiff. Peeking out from the open end of the magazine, the bullet tips caught my attention.

The rounds appeared identical to the 5.8x42 mm DPB87 rounds used by the PLA, with matte black casing and a band of orange around the black bullet. With the Americans’ obsession with everything eco-friendly, I suspected the casing was made from biodegradable calcium-based plastic. The orange band was made of hard rubber, and seemed to be inset rather than simply wrapped around the bullet.

Kuma saw that I had stopped moving and said to me, “Those are *kujiandan* [curving bullets] that work with the ORGAN system.” When I looked to him, he continued, “That orange part there can bend the bullet’s path midflight.”

He extended his index finger and traced an arc with his arm. “They can modify their center of gravity and aerodynamic profile to always hit exactly where they’re meant to. They’re like magic bullets. With ORGAN aiming, a sniper rifle can make a ten-centimeter grouping from two kilometers. Even your ZH-05 and my M4 can do the same from one click.”

The captain went on to explain that, knowing the bullets would be used in China, the US military had ordered ZH-05-compatible 5.8 mm rounds from the manufacturer, Sandia Laboratories.

Again Kuma had mentioned that word—ORGAN—but asking about that would have to wait for later.

For now, I said, “But my shots missed, didn’t they? I was aiming just fine.”

This time, Aypasha answered, saying “Don’t worry. I have

no intention of letting any ETIS fighters escape this battle alive. I will make your bullets strike their target.”

“You . . . will?” I parroted back. She lifted her head, and below her goggles, her bright red lips curved into a grin.

“That’s right. Every bullet fired through ORGAN, I will make hit.”

She controlled every round.

I had no way of making the bullets from my own gun go where I wanted them to.

They would fly through the air, bending and twisting at Aypasha’s will.

“Let’s go,” she said. She spread her arms across an invisible keyboard and tapped at the air with beaded fingertips. The two Mastiffs stirred to life, and I quickly resumed my position at the front-left.

As we walked, Kuma’s eyes searched the horizon. He signaled for me to get my grenade ready. Reflexively, my finger reached for the ammo counter on the magazine containing the pink, tube-shaped EMP grenade rounds. Twenty rounds, with the first ready in the chamber.

“The next wave has fifty killbugs,” Kuma explained. “And the one after that, a hundred twenty. We’ll take that one out with the EMPs.”

“Shi.” Not sure whether to call him “captain” or “boss,” I ended up saying both, then, “What are we doing all this for?”

One by one, I voiced my doubts as they came to me.

What purpose was there for sending people directly onto the battlefield? What was wrong with leaving it to the Bingfeng’s AI? A thousand drones would make short work of the hundred or so approaching fighters. The other side was using their drones, weren’t they?

If my bullets wouldn’t go where I aimed them, why not

just let a MUCAV fire them instead? It didn't matter if an AI controlled them or not.

I saw absolutely no need in sending the drone operator into battle. Couldn't Aypasha control everything from a safe, faraway place like the Americans did?

I looked back over my shoulder to Aypasha and shook my head as I said, "This makes no sense to me. For you to go into the front lines without body armor or a helmet—that's insane."

"You're right," Kuma said, as if he'd been waiting for me to say those words, "of course it's insane. But then again, the very notion of killing others to push one's own beliefs is insane, too."

"What's your point, boss?"

"We're going to make that insanity into something a little less terrible. That's what the ORGAN system is for."

Kuma pointed to the cloud of sand and dust rising into the blue sky and said, "First, let's take care of those convoys."



Kuma explained that ORGAN was short for Operator Relocalized Gun and Firearms Activation Node. In other words, a system designed to place drone and firearm operators into the battlefield, where the enemy can see them. Every component of the system—the interface allowing for control over masses of drones, the Mastiff load-bearing robots, the active camouflage, the magic bullets that hit their targets without exception—their sole purpose was to place the operator in the field.

The whole system was designed to constrain killing to the battlefield.

Amid the cacophony of machinegun fire, Kuma's voice was clearly audible in my bone-conduction receiver.

"Some like to think that the term, ORGAN—which I admit

is a bit forced, as far as acronyms go—is used in the biological sense, but everyone inside the program thinks of it like the musical instrument. The way the operators use both arms and both legs is kind of like way an organist performs—Hey! You’re easing up over there. Keep firing!”

“I am firing!” I said, “Just keep talking!”

Reflexively, I aimed my weapon toward the threat locator displayed in my goggles. I fired three shots into the tangle of bodies. When I saw the fluttering skirt down the end of my rifle, I froze. The ETIS fighters had pushed a civilian into the way.

I was still for only the briefest moment before Aypasha’s scolding voice pierced into my eardrums.

“Zhou, don’t stop!”

I replied, “Shi.” When I lifted my eyes to see what I had done, I found three fighters crumpled on the ground, and the woman they had used as a shield unharmed.

I let out a quiet sigh of relief, then wiped the soot and sand from my goggles’ sensors and returned my focus to the battle.

A gust of the high desert wind cleared away ETIS’s smoke-screen and revealed a Japanese-made pickup truck being lifted into the air by a grenade explosion. Beneath the sailing vehicle was a fighter wielding the Browning heavy machine gun that had been attached to the truck. The gun dangled and danced in his arms as he blindly fired everywhere but at us. Another fighter with a Tibetan AK was running, pushing ahead of him a figure that must have been a child.

It was the same as the last convoy we’d crushed.

Walking through the hillside, the three of us had clashed with three convoys now. My armor, and Kuma’s, was riddled with countless pockmarks left by the terrorist’s bullets. Nothing had proved fatal, but bits of shrapnel, not fully deflected by our shells, had poked a multitude of holes into Aypasha’s dress, and

blood had begun to soak through the cloth.

The Mastiff hauling our gear had sustained a hit, and lost a plate along with the functionality of the metal horse's active camouflage. Even my backpack caught a glancing bullet, and the red mesh bag containing the cigarettes Kuma had given me peeked out from the torn cloth.

The pickup truck landed on its side. Beyond it, within the rising smoke, three dots appeared—more targets from Aypasha.

Sweeping my ZH-05 across the dots, I fired ten shots on full auto. Screams cried out from the smoke, and then three silhouettes fell. Their human shield—another child—turned and ran. Five bullets left in my mag.

I discarded the magazine and extended my arm behind my back. The Mastiff, having predicted I was about to run through my ammo, was already there. Its manipulator arm placed a full magazine of fifteen rounds into my grasp.

Kuma's voice rumbled into my eardrums. "You're getting the hang of this, Zhao. Now, where was I? Last century, humanity banned the use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. The killing of noncombatants became taboo. And in this century, we've banned cluster munitions, antipersonnel landmines, hollow-point ammunition, and the use of antiaircraft rifles for sniping. Even the extremists follow those rules."

"Is now really the time for talking?" I protested.

"Now's the only time," he said, explaining—over the sound of his firing M4—that the Americans created a new problem when they brought their remote-operated drones into war.

"The only result," he continued, "was to intensify terrorist acts. Did you know that the first flight tests of the armed Predator drone took place just before the U.S. was attacked on 9/11? The unmanned robots birthed new anger and new terror. Then the more 'humane' AI-controlled Bingfeng robots spawned the



inferior killbugs and accelerated the cycle of revenge.”

I shouted, “You already told me that!”

“I suppose I did. All right, then, answer me this. How can we stop the cycle?”

I fired four bursts of three shots at a new cluster of targets, then flipped the magazine.

Without waiting for me to respond, Kuma continued, “All combat actions must be performed by soldiers in the battlefield. That’s what we need. We’ll make every nation and organization sign on to the new rules of war. The PLA and PAP will make something similar to our ORGAN system. If ETIS still tries to use killbugs, your AI-operated Bingfeng will strike back in the same way, only with far greater efficiency. It’ll work like nuclear deterrence.”

Even as he said this, Kuma’s active camouflage obscured us from the enemy. With smooth, practiced motions, he replaced his empty cartridge and resumed fire on full auto, sending those magic bullets flying toward their targets.

Between the three of us and the Bingfeng the PLA lent us, how many ETIS fighters had Aypasha killed in the past hour?

The ORGAN was a collection of advanced technology ETIS could never hope to possess.

I asked, “Why would a group like ETIS agree to such rules? It’s too unbalanced.”

“Not true,” Kuma said. “They’ve found a toehold. They can see a path to victory.”

Kuma folded his arm to bring up his shell, then pointed to the northwest hills on my side. I put up my shell and looked at the hill through the transparent armor. A large sand cloud drifted into the air.

Barreling down the hills toward us were more convoys,

in numbers many times greater than what we'd faced and defeated.

They moved differently than the ones before. The others had tried to roll right past us, having considered us unworthy opponents who posed little threat. But these were clearly coming for us.

Kuma calmly ejected his magazine, accepted a new one from the Mastiff, and loaded it into his M4. Following his lead, I got rid of my still half-full mag and replaced it as well. I switched out my grenades for EMP rounds to deal with the killbug swarm that would precede the enemy.

"There's quite a few bad guys left," I remarked. "I'd have thought the PAP would have reduced their numbers a bit more for us."

"What are you talking about?" Kuma said. "The PAP hasn't done anything."

"What?"

"All of our attacks are being carried out by the ORGAN."

I fixed my gaze on the status icon at the side of my goggles' screen and it expanded to display our kill counts. Twenty-four for me, 57 for Kuma, and for Aypasha—321.

When we made contact with the convoys, I thought the fighters who were already dead had been rendered that way by the PAP's Bingfeng.

I turned to see Aypasha stand on her saddle and pop her head out from our shell. She seemed to be looking through her goggles at the approaching caravan.

"What are you doing?" I found myself saying. "That's dangerous."

She gave my warning as much thought as I had, which is to say none. Instead, she stretched herself even higher and lifted her goggles. In contrast with her soot-smeared cheeks, her pale

skin and green eyes bordered by red eye shadow stood out as if they'd been projected there by the active camouflage.

She pointed a finger and its blue, beaded nail to an edge of the convoy. Her sooty lips trembled into a smile.

"They're here. But only two."

She narrowed her red-flecked, green agate eyes.

Her face formed an expression I'd never seen on her before.

Rage.

"Oh," Kuma said, his voice subdued.

I closed my eyes.

Aypasha had been lying when she said she lost her memories of Ürümqi.

This was the rage of someone who'd had her family killed, and who had been brainwashed into becoming a suicide bomber. If it hadn't been for that anger, she wouldn't have been able to engineer the deaths of hundreds in less than an hour's time. Even with my village destroyed, it was only because Aypasha was the one shouldering the burden of each decision to kill that I'd been able to shoot at more enemies today than I'd faced in my entire five years of service.

"All this," I asked, "You went through all this in order to get your revenge?"

Aypasha turned her green agate eyes to me. She opened her lips as if to say something, but closed them again and returned her gaze to the approaching caravan.

I was about to say something else when Kuma cut me off, saying, "I brought her into this."

Kuma rotated his shoulders, then walked to the pack Mastiff and pulled my damaged backpack out from the space between the ammo cases. He tossed it at my feet.

I pointed to the bag and asked, "What's that for?"

He ignored my question. "ORGAN is the most effective

ground combat system in existence. Starting next year, the US, in conjunction with approved private defense contractors, will begin using it in operations in the Middle East and Central Asia. The PLA will have a similar system developed in about two years and will send them into Xinjiang and Tibet.”

“They will?”

“That’s right. And Russia and NATO will follow. The developed world will no longer kill with remotely operated robots or with AI. They will send soldiers into battles. They will fight wars on fair terms.”

“You can’t guarantee the terrorists will see it that way,” I said.

“Can’t we?” Kuma said. He pointed to the sand trails rising into the blue sky. “ETIS has found their victory condition. If they beat us, they’ll have won the battle. That would be quite an accomplishment. But there’s one more point I want to drive home. The ORGAN system is controlled by a person on the spot. I want to create a story so that no one will ever forget that.”

Kuma spread his arms wide, as if to encompass Aypasha and me.

“The M4, symbolizing the American military, and the ZH-05 of the PLA,” the captain said. “Protected by two soldiers, a Uyghur woman in Uyghur dress kills hundreds of terrorists and avenges her father and her family.”

Kuma grinned and wiped the grime from his face. “Beautiful, isn’t it? ORGAN destroys the entire convoy, chases the fleeing ETIS to the border, and vanishes. If we can start a rumor that we became mounted bandits afterward, all the better.”

“Boss—Captain Kuma,” I said, at a loss for anything else.

He put his index and middle fingers together and touched them to his head in a two-finger salute.

“This is goodbye,” he said. “I’ve put some money and papers

for your new identity in your backpack.”

“Goodbye,” Aypasha said.

“Wait,” I protested. “You’re not planning on dying, are you?”

“What, like a kamikaze?” Aypasha replied. “I’m not here to make like some terrorist. I’m going to kill every last one of them here.”

She rolled up the sleeves of her tattered dress and struck a single key on her invisible keyboard.

Electricity jolted through my body. I fell to my knees, and then to my back. Violet smoke wafted from my bodysuit.

*It’s the electrodes of the armored shell.* Such was my last thought before the next shock came to take me into unconsciousness.

The last thing I saw was the blue, cloudless sky.



As a popping, crackling noise continued in the background, I became aware of a hoarse male voice.

“—Ni, hai ma?” You all right? “Ni, hai ma?” the voice repeated, inquiring after my well-being in clumsy Beijingsese. Slender threads were brushing against my face.

I answered, “Shi.” When I forced open my eyes, the first thing I saw was the dull sheen of roughly hammered metal. An engraved stamp with Sanskrit writing glinted in the red light and informed me of what it was I was seeing—an AK-47 made in a Tibetan workshop. The favored black-market weapon of ETIS fighters.

Acting on instinct, I tried to push out my arms, but some kind of woolen fabric was wrapped around my body and gently stopped my movement. It was a Uyghur cloak woven of thick wools of red and black and yellow. Cold highland air worked its

way through the gaps, and I quickly snuggled myself back into the cloak.

What I had first thought were threads brushing against my face turned out to be the long beard belonging to the old man who was leaning over me. Spreading behind him was the wide, starry sky.

I turned my head and saw that my backpack, complete with its new opening, was lying beside me. On the other side, an open-air fire heated a cooking pot and cast warm light onto its surroundings. Beyond that stood four simple tents constructed of waterproof cloth with patterns mottled by dust. The breeze carried a familiar animal smell. I searched my memories, trying to place it, then saw a boy of maybe ten urging along a goat with a rope lead around its neck. They disappeared behind the tents.

Judging from the size of the encampment, I guessed it belonged to a family of twenty or so.

I asked the man if he was Uyghur, and he nodded. Then, carefully, I asked, "Are you involved with ETIS?"

"Certainly not," he answered in his dried-out voice. He flashed a wide grin that was more gap than teeth, then gestured with his knitted muffler and said, "We ride horses. Go where the goats and sheep go. Well, we do have two cars."

"How did I get here?"

"A man, he left you in our care. Big man. He was covered in blood."

My mind, still in a haze, had to work to process the old man's halting, thickly accented Beijingsese, but he filled me in.

A man had come over the hills with two machines that looked like metal horses and deposited me in the nomads' care. In exchange, he gave them a pile of ammunition along with firearms he'd captured from ETIS fighters, before leaving toward the north.

Right away, I knew that had been Kuma.

So he'd met with his mounted bandits after all. The humor of that brought a grin to my face, which in turn sent pain shooting from a cut on my cheek. My hand moved to the source of the pain, and the man laughed.

"That's your only injury," he said.

"You've already looked me over, then? Thank you."

"It's quite the feat," the old man said as a chuckle escaped through the gaps in his teeth. "Just to be careful, we took off your clothes and looked you over, but you had no other injuries. Even after all that fighting you did."

"All that fighting?" I asked.

He reached behind the checkered cloth scarf that draped over his chest, produced an object, and thrust it at me. I tensed at the sudden movement, but then saw what he was holding: a sun-bleached, nicked-and-dented HW7 smartphone.

"I watched it," the old man said. "You protected the train. A tremendous battle."

But that PAP lieutenant, Lie, had said that the stratospheric cellular network, Pingliuwang, had been disabled for the surrounding area.

I asked, "Wasn't your reception cut off?"

"We hadn't been able to use our phones for two days. But today, they suddenly started working again."

At the top-right corner of the phone's screen, next to the signal strength bars, was the word StratNet—America's version of the Pingliuwang. Kuma had to have been behind it. He had said that news of the battle was going to get out, when actually he intended to stream the whole thing live.

"You saw it," I said softly. "You saw what we did."

Age and high-altitude sun exposure had carved an extra line across his eyelids, but his old eyes sparkled as he said, "An

American and a PLA soldier protected Uchqun's daughter, who came back to take revenge."

"That's right," I said. "What happened to Aypasha? Kuma—the man who brought me here—was there a woman with him?"

"So her name is Aypasha," he said, pronouncing her name with an Uyghur accent. "That's a good name. An empress's name. Suitable for someone who eradicated over five hundred apostates."

As for what happened to her, the old man was uncertain. The broadcast ended with her collapse. When Kuma came a half day later, Aypasha was with him, but she was slumped across her Mastiff and made not a single move.

The man ran a hand through his beard and looked up at the starry sky, then slowly, he said, "The fight was easy to follow. Uchqun's daughter—Aypasha—killed the ETIS fighters in a fury. Drones were flying—she controlled them, you could tell. She did have the help of incredibly effective weapons, but this was different from ETIS's beloved killbugs or the government's Bingfeng. It was a fight people like us could possibly win."

"The man who dropped me off—Kuma—and Aypasha would both be glad to hear you say that."

With a chuckle, he said, "Would they now?" He slapped the action of his AK and invited me to sit on his blanket.

Careful not to let open my cloak, I took a corner of the sheet and regarded the old man's camp. For weapons, all I could see was one vehicle mounted with an antique Browning HMG and the Tibetan-made AK in the man's arms. They probably had some kind of radio, but likely a civilian model with no EMP shielding. If anyone came at them with an ORGAN, they would have no hope of resisting.

Choosing my words carefully so as not to hurt the man's feelings, I said, "You're right. You might have a way to win.



Because it's a human coming, not machines."

"People battling people on the same field. It's a war of *gongzheng*."

I tilted my head in confusion, hearing my name. "My war?"

The man touched a knotty finger between his eyebrows and said, "I meant to say it's a *gongzheng war*." Fair, not fairness, he had meant. "I didn't say anything about you."

"That's my name. Gongzheng Zhao."

He blinked those wrinkled eyebrows, then suddenly threw himself back and guffawed, slapping at the AK on his stomach. "The way Gongzheng fights is fair. That's too good. It's Gongzheng's *gongzheng* battle."

When he was finished laughing, he slipped the AK from his shoulder and pressed it toward me.

"Mr. Gongzheng, will you take up a gun for our cause?"

I extended an arm from my cloak to take the weapon. The outdated firearm was many times heavier than my ZH-05, and I nearly fumbled it, but the old man reached out with his bony arm to support me. When I cradled the rifle outside my cloak, I caught the odor of tallow coming from the AK's action. This man didn't even have proper grease with which to maintain his gun.

I asked, "Are you seeking independence, like ETIS?"

"Certainly not. ETIS is our enemy. They steal from us." He waved a hand in front of his face in a dismissive gesture. "We just want to protect our way of life. Not independence, just to live in peace, at our own pace."

"I'm just a soldier," I said. "I couldn't possibly be of any real help to you."

"That's not true," the old man said. He leaned in to me. "Soon, the PLA and the PAP will start using machines like you three did. Teach us how to fight those things. Please, even

if you only stay for two, three years.”

A feeling crawled down my spine.

This was what Kuma wanted.

This was why he had so thoroughly explained to me how the system worked while we were still in the fight.

He wanted me to stay in the Chinese backcountry and to devise and spread the means to battle the ORGAN system.

Any similar system would require a heavy machine, like the Mastiff, to carry and support the operator. Wire traps and pits would be effective against them. The operator could also be ambushed. Without having to face an infinite swarm of attacking Bingfeng, it would be possible to come up with some way to resist.

This is how I could become part of the story, as Aypasha had done.

I could face ETIS and battle against them—me, the Han Chinese; me, who could be spoken of in the tale of Aypasha and ORGAN.

If I stood shoulder to shoulder with the Uyghurs and the Mongols and repelled the Chinese government’s ORGANs, my story would be remembered.

The twin AIs of the Bingfeng and the killbugs had brought the world to chaos, but we could take it back—Kuma and the governments with their ORGAN systems, and me standing against them.

Was it really possible?

The old man took my hand. Maybe he’d seen the change in my expression.

“We’ll pay you later,” he said, “so I hope you’ll accept this for now. Even if I did get it from Kuma.”

From behind the scarf, he withdrew the red mesh bag of Chunghwa cigarettes, handed it to me, and said he reckoned we

could get thirty dollars a carton. He'd kept a carton for himself, which he now opened, then took out a cigarette and lit it. The smell was potent and unadulterated—high-end stuff.

He offered me the open carton.

"I don't smoke," I said.

With the unlit cigarette between his fingers, the old man pointed at my backpack and said, "There's plenty more in your backpack."

Kuma's New Year's gifts.

I laughed and said, "Then I'll take one. But only one. We'll have to sell the rest later."

I accepted the tightly rolled cigarette from his fingers and took a deep drag.

When I pulled it from my mouth, the cigarette's slender, pale smoke, visible even next to the fire pit, rose into the kind of clear, starry sky seen only here in the highlands.

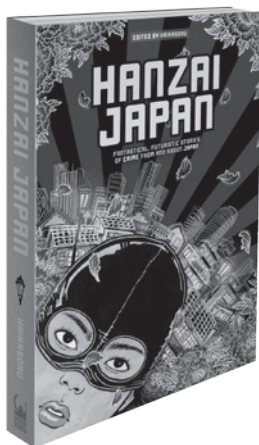






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