

Part 1

*Roses are red, violets are blue,
This world ain't so sweet – they're coming to get you.*

She clutched the child to her chest, swaddled in rags, as she plunged into the freezing depths of the Yalu River. There was already a thin layer of ice coating its surface, which cracked as she penetrated it with her body weight.

Would they hear? Would they spot the telltale signs of her path? She held her baby closer, dreading that she might have to duck underwater for cover. If it came to that would he survive? Her hands trembled, fingers rail thin and tinged blue. This was the main route defectors took to escape the Hermit Kingdom into Northern China. That much she knew, but as to how many actually made it, she could only imagine – and hope.

She spotted the reflection of a light, quivering on the water's surface about ten or twenty feet ahead of her. As her insides trembled and convulsed from the sting of the cold, that bright, warm-looking light seemed to beckon her; implore her to give in, to turn back into comforting, benevolent arms before it was too late. Her brain could barely function in this freezing water, but she still had enough wits left about her to grit her teeth against the temptation.

No matter what that shimmering reflection of light tried to tell her, she knew it was already too late. It had been too late from moment she'd taken that first step into the river. Those benevolent arms would be benevolent no longer. If she were to try stepping back into them now, they would embrace her tight; tight so that all the breath was wrung out of her lungs and her bones were ground to dust.

The baby in her arms lay silent. Asleep. She looked down several times to make sure he was still breathing. Cautiously she placed one foot in front of the other, eyes constantly fixed on the movement of that light ahead. She started to hear voices now. At first she dismissed them as a figment of her paranoid imagination, but with every step forward they started to grow clearer.

Everything around her amplified a hundred-fold. Each painful breath that tore through her chest echoed as if in stereo-sound. And those voices, they were definitely real, and they were growing closer. The baby stirred in her arms. She willed for him to keep his eyes closed and sleep. If he cried it would be the end of them both.

The voices grew louder, echoing in the dark. She couldn't quite make out what they were saying but they must know she was close by. How could she have been so foolish? *Of course* they knew where she was, knew all about her and what she'd been planning, all from the very beginning. On not a few nights had her

eyes snapped open in terror, expecting to see them standing at the foot of the bed, ready to take her because they could read her thoughts.

They knew. They knew *everything*. Hadn't she been taught that in school? From the moment she'd realized she was pregnant, from the moment she'd started picturing escape routes in her head – they knew and they had been watching. She couldn't feel her legs anymore. She could feel water rushing by her hips, but she couldn't tell if it was from her own movement or just the current.

Still gritting her teeth against the pain of the cold, tears rolled down her face as those voices struck her at every angle like a knife's edge. *Why don't you come out already?* The riverbed beneath her feet suddenly sunk down another level and the water now cut across her chest. She had to raise both arms to keep her son out of its way.

Then she saw it – someone making their way down from one of the guard towers. They'd had their fun and they were coming now. He was wearing a military cap and holding a gun. Amongst the blurred panic his silhouette alone stood out clear. Another followed behind him. Their feet met the same solid ground as hers. This was it – death would be a mercy.

Her hands trembled as she held up her baby son, now almost like an offering to those grotesque and cruel cannibals. Her feet kept moving, but all that was left to fuel them onward was a small, isolated voice still clinging to life in the very back of her sub conscience: *keep moving and stay away from the light*.

She was sure her knees must be trembling also, but beneath the water it was difficult to tell. They were coming closer now. She inhaled a mouthful of water when the riverbed took another unexpected drop, and the ends of the rags encasing the baby started to get wet. She could feel her lungs straining inside her chest, trying to force her to cough up the water invading her airway. But she couldn't afford to cough, she couldn't afford a single unnecessary sound.

Saliva trailed down her chin as her chest continued to silently heave. Would they jump in the water, or would they be waiting for her at the other side? That is if she made it without drowning. She could barely breathe. Then perhaps mercifully, or signaling her imminent capture, she felt the riverbed start to incline upward.

Through the darkness she stumbled onto dry land. Her hands might have been shaking from fear and cold, but her legs, it turned out, were resilient. She cast a glance over to the terrible glaring light and caught sight of the two figures again – running in the opposite direction.

Away from the guard towers she crawled into a sprawling patch of shrubbery, lay her son to one side and promptly coughed up all the water stagnating in her lungs. The pain was incredible as her entire body heaved and wretched, fighting for air. But she'd made it across the border.

Her son started to stir inside his bundle of half-soaked rags. She didn't know if she'd done the right thing. She didn't know if what was waiting out beyond those shrubs would be any form of salvation. Maybe she was the one whose mind was in the wrong.

Even now she couldn't shake the rhetoric playing on constant loop in the back of her head. But there was no turning back now. What was done was done, and the only way to go was forward, no matter what sort of punishment lay in waiting.

Part 2

"*Mama!*" The sound of a child's voice broke the silence enclosed between four concrete walls. "What is it Sheng-Li?" A weary, cracked voice responded. "Look what I found!" The child's voice called back in faintly Chinese-accented Korean as he ran across the threshold to the one-room flat.

In his hands he held a tiny brown and gray bird with a visibly broken wing. His mother looked up from her quilting, fingertips red and coarse from the thousandth pass of the needle, with thousands more to go. "What have you got there?" The ghost of a smile flickered across her pale face before it shattered to the floor, without enough spare energy to sustain it.

It had been almost ten years since Sheng-Li had been carried as an infant across the North Korean border into China. Since then he and his mother had scraped a living in the rural northeastern Jilin Province, with his mother sewing quilts from inside their one-room Soviet-era flat.

She preferred to stay inside as much as possible in order to avoid attention. It was common knowledge that the Chinese government sent North Korean defectors straight back to where they came from. If that were to happen, both mother and child would likely be sent to a slave labor camp for political traitors, along with the rest of the family by association.

Hence she'd chosen a Chinese name for her son and discouraged him from using any Korean while out of the house. Recently his Korean had started to become a little unnatural, interspersed with distinctly Chinese nuances. She hoped for his sake that one day he could forget it entirely.

"Mama, I found it out on the ground. Can I keep it?"

The little bird cupped in Sheng-Li's open palms quivered pathetically. One look told it would never fly again. His mother sighed. "Go on then. There's some bread in that cardboard box in the corner. You can feed it – but *only* the mouldy bits." Sheng-Li's face broke out in a smile, but his mother had already looked back down at her needlework.

She'd have to finish at least five more quilts if she and her son wanted to eat next week. Sheng Li was definitely too thin – all his clothes swam on him. Over the

other side of the room he sat with the injured bird in one hand, while tearing up pieces of mouldy, stale bread with the other. Maybe he'd forgotten how to feel hungry, or maybe living on the brink since birth, he'd never properly learned the feeling. He never complained, but wasn't as if he'd ever had anything to compare it to.

For the weeks that followed Sheng-Li took care of that bird. It even started walking round on its own up on the windowsill, singing a shrill tune. Sheng-Li tore up the mouldy bread into tiny pieces as his mother worked, raw red fingers moving swiftly over the half-finished quilt in her lap. Her fingertips were so calloused now that they rarely bled even if the needle struck them.

There were some few occasions where his mother left the house, but usually she wouldn't allow him to go with her. Sheng-Li didn't mind now that he had some extra company. In fact some of the other wild birds seemed to have caught wind and started appearing on the windowsill in hope of food. This became a morning ritual where Sheng-Li would feed the birds while his mother silently pulled thread after thread with weary, calloused hands.

But one day, unexpectedly, his mother shut the window. She had a grim look on her face, different from the usual tiredness. It was far more acute and even a ten-year-old Sheng-Li could sense something was wrong. "Sheng-Li, I need you to promise you won't speak any Korean anymore. Even inside the house." His mother knelt in front of him as she whispered in somewhat disjointed Chinese.

He noticed her eyes drifting up to the ceiling. Could it be something to do with that older woman upstairs? She'd always looked at them funnily. Had she said something nasty? But his mother gave no further explanation. For the next few days Sheng-Li didn't know why, but his mother acted strangely.

An unfinished quilt lay crumpled up in a corner, sewing needles and thread scattered across the floor. Then the one thing that Sheng-Li dreaded the most happened: his mother went out at night. Sheng-Li hated to be alone in the dark. The concrete walls of that cold, wretched apartment only locked in more of the chill. It only happened once in a while, when people wouldn't buy enough quilts, but each time felt to him like an eternity.

"Do you have to go?"

"Just try to sleep. I'll be back before you know it."

She held a rail thin hand to his face. Cold, nothing like living human flesh should feel. "Time will go by quicker if you sleep." It still felt strange to hear his mother address him in Chinese. When she turned her back and locked the door behind her with a hollow sounding echo, Sheng-Li crawled into the corner and took the half sewn together pieces of the unfinished quilt, wrapping it around his shoulders.

Eventually he drifted into a shallow slumber. But the cold of an oncoming winter was cruel in the way it sapped extra energy from his body, yet at the same time never let him be comfortable enough to fall properly to sleep. It was sunrise

when his mother finally came home. Weak pale sunlight cast through the only window illuminated her worn, disheveled appearance, like a ghost.

In the pocket of her ragged coat was an envelope. She kept feeling it with her hand as if to make sure it was still safely tucked in there. Sheng Li sat on the floor. In his palm sat the bird with the broken wing. It seemed to be healing and if it tried, flapping its wings rapidly with a faint murmur like a tiny propeller, it could rise several inches into the air. But only for a few short seconds before it fell back down with a thud. Poor, pathetic thing.

“Hey Mama, who’s that?” Later that day Sheng-Li stood on tiptoe by the small, grotty window while his mother tried to catch a few hours of sleep. But upon hearing those words she leapt up as if struck by a volt of electricity. One glance out the window and she threw away all former caution, switching back to rapid Korean: “Sheng-Li, be good and listen to me, okay? You need to take this now and run. Get on a train to the city and don’t talk to *anyone*.”

She removed the envelope from her pocket and held it out to him. Inside was more cash than he’d ever seen in his life. Taking his hand in hers, she placed it in his open palm and wrapped his fingers firmly around it. Sheng-Li was confused. He’d never seen his mother look so severe. “Are you coming with me?” “I’ll follow you when I can.” Those hollow words echoed faintly in the cold, largely empty room.

His mother cast a gaze back to the window. The police officers were drawing closer and she knew whom they were there for. “Quickly, run and get on the next train. You might not understand now, but you’ll be safer without me.” “I don’t want to...” “Go now. I’ll follow you later.” An empty promise filled with more love than Sheng-Li might ever know again.

When Sheng-Li made it to Beijing with nothing but the clothes on his back and an envelope filled with cash he was left to wander aimlessly. It was the first time he’d ever seen an actual city. There was barely room to breathe amongst the thick layer of smog and the churning ocean of people’s legs running straight into him. Several times he was knocked straight to the ground and when he made to stand back up, it was only to come face-to-face yet again with someone’s oncoming leg or sharp-cornered briefcase.

Amongst the endless sea of smog and human flesh he tried to navigate to no avail. Being tossed from side to side, almost drowning beneath the onslaught of waves, at last he caught sight of an opening. A small alleyway jutted off the main road, in between towering concrete buildings.

With all his remaining strength he pushed against the current, towards that tiny scrap of an oasis. When he finally made it across he collapsed on the cold concrete, his upper body heaving and legs trembling. But before he could properly gather his wits about him – “What have we got here? This isn’t a place for children to be wandering around alone.”

He tried to make out the face of the figure, no, several figures, standing in front of him, leering down, but it was too dark. He didn't know who these people were or what they wanted with him in this alleyway, but he sensed he'd rather brave the rapid current outside than wait to find out. He made to stand up but through the exhaustion and the fear, he found he could barely feel his legs.

"Hold up a second kid. What's your hurry?" Suddenly he found himself upright, toes dangling a few inches above the ground and with a tight feeling around his windpipe. A faint choking noise was all he could muster as the hand that gripped the neckline of his shirt tightened. Then the hand started to move, shaking his entire body while all he could do was dangle helplessly.

A dull noise resounded as the envelope he'd been carrying in the front pocket of his worn jacket hit the ground. It was almost inaudible beneath the choking and short strained breaths, but his assailants picked up on straight away. Suddenly the pressure around his windpipe disappeared and his body landed flat on the cold concrete.

"Hey, check this out. That's a lot of cash for a kid like you."

Sheng-Li struggled to his feet and with an outstretched hand made a leap towards the man who stood holding the envelope. A blow straight through the stomach, and he felt the pavement again as he writhed, coughing and choking. Saliva and stomach fluid pooled bedside his agape mouth. If he'd had enough food in him he probably would have thrown it all up.

Another attempt to take to his feet, and this time a kick to the shins, followed by laughter. "This kid's loaded." He didn't try to get up again. The last thing he remembered was the faint touch of the empty envelope on his cheek as it fluttered down to the ground. Everything around him fell silent. It was so dark he barely even noticed the blackness creeping in from the corners of his eyes as consciousness escaped him.

"Kid. Hey kid."

Somehow he'd managed to crawl his way out of the alleyway, but his legs hadn't carried him far from there. Back amongst the swarm of people he must have barely made it the street length before his legs folded beneath him. Propped up against a street post he sat in a pile of filth and grime. Half extinguished cigarette butts sent smoke wafting straight up into his nostrils and his vision was a blur.

"Can you hear me?" That voice again. He tried to locate the source, but it was as if someone had severed the wire between his brain and the rest of his body. It was only when someone placed a heavy hand on his shoulder that a small sliver of sensibility ran through like him, like a stray vault of electricity. Alarmed, he made to flee, but the hand was too strong, holding him where he sat on the pavement.

"No need to be afraid. My name's Jin Huang. It's my job to take care of orphans like you." The inside of Sheng-Li's skull was ringing with all the discordant sound from every angle, but he responded automatically to what he thought he heard. "I'm not an orphan."

“Of course you aren’t..”

Sheng-Li felt a tug on his arm and he was pulled abruptly to his feet, but his legs still wouldn’t hold. “Looks like you’re in a bad way. Don’t worry, I’ll take you somewhere they’ll look after you.” The next thing he knew he was being hoisted onto the man’s broad back. He was wearing a black suit. The fabric felt almost too nice for Sheng-Li to be touching it directly. “Come on. Would you like a big bowl of rice – as much as you want – with meat as well? When was the last time you had meat?”

From what he could make of the man’s face, it seemed weathered but not quite *old*. There seemed to be a long scar stretching across on one cheek. Sheng-Li simply clung to his shoulders as he was carried through a maze of busy streets, until they reached an area where the crowd started to die away. It was an industrial area, semi-disused. Jin carried Sheng-Li down a narrow flight of stairs into the basement of one of the abandoned warehouses.

There, Sheng-Li came face-to-face once again with a crowd, but different from the one before. There were about twenty, perhaps more, children who all looked around his own age. “We can take care of you here. You won’t have to worry about starving or sleeping on the street again. All you have to do is a few small jobs. How does that sound?”

Sheng-Li didn’t care about anything anymore. All he cared about was the cooked rice he could smell from across the room. It was literal torture. Jin seemed to pick up on the longing in his eyes and smiled. “So you’ll stay?” Sheng-Li nodded silently. All he could think about was eating something, *anything*. Jin gave him a pat on the shoulder as a bowl of steaming rice was handed to him. He didn’t wait for the chopsticks, digging straight into it with his bare hands and shoveling it into his mouth.

From then on Sheng-Li would come to know the dizzying madness of the city like the back of his hand – every street, every back alley, every hidden basement. His job was to deliver packages. Sometimes wrapped up and placed in his pocket, sometimes taped to his body. Apparently adults attracted too much attention and the police would always cause problems. But a child was discrete, rarely noticed. The instructions were always the same – drop off the package, take the money and don’t speak to anyone on the way.

As he grew older however, grew into the lifestyle, he started to find his own rhythm in the way he carried out his work. Addicts were usually too desperate to cause too much trouble – most he encountered would sell their firstborn rather than miss their next hit. But a few could still conjure the nerve to be difficult. At thirteen or so he stabbed someone for the first time, with a pocketknife when they wouldn’t pay up.

It used to be about food and a place to sleep. But after he stuck his knife for the very first time into that lump of quivering human flesh, he started to feel a need for another surge of that same exhilaration. All the resentment, anger, loneliness,

he could express in some tangible form, using some other unfortunate as his canvas. That screaming, squirming hunk of meat, that gush of blood...

When he got a little older he learnt the feeling of reassurance from the weight of a gun in his hand. On his fifteenth birthday he fired a bullet into a wall, barely an inch away from the head of a particularly troublesome debtor. He loved the way all the blood drained away from the man's complexion until he was chalk white, the way he shivered as he collapsed into a corner.

The scene actually reminded him of his own self at one time. He could still vaguely remember that corner, that half-finished quilt in that dismal little apartment. He remembered how cold the concrete had felt against his back, his protruding spine and ribcage. The bird that never managed to fly again – whatever happened to it?

Of course whatever had happened in that room after he'd run, he'd never know. But all he wanted to do right now was bring some closure – closure towards the reflection of that past fear, staring him straight in the face. The man still sat quivering in the corner. Sheng-Li pulled the trigger – *click...*
Empty.

His victim still didn't move, but a strangled moan spilled out from between his lips. Tears and mucus ran down his pathetic face, still in one piece. Sheng-Li walked over and spat at his feet. "Pay up by next Saturday or I come back with a spare ammo cartridge. Try running and I'll catch you – running is one thing I'm very good at."

Part 3

It was Sheng Li's twentieth birthday and he was walking along the red light district with his two of his companions since the old days, Tao and Dai. Dusk was falling and the gray smog started to take on a burnt hue of orange as certain shops closed up and others began to awaken.

"How can you *never* have done it? You're *twenty* already." Tao looked across to Sheng-Li, clearly aghast. "I dunno..." Sheng-Li replied nonchalantly. But Tao wasn't going to be satisfied with just that. "That's it. We're going to take you to a place. Don't tell me none of the girls ever called out to you on the street at night."

"They do." Dai cut in. "He always ignores them."

Tao smacked a palm to his own forehead. "Seriously, what *is* it with you? There's no way a guy our age *can't* be interested. It's just biologically impossible."

"I don't know why, and I don't care."

After polishing off a few bottles of cheap rice wine between the three of them, Sheng-Li returned alone to the apartment he now rented on his own. Stumbling

across the floor he pulled at the buttons on his shirt until it fell loose. Clothes were starting to feel too constrictive.

He undid his belt and let it fall to the ground. The buckle hit the wooden floorboards with a *clunk*, but it still wasn't enough. He unfastened the button at the top of his trousers and wrenched down the fly as he threw himself over the sofa. Lying on his back he reached for his gun resting on the side table and took it in his hand.

He held it above his head, staring up at the long silver barrel. It glistened beneath the ceiling light. Whenever he held that silver pistol, especially when he stared up at its full length, he felt a strange warm sensation wash over his entire body. Or rather it permeated every nerve from the inside out. He couldn't quite describe what his was, but he could feel his pupils dilate and a hot flush run all the way up to his cheekbones.

His stripped off the unbuttoned shirt still clinging to one arm, and let it fall to the floor. As he shifted his bodyweight his unzipped trousers slipped further down his hips. Still he held the gun in the air above him, staring at that long, metallic silver barrel glistening with white pinpricks of light.

Subconsciously his free hand crept along his inner thigh. With the fingertips of the other, he slowly traced down one side of the upright barrel. He shivered from the sensation of the cold, hard metal in opposition to the heat overriding the rest of his body. His free hand slipped further down from his inner thigh while other kept holding tightly to the gun.

The pressure inside felt enormous. Was this how all his friends felt when they went to those brothels? He shifted his weight again and the sofa creaked. He could feel his breath growing ragged and his chest starting to heave. Beads of sweat started forming at his forehead, running down the bridge of his nose and trickling in through the corners of his semi-parted lips.

He tasted the salt, felt the throbbing heat, one hand between his legs and eyes fixed solely on the barrel of that gun. Then the fever finally shattered. His vision cracked, his head rolled back and the gun finally came crashing to the floor. Lucky he'd remembered to put the safety on this time – a small murmur of sensibility in the back of his mind as he lay fighting for breath.

Several days later he was called in by Jin. Apparently there was big deal to go down, smuggling heroin across Central Asia, through China and into Japan. A now twenty-year-old Sheng-Li was to be promoted to take part in this partnership with one of the most notorious organisations in Tokyo. "Their representative, and the main coordinator of this entire operation, arrived in Beijing yesterday. Seeing as you'll be working closely he's asked to meet you in private. He goes by the name of Ren. But be careful what you say around him, he's known to be trigger happy."

Without a complaint, Sheng-Li went to the address he was given – an old disused warehouse. Apparently it belonged to the dummy enterprise. On paper it

manufactured and exported mechanical parts, and was set up for the purpose of this operation. When Sheng-Li entered, he expected to find an older man. The image in his head had been more or less similar to Jin. But to his surprise the man he found waiting for him looked at most only around five years older than himself.

“Sheng-Li, I take it. I’m Ren.”

Ren’s hair was long, almost to his shoulders, and messy, but not completely unkempt-looking as Sheng-Li’s was. It looked as if he might have even styled it purposefully that way, but it was beyond Sheng-Li to think too much on things like that. He wore a pair of military-style cargo trousers with boots, a fitted tank top and dog tags around his neck.

Even in the dark Sheng-Li could make out the outline of muscles running all the way along his arms and creeping up his neck. He suddenly became conscious of his own sunken shoulders and protruding ribs inside his billowing shirt. “So the plan is fairly straightforward.” Ren took a few steps closer to the motionless Sheng-Li. “The cargo’s going to be coming through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The import into China and re-export into Japan will be carried out under the name of this paper-company whose warehouse we’re currently standing in.”

Ren spoke so smoothly and on such familiar terms that it was hard to imagine him in the way Jin had described him. “I already have an arrangement with a friend in the Tokyo police force, so customs shouldn’t be too much trouble. But because of the sheer volume, the cargo’s going to be split into two parts, just to be doubly certain not to draw any excess attention. I’ll accompany one part, and you the other.”

Sheng-Li wasn’t sure what it was, but he felt something he rarely ever felt. He actually thought he liked this guy. “You speak really good Chinese.” The words spilled from his mouth before he could think about how he might sound. Ren smiled. “I do a lot of business here. Hopefully this will be the start of a profitable partnership for the both of us.” He wrapped an arm around a startled Sheng-Li’s shoulders.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you come across a little different from all the other Chinese I know.”

“Oh...” Sheng-Li tried not to stumble over his words. He was still a little taken back from the abrupt physical contact. “Well, actually I was born in North Korea. My mother escaped when I was still a baby though, and gave me the name Sheng-Li, probably so I could blend in better.”

“Where is she now?”

Sheng-Li didn’t know how to answer that question, and Ren seemed to sense his dilemma. “Sorry, you don’t have to answer that. But honestly I’d be interested in hearing more of your backstory. What do you say we go get something to eat then hit up a bar? I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.” Under normal circumstances Sheng-Li would have regarded such an unusual offer with suspicion. So why was it that he couldn’t bring himself to say no?

Together they downed bowls of spicy wanton noodle soup in a hole-in-the-wall shop Sheng-Li always frequented, before moving onto beer and spirits. Then finally, during some dark hour of the morning, Sheng-Li found himself being led into Ren's hotel room – a penthouse suite in one of the seven-star hotels in the city centre. Ren had his arm wrapped tight around Sheng-Li's shoulders; pulling him in so close it was difficult to walk.

Sheng-Li could feel the heat radiating off the other's body and the hint of alcohol on his breath – but not enough to be truly intoxicated. "You ever done it with another guy before?" Sheng-Li doubted if he'd heard correctly, but Ren pressed him again. "Well?"

"I've never done anything." He expected Ren to laugh, but he didn't. He did raise an eyebrow though.

"Really? You outran the cops and escaped to Beijing at ten, started going round stabbing people who wouldn't pay up by age thirteen, but you've never had sex?" "I know. Do you have to keep going on about it? It's just the way things worked out...I don't really understand it myself either." Sheng-Li made to turn away but Ren pulled him in even closer so they were now pressed chest to chest. "It's not as complicated as you think. You see, there are guys who like the girls in the brothels and cabaret clubs, and then there are guys like us."

The next thing Sheng-Li knew, he was being pulled into a forceful kiss as Ren roughly unfastened the buttons on his shirt. Once they were completely open Ren pulled the shirt down off his shoulders, letting it hit the floor at their feet. Sheng-Li felt a familiar warmth wash over him and his heart thumped almost painfully in his chest – but he wasn't holding his gun.

It wasn't until mid-morning the next day that he woke up; his oversized clothes scattered across the floor, intermingled with Ren's tank top and cargo pants. He brushed the stray hair out of his eyes as he rolled over. His joints ached with the movement. Half blinded by the glaring sun through the open curtains, he reached out one hand and felt around the top of the bedside cabinet.

"Got any cigarettes?" Sheng-Li questioned groggily to Ren, who had also started to stir. Ren stretched out across the mattress, one hand landing on Sheng-Li's jutting hipbone. "I think I'm out. Let's call room service – get some coffee as well."

Sheng-Li didn't know what it was. His mind was still a complete blur and he would kill for a smoke, but for the first time in his memory, he didn't feel like...what was it? Like complete garbage, perhaps? Maybe this was an activity he could even use to replace some of the unnecessary blood letting on so many clients. Who knew?

Part 4

In the following few weeks Sheng-Li found himself spending most of the spare time he had alone with Ren. They'd usually go for dinner or lunch, after which Sheng-Li invariably ended up in Ren's bed. He found that if he missed a day or two, his thirst for violence increased sharply.

One time on his debt collecting rounds when they hadn't met for a few days straight, Sheng-Li pinned someone's hand palm down to a tabletop with his pocketknife while he beat them repeatedly over the head. He continued in this haze of fury until his victim lost consciousness, face submerged in a pool of blood.

It really hadn't been necessary to go so far. Chances were that particular client would have paid up sooner rather than later – just as they tried to swear they would through a mouthful of blood and knocked out teeth. But Sheng-Li didn't really care about the money.

No matter how he tried he couldn't shake the feeling of restlessness. So, turning his back on the bloody scene, he decided to make an unannounced call to Ren's hotel room. He tried to straighten up his clothes a bit, in an attempt to arouse minimal suspicion when he entered the lobby of the seven-star hotel.

The spare room key Ren had handed him was tucked inside his shirt pocket. He didn't know if Ren would be in or not, but even if he wasn't he could just let himself in; maybe take a browse through the mini-bar or the pay-per-view. He put the key in the lock and pushed the door open. But as he did so, he started to hear the faint murmur of voices coming from the sitting room.

Keeping his footsteps as quiet as possible, he crept along the hallway to the source of the noise. There through the crack of the door left semi-ajar, he caught sight of two people, Jin and Ren, seated around the coffee table. Jin sat directly opposite Ren in his usual black suit, broad shoulders like a great dark mass, sucking in whatever sunlight was projected onto them through the window behind. "So everything's sorted then."

"It is..." Ren replied hesitantly. "But I want a favor."

"A favor?"

"I want Sheng-Li changed for someone else."

A look of confusion crossed Jin's face. "Why? What's it to you who the scapegoat is? It's just a mule to distract from the real shipment."

"Exactly. It doesn't *have* to be him. So I want you to change it to someone else."

Jin seemed to still be trying to work out if he'd heard correctly, but there was a definite strain of irritation in his tone. "Hasn't your cop friend on the Japanese side already got him on file? Hasn't the media story already be drafted up? *North Korean defector turned international drug dealer?*"

"I can get them to change it."

Sheng-Li felt overcome with anger. He tried to hold himself together but his entire body was already trembling beneath an unquenchable surge of rage. When he threw the door open with one hand, it smacked against the opposite wall, causing plaster to crumble onto the carpet. "I see how it is now. I'm the mule for your dummy shipment, am I? Well I won't do it, so I guess your argument's over. Find someone more stupid and gullible."

Jin took to his feet, regarding the disheveled-looking Sheng-Li with a mixture of distaste and humour. "Oh...I think I see now. I think I can see *exactly* what's going on here. He only does it for the power trip, you know." Jin smirked as he gestured to Ren. "But he needs to learn to *respect his elders*. Otherwise there might be some not too pleasant consequences."

At those words Ren followed suit, putting out the cigarette he'd been smoking and standing up. "Well if I'm as drunk off power as you say, then you can listen to me tell you right to your old decrepit face that *he's not doing it*. So find someone else!" Jin's expression soured. His distaste for being spoken to so brazenly by someone as young as Ren was obvious.

"You're telling me you'd risk everything for *this* piece of trash. I *literally* picked him out of the gutter when he was ten years old, covered in dirt and fleas – like an animal."

"Change it to someone else or the deal's off."

"That's a much more dangerous threat for you than it is for me. You'd better start learning to watch your mouth when you're on *my* territory."

Jin turned to Sheng-Li. "*Look* at him for god's sake. Surely you could find someone better to engage in your little *hobby* with. He's a scrawny flea-bitten mongrel, just like his mother."

Sheng-Li almost doubted his own ears. "*My mother?*"

"Yeah, didn't I ever tell you?" The smile across Jin's face broadened. "I used to travel to the northeast, Jilin Province, every once in a while. A lot of addicts up that way, especially in the rural parts. And there was always one Korean lady, who used to make quilts as I recall. But the quilts didn't always sell..."

"I'm warning you, shut your face old man." Ren shot a murderous glance across to Jin, but Jin ignored him. "I remember her well because of that thick Korean accent. You look just like her Sheng-Li – I could tell almost straight away. Guess that's to be expected considering the amount of times I've had her." By now Sheng-Li was shaking so heavily he could barely hold his body up straight.

"You what...?"

Jin laughed. "You heard me. I had your mother. Your mother was a *whore!*"

That was it. At those words Sheng-Li wrenched his gun out of his back pocket and without hesitating fired a shot into Jin's shoulder. Blood exploded like a crimson firework, spraying the curtains behind him. Jin let out a cry of pain, but Sheng-Li didn't stop there. He fired another shot and then another: into the opposite shoulder, the kneecap. Jin looked like a puppet held up on a string, being wrenched from side to side in time with each bullet.

The bloody firework display stained the entire sitting room from corner to corner until Sheng-Li finally stopped to draw breath. Jin lurched forward. It was difficult to tell if he was dead or still clinging to life. But Sheng-Li soon made a certain answer to that question, raising his arm again, chest heaving, and firing one final bullet straight through Jin's head. The body hit the ground with a dull thud, one arm catching on the corner of the coffee table.

Almost immediately Sheng-Li followed suit, dropping to his knees on the carpet. Entire body still shaking, he was covered from head to toe in the back splash of Jin's blood. Ren knelt down at his side, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "Looks like I've really fucked up this time..." The strained, gravelly voice barely managed to push its way out of Sheng-Li's throat.

"It's okay. I'll call in a few favors – get the body moved. We'll make it look like he died in a scrap with some rival gang. You'll go missing as well."

"What?" Sheng-Li looked up at Ren, large drops of blood and sweat clinging to his eyelashes and blurring his vision.

"We'll get a new scapegoat and you'll come back to Japan with me."

"Running away...*again*..."

"Maybe, but this time you won't be alone. I'll stay with you."

Ren leaned over and kissed Sheng-Li on his blood-soaked lips, without wiping them clean. He took in everything. Blood and guts stained the cream-colored carpet and curtains. When their lips finally came apart, Sheng-Li's head dropped like a dead weight onto Ren's chest. His heart was still pulsing rapidly and the hand that kept hold of the gun continued to tremble faintly.

"I want to leave this place..."

...

With Beijing behind him Sheng Li looked back on the chain of events that brought him to where he was now. He remembered that bird with the broken wing, a prisoner with him in that little apartment and wondered if it had ever learned to fly again. Of course his common sense suggested otherwise. Chances were if it hadn't been crushed beneath the heavy boots of officers who'd stormed the wretched concrete hovel, it had starved to death or been caught by some predator outside.

How long he himself would survive in Tokyo he couldn't say. It was simply from one dog-eat-dog world to another. Except for Ren. The logic of it was impossible for his brain to compute, but somehow he knew Ren wouldn't betray him, at least not on purpose.

Broken and beaten, with scars that never faded; the ugliness of it all time never healed, but rather masoned into stone. All that was left to do was walk, one foot in front of the other, until one day everything crumbled. But that was okay. He

rested back in his seat in the first class cabin of his flight en route to Tokyo.
Downing the last of his whisky on ice he let himself slip into a groggy slumber.
He'd face whatever came to him when he woke up.

END