

A
Fickle
and
Restless
Weapon

“Epic,
imaginative,
full of twists.”

Cyril Wong, author
of *This Side of Heaven*

Jason Erik
Lundberg

Author of *Diary of One Who Disappeared*

Advance Praise for *A Fickle and Restless Weapon*

“Reminiscent of the uncanny visions of Jeff VanderMeer and Don DeLillo and buoyed by Buddhist philosophy, the narrative deepens the speculative world of Tinhau through a complex web of major to side characters. Epic, imaginative, full of twists and psychological surprises, the novel raises an intriguing mirror to contemporary, global-capitalist realities, coming alive with mind-bending magic, unexpected transgenderism and political machinations.”

—Cyril Wong, Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of *This Side of Heaven*

“Thrilling, textured, fantastical.”

—Ken Liu, award-winning author of *The Paper Menagerie* and *The Grace of Kings*

“In propulsive, crystalline prose, Jason Erik Lundberg masterfully orchestrates an ambitious, wide-ranging tale of shifting identities and political intrigue. Lundberg’s searing depiction of the imagined surveillance state of Tinhau raises probing, complex questions, giving readers no choice but to consider their world anew.”

—Kirstin Chen, bestselling author of *Bury What We Cannot Take* and *Soy Sauce for Beginners*

“Jason Erik Lundberg’s debut novel is a much-welcomed vortex into his majestic imagination and speculative inventiveness. Lush and rich with sensuous textures and cultural details, the Tinhau of his creation is populated by a cast of humans and posthumans, local folk and transnationals, all living in a time when ‘Fear is Safety’. But where Lundberg truly shines is in his deep insight into the thematic threads of the book—art and agency, appetite and repression, identity and negation, isolation and engagement, wonder and loss and acceptance: the complex personal and external struggles of the individual versus authority, the endless match of the longing for freedom against the strict demands of society. There is one novel that you must read this year. This is it.”

—Dean Francis Alfar, Palanca Grand Prize-winning author of *Salamanca* and *A Field Guide to the Roads of Manila*

“The Republic of Tinhau is a welcome addition to the archipelago of literature’s imaginary islands. In *A Fickle and Restless Weapon*, Jason Erik Lundberg brings the reader to its shores and its stories with style and daring invention.”

—Sjón, celebrated author of *The Blue Fox* and *CoDex 1962*

A
Fickle
and
Restless
Weapon

Also by Jason Erik Lundberg

Fiction

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Embracing the Strange (2013)

The Alchemy of Happiness (2012)

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The Time Traveler's Son (2008)

Four Seasons in One Day (2003)

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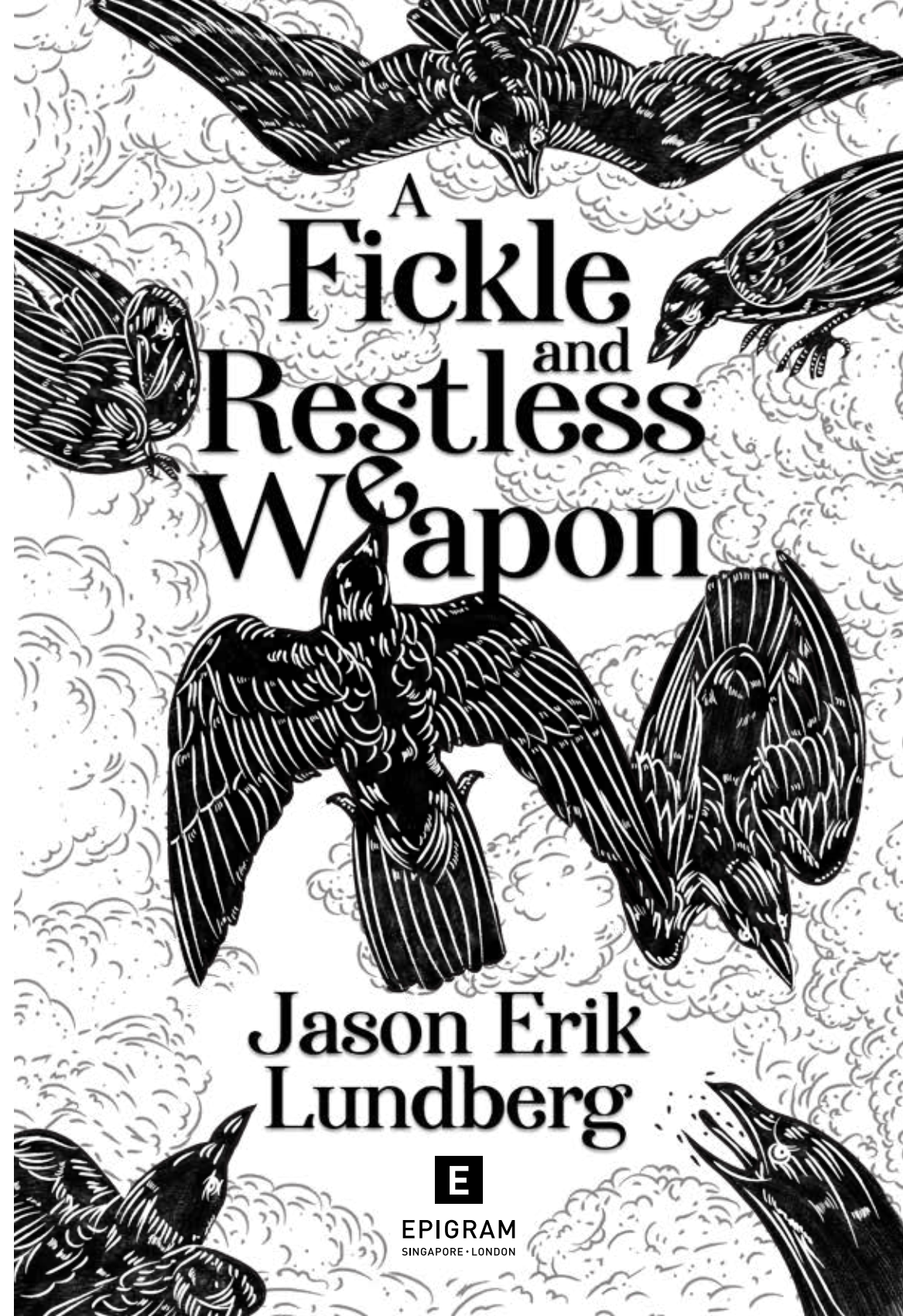
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Volume One* (2013), *Two* (2015), *Three* (2017) and *Four* (2019)



*For Jamie Bishop—
who was there for the start of this book, but not for its finish*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Dream strange things and make them look like truth.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne

*Like an archer an arrow,
the wise man steadies his trembling mind,
a fickle and restless weapon.
Flapping like a fish thrown on dry ground,
it trembles all day, struggling
to escape from the snares of Mara the temptress.*

—The Dhammapada

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VAIOR

ATLANGO

CURCO

TMRT LINES
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NORTH-SOUTH (NS)
NORTH-EAST (NE)
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THE REPUBLIC OF TINHAU



Prelude

Lights in the Sky
February 1999

ON THE DAY that the Range attacked for the very first time, Meghan Ooi was slumped in the back seat of a rented Toyota and sighing audibly as the dreary highway landscape rolled by the window. Instead of spending the Lunar New Year with her extended family—eating all the incredible Teochew dishes that her Auntie Keng would concoct, gossiping with her female cousins and shopping for new clothes—she was stuck on the other side of the planet with her blur parents and annoying little sister. Their anticipated destination: Disneyland. What a cliché. They'd flown halfway around the world, from their home in the tiny equatorial island-nation of Tinhau, all to visit a theme park decades past its prime.

Her mother played with the radio, settling on an NPR station; some boxer named Mike Tyson had just been sentenced to life imprisonment after accidentally killing two people with his car. Meghan's mother tsked at the news and said something banal to her father, all of which was immediately forgettable. Meghan's little sister Opal sat next to her, stroking the egg-shaped Tamagotchi in her hands; it was apparently a limited edition available only in Nippon, and Opal had discovered it during their layover at Narita International Airport, cooing over the beeping little device thereafter.

Meghan brooded, tamping down the impulse to snatch the Tamagotchi and fling it out the window. This extended trip meant she'd miss a week of classes on top of the government-mandated

two-day school holiday, and she had an important History test coming up; Secondary Three was already proving more difficult and stressful than Sec Two, and the thought of time spent away from her studies caused her trapezius muscles to bunch up in tension.

“Aiyoh, Pa,” she said. “Why we don’t stay at the resort, ah? Then we can just roll out of bed and see Mickey and Minnie straight away instead of all this driving.”

“Ai Lin,” her mother said, turning around in her seat and using Meghan’s legal Chinese name in that emphatic way that always made it sound like an insult. “Is that the way to speak to your father?”

“Too ex, too ex, I already told you lah,” her father grumbled from the front seat. “You think money grows on tree, is it? No need to work hard, is it? And must pay school fees for you and your sister some more. Come, we reach soon, just hush.”

Meghan sighed again and leaned against the window, her antler nub striking against the glass with a soft *tok*. Her reflection was distorted so close up, but she was still able to detect the black stripes that stretched from the undersides of her eyelids to the corners of her mouth, and the slight natural elongation of her head. For the first ten years of her life, she’d put up with her mother calling her “my little gazelle”, until she made it clear in no uncertain terms that the nickname was no longer cute; she still recalled the hurt way that her mother’s face had crumpled at the declaration, but Meghan had stood her ground, and her mother had respected her opinion on the matter from then on.

She often wondered how different her life might have been had she been born this way only ten years earlier: labelled a freak, a deformation, a curiosity, shunted to surgeons to shave down the bones of her face into a more acceptable shape, or shipped off to special-needs schools to segregate her from the “normals”. But instead, by the time she had made her grand entrance, squalling and tight-fisted, the

world had had almost ten years to become accustomed to the birth of *swees*; she’d read in *The Tinhau People’s News* just the previous week that there was now more than a twenty-five per cent chance of any given child on the planet being born a *swee*.

Not that she hadn’t put up with ridicule over the years, which usually combined a description of her physical features with the onomatopoeic sound of her surname. “Horse Face Whee!” was a common epithet. There had also been some frightening recent talk about eugenics in the Tinhau Parliament, about which Meghan had been assigned to write an essay by her English teacher, a paper that had received a B4, with comments that begrudged her for not taking a stronger stance because of who she was, as if her entire identity revolved around the fact that in just a few unremarkable ways she resembled an antelope.

As the road surface briefly roughened, causing her antler nub to vibrate with a quick *tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap* against the window, Meghan raised her head to stop the sound and grinned at a memory from the beginning of January, just the month before. Her best friend Levana, the self-proclaimed Queen of Goths at Tinhau Chinese Girls’ School, had given her a small vibrator for her fifteenth birthday, hurriedly bought in one of the discreet sex shops on Coppice Road. It was silver, bullet-shaped and only half the length of Meghan’s index finger, with a stretchy silicone strap to fit over said finger, and Meghan couldn’t stop giggling as she finished unwrapping the gift. Levana had invited Meghan over to her flat on the pretence of project work in order to give it to her, and after locking the door of her bedroom and determining that the bullet worked, announced that they should “vibrate some stuff”. They started with innocuous things like the top of Levana’s dresser, Meghan’s school books and Levana’s teeth, before she thought to place it on Meghan’s right antler nub; the corresponding

thrumming of her skull made her feel as though she were getting an electric shock.

Meghan still had not used the vibrator for its intended purpose. Even the thought of doing so made her blush furiously.

And it was as she was thinking these private thoughts that, about two kilometres in front of them, an arc of emerald lightning ripped a jagged tear through the late morning sky and connected with the ground in a massive explosion, in the exact location of the Happiest Place on Earth, which Meghan could feel in her bones even though they were still so far away. Opal yelped next to her and dropped her Tamagotchi to the floorboards, screaming, “Ma! Ma! Shit, Ma! They blow up Disneyland, Ma?”

Meghan’s mother had been shocked into silence. The Toyota slowed on the highway, just enough that it was evident her father had lifted his foot from the accelerator. Opal was crying now, but Meghan felt a surprising lack of emotion at the thought that lightning had struck a theme park so hard that she could still feel the concussion vibrating in her body, and was about to say something to her sister when a second bolt of green lightning streaked down in the same location, then another, then another. Her father stomped on the brake now and pulled over as far as he could onto the road’s shoulder. Meghan counted the flashes as her mother burst into tears and her father groaned, “*No no no no no no no*”: seven concentrated strikes in all before it seemed to be over, a huge plume of smoke billowing upward and outward in front of them.

The other cars on the highway had also slowed and stopped, a sight that scared Meghan more than the apparent destruction ahead. Her family’s gazes were all trained in front of them, and so Meghan was the only one to see a shape rising back into the clouds, a pointed inversion like an upside-down mountain, which disappeared up into the cumulonimbus as though it had never been. They all sat there,

stunned and in shock, for nearly five minutes before Meghan’s father snapped out of his observational trance, put the car in gear and then headed forward once more.

“Javier Ooi!” Meghan’s mother shouted. “Where the hell are you going?!”

“Disneyland. We going to Disneyland.”

“What!”

“People are hurt! I can help!”

Meghan admired her father in that moment. He worked as a civil servant in Tinhau’s Ministry of Infrastructure, and had differentiated himself from his colleagues (at least, as far as Meghan knew) by his generous spirit. At ministry functions, he was often held up as the model of selflessness, and was always helping their neighbours with little odd jobs that the town council never seemed to get around to. And now, he was planning to run straight into a disaster area to help those in need.

He might even have succeeded if Meghan’s mother hadn’t slapped him hard across the cheek, making Opal gasp and cover her mouth with her hands, and Meghan recoil as though she’d been the one to receive the impact.

“You think for a moment about your family, you fucking fool!” her mother shouted, the first time Meghan had ever heard her use such strong language. “Are you going to drive your daughters into a war zone? Hah? Just so you can tell stories about it back home? You really so goddamn *stupid*, is it?”

Silence settled over the inside of the car like a thick blanket, and her father’s shoulders drooped, as though the air had been abruptly let out of him.

“You turn this car around *right now* and get us to safety. What use is being a hero if your family is all dead?”

In the coming months and years, as Meghan suffered through

the repeated psychological trauma caused by regular successive worldwide attacks made by what the mass media would dub “The Range”—pushed through empathy into depression, then blithe acceptance, then inurement—she would think back to this moment, to this feeling of helplessness and futility, to this exact coordinate in spacetime when her father turned the steering wheel of the rented Toyota and wove them the wrong way back through frozen highway traffic—Ground Zero-Zero-Zero-Zero—and she would know with utter certainty that *this* was the instant the world went crazy.

Book One

September 2014–May 2015

PART ONE

The Downward Spiral

1

IT WAS LATE MORNING when Zed arrived, incognito.

The passenger train slid into the Tinhau West station like an intruder: stealthy, quiet, a hiss and a sigh. Zed gathered his rolling suitcase from the rack above his head and departed the berth with heavy steps, leaving it empty behind him. He had been fortunate to have the cabin to himself for the final section of his journey across the Malayan peninsula then over the Kallang Straits and into the Republic of Tinhau. For the fourteen hours beforehand, he had suffered the presence of a Ceylonese electronics merchant who'd droned on and on about the latest ordinator processors and advances in mobile phone technology, and, mistaking Zed for mainland Chinese, praised the ingenuity and commitment of the PRC in their development of clean energy, and then at one point fell noisily to sleep and snored as if he had inhaled a jet engine; however, the man's raucous and oblivious presence still had not been enough of a distraction from the purpose of Zed's travel: the funeral of his older sister, Elisha. When the merchant finally disembarked at Surat Thani in Siam, Zed had collapsed into his exhaustion and slept the rest of the way to his destination, startling awake as the conductor announced the arrival into Tinhau West station.

After enduring an insufferably long queue at the immigration lounge, during which many groups of people around him with improper documentation were turned away from the border, Zed

emerged into the stifling tropical heat of his homeland with his British passport stamped, his shirt instantly soaking through with sweat. The humidity sucked at his breath and churned his stomach. For the love of the Buddha, had it been this fucking hot when he'd left? He proceeded around clots of travellers and tourists, following the signs outside the station to connect up with the TMRT subway interchange that would carry him the rest of the way. He descended via the escalator to the concourse level, purchased a single-use pass with his credit card, stepped through the turnstile to the platform and stood in front of the glass doors for the East-West line. From one train to another.

The subway train arrived after a short wait, and the doors hissed open. Zed took a seat near the front of the car, and placed his suitcase in the aisle. Above the windows were strips of adverts for skin-whitening cream and hair-straightening shampoo, as well as signs prohibiting eating, drinking, smoking and the possession of durians on the train cars. A poster to Zed's right displayed a stock photo of a mushroom cloud in radioactive orange, captioned with: PENDERHAKA ARE EVERYWHERE—REPORT ALL SUSPICIOUS INDIVIDUALS AND ACTIVITY; fine-printed with: *This message brought to you by PropaCorp.* Zed also took note of the increased number of bio-mechanical scunts latched to the ceiling of the subway car, insidious barnacles protected by spheres of opaque glass, ever-vigilant, always watching and recording.

As if to punctuate the heightened security theatre and fear-mongering, significantly more pronounced in the years since he had migrated abroad, the square video screens that dotted the subway car's interior amongst the advert strips all showed the same BBC breaking news report: an attack by the Range in the North American Union state of Texas, which had killed around fifty people and destroyed a number of refineries and a significant section of the Keystone

Pipeline. According to the crawl, it had happened only two hours before, while Zed was still on the passenger train. The unleashed devastation had, like all reported Range incidents around the globe, come completely by surprise. The footage cut from firefighters battling the blazes and paramedics tending to the wounded, to a looped recording of the attack as it had happened, captured by a witness' iPhone: the amorphous, inverted, mountainous structure descending through the clouds and laying waste with green lightning, then disappearing back up into the stratosphere without a trace. The provincial governor of Mexico had swiftly pledged resources and emergency personnel.

The remainder of the seats on the subway train soon filled up, with families going on a day trip down to Repose Bay, with teenagers headed to the shops in Negeri Draseleq, with tall rufous-skinned Pohonorang workers trudging to destinations of menial labour. All such normal activities, as though four dozen human beings had not just had their lives snuffed out on the other side of the world. Zed sighed. He looked into the faces of a people he hadn't seen in twelve years. He was surprised to discover that he had missed them so much, and saddened once again by the reason for his return; both life and death surrounded him today. He also perversely wondered at the potential pandemonium were he to reveal his true face, as he had done ever-so-sneakily to the immigration officer just now. He might have been able to travel unhassled and unrecognised in someplace like Johannesburg or Rio de Janeiro or even parts of the NAU, but not in his homeland.

The doors finally closed, and the subway train advanced into Tinhau.

At Kennaway⁴, an extremely pregnant woman boarded with a toddler in tow. Every seat in the train car was taken, and the woman glared around, daring everyone with her gaze. Zed was exhausted,

having travelled for the past several days over the vast swathes of the Chinese mainland, then down through Viet Nam, Cambodia, Siam and Malaya; it would have been financially easy enough to hire a car and driver to bring him the whole way, to arrive in comfort and luxury, but that just wasn't his way. He had at least fifteen more minutes on the TMRT, and he didn't want to spend them standing up, but none of his fellow riders were apparently going to give up their seats. So he got to his feet and motioned to the young mother, who smiled genuinely and sat on the proffered indentation in the plastiform bench. After she'd got situated, and heaved her squirming little boy onto her lap, she unleashed an invective in Hokkien at the other passengers, all of whom averted their eyes in shame. Zed couldn't understand the exact words—his Hokkien and Teochew were rusty; he'd always been much more proficient in English—but the meaning was clear. He sat on his suitcase and tried to balance amid the subway's vibrations.

Zed disembarked at Ilianore2. The northern escalator brought him up to street level, and after waiting for only a few minutes at the streetcar stop, its overhead awning like a turquoise question mark, the vehicle arrived with a clanging of bells. The streetcar wound through familiar thoroughfares, passing the primary schools, the recreation centre, the boarded-up Workers' Party headquarters. The smells of his childhood permeated the streetcar, saturating his brain with memory. Past the Indian grocer, the Dutch chocolate shop, the British butcher, the Viet-Nameese café. Past the independent booksellers, tobacconists, tailors, luggage suppliers, liquor stores and many many food courts. He recognised some, the businesses that had managed to hang on despite Tinhau's relentless march of progress, but the new shops and stalls far outnumbered these, providing a familiar but altered landscape. The past and the present overlaid in his mind's eye, a distinct disconnect between the two, an unmatched set.

At Negeri Ilianore public housing block 137, Zed stepped off the streetcar and approached the looming concrete building, its blueprint ubiquitous all throughout Tinhau, as though gigantic filing cabinets had been knocked on their sides all over the entire country. In the foyer, sitting behind an enormous plywood desk, was the doorman, feet up, reading *The Tinhau People's News*, the government mouthpiece. Zed cleared his throat and the doorman pulled a corner of the broadsheet down until his left eye came into view.

"Yah?"

Zed relaxed the part of his mind that qualified him as a *swee*, and with a practised mental click, his facial features flowed and reshaped and settled into their most familiar form; the feeling had been highly disconcerting after he'd discovered his ability as a teenager, as though nothing solid of him really existed, as if he were made of slow-moving tar that occasionally allowed itself to stiffen into a given form, but that had been long ago, before he had gained mastery.

At the physical change, the doorman jerked his feet off the desk, but to his credit did not fall over or even yelp in surprise. *Swees* were more common every day—there were some experts who proposed that in just one or two more generations, no human being would be born without some kind of special ability—but Zed would have forgiven the doorman for losing his shit, at least a little bit, at seeing a man change his face right in front of him. Zed dug his scuffed national identification card out of his pocket and flashed it at the man, who grunted.

"I know you lah. You staying long?"

"No."

The doorman grunted again and motioned to the lift with his head. "Okay, you know where," he said and then went back to his newspaper.

Zed walked to the lift lobby, rolling his suitcase behind him, his head stuffed full of cotton after the long voyage, his arms and legs

abruptly heavy. He was so tired. He closed his eyes as the machinery that powered the lift in front of him hummed.

“Oi, superstar. Welcome home!”

Zed turned around at the doorman’s utterance, and flinched as the flash from the man’s mobile phone temporarily blinded him. A brief surge of anger rose up, daring him to charge back to the desk, snatch the man’s phone and dash it to pieces on the tiled floor of the lobby, or at the very least throw the man his middle finger, but then just as suddenly the feeling dissipated. He’d been photographed so often by so many people over the past several years that he could make no claim to privacy anymore. Still, he’d hoped to be able to avoid the amateur paparazzi for at least a few days, until after the memorial service. He sighed. Too much to hope for. The man was probably already uploading the photo to Friendface or Instagram even as Zed stood there.

The doors soon parted and he stepped inside, pressed the button for seven. The lift hurtled upward and then dinged open at the seventh floor: the corridor was more run down than the last time he’d been here, more dirt and scum on the walls, a darker grey cast to the concrete. In one of the neighbouring flats, a Tamil soap was cranked to full volume, and the melodramatic dialogue echoed in the corridor. At the third door on the right, he took a deep breath and knocked. After a few moments, the door opened.

A large Pohonorang woman stood there, mop in hand. At over two metres tall, she filled the entire frame, and her dark reddish-brown skin, coarse all over as if she were an ancient oak tree come to life, was shiny from work. Her deep green eyes glistened, and the corners of her mouth pulled upward slightly. The kind face and the looming presence of his early years.

Then a middle-aged Chinese woman in a flower-print dress appeared from behind and elbowed the Pohonorang maid out of

the way. The woman’s straight dark hair was cut short in a bob that accentuated her sharp cheekbones, and her eyes were rimmed with red, her smile bittersweet. As the maid turned to go back into the flat, the Chinese woman pulled Zed forward into a rib-crushing hug that expelled the air from his lungs. After a long moment, she released him and looked at his face, her eyes blinking quickly.

“Sayang, sayang,” she said. “I thought you coming tomorrow! I was going to ask R to fetch you from the station.”

“Hallo, Ma.”

“It is good you come home, sayang. We can put your sister to rest now.”

2

“DID ELISHA LEAVE a note?”

“No, no note,” his mother said, as they sat in a Nipponese restaurant two blocks from her flat. “Nothing in writing. But you know her lah, always promising to do it.”

Zed knew. His big sister had threatened many times during adolescence and early adulthood to end her life, mostly when she’d gone off her bipolar meds. A vicious spiral: the medication would make her feel better for a time, more centred, more evenly paced, and so she would reduce the dosage or stop altogether, first spiking into a manic frenzy, trying to do eighteen things at once, and then plummeting into depression so severe that she would hardly leave her bed or talk to anyone for days on end. In these days of blue, Elisha would often lock her bedroom door and blast Nine Inch Nails from her boombox; *The Downward Spiral* was, perhaps not ironically, her favourite album, and although Zed could appreciate it on an aesthetic level, he much more enjoyed Trent Reznor’s later work, in particular *The Fragile*, which was more nuanced and less angry. Elisha seemed to need the angry Reznor, the devastated Reznor, screaming out his hurt to the universe.

During Elisha’s TDS Days, as he came to think of them, she would also write long discursive journal entries full of self-loathing and violent imagery, and then leave the journal open and in full view on the dining table, the couch, the kitchen counter. An obvious cry for

help that led to psychiatric appointments, increased pharmaceuticals and even, after one particularly troubling episode when she refused to eat anything for four days, a stint at the NHS hospital at Mount Diana. By the time Zed was eighteen and Elisha was twenty-three, her TDS Days had become an expected annoyance, cries for help reduced to cries for attention; two years later, Zed had moved out, and twelve years after that, Elisha threw herself in front of a TMRT train pulling into the Biyuron2 station.

“And then the news reporters! From *Tinhau People’s News*, *Tinhau Free Press*, Channel 5, Channel 12, these vultures. Public transport disrupted for half the day, and so is a big story. Don’t know how they find me, the polis say they never release my Elisha’s name, but these bastards, these tricky bastards. They come asking questions, poking their noses, until I shout at them to go away. I find out who point them my way I’m going to stomp their toes flat.”

Zed placed a hand on his mother’s over the table. Her voice had raised in intensity, and he could feel her hand shivering with anger. He didn’t want to ask the next question—he was afraid it would only add to her distress—but he felt it important to know the answer.

“Ma, have you told Pa yet?”

She paused a moment and took a breath. “Yes. She his daughter so he have a right to know. And he not coming to the funeral. Alamak, too busy working in that Dubai to pay respects to his little girl. I say okay lorh. More than twenty years he not around we still okay, we don’t need him now lah.”

Zed was actually relieved. His father had walked out on the three of them a week after Zed’s tenth birthday, and relations had been strained ever since. Elisha had been especially close to their father, and took his abandonment particularly hard. It was possibly no coincidence that, shortly thereafter, her bipolar symptoms had manifested for the first time.

Zed and his mother sat quietly as the restaurant's sushi carousel noisily wound its way through the room, providing an assortment of raw and cooked dishes. After a minute or two, Zed's mother plucked from the carousel some plates of salmon, fried bean curd, prawn, unagi, octopus. The aircon blasted arctic air into the dining room and caused Zed to sneeze three times in abrupt repetition. Shopping bags from the nearby mall clustered around the feet of the other diners like pets begging for scraps.

"The service here slow, so eat," Zed's mother said.

Zed mixed soy sauce and wasabi in a small saucer, then plucked prawn sushi off its plate with his fingers, dunked it in the sauce and gulped it down in one bite. The saltiness of the soy was nicely balanced with the sharp spiciness of the wasabi, and left his throat pleasantly tingling. Down next went the eel and the octopus, the flavours coating the inside of his mouth. He washed the sushi down with sips of scalding green tea.

A server approached their table then, a university-aged girl not that much younger than Zed (although since he had passed thirty years old, it had become more and more difficult to judge), notepad out, pen at the ready. She wore her hair in a ponytail that made her look younger than she most likely was, and she exuded an energy that Zed immediately found intoxicating. The tag pinned just above her left breast revealed that her given name was Huang Sin.

"Okay. What you like?"

"Vegetable tempura set," said Zed's mother.

"Flying fish with udon," Zed said.

The server paused in her writing. "Flying fish, really ah?"

"Yes." Zed turned to her. "Why? Can or not?" He found the old Tinhau sociolect returning with a vengeance, making his speech punchier, quicker, more direct, and he smiled. He'd travelled all over the world, and yet this pattern of speaking was totally unique to this

specific region in Southeast Asia.

"Can, it just that...nothing." She placed the end of her pen against her teeth, as if to chew on it. "I tell chef."

The server left. Zed's mother reached for another plate of unagi on the carousel, and was about to open her mouth to say something when Huang Sin returned.

"Eh, I bodoh, but I need to ask..."

"You got flying fish or not?" Zed asked.

"No no, we got. It uh...you're *him*, is it?"

"Him?"

"The body artist."

Normally Zed would have been delighted to encounter a fan on his first day back in his homeland, but under the circumstances, it was more of an irritant. He'd forgotten that he was still wearing his true face. Zed smiled politely, hoping to get rid of this girl quickly, and said, "Yes."

"Wahlau! I got your DVD, the Barcelona live show!"

"Thank you. Now if you don't mind—"

"I try to get tickets for the Melbourne performance last time, but all sold out." She was cute, and looked to be old enough. He wasn't sure how appropriate it was to be picturing the server's legs wrapped around his head when his sister was still waiting for her final rest, but he couldn't help the polite smile edging upward.

"You give me your name and number, can?" he said. "Maybe you see more of me."

Huang Sin pressed her fist to her lips to stifle a squeal, then scribbled quickly on her notepad, ripped off the sheet (in her excitement nearly tearing the paper in half) and handed it to him. She was coiled tight as a spring, and Zed was sure that if she had not been on the clock, she would have bounced up and down on the spot.

"So nice so nice of you," she said.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the paper from her now-moist fingers. Zed turned back to his mother, and waited for Huang Sin to leave, purposefully avoiding eye contact. After a few moments, during which he could feel her desperate need to continue the conversation, to stay near him a bit longer, she walked away.

Zed’s mother reached out and plucked the paper from his hand.

“Chio bu,” she said.

“Bit young for me,” he said, taking the paper back, then folding it three times before stuffing it in his trouser pocket. Of course, she was *not* too young for him, but his mother didn’t need to know that.

“When people see you, they always lidat?”

“Sometimes. Rarely in the NAU, but in Europe and the UK more. And mainland China big time.”

“Well, you call her, you treat her right, ah? Mister Big Shot?”

“I will, Ma, no worries.”

At that moment, a horrible commotion from the kitchen: pots and pans and dishes and glasses crashing to the floor, along with loud curses in both Cantonese and English. From the doors burst Zed’s lunch, a multicoloured flying fish with webbed fins, still very much alive, soaring a metre above the heads of the diners, its iridescent scales shifting hue as it flapped through the fluorescent lighting, followed by a quartet of knife-wielding cooks. The fish gasped as it twisted through the air, eyes frantically searching for another body of water, a tank, a pond, anything, knowing it was trapped but still attempting its futile escape nonetheless. The restaurant patrons continued their conversations as if this was a regular occurrence, a mild diversion to their dining experience. The fish dipped lower now as its energy was being sapped by its frantic escape, close enough for Zed to stand up and pluck it out of its flight had he wanted to, although he was content to watch, secretly hoping that it might get away. It circled the dining room four times, banging into walls and

windows and slapping a well-dressed yuppie in the face with its tail, suffocating in the open air, tumbling, spiralling, finally flopping to the floor at Zed’s feet. Its eyes pleaded with Zed, but then the head chef scooped up the dying fish by its gills and exhaled.

“They always try to escape,” he said. “Your lunch ready soon.”

The head chef and his crew marched triumphantly back to the kitchen. Huang Sin rushed back over to Zed’s table, shaking, eyes wide. She looked as if she were about to start sobbing.

“Aiyah! You still call me, right?”

3

ZED WAS SO exhausted after he and his mother returned from lunch that he stumbled down the hall to his old bedroom (kept by his mother and R exactly the way he'd left it twelve years earlier), not yet daring to look in Elisha's room, and crashed onto his bed. He slept for eighteen hours without hardly changing position.

He awoke to the smell of freshly brewed kopi and a dry cottony taste in his mouth. Hazy and blur, not entirely aware of where he was, he licked his lips and the roof of his mouth in a vain attempt to restore moisture, opened his eyes, and noticed the steaming mug on his bedside table. Elbowing himself up, he took a sip, extra strong and extra sweet, and everything came back to him in a rush: his big sister was dead and he was back home. He gently placed the mug back down with a shivering hand, and let the hitching tears flow out of him, something he hadn't allowed himself to do since receiving the late-night phone call in his hotel room in Chengdu only a few days earlier.

He pressed his face into the clean-smelling pillow, and muffled his cries. His mother didn't need to hear him weeping now, not when it could add to her own pain and grief. A long moan oozed its way out of his throat. His stomach contracted painfully. The person who had protected him all through their school days, who had taught him about girls, who had helped to shape him into a self-confident young man, was gone. Why had she finally done it?

After a long time, Zed was able to breathe normally again, and he sat up, wiping his face. His pillow was darkened with wet, and his nose was stuffed up, but he felt a little better. Zed's mother could be heard in the kitchen, doing things with pans and glasses, along with the sizzle of oil. His kopi had cooled, so he drank it down then stepped into the bathroom, stripped and ran the shower as hot as he dared. When he emerged, having scoured away the residue of travel, he felt better still and, back in his bedroom, rooted in his suitcase for his nice suit, the charcoal one perfectly tailored for him on Savile Row in London.

"Wahlau, very stylo," his mother said as he stepped into the kitchen. "My rock star son going to show everyone up at the funeral, I think."

"I'm not a rock star, Ma," he said, although he sometimes felt as if he led a rock star's life: constantly touring, entertaining audiences of thousands, being recognised by fans all over the world, making a good living doing what he loved best. He smiled to himself and straightened his cuffs, trying (but not very hard) to conceal his gold cufflinks.

"Rock star could have afforded to fly here, you know, and don't take so long."

Zed sighed. "Mum, we talked about that. None of the airlines in China wanted to risk an encounter with the Range, the ones still remaining anyway, especially when they can't track it. Even chartered pilots are grounding themselves now, no matter how much money you flash at them."

Zed felt a detached sympathy for the global victims of the Range; these atrocities were unfortunately all too common these days, occurring three or four times a year for the past decade and a half, striking without prejudice or regard for national borders. The midwestern area of the former USA had been devastated, the target

of the first attacks at the end of the twentieth century, thousands of acres of farmland destroyed, scores of families displaced and grieving, the action leading to the putting aside of old animosities with Canada and Mexico and the formation of the NAU itself. India and Pakistan had stopped blaming each other once their cities were equally bombarded by the green fire from above. The Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe had seen similar destruction. The phrase “Look to the Skies” had become common parlance. The millennial cults that had popped into existence around the world under the shadow of the Y2K Endtimes refocused their worshipful efforts in the intervening years, in the hopes that their devotion to the destructive flying mountain would protect them. Only Southeast Asia and the Pacific region of Oceania had still been spared, leading to paranoid conjecture and accusations from the West, and an increase in refugees and asylum seekers from all sides. It was no wonder that security had been so heightened at affluent Tinhau’s land-bound entry point the previous day.

“You could take an airship, right? Lower altitude, more safer?”

“Yeah, Ma, safer, but much slower. I wouldn’t have made it in time.”

“Okay lorh. You here now, that what’s important. Hey, eat, I make you breakfast.”

“You? Really? R didn’t make it?”

“Oi,” she said, standing up straighter in mock disdain, “I cook, you know.”

“Since when?”

“Aiyah, don’t talk so much, and sit down.”

Zed sat at the marble-topped kopitiam table, speckled and scratched and bearing the marks of his and Elisha’s enthusiastic childhoods, but still not much the worse for wear; Zed’s mother had utilised her haggling skills to the utmost and still complained about the cost afterward, but the table remained in great shape so many

years later. She handed him a plate of two eggs over easy and corned beef hash drowned in ketchup.

“Ma, I can’t believe you remembered.”

“Of course. I remember. Your favourite breakfast, you know. I don’t forget that.”

As Zed tucked in to the food—cutting into the eggs, letting the yolk ooze out onto the corned beef and potatoes, and then mixing everything together in a swirl of painterly deliciousness—there came a sharp knock at the front door. Zed’s mother got up to answer it, and then said some words he couldn’t quite make out to the caller. After a moment, she stepped back into the kitchen.

“Someone for you,” she said with a frown. “Gahmen man.”

“What does he want?” Zed asked, mouth full.

“He never tell me. Swallow, then go talk to him. But don’t take too long, okay? Funeral in just an hour.”

Still standing in the open doorway was the government man, dressed in short shirtsleeves and dark brown slacks, hair plastered to his skull and combed all to one side, skin pasty from a civil servant’s life inside a cubicle under fluorescent lights, already sweating in the morning heat. He held a file folder stuffed to overflowing with papers, and smiled awkwardly as Zed approached.

“Hello? Mr Quek Zhou Ma?”

Zed cringed at the sound of his given name coming out of this stranger’s mouth. He’d gone by his stage name for so long that anything else just sounded strange. “Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m sorry to disturb, Mr Quek, but I’m from the Ministry of Culture, and I would very much like to discuss collaborating on a performance during your time here in Tinhau.”

“How did you even know I was back? I just got in yesterday.”

“Ah, well, news travels fast in our small country, you see. Several sightings at a sushi carousel were reported on Friendface by your fans

here, and we were able to track your movements on public transport; you used your credit card.”

Zed exhaled hard through his nose. “You don’t think that violates my privacy a bit?”

“Normally, sir, I would completely agree with you. But my superiors take a strong interest in you as one of our nation’s most successful and widely recognised cultural exports. A performance by one of Tinhau’s best and brightest would draw in lots of local and international interest. Your performance would be fully backed by MOC, with a budget completely at your discretion.”

“Look, this just isn’t a good time. Do you have a card or something, I can call you later?”

The government man fumbled around in his pockets, while trying to keep his papers from scattering in the corridor breeze, and after a few moments he produced a wrinkled and slightly moist business card and passed it to Zed with both hands. The civil servant’s name was instantly forgettable, so Zed slipped the card into his inside jacket pocket and didn’t worry himself with remembering it.

“I look forward to hearing from you,” the man said. “The sooner the better, eh?” Then he smiled one more time, turned and headed back down the corridor to the lift lobby.

Zed hadn’t planned on performing at all while back in his homeland. He was here to say goodbye to his sister, make sure his mother was okay and then head back out into the world again. He and his troupe had thankfully finished their run on the current tour three weeks earlier, everyone from performers to stage krewes now taking a much-needed rest. Maybe he could spend some time in his London flat, catch up on some reading, make sure his three cactus plants were still alive. But Zed could never rest for long; his wanderlust, his urge to be elsewhere, always hummed beneath the surface of his skin, in the soles of his feet.

However, as he and his mother later rode in the chauffeured Mercedes to the funeral parlour, he came back to the conversation again and again. Maybe it would be good to stay in Tinhau a bit longer after all, reconnect with his culture. Prodigal son returns, and all that. And with basically an unlimited budget, he could put on the show he’d always wanted.

The funeral parlour was located on a busy road amid blocks of lighting shops, their windows alight with chandeliers, sconces, avant-garde snake-hooded art pieces. A sparkling, glittering prelude before the Merce proceeded into a subterranean car park, then out of the car and up a dimly-lit lift to the fourth floor of Tinhau Casket. Five parlours on this storey, all accessible through the hallway, glass doors revealing a variety of religious ceremonial rites. The funeral director, a voluminous Malay woman with teased and highlighted hair, dressed in a white pantsuit with a large white chrysanthemum pinned to the lapel, waited for them at the door to the air-conditioned Bougainvillea Suite.

She ushered them inside without a word; Elisha’s closed casket was already set up at the far end of the room, surrounded by Tibetan prayer flags, yellow curtains, three large Buddhist thangkas and an array of floral arrangements sent by friends and relatives of Zed’s mother. At the foot of the casket was a small table, on top of which stood a statuette of Kwan Yin, offerings of flowers and oranges, joss sticks to be burned by the mourners and an enlarged photo of Elisha in her early twenties. Zed recalled the occasion of the photo, one of the few in adulthood in which she’d been smiling: they’d been sitting at the kitchen table, and she’d just opened her acceptance letter to art school; he’d taken the shot quickly with his digital camera, which was why it was slightly out of focus, and it was the only time that he could ever remember seeing an expression of pure, blissful joy from his sister.

The casket featured a small window directly above Elisha’s face,

and Zed could hardly believe that she wasn't faking, that this wasn't just some elaborate prank and that she would open her eyes, throw off the lid, pop up into a sitting position and yell, "Gotcha!" She looked exactly the way he'd seen her three months ago, the last time they'd vidchatted online; her face was relaxed, serene even, free of anger and paranoia, and so natural that she merely seemed asleep, more colour in her cheeks than in the MOC man he'd met earlier. He was glad that it wasn't a fully open casket, as he had no idea the damage that the TMRT train had done to the rest of her body, and didn't want to know; her face, the only part of her visible, had thankfully been left untouched by the horrible collision, or else the undertakers had done a masterful job making her look so.

Over the next three hours, the room filled with friends and acquaintances, and relatives whom Zed hadn't seen since he was a child; his mother had effectively cut herself off from her three sisters for reasons that he still was not aware of, but now his aunts, along with uncles and cousins, streamed in to give their condolences. Several of Zed's cousins approached him with a "sorry", but didn't seem to know what else to say, either because they were uncomfortable about the situation or just didn't know how to deal with a famous family member.

At the end of the wake, two Buddhist nuns in saffron and maroon robes entered the room; the muted conversation stopped, and then the chanting began. Though his mother had taken Refuge in the Gelug tradition (mostly because she so admired the Dalai Lama), Zed had never been terribly observant, so to speak, and didn't recognise any mantras other than *Om mani padme hum*. The nuns circumnavigated the casket more than a dozen times as the bereaved looked on and added to the chanting if they knew the words. Zed's mother gripped his hand tightly.

After the ceremony, Zed's mother thanked everyone for coming and said her goodbyes. As his relations filed slowly out of the room,

Zed stepped over and looked one final time at the Sleeping Beauty under glass. Conflicting memories: Elisha being helpful, loving, torturous, mean, encouraging, violent. He wanted to focus solely on the good times, but she had also made his life hell. He supposed it had been like most sibling relationships, with the added bonus of manic depression to complicate things. It still all seemed so hard to believe.

His mother approached from behind and placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned to face her and she jerked backward, eyes wide, mouth opened involuntarily. Fresh tears sprang to her eyes.

"You stop that," she hissed, squeezing his arm with fierce pressure. "Stop that face right now. Change back straight away."

Zed reached up and touched unfamiliar features, cheekbones sharper, chin blunter, lips softer. Elisha. He was normally so in control of his abilities; thankfully, no one else had seen. He closed his eyes, turned inward, and felt his face shifting and flowing and returning to its natural form, no longer resembling that of the prone figure under glass. His mother released her grip, and turned back to the others.

Zed touched the glass lightly, his restored face superimposed reflectively on his sister's. "See you in the next life, big sis."

After the last of the sympathisers had left, the parlour staff fastened a wooden square over the casket window, cutting Zed and his mother off from Elisha for the last time; then they placed arrangements of chrysanthemums atop the casket, loaded the casket onto a wheeled platform and escorted it down the hall to the service lift.

"Please," said the funeral director, giving the enlarged art-school-acceptance photograph of Elisha to Zed's mother, "if you will follow me." Zed's mother passed the photograph to Zed, and he was struck by how unrecognisable Elisha was when viewed up close, just a collection of pixels, an assemblage of dots.

Down the same lift they had taken up earlier, exiting at the car park where the staff were already loading the casket into a long black

hearse. Once it had been secured, the back doors were shut, and the funeral director turned to them once again. She hugged Zed's mother, then assured them both that the casket would meet them at the Manjusri Vimala Temple for the cremation and installation of the cinerary urn.

In the Mercedes once again heading towards the temple at Opium Hill, Zed's mother took his hand and said, "What a lovely service. I think Elisha would have like it."

"She probably would have complained about all the flowers. Her allergies, remember?"

"Aiyoh, you right, she sneeze herself silly!" She laughed briefly, the sound catching in her throat. Zed squeezed her hand, and she smiled at him. "My good girl," she said. "She don't deserve this life." And Zed understood that his mother and he were sharing an identical difficulty: anticipating that Elisha might take her own life for twenty years, and even expecting that it would happen, did nothing to dull the pain once she'd actually done it. There was no relief here.

Zed would definitely need to stay longer than he'd originally expected. His mother needed him right now. He would give a grand performance to the people of Tinhau, dedicated to Elisha's memory, and donate a large percentage of the proceeds to research on bipolar disorder. It was the best way he could think of to honour his big sister. He extracted his phone from a trouser pocket, and the MOC business card from his inside jacket pocket, and tapped out an SMS to Mr Kenny Foo, Information Officer Second Class (Arts and Culture Development Office), instructing him to meet Zed at the Mulut Besar Café in Negeri Draseleq two days hence to discuss the terms of his performance. It would be expensive indeed, but he'd put on a show that would make his sister proud.

He pressed send, then closed the phone with a snap. His mother looked over briefly at the sound, but said nothing.

4

THREE MONTHS. ZED had put together a brand-new show in only three months, something he'd previously thought impossible. At his most frenetic, the fastest he'd been able to do so before was six. And this show was a hundred times more logistically nightmarish—he'd brought in his creative partner Vahid Nabizadeh from a holiday in Bali, his pit orchestra down from Chengdu where he'd left them, and his lighting and stage krewe from London; he'd also had to liaise with local set-makers, prop masters and costume designers; and on top of all this, he had to actually write the script for *Looking Downward* (based on a novella he'd once serialised online), hold auditions, and justify each and every cost to the MOC. Throwing himself into the preparation helped take his mind off Elisha, and the flow of his work made his entire body hum. Rehearsals had gone well, although one of his leads (The Green Empress) had got knocked out with a wicked Plavan Flu for two weeks; she assured him that she would be ready to perform come showtime, but Zed readied her understudy just in case.

Dress rehearsal: everything that could go wrong did go wrong. The lighting cues were off, a portion of the castle set tipped over (trapping the young actor playing the Catoblepas for nearly ten minutes) and had to be reset in position, The Green Empress was still coughing up small frogs in her hotel room and her understudy flubbed half of the lines, carpenters worked overtime to stabilise the

structure of Vahid's (menacingly creaky) puppeteering mezzanine, half the pit orchestra was flat and the other half sharp, and all the stress was causing Zed to mis-morph, to mimic characters who had just departed a scene or not appeared. In the midst of all this, Mr Kenny Foo, Information Officer Second Class (Arts and Culture Development Office), paid a visit, questioning the use of the acoustic-enhancing materials imported from Belgium, and that was it, it was all too much, tribute performance or no, this was just not worth it.

"*Fuuuuck!*" Zed shouted, his voice projecting (thanks to a combination of his natural abilities and the Belgian tiles), and everyone, in front of house and back, stopped what they were doing. Kenny Foo seemed to shrink in on himself. "Are you fucking *kidding* me with this shit? Acoustic tiles? During our fucking dress rehearsal? It's all been justified, it's what I want, it was already approved, so why are we talking about this shit right now?"

"Easy, my captain, easy." The British-accented voice came from above, Vahid on the rickety puppeteering mezzanine, clad completely in black. He descended the ladder quickly, monkey-like with his four arms, one, two, three, thunk onto the hardwood, and then directly into Zed's face. Vahid had never really understood the concept of personal space. A constant bundle of nervous energy, so much so that it radiated from his pores. He reeked of peppermint and wood glue, an omnipresent scent. "Whyn't you go for a walk, eh? Clear the head, cap. I'll deal with this."

Without another word, Zed leapt off the stage, forgoing the stairs, and strode up the centre aisle, passing underneath the three levels of balcony seating and private boxes, out to the lobby and then outside into a surprisingly cool Tinhau evening. The Orpheum Theatre was located in Negeri Biyuron, the district the government had set aside for appreciation of the arts—museums, galleries, auditoriums, studios, loft spaces and tertiary schools for both the visual and

performing arts—but commerce was inextricably merged. The Tinhau People's Party was far too pragmatic to allow art for art's sake, valuing it for either its monetary worth or the prestige it brought to the state. Zed noted that Biyuron was also the district in which his sister had committed her final corporeal act; he wondered what she had done just prior to the suicide. Had she seen a play? Toured a gallery of local artists? Or had she been wandering aimlessly, picking the Biyuron2 station by chance?

Zed stood on the sidewalk outside The Orpheum, breathing heavily, and looked across the busy city street at the Museum of Industry, a nightmare of a building, only four storeys tall but covered in a kudzu of technology, pistons turning, flywheels spinning, gears ratcheting, penetrated all over by wires and tubes, with steam and small goutts of flame bursting from outlet towers on the roof. A monument to the industrial age, and tacky as all hell. It made a horrible racket, although thankfully, this could not be heard inside the theatre; he would have been even more incensed to have to perform with such a cacophony as a backdrop.

Zed shifted his features to something blandly forgettable and started walking, the sidewalk strangely spongy under his shoes, the continuous whooshing traffic on his right becoming a wall of white noise, occasionally punctuated by the blat of a lorry horn. He had no idea where he was heading, only caring about the passage of concrete under his Jack Purcell sneakers, putting one foot in front of the other, slowly descending into a timeless trance devoid of tension and stress and frustration, with each step pushing his worries into the ground, which absorbed them greedily.

After a time, Zed realised he'd entered a residential area, an enclave of warehouses that had been repurposed into artist housing during his absence from the country. He passed cafés and bars and boutique shops catering to niche tastes in clothing, accessories, Nipponese

papercraft, vinyl figurines and nostalgic knick-knacks. A sign hovered into view on his left, diaphanous, translucent, and Zed wondered if it was really there or just a hallucination: Readers' Square. Beyond the sign, the landscape opened up into a small public park, all ambient sound muffled by a variety of palm trees, within which was located an intimate semicircle of large cubed stones with another at their centre, the perfect setting for a literary reading of about thirty attendants, almost all of which were occupied by meditators seated in the lotus position, illuminated by a series of small lights inset into the soil.

Alerted by Zed's presence, though he had made no noise, the meditator at the central locus opened his eyes; shaven-headed and serene, dark-skinned but unclear in ethnicity from this distance, tall in torso and spine erect, the aspect of a monk although he wore a T-shirt illustrated with a stylised Nipponese monster and loose blue jeans rather than traditional monk's robes, and as Zed looked closer he realised the figure was a woman instead, South Asian in origin, and she smiled at Zed and motioned for him to take a cube to her right. He approached as quietly as he could, the long grass under his feet whispering against the soles of his shoes and the cuffs of his chinos, and took a seat where the woman had indicated, unable to wrangle his feet into the lotus position and having to settle for regular cross-legged instead. The woman had not taken her eyes off Zed, an unashamed intensity in her gaze, a spark that he could sense even in the dimness of the Readers' Square, but as he finally settled in on the surprisingly comfortable block of stone, she smiled again, small crow's feet betraying the timelessness of her features, licked her lips with a small tongue, and closed her eyes once more.

Zed had never taken well to meditation. His mind raced, his legs itched to break the stillness, he got bored or sometimes fell asleep. He just never seemed to get the hang of it, and on top of it all, poor circulation in his feet led to tingling numbness which he would have

to stomp away and endure until the blood returned. But he felt none of this now. Perhaps it had been the mesmerising walk that had led him here, perhaps it was just his time to get it right, but as soon as he closed his eyes and concentrated on his breath, the world and all his corporeal complaints drifted away. He recited *Om mani padme hum* silently to himself, over and over, the all-inclusive mantra blooming in his mind and becoming the whole of creation, replacing the mundane world with six syllables.

And just as he was ready to sink into timeless, formless nullity, a voice, low but female, Americanised in vowels and pronunciation, retrieved him, preventing him from losing himself completely. The voice said, "Now let's all set our motivation, that the positive merit we achieve tonight will be used to benefit all sentient beings, that we will go back out into the world with our minds clear and focused so as to perform propitious deeds to increase our good karma so that one day we will all reach enlightenment and become buddhas." There was another period of silence as Zed and, presumably, the other meditators, set their motivation, then the voice said, "All right, now open your eyes and return to the world."

Zed did so, and for a moment, the bald Indian woman in front of him glowed with an aura of green fire, a simmering low-level power that surrounded her body, intensified in the middle of her forehead at her ajna chakra. Zed blinked once and the green fire disappeared, although a greenish tinge seemed to now lie beneath her dark skin. Had it been there when he first entered the circle? The other meditators, mostly Chinese, but with a mix of South Asians and Caucasians, rubbed their eyes and murmured *sotto voce*, unfolding themselves and preparing to leave; several of them glanced his way and whispered amongst themselves. Zed reached up and felt his true face, apparently having emerged during the meditation. He edged down from his cube and approached the Indian woman.

“Thank you for letting me take part,” he said. “I really needed it.”

“You’re quite welcome,” she said. Again, Zed was unable to tell her age, but guessed her at a few years older than himself, perhaps in her late thirties. “Although you must be careful not to lose yourself so completely. I can tell you have a lot of issues bottled up, which is an occasion that sometimes leads to complete detachment from the world. This is something the Buddha does not want from you. Trust me.”

Instead of asking how she could possibly know any of this, he took a breath and said, “Can I come again?”

She smiled once more, easily, naturally, and Zed noticed that her bottom front teeth were slightly crooked. “Please do. We meet here at this time each week.”

“I’m Zed, by the way,” he said, then added, “Quek Zhou Ma, actually.” His given name felt awkward in his mouth, like uneven pebbles.

“Nice to meet you, Zuma,” the woman said, mispronouncing his name. He didn’t bother to correct her; meeting someone who didn’t automatically recognise him was a novelty these days. “My name is Tara.” Then she slipped off her seat with surprising agility, her movements lithe as an ocelot’s, bent down to retrieve a canvas shoulder bag, rose to her full height (which was a full head taller than Zed, and he was considered tall), and stepped forward to speak with some of the other participants who had remained behind.

Tara. An interesting name, one of the emanations of Avalokiteshvara, like Kwan Yin. Although, Tara’s American accent also revealed significant time spent there, in a place where her name might be considered quite mundane.

Zed made his way back out of the park, out of the Artists District, and headed once more towards The Orpheum. His mind now not as restless, and so the walk seemed to take no time at all. Had he really been so close? Or did it just seem that way? He passed the noisy Museum of Industry, then walked up the front steps of the theatre

and back into the lobby; the sounds of the orchestra performing the show’s overture wafted over him. He reached into his pocket for his mobile and checked the time; remarkably, only forty-five minutes had passed. He stopped at the doorway to the auditorium and listened.

Angklung and djembe and balaphone and gyl and guzheng and pipa and tamtam and sitar and guitar and duduk and keyboards, all together, setting the mood, setting the stage, preparing the potential audience for the drama to come. The trio of bolvoxors joined in, each one on a separate microphone, *deen da dakka choom*, the vocal percussion starting simply, adding syncopation, supplementary syllables and staccato accents, faster and faster, putting their whole bodies into the performance, twisting torsos, rubbing hands, stomping feet, eyes clamped with the effort, akin to a frenzied trance, passing rhythms down the line then back up, issuing a challenge with each percussive utterance, pushing the other orchestra members, driving driving driving until crescendo, until fortissimo, until climax, and then the slow and lugubrious cooldown, the drawn-out exhale, the progression to mezzo piano, then to piano, then fadeaway.

Several krewes members and actors clapped, and Zed walked down the aisle towards the stage, his steps calm and assured. Kenny Foo was nowhere to be found, although Zed liked to think that he would have handled him with a lighter touch this time round; he would call the MOC in the morning and apologise for his behaviour. Vahid stood at centre stage, acting as director in Zed’s absence, and as he caught Zed’s eye he crossed all four of his arms and arched an eyebrow, as if to say, *Got that all out of our system, have we?* Zed nodded and Vahid visibly relaxed, edging back to his mezzanine so that Zed could retake the reins.

“Excellent,” Zed said as he approached the orchestra pit. “Let’s begin again, shall we?”

5

OPENING NIGHT, AND they had just begun Act I, Scene 4, where the two misters discover that the Turtle, the gateway back to their land, has wandered off, eliciting laughter from the audience in all the right places, when a huge explosion, incredibly close, seemed to inhabit the theatre. The thunderous detonation sent Zed's lizard brain into overdrive, paralysing his body, the shockwaves reverberating The Orpheum down to its concrete foundation. Several startled yelps from the sold-out audience, and then a high-pitched voice shrieked, "It's the Range!" This released everyone else in attendance from their own shocked stillness. There was screaming en masse, and then a frenzied exodus, shoving shoving shoving and parents lifting children over their heads so the little ones wouldn't be trampled, and Zed still on stage, disbelieving, incredulous. Hair pulled, clothing ripped, faces scratched or slapped or punched, all in a desperate move to flee, to get away. Out of the corner of his eye, Zed saw Vahid drop the three metres from the puppeteering mezzanine to the stage without hardly touching the rungs of the ladder, then he was being rushed backstage, down the narrow corridor to the rear of the theatre, into the dressing room, onto the couch, to safety.

Zed sat, shivering violently, whispering, "No no no no no no no," the concussive boom of the explosion still roaring in his ears.

Vahid bent down and placed a hand on each of Zed's shoulders.

"Stay here, mate. I'll go find out what's going on. Don't leave, all right?" He exited the dressing room and closed the door behind him.

Zed should have been deep into Act II of *Looking Downward* at this point, not freaking out on this ugly beige couch. The performance had been going so well, Zed in better form than he could remember in quite a long time, the stresses and mistakes of the dress rehearsal forgotten. His synchronicity with Vahid's marionettes and the on-stage actors was pitch-perfect, as he duplicated their actions and gave voice to the voiceless. His body achieved true full transformation, effecting the dumpy waddles of Mister Hopeless and Mister Shiftless, the haughty stiff posture of the pregnant Green Empress, the mystified wariness of the reluctant heroine. Every emotion, every movement, every gesture had been *real*, in both the narrative and objective sense. Now, all wasted.

After what felt like a very long time, Vahid re-entered the room and closed the door on the harried conversations of the krewe members in the corridor. He wrung all his hands together and shifted from foot to foot as if he needed to piss. His eyeballs shook.

"It's bad, ol' cap, bad indeed," Vahid said, biting a fingernail.

"What happened? Was it the Range?"

"No, not the Range, thank fuck. The coppers are calling it a penderhaka bomb. Domestic terrorism then, instead of from above. Half the Museum of Industry across the street is gone. But no smoking crater, no. Been replaced by a fucken public park, cap. Don't that just eat it?" Vahid collapsed next to Zed on the couch, which exhaled slowly underneath them. His upper arms kneaded his temples and his lower arms crossed over his chest. "A park. They changed machinery into nature. Fuck, mate. So, what do you think?"

"Is everyone else, okay? The actors, the krewe?"

"Yeah, about as much as can be expected. And not all the audience ran off; still quite a few folks out there."

“I just don’t fucking believe this,” Zed said. “It was perfect. We were completely in sync.”

“Right you are, cap.”

“The audience was loving it.” Zed leaned back. “Fucking terrorists.”

Vahid patted him on the knee. “Some homecoming, eh?”

At that moment, Mr Kenny Foo, Information Officer Second Class (Arts and Culture Development Office), opened the door and hesitatingly stepped into view. The last person Zed wanted to see right now, especially under the circumstances. He wore a dirt-coloured Member’s Only jacket that looked old and faded enough to have been bought when it was first popular almost thirty years ago, his only concession to the arctic aircon of the theatre.

“Mr Quek, I am afraid we need to speak.”

Zed had called that morning and left a voicemail apologising for his rudeness the night before, but that same initial urge rose up in him now, the one to curse and shout and possibly throw things. “Can this not wait until later? We’re all a bit shaken up at the moment.”

“I am sorry, but no. We must speak now.”

“About?”

“You and your cast need to return to the stage.”

Vahid stood abruptly and Kenny Foo cringed, jerking back in expectation of violence. “Are you fucken kidding me?” Vahid said, and Zed nearly smiled at the echo of his own words the previous night; he wondered if Kenny Foo naturally drew out this phrase in people. “We got bombs going off all over the place, and you want to pretend everything’s just groovy? Especially when two-thirds of the audience has fled? We’re not your monkeys, money man.”

Kenny Foo reached into a jacket pocket and removed a folded-up sheet of paper, unfolded it carefully, and then brandished it before him, text out, like a crucifix. “You are contractually obligated to perform, *in forma completus et perfectus*, the dramatic performance

entitled *Looking Downward*, on this agreed upon date, with full complement of cast and krewe. High officials in the Ministry of Geomancy have chosen this as the most auspicious day and time to begin the run, and to delay will cast a pall on the remainder of the production and humiliation in the eyes of the Ministry of Culture. Once again, you and your cast need to return to the stage.”

Vahid looked to launch into another tirade, so Zed reached up and squeezed his partner’s lower right arm gently at the forearm. “And if we don’t?”

Kenny Foo exhaled. “My bosses at the Ministry do not look kindly on breach of contract. You will be fined for all expenses incurred and previously assumed by MOC, plus any other damages that they feel owed because of your non-cooperation. Plus,” he lowered his voice, the next piece of news uttered reluctantly, “I vouched for you and your production. Nobody at the MOC wants to take risks like the one I took in proposing this venture; to do so invites criticism that one has ambitions beyond one’s station, which is a quality not encouraged for civil servants. If you breach, I will most likely lose my job and my livelihood, and possibly get blacklisted from the government job market. Please, I implore you, return to the stage.”

Zed considered his words for a moment, then said, “Vahid, do me a favour? Please go out into the corridor and take a vote on who will continue tonight. If we have enough for a skeleton crew, then we’ll go on. But,” and he addressed this to Kenny Foo, “that’s a mighty big ‘if’.”

Vahid rose, opened the door and closed it behind him. The seconds ticked slowly by as Zed and Kenny Foo waited for him to return. Kenny Foo would not look Zed in the eyes. Zed wanted to do the right thing and also show that his art could not be suppressed by violence, but he needed logistics on his side. He sat back and closed his eyes. The image of Tara, the meditator he had met the previous night, rose in his mind, the elegant curve of her skull, the knowing

look in her eyes. Her features shifted into the visage of Huang Sin, the waitress with the youthful energy, and he suddenly felt horny as hell. Maybe it was being in proximity to the bombing, if it could even be called that, a near-death experience.

The door opened again, and Vahid entered. His face revealed the news quite clearly.

“I think you have your answer,” Zed said to Kenny Foo.

“No. No no no. Mr Quek, please, you must find some way, you must—”

“I *must* do nothing, Mr Foo. You live in fear of unemployment and retribution. I do not. Let the MOC fine me. I can afford it. Vahid,” Zed said, standing up, “do me another favour and tell the remaining audience that we’re cancelling the rest of the show tonight; we’ll honour their tickets if they want to come back next week, maybe we’ll do a special show just for them. Then tell the krewe to go home.”

“And where are you going, cap?”

“Away. Director’s prerogative. I need to get out of this building and into a bottomless scotch glass. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You, you—” Kenny Foo spluttered, “you cannot do this! Cannot!”

Zed pushed past Kenny Foo and with determined steps proceeded to the end of the corridor where a stage door opened onto Zed’s waiting limousine, ignoring the civil servant’s threats yelled at his back: he was an amateur, he was renegeing on the contract, he’d never perform in Tinhau again. He lifted his hand and flicked it back as if to say, *Whatever*.

After ducking into the limo’s back seat, he poured himself a single malt whisky straight up from the wetbar. Zed closed his eyes and felt the alcohol burn a line down his throat to his stomach, leaving behind a leathery aftertaste that was not entirely unpleasant. He groped in his trouser pocket for the slip of paper he knew to be inside; written on it in hurried loopy script was Huang Sin’s name

and phone number. He’d been carrying it around all this time, a sort of talisman, although he hadn’t really expected to ever call her. Sin; he could use some of that about now. He snatched the limo phone from its cradle and dialled the digits, expecting to leave a message on her voicemail, but instead she picked up.

“Hallo, Huang Sin? Zed here.”

“Oh,” she said. “Oh.” She repeated this another five times. “I...I didn’t think... Aiyoh, this so unexpected—”

“Where you stay?”

She gave him the address of a government housing block in Negeri Idrani which was actually relatively close to his location, and he repeated it to the driver. He told her that he would be there soon, and hung up. It would be a night she would never forget; she would live out her fantasy, and Zed would deal with the rest of his troubles in the morning.

6

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, the limousine rolled up to Huang Sin's housing complex. It was one of the older neighbourhoods on the island, and so the buildings were shorter, only three floors, and made of red brick instead of concrete, with shops now closed-up on the first storey. Without meaning to, it gave off a retro look, and Zed was instantly reminded of the scratched and faded photos his mother had shown him of her childhood living in one of Tinhau's (then) ubiquitous kampungs, a different era, a different time. Zed opened the limo door and searched for Huang Sin's flat. The complex contained its own hawker centre, looking to feed several hundred people at capacity, and a few stalls were still open, selling satay and roti prata to late-night diners; several televisions bolted to the exterior walls of the stalls replayed the latest Tinhau fútbol match between the Moten Lions and Leten United. Large oscillating fans pushed the sultry air around, while lanky stray cats with short knobbed tails lounged underneath the melamine tables, ready to pounce on errant morsels dropped from above.

After several minutes, Zed located Huang Sin's building and took the stairs to the second floor. He checked the scribbled paper again, found the appropriate door and knocked softly. He had a moment of doubt, a twinge in his conscience, a little voice telling him that it was wrong to take advantage of this girl, that he should know better, that the sex wouldn't really solve anything, that things would still be

pear-shaped in the morning, but then Huang Sin opened the door in a tight black dress that ended at mid-thigh, an outfit suitable for a night on the town, and he found that he couldn't care less about those things. A quick glance at her living room reinforced the retro look of the apartment building, as if the furniture and décor had got stuck somewhere in 1984; it was certainly lived in, and messy, with everything having a battered, trampled-on look.

Before she could utter even a syllable, Zed pushed into the flat and kissed her, hard, mashing lips against teeth, his tongue tangling with hers. He didn't remember closing the door, shedding his clothes or helping her to peel her dress away, but he must have done so as they were suddenly in Huang Sin's bed, sweaty, sheets flung to the floor, and he was thrusting hard, disregarding her whimpers when he went too deep, ignoring her pleas that he was too big for her, and just pounding pounding pounding, punishing her for some crime she didn't know she'd committed, wanting to hurt her for the simple urge to hurt something, anything.

Afterward, he walked into the bathroom and wiped himself off with toilet paper, still breathing heavily, then sat down on the lid and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes hard enough to produce spots. He tingled all over from the post-coital endorphin rush, sheened with sweat in the un-airconned flat. Under his feet, the glossy toilet tiles reflected the overhead light, the grout in between invaded by a pinkish mould.

He held his limp cock in his hand and cursed it silently. How much of his life had been dictated by the whims of his libido? He'd often wished, in his more despondent moments, to be rid of this dangling member altogether, that maybe he would feel better without it taking charge of so many of his thoughts and actions, but he'd never seriously considered anything so drastic. He stood up.

Back in the bedroom, Huang Sin was still lying on her back,

legs spread slightly, tracing lazy patterns with her fingertips on her stomach. Now that the lust had evaporated, Zed hoped he hadn't hurt her too much. He couldn't read her face, which was a mixture of confusion and contentment, as though she couldn't decide whether she was happy that this had happened. She looked at him for a hopeful wordless moment, then rolled onto her side and climbed out of bed. After she had closed the door to the toilet, Zed quickly pulled on his underwear, slacks, shirt. As he tied his shoes, he heard the splash of urine, and briefly wondered why the women he slept with always did that after sex, as if they were pissing away all traces of contact with him. He felt the impulse to leave behind a note, some message that this brief collision of their bodies had meant something, but the urge fled at the sound of the toilet flushing. Shirt still open, he hurried out the door and down the stairs, not ready to answer questions or talk about his feelings.

The limousine was still waiting where he'd left it, and he knocked on the driver's-side window. The driver placed his index finger into the crease of the novel he'd been reading, looked up, then closed the book and unlocked the doors. Zed slipped into the back seat, paused for a moment, said, "Biyuron2 TMRT station," then raised the opaque barrier directly behind the driver, not wanting to meet the man's gaze. As the limousine made its way to the site of Elisha's suicide, he alternately dozed and berated himself. His karma would suffer for his actions tonight.

The ride did not completely backtrack, since the train line wound its way west of The Orpheum, and they reached Biyuron2 in less than a half-hour. The last subway station before the North-South Line entered the Northern Territories, Tinhau's most exclusive district, one enormous gated community, home to the wealthiest two per cent of the population, including the prime minister, the Cabinet, several other high-ranking members of Parliament (although the

majority of MPs chose to live in the districts they represented), CEOs of Tinhau's most successful corporations, bank chairmen, architects, PropaCorp's five highest paid "actistes", et cetera; one needed a specially-made national identification card just to enter those stations, with customised arphids that transmitted the magic code to enter the kingdom of the elite.

Zed shifted his facial features just enough to obfuscate his identity, exited the limo, walked up a short stoop to Biyuron2's crowded and decidedly non-elite entrance, then took an escalator down to the platform level. Even at this time of the evening, the station was still thronged with travellers; he involuntarily smiled at the attractive women who fluidly approached and then passed on by. More than a few returned his smile.

At the turnstile, he waved his national identification card (with a recently topped-up balance) over the sensor plate and passed through, but he wouldn't actually be taking the train tonight. He progressed along the central platform to its very end, and stood directly in the centre. On his right stood the mass of passengers riding south to the interchange at Tinhau West (which would carry them towards downtown), young men and women dressed up for the weekend, heading off for drinks, parties, clubs, bars and likely hook-ups by the end of the night. On his left were only four people along the entire length of the platform, three women and one man, dressed in tastefully expensive business suits and waiting to progress into the Northern Territories; at the NT1 station just over the border, the train would be stopped, NICs would be scanned by humourless men in blue paramilitary uniforms, and security wands waved over clothing and handbags, to ensure that only those who belonged passed through.

After three minutes, the westbound subway train arrived, empty but for maybe a dozen people, and the hordes of Biyuron2 passengers crammed inside as soon as the doors opened. Zed watched them,

remembering a similar experience in Tokyo. There, it was the job of a pair of fit Nipponese men at each entrance of the train cars to pack in as many people as possible; one wore a cushion strapped to his back and stood at the open doors after the passengers had entered, then he braced himself as his partner grabbed the metal grips on the open doors and then jumped up in the air, his knees landing on the cushion and pushing hard, squeezing his partner into the car, and, by principle, anyone in front of him. Then both men jumped back as the doors closed on the breathless sardines inside. This happened hundreds of times a day in stations all throughout Greater Tokyo.

As the TMRT train pulled away, Zed was left alone on his side of the platform. Pasted like an advert into the tiles at his feet, readable now that the other people had gone, was a statement that “half-height” protective gates would be installed in the coming months, and to please excuse any interruptions in service that may occur as a result. What the statement neglected to mention was the reason for the construction of the secondary gates: to prevent people, such as his older sister, from flinging themselves off the platform on purpose, or falling or being knocked down accidentally, onto the tracks. Although, based on what his mother had said about the press pestering her at home, Zed got the feeling that the government was more concerned about subway service delays than about saving human lives. Whatever the reason, it was too little and far too late.

Zed turned his attention to the tracks themselves. His mother had said that Elisha had watched the train coming from this direction, entering her side of the platform first, waited until it had almost approached and was therefore just starting to brake, and then without a word or scream or any sound whatsoever calmly stepped off the edge of the platform. It wasn't clear, according to the coroner, if she had even hit the tracks before the train collided into her, but at that point, what did it matter? It had taken the efficient TMRT

cleanup crews only two hours to make the area look like nothing had happened there at all; three months after, and it was impossible to tell that someone had jumped to her death at this very spot.

Zed made his way to a metal bench in the middle of the platform and sat, all the strength abruptly run out of him. He bent forward, elbows on knees, and let his eyes unfocus in the middle distance. Above him, on the digital video screen, there ran a number of government-funded scarevids in between displays for train arrival times. The first one played out a scenario where a nondescript teenager in a ballcap leaves a mysterious bag on a train car, then departs and with a mobile phone detonates the bomb presumably left inside, resulting in a realistic explosion and terrified screams from the dying hypothetical passengers, while a deep-voiced announcer intoned, “Penderhaka are everywhere—report all suspicious individuals and activity. This has been a PropaCorp Production.” Zed couldn't remember exactly what “penderhaka” meant, but he was pretty sure it equated to “traitor” or “terrorist” or some rebarbative othering type of word.

Another scarevid involved scenes of anonymous muscular men in black outfits and balaclavas training in some anonymous desert, intercut with seated passengers on an commercial airline looking surreptitiously at their neighbours, eyes lingering on scruffy shabbily-dressed, sweating young men in their twenties of various races—Chinese, Malay, Indian, Caucasian, African—then all eyes looking out the airplane's windows as a squadron of Tinhau Air Force jets surrounds the plane, followed by an extreme close-up on a pair of South Asian eyes, widened with terror. Then a black screen with the following white text fading in quickly: “Penderhaka knows no one race. Fear is Safety. Join the TAF today. This message brought to you by PropaCorp.” Zed couldn't even think of whom the TAF might be defending the country against—Malaya? Indonesia? Australia?—

since Tinhau had a solid economic and diplomatic relationship with all its Southeast Asian neighbours, and he put it down to yet one more system of controlling its own citizens.

More videos tried to grab Zed's attention, but he ignored them, offhandedly noticing the profusion of scunts arrayed in rows on the station's ceiling and at the top of concrete support pylons, the never-sleeping eyes of authority. He focused once again on the curved tunnel wall in front of him, the grey concrete still immaculate even after years of constant use. He had to give it to the gahmen: they kept a clean country. When external opinion was integrated into foreign and domestic policy, anything that could scare away foreign interest (and, more important, investment and ready cash) was dealt with in the most expedient manner possible. His sister's blood, indelible in almost any other situation, was ephemeral in this place, wiped away with apparent ease.

He sat, deep in thought, as humanity passed around him, always in a hurry to get elsewhere, the incoming trains eventually disgorging more people than taking on; he sat there until the station lights dimmed, and he looked at his mobile and realised it was almost one in the morning. The station was getting ready to close for the night. Had the security men watching the scunt feeds enjoyed seeing him sit still for more than two hours? Was he now on some gahmen watch list? He pulled himself off the metal bench, stretched his back muscles, then walked back through the turnstile (his NIC now five Diom lighter) and took the escalator up to street level. The night air was saturated with conversation and hydrocarbons from the nearby highway, but he breathed in both. Nothing had changed.

Down the steps and he knocked on the limo's window again to wake the napping driver. Zed tumbled inside, rubbed his eyes and said, "Home, please."

7

ZED HAD BEEN incredibly stupid, he saw that now, burying his head in his directorial duties and staying quiet. Stupid and prideful and dismissive of the threats of a small-time civil servant named Kenny Foo. In order to cover his own ass, on the Monday morning after the bombing, he'd taken Zed's breach of contract all the way to the Minister for Culture, who launched a face-saving vindictive assault on Zed's character. Minister Chua saw the chance to deflect attention away from the humiliation of the Museum of Industry bombing, and published a scathing editorial in *The Tinhau People's News* the following day, denouncing Zed as a spoiled, ungrateful child who did not deserve Tinhau's support or recognition, spinning a simple breach into an epic slap in the face to the nation itself. On Wednesday, this character assassination was continued by the Ministers for Housing, Progress, National Development, and Home Affairs, lambasting him as a coward, a subversive and a troublemaker, not in the op-ed pages, but on page one. *TPN* released a special evening supplement with a statement from the prime minister himself, equating the breach to a matter of national security. No mention was made by anyone of the fact that Zed had planned to give a special show to the ticketholders affected by the cancellation. The bombing itself was relegated to the back pages of *TPN*'s "Home" section.

Morning talk-radio hosts on Thursday devoted hours of airtime to his actions, accusing him of megalomania, narcissism and worse.

#ZedBreach became the top trending topic on Friendface for sixteen hours straight, and groups and pages sprung up like weeds, dumping on him, his theatre troupe, his friends and his family with a level of anonymous vitriol that could only be found on the internet, gathering hundreds and then thousands of members. More than a dozen Tinhau vloggers with a blatantly obvious bias towards the government dug into his past and twisted real events into monstrous fabrications, implying that he had been arrested twice for statutory rape, advocated frequent and habitual use of methamphetamines, punched a baby in the face in Shanghai and microwaved hamsters for fun. The narrative of falsehood spread like wildfire to computers all over the world, until, by Saturday, one week after the bombing, his global reputation had been ruined and *Looking Downward* (which had seen fewer and fewer attendance numbers as the week wore on) had been permanently cancelled by The Orpheum and the MOC.

Zed had allowed the situation to be taken out of his hands and framed by others. Not even an hour after he had written his own statement and posted it at the top of zed.org, explaining in calm and objective terms what had actually happened, his website was crashed by a distributed denial-of-service attack coordinated by a group of hackers calling themselves Pseudonymous, and then replaced with a photograph of a wooden spork. His Friendface account was disabled after his Wall attracted so much attention that the Friendface offices in Berkeley qualified it as a violation of the site's Terms of Service. His private email address was leaked, and his inbox filled up with hate mail and penis-enlargement spam.

He was successfully sued by the Ministry of Culture, and the High Court (made up of staunch Tinhau People's Party supporters with strong ties to the MOC) awarded punitive damages in the amount of eight million Diom, an unfathomable amount that wiped out Zed's previously considerable savings. His passport was confiscated

by Immigration and Records until he could pay it all; the MIR officer who came to Zed's mother's flat to collect it did so sheepishly, apologising, saying he was a fan, this was only his official duty and would he mind giving an autograph? Zed couldn't slam the door in his face fast enough.

PEN America, Amnesty International and Artists Without Borders drew up petitions and made official statements on Zed's behalf, a few drama-related groups organised online in his defence, and a lengthy opinion piece at the *Hemisphere Confidential Report* about Zed's harsh treatment briefly went viral, but they were whispers in a typhoon, and went largely ignored by the Tinhau government. The more vocal groups were berated as trying to incite division and interfere in the country's domestic affairs.

Vahid, Zed's four-armed creative partner, had become enamored with Tinhau's culture and food, and had decided to stay, but was not currently talking to him. Zed's theatre troupe had scattered back to their home countries, having only been paid half their salary for the show.

He was broke.

He was ruined.

He was finished.

Zed spent his days locked up in his mum's flat, watching bad reality-based television shows imported from the NAU. His mother's Pohonorang maid went daily to the markets, and brought back the requested junk food; he sat shirtless on the sofa just like when he was a kid, eating Tim Tams and bags of crisps, feeling his body puddle under the weight of his loneliness. He stopped shaving. He stopped bathing. Some days he didn't get out of bed, except to use the toilet or rinse the sour taste of failure from his mouth. More than a few times, his mother compared his behaviour to Elisha's TDS Days, but he ignored the comments.

The world celebrated the new year, but Zed remained a hermit, unwilling and unmotivated to even leave the confines of his mother's flat. A month passed, and the hate mail slowed. The phone stopped ringing. Friendface pages devoted to name-calling and badmouthing reduced in activity. They were forgetting him. He was yesterday's scandal. He perversely missed the attention.

His mother went to the Manjusri Vimala Temple more and more. It soon became a daily occurrence, and she returned home smelling of incense. She consulted the *Chien Tung*, and burned joss sticks in the family altar that took up a significant section of the northwest wall in the living room. She prayed to her ancestors twice a day.

The Lunar New Year arrived. All of Tinhau was devoted to the two weeks of celebration, with red lanterns being displayed in the streets and inside homes, with streamers and strings of firecrackers decorating the shopping district. The local news covered the festivities, and the stores played the noisy holiday music that permeated the markets and stalls at this time every year. Zed's mother told him that several of her friends, knowing of his situation, had given him ang pows containing a little money inside, and that she would store the money in a safe place for him to use later. As though he were still a child. In the evenings, Zed could hear small fireworks set off in the neighbourhood, but he stayed inside.

On an unusually cool March morning just a few weeks before Zed's thirty-seventh birthday, his mother burst into his room, declared that she was sick of his self-pity and that he needed to get out of the flat for a while. Her gambling group was coming over for a sisek game punctuated by conversation in Teochew, and she didn't want to have to worry about him moping in the other room. Plus, it was time to accept what had occurred and move on. To his surprise, Zed agreed.

He lingered in the shower, running the water hotter than normal, knowing that his shirt would not be soaked with sweat as soon as

he stepped out the front door. After washing, he rooted through the pile of clothes on the bedroom floor, miraculously finding a clean muslin shirt and a pair of cotton shorts. His beard had got thick, his facial hair more abundant than those of many other Chinese men, and the dry skin underneath itched and flaked, but he didn't feel like shaving. At least no one would recognise him.

Zed bade his mother goodbye, rode the lift down to the lobby, then took a streetcar to the nearest TMRT station. He spent some time in Negeri Draseleq, wandering through the blocks of shops, sitting on the banks of Tiron Lake and watching the ducks. He ambled through the crowds in Negeri Ciravesu, whole armies of be-suited men and women hurrying off to jobs in finance or government, sharp in their eyeglasses and Western dress. He passed by the Obsidian Tower in the city centre, a gargantuan fuliginous structure stretching up into the clouds, bamboo-like, Tinhau's seat of government, guarded at its base by paramilitary soldiers armed with assault rifles.

He took a long walk through the various paths of the Arbour Hillocks Nature Preserve, stopping for a bit to admire the fishermen casting their lines into the Tehtarik River. He dipped a hand into the river and drank the cool brown liquid; in its pure form, it tasted lightly of tea, but when it was heated to volcanic temperatures and sweetened with ginger water and a finger of condensed milk, it transformed into Zed's favourite drink, teh halia. The birds were out in full force, briefly relieved from their typical humidity-induced lethargy. Mynahs, lories, parakeets, bluebirds, pittas and Baya weavers all sang and flapped and twittered in the branches above him. Hordes of dragonflies flitted and buzzed around his face, then dispersed. A cool breeze, such an unusual feeling in the normally tropical environment, riffled the leaves of palm, bodhi and banyan trees, and played with his grown-out hair.

He wasn't quite sure of the point at which he left the preserve

and entered Negeri Biyuron, but it was early evening when he found himself in front of The Orpheum. The façade had been renovated and thoroughly cleaned; it shone as if straight out of the box. Colonnades had been added as well, giving the theatre grandiosity. It looked as if the Ministry of Culture had put Zed's money to good use. He wondered what they had done to the interior.

He stepped forward, then stopped as from the front doors emerged the last person he expected or wanted to see: Mr Kenny Foo, Information Officer Second Class (Arts and Culture Development Office). Although, if his new suit (Zegna, if Zed wasn't mistaken) was any indication, he looked to have been promoted, using the debacle surrounding Zed's breach to elevate himself up the MOC's hierarchy. In a panic, Zed's morphic abilities surfaced, giving him a paunch, a bulbous nose, a slight limp, a thicker beard and a more prominent brow. Kenny Foo, looking frustratingly comfortable in his expensive suit, glided down the steps and onto the sidewalk, giving Zed a wide berth, and passing by without recognising him. After he had walked a block further, Zed exhaled and returned his features to normal.

He no longer felt like seeing the inside of the theatre, site of his iniquity and undoing, so he walked across the street via the zebra crossing to the new public park. In addition to supplanting over half of the Museum of Industry, it was now slowly encroaching on the rest; grasses, mosses and ivy had spread across the building, threatening to engulf it. Those penderhaka bastards had led to his downfall, but he had to admit that the park was a pretty one.

A pair of sarus cranes, beautiful in their awkwardness, their heads splashed with an electric red colour Zed wouldn't have expected in nature, drifted down out of the sky and landed in the branches of a bodhi tree. They rubbed their heads and necks against each other, and made nickering noises reminiscent of chattering squirrels. Then they launched back up into the sky, soaring off to a hidden-away love

nest, or to find food, up and away and out of sight behind a group of buildings. Zed looked back down at the tree, which was swaying lightly, either from the cranes' departure or from the gentle breeze, it was impossible to tell. Had that just happened? It was such an unreal occurrence that he easily could have imagined it. Did cranes even fly? He had always thought of them as flightless birds, but he could have been wrong. He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything.

In that moment, he profoundly envied those birds, rising gracefully, effortlessly, escaping gravity and heartache and egomaniacal hubris. He imagined himself among them, leaving behind material attachments and desire, flapping his stately wings and gliding on unseen air currents, free of disappointments and unmet expectations and the tyranny of society, going ever higher, soaring up into the vast spaces of a limitless sky. What would that be like, to let go and just fall?

Zed sighed and sat down on a wooden-esque bench that had organically extruded up from the ground, and it gave slightly under his weight. He breathed in the cool air and closed his eyes. He missed the adulation and attention, but the loss was less every day. The world hadn't ended along with his career; it had kept spinning on without him. His mother had been right: he was, in fact, *not* the centre of the universe.

The weight distribution of the bench shifted and it squeaked. Zed opened his eyes. Sitting next to him was an attractive Indian woman, her hair cropped to stubble, her dark skin undertoned with the deepest green of forest undergrowth, her eyes devoid of iris colour, black as kohl behind glasses with thick rims, her nose broad and strong, her willowy frame ramrod straight. In his introspective state, it took about ten seconds to recognise that she was Tara, the meditator he had met almost three months ago. Once again, she wore relaxed-fit blue jeans, but instead of a Nipponese monster on her purple T-shirt, the Om symbol, ॐ, was displayed in Devanagari script.

“Hallo,” he said.

“Hullo,” she said. “Zuma, right? I never saw you back at Readers’ Square.”

Zed hesitated a moment, chagrined that she had seen right through his “disguise”, then said, “A lot has happened. I’m a bit lost at the moment.”

Tara smiled, put a hand on his arm, her touch cool and dry, and said, “Tell me.”

PART TWO

A Warm Place

1

TARA KNEW EXACTLY who sat next to her on the park bench, even as he told her his story. She'd seen the posters with Zuma's face on them weeks before the opening of *Looking Downward*, proclaiming the excellence and majesty of his stage show. After meeting him in the meditation circle, she had rented his *Live in Barcelona* DVD, but was not terribly impressed. The cover copy sang the praises of his revolutionary narrative form, but it was all just a variation on a theme to her. In her travels, she had seen puppet theatre in Nippon, Siam and Bali, and his style seemed to borrow from each. The stories themselves weren't bad, but the medium was far from original. She was, however, captivated by his ability to adjust his shape to mimic the marionettes; it must have taken a long time to perfect that. At first she thought it an illusion, a trick of computer graphics, but the changes that occurred looked organic, lacking the smooth fakery of CGI.

She was also interested in the fact that he had introduced himself to her as "Zuma", which she'd thought was a Tibetan word rather than a Chinese name, meaning "false". Did he really see himself that way?

His downfall had been the news-of-the-day for two solid months, and she'd read of the bomb threats and hatepages on Friendface, her sympathy going out to this uncompromising artist. And so, when she had seen him just now in the new public park, head tossed back, eyes closed, unkempt, grizzled and alone, she found herself sitting next to him.

At his reticence to discuss the recent past, Tara reached into her banjara handbag, her gesture rustling the tiny mirrors that decorated the bag's exterior so that the fading light caught the movement and produced dozens of sparkles on Zuma's face and clothing. From the bag she extricated a bar of her favourite brand of chocolate, which was expensive and difficult to import into Tinhau, but so worth it; she unflapped the cardboard packaging, peeled down the foil and revealed the deep brown goodness, glossy with shine. She ran a fingertip lightly over the surface, releasing the aromas of spices, caramel notes and tropical fruits, which drifted up and surrounded them. She raised her eyes to see Zuma's intense gaze on the chocolate.

"That smells amazing," he said.

"Would you care for a piece?"

He nodded. She broke off a chunk, the chocolate soft and partially melted. Tara handed him the piece. He moved to put the entire thing in his mouth, but she stopped him.

"Wait," she said. "Smell and taste are closely interrelated." She motioned for him to follow her lead. Zuma breathed in his own piece, and his eyes widened. His nostrils swelled to take in even more of the scent, bigger and bigger, impossibly large. She put a hand on his arm.

"Easy."

"It's, it's just, I never—"

"Now," she said, "bite off a small portion and let it sit on your tongue. The chocolate should slowly begin to melt. Wait until you feel the tongue completely covered, and then swallow."

Zuma was visibly breathing harder. He uttered grunts and moans of pleasure from the back of his throat. She bit off her own piece, the taste of spicy curry powder and coconut flakes sending a heated flash to the edges of her tongue. The evening breeze

caressed the small amount of hair growth she'd allowed herself; it really was time to shave her head again, a useful practicality in such a normally sweltering climate, but she'd also got used to not needing to buy hair care products, and the societal judgement that came with one's coif. After the chocolate had slid down her throat, she emerged from the self-induced trance to the vision of tears trickling down Zuma's cheeks.

Poor guy. Maybe he wasn't ready to enjoy himself yet.

She waited patiently as he sniffled and wiped his face. He exhaled loudly several times, and then seemed to pull himself back together. He looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

"Aren't Buddhists supposed to renounce fancy foods like that?" he asked.

Tara smiled, although he could not see it. "Of course not. Taking enjoyment in the taste of extremely good chocolate does not make me a bad Buddhist. If I became addicted to it, then possibly, but if it's only in moderation, on special occasions? No. The Buddha himself believed in the middle way between asceticism and overindulgence, recognising that nice tastes or beautiful sights are part of what make our time in samsara bearable, as long as we remember that happiness is not dependent on these sensory pleasures. As with everything within cyclic existence, the taste of this chocolate bar is an illusion; one can enjoy it as long as one never forgets this supposition. Plus, I'm not a nun, either ordained or in training."

"You're not? But you shave your head."

"I fortunately have a nicely-shaped head; why wouldn't I want to show that off? Lay practitioners are not expected to completely forgo their illusions, at least not in this life."

He nodded and turned back to her. "Thank you for the temporary illusion then."

"You're welcome."

“I’m sorry about that. It’s just, well...” He trailed off. She let the silence hang in the air. “So,” he said. “You said your name is Tara, right?”

“I did.”

“Is there a last name?”

“It’s just Tara.”

He smiled and looked down at his shoes, amused by some internal joke.

“I understand,” he said.

Did he? She saw at least two ways he might have taken her remark. It could be that her name was mononymous, like a diva or a rock star, someone like himself. If this were the case, it would be an understanding of how similar they were, although her singular name would not be an indicator of the depth of her ego such as only using one alphanumeric to sum up one’s essence in a stage name, and the last letter of the alphabet at that. But the similarity would be there, a foundation upon which to build a relationship, friendly or more than.

But the simple fact was that they had just met, and she was not yet comfortable giving out her family name, which he would be able to look up online and in the phone directory. By withholding her surname, she retained the control, and it was possible that it was this that he understood.

Before she could ask him to elaborate, he abruptly stood and dusted off his cotton shorts.

“Would you join me for dinner?” he asked.

She smiled, thanked him and said no. She needed to get to a previous engagement. Tara stood up and placed the remainder of the chocolate back in her bag, casting sparkles on Zuma’s face again. He looked slightly dejected by her answer; was he really not used to being rejected by women?

“Can I see you again?”

“Certainly,” she said.

“How will I find you?”

She motioned to the bench. “I sit here often. It’s one of my new favourite places.”

Then she turned and hurried off in the direction of the nearest streetcar stop, a smile on her lips. Of course she’d be seeing him again.

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Jason Erik Lundberg

December 2004, Raleigh

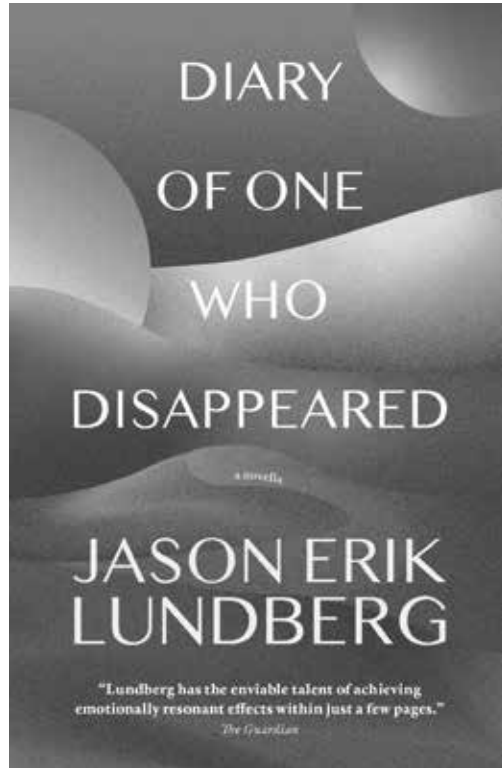
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JASON ERIK LUNDBERG was born in New York, grew up in North Carolina and has lived in Singapore since 2007. He is the author and anthologist of over two dozen books, including *Most Excellent and Lamentable* (2019), *Diary of One Who Disappeared* (2019), *Carol the Coral* (2016), *Strange Mammals* (2013), *Embracing the Strange* (2013), *The Alchemy of Happiness* (2012), *Fish Eats Lion* (2012), *Red Dot Irreal* (2011), the six-book *Bo Bo and Cha Cha* children's picture book series (2012–2015), and the biennial *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series (est. 2013). He is also the fiction editor at Epigram Books (where the books he's edited have won multiple awards, and made various year's best lists since 2012), as well as the founding editor of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction* (2012–2018). His writing has been anthologised widely, shortlisted for multiple awards, honourably mentioned twice in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and translated into half a dozen languages. *A Fickle and Restless Weapon* is his first novel, and twenty-fifth book.

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day he meets Tara—alluring, philosophical,
gifted—who pulls Zed and Vahid into a plot
bigger than all of them.



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