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BAND EIGHT

In this Nation, the rich can do no wrong.

THAM CHENG-E

Author of *Surrogate Protocol*

**BAND
EIGHT**

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For Joel

“Where there is no Property,
there is no Injustice.”

John Locke,
Two Treatises of Government (1821)

PART ONE

1

For the past hour, Chanachai Natipong had sat at the living room window, hidden behind the blinds, armed with a pair of binoculars the size of a pack of cigarettes and half as thin. He was observing a long-limbed, sinewy man traversing the corridor that led to his flat. He was studying the part of the face unconcealed by a scarlet, floppy fringe, and committing it to memory.

Umair Syed Zaki. These days you couldn't do without a cyberwhiz. Tomorrow he'd have to make contact, perhaps make Zaki an offer. There were others to fill the roles he needed: someone in defence-science would prove useful, or an ex-wealth-profiling manager. Or both. He ran through the names in his head, counted six.

That would be his team. Six Aspirants. No more, no less.

"Time, fifteen-twenty-two," he said to someone behind him.

There on the couch—sprawled like a coverlet—was a giant dressed in a frumpled batik shirt of blue floral print, a log of a leg draped over an armrest. Bobby. Above him a stale pall of cigarette smoke lingered. He took down Chanachai's report on a touchpad, a cigarette clasped lazily between the lips. Then he ran a thick finger across the scratch-proof, crystalline surface, casually scrolling through the rest of the profiles.

"Nat, I need a favour," Bobby said, browsing, lazy-eyed.

"Time, fifteen-twenty-two," Chanachai said, scratching at his undercut and turning his head slightly towards the big man. "Pay attention, Bobby. Unit zero-five-one-three-five. Zaki's reached behind the utilities—gas meter—left of the unit. Take it down. What time did he leave this morning?"

The giant checked an entry. "Zero-nine-twenty-five."

"Which unit did he lodge in last night?"

A quick flick of the finger. A dart of eyes. “Umm, zero-eight-one-twelve.”

“Same block?”

“Same block.”

“Okay. He’s stopped. Unit zero-seven-one-three-one. Take it down.” Chanachai extended the binoculars’ range and adjusted the focus. “Definitely plugged into the system,” he said. “He does on average what? Six-hour days? Five?”

“More like five. Too few, makes no sense.”

“He does nights too, if you hadn’t realised.” Chanachai, slightly irked by Bobby’s cigarette smoke, waved it away from his face. “This Zaki fellow doesn’t have a job. He hacks and counter-hacks, for whoever pays. By the order of the Boarder flats, I think I know the Sleeper using him. He can hitch him up with us.”

Bobby paused at a profile on the touchpad. “Wilson. Military man,” he said. “Want me to check him out?”

“Already did. He’s on the Residents’ Committee.”

Bobby shrugged. “Whatever it takes to look useful. Hey, did the bugs work?”

“They worked very well,” Chanachai said, running a finger over a knob on the binoculars for better focus. “You did good there, Bobby.”

The giant blushed. “So who’s the lucky girl?”

“Whoever’s in there.” Chanachai passed his thumb over a shoulder.

Bobby scrolled on, stopped at another profile. “Sofia,” he said. “Good-looking.”

The man named Zaki entered a flat, closed the grille, the door. Chanachai let go of the blinds and turned away from the window. “Don’t you dare touch her, Bobby. She’s a good girl. Gave her some money once for her mum’s funeral. Paid it all back. Every single cent.”

“Hey, I got a wifey and a family,” Bobby said.

He did indeed. Chanachai slid open the panes to let the smoke out. A bookie had introduced him to Bobby, said he needed money for a business. They’d known each other for five years now, and he probably knew more about Bobby than he knew himself: a family man, a genial

giant, slow to anger but possessed a propensity to self-pity. Bobby and his wife had four chubby kids, all boys, all of whom were gargantuan for their ages; it took a truckload of food to feed them. Standing at one-ninety, Bobby was a human obelisk. His stature had earned him some fame in the local basketball scene, once in his youth, when he briefly made the Nationals. But he wasn’t a game-maker, and he lost his edge once his opponents found ways to trip him up. His coaches sat him on the bench for a couple of tournaments, then threw him out before he even turned twenty.

On a few occasions Chanachai had tried getting him back in the game, but he couldn’t run two laps around the court without suffering a heart attack. *If you’d played on*, he told Bobby, *you’d be out there dribbling freestyle with the basketball instead of carrying it in your belly*. Chanachai couldn’t be certain how Bobby came to be in his pocket. It was mostly money. Yet he couldn’t help but notice how Bobby tended to stick around because he didn’t quite fit in. On Bobby’s first job as a corporate employee, he was called witless because the cholesterol he needed for his brain had gone to his belly. Six months into his second job, he was ousted by an incoming migrant who’d do the same work for half the pay. So when Bobby started losing his day jobs, Chanachai gave him another. Sometimes he’d be working two or three jobs and still fell short of the taxes required to keep him in Residency.

Residency. Who would’ve thought? Chanachai couldn’t conceive of a time in the Nation when everyone was born a Citizen. Bobby was born a Resident like everyone else. It had been that way ever since the authorities abolished *jus soli*. They could’ve put him in the lowest rung—a Transient—like they did for migrants. So it was supposed to be a concession that they made him a Resident at birth. But Residency Taxes were high because they were supposed to affirm competence of those who paid them. Pay enough of them and you become Citizen. Pay too little and you get dropped to a Transient. Pay even less and you get deported.

At least that was the theory.

Bobby had worked hard to pay them. And like most Residents, he never could work hard enough. It wasn’t that Bobby didn’t try. He had

taken risks, got in and out of real estate. He did renovation contracting, ran a themed café. Both businesses folded in a year. When it came to business, Chanachai reckoned, Bobby stored potential, turning kinetic only at the right opportunities.

Right fits were hard to come by. He had observed Bobby with his four overactive kids. That mountain of a man could turn kiddy meltdowns into merriment. Mummy was better at breaking bad news to children without turning them neurotic. It all came down to aptitude. People were smart in ways that didn't fit what they did, and were placed in jobs that worked a fraction of their potential and extracted a darn lot of weaknesses. After his last two businesses, Bobby sold cars, traded stocks, drove cabs. Now his food delivery business wasn't looking to last the next few months.

Not a bad thing, thought Chanachai. He could get Bobby to work for him, full time. Bobby had potential. That was why Chanachai decided to take him in. There was some charity in it. A social enterprise.

"Put that bloody cig out," Chanachai commanded.

Bobby stubbed it into his empty food box. "Hey listen, about the favour—I really need you there at the Appeals Office. You have to meet the appeals officer."

"Why, you marrying him?"

"Don't joke about such things, Nat."

Chanachai held out his arms in a gesture of innocence. "What'd you want me to do? Hold a knife to his throat?"

"Make him an offer, like the Godfather." Bobby scooted to the edge of the couch, his upturned palms limp between his knees. He looked wretched and pitiful. "You have to speak to them, you know, pull some strings, threats, whatever, or I'll be, well, you know—"

Chanachai knew. He knew how difficult it would be for Bobby to tell his children that if the appeal didn't work, they'd be deported to a Depository. He couldn't tell them they'd be trading their gardenesque utopia of pristine waterfront parks and safe, manicured sidewalks for grubby, third-world neighbourhoods and snarled dirt streets flecked with dung and blood. He observed Bobby with obliging attention,

noting every detail of his sorrow, the drooping jowls, the falling gaze. The big man looked almost ready to break out in sobs. But he wouldn't. The big man had come too far for that.

Chanachai had come pretty far himself. He had arrived in the Nation, found work as a rail technician maintaining underground conduits that carried freight pods. He had counted on his diligence to make Citizen within five years. But automation kicked him back to the streets, and had his family drifting for months before a charity got them a flat in Havenloft-Beo. He fell behind on his taxes, lost his Residency and was made a Transient.

Then three years later, the Central Coalition Party deported his wife and daughter. He fought the lures of alcohol and drowned his sorrows instead in consecutive fits of late-night runs, when he ran like he had when he was seven years old, wildly, after that dirty white van that held his mother and sister, whom his father had sold to the traffickers. Then he turned 16 and sold his father to the gangs. He ran like he had when he found his father's rotting head spiked to a fence. He ran barefooted when his flip-flops tore, fuelled by a volatile blend of rage and confusion. He drove himself bare-chested into the winds, sprinting stretches after stretches of streets and on wooded trails of yellow dirt, where one would find the occasional murdered victim, and then on the clean, synthetic asphalt of the Nation's park connectors. He ran until exhaustion overtook the grief and brought him back to life.

After a year of drifting in and out of odd jobs, Chanachai Natipong assembled a group of like-minded individuals, pooled a decent amount of capital and started a bookie business. He gave moderate odds at first, then better ones when he got into match-fixing at the local leagues. He struck up friendships with team managers and offered them generous cuts, believing that costs incurred in the right places were as good as investments. Capital grew and soon he was able to offer loans. With the legal system beyond the reach of the common man, he became a real alternative. Two years into the enterprise, he had made enough to convince himself that he should've been a businessman. If only fortune saw differently.

Chanachai's mobile phone rang, and between Bobby and him a gaunt young man appeared, pale, disembodied and legless—an ethereal spectre that brought a startled yelp out of Bobby. "Sorry, it's the darn gizmo," Chanachai said to Bobby, laughing, tapping at the device. "Can't count on the cheap ones for a life-sized holo." Then to the ghostly young man, he greeted, "Beng, what's up? Smile a little. You look like a freaking ghost."

The man lifted his long, haughty chin, exposing a profusely tattooed neck and tossing his head in the direction of something or someone beyond the holographic projection. "Mata beside me lah. Come—get me—" he said, the speech and movement lagging a little. "Tanglin—Poo—Station—this—f—king—Citizen—want to press—charges—"

Chanachai kneaded his face. Beng Seng. Never held a job for more than a year. Strange that the jumpy projection should bring to mind Beng Seng's aged mother, and how she wouldn't leave the flat after what had happened to her family. On the rare occasion she did, one would find her at the local mall, perched on the same bench by the escalator to watch the world, vegetative, inert, reeking of unwashed hair and urine. At times, she'd be asleep.

Once someone called an ambulance after failing to rouse her from her habitual hibernation. Chanachai told Beng Seng about it; he went to see her and ended up inciting an intense round of caterwauling between them, right there at the hospital lobby. Chanachai had to haul him out the door, raging and in tears, while his mum, awake and grief-stricken, collapsed right back into the paramedics' arms. *She'll live, right, Nat?* he had asked Chanachai that day, while sitting teary and forlorn at an old Havenloft coffee shop. *Just got to keep the spirits up. Optimism, like you always said. Could've fought and fainted at a worse place. Better in a hospital than a shopping mall, right, Nat?*

The hologram hung, freezing the face in a downward glare. Chanachai turned briefly to Bobby, his countenance reproachful. "Am I a nanny for grown men?"

The hologram moved. "They allow one—phone—call—who else—I call? I—no lawyer—leh." It hung again, and an awkward,

amusing silence swallowed their conversation.

"Beng Seng, you there?" Bobby swiped an arm into the hologram, and threw himself back when it came alive. "Hey, Nat's got to come with me to the Appeals Office first."

"What—time—get here?" stuttered the flickering, boorish spectre.

"What trouble you got into?" Chanachai's voice carried displeasure. But the spectre had frozen once more, seizing the young man's face in a twisted, beastly snarl that made Bobby laugh. The call died suddenly, and the hologram vanished.

"Come lah," Bobby waved a hand. "After the Appeals Office, I can drop you off at the police station. Then I go pick up my chubbies from daycare and maybe in time to come around, pick you and Beng Seng up. *If he gets bail.*"

What could he say? Chanachai threw one final glance at the opposite block, at the array of doors and grilles and windows, amid draperies and sheets left out to dry, and found no activity worthy of notice. Apart from the surveillance, the afternoon was restful, perfect for a nap. But Chanachai Natipong could never afford such luxuries. After all, he was a busy man. "Nat," Bobby said from the doorway. "You coming?"

"Yes."

"Nat—"

"What?"

"Is it really going to happen?"

Chanachai did not expect the question, which stirred in him unnecessary doubt regarding Bobby's integrity. It was unfounded, irrational at most. He knew the man. Bobby would walk through fire for him. Yet strangely the question led him to smile, for it also brought a titillating sense of anticipation, like a roller coaster's ascent before the drop.

"Of course," he told Bobby. His smile was wry, crooked, as if portending a medieval judgement on a bitter enemy. "Once the team's gathered. It'll happen."

Bobby looked worried. "When?"

"You'd do better not asking, Bobby."

2

The facial tic began when Santhosh was six years old, on the day he stood with Papa at the gallery and sent Mama into the fire. He blinked and wrung out tears so that new ones could form, then he blinked again and wrung out more. And the tic never really went away.

His cries carried on, and there was no Mama to pacify them. Papa occasionally tugged gently at him, little by little, away from Mama. Let go, he said. And after many tries the boy yielded, bawling louder, angrier. Papa took his hand and walked him out of the gallery. Behind them the incinerator roared, feasted.

It was just the two of them from then on. But such was life.

Eight years later: the boy was now 14—bespectacled, with thick, matted curls and large, rolling eyes that blinked because of his tic. Papa had named him Santhosham—Santhosh for short, which meant “happiness” in Tamil. Papa was a Transient with honours in digital pedagogy, who ended up working ninety-hour weeks disposing trash, scrubbing in a steel mill and cleaning cars on weekends. Santhosh never believed the silly reason Papa gave about how manual jobs paid better. He blamed it on universities that churned out graduates by the tens of thousands, with fresh skill sets and at half the price.

Nidamarthi Priya Bartram was Papa’s name. Mama’s was Isabella. She was Filipina, he was Tamil, and they had met at a call centre in Chennai. It was Mama who had wanted to come to the Nation. She told Papa it was a better place for raising children.

So they came, and Mama cradled three-year-old Santhosh on her lap during the budget flight. And then she departed, just three years later. When they lost her, they also lost the family quarters at the dormitory. So they lodged in the backroom of one of the pneumatic bin centres that Papa operated, one that had been kept reasonably clean. Santhosh was

just seven when he started coming home from school every afternoon, alone. The nearby public library was a gem. While Papa worked shifts, he read away the hours, first in the library, then in the ill-lit backroom. Santhosh became severely myopic by the time he was ten.

On Sundays they played cricket at a park circumscribed by the glittering towers of luxury apartments. Papa pitched and he batted. From time to time, the construction guys from a nearby dormitory joined them. They made a jolly bunch of cheering backbenchers waiting their turn. Sometimes they turned up with snacks, like greasy bags of punugulu, or fried potato balls of chillies and coriander they called aloo bonda, or lentil fritters or sweets. Santhosh loved the unni appam. But this part of his life disappeared too when the park warden evicted them after someone complained to the local member of Parliament. *No sweat*, Papa would say. *Cricket was really more British than Indian*. They could live just as well without it.

Papa made arrangements to collect trash in the day so he could shower before heading out to the steel mill by six in the evening, work seven more hours and be home by two. Santhosh never understood the schedule, until he came to know that the furnaces ran 24/7. At night he’d hear Papa lying down beside him and patting him, and if he was tired, he’d go on sleeping, comforted by Papa’s touch. If he wasn’t, he’d wake and chat with Papa. It didn’t matter what time it was. The nights were always deep and still.

BB

One day Santhosh returned late from school without the keys to the backroom because a bully had thrown them into a canal. Papa had left for the next shift, so he had to spend the day at the library. At night an elderly stranger found him asleep on a stone bench at the void deck of Havenloft-Beo, and sat with him for hours until Papa returned to take him home. Two days later Papa acquainted himself with that stranger.

A month later the stranger filed an application on their behalf to Bridging Lives—a charity that rendered assistance to abused and needy Transients. Its co-founder was a pastor named Matthias Palanca

Ching, who worked to accommodate them in a flat at Havenloft-Beo on a concessionary rental. Those had been good times because the stranger had offered to care for Santhosh in the day without charge. Papa was wary, but acceded to it for want of better alternatives.

It took four months before the neighbour became a friend, a full year before he became family.

And this was how Uncle Kwan entered their lives.

3

The automated queue system was broken, the seating fell short and the line stretched past the Appeals Office into the open air. Chanachai wore a white singlet that contrasted sharply with his bronzed, toned shoulders. Usually he would've enjoyed the sun. But this was too much. In front of him, Bobby moved into a narrow sliver of shadow, his head rising over many others. The sun beat down on the litter—mattresses; pieces of furniture, cracked and bleached; rusting crockery—shored against walls of insalubrious rental housing the government called Havenlofts. Relics—of past Aspirants who never made the jump to Citizenship.

They reached the entrance and found a young lady handing out slips of paper with numbers on them. She looked stoned and stoic, as if impervious to any insults she might receive on account of the technical glitch. Her indifference irked a fair number of appellants who weren't used to such primitive tedium in this day and age. For another hour they waited, now trapped in the moist, tepid air from an old, overworked air-conditioner, while well-dressed holographs strolled in their midst, extemporising new policy packages and offering cash grants for voluntary deportation.

"Won't take long," Bobby said, swiping the perspiration off his nose. "They've got five rooms open at a time. We'll be there soon."

"We'd better. If we don't by four-thirty, you can forget about the appeal."

Someone called Bobby's number thirty minutes later. Chanachai's glib tongue convinced an administrator to admit him because he was a close business partner, in case he should be called upon to offer a mortgage in return for Residency extensions. *Why would he lie?* Chanachai told him. They'd have the usual lie-detecting gizmos.

Dozens of surveillance cameras. Armed guards at the front and rear. After all, the Appeals Office had seen its fair share of violence.

The polygraph was the size of the room. It was white, hemispherical, saturated with airborne electrodes of the omniscient lie detector, and it smelled like the bowels of a giant computer. Chanachai was offered a steel chair in front of an arching white wall. Bobby took a tiny stool at the centre of the circular space, perched precariously like a bull on a pin. Ahead, an officer navigated holographic frames over his desk.

“Five months behind on the Residency Taxes,” the officer said between pauses. “Over eight grand, including interest.”

Bobby’s effort to smile gave him a timid and tenuous appearance. “I have a business that isn’t doing too well. I reckon it’ll pick up in a month or two, so I was thinking if I could—”

“Only Citizens get extensions. Aspirants may file for Relief,” the officer said, not bothering to conceal his impatience. “It’s the only way out of back taxes.”

Bobby gave up trying to smile. “If I file for Relief, won’t I lose my Residency and—”

“Drop to a Transient? Yes, for three years. After which you may upgrade your tax payments and reapply for Residency.”

Damndest option, Chanachai thought, flexing an ankle to a rhythm. Bobby wouldn’t last three years with the kind of pay he’d draw as a Transient. He’d be better off collecting debts and doing paint jobs and trafficking in exotic pets.

“Then again,” the officer added, “if you fall behind on Transiency Taxes, well—”

“I’ll be deported.”

“That’s right.”

“If I become a Transient the banks will cut me off. I have mouths to feed, rent to pay.”

“Your wife can work, no?”

“Someone has to be home for the kids. I can’t afford to put all four of them in daycare. I alternate them in pairs. I can’t afford a helper either.”

The officer looked at him, not without a glint of sympathy. “Go

check out the Job Banks.” He returned to his touchpad, passed the stylus over a shoulder. “These days, having a single job won’t do for an Aspirant. Get yourself a couple, climb the rungs.”

It sounded easy, like directions to the subway. Chanachai couldn’t help feeling sorry for the big guy. There wasn’t enough room in the Nation for the mediocre. One had to be the best or be left behind. It was the Truth for as long as he could remember. But the Nation hadn’t always been like this. So he heard. Most believed it was the Plague that shifted the paradigm, when the health minister fled the country four months before it became a pandemic. The Plague came from mosquitoes, some said, or out of a bacterial strain released by drug companies that made antibiotics. Others theorised it was viral—the work of vaccine manufacturers. Then there were the recurring recessions, the genocides a world away, the humanitarian pressure to admit refugees, migrants—*Transients*.

Scholars had offered interpretations, written books on them. Still, nobody really knew what had set things off for the Nation. People only remembered the rants, the rioting, the year the Nation held a snap election and made the Central Coalition Party government. It was as if everyone woke up one morning and discovered that one era had been replaced by another—one that wasn’t necessarily better.

The Nation had been sanguine at first, until the CCP opened its doors to the world while the other countries, haunted by the Plague’s lethality and the migrant influx, kept theirs closed. Trade tariffs were the first to go. Foreign taxes went next, and then—*jus soli*.

So the culling process began. The CCP awarded concessions to the deserving, to those already privileged, and weeded out the mediocre if only to make room. It transformed the Nation into one succulent, steaming pie, poorly carved and shared only by the powerful few, while most foraged under the table for its crumbs.

Chanachai had been there in the thick of it when the lesser countries began receiving money from the greater ones to take their trash—the emergence of the first Depositories. When the labour market overflowed. When the sex trade flourished. A time not too long ago.

Yet how little he had been then, when he watched his mother and sister being driven away to a brothel he'd never know, to sate the demands of loaded, perverse men. Or worse: to diseased warehouses in a lesser Depository. In any case they'd be dead already. What difference would it make now? What mattered were those still living, those he could still save. Those who had worth, if only they'd lived long enough to employ it. *Change*, thought Chanachai. How much of it could we anticipate? The Nation had simply sleepwalked from one nightmare to another.

He snapped a picture of the officer from where he sat, wired it through to someone. A response arrived within minutes, which he took down on ink and paper.

Bobby leaned forward on the tiny stool, its metallic joints squeaking from the movement. "I was born and bred here," he said. "Does that count for anything?"

"I'm afraid not," said the officer.

It was Bobby's habit to scratch his scalp when the stress got to him. The effort sounded coarse and gritty, like the passing of a blade across a leather strop. Dubious specks flew and the officer leaned away to put more distance between them. "Relief's your best option," he said. "You're due to pay in four days. The bureau's very strict on this. We can't have everyone chalking up back taxes."

Bobby's enormous shoulders dropped as low as they could go. He glanced over at Chanachai, who caught the plea in that fleeting gaze. The officer too might have detected it, for he leaned to the side, deliberately seeking out Bobby's companion, saying, "In considering extensions, we do accept assets from time to time. If you could offer some form of substantial mortgage. Unless, of course, you're prepared to part with your flat—that being your only asset for now."

"Not my flat," Bobby said. "I do have a van."

"We don't take vehicles unless they are of substantial value."

"How about a Koenigsegg XXR with a hypercharged V12?" Chanachai's voice reverberated off the rounded surfaces and hung heavy and taunting in the still, electrode-infused air. The officer looked at him and displayed a restrained eagerness to negotiate. The polygraph

might have decided that whatever he had said about the Koenigsegg wasn't a lie. "Thirty-six proximity sensors," Chanachai added. "An Intel Cyberon microprocessor and autonomous manoeuvring capability at eighty kilometres an hour. It's worth something, no?"

"At eight million apiece?" The officer appeared convinced, now offering a lopsided smirk. "A limited circulation of fifty-four pieces worldwide? We could work something out."

"It must've left an impression," Chanachai said. "Once you're up the rungs as one of the Nation's elites, you'd want a toy like that." He left his seat and swaggered to the front. He watched the officer's face stiffen, his hand slipping under.

"I did some reading." The officer's voice did not quaver one bit. "We all had to."

"How far did you get? Stanford? Oxford?" Chanachai breezed past Bobby, whose worried gaze followed him. "What kind of commission do they pay you for each mortgage deal you close?"

"Please, stand back."

He was now almost at the other end of the commodious room where the officer sat. Abruptly he halted, at an indiscernible spot on an ocean of floor—a dull, homogeneous black—just as a screen of light filled the space between them. Lavender blue. Lovely but potentially deadly, and reeking of ozone. A curtain of supercharged electrodes that would electrocute anyone attempting to cross them.

Chanachai lifted his arms, exposing a roll of cash in his hand. He only needed to get close enough for the cameras in the walls to pick it up. And if they did, he knew that the officer would reject the bribe to his own credit. It would attest to his integrity, and his career would probably soar. Every public appeals officer would jump at an opportunity like this. "Please, this is no way to treat a customer," he told the officer. "You've got five spyeyes on me. What harm could I hope to do?"

They took turns stealing glances at the pinholes in the walls, mere specks in an expanse of white—nano surveillance cameras that eluded the untrained eye. The electrode curtain dissolved. The officer waved

Chanachai over. He advanced, passing a hand through the air just to make sure. At the desk, he left the roll, along with a note that bore the officer's full name, identification number and home address.

Chanachai withdrew from the table, not without perceiving a measured look of surprise on the officer's face, a slight twitch of an eyebrow. "Don't take this upon yourself. Be careful what you say to that man over there." He nodded towards Bobby. "He has friends who bear grudges. And when they do, they'd have to take it out on whoever's responsible."

The officer's steely gaze narrowed to a squint and he gave a short, strained laugh. "Well, we do apologise for our inflexibility, Mr Natipong," he said. "If you are so proficient in the tools of the dark trade, I thought you'd exercise greater intelligence."

It wasn't the response Chanachai had expected. He felt strangely disarmed and vulnerable. His mind spun, searching for what might have gone wrong in his plans or with whomever he had sent the officer's visual profile to, when the roll of cash, and the note, hurtled through the air and tumbled across the floor not far from where Bobby sat. The giant looked at it, then back at Chanachai.

"We've received more cyber-threats than you could count, Mr Natipong," the officer went on, now calmly crossing his fingers over the desk. "And the best defence is to put in only what we'd want you to see."

Either the officer was bluffing over the authenticity of the address or he wasn't. In any case, Chanachai felt duped. He made a final attempt to rationalise the matter and concluded that there was nothing else he could do.

"Now take your friend and leave, Mr Natipong."

Chanachai chuckled, scratched a cheek. "Well, my surname is Chanachai, really. That's Thai for 'Chan'. But I like it better if you'd call me Nat."

The same cold, snooty glare. "Such a pity I'm not a linguist," said the officer. "Now get out before I call security."

Chanachai didn't want to talk when they were back in the car, which looked more like a packed tin of sardines with Bobby weighing down a side. It was Bobby who spoke first.

"What the hell went wrong back there? I thought you had a plan to get me out of this. Now they're going to deport me in less than a month."

"Take it easy," Chanachai said, suddenly longing for a cigarette, a habit he thought he'd given up. "What do you owe in back taxes?"

"You heard that prick. It's like eight grand or something."

"I'll pay." He looked out the window and sucked a morsel out of his teeth.

Bobby looked at him. "You will? Really?"

"Yes, Bobby," came the vexed reply. "It only means you've fallen deeper in my debt. Now drive me to the station."

4

The Nation was like a fried egg, Uncle Kwan used to tell strangers over coffee whenever he shared a table with them. A perfect, jocular allegory. The Nation's yolk was its Core and the egg white its Fringe, and the closer you got to the yolk, the more expensive everything became. Very few Aspirants could live in the yolk unless they won the lottery for flats in the remaining Havenloft estates there. To Aspirants, the Core was employment, rarely a home. To Citizens, the Core was both. Its office towers were a ten-minute cycle away from the lustrous downtown apartments furnished with car-lifts, wine cellars and automated underground storage for Litespeeds and Cannondales.

You eat what you earn. You *are* what you earn.

Now if this isn't equality, the CCP argued, *what is?*

Yet not all Citizens were elite. No one knew this better than old Uncle Kwan. There were those who belonged in grubby Havenloft estates, inside flats which they managed to own before the rent-only policy kicked in. People like himself. Aged *remnants* of an old regime—lucky Citizens by birth. Home for him had been Havenloft-Beo for the past fifty years. This place had seen better days, he used to say. He had paid taxes, served the Nation in ways he knew best.

Still, the CCP wanted him dead for another reason.

Volunteers called on him that Saturday afternoon. One of them, a man in a gaudy dress shirt, sat down brazenly on an antique Z-shaped hardwood stool and almost leaned into his wall of phones—antiquated touchscreens and primordial ones with buttons—mostly Motorolas and Nokias. Uncle Kwan did well to conceal his chagrin. An impression of a cantankerous old man served only to justify their efforts. On a crate converted into a coffee table, he laid rice cakes and coffee. “Try them. They're from Balestier Road. Everything changes

but not the Balestier cakes.”

“Thank you, Uncle Kwan,” a young woman said.

Switching to a thin, euphonic tone used to coddle a child, she added, “You know, being able to decide when, where and how is assurance that everything is being taken care of.”

He laughed at the irony that he was offering refreshments to people who wanted him dead. “Ah yes, you were talking about killing myself.”

“Oh no, Uncle Kwan”—a pleading frown—“it's about accepting the inevitable in a timely and responsible manner. The State celebrates such contributions, especially if it's from a Citizen like yourself.”

More laughter. “Ah, of course, I kill myself and the government throws a party.”

The Volunteer blanched at the humour and her senior, the well-dressed man, looked ready to interject. “Oh, but it isn't killing,” she had to say. “It's contributing nobly.”

This was their second visit of the week. The frequency had persisted for the past two years, since Uncle Kwan turned seventy. Havenloft-Beo was full of old, lucky Citizens who took up places and social aid, and contributed little in return. If the CCP had to make room, where else to start than Havenloft-Beo?

The Euthanasia Policy, or Eupol, wasn't yet mandatory but it was already a splinter in his foot. Before Eupol, the CCP told them, people had died diseased and without dignity. With Eupol, a death well-planned was extolled as a final achievement of life, a redemptive deed. He had voted against the CCP at the last elections. But that was too petty a reason for the attention he was getting. It was more for the fact that he had been a Boarder, and Citizens-turned-Boarders never sat well with the CCP, especially a *remnant* who was past expiry. It wouldn't be long before they'd employ less courteous ways to kill him.

Preoccupied, Uncle Kwan passed a hand over his thinning pate; the hair, richly combed and white as snow, was still thick in front. “More coffee?” he offered. The woman declined. He poured a black stream into her senior's cup. “I heard there's a poison that will make me feel blissful dying.”

Her eyes brightened. “Yes, it’s called—”

“But I’m not thinking of cremation. I don’t like the idea of burning.”

“Well—” She rummaged around her bag for a brochure. “There’s water cremation. It sort of melts you down so nothing gets burnt and—”

“Sounds expensive.”

She touched him—a soft, youthful hand on his freckled forearm. A gesture of empathy that came out hideously awkward. He felt his wrinkled skin sag. She showed him a pamphlet featuring a poignant picture of a wealthy old snot lying in bed and being lovingly embraced by a man, a woman and grandchildren, all plotting to end his life.

“We don’t believe in making you pay for your own passing,” she said. “We will arrange for all your assets to be monetised and be donated to any individual or charitable organisation of your choice.” She flipped a page. “And for the promotional period, you get to enjoy a nominal tax of only two-point-seven per cent instead of the usual seventeen, water cremation included. That way you leave more to your loved ones.”

He cleared a phlegmy throat. “As you can see, I’m earning myself an honest living.”

“Oh, but how’s business, Uncle Kwan?” Her voice carried concern.

“Brisk!” His eyebrows jumped. “Amateurs go to Re:Store but experts come to me.”

He had been a head nurse at a government hospital during the Plague. When the economy nosedived and joblessness struck, he had stayed relevant because people were still crashing their cars, falling off buildings and getting cancer. He started the antiques business out of his own collection, but it never really became a business until his retirement.

But here was the truth: his retirement fund had run out in the first two years and he would’ve starved if it weren’t for his social benefits. Entrepreneurship was a marvel until the market started rewarding entire pies to the minority elites who created monopolies from an idea. Re:Store was one of them. It dominated the antiques business and had a clever way of collecting artefacts and transporting them with automated freight pods. It restored and certified the goods, sold them

online for obscene profits and offered a meagre cut to its erstwhile owners. It had thousands of collection centres in Southeast Asia alone, and Uncle Kwan could never hope to compete.

“I understand your attachment to your collection,” the Volunteer said. “But in the event of ill health or for whatever reasons, we could arrange to sell the items to the galleries of your choice. I know how you feel about amateur collectors but we know of many national galleries that would love to have your collection.”

“That’s a clever thought,” he said, watching her face brighten at the compliment. “I’ll still have to think about it because I’m not ready to play God just yet.”

“Consider the benefits of finishing well, Uncle Kwan. We offer really good packages; the earlier the date, the better they are.” She passed a finger over her AirTouch tablet and brought up a holographic schedule. “Shall we set our next appointment?”

“In two months?”

She pouted, her red lips glistening. “Anything sooner?”

“Okay, in two weeks,” he sighed. Another pair would be dropping in next Wednesday. There was no way they’d leave him alone.

The Volunteer got up and adjusted her skirt. “I hope to hear good news the next time we meet. We’ll throw in the water cremation just for you, and for a limited period only.”

“It sounds very good, thank you.”

They left. He snapped the grille shut. They always said Eupol was about being a martyr for the greater good. Upon his passing, a young, conscientious Aspirant would house his family in the emptied flat. The funds from his social benefits would be channelled to a needy soul working eighty-hour weeks to make ends meet. Yet what is it but euphemistic suicide? It would be easier if the CCP were to gas him in his bedroom—if the rumours were true.

For one to believe such things was to err on the side of caution. And to save oneself was to be enrolled in a Sanctuary—a posh retirement village run by an astute entrepreneur who had paid huge levies to disengage his property from Eupol. It was a ten-hectare gated

compound that offered the luxury of a natural death and that ensured one did not decompose alone, undiscovered. It had pools, woodball lawns. Prerequisites? A small fortune of an entry fee and one piece of luggage per occupant.

He sorely wished he could bring everything along. Every item in his flat sparked a memory—they included analog radios, iMacs, vinyls, vintage magazines, century-old newspapers, a Philippe Starck juicer.

He reached for an old picture of him and his wife on an ocean liner. The winds drew her hair across her visage where sunlight fell aslant—a beauty immortalised just four months before lymphoma took her. He'd promised her he'd continue to live the best he could. In the first month after her passing, he almost broke that promise.

He laid the photograph carefully in his suitcase, between layers of clothing.

After a gruelling hour of deliberation, he gave up and left his flat, noticing a clean spot of resin flooring in front of the next flat. Residents had resorted to cleaning only their thresholds since the cleaners stopped coming. The neighbour had been a single mother who had died and left behind a young daughter and a mentally-challenged son—not particularly suitable candidates for company.

Thinking of how he might die, he crossed the street, and passed a pocket park and the discordance of caged birds and their audience. A dozen people greeted him. He took his time to greet them back, then trudged on towards 55 Beo Drive for his weekly dose of sanity.

5

Communion. Santhosh looked around: the three-bedroom flat at 55 Beo Drive was packed solid. Services weren't always like that. Under the Pact laws, crosses, crucifixes and usage of the term "church" became regulated. It was part of the CCP's truce tactic to seek a "balanced and amicable" solution that appeased religious radicals and protected the Nation against vendettas. The CCP told everyone it worked because there hadn't been bombings and beheadings in the Nation for almost a century.

Most of the worshippers had attended a registered church named 84 Grovefield Lane. When it had overflowed, Pastor Matthias Palanca Ching had sought to expand its capacity but the CCP rejected the request. The quota was sacred. An incoming worshipper couldn't join unless a fellow worshipper got deported. Sacrifices had to be made in the name of common good. And what was better than a religion founded upon sacrificial love?

So the pastor conducted services for the overflow at his home in Havenloft-Beo. Judy, the pastor's wife, played a hymn on the piano. The congregation was silent, reverent. Juvenile titters trickled in from the back and someone hustled the pastor's three-year-old twin daughters into a bedroom. The pastor's voice rose over the hush. "In one heart and mind, we partake the bread and cup. We remember Christ, who had broken his body and shed his blood for us."

The piano and a small choir led the worshippers in the hymn. Santhosh sang, Papa beside him holding out the wafer and cup. In the air over the congregation, holographic stanzas flickered:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tham Cheng-E is an architect who also writes about the special needs community for the online magazine *Special Seeds*, and maintains a family blog on parenting and Down syndrome. His first novel, *Surrogate Protocol*, was shortlisted for the 2016 Epigram Books Fiction Prize.

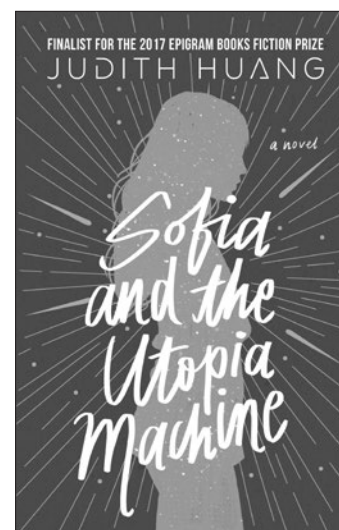


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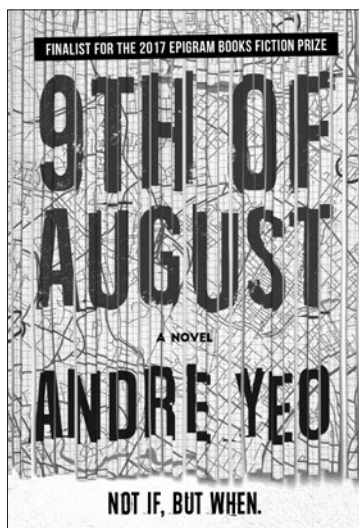
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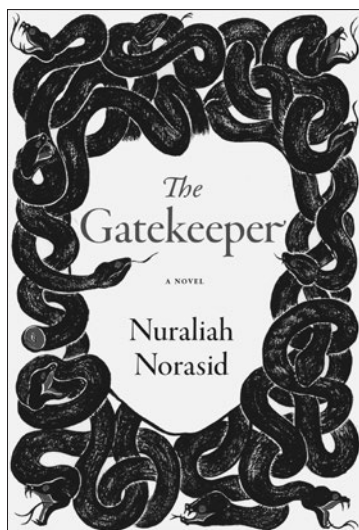
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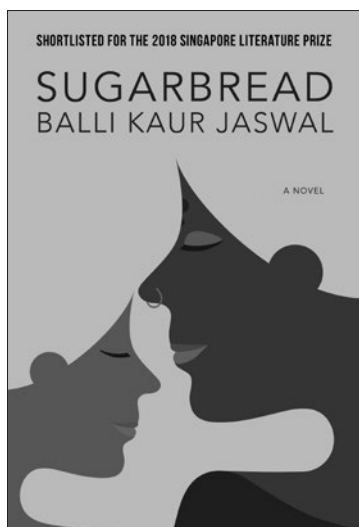
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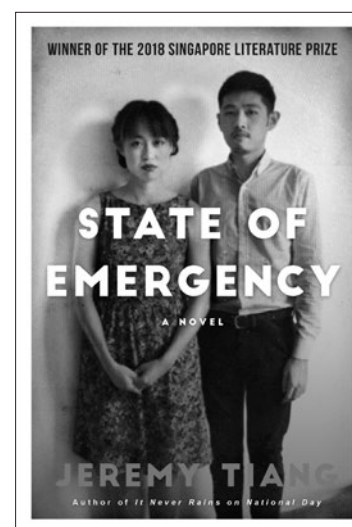
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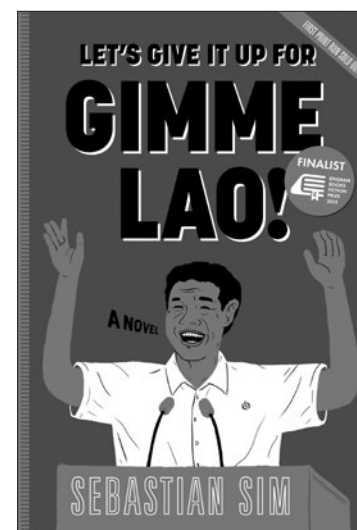
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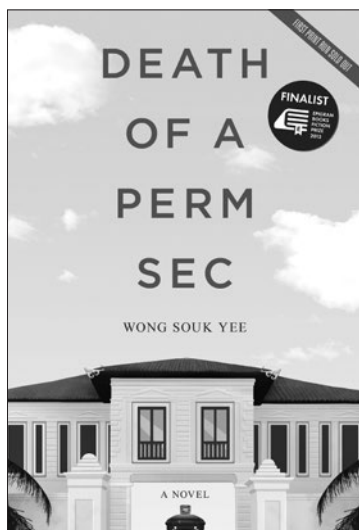
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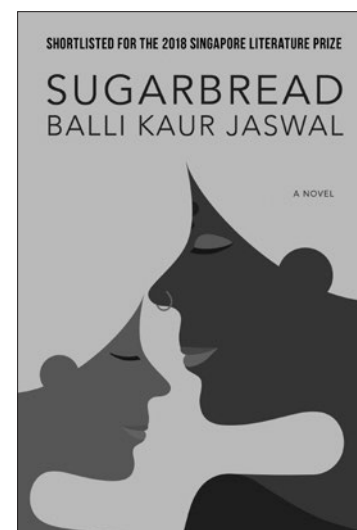
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The rich are insured against misfortune
The rich can do no wrong

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