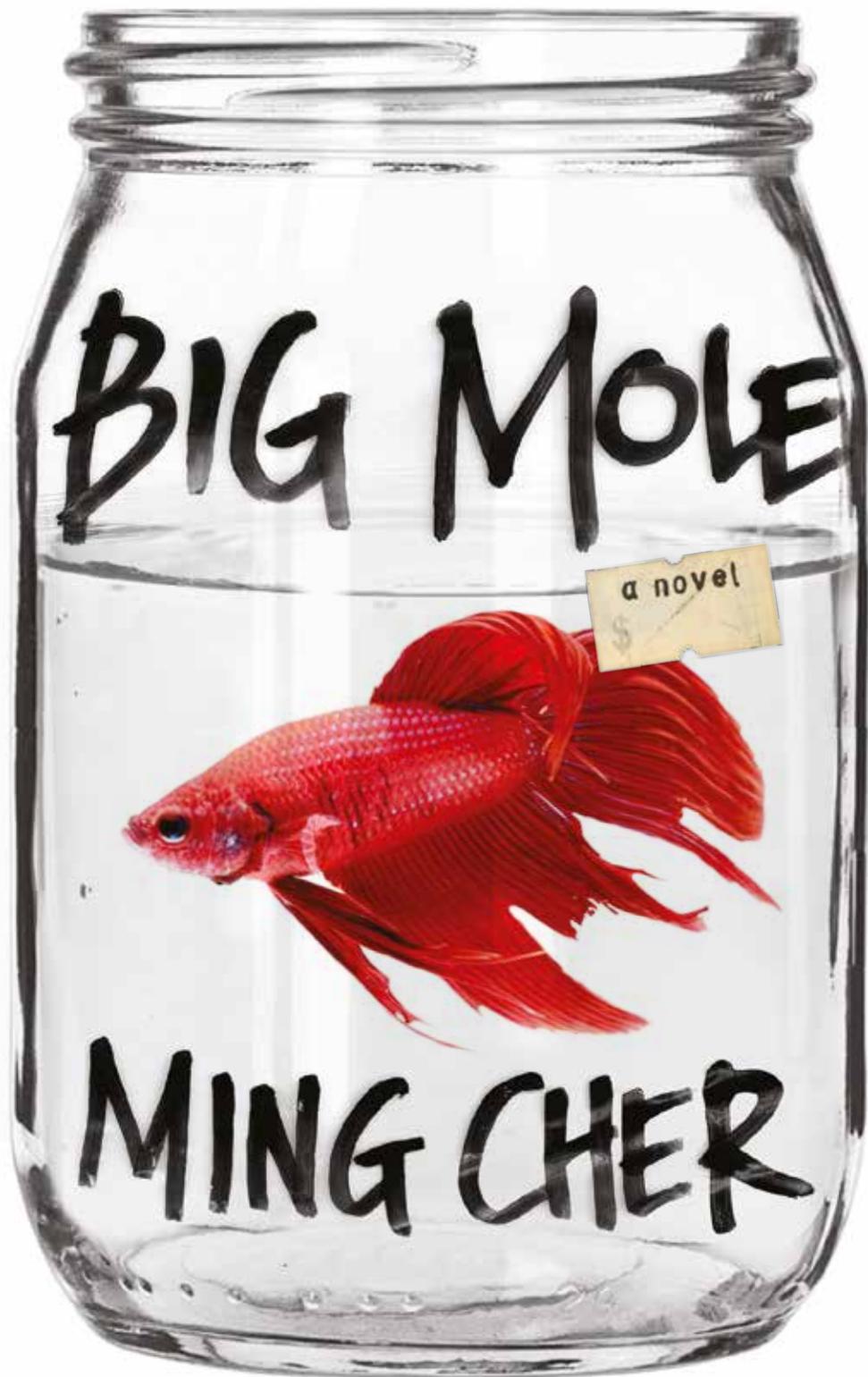


THE LONG-AWAITED SEQUEL TO SPIDER BOYS



BIG MOLE

a novel

MING CHER

PRAISE FOR SPIDER BOYS

“*Spider Boys* draws us into an exotic world which becomes increasingly familiar and engaging with every page. In Ming Cher’s hands, the hybrid dialect of Singapore street youth becomes uncannily evocative and poetic. At times I was reminded of SE Hinton, but this is a highly original novel – gritty and tender and thoroughly fascinating.”

— JAY MCINERNEY,

author of *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Brightness Falls*

“Haunting and sexy, *Spider Boys* is an astonishing book. Ming Cher’s jagged English pulls no punches. *Spider Boys* will remain with you long after you finish reading it.”

— PETER HEDGES,

author of *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*

“Has put Singapore on the world literary map.”

— KOH BUCK SONG,

The Straits Times

“Impressively confident in tone, Ming Cher’s arresting first novel details the lives of street urchins and petty criminals in the Singapore of the 1950s. A notable debut in which the author mines the abbreviated, hard-edged local street slang to yield prose of stunning emotional impact. The narrative moves among its characters in quick cuts, but the exposures go remarkably deep nonetheless, revealing this exotic milieu as the universal world of any child growing into adulthood.”

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Although Ming Cher’s is a familiar tale of coming of age within a criminal organization, his unique setting and raw, quick pace keep the tale compelling...an interesting voice on an age-old theme.”

— KIRKUS REVIEWS

“The work is innovative, challenging in many ways and a valid, if not seminal, contribution to the history of Singaporean literature in English.”

— EMMA DAWSON VARUGHESE,

Beyond the Postcolonial: World Englishes Literature

ALSO BY MING CHER

Fiction
Spider Boys

BIG MOLE

a novel

Ming
Cher



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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigrambooks.sg

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Ming Cher, author. Big Mole.
– Singapore: Epigram Books, 2015.
pages cm

ISBN: 978-981-4655-35-4 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-981-4655-34-7 (ebook)

1. Gangs – Singapore – Fiction.
2. Revenge – Singapore – Fiction.
3. Criminal investigation – Singapore – Fiction.
I. Title.

PR9570.S53
S823 — dc23 OCN919201003

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.

First Edition: October 2015

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*For my son Marco, my daughter Leila, and
all my siblings and their families in Singapore.*

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Part One



1

Fighting Fish

The history of the Makassan sailors and their prahu vessels – typically ninety feet long, made of teak, with two triangular sails, sailing as far as Vietnam and China – is as old as the bullock carts in Java. Even after the Dutch had colonised Indonesia, the Makassar prahus still followed the prevailing winds in fleets of a hundred to trade in Southeast Asia. Many of these sailors and their families were stuck in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation in World War II, just after the two main British warships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, were sunk by kamikaze pilots in the Straits of Malacca. Among the wartime survivors was a four-year-old Makassan girl with a large mole dangling like a pigeon egg under her left eye, who was looking for her lost parents. She was picked up by a brothel woman, but later ran away to live among street boys left homeless by the war.

They gave her the nickname Big Mole.

Everybody still called her Big Mole, even though the blemish had been removed by a Malay doctor in her kampong when, at 14 years old, she started a pet fish shop from a run-down charcoal hut, behind the pre-war rubbish dump by the monsoon canal in Geylang. Nobody would have recognised the new Big Mole if they had not seen her in the intervening seven years: her frizzy hair had become shiny and wavy, her cheekbones high, her legs long, and her breasts full and firm. Her left eye (which had sagged because of the presence of that dangling mole) was now the equal of her striking right one.

She had constantly borne the weight of depression when under the thumb of Chinatown Yeow during her raw street days, but now her standalone pet fish shop had become a centre for hard-core ex-spider boys, who came to buy fighting fish for betting on behind her shop, which was surrounded by bamboo hedges taller than its thatched roof. Her streetwise regulars were between 18 and 25 years old. They held no real jobs, and had grown up gambling on fighting spiders and fishes. Some were involved with minor gangs, doing their own thing, but remained friends behind her shop.

•

Koon was 22, tall with a solidly-built body, a regular at her shop. "Hey, Big Mole!" he yelled in Cantonese one Thursday, with a wide grin. "I'm back. Anybody showed up yet?"

Big Mole was playing solitaire at her shop's counter by the back door. "No one leh. Are you in a hurry?" She flipped over another card while glancing sideways at him.

"Not at all," Koon replied. "What about Hong? He around?"

"Yah, at the back." She stretched her arm to open the nearby door so Koon could enter the backyard, which was stocked with two-inch-long fighting fishes in clear glass jars lined up on long shelves at eye level. Under the shelves were big dragon pots, which had been originally used for packing century eggs imported from China, but had been reused for breeding fighting fish and other pet fishes such as goldfish and angelfish. The shade provided by the leafy potted plants that her boyfriend Hong had hung above them created ideal conditions.

Hong was a former burglar with dreamy eyes, small and light, 24 years old. He was pulling weeds in the backyard, the ground of which was covered by crushed seashells that stopped mudding. There was a long table at the centre of the yard made from stolen scaffolding planks and surrounded by benches, for the boys to gather at when they bet on the fighting fish. Big Mole eavesdropped as she slowly closed the back door.

"Ah Koon, so how?" Hong said, ripping the weeds from the dirt with his unusually long fingers, longer than Koon's, who was over six feet tall.

"Same as usual, but not for long." Koon helped himself

to the hot coffee that was kept in a vacuum flask on the long scaffolding table; spare cups were stored in a tub of clean water.

“Pour a cup for me too, brother,” Hong said as he stood, moving to pump out the well water from the far corner to wash his hands and firm-jawed face.

When they sat on the bench with their coffee, Koon said, “Hey Hong, got something to tell you, but have to keep it between you and me hah. Can you guess what it is?”

“Is that a joke or what?” Hong asked playfully. He knew Koon could be a bit thick in the head, but he was always a real friend when you needed him.

“No, not joking.” Koon shook his head seriously. “I am not going to be a coolie any more. I am joining the 08 for three square meals. Play their number. You know what I mean?”

“Yah lah,” Hong replied. “So, who is your big brother on board?”

“Hard to say, haven’t met him yet,” Koon admitted. “I am on ‘standby’ for now. Have to prove myself first.”

“What do you get for being on standby?”

“Ten dollars for just a few hours,” Koon said. “Compare that to my donkey job of five dollars for eight hours’ work!”

“Can’t argue with that,” Hong said. “So, where is your standby?”

“Temple Street,” Koon said proudly, with a twinkle

in his eyes. He was looking forward to proving himself to the 08 gang, which had claws stretching from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur.

“Koon ah, Temple Street was the 24’s old territory before the 08 was there,” Hong warned him. “I bet they will come back. Big Mole or Sachee can tell you more; they grew up in Chinatown.”

“I know lah.” Koon nodded and changed the subject. “Seen Kwang lately?”

“No leh, not for a few years. Have you?”

“I saw him just two weeks ago.”

“So how?”

“Broke as usual. Hooked on mahjong.” Koon laughed. “Lent him my last twenty bucks the other week.”

“Where’s he stay?”

“Drifting lah, working and living in construction sites. Right now in Woodlands, doing bar bending at the big project for making drinking water from Malaya.”

“Let’s catch up with him,” Hong suggested. “Go together on my bike – how’s that?”

“Yah, then give him a surprise,” Koon beamed. “When can we go?”

“Make it tomorrow,” Hong said. “Fearless Sachee will be here to help Big Mole. We can be out the whole day. Meet when ah?”

Koon counted on his fingers thoughtfully. “Have to standby Temple Street nine to noon, hmm...for three hours.

I meet you at the roadside coffee stall on Neil Road at half past twelve. Okay or not?"

"Okay, keep it like that." Hong stood up to get back to work on the weeds.

"Okay, see you tomorrow," Koon said cheerfully, and then left Big Mole's pet fish shop.

He died the next day in a gang fight.

Fate Reveals Itself

Hong was waiting at their meeting place on Neil Road when he heard the news about Koon. He took off on his 50cc motorbike to Temple Street in the heart of Chinatown. Roadside hawkers were shifting their scattered gear, and a gathering crowd was watching an old and bent woman splash buckets of water at patches of dried blood near her vegetable stall, and scrubbing at them with her broomstick. Koon had stood, fought and died there in a raiding gang clash. *Why? Why? Why?* Hong kept asking himself as he sat astride his motorbike, the engine still running, going through the minute of silence with awe, as if time had turned back and Koon was still talking to him behind Big Mole's pet fish shop.

His reverie was forcibly ended when he was pushed from behind. He jerked back into awareness and saw a tiger-faced man in his early forties with a fully tattooed

body under his open shirt. "Hey, what you doing here, boy?" the tiger growled quietly. "What you staring at? Stop puffing your bike here, boy."

"What you mean ah?" Hong said, revving the engine. "Can't hear you lah! Repeat that?"

"You trying to be funny with me? You look like a rat, boy."

At this point Hong was boiling inside, but had sussed the man out. The tiger was subtly and quietly imposing his authority, purposefully posturing his fully tattooed body, shirt unbuttoned, to look cool on the surface after the gang clash. This tiger definitely had something to do with Koon's death. Hong reversed his bike to about twenty feet away from the tiger and shouted back, "Hey! Who the fuck are you?! Are you a cop?!"

The word "cop" was a direct insult. It startled the local shopkeepers and street hawkers, who paid the 08 gang protection money for doing business, and made the tiger lose face completely. The tiger roared and charged at the rat. The rat spun his bike and kicked its front wheel upward, causing the tiger to jump aside. The bike kicked up again and the tiger fell backwards, legs splayed. The bike's front wheel smashed down on the tiger's right leg, just above the ankle, and then Hong raced away from Temple Street.

Hong headed for the Beach Road waterfront to calm himself down and think things over, but he soon became frightened. He had overreacted. The tiger would never forget

him. Word would spread among the locals in Chinatown who knew where Big Mole's pet fish shop was located, and it would reach the tiger's ears. It was no secret that he and Big Mole were living together; he had stopped burglarising and turned over a new leaf for her sake. He had even quit smoking to keep fit. They had worked hard together and found love. He knew that the tiger's "claws", his henchmen, could easily grab Big Mole from her shop. She was an easy target.

He cursed his mistakes, then remembered the point of meeting up with Koon in the first place that day: to pay Kwang a surprise visit in Woodlands. Kwang would know what to do. Hong was soon caught in a traffic jam caused by an accident up ahead. "Fuck that!" he swore. He got off his motorbike and pushed it along the walkway into a side lane to enter Bugis Street, then rode off toward Woodlands to look for his errant friend.



Kwang was about the same age as Big Mole. When he had won the Spider Olympics many years ago, his supporters betting on him clapped madly in unison. Koon had been there too. So had Fearless Sachee. Big Mole had wept with happiness because of the money she had won, which allowed her to start up her pet fish shop and get her big mole removed.

These memories rose up once again in Hong's mind, made all the more vivid by the uncertainty of the future, as he

arrived in Woodlands, a semi-rural town set on higher ground about a mile away from the Johore Causeway. He made a U-turn towards the long dirt road that led to the massive freshwater treatment projects, building reservoirs, sub-reservoirs, filtering plants and pumping stations that treated the water Singapore bought from Malaya, and ran from the Johore River through pipes along the causeway. It took Hong over an hour to arrive at the isolated dirt road mainly used by construction trucks. He relieved himself along the quiet roadside and felt calmer, not so uptight. He glanced at his Seiko 5 for the time and realised that it was Friday the 13th, a fact that made him shiver even though he was not the least bit superstitious. He biked slowly as he approached the vast worksite, wondering what Kwang would do in his shoes.

At the wide entrance there was a big stop sign next to a cardboard shed, in which stood a burly Sikh watchman wearing a turban. Hong stopped his motorbike in front of the watchman and said in Malay, "Hello, my friend. I am looking for the bar-bending area. Please tell me which way to go? Left, right, straight or what?" With his hands, he gestured at the dirt tracks made by tractors that fanned out from the entrance.

"For that, I don't know," the watchman replied. "Do you have a pass?"

"A pass? What you mean hah?" Hong sat tight on his bike.

"I mean a pass: your company paper."

"No, I don't have. I don't know I need one. I am looking for a friend. I come from a long way. Can you compromise? You can hold my IC, yes?" He dug into his back pocket for his Singapore identity card.

"Your IC is no good here," the watchman said, shaking his head. "You have no pass, you cannot go in. I have to look after my uniform first." He pointed at the letters embroidered in green on his khaki uniform: PWD, for the Public Works Department.

Hong didn't want to cause any more trouble. He backed off to wait for some workers to come out from the site, hoping one of them could inform Kwang as to where he was. He waited on his 50cc under the shade of billboards with the names of famous contractors, architects and consultants involved in the project. But he couldn't sit tight with all his anxieties, and gradually looked up at the billboards, wondering how those famous companies had become so big, rich and powerful, making people work round the clock like monkeys and donkeys—for example, the burly watchman inside his cardboard cage. Hong stared at the companies' logos, comparing their designs and mission statements, imagining the whole network.

Then he heard the rumbling of a big truck kicking up clouds of dust on the dirt road behind him. The truck was carrying the standard forty-foot-long rounded steel bars that were used for reinforcement in building construction. The driver and his assistant were wearing dark sunglasses

and their company's red caps. When they braked at the big stop sign, Hong saw the truck assistant showing their company's pass to the huge watchman. He seized the opportunity to approach them for help, but before he could open his mouth, fate revealed itself. The truck assistant yelled, "Hey! Hong! What are you doing here?" as he took off his red cap and dark sunglasses.

Hong couldn't believe his eyes. "Hey! Botak!" He waved and walked towards the truck. "I can't believe it's you!"

"I'm surprised too!" Botak replied. "Haven't seen you for what, six or seven years? What are you doing here?" Botak had been a major player in the annual fighting spider competition, which was organised by a young-at-heart, rich old man nicknamed Shoot Bird for his crossed eyes; he died of a heart attack the year following Kwang's big victory, and his death ended the unique era of fighting spiders in Singapore, no more to war-dance back and forth before grappling like wrestlers.

"Looking for Kwang," Hong answered. "You remember ah?"

"Of course! I mean, who can forget? He is working inside, doing bar bending."

"That's what I hear. But can't get in to look for him leh. Watchman won't let me in. That's why I am stuck here."

"All he needs is a rubber stamp on paper," the truck driver said. "We have spare paper for you. Come, we take you there."

Botak added: "We are dropping our steel near Kwang's workplace."

"My motorbike is over there." Hong pointed at his 50cc under the big billboard. "Okay to follow you?"

The truck driver gave Hong a thumbs up and a spare pass for the watchman. Hong biked behind the rumbling steel truck to where Kwang was working. "There lah!" Botak said and pointed. Four people were dragging a long handle together to bend one-inch round steel bars into required shapes from a three-foot high bar-bending table made of ironwood. Hong grimaced at the way they dragged the bars like beasts of burden under the blazing equatorial sun.

Kwang had gone through a soul-searching period after he'd split up with his childhood girlfriend, who had had a secret affair with Chinatown Yeow. He had then drifted into construction jobs in steel fixing, moving from one worksite to another like a nomad for over seven years, working for sharp sub-contractors who knew exactly what their workers were worth. He had become a leading hand at bar bending, with three guys working under him. As the front man at the bending table, he had to continually lift the top part of the bender to fit in the one-inch steel bars for bending. He said, "Oops!" when stopping slowly, or "Ooff!" for enough, to control the momentum as he and his men dragged the long bending handles together, making sure the angle was just right, not over-bent or needing to be re-bent. He didn't like to waste time while working.

But when he saw Hong coming, he sent his three workmates away so that he and Hong could have a private chat. "Hey, do me a favour," he said politely to them. "Go and get some more one-inch bars from the cutter." The bars were over three hundred yards away and it would take them some time to return.

Kwang looked relaxed, although the sun was so hot that he needed to wear thick cotton clothing to absorb his sweat. "Hey, how you know I am here?" he asked, grinning while he wiped his face with his rolled-up sleeves, which displayed powerful arms—strengthened by his constant lifting work—that had knocked out bigger guys with just one quick punch. He had a rugged face and lean body browned by the sun, and looked older than his actual age.

"Koon tell me," Hong said briefly, looking for Kwang's reaction.

"He say anything about the twenty dollars I borrow from him?" Kwang asked. "I told him I can get him a job here for six dollars a day. He said he will think about it."

"Did he?" Hong sighed at the irony, then soberly broke the news: "Koon is dead."

"What?" Kwang stepped back, looking confused, not sure if he had heard Hong correctly.

"Koon is gone, dead." Hong gestured with a crooked finger. "Die from a gang clash this afternoon in Temple Street."

"Gang clash with who?" Kwang asked, showing no

anger, no shock, nothing. He spaced out for a while before he continued. "Funny thing, I have a strange feeling about Koon today. Hard to believe he is gone. So...what do you think we should do?"

"Not sure," Hong replied. "We have to think about that."

Kwang wiped his sweaty face on his sleeve again and blinked. "Koon only has an old mother at home. You seen her yet?"

"Not yet."

"We should do that together. See what we can do for Koon's funeral."

"Right, right." Hong nodded half-heartedly, because it was hard to disagree.

"Can you wait until five for me to finish?" he said. "Forty minutes only. We can have a proper talk later. My guys are coming back; I have to work."

"I know, I can see lah. My bike is there." Hong pointed at where Botak and the truck diver were unloading the round steel bars. "Okay for me to wait for you?"

"Yah, see you later," Kwang replied. He hurriedly returned to his work.

Kwang finished at 5pm, took a quick bath and put on clean clothing, including his round-necked Swan brand white cotton T-shirt, which was cheap, easy to wash and dried quickly. He approached Hong, still waiting near his 50cc bike. "Let's makan first. You hungry?"

"Yah man. Where to go?" Hong asked, although he

was in no mood to eat. He wanted to talk about the situation regarding Big Mole instead.

“Woodlands hawker centre,” Kwang said. “Koon and I eat there when he was here last time.” He got on the back of Hong’s bike. On their way out, as they passed the gate, Kwang waved at the Sikh watchman, who waved back as if they were good friends.

At the hawker centre, Hong didn’t want to bring up the topic of the dead while they ate. After they had finished their fried noodles, and were drinking their coffees, he said, “Big Mole and I live together for nearly half a year. That’s because of you – you introduce us.”

“Long time ago what,” Kwang replied dismissively, then asked the question that had been bothering him. “What did Big Mole and Sachee say about what happen to Koon?”

Hong shook his head. “I don’t think they know yet. I have not told them.”

Kwang sat back and frowned. “What do you mean, you not told them yet?”

“My head is jammed. I can’t think straight,” Hong admitted, and related the whole story of what happened earlier with the tiger at Temple Street, and also about his own fear for Big Mole’s safety.

Kwang smoked his Camel cigarettes, and listened patiently without interrupting, until Hong had finished talking. Then Kwang said promptly, “We better go to Big

Mole’s shop now. Talk about Koon’s funeral later.”

Hong was glad to hear that. “It’s hard to find a friend like you,” he said. It was nearly 6.30pm when they left the hawker centre and rode toward Big Mole in Geylang.

•

As the sun was setting that Friday the 13th in Geylang, Big Mole’s pet fish shop appeared to be quiet inside, but in the backyard, a group of ex-spider boys was busy smoking and chatting. Fearless Sachee was lining up a dozen fighting fish, each in a clear glass jar, in a row along the long scaffolding table. When the cardboard between the jars was removed, the fish could see their opponents and displayed their full fury, puffing up their mouths and red gills, whipping and slashing at the water with their dark turquoise scales, rubbing their bodies vigorously against the transparent glass barriers, spoiling for a fight.

Sachee was four years younger than Big Mole and they had stuck together ever since seeing each other begging on the streets in Chinatown; his grandmother had taught him how to beg at a young age, but she was dead now. When Sachee was eleven years old, he had stabbed to death a notorious bully named Chai with a long, sharp fruit knife hidden inside a rolled-up newspaper. Nothing in him had really changed over the years, except that he had grown stronger and taller than the average man; he basically lived on impulse, like those around him. He helped to run the

shop, and lived with Big Mole and Hong inside the big Malay kampong in Geylang.

“Bets all fifty cents each,” he said as he removed the cardboard screens between jars. “Pick your choice before I roll dice.”

Big Mole was counting the day’s earnings at the counter near the wide sliding front door when she heard the slamming of car doors opposite the junction with the main road. Three fierce-looking men exited a black Vauxhall, with another one remaining in the driver’s seat. Their eyes were focused on her shop as they waited for the traffic to clear, so that they could cross the road. Immediately sensing that something was wrong, she zipped into the backyard and locked the door behind her, then clapped her hands at the noisy ex-spider boys sitting at the long scaffolding table.

“Hey, hey, listen!” she whispered loudly. “Three funny-looking men coming from the road. Don’t look good to me. Any of you have anything to do with them?”

A small-time thief whispered back, “Look like undercover cops or not?”

“No lah, nothing like that.” She brushed aside her shoulder-length, wavy hair and put her hand on her slim waist, trying to project confidence with her body language.

A fly-by-night said, “Okay, Big Mole, what you want us to do?”

Fearless Sachee answered, “I go see what they want.”

“No, not you, Sachee.” Big Mole smacked his thick arm

like she had in their old street days. “Don’t rush for nothing – let me handle them.”

Before he could think of a response, there came several knocks on the back door, which caused everybody to fall silent. When the knocking got louder, Big Mole whispered, “What the fuck do they want?” with her hands up, talking rough to psych herself into acting tougher than she was. She looked at the backdoor rats in front of her, and knew not to be afraid; together, rats could eat up a crocodile.

The banging got louder, as if the fierce men were about to break down her back door. Sachee could not stand the sound any longer; he grabbed an 18-inch-long water pipe an inch in a diameter, from the dozen underneath the long scaffolding table, and told her quietly, “Let me go, Big Mole, let me smash them up!”

“I go with you too,” the fly-by-night said.

All the others agreed. “Yah, let us go, Big Mole!” they whispered loudly.

“Shush.” Big Mole pointed a finger at them. “Listen, listen to me. Don’t do anything stupid unless they ask for it, okay? Let me check them out. Split up first, round up the place.”

The backdoor rats knew exactly what to do. One group seized their own pipes and slipped past the small back gate to edge around the property toward the front. Sachee and a few others squeezed behind the breeding area for the pet fish on the far left, hidden from the back door, and got closer to

Big Mole. The banging on the door continued loudly while she was unlocking it. "Coming! Coming! I am coming!" she yelled.

She opened the back door and filling the frame was a beefy man with fishy eyes, who looked to be in his thirties. Behind him were two men in their late twenties: one leant against her shop counter, and the other was watching the fish swimming in their tanks near the sliding front door.

The beefy man eyed Big Mole from head to toe, then asked, "You hear me knocking your door or what?"

"Yes, I did. I was in the toilet," Big Mole lied calmly. "Can I help you?"

He ignored her and stood on tiptoes, craning his thick neck above her to scan across the backyard. The long table was empty—the fighting fish and cups of coffee had all been removed by the quick hands of the backdoor rats, giving the appearance that she was completely alone. "Are you the owner here?" he asked

"Yes, I am," Big Mole replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing much," he said, staring at her. "Come to talk business, is all."

"Ah, what kind of business is that?" She played dumb, fully aware that nobody "talked business" by banging on doors.

"Fish business. Show me your fish," he said and moved aside for her to enter the shop. She knew that these men were dangerous; they might have come to kidnap and rape her, or even sell her to a faraway brothel in Malaya. This

was known to happen. What else could it be, since they had a car waiting outside?

"Sure, what kind of fish you like?" She sashayed her hips as she walked, as if to tempt them.

The cheeky one leaning against the counter whistled. "I like your bum. You a virgin ah?"

"Don't be so rude," she said, but smiled invitingly, to see what would happen.

The beefy man closed the back door and blocked it with his body. The one watching the pet fish swimming in their tanks turned and closed the sliding front door. The cheeky one grabbed Big Mole from behind, pinning her arms and squeezing her throat. She screamed her loudest; the back door burst inward, followed by Sachee and three of his backdoor rats. The thatched leaves in the roof trembled with the impact, and the beefy man stumbled forward under the assault. Sachee smashed his pipe into the cheeky one's face, and the man immediately let Big Mole go. The third man reopened the sliding front door to escape, but was shoved back into the shop by the other group of backdoor rats who'd been waiting outside; they came in quickly and closed the sliding door behind them.

It was all over in seconds. Big Mole readjusted her bra strap, and rubbed her aching arms and throat, not really hurt but just shaken up. Her attacker lay on the floor of the shop, shivering and bleeding from his forehead, nose

and mouth. He tried to talk, but no words would come out, only a gurgling sound; his jaw was clearly broken.

The beefy man was lying on his side, unmoving. No blood was visible on his body, but the backdoor rats had rained down blows upon him with their pipes, bashing his bones and internal organs. His fishy eyes stared wide with raw horror and he breathed heavily.

The one who had tried to escape trembled like a leaf in the wind. He collapsed to his knees when Sachee dragged him in front of Big Mole so she could decide what to do with him. She was not frightened; she was furious about what could have happened to her had Sachee and the backdoor rats not been there, about how many girls this trio might have raped and sold into slavery. She bent down and yelled in the face of the trembling leaf: "You trying to fuck me here or what!"

The leaf shook his head from side to side. "No, not me, not my fault!"

"You better be straight with me," she growled. "Tell me the truth. What do you want from me?" She wanted him to confess openly, not just for her sake but for that of everybody in the shop, for she knew that the truth was crucial for survival at the knife's edge of life.

"I was told to come. I know nothing," he mumbled.

"Told by who?"

The leaf looked wearily at his two half-dead accomplices. Big Mole knew he was trying to keep his code of silence in

every way possible, out of fear rather than courage.

"Well," she said cunningly, "if you are afraid of them, you might as well finish them off yourself."

"That's right!" a backdoor rat agreed. "That's the way, Big Mole. Let him do the rest himself. Save our hands from getting dirty."

She looked at the leaf. "So how? Are you going to do it?" The leaf shook his head and whimpered. "If not, you will have to eat the shit in the toilet buckets." This was an old trick she had learnt from Chinatown Yeow when she was still under his thumb.

The leaf didn't know what to do. He broke down and sobbed.

An impulsive rat gave him a kick in the side of his head. A loose cannon bashed him in the jaw and said, "I put his head in the shit bucket for you, Big Mole." Someone else punched his face, and another kicked him in the gut. Then the mob took over, beating and kicking the trembling leaf until he was half-dead himself.

The temperature cooled as dusk fell. Through the smashed back door, the fingers of sunlight that had slipped into the shop were fading, just as with the tempers of those inside, as though the demons of impulsiveness and rage had left. The shop filled with silence, the only sound being the varieties of pet fish swimming in their tanks—the goldfish, the angelfish, the rainbow fish.

Big Mole gasped suddenly. "Oh! I forgot! Another

one of them was waiting in a black car on the opposite side of the road.”

Sachee dashed outside. When he returned, he said, “There is no black car outside! He must have run away, escaped!”

“That means we have to watch out,” a small-time thief warned. “Sachee, what you think we must do?”

“Better ask Big Mole first.”

She knew that the one who had escaped would come back with more gangsters sooner or later. She also worried about getting caught red-handed by the cops for the three half-dead men in her shop. The backdoor rats might abandon ship for survival in the storm, and leave her with no crew on board to defend her. After calculating the odds, she decided that getting rid of the three half-dead men was more important than worrying about the one who had got away. She knew she had to be careful, even though the backdoor rats would bend over backwards for her.

She said to the small-time thief, “No matter what happens, we must wait and see. Can you all wait for Hong to come back and see what we can do together?”

The fly-by-night asked, “Wait for how long?”

“Won’t be long,” she said as she looked at the clock, which read 6.30pm. “Hong told me he is going with Koon to catch up with Kwang, who is working in Woodlands.”

Although Kwang was not interested in fighting fish and seldom appeared at the shop, everybody there liked

him. They knew he was a man of his word, had a quick mind, the guts and nerve to go against the odds, and win. Somebody said to her, “You mean, Kwang will be here tonight?”

“Yes, I guess so.” She lied a bit to placate everyone—she was expecting to see Koon and Hong, but not Kwang.

The loose cannon said, “If Kwang is coming, I don’t mind waiting.”

“That’s right,” Sachee said, supporting him in order to smooth out the edgy situation and pressure the rest to wait with them.

•

The half-moon was quite bright in the cloudless night around 7.30pm, when Kwang and Hong arrived at Big Mole’s pet fish shop. Light from the shop’s interior phosphorus lamp seeped out of the gaps of the thatched roof. Hong felt a sense of relief as he shut off his motorbike.

“I think Sachee and his mates still around,” he said. “The big bright lamp is on inside.”

“Must be.” Kwang got off the back seat and knocked on the front door of the shop.

Sachee and his backdoor rats were eating satay at the long scaffolding table visible through the broken back door, and a stolen portable radio played Mandarin pop songs. They couldn’t hear the knocking on the front door from the backyard.

Big Mole was playing solitaire again at the shop's counter to keep herself calm, while at the same time keeping an eye on the three half-dead men. They looked washed out in the light of the phosphorus lamp that was attached to the main beam of the thatched leaf roof by a long thin rod, and hardly moved at all now. As she played her cards, she wondered what the backdoor rats would do when Hong came back with Koon, rather than Kwang, whom they were expecting. It was not easy to wait with the weight of that white lie on her shoulders. Every second seemed to stretch much longer than usual.

So many problems had to be addressed, such as how to survive when the black Vauxhall driver returned with his gang to take revenge. Would they burn down her shop or scar her face with sulphuric acid? Could Hong help at all? The cold hard fact was that everybody was waiting for Kwang, not Hong or Koon. She didn't expect to see Kwang at all. His knocks on the door were nearly drowned out by the loud Mandarin pop songs being played in the backyard. She heard it faintly, and held her breath warily as she walked to the sliding front door to see who was there.

"Knock louder," Hong suggested as he pushed his 50cc bike onto the curb.

When Kwang knocked louder the second time, Big Mole thought it was the black Vauxhall driver who had returned for revenge. "Who is that?" she asked sharply, attempting to sound fierce.

"It's me: Kwang," he said calmly. "Open the door, Big Mole."

The familiar voice was too good to be true. "Really you, Kwang?" she asked louder, just to make sure that the devil was not playing tricks on her.

"Yah lah," he said clearly. "It's me, Big Mole."

His clear voice made her heart race with relief. She combed through and neatened her wavy hair quickly with both hands before opening the sliding front door. "Oh Kwang, I can't believe it's you!" She threw her arms around him, almost falling over herself to hug him, but retreated at the sight of Hong just behind him.

Hong could not help being a bit jealous of the way Big Mole reacted to Kwang at the doorway, but managed to swallow the sour taste in his mouth and pretend not to notice. "You okay?" he asked as she moved aside for him to push his 50cc into her shop. He stopped suddenly at the sight of the three still gangsters lying on the floor under the bright phosphorus lamp. His face turned white. He looked at his Seiko 5 watch, and his jaw tightened while he thought about what to say.

"What happened hah? How long ago? Tell me, Big Mole."

"Not yet." She frowned at him. "Go inside first."

Kwang closed the sliding front door before he joined everyone else in the backyard. He was like a magnet at the long scaffolding table; everybody lined up in his direction,

very glad to see him. Someone turned off the loud radio. Kwang's steady eyes spoke volumes without him having to say a word, and he looked sharp and calm as ever. They knew he was a gentleman of his word, and moved aside automatically for him to take a seat at the centre bench around the long table. The small-time thief who was sitting nearby stared at Kwang's strong bar-bending hands, and imagined being able to drop a big guy with just one quick punch. The loose cannon poured him a hot coffee from the kettle on the portable clay stove that was burning a slow charcoal fire. The fly-by-night offered him a Camel cigarette.

Fearless Sachee struck a match and asked, "You want to know how all this happened?"

Kwang knew Sachee was the most outspoken person there. "Tell me lah," he said, and listened. Sachee described how they had managed to save Big Mole in the nick of time and asked, "What you think we should all do now?"

"Listen to what Hong has to say first." Kwang wasn't ready to answer the tricky question, and needed time to think.

"Stupid lah," Hong admitted. "I lose my head with the tiger at Temple Street, head of 24 gang. Sorry, it's my fault." He took a deep breath. "That tiger and the 24s jump Koon earlier today and kill him." There was a sudden hush from the entire assembled group.

"No, not your fault," said a good friend of Koon's. "You do the right thing, Hong."

"This is fate," the small-time thief said. "We are all in the same wok."

"Right," Sachee agreed loudly. "We are all in the same wok!"

Big Mole let out a deep breath. "At least we are not in the dark any more," she said. "The truth has come out. Can't turn the clock back. We must see what we can do now."

"Definitely," Hong assured her. "I put my head on the chopping block. Leave it to me."

"We must have a plan," the small-time thief said. "Do you have any?"

Hong had no immediate answer. He paused, thinking, head down.

Sachee turned to look at Kwang. "So, what can we do?"

"Let's think together first," Kwang advised, and looked around to see if anyone wanted to have their say.

Somebody said, "We must get rid of the three gangsters first."

Somebody else asked, "How?"

Another person replied, "Just dump somewhere quietly after midnight."

"But not dead yet," said the loose cannon.

"No matter, can still dump."

"Easy for you to say," the fly-by-night said. "What about the cops?"

The word “cops” made them think twice. Nobody wanted to face the police. Everyone went quiet. They didn’t know what to say, and looked to Hong for the answer.

Hong rubbed his jaw thoughtfully and gestured with a finger. “The cops are not a problem. If they were to come, they will have by now. This has nothing to do with the cops. This is a matter between me and that tiger in Temple Street. I started the fire—I will face it. I will find a van to get rid of the gangsters. Talk about the rest later.”

Big Mole stared at Hong’s dreamy eyes, which always fascinated her. “Are you sure?”

“Definitely,” he said, as she sat next to him. “I do anything for you.”

“Are you going now?” She placed her hand on his firm shoulder.

“Yes,” he said, for everyone to hear. “We can use the gunny sacks from the charcoal shed as body bags. Wait for me to come back with the van.”

He retrieved his skeleton keys from under Big Mole’s counter, then caught a taxi from the main road to the new Katong Odeon Cinema, which had a free parking area behind it, so as to find a van to steal. It took him less than half an hour to return with the stolen van, during which the backdoor rats bagged up the three unmoving men inside the charcoal gunny sacks. Hong reversed the van and stopped at the curb outside the shop for the backdoor rats to quickly chuck the three body bags inside.

Hong, Sachee and the loose cannon drove to the isolated end of Changi Beach, removed the gangsters’ watches and wallets, dumped the three bodies, and drove the stolen van back to the Katong Odeon cinema’s free car park before the movie inside had finished. They caught a taxi back to the fish shop, and all the backdoor rats raved about Hong’s words and deeds, and how he had got them off the hook so quickly.

They moved aside so that he could sit with Big Mole on the centre bench opposite Kwang and Sachee. Everyone was now in a buoyant mood, and no longer worried about the cops. One of them started to offer his services. “Hey, Hong,” he said, “are we going to wait here for the 08s or what?”

A twinkle appeared in Hong’s eyes. He stood up, raised his long index finger, and said: “We don’t need the 08s. The truth is we don’t have any real future unless we can walk together as one, to raise our own flag. Flag called Koon Thong. For Koon!” He paused to see what the reaction from the rats would be after he had used Koon’s name with the word “thong” for gang.

“That’s right!” Sachee lifted up his fist. “Raise our own flag called Koon Thong. For Koon!”

“You are not wrong, Sachee,” the loose cannon agreed. “I am all for Koon Thong.”

“We need a plan for that,” the small-time thief suggested.

“We need the *water* to do that,” the fly-by-night said, rubbing his fingers together, referring to money. “We can’t raise our own flag without that!”

“Don’t worry about money lah,” Hong said, waving his index finger. “I used to think like that too, but no more. Money is everywhere—if there are people, there is money. There are no limits! All we need are guts to catch the faceless people behind the big 24 gang that controls the money around here. Right or not?”

The message was clear. They all knew that the established gangs were organised by secretive people operating legitimate big businesses. One of them belonging to a small gang said, “I am sure my side will help to increase the numbers for Koon Thong.”

The quiet one said, “We are already together in the same wok from what has happened. We might as well sail under the same flag for Koon Thong like you say, Hong.” He was the oldest there, 26 years old, and had done five years in Changi Prison for driving the getaway car in a big pawn shop robbery. His support made most of the backdoor rats, including the sceptics, nod their heads, but not Kwang. When they saw he was not interested, they wondered why.

Sachee, who was sitting next to Kwang, nudged him. “Will you be our big brother for Koon Thong? I will listen to you. I will do what you say.”

“I’ll vote for that,” Hong said. “You be our leader.”

“No, no,” Kwang shook his head, grinning. “I am not here for that.”

“At least you can give us some advice, Kwang,” Big Mole said, trying to find out what he was thinking.

“Advice on what?” He looked like he didn’t know what she meant.

“Tell us what to do; think for us,” she looked pleadingly at him. “The one who drove getaway in the black Vauxhall will surely come back for me.”

“I think what is more important must come first,” he said.

“That’s right,” Hong agreed. “What is more important must come first.”

Kwang continued: “Trouble is the tiger in Temple Street. You all know where are the corners in Chinatown. Find out where he lives—catch him first.”

“I can do that!” Sachee raised his hand immediately to volunteer.

“That tiger can be very slippery,” the quiet one warned. “Don’t raise the alarm. The main thing is to do properly. Do we have enough time for that?”

“Why not?” Hong replied. “That tiger knows we can bite because of that guy who escaped in his black Vauxhall. They will think twice. That will give us some time to find out where he lives.”

“You are right,” the quiet one agreed.

“I know a few guys who are 08 members,” Hong said. “

One stays in Toa Payoh. He hangs around for the 08 at Temple Street. He probably knows where that tiger is living. He is a friend of Koon's too. Was a district player with his spiders during Shoot Bird's time, so Kwang will probably remember him."

"Do you?" Sachie asked Kwang.

"Yes, I know him," Kwang admitted. "He is still in Toa Payoh."

Hong jumped at the opportunity. "He will probably open his mouth to you, Kwang. That will turn the tables for us, and help us to move ahead."

"Oh yes, give us a hand, Kwang," Big Mole said persuasively. "Put some sweets in his mouth, and help us to change the situation."

"That's what we need," Hong added. "That guy could run both ways for us – be a double agent. That will really help Koon Thong in the long run."

"We need your help, Kwang." Big Mole looked straight at him, eye to eye.

Kwang smoked his Camel thoughtfully, and then nodded his head. "All right, I see what I can do."

"When?" Big Mole asked.

Kwang asked for the time.

Somebody answered, "Five past ten."

"I see what I can do." He stood up to go.

"Let's go together on my bike," Hong suggested. "I know that Toa Payoh guy quite well."

"No lah," Kwang replied. "That guy probably knows what you did at Temple Street today. Not good for him to be seen near you. I better go alone."

"You are right," Hong admitted, and saw him off outside the shop. He wanted to show his appreciation to Kwang, in order to bolster his confidence and hopefully to encourage him to perform well.

Big Mole went back for her solitaire cards while Hong and Kwang stood outside the shop, talking. As she played her cards, she was transported back to the time when she was living in the big Chinese kampong at Bukit Ho Swee, when Kwang fell asleep on her bed during the drinking party with his supporters, after he had won the Spider Olympics. Although they only shared the same bed that night years ago, she still remembered him hugging her in his sleep, saying, "Kim, Kim": the name of his childhood girlfriend, who had ended up with Chinatown Yeow. She pretended to be Kim on that unforgettable night, when she was still poor, lonely and ugly, unable to forget the feeling of Kwang's strong arms around her.

•

Former spider boys came from all walks of life – they ranged from homeless street kids and school dropouts to decent kids, but the best ones were those who had gone anywhere and everywhere to search out and capture their fighting spiders; they even ventured into dangerous bushes

infested with black mambas. These boys were risk-takers and crowd-pullers, always on the move, always looking for worthy opponents with which to fight their spiders. These betting matches often ended in punch-ups.

Kwang had had his fair share of fistfights in his youth, “second to none” in the words of those who knew him. After years of catching spiders all over Singapore, he still had a map of the country in his head, and had no problem finding the Toa Payoh guy at the local coffeeshop in the semi-rural suburb. Kwang saw him drinking Tiger beer with two other guys sitting around a collapsible table under a streetlamp in the open space. He walked up behind the Toa Payoh guy, and said, “Hey, guess who?”

The Toa Payoh guy turned round. “Hey, Kwang! We were just talking about you! Sit down for a beer lah.”

“Cannot drink beer,” Kwang said. “Kopi-O will do. I go and get it. Do you all want anything else?” he offered in return, as a goodwill gesture.

“No, we are fine,” the Toa Payoh guy replied and waved at the old coffeeshop owner who was clearing another table nearby. “Hey uncle,” he asked respectfully. “Can we have kopi-O, please?” He then introduced the other guys at the table to Kwang as the waiter brought over the black coffees.

“The next big election is coming soon,” Kwang said. “Which party you all going to vote for?”

“Makes no different to me,” said the guy to his right. “What about you?”

“Can’t vote,” Kwang told them. “No registered address.”

“How come hah? What’s your address on your IC?” the Toa Payoh guy asked.

“Bukit Ho Swee,” Kwang said. “But I live at worksites now, do bar bending for the freshwater project near the Johore Causeway in Woodlands.”

“That’s long way from here,” the Toa Payoh guy said. “Do you often come out from there?”

“No, not unless I have something important to do.” Kwang saw this as an opportunity to get straight to the point. “I come down tonight to talk about Koon. You hear he died in a gang clash this afternoon?”

The Toa Payoh guy finished his beer and said, “To be honest, we were all there when Koon died. He was talking about going to see you when a bunch of 24s leapt out from a minibus to raid our corner. Koon grabbed a chair and charged at them. He tripped and fell down, and got chopped by their machetes. I rather not talk about it. You can blame me for that: I was the devil who opened the door for him to join 08.”

“I heard Hong came afterward and jumped his bike at your tiger in Temple Street. Did you all see that?”

“No lah, but still got the blame for it!” the guy facing Kwang said, frustrated. “Our dole thrown on the floor for us to pick up. But of course we didn’t do. We walk off.”

“Where is that tiger then?” Kwang said, digging deeper.

“No idea. Could be walking on his crutch in Spottiswoode.”

“Spottiswoode is high-class area,” Kwang said. “Where he stay?”

“Big redbrick house with hibiscus hedge and old iron gate,” the Toa Payoh guy said. “Spottiswoode Park Road. I go there last week and see him moving his barang.”

Kwang finished his coffee, stood and said, “I have to catch the bus before is too late. If you all need a hand with anything I can help with, you let me know.”

“We are looking for something decent to do,” the Toa Payoh guy said earnestly. “Use our hands for an honest living, actually.”

Kwang knew they had no choice after leaving the 08 gang that had previously fed them. “Can always get you some labour job at my workplace in Woodlands,” he told them. “Just mention my name to the Sikh watchman at the front gate; he is my friend.” He said his goodbyes and caught the bus back to Geylang.

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Late that night, the ashtrays at the long table were full after all the backdoor rats had left Big Mole’s pet fish shop; they intended to return the next morning for a Koon Thong meeting. Hong, starting to feel like a ten-foot-tall general, suggested that they meet at 11am. He now lay on Big Mole’s lap as they sat on the couch behind the shop’s counter. She was half-asleep herself, but was startled awake when Kwang knocked.

The General jumped up to quickly open the sliding front door. “Hey, any luck?” he asked immediately, although his dreamy eyes were still half-open.

“Hey, give Kwang a chance to catch his breath leh,” Big Mole said, frowning. “Kwang is doing us a favour, right?”

“Right, she is right,” the General apologised to Kwang. “I make you a cup of coffee first.”

“No need lah,” Kwang said. “I already have coffee with that Toa Payoh guy.”

“You found him!” the General said and rubbed his long fingers together.

Big Mole, who saw the big picture, interrupted: “You working tomorrow?”

“I take Saturday and Sunday off to see Koon’s mother in Pasir Panjang,” Kwang replied. “See what I can do to help.”

“Tomorrow is tomorrow,” she said. “What about tonight – where you sleeping tonight?”

“Anywhere, I am easy. Here, you don’t mind,” he said, gesturing at her couch behind the counter.

“Why not come to my place in the Malay kampong for tonight?” she suggested.

“What about Sachee? He still stay there?”

“Yes, but not coming back tonight. He is out with his friends. There is a spare canvas bed in his room; I am sure he don’t mind if you use it.”

“Only takes twenty minutes to walk there,” the General

said, also trying make Kwang feel welcome. "Have breakfast with us in the morning."

"Try my fresh eggs," Big Mole added. "I have chickens that lay eggs every day."

So they walked together under the half-moon toward the biggest Malay kampong in Singapore.

"The Malay kampong is very different from Chinese kampong," Big Mole told Kwang as they walked. "Very safe lah. We don't even have to lock our doors. A lot cleaner than Chinese kampongs too, because no pigs or dogs to shit everywhere. We have our own rules, made by our Muslim leaders. Even the cops don't dare to interfere."

"That right?" Kwang replied, then got straight to the point about what he had found out in Toa Payoh. "I found out that tiger is living in a redbrick house on Spottiswoode Park Road. I know that area. One redbrick house only."

"That's all I need to know," the General said. "Koon Thong has the upper hand to get him first. We will need to be ready after our meeting tomorrow. Must be a lot of funny business going on inside that redbrick house."

"Not my business any more," Kwang said as they entered the Malay kampong; the thatched-roofed houses were raised on stilts against the frequent monsoon flooding, had wide pathways between them, and possessed a kind of serenity in the quiet neighbourhood under the moonlight.

"My house is over there," Big Mole said and pointed. Her two-bedroom stilt house was over seven feet above

the ground, and half a dozen chickens lived underneath in a coop. It was fenced sparsely by frangipani trees, their top branches reaching over the roof, creating a more secluded atmosphere and producing a lovely fragrance when the buds blossomed into flowers, especially after midnight. According to local myth, the scent of the frangipani was associated with the pontianak, but Big Mole had always loved the smell.

That night, they all went straight to bed, the end of such a long, eventful day. Kwang dreamt about a little green angel and a little red devil growing taller and taller as they stepped down from a train. The little angel said, "See everything as beautiful." Kwang blinked at her, and her face transformed into that of Big Mole. The little devil said, "See everything as powerful," and his face changed into Hong's. Kwang peered inside the train and saw the faces of Sachee, the loose cannon, the small-time thief, the fly-by-night and other faces he couldn't quite remember.



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