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The Lost Xuyan Bride

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"They say you are the one to see if I want to track down a missing person," the woman said, pulling to her the only chair in my office. She wore silk, embroidered with a *qi'lin* unicorn--a rank reserved to the highest businessmen of Fenliu.

I saw her long, lacquered nails and the impeccable yellow of her skin, the way she moved, sinuous and yet in perfect control--and I came to a conclusion. "I don't take clients from your background," I said.

"Indeed?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Too much trouble, Mr. Brooks?" She'd switched from Xuyan to English on the last sentence. She was good. Likely she also spoke Nahuatl, the language of Greater Mexico. A true businesswoman, who would be at ease anywhere in North America.

"Yes," I said. "How odd that it's the richest that cause the most difficulties."

"I assure you I have no intention of causing difficulties," the woman said. "I will be straightforward."

That was familiar territory. "And leave me free rein?" I felt myself slide into the rhythm of an oft-practised dance, politeness relayed back and forth until we both reached an agreement. Xuyans could be difficult to handle, but I was used to dealing with them.

She surprised me by putting both hands on the table. "I have no time to bargain with you, Mr. Brooks. If you will not take the case, I will find another investigator."

Money was tight, tight enough to make me regret moving west of the Rocky Mountains, into Xuyan territory. I could not afford to refuse her; and likely she had seen the peeling paint and the basic computer on my desk. But she was good at showing nothing. A good liar.

"Tell me the case," I said. "And I'll see whether I can take it."

She looked at me from under long lashes. "I am He Chan-Li. I work for Leiming Tech. I want you to find my daughter."

I said nothing, watching her. Watching her eyes, which told me all I needed to know: she was deciding what she could afford to tell me. And when she started speaking again, I knew I did not have her full trust.

"He Zhen did not come home seven nights ago," He Chan-Li said. "Her fiancé hasn't heard from her either."

"Seven nights is a bit early to declare her missing," I said, slowly.

He Chan-Li did not look at me. At last she said, "She had a tracking implant. We found it abandoned in a derelict building south of Fenliu."

A tracking implant. Not really surprising, for most of Fenliu's elite equipped their children with those, fearing kidnappings. Though... I remembered the fiancé. "How old is she?" I asked.

"Sixteen," He Chan-Li said.

Sixteen was old. Sixteen was adulthood for girls in Xuya, far too late to bother with tracking. Most teenagers ran amok anyway, tracking implants or not. But I said nothing.

"Why a private investigator? The tribunal militia could..."

He Chan-Li shook her head. "No. This is a private matter, Mr. Brooks. I will not bring the militia into it."

"I see." There probably was a reason, then, and I was going to have to find it, and soon. "Do you have leads? She might have run away--"

"No," He Chan-Li said. "She is not that kind of girl. And how would that explain the tracking implant? She never went into that area."

I could think of a few reasons for the tracking implant's location--knowing that Xuyan teenagers were no wiser or more well-behaved than their American counterparts. But I said nothing; merely noted the "running away" as a possible explanation.

"I can show you her room," He Chan-Li said. "And you can talk to Wen Yi, her fiancé."

I pondered the matter for a while. When I did not answer, He Chan-Li said, "I will pay you, Mr. Brooks. I will pay you well." There was something in her voice--something she could no longer hide--worry, perhaps?

I said, "I'll take the case. But I make no guarantees."

She nodded, looking relieved. "This is a recent picture."

I took the glossy paper, raised it to the light. He Zhen was smiling the careless smile of teenagers all over the world, displaying white, perfect teeth--probably enhancements, but they didn't look artificial. The expensive kind, then.

"That's all you have?" I asked.

"Yes. The tracking implant is at my house; I can give you the address where the security company found it. Is that enough?"

I shrugged. "It's going to have to be."

"I see. I'll take you to my house, Mr. Brooks, and you can see for yourself."

I shook my head. "I come in my own time." In truth, there were several things I needed to do before leaving, things I could not let her see.

He Chan-Li raised an eyebrow. "Some would say this is arrogance."

I shrugged. I could maintain the polite facade my lover Mei-Lin had once taught me, but not for long. At heart, I remained an American, and the elaborate subtleties of Xuya forever beyond me. "It is my way."

He Chan-Li looked displeased, though only a slight tightness of the mouth betrayed that. "Indeed." She waited for me to say something, but I did not. At length she rose, with a smile I knew was fake. "By the time you arrive at my house, Mr. Brooks, I may be gone. I have a business meeting."

I nodded, did not speak.

"Someone will take care of you there," He Chan-Li said.

And as she turned to leave my office, I saw, for a moment only, the emotion she was trying to hide from me.

It wasn't worry. It was raw, naked fear, a fear so strong that I could almost smell it.

Afterwards, I stared at the walls of the office for a while. I should have refused the case. There was too much I did not know, too much I was going to have to pry out of the client. But I needed the money.

Being an American in Xuya--a real American, a practising Protestant, and not one of those who'd converted to Taoism or Buddhism--meant you were on your own. No company would employ you; those few landlords that rented to you would do so at exorbitant rates. It was hard to get by; which was why I'd taken He Chan-Li on, against my better judgment.

I did not know where He Zhen was. But it was entirely possible she had not left Fenliu--as the daughter of a wealthy woman, she would be a prime target for ransom. I hoped it was the case. I hated travelling abroad--Greater Mexica had stringent entry requirements, demanding either proof of familial ties or of religion, and while the impoverished United States were softer on immigration, I had no wish to return to a place where there was a warrant on my head.

Before I left for He Chan-Li's house, I started a search on my computer, feeding it the names of He Chan-Li and of the fiancé. It was not an entirely legal search, since the program would trawl through administrative records as well as on the network; with luck, I should have some results by the time I came back.

#

He Chan-Li's house was in the richer suburbs of Fenliu. I took the mag-lev train from my shabby building, through the centre of the city and its skyscrapers of glass--the heart of Xuya's economic dominion on North America--and then into the

residential neighbourhoods. The view on either side of the train became apartment buildings decorated by red and yellow lanterns, which in turn gave way to individual houses with slanted roofs and white-washed walls.

At the address He Chan-Li had given me was a thick wall of bricks, covered by garlands of wisteria. When the door opened, I was surprised to find an old woman in traditional Xuyan dress: robes heavily embroidered with peaches, the ancient symbols for long life. Behind her, inobtrusive, stood a servant in livery.

The old woman said, "My name is He Lai. My daughter told me you would come here." He Lai's face was tanned by the sun, and wrinkled like an overripe plum. She exuded a serenity I found uncanny.

"He Chan-Li told me someone would be waiting for me. I expected a servant, not a member of the family."

He Lai shrugged. "It is not menial work to welcome a guest into your home."

There were ponds covered with lilies and lotus flowers, and weeping willows with long branches trailing in the water: a beauty that seemed to belong to another time, to another place. But I saw the small, inobtrusive control panels that controlled the security system; and knew that this was no pleasure garden. It was a fortress.

"Here." He Lai was pointing to a small pavilion by the side of a bigger building--that last presumably being the main house. "Those are my granddaughter's quarters. We have touched nothing since she left--I kept the servants away from here."

"Thank you," I said, and realised she was looking at me, waiting for something.

"You will find her?" She sounded worried.

"You have any idea of where she might be?"

"She confided in me--but she told me nothing about leaving. I would have thought--" He Lai shook her head. "I ought to know the risks, living in that house. Two years ago, a gang kidnapped my daughter's maid and held her for ransom."

"And?"

She would not look at me. It had ended badly, then. "I'll do my best," I said. "But you know I can promise nothing."

"I know. But you can understand how I feel."

I remembered sitting in the doctor's waiting room, waiting for the diagnosis of my lover Mei-Lin--and how badly I had wished that it was nothing, that Mei-Lin would live. I did understand how frightening it was, to be in the dark.

So I said nothing, made no false promises. I bowed to He Lai, simply. And then I slid the door open, and entered He Zhen's rooms. The servant followed me, no doubt to make sure I stole nothing.

It was everything I'd expected a Xuyan room to be: a low bed of ebony, with a lacquered pillow laid over the sheets; a few pieces of furniture arranged in a pattern for long life; a

laptop on the mahogany desk; and in one corner of the room, a shrine to the spirits of the ancestors, with ashes in the incense burner.

I knelt to check the shrine, triggering a flood of blue light from the neons above it. The ashes were old. It did not look as though the missing girl had gone back to her room. I had not expected it.

Several engravings adorned the walls: Chinese paintings, reproductions from the Ming dynasty--including the most famous of all, the eunuch Si-Jian Ma's ships departing from Nankin, on the journey that would lead him to discover America long before any European set foot on those shores.

I opened the drawers of the bedside table, and found a jewelry box filled with pearls and jade pendants, as well as a sheaf of yuans, neatly tied together--enough to pay my rent for several months.

I rifled through the jade pendants, until my hands snagged on something--a small item that had been carefully hidden at the bottom of the drawer. I raised it to the light: it was a twisted knot of jade in an abstract pattern, one that was familiar, although I was not sure why. It did not seem like a traditional Xuyan pendant, unlike the rest of the jewelry.

Apart from that, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

And yet...

I turned again, to look at the room, at the small things that were not quite right. Someone else might have missed it, but I'd seen enough rooms like those to know where the subtle sense of wrongness came from. Someone had been there before me. Someone who had attempted to put everything back into place, but had only partially succeeded.

According to He Lai, the servants had touched nothing; it could have been He Chan-Li, but I doubted that.

Odd. A place like that, with its state-of-the-art security, would be hard to get into. Why go to all that trouble?

I opened the laptop. It was the latest fad from Greater Mexica: sleek metal outside, with a corn-yellow keyboard inside, and a touchpad adorned with a stylised butterfly--symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexica god of knowledge and computers. The laptop beeped as I started it up, but it did not ask for any password or fingerprint.

Ah well. You never knew. Likely whoever had ransacked the room had also erased everything from the hard disk, but he might have been sloppy.

I took the laptop, slid it back into its embroidered case. I also picked up the pendant, and turned to the servant, who for the whole duration of my search had silently stood in a corner. "Can I take that?"

He shrugged. "You'll have to ask the mistress."

Before I left the room, I snapped a few high-res pictures. My instincts were telling me I'd missed something, but I couldn't figure out what.

I'd expected He Lai to be waiting for me outside. She wasn't. In her place was another Xuyan: a dapper man dressed in red silk robes. He had no insignia of rank, but I was not fooled. There was steel in his bearing and in his gaze: not someone you'd want to cross.

"I suppose you are the investigator Mother hired to track down He Zhen," he said.

I did not miss the way he referred to He Chan-Li; in Xuyan, it could only mean one thing. "You would be the fiancé?" I asked.

He smiled, displaying yellow teeth. "Wen Yi."

"Jonathan Brooks," I said grudgingly, still looking at him. He was not pure Xuyan--although his skin had the waxy, yellow cast I associated with Xuya, his features were distinctively Chumash Indian, the original inhabitants of Fenliu. "What are you doing here?"

Wen Yi smiled again--in an angelic way that was starting to get on my nerves. "I wanted to talk to you."

"You are talking to me."

He looked amused. "You Americans are so uncivilised. Sometimes I wonder why you come into Xuya at all."

I did my best impression of a smile, though it was thoroughly insincere. "Some of us like it here." Not entirely true: I'd never have moved past the Rocky Mountains if I hadn't had a fifteen-year jail sentence hanging over my head in Virginia. The United States take foreign sympathies very seriously, and even though Mei-Lin was only half-Xuyan, the state police judged that our being lovers was a crime. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

Wen Yi looked surprised. "I'm family."

"Not yet."

"Almost," Wen Yi said. "The marriage was to take place in a month."

There was something in the way he spoke--it wasn't the absolute confidence the sentence brooked. It was--anger? I'd learnt to read Xuyans, to see beneath what Americans thought a smooth, calm facade. Had I been asked what Wen Yi felt, I would have said rage. But why?

"When did you last see He Zhen?"

"We had--a meeting scheduled seven nights ago, but she never came."

"What kind of 'meeting'?"

"I do not know," Wen Yi said. "She said she had important things to tell me, but would not say what."

Liar. Smooth and smiling, but liar all the same. He had seen her that night, I was ready to bet.

"Can you tell me about her?" I asked.

"A lovely girl," Wen Yi said.

"Is that all you have to say about her? You two were engaged."

He shrugged. "An arranged marriage, Mr. Brooks. You know how things go in Xuya."

"A marriage for the sake of Leiming Tech?" I said. "You don't sound so worried that He Zhen's gone."

He raised mild eyes to me, but I could feel the anger simmering within. "I am worried, Mr. Brooks. You would do well to remember that."

"Is that a threat? If that is all you have to offer--"

Wen Yi was not looking at me. He said, "She was a beautiful, charming girl. When she laughed, it was as if the sun had risen in the room."

"You think she's been kidnapped? That she's run away?" I didn't believe that. Running away required planning; and He Zhen would have taken her laptop, as well as the money in the drawers of the bedside table--all of which were still there.

He started. "No. She'd never run away. She was such a devoted daughter."

"I see."

"If you have any information on her whereabouts--" he slipped me a glossy card. "Call me."

And that was likely all he had come here for. He played the part of the besotted fiancé very badly--save for his worry at her disappearance, which sounded genuine. Which did not mean anything--he could still be afraid that I'd find out he was behind all of it.

I watched Wen Yi walk away; when he was gone, I went into the main building, where I found He Lai waiting for me. She had a lacquered box in her hands. "My daughter said you should have this."

Inside the box was the tracking implant. I bowed to thank her, and asked, "You knew her well?" I asked.

He Lai's eyes watched me, expressionless. "She was my only granddaughter. How could I not know her?"

"How was she, in the days before she disappeared?"

"She was in high spirits, but then the engagement had just been finalised after a year--"

"How did she feel about the wedding?" I asked.

"She was happy," He Lai said. "Wen Yi is a man of status in the community. She was going to be an adult--"

"And move away from this house?" I asked, and when I saw her wince, I knew I was right. "So she and your daughter did not get on."

"Zhen always showed proper deference." He Lai looked defiantly at me.

"I do not doubt that," I said. But there were other ways to disobey. Still, it was looking more and more unlikely that He Zhen had run away. Whatever her quarrel with her mother, He Zhen would have been out of He Chan-Li's reach in a month. Raising a furore in Fenliu would have been counter-productive.

And, whatever had happened to He Zhen, why had her room been searched? What had they thought to find there, and had they found it?

All questions to which I had no answer.

I raised the pendant I'd found in the drawer, dangled it before He Lai's eyes. "Does this mean anything to you?" I asked.

He Lai's face twisted. "It's Zhen's favorite."

"It's not Xuyan," I said.

"No. Zhen's father brought it back from a business trip in Tenochtitlan. It's a glyph that means 'Good Omen' in Nahuatl."

"I thought He Zhen was very young when her father died."

He Lai did not speak for a while. "There are some things you don't forget. Zhen loved her father very much."

The implications were clear enough. He Zhen had not loved her mother.

He Lai said, "You can keep it, Mr. Brooks. If you find Zhen--"

"You know I can't--" I said, and she cut me forcefully.

"I know what I am doing. Keep it. You can always give it back to me later."

Her tone implied, very clearly, that she hoped I wouldn't have to give the pendant back to her.

I showed her the laptop, and she shrugged. "You can take that too." She sounded distracted, as if the pendant had brought back unwelcome memories. I guessed seeing her daughter and her granddaughter quarrel regularly must have been disheartening.

#

I spent some time questioning the servants in He Chan-Li's house, asking them if they had any ideas of where she might have gone, but nothing interesting came of it.

After leaving the house, I took another train to the place they'd found the tracking implant. It was a shabbier mag-lev, which kept pitching as it ran, giving the impression it could leave the tracks at any time.

The people seating by me were the usual crowd: the wild-eyed youths drunk on opium and morphine, the dullard beggars reeking of rice alcohol, the lone mothers with tired eyes, hugging their children to their chests as if afraid someone would steal them. Many of them were Whites or Blacks, lured west by the promise of a better life in Xuya--and discovering they could not fit into this alien society. I, at least, had had Mei-Lin to help me, in the short months before cancer carried her away. They had no one.

I could not afford pity; I was already barely rich enough to help myself. But, still, every time a crippled beggar moved past me, I felt an obscure guilt.

I alighted at the Gardens of Felicity, a small station blackened by pollution and grime. The place reeked of urine; I silently made my way out of the station.

The place where they'd found the tracking implant was one of the numerous social buildings started by the previous magistrate of Fenliu, and abandoned when Prefect En Pao had come to power and the whole staff of the tribunal had changed. I stepped over crushed paper lanterns and plastic wrappings, wincing each time my shoes hit a puddle of unsavoury things. It seemed even beggars did not sleep there.

At last I stood on the fifth floor, staring into an incomplete apartment--the workers hadn't pierced the windows yet. There was nothing remarkable here.

No, not quite true. I knelt, and rubbed my fingers on the ground. What I had mistaken for brown paint was dried blood. I looked up at the outer walls, which had once been decorated with plum flowers and swallows.

Beneath one fading set of characters, I found what I was looking for: two small holes, barely visible, with the same reddish stains. Bullet impacts.

I took pictures of the holes under all possible angles, and took a few samples of the blood. A quick scan with ultraviolet revealed a few hairs on the ground; I bagged those as well.

But, no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find the shell-casings--which meant that someone had taken them away. Someone who was used to wielding a gun.

I was starting to understand why He Chan-Li looked so fearful. This wasn't a bored teenager running away. In fact, if, as I suspected, the blood belonged to He Zhen, there was a chance she might not even be alive.

#

I came back to my flat late at night, exhausted. I dumped He Zhen's computer on the bed, and fixed myself a quick meal: instant noodles and sweet-sour pork.

When I was finished, I quickly rinsed the chopsticks and plastic bowl, and sat before my computer to look at the results of the search I'd started before leaving for He Chan-Li's house.

There wasn't anything surprising about He Chan-Li (co-founder of Leiming Tech, nowadays leading partner, and one of forty-nine businessmen entitled to the *qi'lin* insignia), or He Pao (He Chan-Li's husband and co-founder of Leiming Tech, dead of congenital heart failure ten years ago). But on our smiling fiancé Wen Yi...

Ostensibly, he ran a small but very successful company of personal care for the elderly. However, he had ties with the White Lotus: a rebellious organisation that had fought the Chinese motherland in Xuya, and that had subsequently turned to crime after the independence.

No charges had been brought against Wen Yi--and not surprisingly, since there was no tangible proof, and since his money had funded part of Prefect En Pao's re-urbanisation campaign.

Clearly the kind of man who'd have access to guns and who would not hesitate to use them.

I sighed; and ran an analysis on the blood and hair samples I had gathered at the derelict building, and on the pictures of the bullet holes.

In the three quarters of an hour that it took to complete, I busied myself with He Zhen's computer, rifling through her personal folders. There wasn't much. I found a few pictures of He Zhen with friends, grinning into the camera with that same reckless abandon. The pictures with her mother were more subdued; seeing the way she stood, I doubted her childhood had been happy. A businesswoman entitled to the *qi'lin* was not always the best or more sensitive of parents.

But the folders were abnormally empty; someone had indeed erased almost everything from the memory. They had made only one mistake: the only way to erase anything permanently from a hard disk was to destroy the physical support. If not--I could probably manage to recover the erased files, but it would require an enormous amount of time, all the more so because I had no idea what I was looking for.

My computer beeped to warn me the analyses were complete; I moved from He Zhen's computer to mine, and looked at the results.

The bullet holes, first: coming from an automatic Yi-Sen with a modified barrel, a gun favoured by agents of the White Lotus. And the rest: no great surprises either. There were two different DNAs involved; the blood was He Zhen's, but the hairs belonged to smiling Wen Yi. Neither of which, of course, had any reason to be in that building seven days before.

I debated over whether to call Wen Yi and demand explanations, and dismissed that as clumsy. Wen Yi apparently still believed me on his side; better not do anything to antagonise him.

I launched a standard analysis on He Zhen's computer--on security files and erased mails. That alone was going to take most of the night.

Before going to bed, I moved the pictures of He Zhen's room to my laptop, and looked at the splendid room, but try as I might, I couldn't find what I had missed.

#

I woke up long before my alarm clock beeped; seeing, over and over, the stylised butterfly on the touchpad of the laptop, and knowing exactly what was wrong with it. The butterflies of the Mexica god Quetzalcoatl did not have markings on their wings; and this one had.

I got up, throwing a cotton robe over my pyjamas, and opened up the laptop again, looking at the wings very

carefully. They looked like markings, but, if you bent the right way, there was something about them...

Something I'd seen before. Like He Zhen's favorite pendant, those markings were Mexica glyphs.

I did not speak Nahuatl, the language of Greater Mexica, but in the age of the internet that was no trouble. I hooked up to my building router, then to a Mexica search engine, and from there to a Nahuatl-Xuyan dictionary.

The glyphs were easy to find. They read: Smoking Mirror.

Smoking Mirror. A further search ascertained that this was the frequent epithet of the Mexica god of War and Fate: Tezcatlipoca, whose favourite occupation was challenging travellers at night to outlandish contests.

Which made me feel as though I'd leapt a wall only to find myself staring at a deep ravine, with no bridge in sight.

A password?

Think. Why had He Zhen left this here? Had she suspected that her laptop wasn't safe, and left a message for someone else, someone familiar with Mexica customs? I thought there might be a connection with the Mexica pendant I'd found in He Zhen's room, but no matter which way I looked at that pendant, I couldn't make the pieces fit together.

I finally let the matter rest, and checked the recovery I had launched on the laptop. I had not been expecting much, but what I saw was enlightening. He Zhen's computer was now on open session: all you had to do to make it work was to turn it on. But that had not always been the case. Eight nights ago, someone had switched the core routines from private ID session (which required a login, password and fingerprints to start up the computer) to open session.

It was an odd move. I'd have expected the reverse, if He Zhen had had some files to protect. I fiddled a bit with the computer, and asked it to retrieve the log history. Which, of course, had been erased. But the log history was always in the same place on the hard disk--which was perfect to launch another recovery.

When I turned away from the computer, the waitbar on the screen was displaying a two-hour search, and it kept slowing down. Someone had gone to great trouble to change those parameters, and not be discovered.

I left the computer to run its analysis; and called my client, He Chan-Li.

She appeared on my screen already dressed for work: white makeup applied liberally to her face until no patch of skin remained uncovered, and a smart set of robes emphasizing the curves of her body, prominently displaying the *qi'lin* insignia. "So?" she asked. "Any progress, Mr. Brooks?"

"Yes," I said, going straight to the point. "I understand why you haven't called the tribunal militia into this."

Her eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?"

"You know who Wen Yi is, don't you? That's why you're so afraid."

She stood, quietly, against a background painted a soft white. She did not move; did not look at me. From a Xuyan, it was as good as an admission.

"Did He Zhen know?" I asked.

He Chan-Li said, "The company--has trouble. Financial trouble. Wen Yi offered--"

"Support." I tried to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "In exchange for a docile wife. Did she know about Wen Yi's other activities, Mistress He?"

Her voice, when she finally answered me, was emotionless. "No. Zhen was very honest. She--"

"She wouldn't have stood for it. And Wen Yi would not have tolerated a refusal. Is this what you think happened?"

He Chan-Li looked at me, and would not answer.

"There's blood where they found the tracking implant. Your daughter's blood."

It was hard to tell with the makeup, but I think she had gone pale underneath. "He wouldn't have dared--"

"Do you truly think that?" I asked, watching her eyes-- watching the minute flicker of emotion that crossed them.

She said, at last, "Zhen never understood--that the company was everything that kept us afloat. She never understood the meaning of filial duty." Her voice was bitter.

I pitied her then--for she was the one who had not understood her daughter. I only said, "I see."

"Have you--" He Chan-Li swallowed--"found her?"

Her body. "No. I'm still working on a couple of things. I'll keep you informed." And I cut the conversation before she could take it further.

I sat for a while, thinking. If Wen Yi had indeed killed He Zhen that night, why was he so worried? He could not possibly have left any evidence in her room.

Think of it another way. If He Zhen's blood did indeed mean she was dead, why had Wen Yi killed her? He had her mother's agreement, and in Xuyan law that was enough for a wedding. If the bride was not docile--well, there were ways to tame her into submission, ways I was all too familiar with from a hundred sordid cases.

I remembered the searched bedroom, and the erased files on He Zhen's laptop. He had not killed her because she had protested; he had killed her because she threatened him. Because she had the only thing that would make him fall: proof of his ties with the White Lotus, proof the tribunal could not ignore.

It was a long shot. But not an absurd one.

Smoking Mirror. If He Zhen had indeed gathered proof, she would have been smart enough not to leave them on her computer. I could think of several places on the net where she could have opened an online storage account.

I tried them one by one, entering "Mexica", "Tezcatlipoca" and "Smoking Mirror" as usernames.

On the fifteenth try, I hit paydirt. There was a "smokingmirror" account opened two years ago on treasurechest.xy; and after a maddening hour of fiddling with a password-breaking program, I was finally granted access.

He Zhen's treasure trove, though, was nothing like I expected. I'd thought I'd find ties to the White Lotus--things that would make Wen Yi feel threatened enough to kill.

What I found instead was a shrine to Mexica culture.

There were pictures of the ball-game champions, leaping beneath the vertical stone hoop with proud grins; videos of religious processions ending in blood-soaked sacrifices at the great pyramids; images of Jaguar Knights laying down their lives in the Tripartite Wars before American rifles; icons of gods and goddesses with their hollow eyes turned towards the viewer.

After a while, I finally turned away from the accumulation of data, and checked the storage capacity. The account was almost full: if I wanted to look at everything, it would take me several days. I suspected I'd stop long beforehand.

Some admire the Mexica's self-sacrificing spirit and their relentless devotion. I think it is a sick religion, and an even sicker civilisation, making thousands of sacrifices every year for no other reason than blood-thirst.

Well, I knew the meaning of the butterfly's wings; and it did not feel like a lot of progress. I turned off the computer, checked my log recovery--which still displayed a four-hour wait--and went into the kitchen to prepare lunch. As I was picking some coriander from the fridge, a glint from the window caught my eye. I put down the stalks I'd been holding, and raised the curtains.

An aircar waited underneath my building: a slick, red limo with tinted windows, conveniently masking the view of its driver and passengers.

There was an itch between my shoulder-blades: a familiar sign of danger. The sign, too, that I was onto something.

All I had to do was find out what.

#

Lunch was brief and perfunctory. I gobbled up my steamed rice and eggs, trying not to focus on the aircar, and came back before my desk to find He Zhen's computer blinking. My recovery of the log history was complete.

I stared at the screen, at the last few lines of the log. It had been He Zhen who had connected last, a few hours after midnight eight days ago--a remote session launched from an unknown router address.

Could it have been someone else? I thought for a while, but decided against it. If someone else had had He Zhen's

login, password and fingerprints, they wouldn't have bothered with changing the session system.

I tracked the router address, which turned out to be a network centre not far from the Gardens of Felicity. What had He Zhen been doing? Erasing things from her computer?

I stared at the timestamp, and saw that the connection had been broken after thirty seconds. Far too short to log in and erase multiple files--unless He Zhen had set up some kind of script. But I knew she hadn't been planning to run away, so there was no reason for her to have done so.

My phone was beeping--an incoming call that I had not seen for several minutes.

"Yes?" I asked, pressing the button to light up the screen.

It was Wen Yi, now dressed in purple silk with serpentine animals embroidered on the sleeves. The animals looked very close to Chinese dragons, but not close enough to give offense--in Xuya, as in China, the only people entitled to the dragon were members of the Imperial Family.

"Mr. Brooks? I wanted to check on your progress." He was speaking English, though he knew I could speak perfect Xuyan. By this he subtly relegated me to a rank of inferior--the worst kind of immigrant, the one who could not fit into Xuyan society.

"You are checking," I said, curtly. "Is that red aircar yours?"

He laughed. "You Americans--"

It was a deliberate insult, and it smarted. But I would not give in to anger; that would only reinforce his low opinion of me. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Tell me how things are going."

"I do not think I can do that," I started. "My client--"

"I am not a man you can dismiss that easily, Mr. Brooks."

"I do not doubt that. Still, my progress is my own."

Wen Yi said, "I am told you are working hard. That is a good thing, Mr. Brooks. But you should not forget, when you do succeed in your search, who is paying you in the end."

An unmistakable reference: he was He Zhen's future husband, and almost part of the family, with the engagement finalised. "If I succeed," I said.

"You will," Wen Yi said, raising a long-nailed finger, lazily, as if admiring a dagger. "You have--drive, Mr. Brooks. Take care not to lose that, or there will be--consequences."

"I see," I said. "Consequences." He was telling me that no matter what happened, I had to continue the search for He Zhen. Which, in turn, meant that she was still alive.

I had no time to focus on the consequences of that, because I needed all my wits about me--a conversation with a Xuyan, especially a powerful one, always felt like navigating between pits of acid.

"Do not think yourself overly safe, Mr. Brooks. There are many paths a man can take."

Another, subtler threat: I would not protect He Zhen if I abandoned the investigation. He would merely find someone else to duplicate the little I'd done.

"I see," I said, again. I did not want to provoke him further.

Wen Yi was still staring at me. "A pity. You are a smart man. And yet you refuse to fit in among us. Even your Xuyan friend was unable to impress the bases of our society on you."

I wanted to tell him he had no right to bring my lover Mei-Lin into the conversation, no right to sully her memory. But that would have been folly. So I simply shook my head.

"There could be a bright future, among us."

I said nothing. I couldn't give him a satisfying answer.

Wen Yi said, "It is not for nothing that we dominate North America. It is not for nothing that our motherland China has triumphed over the Whites in Asia."

"I know your worth," I said, slowly. "I do not doubt your might. But my ways are my own. There is little for me in Xuya." And I realised, as I said those words, that they were true, that nothing tied me to that dingy office in Fenliu, beyond the memory of Mei-Lin, and the knowledge I could go nowhere else.

It was not the best of times for such a sobering thought.

Wen Yi's face remained impassive. But his eyes took on a darker glaze, and his voice, when he spoke again, was clipped and precise. "Very well. I had thought you more capable of grasping the opportunities at hand, Mr. Brooks. No matter. Do what you are paid to do. It will be enough."

And he cut off the communication, leaving me standing in my living room, shaking.

So. I had learnt several things, most of which unpleasant. Mei-Lin had advised me to leave the White Lotus alone, once, in what seemed like another lifetime. I knew that in that, as in so many things, she had been right.

The only thing I could focus on was Wen Yi's admission that he was looking for He Zhen. Ergo, that He Zhen was still alive, laying low for fear of the White Lotus--

No.

If I'd been her; if I'd gone to that meeting and been wounded, and known that if I came home, my mother would simply hand me over to my future husband, I wouldn't have remained in Fenliu. I'd have gone to a place where the White Lotus had no reach.

Greater Mexica, or the United States.

Given what I already knew, it had to be Greater Mexica.

But she had to get past the border. It wasn't that easy, especially to get into Greater Mexica, which had all but closed its borders. The entry requirements were stiff for the border towns, and got stiffer the further south you went. To

settle permanently into the capital at Tenochtitlan for a non-Mexica was near impossible, unless you had serious leverage.

You needed outside help.

I knew a couple of people who specialised in passing foreigners into Greater Mexica; they were easy to find if one insisted badly enough. They were also easy with their promises; most foreigners they ferried across the border ended up indentured in some brothel in Cuauhpamoc or Itzohuacan, or in the silver mines, breathing dust until they choked on it.

I plucked the picture of He Zhen from the table, and went out, back to the Gardens of Felicity, and the network centre she'd connected from eight nights ago.

Then I moved in ever-widening circles, questioning those human smugglers I could find, showing them He Zhen's picture. I got only blank looks.

The thirtieth or so I tried, though, shrugged, and said, "You'll want Doc Smith for that. He always gets the strays."

Doc Smith was American--Irish by birth, judging by the impressive mop of red hair. I found him in a sordid bar in the Fragrant Hermitage district, the poor White neighbourhood. He was nursing a cup of rice alcohol between quivering hands. When I showed him the picture, he stared at it with rheumy eyes. "No," he said. "Never seen her."

He was lying. He'd looked at the picture for far too long. "She'd have come here eight days ago," I said. "Possibly wounded. She'd have been desperate to get across the border."

"What's it to you?" he asked.

"Her family wants her."

"Some family," he snorted. "Let the dead dogs sleep, boy. We'll both feel better for it."

I shook my head. "Wish I could, Doc. But I have a job to do."

"Sounds like a crappy job if you ask me."

Yes, a crappy job. Tracker for the White Lotus, because there was no other choice if I wanted to save He Zhen--if I wanted to save my skin. I focused on the task at hand. "Is your job better? False promises to clients?"

He shook his head. "I've never cheated a client before. Don't intend to start now. I gave her what she wanted."

"And what was that?"

He smiled. "Safety. And I won't tell you more, boy. Old Doc is no fool."

"I'm not with them."

"That's what they allow you to think," he said, with a slow, sure smile. "Trust me, boy. Give it up, and go home."

I stared at my hands for a while, thinking of He Zhen, of the lie that had been her life--years spent dreaming of another place, only to find out marriage would be no refuge. "I can't," I said. "She's not safe where you sent her. She won't ever be safe."

"So you're meddling? It's an unhealthy occupation," Doc Smith said.

I spread my hands on the table, thinking back to Mei-Lin, of our brief months of happiness in Xuya before death had taken her. "I have nothing else left," I said.

Doc smiled. He slid his mug of rice alcohol towards me, but I shook my head. "I'm not here for oblivion. I'm here for answers."

"I can see that." He stared at me, and it occurred to me that the rheumy eyes saw far more than they let on. "It's no place for tender hearts, Xuya. No wonder they all want to get out."

"Give me her address," I said. "Or I'll call the militia here."

"That's an empty threat, and you know it as well as I do. No Chinaman is going to enter this area."

"If I could track her here," I said, "someone else will. Someone else will come, and they'll tear her address out of you. Don't you think she ought to be warned at least?"

He looked at me, cocking his head like an owl studying you before it pounced. "I'll give you a contact address," he said. "That's all. You're on your own after that."

"Thanks."

His hand closed over my wrist. "I'm trusting you. I trust that you have a heart and a brain. Don't you disappoint me."

I said nothing. I could no longer make any promises.

#

The address Doc gave me was a temporary electronic mailing folder, where I left a concise message to He Zhen, appealing to her family sense. I also left something else: a spy program that would monitor the connections to the server.

And then I waited.

It took two days, during which Wen Yi called at least three times. I never answered.

I got a mail in return, unsigned. *Let matters rest.* I erased it, for what I was most interested in was where the mail had originated.

As I suspected, it came from Greater Mexica. More specifically, from a network centre in the inner suburbs of Tenochtitlan.

Damn. It looked like I was going to have to pull a few strings of my own.

I went back to the Fragrant Hermitage, into one of the seedy bars, and paid for forged travel documents--a fake e-visa that attested to my being a faithful practitioner of the Mexica religion. The visa mentioned that I was entitled to travel to Tenochtitlan, for a pilgrimage at the Great Temple.

After checking the visa carefully, to make sure I had not been cheated, I spent the next few days reading about the Mexica gods and the sacrifices--preparing myself for embarrassing questions at the border.

And then I made the rest of my travel preparations, very ostensibly. Within two days, I was on the road south in a rented aircar, and followed at a distance by two red airlimos.

#

Greater Mexica was not a beautiful country: the North was a desert dotted with casinos and brothels. As you moved south, the land gave way to marshes, and to the electronics plants that brought in most of Greater Mexica's wealth.

My progress was slow: the Mexica took their immigration very seriously; in each town, I was stopped for my papers by two or three officials in feather regalia. I hoped the red aircars behind me would be stopped, too, but knew better than to hope.

It was a prosperous country, in spite of the aridity: in every hotel were brand-new computers with butterfly symbols, and hotspots where you could access the network for no extra charge. I could almost feel the communications saturating the optic fibres beneath my feet.

On the fifth day, I reached the outskirts of Tenochtitlan, and joined the queue of vehicles being checked at immigration. I spent the fifth night in my car, slowly inching forward towards the lights of the big city.

The immigration officials spent some time with me, but not overmuch. They injected nano-trackers into my blood to be sure I would indeed be leaving Greater Mexica at the end of my "holidays".

For a foreigner, it is forbidden to sleep in the heart of Tenochtitlan. I found myself a hotel in the suburb of Tzopalli, some twenty miles from the centre, and used the network connection to leave a message on He Zhen's electronic inbox.

In the morning, I went to the network centre, found myself a nearby bar, and settled before a mug of hot cocoa. I still had my spy program in the inbox, set to send me a mail as soon as someone accessed it.

Nobody fitting He Zhen's description came, but my spy sent me a mail all the same. I inobstrusively looked into the network centre, and found only a small child of ten or so years, wearing the square steel collar of slaves. A messenger, then.

I followed the child through the alleys and canals of Tenochtitlan, and lost him when he hopped onto a black barge that sped away from me.

A barge with a cactus-and-eagle insignia.

The emblem of the family of the Revered Speaker, the Emperor of Greater Mexica.

Damn.

I asked a few discreet questions, and ascertained that this particular boat was the property of one Yaotl-tzin, a minor member of the imperial family who lived on an island some ten miles south of Tenochtitlan. I also got rumours about

that house, definitely on the unsavoury side: of virgins brought from Greater Mexica or from abroad, to serve as fodder for private orgies.

With a growing hollow in my stomach, I thought of Doc Smith's words to me: *I gave her what she wanted. Safety.* If that was safety, he had a very sick sense of humour.

Rather dispiritedly, I asked for an interview with Yaotl-tzin--the Honourable Yaotl--, under the pretext of writing a memoir. I wasn't expecting much, but rather unexpectedly Yaotl-tzin acceded to my request.

#

On the day of the meeting, the black barge came to pick me up on the quays of Tenochtitlan. It was manned by a dozen slaves, sturdy men who busied themselves with the controls and ignored my attempts at starting a conversation.

As the shores of the city receded, I wondered, not for the first time, if I was not making a mistake. No one would go looking for me if I vanished now. I'd been carrying He Zhen's pendant ever since entering Greater Mexica; I could not help fingering it from time to time, looking for reassurance.

Yaotl-tzin's house was a huge villa by the shores of the lake: a maze of patios and arcades decorated with Mexica frescoes. I followed my escort through several courtyards with pine trees, through corridors with wall-screens displaying the history of Greater Mexica, from the short-lived war with Hernan Cortes and his conquistadores--a war Chinese gunpowder and cannons had soon ended--to modern times, the Tripartite Wars and Mexica dominion on silicon chips and high-grade electronics.

I was shown into a living room with glass cases displaying old codices. Near the window was an ebony desk of Xuyan facture, loaded with papers and ephemeral chips; and a wicker chair where I seated myself, not sure of what else I could do.

I waited. Invisible loudspeakers broadcast Mexica hymns, with flutes and drums giving an odd resonance to each verse.

When the curtain of the door was lifted to a tinkle of bells, I rose, ready to confront Yaotl-tzin with my feeble excuses.

But it wasn't Yaotl.

It was a woman dressed in the fashion of the Mexica, with an elaborate blouse and matching skirt, decorated with patterns of running deer and parrots. Her hair fell to her shoulders, Mexica-style; her skin was the yellow of corn, so prized by Mexica that young girls would lather themselves with makeup. I knew it to be no dye.

For, unmistakably, the woman confronting me was Xuyan.

"You are a stubborn man, Mr. Brooks," she said, in accented English.

I bowed in the Xuyan fashion, with both hands slid into the folds of my sleeves. "Mistress He Zhen," I said.

She shook her head. "No more. Here I am known as Tlazoxochitl, Precious Flower."

"It suits you," I said, without irony. She looked Mexica--the quiet, sure way in which she moved was more Mexica than Xuyan, as if she had indeed blossomed there.

"Why did you come here?" she asked.

"Why did you?"

She shrugged. "You know why. I had no choice. I will not marry a man like him."

"And that was your solution?" I asked. "To be some whore in a stylish brothel?" I realised I was unfair, but I could not care any more. I felt used--knowing all I had done in finding her was bringing the White Lotus here.

She smiled, in a slow, secret way that reminded me of the effigies of Buddha in the temples. "I am no whore. I am mistress of this house."

"That was how Doc Smith got you past the border?" I asked.

"Of course, Mr. Brooks. It is the fashion of the court, to have Xuyan wives who are pretty and know how to hold themselves in society. Yaotl needed a paper wife he could display at family parties. He thought I was perfect."

"Perfect," I said, slowly, staring at her.

She smiled. "You forget family does not always include ties of blood and flesh. Tell me why you came here."

"You know. Your mother hired me."

Her face darkened. "Yes. But you are no fool. You know the real reason. And still you came."

"You are in danger here," I said. "Wen Yi is looking for you. I need the proof you brought to your meeting with him."

She crossed her arms over her chest--one of them still moved awkwardly, and I guessed she had not completely healed from those gunshots. "Why?"

"Because I need to expose him."

"I could have exposed him at any time," He Zhen said. "I chose to come here instead. I am safe. I do not need you, Mr. Brooks, or anyone else. This is a fortress safer than anything my mother could devise." She had moved towards the window; I followed her, and saw in the courtyard Xuyans being dragged to their knees by burly Mexica. As I watched, the Mexica raised automatics, and methodically shot the Xuyans in the head. "The White Lotus has no reach here, and never will have," He Zhen said.

"No," I said, at last, feeling my stomach roil at the casual violence. He Zhen's face was still emotionless. "Tell me, was it worth the price, He Zhen? Was your safety worth that price? Tell me whether you're happy."

She smiled again, but there was bitterness in her expression. "Am I happy, moving from one arranged marriage to another? I do not know, Mr. Brooks. Here I wield what power I can in the house. Here I am not sold like a piece of flesh to

save the family fortune. What would you have done in my place?"

"I don't know," I said. "But if I had been your father, I wouldn't have let you be so bitter so young."

"But you are not my father. How fortunate." He Zhen moved between the glass cases, laying her hands over the beautiful codices. "You learn, you know. Living in my mother's house, you learn very fast."

"It mustn't have been so bad," I protested, moved to defend He Chan-Li through some obscure instinct.

She smiled again. "You know nothing. You are a lucky man, Mr. Brooks."

"I know that your fiancé tried to kill you. Do you find running away such an easy solution?"

Her face darkened again. "I am no coward."

"Then prove it."

"By coming back like a bird to the slaughter? I am no fool."

I sighed. "No, you are no fool. And yet what did you think you'd achieve, that night?"

She shrugged. "Foolish things. You are right. I thought I could break a marriage contract by myself. Life taught me otherwise."

"I can still get the man who shot you." I thought back to the picture of He Zhen her mother had given me, of the radiant, innocent smile, and knew that nothing I did would bring that back.

He Zhen looked at me with dead, emotionless eyes. "Why should I help you?" she said. "You came here to save your skin."

"I came for you," I said, knowing it to be a lie.

"I have no need of you."

"You've already said it."

"That does not make it any less true," she said. "Go away."

"No," I said. "I will not leave without proof."

"Go away. Find yourself a hiding place, Mr. Brooks. Somewhere the White Lotus hasn't touched. They still exist." Her smile was ironic.

Once, ten years before, I had run away. I had crossed the border in the middle of the night with Mei-Lin by my side, going forth into the darkness with no idea of what I would find.

The world had shrunk since then. Mei-Lin had died, and I had traced my own path, to stand here, in the heart of the Mexica Empire, facing a girl who was no longer young. "I will not run away," I said, gritting my teeth. "I will see justice brought."

"Then you are brave," He Zhen said. "Foolish, as well, for all your words."

Perhaps she was right. But I could not walk away. I had no come all this way for nothing.

I had one last thing left--one last toss of the coin to convince her. "You may not care about what Wen Yi did to you, but others do."

"My mother?" He Zhen laughed--a sick, disabused laughter.

"You have a grandmother," I said, and saw her flinch.

But still she faced me, unmovable. "I had," she said.

"Here it doesn't matter any more."

I reached inside my pockets for the one thing I'd taken all the way from Fenliu to Tenochtitlan: the jade pendant He Lai had given me--the one she'd said was He Zhen's favorite. Gently, I laid it on one of the glass cases, and saw He Zhen's gaze sharply turn towards it.

"Your grandmother thought I should return this to you," I said. "She hoped I would not have to bring it back to her."

He Zhen said nothing. Her gaze had turned inwards, as remote as that of a statue.

"What should I tell her?" I asked, softly.

"It doesn't matter," He Zhen repeated, with much less conviction. For the first time emotion had come into her voice. She stared at the pendant for a while, biting her lip.

Then, slowly, agonisingly slowly, she reached out, snapped her hands shut around it. Her face still had no expression.

I did not speak, simply watched her wrestle with herself.

She said, at last, "Very well. You are a hard man to refuse, Mr. Brooks. My servants will give you what you need. Do what you want with it. And then leave."

"Thank you," I said.

I walked back to the door in silence, leaving her standing before the open window, silhouetted in light. Beneath her, in the courtyard, lay the corpses of the White Lotus' agents.

When I lifted the curtain to exit the room, I heard her call me. "Mr. Brooks?"

I did not turn around.

"I am not happy," she said, very quietly. "But don't tell her that. Tell her that I did the best I could, with the little I had. And that it will have to be enough. After all, isn't it the same, for everyone?" And for the first time I heard a sixteen-year-old, bewildered girl, wondering if she had done the right thing.

I said nothing. In truth, I had no answer, and she must have known it. I walked away without looking back.

#

Before I left Greater Mexica, I went back to my hotel, and used my connection to tinker with things. I forwarded the proof He Zhen had given me to the tribunal of Fenliu. I would have liked to send it in my own name, even to face Wen Yi myself and tell him who had delivered the final blow, but I

knew this was foolishness. If I did this, there would be no safe haven for me in Fenliu, nor anywhere in Xuya. The White Lotus always avenged its own.

So to cover my tracks, I manipulated the router addresses until it looked as if He Zhen herself had sent the incriminating evidence.

It was the most satisfying thing I had done in a while.

As I drove back to Xuya, I followed the development of events with interest; although I wasn't in Fenliu, images of Wen Yi's arrest made the news even in Greater Mexica. The newscasters were betting on a strangling at the very least--Xuya did not joke with corruption of government officials.

In Fenliu, I dropped off the car back at the rental agency, and took the mag-lev to He Chan-Li's house. I found her still awake, although it was the middle of the night.

She met me at the door, still dressed in her business suit. Behind her was her mother He Lai, in the same traditional costume she'd worn when I'd come to the house. "Mr. Brooks. You come at a difficult time," He Chan-Li said.

"I know." Leiming Tech's value had plummeted on the market, and the banks were withdrawing out of it, fast. "I came to tell you your daughter is well, but that she won't come home."

He Chan-Li's face did not move, but I could feel the hatred emanating from her. "She never did know what family was."

"No," I said. "Aren't you glad that she's alive?" But I already knew the answer to that. I knew why He Zhen had felt so oppressed in that house.

He Chan-Li said nothing; she turned away from me, and walked back towards her house.

I was left with He Lai, who was quietly staring at me.

"I am glad," she said, softly, as I pressed into her hands the other thing He Zhen had given me: a small pendant in the shape of the red lotus, the Xuyan symbol for filial devotion.

I asked, at last, "You were the one who erased the files on He Zhen's computer, weren't you? That's why she had to change the session from private to open, because otherwise the computer would have asked you for fingerprints."

He Lai said, not looking at me. "She is my only granddaughter. What else was I to do? Sometimes our paths take us far away from what seems truth, but they are still the ones the gods ordained for us." There were tears in her eyes now, and she was making no effort to hide them.

"I know," I said at last. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. I'll see to it that you are paid."

"This isn't about money," I protested.

"Most things are," He Lai said. "You will be glad for it, trust me. Goodbye, Mr. Brooks. I trust we will not meet again."

No. I did not think we would.

I rode the mag-lev back to my flat, staring at the patch of sky I could see between the skyscrapers. At this hour of the night, I was one of the only passengers; I listened to the familiar whine of the train, like a symphony welcoming me home. I would go back to my flat, rise in the morning and go again through the routine of my life; filling the days and nights as I had done since Mei-Lin's death. I wondered whether this was worth it; or whether I did it because I had no other choice. I wondered if it mattered, and thought back to He Zhen's words.

I did the best I could, with the little I had. And it will have to be enough.

Yes. It would have to be enough, day after day, night after night.

It would have to be.

END