

Jon Grey was twenty-seven years old when the Devilfish ate his tongue. Not his idea. Not his idea at all, in fact he had firmly refused the invitation, which was very bad protocol in Xin Xiwang, New Hope City. Not the way to build relationships, build trust, and Jon was in the trust business, no doubt. To make people like him, feel at home with him, and then to be forgotten. The Grey man, indeed. In and out. Nice and smooth. But not there, not at that restaurant, hell no.

His name. His name had chosen him. And he had always been good at running away. Leaving the Arkology had been easy, it's a walkabout, he told himself, I'm going to find myself. Fifteen years old but grown, corn-fed and ruddy, marching though the fields to the highway like he was going somewhere, like he had somewhere to go. That part was easy. When he was a kid he used to sit high up on the turbine, looking out over the farm, waves of corn rippling like the ocean, just loathing it all, the stupid hand-made toys and the stupid hand-made clothes and the stupid hand-made food. His Uncle came to see him up there sometimes, saying hey little dude, what's happening, with his russet dreadlocks and bloodshot eyes, rice pudding and strawberry jam. He never did tell him quite how much he hated it there.

In the back of his mind, he might have thought he could always go back, but when the drifter's neck snapped under his fingers out back of the truck-stop diner something else snapped too, an umbilical connection he had not noticed in himself until it was gone. So this is what liberation feels like. Nausea and a sore neck. He stripped the dead man of everything, starting with the essential documentation. Jon Grey. Better than Jyrymy. Onwards and upwards. He had the picture changed in LA, switched out the biometrics in Vancouver, flew ultrabudget to Beijing. That was eleven years ago. Ancient history.

It's good to make him sweat a bit, Jon thought to himself, good to keep him on the line, coming to me. Wanting it. Imagining what I can do for him – thinking about how he can scam me, maybe. Thinking about angles. Jon sitting in the hotel café, up on the roof, trying not to strategise too much. Stay loose, improvisational, he told himself. That's the way to go. Drinking coffee and taking in the view, staying out of the sun, just another foreign businessman, rationalising, trying not to feel like he had wimped out.

Linh hadn't liked it. These guys, they bond over food, nhe, she had said. Linh, he had said, using her name, pronouncing the 'nh' sound, a closed-mouth 'ng' as well as he could, Linh, don't worry about it. I got this. These guys love me. I got this. She didn't remind him that she was his supervisor. She didn't have to. I watch you, nhe. You do good, ok?

Ok. I got this, he thought. The coffee had come in a glass with a stainless steel top hat full of grounds and hot water with a filter underneath. Pretty neat. He admired the machine-cut edges, super smooth and regular, imagined the factory stamping out a thousand of these a minute, more. Jon gave a little sigh. The coffee had all drained out into the glass. He took the lid off the top hat, laid it on the table upside down, took the filter off the glass and placed it on the lid. Looking around, he took a sip of coffee. Strong and chocolatey, and earthy too, Jon didn't like it too much but it was part of the act. Not too busy today, a few other business types looking out at the ocean, making small talk. A group of kids in matching school uniforms, chattering in Vietnamese.

New Hope was nominally Chinese, part of North Viet Canton, but almost everyone Jon had seen and heard around in the hotel, the bars, the skytrain, were Vietnamese. Not so surprising, the project had been run out of Hanoi, with the hottest Korean engineers, fresh from the Kamchatka oil platform assembly, drafted in to build up the artificial island from the ocean floor. The central station, hotels and bars, skytrain and solar dome had been constructed in shifts by an army of spiderlike self-organising construction units and a swarm of Viet nationals working round the clock, the whole project done in less than three years. Only sixty-one fatalities, the bones far below - Jon supposed - in the deep ocean, staring up at all this glittering excess, insider dealing, hospitality loaded like a gun. Not so surprising some of the workers, tough little wiry guys with hard eyes and harder wives, stayed around to clean rooms, serve drinks and cook, in the jewel of the South China Sea, the hub of South Asia, New Hope City. They were the ones who came from the city nobody came from so why not, nhe?

Many of the patrons came to the café for the views out over the ocean, and Jon too had turned his gaze to the expansive, spotless windows. Get some perspective. Apparently the North Viet coast could be seen from here, the port of Hue a brown smudge to the west at the end of the long skytrain guideropes, Shenzhen too, darker and to the north, just to the right of Macau. Hong Kong on a clear day, so they said. But Jon wasn't looking out to sea, he was trying to make out individual solar panels on the transparent dome that both protected and powered New Hope. He knew they were there, clean lines of precision engineered triangular polyalloy. The thought gave him comfort. To be cocooned in the construction, so premeditated, the deliberateness of it. Keeping out the dirt.

He was squinting hard at a section of the sky when a bird flew past, outside the dome. There it was – he could make out the panel lattice, the angle of each refracting the bird's flight into a flickering sequence of still frames across the sky, and Jon was delighted. Like it was caught by the paparazzi, he thought. Or a zoetrope, like the one my Uncle made... candle in the middle, slits cut in the wheel, spin the carousel and see...

He turned his thoughts to Huang. He'd rather think of Huang than the magic turntable, his Uncle, the Arkology or any of that. Ancient history. Huang is the here and now and will have to be dealt with.

Don't say about eyelids, Linh had said. Huang had had eyelid surgery. His eyes were round, round like a circle round. He couldn't blink right, and had that kind of rheumy-eyed look some heavy drinkers get when they get old. Huang liked to eat too. All of

him is pretty round, Jon had thought. The walk, the smile, apologetic, too polite – hard to take him seriously. Most people didn't. Jon did. A way in.

He hadn't been hard to meet, either, alone at the bar, drinking the courage to go get a girl. Jon had done that with him, that and more, showing him the dive bars and strip joints under the capsule hotels on the south support, deep in the structure, below sea level, the Kyrgyz and Tajik and Laos girls, fresh from the village, paying off their transport debts a salaryman at a time, peanuts and kimchee and weak metallic beer, too-loud music and strange, disjointed conversations with the strange, fat little man, always under the watchful eye of the mamasan. Putting in the hours. Keeping that mild, easy way, being receptive, compliant, mirroring the way he holds his chopsticks, pauses before he speaks, the flashbulb smile before he gives an opinion, falling into his rhythms, his pace, getting ready to take the lead so when the time comes he cannot help but follow and think it's his idea all along.

Huang had leaned in conspiratorially in one of the Russian clubs, sitting in a booth vodka-drunk one night. I find something for you Mr Jon, he had said, I find something real special. We go, eat Devilfish, see true face. Huang gazed up like the full moon as Jon poured the pepper vodka and tried to pretend not to know what was coming, heart sinking. What's Devilfish, Huang? Tell me more, he had said, tell me about it. Tell me the horrible story behind this god damn poison. Tell me about hallucinogenic effects, of people dying, or nearly, or going mad. Idiot, you idiot. Tell me about your toxic undersea friend, the eyeless, rough and mottled crimson slug, dredged up from the weeds and trenches, why don't you. Why won't you, won't you just let me, let me -

The sight of Linh entering the café shook him from his reverie. Time to get in character. He took a deep breath, tuned out the tinny background static of his nerves and misgivings, the professional hazard of long-exposure, low-intensity stress which he always remembered much later as excitement, and became calm. The Zen master. Linh was ordering at the counter but he had been seen, for sure, so he watched and waited until she finished giving her order, turned sharply and marched towards him with quick little steps. She could've been one of the schoolkids if she swapped her cream embroidered business-cut Ao Dai for one of their sailor outfits.

"I see you. You hide, nhe?" said Linh, sitting. In fact, her Standard English was pretty good, Jon had caught her out a couple of times, that or she had been sending a message, letting him know that she would be onto him if he switched to it. The casual sarcasm of the native speaker. But her use of Business English - the unambiguous, ubiquitous business language of the world – told Jon he was on the clock.

"Yeah, I hide from you," said Jon, with half a smile. The guilty schoolboy routine. "We should talk though."

"You like Xin Xiwang? You always up here," said Linh, gesturing dismissively at the windows, the observation deck. "It same every time. You find new place, Jon Grey."

"There's nowhere to hide from you, Linh." She smiled and relaxed a little. Sometimes Jon really thought she liked him. But not usually.

"Why you not go restaurant, nhe?"

"Not go restaurant. Bad meeting" said Jon. "I take him, ok. He take me, not my meeting, his meeting. I lead, he follow, is better."

"You go. He want impress you, make you happy, like him more. Restaurant is special. Is good opportunity. You meet more guys, get inside. I sell two manager, four engineer, already. You find for me, nhe? Find soon. You go there for me, ok?"

"Come on Linh, you know I can eat anything. I like spicy food, I try new things all the time. I eat turtle, snake, no problem. You eat with me, right? Remember?"

"Devilfish not real. Just story. You go, make trust, ok? Why you not go?" She said it. She knows the story. Why, thought Jon, why are you making me do this, there has to be another way, god hell, I'm wriggling like a worm on a hook here. Headhunters on the line already, I bet she's started short-selling in Beijing, agents in Macau taking hedge bets, everything in motion, if I didn't love this I'd hate it so much.

"I know. I know. Not real. But," said Jon, "Huang think is real. So I get sick because Huang crazy? We friends already. I get good information already. We know about patents, we know where factory. Plenty information, nhe?"

"You not get sick. You get information. Everything ok, you do good here. You get me firewall, investors, party contacts." Linh started picking at her salad, hydroponic leaves a vivid, unreal green in the sunlight. "We know staff, you do good. But we not know position. We understand position, know company, know chaebol."

This was all too much. Deeper involvement, longer exposure than last time, than any time before. "Then what? So we know the political position of this company in its business family. What do we do then?"

"Then," said Linh, smiling sweetly, her eyes upturned crescents, bops the table with a tiny fist. "We crush."