

Chapter 51

From the Top of Mount Tai the World Looks Small
Some Illusions The Mathematical Temperament Is Prone To

Margaret did not, after all, write to William. She took Professor Shi's words to heart, gathered up her courage, and went to seek him.

This was some days later. The day she spoke with Professor Shi was a Monday, December 23rd. Two days later was Christmas Day. Everything was closed, there was nothing to do. She went with Johnny Liu to a seafood restaurant. Several dozen fellow-countrymen had had the same idea, and Margaret and Johnny had to wait an hour to be seated. Thursday she went in to the Met for some full-voice practice, her next performance being still ten days away. The pianist did not show, however, and after vocalizing for an hour Margaret whiled away the rest of the afternoon reading through a score of *Nabucco*, an opera Colman had mentioned as a possible engagement for her in the spring. On Friday she went to see Professor Shi for a lesson. Professor Shi told her about William right away.

"He lives in the Pierre Hotel. Can you believe it? The money he must have! He has his own suite there and pays a monthly rate. Here, that's the suite number."

"In a hotel?" Margaret laughed. "If he's really so rich, why doesn't he get a big apartment on Park Avenue?"

"Oh, he's very eccentric. He has a name for that. Besides, I can see his point. We Chinese, your generation and mine, we are not used to material possessions. An apartment, a house, a car—what do these things mean to

us? We have no experience of managing them. They are a nuisance, consumers of one's time. Why not just hire them as you need them, then discard them without a thought? So much simpler! Perhaps if I had the wealth our Mr Liang has I should do as he has done."

It was the fact of William's living in a hotel that led Margaret to call on him. The grand apartment buildings on Park and Fifth intimidated her, with their awnings and bare gleaming lobbies and forbidding, military-looking doormen; but a hotel was a public place. You could just walk in and speak to a desk clerk, with people passing to and fro all around. So that is what she did, in the morning of New Year's Day 1986—a public holiday, Johnny Liu had told her, when the Stock Exchange and all the banks would be closed.

It was easier than she had supposed. The desk clerk spoke her name into a telephone, listened for some time, then hung up the phone and told her to wait in the lobby. Margaret waited, leafing through some fashion magazines. After twenty minutes a squat, tough-looking fellow-countryman, bulging out of an ill-made suit, approached and asked her, in Chinese with a thick Shandong accent, to confirm her name.

"Yes. I am Han Yuezhu."

"Mr Liang will see you now. Please follow me."

They rode up in an elevator which the Shandong guy had to open with a key. Along a corridor, its thick maroon carpet making Margaret think of Buckingham Palace—though this place was much better maintained. A door. Shandong addressed a speaker phone beside the door.

"Boss? The lady is here, Miss Han Yuezhu."

There was no reply, but after a few seconds some mechanism in the door made a clicking sound and Shandong pushed it open. From her fairly extensive experience of hotels, Margaret had supposed the door would let right into the room, as at Ramada or Holiday Inn. Instead it opened into a wood-paneled lobby, with a coat-rack and an umbrella-stand and two doors leading off. William was standing in the nearer doorway. He was wearing baggy jeans, a loose sweatshirt, and cheap rubber flip-flops of the kind that can be bought in convenience stores for sixty-

nine cents, right and left yoked with a loop of tough plastic to be severed and discarded before you could wear the things.

“Han Yuezhu, welcome to my home. Thank you,” (to the Shandong man, who bowed out back into the corridor).

Margaret followed him into a large light room, with windows looking out over Central Park, across the whole width of Central Park.

“Wa! she said. Beautiful view!”

“‘From the top of Mount Tai, the world looks small’,” said William, quoting a classical tag.

The room was much larger than anything Margaret had experienced on her trips out of New York, but you would not have said it was opulent. The furniture was for the most part comfortable-looking and rather old-fashioned: a big, heavy sofa with matching armchairs, an elaborate sound system in a polished wood cabinet, a table also in polished wood, with straight-backed chairs to match. There was a grand marble fireplace, its orifice hidden behind a fine-looking wood-framed tapestry screen. A large-screen TV stood in one corner. Two doors led off into other rooms, in addition to the one she had entered from.

Margaret seated herself in one of the armchairs, William on the sofa. His manner did not seem hostile, though he had not smiled. He leaned back, contemplating her without expression. Margaret noticed now, as she had not before, how very handsome he was: well-proportioned features and smooth skin, the body slender but capable-looking, athletic even—he had been an enthusiastic swimmer, she recalled.

“Is that guy your bodyguard?” she asked, for something to say.

His eyes steady on her, William seemed not to hear for a second or two. Then he blinked and made a quick little smile.

“One of them. I have several. He’s from Shandong.”

“Yes, he has the accent. Looks it, too. Very suitable for a bodyguard.”
[Shandong people are proverbially pugnacious.]

“I’m not crazy about it, but the hotel insisted. John Lennon was shot just a short distance from here. Do you know this name, John Lennon?” They were speaking Chinese, and he had used the Chinese name, *Yuehan Lainong*. He seemed to have a rooted aversion to putting foreign names

into his Chinese sentences in their native forms, as most modern people did without thinking.

“Yes, I know.”

“And there have been some kidnappings. So it’s probably for the best.”

“I’ve heard that you are terrifically rich.”

“Yes, very. Net worth close to half a billion, probably. I’m really not sure. After a hundred million it stops meaning anything. Certainly I could buy candy for everybody in China.”

His face flickered in an odd, secretive half-smile, as if this were some inner joke he did not expect her to understand. Margaret was reeling from the numerals he had used. The Chinese language counts off its zeros by fours; Weilin’s “close to half a billion” had actually been expressed as “four or five *yi*”, *yi* being the word for ten thousand ten thousands. This number was normally heard only in reference to populations, China’s being of course ten *yi*. It inevitably brought to mind the vastness of the homeland and the teeming density of her people, and in Margaret’s not-particularly-numerate mind was a near synonym for “infinity”. Yes, he could buy candy for all of them!

“So much money! I’m surprised you live in a hotel. You could have your own apartment, here on Fifth. Or a big estate in Connecticut.”

William smiled, quite relaxed and amiable. Margaret wondered if he was playing some kind of trick on her—storing up his resentment for the right moment, to unleash it on her again, to stun and terrify her with it. If so, he was a great actor. No, it could not be.

“Too much trouble,” William was saying. “Yes, I looked at a lot of apartments here in New York. But you have to hire people to cook and clean, get furniture—a lot of things I just didn’t want to be bothered with. So I decided a hotel would suit me best. Here everything is taken care of for me. Except the bodyguards, I hire them. Hotels—even a high-class hotel like this one—are public places, they felt I needed the extra security. But overall it’s a great simplification. I have the mathematical personality, Yuezhu—I love simplicity. Einstein had all the cuffs cut off his shirts, you know. He said it was a waste of time doing up the buttons. I think I shall be like that when I’m older. But it wouldn’t do on Wall Street.”

“With half a billion, I should think you could pay to have someone come and do up your buttons for you.”

This brought out a real smile; and in the smile, she saw her playmate of so many years before, coming up the road toward the barracks, carrying his book-bag, his eyes scanning for her. Seeing that, she remembered why she had come, and dropped her eyes in embarrassment.

William seemed not to notice her discomfort. “I really have quite the wrong personality to be so rich,” he said. “Not a shopper at all. My colleagues are always telling me I should buy a yacht, or a plane, or a casino, or something else. I think about it. A yacht—yes, I might like that. But it all seems like so much trouble.”

He smiled again—the same smile, evoking those same memories.

“As it is, I don’t even own a car. I used to. My colleagues insisted, and made such a joke of it, I gave in to them and bought something called a Lamborghini, a car they recommended. But I couldn’t get the hang of driving. I smashed it up. There were interviews with the police, and insurance reports, and stories in the newspapers, and all kinds of unpleasantness. So I gave up on owning cars. Anyway, I find I can hire everything I need. But how about you, Yuezhu? You have done well for yourself, it seems. Singing at the Met.”

“It was a lucky break. I came here a year ago from England. I’ve been doing whatever roles I could get, all over the country. Then two singers dropped out in the flu epidemic, and I got that part.”

“You sang very beautifully. It was your voice that gave you away. As soon as you got into that song, I knew it was you.”

“Did I sing for you when we were playmates together? I really don’t remember it.”

“No, I don’t think so. But your voice always had that quality. A certain. . . I don’t know. Something deep, from the chest. Even when you were a child.”

“Yes. We call it *timbre*. It’s unique, as individual as a fingerprint. It’s a singer’s trademark.”

William flicked the little smile again. Then, very abruptly: “I guess you came to tell me you’re sorry about my father.”

Margaret had hoped the ice-breaking might go on indefinitely. She

did not feel at all ready to broach the subject of William's father. Taken aback by his frankness, she could not speak.

"It's all right," said William. "Perhaps I shouldn't have been so rude at the Met party. After all, those things happened such a long time ago."

"Oh! Do you mean it? I thought. . . after what you said at the party, I thought you were nursing such resentment."

William got up from the sofa and walked over to the window. He looked out at the park. It was some time before he spoke. Nervous, afraid of what reaction she might provoke, Margaret dared not break his mood, hardly dared even to breathe.

"Yes," said William eventually. "I thought so, too. It's strange, you know. You keep these things in your heart for years—cherishing them, almost. Taking them out and looking at them, reflecting on them, rehearsing them. And then, when the light of day shines on them at last, they are not at all what you thought they were."

He turned to face her, not really smiling but with a pensive, somewhat self-mocking look.

"There's a saying in English: 'Revenge is sweet.' But actually it's not. Nursing the thought of revenge, that is sweet. Knowing that the moment of revenge will come—anticipating it, preparing for it—that is very sweet. But the thing itself, when you see it—I mean, when you see the person who's the target of it, when you actually see that person struck by it—it's not sweet at all. It's tasteless. Even a little bitter, I think. I know what I'm talking about. I've tasted a lot of revenge, settled a lot of accounts. Enough, I've done enough of that now."

The full smile again now. Somehow, Margaret felt shamed. She looked down in embarrassment.

"You know," (William continued) "foreigners say that the national vice of us Chinese is gambling. I don't think so. In my opinion, our national vice is self-pity. How we love to whine, to feel sorry for ourselves! It's everywhere in our culture. How many times have you heard a fellow-countryman say: 'I've shown nothing but kindness to so-and-so, and see how he repays me with coldness and injustice!' Then you go to so-and-so and ask him about it, and he uses exactly the same words about the first guy. Sometimes I think we Chinese are not capable of human

relationships. There's something pathological in us, some irresistible impulse to whine and moan about our misfortunes. It's in our literature: Lin Daiyu sniveling herself to death," [referring to a character in the great classic novel *Red Chamber Dream*, who dies from thwarted love for the hero, Baoyu] "all those mawkish poems about loss and sorrow and being victimized—the *Songs of the South* and so on. It's in our politics: look at the way our leaders go on about the humiliations of the last century, how they love to present us as a nation *wronged*, to whom some kind of restitution is due. It's pathological, a beggar displaying his wounds—most of which wounds, if truth be told, we inflicted on ourselves. We are not a healthy people."

"If someone has done you a wrong, isn't it healthy to feel resentment about it?" put in Margaret, who always hated to hear criticism of her race.

"Healthy to feel it. Not healthy to enjoy it, to wallow in it. I think the Christians are right; forgiveness is a very high virtue. To be practiced properly, of course—in the right time and place. But forgiveness is more difficult for us Chinese than for any other people. So very difficult! Perhaps because we never had Christianity to teach it to us. Perhaps because our land is too poor and crowded, our lives too hard and competitive. Or perhaps something in our actual nature—our blood, our genes. I don't know. We're a very inbred nation, after all. Been fucking each other for five thousand years. Of course we're not healthy."

He came over to stand in front of her.

"All I'm saying is, you were just a child, Yuezhu. You can't be blamed. Let's forget it. Let's make peace."

Now he put out his hand. Somewhat awkwardly from her sitting position, Margaret shook it.

William smiled—the full, natural smile. He had beautiful teeth; not perfectly regular, but nearly enough so that the one minor irregularity—a lower incisor folded behind two others—bore all the charm of the lesser kinds of human frailty.

"Great! Will you stay and have lunch with me?"

"All right. Does room service just bring it up? Is that how you take your meals?"

"Sometimes. But they have no regular Chinese chef, and usually I

prefer to eat Chinese. There's a restaurant, Silver River, on Fifty-Eighth Street. I have an arrangement with them. They cook whatever I want and bring it round. They rip me off disgracefully, of course, but I don't care. What is it, eleven fifteen? the boss should be there already. You can order anything—what would you like? It's first-class food. Anything at all."

Margaret considered. "Bear paw," she said at last.

William laughed. He had gone to the table behind the sofa and picked up a phone. "I doubt they'll do that. It's illegal in America, you know. Americans are very sentimental about animals. Doesn't mean they wouldn't do it for me, of course, but they'd probably want a few days lead time. Hello? *Wai?*" William had a brief conversation with the telephone in Cantonese. "No bear paw," he said at last. "Next choice."

"Lobster. I like lobster."

"No problem. You shall have a big fat one right out of the tank. What else?"

"Lotus root. Sea cucumber. And seven treasures soup."

There was more Cantonese, then William hung up. "Twelve thirty. Meantime, I'll show you the suite."

Next to the room they had been in was another, with the curtains drawn. It was full of computer equipment. There were three or four monitors, one very big, and printers, and processors, and a copying machine, and tangles of wires everywhere. All the screens were live, one of them scrolling up lines of text and numbers. It was possible to do business, apparently, even when the New York exchanges were closed. William seemed very proud of this room, and tried to explain the screens, going from one to the other, tapping at the keyboards, lapsing into technical jargon with, now, some English words imbedded in his Chinese: *network, server, software, cache*.

"The hotel had to rip open walls to bring the cabling up. Cost a fortune."

"It's all a mystery to me," said Margaret frankly. "I really don't understand this stuff at all."

William laughed and apologized. "Well, other people's work. . . I suppose if you told me all the technical details of your singing I'd be just as lost."

There was a bedroom, very untidy, a huge bathroom with a sunken tub and some exercise equipment—not the Iron Bride—and another room William was using as a library, shelves of books covering every wall. He pulled down one of the books to show her. It was a thick compendium of mathematical tables.

“Abramowitz and Stegun,” said William, running his finger along the names on the front cover. “A classic. Useless now, of course—anybody who needs this stuff has a computer. Could print his own.” William seemed oddly fond of this quite exceptionally dry volume, gazing at it tenderly for some seconds before carefully setting it back on its shelf.

“My father taught mathematics,” said William, when they were seated again back in the main room. “I don’t know if you remember that. I guess the talent is inherited. I always liked math. So pure! So certain! He had that book of tables, the one I showed you. The Red Guards used it as evidence when they struggled him. They said he was a spy and that was his code book. Can you imagine? The stupidity of it!”

“They were very idealistic,” said Margaret cautiously. “Of course, what they did can’t be excused. But they thought they were upholding the revolution, saving Chairman Mao from his enemies.”

She held her breath after this, wondering if he would take it amiss. But William only went on contemplating her calmly.

“What happened to your half brother?” he asked.

“He went into the army. Now he’s quite a senior officer. In one of the secret branches—to tell the truth, I’m not quite sure what exactly he does. Some kind of intelligence work, I suppose. He’s not allowed to talk about it.”

“Rooting out counter-revolutionaries, no doubt.”

“I guess so.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t alluding to my father. Perhaps we should just avoid these topics.”

There was an uncomfortable pause, William himself somewhat embarrassed, it seemed. Unable to think of anything else to break the silence, Margaret asked: “Do you have other family?”

William shook his head firmly. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s rule our families out of this and all future conversations. Out of bounds. Okay?”

“All right.” Margaret laughed, relieved. “Tell me what it feels like to be tremendously rich.”

“No. *You tell me* what it feels like to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House.”

* * *

“I felt uneasy the whole time,” said Margaret to Professor Shi. “But I must say, he was very amiable. I didn’t feel that he hated me at all. He was more like I remember him when we were small together. A bit dreamy, an intellectual by nature—though of course the Cultural Revolution destroyed his chance of an education. And very handsome—I had forgotten that. Charming, really, in a . . . what’s that American word? *Nerd. Nerdy.* In a *nerdy* way.” Margaret had to explain *nerd* to Professor Shi.

Professor Shi nodded. He had been listening with great attention to Margaret’s account. “I am familiar with this type of character,” he said. “Self-absorbed, narcissistic, monomaniacal. He is fortunate that his particular mania is so profitable. And you, I think, are fortunate that this young man limits his external actions to that one tiny sphere. Such great wealth might make a monster out of a more worldly man.”

“I don’t think he’s a monster. He seems quite gentle, actually. And rather lonely.”

“Do I perceive some attraction?”

Margaret laughed. “Oh no. Just a sentimental one.”

“Shall you see him again?”

“Yes. I promised to go to *Lohengrin* with him. He’s a big Met benefactor, got his own box. Now he just has to learn opera.”

* * *

William himself had no-one he could talk this over with. He had brooded on it from seeing Margaret at the party to her appearance in his suite, with the conclusions he had expressed to her. Now he found it in his thoughts even more. This woman he imagined he had hated—he did not, in fact, hate her at all. About that, he was quite clear. However, there was more.

Some of it was simple physical attraction. Sitting there in his arm-chair, so nervous with him, she had been pretty and vulnerable, and he had felt aroused. Still that was not all. More than simple possession of her, he wanted to restore what had once been; to re-establish contact with one of the few people he had ever felt close to. In fact—the thought came uncalled, then would not leave—he wanted to marry her, to fulfill the scheme Gordon had inspired. Simplify his life; lift up his soul with music; marry a wife. For a wife, Han Yuezhu would do nicely, very nicely indeed, if only she could be persuaded to it—if only he could find the way to persuade her.

He had a date with her for *Lohengrin*, and a promise from her to give him a comprehensive explanation of the opera, its production, and the different vocal skills employed by the singers. William saw this as the opening skirmish of his campaign. He had given the Met a hundred thousand dollars, and consequently had his own box, with his name on the door on an engraved brass plate someone polished every day.

In the event, though, Ortrud schemed and Elsa wept without benefit of his or Margaret's appreciation, and Lohengrin rode his swan-boat—at least so far as William and Margaret were concerned—in vain.

* * *

For dinner before the show, William had booked a table at Pamplermousse, currently the most fashionable and expensive restaurant in Manhattan. He sent a car for Margaret, to the house in Flushing where she lived with a classmate from the Beijing Conservatory, a young Shanghainese fellow with no immigration status who lived by his wits, and whose father had had a cap put on him in the Cultural Revolution as a “historical counter-revolutionary”. (The addiction to high-class detective agencies is, for those who can afford it, extraordinarily difficult to break.)

William himself was at the restaurant ten minutes before the time he had given the car service and waited in the lobby for her. When she arrived and had been relieved of her coat—an unhappy thing in leather and fake fur—he walked behind her to their table. She was wearing the dress she had worn to the Met Christmas party, the dress he had insulted

her in: a simple black-and-gold floor-length gown low at back and front, with narrow shoulder straps. The skin of her shoulders, arms and back was exceptionally smooth, pale and firm-looking. Her figure was slim, and moved with a dancer's fluid precision. Her chest and shoulders were (William thought) a shade wider than they ought have been to suit her figure, but the long sturdy neck he remembered from their infant years was as striking as ever. Her breasts, he saw as she was being seated, were in proportion to her shoulders and chest—larger than normal for a Chinese woman, but not enough to make her look top-heavy.

She caught his glance as he himself was being seated, and blushed just perceptibly. Ill at ease in such a place, as fellow-countrymen always were, as he himself still was, just a little, despite years of practice. The four tail-coated waiters cooed over them in French accents. (French-Canadian farm boys, Theo had explained when introducing him to Pamplemousse a year and a half before, with no marketable skills, the only requirements for this job being a passable French accent and a willingness to be insulted.)

William knew, from the detective's report, that she was not used to any kind of expensive lifestyle. *Capuleti* had been her first real success; before that she had been a struggling singer, one among dozens fighting for roles in obscure under-financed productions. Probably the lovely black dress was the only decent one she owned. Certainly the address in Flushing was a long way from any center of fashion, and she and the Shanghai boy shared a room. William thought about her sharing a room with the Shanghai boy and wondered at their most private moments, trying to imagine her face gasping in ecstasy. It was a pleasing thought, and arousing to him, and William rededicated himself to the plan he had formed.

He prompted her to talk about the opera they were to see. It was not one she knew well, Margaret confessed, though there was a famous chorus in it she had sung at college. Just being a singer didn't mean you knew all the operas. There were more than a hundred operas in frequent performance; a singer needed at least a month's preparation to be able to sing a role at all, several different performances of it under different circumstances and with different partners to know it well, and so it required

many years steady work to build up a good repertoire with sound, deep knowledge of your roles. Still, by the time the entrée arrived William had learned the outlines of the plot, the fact that the work's first conductor had been Liszt, that Liszt's daughter had later married the composer, that the set they were to see was thirty years old, having been erected for the old Met, and therefore was somewhat too small for the stage, and that the mezzo had recently endured an unhappy affair with a leading Spanish tenor, said affair concluding with an abortion and nervous breakdown of the minor sort.

It was part of William's plan to confess to Margaret the part he had played in her exile and disgrace. Like many theoretical and unworldly people, he felt that a sound relationship could only be established on a basis of perfect honesty, could only get properly under way when the participants had no secrets from each other. The world would be a very different place if this were so, and most of us would be married to somebody else; but the belief is strong among the mathematically inclined nevertheless. In their conversation at his Pierre suite on New Year's Day Margaret had told him of her exile in the far west, and William had listened quietly to the tale. Now, when she passed a remark about social conditions during her days at the Conservatory, he saw his chance.

"That was the time after the Cultural Revolution had ended," he said. "The time of 'settling accounts'."

"I'm surprised you know such things," she said. "You were long out of China by that time, I think, weren't you?"

"I kept in touch."

William sipped at his wine. It was something very expensive, a name he remembered Theo having ordered once. Wasted on them tonight, of course. Neither he nor Margaret knew anything about European wine. It could be something the restaurant kept in buckets in the basement, for all they knew. William could drink no more than one glass anyway, and Margaret seemed unlikely to do much better—she had hardly touched hers. But when you went to a high-class restaurant in the West you ordered a bottle of wine, that was how it was done; and besides, William thought he needed fortifying for his confession. Now he took a breath.

"I did some settling of accounts myself."

Margaret frowned at him, puzzled, not sure of his meaning. “In America?”
 “No. Hong Kong and China. As a matter of fact, it was because of me that you were sent to Qinghai.”

“Because of you? What do you mean, Weilin?”

“That frame-up at the college. I have an old friend in China. In Shanghai—but he has connections all over the country. Using my money—a huge sum of money, let me tell you—he bribed someone at a very high level in the Public Security Bureau in Beijing. They organized the whole thing.”

Margaret was stunned. She stared at him. “What. . . *Why?*”

“Revenge. My revenge against you. Because of my father.”

“*You* did that?”

“Yes. It was me, Yuezhu. I really wanted to get your half brother, but he was in some secret military unit, even my friend with all his connections couldn’t reach him. But you were an easy target, once we found you.”

Margaret’s thoughts were in turmoil. “The Englishman,” she said, “Mr Powell. . . they charged him with being a spy! *You* did that?”

“I don’t know the details. They told me there’d been some kind of frame-up and you’d been assigned to Qinghai Province. That was all.”

“He might have been shot!”

“Who?”

“The Englishman. You can be shot for spying.”

“I don’t know anything about this Englishman. Somebody would have been shot? Well, then he’d be dead, wouldn’t he—same as my father. A life for a life, Yuezhu.”

“And I. . . I was two years in that stinking place. Because of you?”

Margaret’s head was clearing. Clearing of confusion, at any rate: clouding with something else—rage, pure hot rage.

“*Because of you?*”

Up to this point William had been taking the matter lightly. It seemed to him, weighing the thing mathematically, with the mathematician’s illusion of objectivity in worldly matters, that Margaret had no great injustice to complain of. All right, she had endured a few months in a poor district. How could she think that weighed in the balance? His father was *dead*, and his mother too, and his life had been torn apart. He himself had lived in poverty for years. What had she to

complain of? Why, he had been merciful! He had not foreseen, and could not now see how his actions appeared to her: machinations conceived in malice and executed in darkness—deeds done, as the Chinese say, “behind the curtain”. So far, therefore, he had supposed she would see things as he did, would be understanding. When Margaret stood up suddenly—jolting the table, causing one of the stemmed wineglasses to fall and break on the cloth, splashing its contents red across the white cloth—he saw the color in her face, the fire in her eyes, and he knew he had miscalculated everything horribly.

“Yuezhu . . .”

“You stinking dogfucker.”

In her fury, Margaret reached back to the dialect of her childhood, to the expressions she had heard from peasant hawkers on the street in Seven Kill Stele, the worst expressions she knew.

“Son of a bitch turtle egg fuck your grandmother. Rotten meat filthy pig dick rat cunt.”

“Yuezhu . . .”

“Your mother’s wet pussy, you stinking snake turd. You arranged all that? All that happened because of you?”

“Yuezhu, my father . . .”

“Up your father’s ass! What about my father? He’s dead, too—and if not for what you did, he might still be alive! I hope your stinking father is eating shit in hell!”

Now William was standing, too. People at other tables were looking at them. Fortunately, very few of the kinds of people who patronize expensive Manhattan restaurants can understand profanities uttered in the southwestern dialect of Mandarin. Still Margaret’s agitation was clear enough, and her voice—that magnificent instrument now flying loose without restraint—carried to every part of the establishment.

“Yuezhu, I am truly sorry. It was because of my father.”

Margaret stared at him a moment, then took her pocketbook from the chair back and strode away.