

## Chapter 76

A Hero Crosses the Ocean to Find Shelter  
Weilin Voyages Beyond the River of Stars

In the middle of his second week in Southampton William took another fever. It was not as strong as the previous one, but his system did not seem to recover from this one so well. When the fever subsided he was in pain from his muscles and joints. They got painkillers from the doctor; but now Margaret saw that his mind was weaker, it was more difficult for him to gather his thoughts, and he did little reading.

It was at this time that Margaret found out about Valerie and Mr Ng. Not that they had taken any pains to conceal themselves; Margaret had simply not been paying attention. Now, when William began to be in constant pain, there was a night when he woke groaning at two o'clock. Mrs Mo and Margaret got up to attend him, but could not find his medicine. Margaret went off to wake Valerie, who had been with the doctor and got all the prescriptions filled. When she reached Valerie's room there were scuffling and murmuring sounds behind the closed door, and the door of Mr Ng's room was ajar, and the room itself empty.

Margaret smiled at her own naivety—it had never occurred to her that these two might be sleeping together. What a strange couple they made! But it had been obvious, after all. The flat in Forty-Sixth Street had had only two bedrooms, and William had occupied one. As she was musing on this, taking quiet pleasure in her discovery, and wondering how best to proceed, the door of Valerie's room opened and Valerie emerged,

buttoning her housecoat. She turned in the doorway, said *It's all right* to Mr Ng inside, and simultaneously saw Margaret.

“Oh!” said Valerie, and giggled in embarrassment.

“William’s in pain again. We couldn’t remember which medicine . . .”

“Yes. I heard him on the intercom. It’s all right. Come on.”

After dinner the next evening, sitting by the pool in the cooling sea breeze, listening to crickets in the bushes, Valerie spoke frankly.

“Charlie’s such a nice old fellow,” she said. “I’ll say this for Chinese men: they really know how to treat a woman. And then . . . well, you’re a woman yourself. You know. Any port in a storm.” She laughed gustily.

The English were a seafaring people, Margaret recalled. She had in fact, after further reflection, decided that it was all very charming. Brought together to attend a dying man, these two—plump, breezy Valerie and stoic old Mr Ng—had affirmed the greatest of all truths about our condition: that while the final battle is lost to Death, Life will win all the others, given half a chance.

\* \* \*

There was a character scroll in the master bedroom—a very fine one, done by a master calligrapher in Taiwan—of Li Bai’s poem “Song of Changgan”.

. . . Oh, when at last you return,  
Through the three districts named Ba,  
Send me a message on ahead!  
I will come to meet you, and will never mind the distance,  
All the way to Chang Feng Sha.

Most of the time when he was awake Weilin knew the poem was “Song of Changgan”. Sometimes, however, it seemed to be “Night in the Pavilion”, the scroll his mother had made for their apartment in Seven Kill Stele. This did not seem like an illusion at all: the characters were

bold and clear, especially those for “Sleeping Dragon” and “Prancing Steed”.

Weilin could smell the sea. He could hear it, too, though somewhat distantly; the slow rhythmic breaking of rollers on a beach. He liked this very much. He liked this room altogether, with its soft greens and yellows, its window looking out on trees and shrubs, and Mother’s character scroll of “Night in the Pavilion”. The room was very still and quiet, filled with sunlight and the smell of the sea.

Han Yuezhu was in the room now. Weilin thought he must have dozed off, as the light was now much lower. Yuezhu stood over him, looking down at him. She was wearing her pretty flowered bathing costume, the one she had worn the day the foreigners came to the pool, and her hair was done in crude pigtails sticking out at each side. One of her top front teeth was missing, which rather spoiled her looks; but if you discounted that, she really was quite pretty.

“Are you all right, Weilin?”

“Yes. Only . . . hard to breathe. Perhaps I caught a cold at the pool.”

Yuezhu squinted, as if not understanding him. Then: “Mr Mo and Mr Ng will come to turn you soon.”

“Turn me?”

“So you don’t get bedsores.”

“Oh. Yes. Of course.”

Perhaps they did come, and perhaps they didn’t; but now the room was full of light again. Although there was nothing to be heard, William expected someone to come in. Sure enough Little Fu came in. He was quite naked. Around his neck was a blue line, like a tattoo, where his head had been reattached.

“I’m sorry,” said Weilin. “I didn’t do anything to help you.”

“It’s all right,” said Little Fu. “It didn’t hurt at all. When they pushed their *jibas* into my bottom, that hurt. But the other thing didn’t hurt at all.”

“I’m glad,” said Weilin. “But still I wish I could have done something.”

“It’s all right,” said Little Fu. “It’s all right.”

Some time after Little Fu had gone, possibly on a different day, Li

Xiaolong came in. He was in his boxer's outfit, baggy black jacket and pants, and *wushuxie*—black cloth shoes with white soles.

"Look at this," said Li Xiaolong. "I call it 'Little Dragon Whipping his Tail'." He executed a complex movement: roundhouse kick with the right foot, coming down on that foot, turning right around on the ball of the foot to back-kick with the left, coming upright at once into a high front kick; then crouched, and jabbing down with the fists one-two, one-two.

"It's very good," said Weilin. "You should use it in one of your movies."

Li Xiaolong bounced over to the bed and grinned down at him, hands on his hips—sprung steel, all sprung steel.

"You don't look so good," he said. "Are you fighting?"

"Not really," said Weilin. "I've pretty much stopped fighting now."

"Never stop fighting!" said Xiaolong, and danced away, forward-kicking and punching to the door and out.

After so much conversation Weilin thought he would like some soup, but found he could not climb out of the bed. It was all he could do, with all his strength, to get over onto his side. The effort from this left him wheezing, minuscule flashbulbs popping in front of his eyes. It dawned on him that SOMETHING TERRIBLE HAD HAPPENED. He screamed, and got an arm out of the bed, and knocked a cup from the bedside table.

There were running feet in the corridor. Valerie came in, wearing glasses for some reason, and another woman Weilin thought he should know but didn't. They got him back into position on the bed.

"I wanted some soup," sobbed Weilin. "Some *soup*."

This was in Chinese, apparently. The strange woman translated it into English for Valerie. Valerie went out, coming back some time later with a bowl of soup. She sat on the edge of the bed and spooned soup to him from a broad Chinese spoon, murmuring his name, mispronouncing it in the way she had. *There, Willum, that's good, that's right, Willum*. The soup dribbled over his chin and Valerie had to keep dabbing it away with a napkin. Spoon and dab, spoon and dab, murmuring his name. After the soup she tried him with some bread, but Weilin's teeth hurt and his jaws wouldn't work. He was very tired and wanted to sleep. Mr Ng came in to join the two women. They exchanged some remarks in low voices, look-

ing at him from time to time. Then Valerie started to cry. The other woman took her out, but Mr Ng stayed, pulling up a chair by the bedside.

“Where is Yuezhu?” asked Weilin. “I’d really like to see Yuezhu.”

“Singing,” said Mr Ng, speaking in Cantonese. “Yut-jyu’s gone to New York City to practice her singing.”

This didn’t really make much sense to Weilin. Yuezhu was a dancer, wasn’t she? Not a singer. But he was too tired to argue about it.

\* \* \*

One Friday in late August, her head full of Norma, Margaret took a walk down to the beach after lunch. There were rather a lot of people on the beach, sucking up the last air of summer, and after strolling to and fro at the water margin for half an hour failing to find the mood she sought, Margaret climbed back over the dunes and headed up Ocean Drive to the house.

Halfway along she saw the figure of a young man walking towards her down Ocean Drive from Gin Lane. It was an oriental—most likely a fellow-countryman, she thought—wearing a loose denim jacket, jeans and sneakers, carrying over his shoulder a small duffel bag. Closer up, Margaret thought there was something familiar in the features beneath the untended shock of black hair. Just at this point the figure stopped and waved to her with his free hand.

“Han Yuezhu! Han Yuezhu!”

Margaret was still at a loss. She stopped five yards from the young man.

“I’m sorry . . .”

When he grinned at her, she knew.

“It’s me, Peanut Wang! I grew my hair!”

“Peanut!” she screamed, and threw herself on him, hugging him fiercely. “Oh, Peanut! I really thought you were dead. Chasing after the soldiers like that, you silly fool! Oh, what happened? Oh, oh! Oh, come into my house! What happened? How did you find me? Oh, tell me, tell me! Tell me everything!”

On the way to the house, and seated at the kitchen table with a bowl

of instant noodles, Margaret and the Mos arrayed on the other sides of the table like an interview committee, Peanut Wang told his story.

He had joined in with the workers at the northeast corner of Tiananmen Square, throwing stones at the soldiers. The workers had even caught some soldiers and beaten them to death, though Peanut insisted he had had nothing to do with that. The workers were completely fearless, he said. The soldiers were already firing into the crowd, but the workers just kept on throwing. Some of them had Molotov cocktails, and at least one tank had been destroyed.

“Tanks?” asked Margaret. “They were fighting tanks with nothing but stones to throw?”

Peanut nodded proudly. “It was very glorious,” he said. “Actually, if you’re brave enough to get up close, a tank is rather easy to stop. Tanks are not really designed for street fighting. You just shove some scaffolding poles in between the wheels and the tread. That stops it, and if you’re really close the tank’s machine-gun can’t get a line on you. You can throw a Molotov cocktail into the turret. The main problem is getting close enough. A tank can move much faster than you’d think and if you’re not nimble you get squashed. I saw several people squashed; some dead, some alive. When a person was squashed their bones broke snap! snap! snap! with a sound like wet wood burning.”

“Oh, Heaven,” murmured Mr Mo, face turning puce, a hand over his mouth.

“Was Norbu with you?” asked Margaret.

“No. I didn’t see Elder Brother Norbu until almost the end. The soldiers had us trapped in front of the museum. They had advanced down the Square, so now they could come at us from three sides—because there had been soldiers hiding in the Museum itself. It was hopeless, and everybody was running away. I was running with the others, and I ran right into Elder Brother Norbu. He had come to find me. We ran off together. Most of the students had gone. Norbu wanted to go back to the Monument to get your friend’s body, but there were soldiers all round the Monument. They were shooting at anybody they saw. They shot at us, but thank Heaven they didn’t hit us. There was so much smoke, you could hide in the smoke. We got out of the Square at last, into the streets

down toward Front Gate. But there were soldiers everywhere, you couldn't avoid them. Some of them were shooting. Some others didn't shoot at all, just tried to grab people. We were ambushed by one of these squads, down by the railroad station. They jumped out on us from behind some carts. I broke free and ran. They would still have got me, but it needed three or four of them to hold Elder Brother. He yelled at me to run away, so I ran. I couldn't do anything. I'm sorry, Elder Sister. If I'd gone to help him they would just have arrested me too. I don't know what happened to him."

"It's all right," said Margaret. "I know . . ."

Mr Mo was shaking his head fiercely. Peanut Wang couldn't help but see it, and indignantly opened his mouth to defend himself.

Margaret preempted him. "It's all right," she said. "He's not a stool-pigeon. I'll stand guarantor for him." She laughed, and reached out across the table to pat Peanut's hand, to reassure him. "Norbu is in a camp in Heilongjiang Province. I have a relative in the army, trying to get him out. But it's a delicate business. Still, I believe he is all right."

Peanut nodded, absorbing a mouth full of noodles.

"How did you get out of China?" asked Mrs Mo, while he worked on the noodles. Peanut Wang shook his head.

"Not easy. The day after they took the Square the army was running wild all over the city. They just shot at anyone who showed himself. The citizens were just cowering in their houses. Someone told me later the soldiers even shot up the Beijing Hotel, where there were foreigners living. Who'd believe our People's Army could behave in such a way?" Peanut Wang shook his head, still not able to believe it himself.

"But how did you escape?" prompted Margaret.

"By railroad. I got into the shunting yards behind the station, hid in some empty wagons. Hid there for two days. I ate garbage, rotten cabbage leaves left on the floors of the wagons, water from the standpipes. Then I hid on a train, a freight train. Unlucky for me it was going west. I ended up in Taiyuan, in Shanxi province. Such a poor place! But the people were very kind. They knew I'd been in the movement by my Beijing accent, but nobody turned me in. I found help wherever I went. Even the police! I made my way across China, living on charity. In

Guangzhou there is a whole organization smuggling people out to Hong Kong. They do everything but advertise in the newspapers. In Hong Kong there's a big public library. I found a picture in a magazine of myself in the Square. I took it to the U.S. Embassy and they gave me a visa. Some patriots in Hong Kong paid my fare. Another group of fellow-countrymen in Seattle sponsored me to study at the University there. I start next semester. Biology, botany of course, something called Environmental Studies, I'm not sure what it means. It will be hard, my English is so poor, but I can do it. Only, I saw you on TV, singing at that concert—the one where you fainted. Oh! I started to cry when I saw you faint. But right away they said you were all right. Then I got the idea to come and see you. I borrowed some money and came on the Greyhound bus. I went to the Metropolitan Opera House to ask them where you live. They said you'd be in on Monday for a practice, but I didn't want to wait till Monday. So I got a train out here. There's a restaurant in the town run by fellow-countrymen, they told me where you live."

They were all moved by this little Odyssey, so plainly told. Nobody said anything for a minute or two while Peanut slurped away at his noodles. Then Margaret reached out again and put her hand over his.

"Consider yourself an honored guest in my house, Younger Brother. *Wode jiushi nide.*" [What's mine is yours.] "Don't even ask for things. Just take whatever you need. When you're ready to leave you can fly back to Seattle first class, and you shall have a limo waiting at the airport."

Peanut Wang grinned at her over his chopsticks. Margaret could see now why she had not recognized him. Aside from having a full head of hair, his face was no longer that of a fresh country kid. It had aged more than it had any right to in just two years. The skin was clearer, and there was a depth about the eyes, lines across the brow.

"Thank you, Elder Sister. We've been through a lot together, haven't we?" He looked down. "I'm really sorry about your friend the dancer. I have no idea what happened to him. People say the soldiers that occupied the Square burned all the bodies, but I don't know if it's true."

"Whatever happened," said Margaret, "he is at peace now."

\* \* \*

With six adults, an invalid and an infant, the house was full. Mr Ng, making a virtue—or vice—of necessity, moved into Valerie's room and surrendered his own to Peanut Wang.

Peanut was quickly integrated into the shift arrangements, supervised by Valerie and Mr Mo, for nursing William. He showed no alarm or reluctance when William's condition was explained to him, listened carefully to Mr Mo's explanation of the necessary precautions, and entered at once, without hesitation or any slightest sign of distaste, into the grisly necessities of terminal care, to which the others—excepting perhaps the fastidious Mr Mo—had by now all accustomed themselves. At the time he arrived there was a debate going on in the household between the bedpan faction and the diapers. William was now too weak to sit on the bedpan by himself and had to be maneuvered into position and held upright. Margaret and Mr Mo had argued that it was time to consider adult diapers. Valerie and Mrs Mo were opposed, and Mr Ng had not rendered an opinion. Peanut, however, joined the bedpan faction, saying that so long as William could control his functions, diapers were an unnecessary insult to his dignity. Mr Ng voted with him, bringing the strength of the bedpan faction up to a decisive four.

"A triumph for democracy," murmured Mr Mo.

On the Friday before Labor Day Margaret, chauffeured by Mr Mo, came home from a grueling session with Old Shi to find the others all assembled in the kitchen waiting for her, including even little Chunxiao in his high chair. At first she thought William must have died, but Peanut's impatient, eager face gave the lie to that.

"Open it!" said Peanut. "We all want to know. Open it, quickly!" and handed her a steak knife, pointing with his other hand to a letter on the table, Hong Kong stamp.

Inside the envelope was a small sheet of coarse bluish paper. The paper had two straight edges and a corner, but the rest of its perimeter was torn in a rough semicircle. Scrawled on the surface in pencil, barely visible against the dingy paper, were Chinese characters.

Dearest Nightingale:

I am well. My health is good. Lord Buddha protects me. You must not worry about me. My case is being considered by the authorities. I hope for a decision soon. Do not try to take any action on my behalf, it may have a negative influence. I think of you all day and dream of you all night. Kiss my baby for me, my little Chunxiao. I don't think Peanut was arrested, I believe he is safe. Freedom! Truth! Democracy!

With ten thousand kisses . . .

The signature was indecipherable, probably by intent. Margaret hugged the ragged page to her breast and murmured thanks to Heaven as the tears poured from her eyes. She gave the page to Peanut, who read it, began weeping himself, and passed it on.

"He knows his child's name," said Mrs Mo.

"Hard conditions," said Mr Mo, fingering the coarse paper.

"His camp is light regime," said Margaret. "So I am told."

"Yes," said Mr Mo. "In strict regime, no paper at all. Also no food, no medicine, no hope. In such places our country buries her bravest patriots."

"Such a big country," said Mrs Mo. "Such a powerful Party. And they cannot bear a little criticism."

\* \* \*

After the visit from Li Xiaolong—days after, possibly—Weilin's parents came to see him. It was a beautiful day in the room, the window open wide, the fine green curtains floating and shifting lazily in a sea breeze, everything glowing with light, the wondrous pure Southampton light.

He hadn't seen his parents come in, but there they stood smiling down at him. To Weilin's mild surprise they were holding hands. He thought his mother looked beautiful, her skin smooth as a girl's.

His father said his name, perhaps thinking he was asleep. “Weilin, Weilin.”

“It’s all right, father. I’m awake.”

“Such a lovely place,” said Mother. “Close to the sea.”

“Yes. You can smell the sea,” said Father, smiling over at Mother. They seemed very happy together.

“I’m sorry I can’t get up,” said Weilin. “I caught a cold at the pool with Han Yuezhu.”

“It’s all right,” said Father. “Never mind.”

“I kept your hair clip, Mother,” said Weilin. “Look, on the bedside table.” Weilin moved his head to indicate the red plastic hair clip, there on the bedside table, where he had had them keep it ever since he had known he should stop fighting.

“Thank you, Weilin. You are a good boy. I thought I had lost it.”

“So pleasant,” said Father. “By the sea. You can hear the sea, turning its pages.”

Mother laughed. “That’s a lovely image, Bullfrog. Turning its pages.”

“It’s not mine,” said Father. “It’s Yuan Cuifeng’s.”

“Really?” Mother frowned, thinking. “Strange, that our poets wrote so little about the sea. It’s a good subject.”

“Well,” said Weilin, “you can write a poem, Mother.”

“Yes,” said Mother, excited. “Come on, Bullfrog! Let’s go down to the sea. I’ll write a poem, and you can harmonize it for me.” She turned to face Father, still holding his hand, and smiled up at him. Her pretty face glowed in the bright sunlight filling the room.

“Yes,” said Father. “The sea, we’ll go to the sea. You stay here, Weilin.”

“Oh!” Weilin wanted to go too, though he understood vaguely that he couldn’t. The regret was sharp—regret and impatience. He so wanted to go to the sea!

“But when shall I see you again?” He asked

“Oh, you’ll see us soon,” said Mother. Detaching herself from Father, she came over to the bed, bent over him, and kissed his cheek. She smelt of the perfumed soap she liked, one of the earliest smells he had known. “Don’t worry, Little Pangolin. We’ll all be together soon.”

“We’ll all be together soon,” repeated Father. “Sleep, now, little fellow. Sleep.”

Weilin slept.

\* \* \*

The morning after Norbu’s letter, Saturday, Margaret drove into the town for some small shopping. She had passed her driving test now, and was free of the need to be disturbing Mr Mo from his literary and culinary pursuits each time she wanted to take a trip, though she still used him for the haul to Manhattan. When she came back from her shopping this Saturday Mr Mo was preparing lunch. Peanut Wang was in the kitchen with him, at the kitchen table studying a textbook of English.

“Weilin is heating up again,” said Mr Mo. “I’m afraid he will have another fever.”

“He is so weak,” said Margaret. “I wonder if he will survive another fever.”

“Do you want me to fetch the doctor?” asked Peanut.

“No. Weilin would hate that. I feel he’s near the end. What could the doctor do but prolong his suffering? We have everything he needs.”

Mr Mo’s prediction was correct. That afternoon William slipped into fever again. It was not a very intense fever; his physical exhaustion was too great.

Margaret sat with him that evening, all evening long, until ten o’clock. She hoped his mind would clear for a while, but it didn’t. Only, when the fever was at its feeble height, he whispered: “Such a pretty outfit.” Then, after several minutes of vague unintelligible murmurings: “They are only foreigners. Nothing out of the ordinary.” He said these latter words quite clearly, then fell into deep sleep. Drowsy herself, Margaret left him, handing over to Valerie.

Valerie came to wake her at midnight. “Nearly the end,” she said.

Mr Ng and Mrs Mo were in the room. William was very still and cold. Margaret might have thought him dead already but for his breathing, which, though shallow and irregular, rasped and gurgled in his chest. She took his hand, but he gave no sign of consciousness.

Valerie brought in Peanut Wang and Mr Mo. They stood at the back watching; Mr Mo meditative, with his arms folded across his chest, Peanut wide-eyed and frankly curious. Now everybody was in the room. They all stayed to the end.

At twelve thirty William's breathing stopped. Then his body shook and trembled, and the breath came again, but clearly with great effort. This was repeated three or four times over the next twenty minutes, the effort greater each time. At twelve fifty he made a croaking sound in his throat. The breathing stopped again. They waited for the trembling effort, but it did not come. After five minutes, Mrs Mo leaned over him, her cheek to his nostrils.

"He has left our world," she said in Chinese.

Valerie, though she could not have understood the words, gave forth a peculiar little cry, somewhere between a yelp and a sob. She turned to Mr Ng, who put his arm round her and rested her head on his shoulder, his face grave.

Margaret set William's hand down on the quilt. Standing, she leaned over and kissed his lips. They were dry and quite surprisingly cold already. It was the first time she had ever kissed him, she reflected—this boy, this man, whose fate, by the unfathomable decrees of Heaven, had got so tangled up with hers.

Mrs Mo was beginning to weep. Her husband led her from the room. Peanut was standing by the wall, weeping open-eyed, his cheeks shining with tears. Margaret followed the Mos out.

She did not feel she could sleep. She dressed, put on jacket and boots, and a scarf—it was a cool night, and a singer thinks first of her voice in all circumstances—and left the house by the front door. It was very dark outside. The sky was clear, but there was no moon. She felt her way to the garage to get the flashlight. Thus equipped she went out and walked to the beach. She kept the flashlight on to help find her way over the dunes; but once on the beach turned it off.

The sea seemed subdued, hissing and whispering its everlasting cadences. When her eyes adjusted Margaret could see quite clearly. There was phosphorescence on the water, bright at the crests of the waves, endless parallel lines of shimmering ghost-light ruled across the glassy

surface of the water. Above were the stars—such a host of them! The sky was exceptionally clear, to the degree that she could see new stars winking into existence near the horizon, as the Earth rolled toward them. In the opposite direction, along the shore line to her right, that great sleepless city a hundred miles away reflected from the sky as an upturned bowl of orange luminescence, hardly more than a lesser blackness against the black.

Arching over all was the mighty Galaxy itself, spectral and changeless. Americans called it the Milky Way, which Margaret thought somewhat childish. In classical Chinese the poets called it Silver River, or River of Stars. There was one poem she remembered from the ancient times, one of Du Fu's.

. . . Drum and bugle bravely sound the fifth watch.  
Three mountains—above winds the River of Stars.

Listening to the sea, gazing at the blameless stars, thinking of the old poet, Margaret knew, with certainty for the first time in her life, that there was another world, better than this one; a place of serenity and bliss, the place she had glimpsed when *flying*; a place where she could meet William again. There they would be freed of all passion, as they had been in the purity of childhood, playing in the hollow by the bamboo grove, all innocent, all clean, all unknowing.

In the meantime life's battles were to be fought. She had her gift, which she must share with others. William should be properly mourned, with a decent funeral, according to the customary rites of their race. Norbu must be freed somehow. There was Little Chunxiao to be raised. And perhaps others, Heaven willing. She was only thirty-three, after all. So much to do! So much life to live! And when it was all done, when all these things had been accomplished, when all that could be given had been given, all accounts settled, then—only then—could the traffic of the world yield to silence and peace, in that other place: beyond the River of Stars.