

“Did you do it yet?” The voice on the other line sounded agitated.

“Not yet. I’m getting to it. I can see her.”

“Well, hurry! Boss wants it done soon.”

“I know, Ling,” he snapped. “I’m trying to do this as quickly as I can. Wait—she’s coming this way. I’m hanging up now.” He tucked the phone into his pocket before walking hastily towards the woman. He slowed his steps when he was directly behind her. Peering at the ends of the abandoned road to make sure that they were completely alone, he took a deep breath.

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

The woman turned around and Chang had to bite his tongue to keep from yelling at her to run, run away from him, where it was safe. But he couldn’t do that. The Boss would be angry.

“Yes?”

He tried to compose himself.

“Forgive me, miss,” he said, hoping that she’d understand that he didn’t want to do this, that he was being forced to do it with a threat looming over his head. Then, in one swift movement, he pulled the burlap sack he’d carefully hidden behind his back over her head.

He struggled to pull it over her body as she thrashed against it and screamed for help.

When he was certain the sack was secured in place, he hoisted her over his shoulder and closed his eyes against his tears.

I’m sorry, he wanted to say. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

He carried her to the black hearse he knew would be waiting at the end of the street and placed her in the back seat.

Ling turned around to look at him.

“You did it.”

“Told you I would. How about you?”

“She’s at Headquarters already.”

“Good. Then our kids are safe.”

“Yeah. For now.” Ling turned back around and started driving.

For now, Chang thought wearily. Always for now.

Ever since his father had died, the government was always harassing him, because it was his duty to carry out what his father used to do. It was part of a contract that he’d signed without

Chang's knowledge. It stated that after his death, his firstborn son was to take his place in what was called the Plan. To this day, he still couldn't find it in his heart to forgive him for not mentioning that helping kill people would be such a prominent part of his future.

When he was first told about the Plan, he'd thought it was a sick joke. He remembered the Boss explaining it to him.

"The Plan, Chang, is basically the...*elimination* of some people in China. To help with our overpopulation problem."

Chang remembered how his palms had started to sweat as he registered the actual meaning behind his words. "You mean...?"

"That's precisely what I mean. And Chang—after your father's death, I find myself short of a man to help carry this out."

Chang had been horrified that the man could ever associate anything like murder with his father. "My father would've never—"

"But he did. Numerous times. Do you want to know why? Well, for some reason *you'll* do exactly as I say. He had the threat of his children over him."

Chang remembered the feeling of being punched in the gut. "No. You wouldn't. Mei-Lyn is just a baby—"

"I know. I know everything about you and your family. I know that your wife died after giving birth. I know that you'd do anything for your daughter's safety."

Chills ran down Chang's spine. Where did this man find out about such personal things?

The Boss quirked an eyebrow. "So?"

"You're asking me to help murder people."

He'd stared at him, his eyes cold and unblinking. "I'm not asking; I'm telling. And if you refuse, well...I think you can fill in the rest."

Chang had swallowed, knowing he had no choice. "I'll do it."

And that's how he'd become a kidnapper.

Chang pulled the burlap sack over his shoulder as Ling showed the Headquarters' scanner his ID card. The huge metal doors opened and Chang followed him inside.

They headed to the Dungeon. Chang ignored the other cellmates as he made his way to the farthest one to the left.

He placed the woman on the floor and bent down in front of her.

“I’m going to pull the sack off of you now,” he said quietly, “but you can’t struggle or try to run. There are cameras everywhere. They’ll catch you.” *And punish you*, he added mentally.

He untied the sack and pulled it off her body. She looked petrified.

“What’s happening?” she asked shakily.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Will I... can I leave soon?”

Chang swallowed and turned away from her like he always did whenever the question arose. “Don’t struggle when the guards come. It’ll do you no good.”

He locked the cell door and walked towards Ling. “Let’s go find Boss.”

“You’ll both get extra pay. You did remarkably well.”

“Thank you, Boss,” said Ling.

“Yes, remarkably well indeed,” he muttered, walking away from the window and sitting down at his desk. “Ling, you are excused. You will be contacted later about when your next job is. Chang, I need to talk to you.”

Ling gave him an apologetic look as he left the room.

“Chang, your next abduction will happen three months from now. But I must inform you of something before you do it.” He reached behind his desk and pulled out a stack of papers. He handed Chang the top one. “That’s her.”

Chang looked down at the paper and his eyes widened. “She’s just a child.” He looked up. “You told me that the abductions wouldn’t happen to children.”

“Well, we’ve made a change.”

Chang waited for an explanation.

“You see, we’ve realized that we’ve been going about this all wrong. Here we are, taking people at random, when we should really be thinking about their value to our country. We’ve decided to try something new.”

“What, killing *children* at random?” he said, momentarily forgetting to stay courteous.

“No, not just children; we’re still taking adults, too,” the Boss said, as if that made it better. “But not at random anymore. The people that you’ll be abducting now will be people of, shall we say, *lesser value* to our society. Specifically people with disabilities.”

Chang's eyes grew wide, but he was quick to compose himself. "I'm afraid I can't do that, sir."

He regarded him curiously. "Ah. So that's where you draw the line."

"We can't target them for something they had no control over, sir. It's not their fault."

"Yes, I agree with you, of course. But Chang, think this through. If we keep on taking people that are of more importance to our country, how will we thrive? If it is between taking them and taking the people that are of lesser value, who would you pick?"

"Boss, taking people that are completely helpless is...is beyond inhumane. Please, rethink this."

"I've thought it through many times, Chang, and I need to know if you are willing to participate."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not."

"I see," he muttered. "So...even with the risk of never seeing little Mei-Lyn again, you won't do it?"

Chang chewed his bottom lip. He hated how he could be so easily manipulated. "I'll do what I need to do," he said reluctantly, "to keep her safe."

The Boss grinned widely. "I think we both know what that means. Thank you. You are dismissed."

Chang pounded on Ling's door frantically. Ling opened it, looking troubled. "It's time, isn't it?" Chang nodded. Ling bit his bottom lip. "You've thought this through?"

"I've never thought harder about anything."

Ling scrutinized his friend. "Okay. I'll get him. Meet me at Lydia's tomorrow afternoon."

They stood outside her door with their luggage. Lydia opened it and stared at the four people that stood on her doorstep. Her gaze fell onto the two children, then onto the men.

"So, I see that it is time," she said in her raspy voice. "I can't say that I'm surprised. Figured it'd happened sooner, rather than later." She stepped aside. "Come in."

"No, I'm afraid we can't," Chang said. "We have to have as little contact with you as possible. But please, take the children and their luggage." Both Ling and Chang handed over the toddlers. "Everything you'll need is in the suitcases. Fake ID cards, fake birth certificates—

everything. For them and for you. Please leave as soon as possible.”

“You’re not planning on coming back, are you?” the old woman asked.

Ling hesitated before saying, “No. So we’d appreciate it if you’d raise them as your own. And one last thing—don’t tell them anything about us, at least until they’re teenagers, okay?”

Lydia nodded solemnly.

“How soon can you leave?” Chang asked.

“As soon as you two go away. I have everything ready inside.”

“All right.” He nodded briskly. “I guess we’ll be on our way.”

He took one last look at his oblivious child and tried to smile. “Bye, Mei-Lyn. I love you.”

She waved her hand, a huge smile on her face. “Bye-bye, Daddy!”

Chang grabbed one of Ling’s arms and led him away, feeling terrible about making him leave his son. *This is what’s best*, he kept telling himself. *This will keep them safe*.

“How are we going to explain this? Boss isn’t expecting us. How’ll we get through his guards?” Ling asked when they were in front of Headquarters.

“The guards are no problem. All of them trust us; they’ll let us through. The problem is that *Boss* doesn’t trust us. At least not fully.”

“Yeah, this won’t be easy,” Ling mumbled. “Chang, I’ve been thinking...and I don’t know if either of us could do it...but we could shoot venom into him. That’s how he kills the people in the dungeon, right? By sticking a needle that’s filled with poison in their arm?”

Chang knew of a hundred different things that could go wrong with that plan. He also knew that, over the last year, the two of them had come up with thousands of other plans that were way too complex. This was supposed to be quick and clean. So Ling’s plan was as good as any.

He nodded. “Yeah, I think we’ll do that. We’ll have to rely on everyone’s trust, though.”

“It’s a good thing we’ve been loyal kidnappers, then.” Ling looked at the building in front of them. “Okay, listen. I’ll go to the medical room and get the needle and venom. They won’t think anything of it because I’ll tell them that Boss wants it. We’ll meet up in the lobby and go to Boss’s office. We’ll find a way to get close enough to him so we can stick him with it.”

“I don’t know,” Chang said reluctantly. “Ling, why should we both go into his office? Maybe if I go alone, you can still escape.”

“No, that won’t work. Think about it, Chang. There are security cameras everywhere.

We'll both die either way; they'll find the footage of me sneaking the venom out of the medical room eventually.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that.” Chang let out a shaky breath. “All right. I guess I'm ready.”

Chang waited in the lobby while Ling went to get the poison and syringe. He tried to calm his nerves, but it was hard. Everything made him jump.

When Ling finally got out of the elevator, Chang relaxed a bit.

“Let's get this over with,” Ling muttered under his breath. He unfolded the cloth he had in his hands and revealed the syringe. It was already filled with venom. “I did it in the elevator. Figured it'd be easier to do it with no one around.”

“Good idea.” Chang took the syringe and tucked it carefully into his pocket.

They made it to the large mahogany doors of the Boss's office, where two guards stood, arms crossed over their chest. “Remember, keep your voice steady,” Ling murmured to Chang as they approached them.

Chang cleared his throat as he stood in front of one. “Excuse me, sir. Boss has summoned us. If you would be so kind as to let us through, it would be much appreciated.”

The guard narrowed his eyes. “He hasn't told us anything about visitors.”

“Well, he's asked us to come see him about a mission,” Ling snapped. “And he also said he doesn't want to be kept waiting. I don't think he'd be pleased to find out his guards have interfered with his schedule.”

The guards stared at him for a moment. Then, the one Chang had talked to glanced at him again, and he swore that his eyes flickered to his pocket. But he figured that he was just imagining things, because the next thing he said was, “All right. Go on in.” Chang pushed the giant doors open and cleared his throat. His heart was working overtime and he felt like he was going to be sick; his legs felt like jelly and he was afraid that they would buckle under him.

“Hold it together,” Ling whispered. Chang nodded and forced himself to move forward.

“Chang, Ling—what are you doing here?” the Boss asked.

“Actually, sir, I—I mean, *Ling*—wanted to discuss the new Plan,” Chang said.

“Oh? How does Ling know about it?”

“Sorry, sir,” Ling said. “He assumed that I'd have to do it too, sooner or later, so he told me about it. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Yes, but please, both of you, be careful while discussing it out in public. We

wouldn't want any prying ears listening in now, would we?"

"Of course not, sir," Chang said. "I made sure to talk about it in an abandoned area."

"Good." He turned to Ling. "Okay, ask away. But first off, do you or do you not think that this is a much better Plan? Because I think it is pure genius."

"Oh, of course, sir. Pure genius, indeed. China will never be better. Now sir," Ling said, lowering his voice, "is it true that everyone has a child they must abduct at some point?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." He shook his head in feigned sadness. "Such a shame. But, we must do what has to be done. For the greater good, you know?"

"Yes, of course. Sir, would you mind if I got to see my child's document right now? I know you told me my next abduction will be announced later but—"

The Boss waved away his concerns. "You can begin early, then. I just thought you might want a break. Here, come behind my desk. It's in a filing cabinet."

Ling threw a look at Chang before walking around the desk. He could tell when Ling found his victim by the way the colour drained from his face. "Boss, this boy is only three-years-old."

The Boss turned his chair around to face him and Chang knew it was his chance. He let impulse take over.

It happened quickly. Chang felt as if his brain had disconnected from his body. He moved forward as the Boss was explaining something to Ling, quickly taking the syringe out of his breast pocket. The next thing he knew, it was jabbed into the Boss's arm.

He turned around to face Chang, shock and betrayal on his face. Chang just stared at him as the poison took over his body and his eyes became blank. Then the Boss's head hit the desk with a heavy *thud*, and it was over.

Chang looked up at Ling, shaking.

Ling tried to smile, though it looked more like a grimace. "We did it."

Chang turned his attention back to the Boss's body. "Now what?"

Ling was just about to answer when suddenly, an alarm started blaring.

"How did they know? Who could've seen?" Chang looked around the room wildly. There wasn't anyone in there besides themselves.

"The cameras," Ling replied calmly. "They saw us."

The rest was all a blur. Guards came racing in and Ling and Chang were dragged out of the room roughly. They were thrown into one of the Dungeon's cells by a guard that Chang didn't

recognize.

“You two are in a lot of trouble,” he said, pulling out a key and locking them inside.

“Assassinating the Boss has a death penalty, you know that? What the hell were you thinking?”

He didn’t wait for an answer as he strode away.

“You know, I really *don’t* know what we were thinking,” Ling said. “We killed him. So what? They’ll just elect a new Boss. He’ll learn about the Plan and he’ll go along with it, just like every other Boss before this one did. And no one’ll stand up to the new Boss, either.”

Chang was quiet for a moment. Finally he said, “Ling, don’t you think that that was too easy? Killing him?”

“Sure. But I just thought we got lucky.”

“Well, you know what I think? I think the guard at his door wanted him dead. He looked at my pocket, Ling. He knew something was off. Boss never hired stupid people, you know.”

“Yeah...I guess you’re right,” Ling said reluctantly.

“And just think—he might not be the only one who feels that way. Others might, too. I mean, we can’t be the only ones that he’s blackmailed, right? There must be others.”

“Too bad we’ll never find out,” Ling muttered.

“Yeah. But we anticipated death when we agreed to do this.” Chang sighed. “At least our kids are safe.”

“Yeah. For good, this time.”

“For good.”

They stayed in the cell for another hour. Chang thought about his wife and wondered if he’d meet her in the afterlife. It cheered him up a bit to think he might, and he told Ling, whose wife had died in a car accident the year before.

Soon, someone in a nurse’s outfit—Chang refused to call her a nurse—came in with two syringes identical to the one he’d killed the Boss with. Chang was oddly relaxed as she stuck one of them in his arm. He was ready for death; ready to leave this cruel world where hurting people was the solution to someone’s problem.

As he slipped away, the only thought he could muster was, *I forgive you, Dad*. Because now he understood why he’d kept it a secret, and holding a grudge against him suddenly seemed pointless. Besides, if he was going to visit him in the afterlife, he couldn’t be angry. He had questions to ask.