**The Cautious Traveller's Guide to the Wastelands**

*The Greater Siberian Wastelands are vast and unkind. Though now of course empty of human habitation, it is hard to comprehend how men, women and children once lived here, with so unforgiving a landscape around them. Yet we must thank the engineering marvels of the modern age that let us – despite the risks – traverse once more these barely imaginable distances.*

From *The Cautious Traveller's Guide to the Wastelands*, by Vassily Rostov, Moscow, 1857, p1

**Prologue**

Once there was a not-quite girl. She was small and still, and she knew many stories. Stories about why the water in the pools was silver (because water was greedy and swallowed the moon), and why she must not go to the far hills (because wolves lived in the hills, deep underground, and listened for footsteps on the rocks above them).

'And what is beyond the hills?' she asked the grown people.

'There is nothing beyond the hills, little one,' they told her.

As she grew, the not-quite girl learned not to be curious. Curiosity was the opposite of stillness, and this meant it was dangerous. There were plants hungry for blood, insects that hunted in darkness, liquid that bubbled and spat. There were many, many things that stung or bit or burned, that waited and hunted and leapt. She learned how to take up as little space as possible, how to walk through the world lightly.

'There is safety in slowness,' her grown people said, 'in stillness and silence.'

So the not-quite girl learned how to watch, and wait. She learned how to crouch in the shallows so that fish flicked round her ankles and waterboatmen crashed into her knees. She learned how to hide herself in reeds. She learned such stillness that spiders wove webs between her fingers and moss settled on her skin. As the long hours passed, she watched the water turn from silver to violet, and storms streak across the sky. Her prey did not see her, because she was silent and still as the rocks.

And sometimes, when a shadow raised its head far in the distance, she began to wonder what the distance held.

'The closer you get to the distance the further away it is,' said the grown people. 'That is the way of things.'
But she was learning what lies looked like. Slowly, slowly, she crept further away from the shallows and the reeds. She made sure she was back by dark, but she was young and her limbs were strong and they carried her further on each of her explorings. Until one day, she saw the monster approach.

She smelled it first, hot and unfamiliar, and she dropped to her hands and knees and tensed her body for flight. Whatever it was, it was angry, and it was fast. The ground trembled beneath her and the roaring in her bones felt like singing. The monster had no legs, like a snake, but it moved in a straight line and its breath was a dark grey cloud. All along its body were countless eyes.

She watched it for a long time, until it disappeared from view into the hills where the sun was setting.

And the not-quite girl began to dream of the horizon.

Chapter 1: Leaving

'Monsters,' said Alexei, 'come in two main types. You have your flying monsters, what are mostly wings and skin… oh and beaks – at least one beak – but as a rule not many legs, two on average, and sometimes little stubby front hands. And then you have your ground monsters, them which are distinguished by their great variety of legs and eyes, but which can't run fast enough to reach the train, despite all the legs. Usually, they can't, anyway. Not like the flying ones, of course, which is why you'll have noticed we have scarecrows on the roof…'

'Scarecrows?'

'Course, the flying monsters are a lot bigger than crows, mind you…'

Zhang Weiwei rolled her eyes. Terrorising the more gullible passengers in Third Class was Alexei's favourite Leaving Day ritual. He'd tried to do the same to her when she'd first joined the Company, but she'd had her revenge by putting xigu bugs in his bunk. (You didn't grow up surrounded by semi-feral small boys without learning a thing or two about the tactical deployment of biting insects.) 'You scared of a few crawling things?' she'd whispered when he woke up the whole carriage with his yelling, and he'd kept a respectful distance ever since.

'Don't listen,' she told Alexei's most recent victim, a young boy with enormous eyes and skinny arms wrapped around a battered suitcase. 'We don't have no scarecrows 'cos this whole train's enough to scare any monster half out of its wits.'
The boy relaxed his hold on his suitcase a fraction and nodded. Weiwei perched on the opposite bunk, letting the steady stream of suitcases and limbs clatter and clomp around her, and keeping half an eye on the attempts to hide piles of silks and packages of tea inside the walls of the train itself. She ignored the sweat that was already dripping down her neck. Whilst in the station the train windows were still open, and the dry air of Beijing carried the smell of oil and hot, nervous bodies.

'You know what we look like from the outside, when we're steaming along the rails, burping smoke and covered in iron and spikes and…' she hunted for the right word for the bristling mechanics of the train '… stuff?'

The boy shook his head.

'Like an armoured dragon, that's what,' said Weiwei, then broke off to exclaim, 'No, not like that!' to the would-be smugglers. 'You need to find the panels that move… Here, let me do it.' She scampered up the stack of bunks and helped two young men pack their goods into the wall more safely. 'There,' she said. 'If they're not well hidden the guard won't be able to pretend not to see them.'

She accepted their thanks graciously, and returned to her perch, pocketing the coins they had pressed into her hand. 'Anyway, like I was saying, an armoured dragon. The biggest and fiercest thing in all the land. And we're all in here safe and sound in the… in the dragon's belly.' (She was starting to have doubts about this story but plunged on regardless). 'And the dragon will fight off anything in its way and carry us all safely across the Wastelands to Moscow,'

'In its belly?' said the boy.

'In its belly,' said Weiwei, firmly.

Alexei snorted, but before he had time to make a sarcastic comment a long horn blew. It was a warning, deep and bone-thudding and it sent a kind of shudder through the carriage. Weiwei felt the shudder travel up her spine and lodge somewhere at the back of her skull where she knew it would remain for the whole journey. She was annoyed to realise her hands were clenched into fists. She didn't look at Alexei, as she knew he would read her face with ease and he would be sympathetic, which was much worse than being mean. But both of them reached out superstitiously to touch the iron bars on the window, and neither of them met the eyes of the boy with the suitcase.

'Thirty minutes', came the disembodied voice of the station controller, in Chinese then in Russian. 'Departure in thirty minutes.'
And then the sadly less disembodied voice of Ah Pang, the First Steward, who was outside on the platform yelling directions. Weiwei didn't have time to duck before he saw her.

'Don't think I can't see you two in there,' he yelled, 'Stop loitering and do something useful.' Weiwei scowled, but was gratified to see him, seconds later, disappear in a cloud of dirty steam.

She pulled a sympathetic grimace at the boy and nudged Alexei in the ribs. 'Loiterer!' she shouted, grinning at his expression, and jumped the two steep iron steps onto the platform. Different languages crowded in at her ears; Chinese and Russian and others she didn't understand, some sharp and spiky and some smooth and guttural but all shadowed by a panicky undertone, and spoken too loudly, as if to drown out gathering fears. She jumped back and forth between platform and train, clambering over the trunks and travel bags strewn between the bunks and pushing through the crush of bodies, ducking to avoid elbows and occasionally resorting to a carefully placed pinch to clear a path through the crowd.

'All aboard!' yelled Ah Pang, though the effect was spoiled by his coughing through the steam, and no-one paid him any attention.

'Not yet, not yet,' a woman muttered, over and over again.

'Yuan Guan guide you safely through all dangers,' a priest intoned, rubbing prayer beads through his fingers. 'Guide you safely…'

And someone, with the kind of voice that elbowed all other voices out of the way, shouted, 'Be CAREFUL you idiots, the contents of that box are worth more than your wretched brains can comprehend.'

Weiwei jumped, the voice having come from somewhere just above her head, and almost crashed into a group of porters struggling with a large crate. There were holes drilled into its sides, and she thought she saw something moving within. All four men were sweating, and their expressions suggested they were in no mood to look kindly at the voice's owner.

'Carefully, I said. Do you know what that means? Should I speak more slowly? Where is the stationmaster? We were assured that cargo would be dealt with appropriately.' The man pulled out a handkerchief to rub his head, which was balding and glistened with sweat. He wore long robes stretched tight across his belly, and when he spoke gold glinted in his teeth. A bandage was wrapped around his right hand, and he regarded the crate with clear dislike.

'And keep it upright, by Heavens what we have to deal with.' There was something familiar about his voice, but Weiwei couldn't place it.
'Is there a problem, Jinlu?' An aristocratic voice, in English. The speaker was tall, and like many of the European men Weiwei had seen, appeared to be entirely held up by his clothes and his facial hair.

The demeanour of the large man changed immediately, along with his language. 'Good sir, no problem!' he beamed. 'These fine men are just helping us load the last of the cargo. Nothing to it! Almost done!'

The European rummaged in his coat and produced a large gold watch on a chain, and Weiwei couldn't stop the twitch of her fingers. Worth five hundred yuan at least, maybe more, if she found the right buyer…

Beside her she heard two studious-looking young men whisper excitedly, 'That's him! Henry Grey.'

'Dr Henry Grey,' another corrected. 'Perhaps he would look at my writings on the salamander…'

'Don't pester him, he doesn't have time for your amateur research…'

She stared, curiously. This Dr Henry Grey didn't look very special, she thought, though the young men were clearly thrilled. To her, he looked just another traveller too rich to care about the risks.

'Well, we seem to be running to time,' he said to his servant, 'which is a novel experience on this trip. I shall be in my cabin. Bring me my notebooks when you are done here.'

What happened next passed too quickly for Weiwei to completely understand what she was seeing. The man called Jinlu was lowering his head in a polite bow and Dr Grey was turning away when a figure dressed in simple peasant clothes, with a headscarf obscuring their face suddenly pushed past him. There was a flash of something bright in their hand and a strange, stretched moment when all sound seemed to vanish, as if sucked into the dazzling silver of the knife. Then Jinlu was moving, faster than such a large man should, and he and the figure were rolling onto the platform, the knife clattering onto the floor but the figure, eel-like, slipping from his grasp and jumping to their feet in one swift movement. Weiwei didn't even have time to call out before they disappeared into the crowd.

'What on earth are you doing? Do be more careful, Jinlu!' Henry Grey steadied himself on an open-mouthed porter and righted his hat. 'Pick yourself up off the floor, man, people are staring.'
Jinlu heaved himself to his knees, seemingly much less agile now. He leant down to brush the dust from his robes and as he did so, Weiwei saw the knife disappear into his sleeve.

'Beg your pardon, sir, an unfortunate collision,' he said, panting, once he was upright again. 'You are not discomforted, I hope?'

'Well, no, hmpf, there seemed to be some-

'Someone in a rush, I think! Dear me, how rude. Well, they are gone now, perhaps you would like to retire to your cabin? Let me escort you.' He took Grey's arm and guided him firmly away, looking around him carefully as they went, Weiwei noticed. They were followed by the porters with the crate. As they passed, a yellow eye blinked at her through one of the airholes and she took a step back in surprise.

She watched the odd little group until they were swallowed up by a cloud of steam. Astonishingly, no-one on the platform seemed perturbed by the disturbance. In fact, it appeared that no-one had even noticed it, so wrapped up were they all in their own concerns. Weiwei shook her head, with a sigh beyond her years at the heedlessness of her fellow humans. But turning back, she realised that she was not the only one watching, after all. A woman stood at the window of the First Class carriage, wearing a black qipao and an expression on her face that Weiwei could not read. A silver hairpin caught the sun as the woman turned her head, reminding her of the flash of the knife. Had she really seen it? Now that she tried to replay what happened in her head it all seemed blurred and vague, like the feeling you got when you looked at the sun for too long. Had it just been a pickpocket? There were plenty of those around, as she knew all too well. But carrying a knife… That made it different. Dangerous. An ill-omen at the start of a journey, she couldn't help thinking, with a shiver.

'Ten Minutes', came the station controller's voice, shaking her out of her reverie. No time to worry now. 'Departure in ten minutes. All aboard. The train will depart in ten minutes.'

The gates to the station started to creak shut. The porters ushered the last stragglers towards their carriages. A series of clangs proclaimed the locking of windows and the dropping of iron bars. From somewhere amidst the steam, Weiwei could still hear the priest's incantation. 'Yuan Guan guide you from all dangers.'

Ten minutes later the platform was empty but for the small figure of the station controller. She watched him raise his flag and look up at the station clock. Faces from behind the platform gates stared at faces behind the bars of the train windows. Some of them were
weeping. There was a moment of quiet that stretched longer than it should have done. Then the flag fell, and the Trans-Siberian Express, in a slow cacophony of steam and screeches and creaking wheels, rolled out of Beijing Railway Station, towards the uncertain spaces ahead.

Chapter 2: New Acquaintances

*From Beijing the train runs north-west, passing through the last lands of the Chinese Empire. Beijing is a hard, brittle city, of painted walls and latticed windows. Its temples are indescribably beautiful but its streets are full of dust... It is three thousand miles from Beijing to Moscow. The journey takes twenty days.*

- _The Cautious Traveller's Guide_, p3

Better to be moving. That was what rail folk said. Better to have rail beneath you, wheels to rock you, a distant horizon to reach. On Leaving Day most of all, better for the wait to be over. Weiwei and Alexei stood at the window, watching the solid stone buildings of the station recede. Over the past weeks, trapped in Beijing, Weiwei had felt her insides knotting together in mingled anticipation and fear. It was always the same, during each of these enforced rests, the weeks between journeys, when rail rats like her had to fend for themselves. She had felt not quite present, somehow. At unexpected moments she had felt the ground beneath her feet move; had woken in the bed she shared with four other of Miss Yan's girls to the echoes of a ghostly whistle.

'It's normal,' said Alexei. 'Well, normal by our standards. I always think I hear it – the train – wherever I am, even when I'm miles from the station. Like it's following me. And it'll only get worse... I heard about someone who thought his legs had turned into wheels....'

'Course you have,' said Weiwei. She found it was best to remain resolutely unimpressed by any of Alexei's stories or it just encouraged him further. He was only a few years older than Weiwei but he had already been promoted to Second Engineer, which made him (in his own eyes) probably the most important person on the train. Certainly more important than the First Engineer who – he informed Weiwei at frequent intervals – really had more of a ceremonial role, and at twenty-five was doubtless fading in intelligence.

They spoke _Railhua_ together – the mixture of Chinese, Russian and English used by rail people – and Weiwei was secretly proud to feel the strange combinations of words roll off her tongue, even though she had only worked for the Trans-Siberia Company for a little over a year.
'And of course, there's the story of-
'Don't you have some cogs to be tightening, or something?' she interrupted.

He grinned and rolled up his sleeves to reveal (for the tenth time that day) the newly inked design on his forearm – complex patterns which Company engineers gave themselves after each successful Crossing. Engineers, Weiwei had learnt, were nothing if not self-congratulatory.

'The engineering team, unlike other members of this train,' said Alexei, 'are ready, prepared, organised, and any other words you can think of for competent and generally brilliant. Haven't you got some floors to mop, or something?'

'I do suddenly feel a desperate need to be somewhere else…'

She left him admiring his reflection in the window. She had wanted to mention what happened on the platform, with Henry Grey and his servant and the figure with the knife, but he would probably just laugh and say she was imagining things, or else make a joke about Beijingers and thieves. She would just have to find out more herself, she decided, and wracked her brains to remember why the servant had seemed familiar. That voice… She was sure she had heard it before.

Running her hand along the polished wooden panels of the walls, she walked with the easy, rolling gait of an old rail hand. It was impossible not to feel the strength of the train; its iron and its thick walls and the steady rhythm of the rails. A strength that the walls of her Beijing home had never held.

Through the iron bars of the window she glimpsed the low, ornate buildings of the city. She always found it strange to see them from this high angle, when before she had crept amongst them, dwarfed by heavy doorways and sleek tiled roofs, by stone dragons which had gazed upon her in disdain from their pedestals. They had not wanted her then, and now on each journey she felt a twinge of pride that she was leaving them behind. But she had to work to try and make the feeling bigger, to ignore the sharp twist of fear in her gut. She reached out to touch the metal around the window. It is safe, it is safe, she told herself, like always. How could it not be, something so huge and heavy and strong?

Zhang Weiwei thought she was probably thirteen years old, or near enough. When people remarked that she was rather small for her age she replied that they were rather big for theirs. Anyway, her smallness made her useful – her official title was Junior Carriage Assistant but she was a Rail Rat, through and through.
Rai Rats were the lowest and least well-paid members of the Trans-Siberia Company. They slept in the smallest bunks and got the smallest, meanest rations, and had to work the hardest out of anyone, which meant being fast, and being sneaky. They had to know all the short cuts through the train – how to duck through the kitchen carriages without having hot soup spilled on them; how to tiptoe through the garden carriage without disturbing the bad-tempered pigs; how to scuttle along luggage racks and squeeze into narrow spaces to get to the pipework and wires when things went wrong (and they did go wrong – more often than the Company would like, or would ever reveal to their investors). A Rail Rat might be very young, and they might be paid very little, but they knew an awful lot about the train and all its secrets.

Trying to avoid the demands of passengers who couldn't find the washbasins or wanted to change their bunk or find the dining car, Weiwei made her way towards the workers' sleeping carriage, where at one end there was a tiny shrine.

'Guide us safely,' she whispered, crouching down by the shrine and touching the head of the little god. He was the preferred deity of rail people – Yuan Guan, who watched over travellers. Small and bald and nondescript, with none of the fine moustaches or dramatically drooping eyebrows of other deities, he was nonetheless a reassuring presence. There were already small piles of rice and a can of tinned peaches on the shrine, and Weiwei rummaged in her pocket for a boiled sweet, which she placed next to them. If asked, like most rail people, she would say that she put her trust in mechanics – in wheels and gears and oil. But it couldn't do any harm, she thought, not to stake everything on one throw, as Miss Yan would say.

Getting to her feet, she noticed that Alexei's bunk was as neat as ever, sheets folded back, books lined up on the tiny shelf against the wall. She couldn't resist peering over to see what was new, hoping for one of the martial arts stories that Alexei sometimes picked up in the Wangfujing book markets (she was particularly fond of the stories of Ying Peihua, the female pirate who sailed the South China Seas with her friend Hu Limei, a fox spirit in human form). But today she was disappointed. A History of Railway Engineering in Greater Siberia, she could just about make out, in Russian. 'Sounds thrilling,' she muttered to herself. There was also something else in Russian about steam and engineering, though she couldn't recognise all the words. But no martial arts novel. 'You could at least buy books other people want to read,' she remarked to the carriage at large, which ignored her.

Reaching the furthest, darkest end, she scrambled up a rickety ladder to reach her own bunk. It was so close to the ceiling that she had to fold herself into a hunched ball if she
wanted to sit up. Although the bunk was little more than a wooden board, she had padded it with an old silk eiderdown that made it into a comfortable nest and smelt reassuringly of sandalwood, the smell she always associated with Miss Yan's dark, narrow house. On her little shelf was an untidy pile of stolen sweets and ragged novels, and a family of wooden dragons that the stoker had whittled for her. And in pride of place was a hardbacked book with a blue cloth cover, its pages brittle and smudged from many fingerprints. Stolen from the Panjiayuan Market, under the nose of the snooty stall-holder, she should have handed it over to Miss Yan with all the rest of their stolen treasures, to be counted and weighed and evaluated. But on her way back, hiding from pursuit beneath a bridge, she had opened the book and seen the careful line drawings of strange, bat-like flowers, of ghostly figures raising their arms in salute, of creatures that looked a bit like cats, if cats were twisted and leathery and empty-eyed. And she had seen the railway, the iron road stretching on and on into the distance and she had never wanted anything more than to dive right into that picture, to follow that road as far as it would take her.

Weiwei picked up the book and ran a finger over the Cyrillic letters on its frontispiece: *The Cautious Traveller's Guide to the Wastelands*, by Valentin Rostov, *illustrated by the author*. She hadn't understood the Russian words, when she had first stolen the book and hidden it away from Miss Yan and the other children's greedy eyes. All she had cared about were the pictures. She had heard of the Wastelands – everyone had – but only as stories from the older children to scare the younger ones into nightmares. Only as a warning – *Don't go beyond the Wall!* But these pictures didn't scare her. They beckoned her onwards; towards the railway station, watching the trains depart and pestering the Station Master with questions. And eventually, towards the Trans-Siberian Company itself.

Underneath the title was a picture of a row of trees on a low hill against the sky. Drawn in such detailed pencil strokes the trees seemed to spring from the landscape, oddly alive. And strung between them, hardly visible at all, were delicate threads so light it seemed they would blow straight off the page. According to his account of his journey, Valentin Rostov didn't find out what they were, but they never failed to fascinate Weiwei. They made her feel light inside, as if she could feel a breeze through her own hair. She turned the pages reverently, though she knew every picture and every word. 'Another trip, Mr Rostov,' she whispered. She would be a cautious traveller, just as he recommended, but also an observant one, like him.

On the wall of the carriage, a clock chimed the hour, and Weiwei sighed. Clocks were important on the Trans-Siberian Express, and one was set into every carriage wall (wound
assiduously if unenthusiastically every two days by a rail rat), with their relentless ticking
followed to the second by meals and shifts and routine. Clocks were important, because
without them the train would become unmoored. Time would slip from its gears and
numbers, leak out into the wide spaces and the forests and the endless sky. She muttered at
the tyranny of the chimes but it was still reassuring to hear them, in the most silent parts of
the night, like a thread that led all the way to Moscow.

Now she scampered down the ladder and made a half-hearted attempt to smooth the
creases from her uniform, which already appeared decidedly crumpled. Crouching down to
peer under the bottom bunk, she made out a small, curled up shape. 'Hi, Aloysha,' she
whispered, and pulled some strips of dried meat out of her pocket. The shape opened one
amber eye and regarded her steadily, but didn't deign to move. 'I'll just leave it here, then.
Take your time, no need to thank me, I'm just sharing my food out of the goodness of my
own heart.' She placed the meat on the floor and was gratified to hear the beginnings of a
loud purr.

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'Zhang Weiwei!' A cold voice from beneath her. 'You're wanted in First.'

She froze. Then she pretended not to have heard and carried on climbing monkey-like
up to the luggage racks. She'd always preferred Third Class to First. She could take the smell
of food already on the turn, she could take the pushing and spitting and crowding. At least
people looked at her, here, even if it was just to pester her with questions. In First Class they
just talked at her. Even though the ladies' dresses were so beautiful she longed to reach out
and touch them, and even though they wore bright jewels in their hair and sometimes had
whole cases of books, all this didn't make up for the thankless task of serving them.

'Zhang Weiwei, I know you heard me. Insolence will not be tolerated on this train.
You can learn respect, or you can leave.'

Ah Pang was only twenty four, but he had risen quickly through the ranks of the
Trans-Siberia Company, from cabin boy to steward. He was good at pleasing the right
people, an obsequious smile spreading across his face and making his chin disappear into his
neck whenever the better class of passenger demanded something, or when a superior was
nearby.

'The Chief Steward wants to talk to you.' He gave a nasty smile, and Weiwei's heart
sank. The First Class Steward was in charge of discipline. If he wanted to talk to you, it
wasn't a good thing. She racked her brains for what she could have done such a short way
into the journey. Wages were docked for misdemeanours such as tardiness or slovenliness,
both of which Weiwei had been guilty of in the past. But she was fairly sure she had had no
time to be late for anything so far, and her uniform was, if not positively shining, then at least
acceptably clean.

'The fine, fine,' Weiwei jumped down, timing her landing to knock Ah Pang's hat askew. He
clutched at it in annoyance.

'And put your cap on straight, for heaven's sake. No need to give him something else
to scold you about.' Ah Pang had the trick of sounding pompous whatever he was saying, and
of looking down his nose at people even though he wasn't that tall, so frequently ended up
having to try to look pompous whilst gazing up.

'It is straight.' Weiwei glared at him. Ah Pang curled his lips in a supercilious smile.

'Hardly surprising,' he murmured, just loud enough for her to hear, as she turned
away. She clenched her fists but didn't turn back. Ah Pang never lost an opportunity to make
sly comments about her background, or her orphan status. As if she cared what he thought!
But she couldn't stop a dark curl of resentment wind its way, snake-like, around her heart.

She squeezed her way through the Third Class sleepers and dining car, pausing to
sneak into the kitchen and swipe a handful of dried fruits into her pocket.

'Zhang Weiwei don't put on that innocent look with me, I know you're up to no good!'
Anya Koryovska the Cook shouted after her. Weiwei turned, spreading her hands and
shrugging her shoulders in her best, *What, me?* look. Anya Koryovska gave one of her
famous belly laughs and cuffed one of the kitchen boys over the head. 'Who let rats into my
nice clean kitchen, eh? You need to be more careful in the future!'

Weiwei made herself scarce before the kitchen boys could take revenge.

Between the Third Class dining car and the First Class dining car was a cramped
space known to the rail workers as the Divide, or sometimes, sarcastically, as Second Class.
Weiwei had never quite managed to find a straight answer to why the train had a First and a
Third class, but not a Second. Mr Rostov, in his book, argued that the original architects of
the Company had overstretched themselves and run out of money. Alexei claimed it was
because the architects of the train simply forgot. (This was what happened when important
things were entrusted to overfed men in offices, he said).

Whatever the reason, on the Trans-Siberian Express, Second Class existed only in this
dividing space, where cooks and hands from both kitchens came to snooze or exchange
gossip about the passengers. This gave it an unusual neutrality, above the class divisions
amongst the passengers which tended to be replicated in the staff who served them. And even
though Jia Hongwei the First Class chef stated that the food in Third was not fit for street
vermin, and even though Anya Koryovska stated that the food in First wouldn't fill up the
belly of a gnat, the two chefs were known to sit on the narrow benches in the Divide and
share a pot of *wulong* tea and a slow game of cards.

It was also where the rail workers came for a moment's respite from the passengers,
so Weiwei wasn't surprised to find it currently occupied by Andrei, Under-Steward to the
First Class Steward, looking as mournful as usual. 'Escaping?' she grinned.

'Meditating,' he replied. 'I hear it is highly recommended by your monks for
improving the mind and the body and increasing patience.'

She nodded sympathetically. 'That is certainly what the monks say.'

She didn't envy him his job. She'd never understood why the passengers in First Class
needed quite so many people to look after them. Perhaps, she thought, being rich just made
you learn things more slowly, so you never got the hang of the basics.

'I heard I'm wanted,' she said.

'I can't imagine why,' said Andrei. 'Standards are clearly slipping around here.' He
cocked his head towards First Class. 'Some especially demanding guests, this trip. I think
there's extra help needed with the luggage. If anyone asks, you didn't see me.'

'I didn't. In fact, I don't know why I'm talking to myself. Better go before I talk back.'

She skipped away, feeling much perkier. The First Class luggage carriage was sacred
ground and thus the rail rats lusted after it, constantly. Whilst anyone could walk along the
narrow passageway that, as in most of the carriages of the train, ran along on edge of it, the
luggage compartment itself was windowless and bolted with heavy iron locks, to which only
the Captain and First Officer had the keys. If a passenger happened to need anything from the
compartment during the crossing, the First Officer would escort them to the door, and wait
whilst they retrieved their belongings. It was usually only at the very beginning and very end
of the journey that the lower ranks would be allowed to enter – should the captain deem them
suitably trustworthy – to help with the heavy lifting of cases of silk dresses, screens, jewels
and other marvels. But sometimes, during the journey, if a case was particularly hard reach,
Weiwei – as the smallest and skinniest of the rail rats – would be called upon to scramble
over the mountains of luggage to retrieve it. And if occasionally small items of value went
missing, the First Class passengers were usually safely ensconced in their hotel or home by
the time they noticed, and the trip was so long that it was hard to remember exactly what had
been packed, anyway, and servants were so unreliable these days… Weiwei was careful
never to take anything too valuable. A brooch here, a necklace there, and only from the fullest boxes.

She was so busy daydreaming of luggage car treasures that she didn't attempt to steal anything from the First Class dining car, and barely glanced at the salon as she passed through, eventually running straight into the First Class Steward, who looked disapprovingly at her.

'Zhang Weiwei, stop loitering, you're needed,' he said, ignoring the fact that she had not in any way been loitering. But for once she was too excited to be annoyed and followed the Steward down the corridor without even pulling any faces at his back. Here there was thick red carpet on the floor, and the wood panelling on the walls was polished and gleaming, and gas lamps glowed in bright brass fittings shaped like flowers. It made Weiwei feel itchy. The Steward stopped and knocked at one of the cabin doors.

'This is the employee, sir,' he said, in English.

The cabin was one of the big staterooms, big enough to fit a bed, an armchair and a desk. When she'd first arrived, Weiwei had been fascinated by the way in which the cabins hid so much of what they contained – a wardrobe and shelves set into the wall; a little cabinet that opened to reveal a wash basin – a white porcelain bowl with bright silver taps and running water. She had stood, turning on one tap after the other, amazed when warm water gushed out over her hands.

A European man sat in an armchair. Weiwei recognised him – it was the same man she had seen on the platform, ordering his servant around. Dr Henry Grey. Looking at him better this time, she observed that he was very tall and very thin and possessed of a moustache that put her in mind of one of the long-haired dogs that the rich ladies of Beijing held beneath their arms. He gazed at her through little gold glasses perched on his nose, and she gazed back.

'And she is trustworthy?' he said, in English.

The First Steward hesitated for what Weiwei felt to be an unnecessary length of time before saying, 'All of our employees live up to the high standards which the Trans-Siberia Company expects. You may rely on Miss Zhang for an absolute dedication to her work.'

Weiwei felt that his tone of absolute sincerity was rather over-done. Dr Grey seemed convinced, however, as he waved the First Steward away and smiled benignly at her. She tried not to peer around the cabin too obviously. Next to the armchair the desk was piled high with books and papers, and there were boxes and bags scattered over the bed and the floor. She couldn't see the box that his servant had clutched to him so carefully, though.
'Do you like animals, my dear?' he said, finally.

'Er, yes,' said Weiwei, wondering if she had heard correctly.

'Good, good. An independent young person like you, I'm sure you're not afraid of anything, are you?' He beamed at her, expectantly.

'Well,' she considered things for a moment. 'I'm quite scared of jumping spiders, because they can hide in holes in the ceiling and jump out at you, and my brother said that if you swallow one it'll live inside you and weave webs between your ribs. And I don't like pincher snakes, because once I stepped on one and it bit me and my foot swelled up to the size of—'

'I see, I see,' the man held up one hand and wiped his brow the other. 'Yes, it is indeed sensible to be wary of many of our friends in the natural world, but I have a special task for a very special person, and I think you would be the perfect fit. I assure you that no jumping spiders are involved. But there are some other things you may be interested in—…'

#

'Marsh lizards!' Weiwei pressed her face to the cage, and three fat dragon-like creatures gazed back at her through multi-faceted eyes.

'You've seen them before?'

'Only in pictures. Can they really breathe fire?'

'I'm afraid the closest they get to breathing fire is having extremely bad breath. You can rest assured that your eyebrows are perfectly safe.'

Weiwei bounced from cage to cage, peering inside at lizards and insects and other things which she didn't recognise.

'So you will need to feed and water the animals daily, and change their bedding straw. I will of course be making regular checks on their health, and my manservant will be able to answer any questions you might have. He was most disappointed not to be able to carry out these tasks himself, but one of the bamboo rat seemed to take against him and there was… Well, and we cannot have anything upsetting the animals on their journey.'

Weiwei nodded, distractedly. Iridescent eyes blinked at her, and ears turned towards her. She wanted to reach out and touch their scales, their fur. One of the marsh lizards moved towards her, and stuck out its pointed tongue, as if it wanted to taste her. It belched, and she jumped backwards. Its breath smelled like rotting straw. Three little rodents with long ears and big feet huddled in another cage, flinching as Weiwei put her face closer. And all on its own was a scaly creature with a long tail and a pointed nose.

'What are you going to do with them all?'
'I plan to exhibit them to the Royal Society – they will be prize specimens in the Royal Collection. The people of England will never have seen such creatures – creatures from the East, from beyond the Wastelands. They are really quite fascinating…' He gazed at them lovingly.

'There must be all sorts of things out there', said Weiwei, 'things no-one has ever seen but us.'

Grey turned to her, excitedly. 'How right you are, my dear. What things you must have seen! You must tell me everything, I shall get Jinlu to take it all down. Ah, to have just one day out there with my traps…'

'Things that will eat you,' said Weiwei. 'Or worse. That's why we have the iron. Why no-one goes out there. There are bad things.'

There was a dreamy glint in the naturalist's eye. 'Extraordinary. What we might learn about the natural order. How many times over human knowledge could be enriched!'

'Things that look normal but aren't,' Weiwei went on, louder, in case Dr Grey was a little deaf. But that's what they were, these men with money – she had seen it before; seen the Traversers, seen the ones who simply didn't believe that the world could hold things that would do them harm – deaf to the warnings.

The Steward appeared at the carriage door. 'We are putting a great deal of trust in you,' he said. He was, Weiwei noticed, keeping well away from the cages. 'Make sure you don't let us down.'

'I won't,' said Weiwei, and for once, she was absolutely sincere.

The Steward nodded, still looking faintly doubtful. 'And the equipment you requested is being brought to your cabin, sir,' he said to Grey.

'Excellent, excellent! I shall get on with my work immediately, now that I know my specimens are in good hands.' He beamed at Weiwei. She knew why she had been given the job – it was smelly and demeaning and she was the least important person on the train. But she didn't care. Yet she couldn't help feeling a little jolt of anxiety. Such small creatures, how could someone like her possibly keep them safe?

Chapter 3: The Wall

*There is a saying in the northlands of China: 'The Emperor protects us by the will of Heaven; the Wall protects us by the will of Men.' Few ever see the Wall, just as few*
ever see the Emperor, but both presences loom large over the lives of everyone in the Capital and on the Northern Plains.


By late afternoon they had left the city far behind, and the farms had given way to the grasslands. Weiwei was in the Cartographer's tower, one of her favourite places on the train. The tower was built onto the roof of the final carriage. Like every other part of the train, it was sturdy and unbeautiful; reinforced with iron and studded with heavy spikes. You reached the top by means of a narrow set of winding steps, which opened into a circular room with a domed roof and glass all around, criss-crossed with iron bars which nonetheless allowed for an unparalleled view. It was this view that drew Weiwei back, again and again. Various telescopes and magnifying classes were built into the window, and on tables dotted around the room were compasses and other instruments Weiwei didn't recognise. And everywhere around the room were maps. Maps on the tables and maps on the floor; maps draped over chairs and hanging from the furniture. Maps drawn in intricate detail, every rock and gully labelled; and maps with all their features crossed out – the Wastelands' changes making geography untrustworthy. Weiwei knew that Suzuki-san, the Trans-Siberia Company's Cartographer, pored over the maps, trying to make sense of the changes. Sometimes when she entered the tower he was at the window, holding map over map so that everything could be seen at once; the lost overlaid with the changed overlaid with the uncertain, wavering present. 'It is important that there is a record,' he would say to her, 'Important that it was seen, and acknowledged.' She helped him note down details on the reports that he sent to the Company.

Now she stood gazing through one of the telescopes and hoping for a glimpse of a horseman or a caravan. She had on occasion seen grasslands traders in Beijing, but had only stared from a distance, as they were tall and unsmiling, and Beijingers feared the taint of the Wastelands around them. Now as she watched, figures on horseback came into view. One of them was a boy about her own age, riding a black horse, galloping towards the train. The boy's hair was loose and he wore faded red robes. He grinned, showing a flash of gold tooth. He and his horse kept pace with the train long enough for him to shout something, then he pulled on the reins and the horse veered away, out into the grasslands.

'Fools', he's saying, said Suzuki. He handed her a cup of tea. It was bitter and green and thick and Weiwei thought it tasted horrible, but with that faint possibility that one day she might suddenly find it irresistibly delicious.
'But he's out here,' said Weiwei, suppressing a grimace and trying to lick the strange furry feeling of the tea from her teeth. 'He's not even protected by iron.' She wondered what it would like to fly over the grasslands with the feel of the wind on her skin. She wondered what it smelled like out there.

'But he won't go past the Wall, Wei-chan,' said Suzuki. 'He knows better than that. And who can say we are not fools, thinking ourselves protected by a little iron and glass?'

Weiwei sighed. 'Couldn't you at least pretend to be reassuring, Suzuki-san?'

He peered at her over his glasses. 'If that is what you want, then certainly. I could give you details of the number of crossings since the railway was built, of the passengers who have safely made the crossing, of the trade and diplomatic successes that have been made possible these last eight years. I can – I assure you – bore you to tears with reassurances, but I have come to believe that you are not someone who is easily accepting of simple answers.'

Weiwei scowled into her tea. Suzuki-san had an uncomfortable knack for reading exactly what she was thinking, even when it was completely different to what she actually said.

'And besides,' he continued, with a twitch of his lips, 'isn't it rather glorious to be foolish, every now and again?'

She snorted and looked out towards the empty greenness that surrounded them. 'Or all the time, in our case,' she said.

Although Suzuki-san had a bunk in the workers' carriage, he preferred to sleep up here, so his bedding was in a neat roll on the floor, and a hammock could be raised to stretch from one side of the tower to the other.

Weiwei liked to spend her breaks up here, away from the noise and movement. She liked the way that Suzuki treated her like an equal.

The Company, for their part, liked having someone loyal to neither China nor Russia. 'They believe,' he had said, once, 'That as a Japanese I am disinterested and immune to bribery.'

'And are you?' Weiwei had asked.

He'd thought for a few moments. Suzuki-san, Weiwei had noticed, never gave an answer until he had thought about the question carefully.

'I would like to say that I am,' he'd replied, after a while, 'but if I was offered something truly tempting enough, perhaps not… I am not sure I can answer until I have proved myself as honest as I hope to be.'
Weiwei, who knew herself not to be honest, still wondered what that something would be. She told Suzuki-san about Henry Grey and the creatures in the luggage car, wrapping her fingers around the key in her pocket. (Although, thinking about it, the First Class Steward had looked at her very dubiously when he'd handed it over). She told him about the marsh lizards and the insects and the marmots, and how they were going to be displayed in England and how she was being trusted to look after them for the whole journey.

'Henry Grey…' said Suzuki. 'I've heard of him. A rival of Monsieur Saint-Cloud, isn't he?'

Weiwei tried to arrange her features into the look she thought of as 'intelligent but neutral', which she found most useful when on uncertain ground.

'Whose theories I'm sure you're familiar with, on the evolution of natural things…' Suzuki-san continued, 'Quite fascinating, and making a stir in Europe, by all accounts. It seems we all have more in common with the natural world than we thought. I believe I have one of his papers somewhere, you might find it interesting…' He darted between piles of notes and newspapers and Weiwei made a carefully non-committal noise. 'Extraordinary, really….

Saint-Cloud, I mean. Monkeys and what-not…'

Sometimes it was almost impossible to follow Suzuki-san's train of thought. He was endlessly fascinated by – as far as Weiwei could see – everything.

'Ah ha!' he flourished a news-sheet covered in dense print. 'A review of his book, it may be more convenient than the book itself.'

'But Dr Grey is also a famous man?' she asked, taking the news-sheet, rather reluctantly. For some reason she didn't want this French man to be more interesting and important. She looked at the review, squinting at the tiny Cyrillic letters. 'On the Nature of Change, by Julien Saint-Cloud, is a dangerous book whose author should not be allowed to set foot in this country,' she read aloud.

'Ah, yes, not everyone holds Monsieur Saint-Cloud in high esteem,' said Suzuki-san. 'I believe that Dr Grey in fact shares these doubts. We must all, however, make up our own minds when we have read the work in question.'

Weiwei hastily glued her eye to the telescope, hoping to distract Suzuki-san from suggesting she read any more dry talk of natural science by old foreign men.

'We will be reaching the Wall in two hours,' said Suzuki. He looked through another of the telescopes and made some notes in a ledger. Although the Cartographer's job was to map the ever-changing terrain of the Wastelands, he was also tasked with observing any changes to the land on this side of the Wall.
'Holding steady?' asked Weiwei, trying to keep her voice casual. She tried not to think of tendrils of strangeness, reaching out beneath the earth, touching the soil of northern China and making it change.

'Holding steady,' replied the Cartographer.

What had happened to the landscape, she wondered, to turn it so strange? As if it had turned against the people that once walked upon it and within it.

'Why?' she asked Suzuki, on her very first crossing. 'Why did it happen?'

And Suzuki gave the same answer she had heard ever since she was a very small child, the first time she heard of the Wastelands. 'Nobody knows,' he said. 'Not for certain, anyway. Oh, there are plenty of theories, I'm sure you've heard many of the them.'

Weiwei nodded. The earth had turned against the intruders, it was punishing them for its mistreatment. Humans had been greedy, they had wanted to take too much and give too little. There was a sickness in the land. There was a curse. There was magic. It was the fault of the Chinese, it was the fault of the Russians. All these things she had heard.

'All we know is that the changes started about two centuries ago,' Suzuki continued. 'Slowly at first, then getting faster.'

'The people who were there, when it started, what happened to them?' Weiwei asked. She'd heard lots of stories about this as well but couldn't help her horrified fascination.

'They were changed as well, some of them,' said Suzuki. 'They became... different, in different ways. Some ways so small that it took people a long time to notice, and when they did, it was too late.'

Weiwei swallowed. Everyone knew about some of the methods used, when the changes were finally noticed, and fear spread. Whole villages quarantined, burned. Fields scorched, animals abandoned. And for those who tried to flee, when the borders closed, no mercy but the barrel of a gun.

Whilst Weiwei and Suzuki were staring outwards, Henry Grey's servant's attention was on things much closer to hand.

Wu Jinlu was a careful man. He took pride in his work, and all of his masters had praised him for his neatness and attention to detail. Folding Henry Grey's clothes and placing them gently in the mahogany chest of drawers in his cabin, then picking up the dropped books and arranging them alphabetically on the bookshelf, Wu Jinlu felt a quiet sense of satisfaction. If a job was worth doing, it was worth doing well, and he had found that he did
his best thinking whilst tidying. Tidying a room was rather like tidying a mind, he thought. It was simply a case of putting everything into its correct place, even when that place did not at first seem obvious.

He patted down the cushions on the bed and winced as pain shot from his hand down his arm. He frowned. It would be time to change the bandage soon; the last thing he needed was an infection from filthy rodent teeth to complicate things further. Annoying, to have let a momentary lapse in concentration upset his plans like this. He straightened up. Still, it wasn't an insurmountable obstacle – there the girl could be dealt with in due time. He was, after all, a very tidy man.

For Weiwei, the rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of errands and demands, everyone seeming to think that if they just shouted louder she would drop everything and jump to their command. But only half her attention was on her work. The other half was carefully watching the horizon for a first glimpse of the Wall.

Like all children, Weiwei had learned about it when she was very small. She'd heard stories of the Emperor who commanded its building, over a thousand years ago and of the men whose remains lay mingled with its stones. And of course the tales of Song Tianfeng, the Builder, who fifty years ago had engineered the second building of the wall when the Wastelands began to encroach on the Empire; the moving of the original foundations one hundred miles to the north, the astonishing task of transporting thousands of stones from the quarries of the north, the reinforcing of the stone with iron.

As they drew closer she could see the passengers keeping a closer watch through the windows. The nervous prickling in the air grew, and the train workers tried not to let the feeling infect them, or at least not to let it show. Those who had made many crossings maintained an uninterested demeanour, but Weiwei could see them sneaking glances outside. Alexei spoke more loudly and swaggered more casually than usual.

The Wall appeared as a hazy smudge on the horizon at first. Then it grew, and it kept growing. She could see the guard tower ahead of them, and knew that others stood in the distance – five hundred of them, all along the border, five hundred to watch over the strange lands to the north, always awake, always ready.

Two young men standing next to her pressed their faces to the glass. 'I never thought I'd see it,' breathed one. 'Never thought it was so big.'

They fell into a reverent silence as the train slowed and the tower loomed above them and the Wall grew huger by the second. Early evening light shone down and illuminated the
grey, pockmarked stone. Weiwei thought about Song Tianfeng and all the men who gave their lives to build it. If they hadn't, would the blight have spread to Beijing? Would there be monsters prowling the countryside, horrors and hybrids and things they had no language for?

'How long will it hold?' whispered one of the young men.

'For centuries,' said the other, confidently. 'It has held for two hundred years, it will hold for hundreds more.' He looked at his companion. 'You don't need to worry. The Wall will hold.'

'None of us need to worry about the damned Wall,' muttered an older man nearby. 'We need to worry about what's beyond it.'

They had slowed to a complete halt now, almost directly underneath the tower. Weiwei could see figures moving about outside, some of them in military dress. Above them rose a huge arch of stone.

'We're in the Wall,' said the young man, amazed. 'In the Wall itself.'

And though they were too far below to see, Weiwei knew that above them were the guards stationed on the watchtower – three looking towards China, and three towards the Wastelands. She knew that they wore iron helmets, hammered into the faces of dragons and lions, as it seemed to say to anything that approached – *We too have predators here.*

Underneath the watchtowers was, incongruously, a small building with a sloping roof and a chimney and neat shutters on the windows, which looked for all the world like the home of a small, neat schoolteacher in a Russian village. As the train approached the Wall, causing the ground to rumble and the framed portraits on the wall to rattle, a tense atmosphere pervaded the little house.

The Trans-Siberia Company was renowned for its frontier-spirit and the fearlessness of its actions. It attracted those with a thirst for excitement – as well as those with nothing to lose – to work on the rails, to journey the dangerous distances. But like any Company, it needed the slow and steady; safe and solid minds to sit in patient, wood-panelled rooms and keep watch over the rise and fall of numbers and names and necessities.

Mr Medven and Mr Li, currently seated in the little house beneath the Wall, were two such minds. They were stolid and unimaginative. Not for them the thrill of the rails, the lure of the Wastelands. They were happiest behind their desks, the ground beneath their feet reassuringly still.
And for that reason, neither gentlemen could hide their gloomy expressions as the Deputy Director (Wall Division) of the Trans-Siberia Company expressed his deepest gratitude for their tireless work and enthusiasm.

'Just the men for the job, I've been told!' said the Deputy Director, trying to wipe the sweat from his face without removing his little gold-rimmed glasses. 'The kind of men this Company needs. Smuggling!' he barked, making Mr Medven and Mr Li jump. 'Smuggling, spying, and worse. That's what the rumours say. Have you seen the latest entertainments in Beijing?'

Both gentlemen murmured that they had not, although that was a lie. Anyone traversing the Beijing streets by night could not avoid the puppet shows and the songs; the stories told of the man they called the Crow, a criminal who could fly over walls, who could move through doors without opening them. Who was seen in Moscow and then in Beijing. Who used the train, they said, to move his stolen goods; silver and gold, rubies and jade. The railway was a travelling casket of treasures, they said, and more – it was the carrier of dangerous ideas.

‘Our railway,’ continued the Deputy Director. ‘Our railway has become the backdrop to so-called plotting, and possibly sedition. It will not do, gentlemen!’ Here he huffed a little and mopped his brow. ‘And so these rumours must be snuffed out. They must be got to the bottom of! And the Company has the fullest trust that you, gentlemen, will be the ones to do it.

Mr Medven and Mr Li slumped a little further into their chairs. They thought longingly of their comfortable houses in Beijing, and their cramped desks in their little offices. Neither quite understood what paths had brought them here.

'This is a delicate job, which needs men of delicate sensibilities, of tact, of keen observation. I'm sure you won't let us down.' The Deputy Director smiled encouragingly at them. But injustice burned in the hearts of Mr Medven and Mr Li, and when he escorted them to the small platform outside the Company building, the arch of the Wall towering above them, the Deputy Director couldn't help the flicker of a suspicion that they were very much not the right men for the job.

'Look out,' muttered Alexei, nudging her. 'The Family's here.' Weiwei looked up and saw two men in unremarkable suits remonstrating with a guard who was trying to help them with their cases.

'We can manage quite well, thank you,' said the European gentleman, in English.
'Though if it is too heavy for you…' said the Chinese gentleman, also in English. 'No, no, it is barely a burden. Please, if you would like any help…'

The guard looked on helplessly, and Alexei groaned under his breath. Weiwei frowned. 'Who are they?'

'The Family,' said Alexei, steering her down the corridor away from the little scene. 'Our beloved employers. The Trans-Siberia Company in all its extremely odd glory.'

'Oh!' said Weiwei, light dawning. She looked back at the two men, who continued to aggressively out-polite each other.

'You can spot them a mile away. They have a certain… shadow to them. Like the job's sort of leaked into them.'

Weiwei stared, fascinated. The Company, though ultimately what paid her wages, had always been a distant, fuzzy entity, often grumbled about but rarely seen. There was certainly something office-y about them, thought Weiwei, compared to most of the passengers on the train. They looked as if they were going into work, not embarking on a dangerous journey. And they were speaking English – the diplomatic decision which decided that neither the Russian nor the Chinese side had the linguistic upper hand in the company.

'Why are they here? I've never seen any of them on the train before…'

'The Crow,' whispered Alexei, with relish.

'What – they think he's… on the train?' Weiwei couldn't help peering around, as if she might see a creeping figure emerging from the carriage bathroom.

'I reckon they think there's something going on with the train. I heard from the other engineers that the Company is getting jumpy, seeing smugglers and spies everywhere they look. Maybe these two have been sent to investigate,' Alexei ended, in a sarcastic tone that told Weiwei just what he thought about the likelihood of their success.

_The Crow_, thought Weiwei. It was all Miss Yan's children had wanted to talk about this spring. The Crow and the patterns he left – what did they mean? A theft here, a disruption there – his targets were both the rich and famous and the inconsequential. He had never killed (_yet_, said the papers), but he was not above maiming. His victims would wake in the night, pain searing across their forehead, blood fresh on their pillow. The Crow held a knife in his claws, it was said. Nothing linked the victims Only the sign, carved impossibly deep into the hardest stone walls; copied over and over again throughout the city. The Crow has passed this way, he has dropped a black feather. Know this, and wonder. Weiwei shivered, unsure if it was excitement or fear.
'Urgh, they're going to be sticking their noses into our work the whole journey and trying to tell us how to do things,' Alexei went on, oblivious, 'even though they're usually crouched in their little office and don't have a clue.' Alexei made a rude gesture at their backs. 'Keep your head down, that's my advice,' he said to Weiwei. 'Don't call attention to yourself and you should be fine.'

Weiwei vowed that she would certainly not call attention to herself. In fact, she prided herself on being as inconspicuous as possible. Even when not actively up to no good, on the train, being unobtrusive was generally the only option to avoid being asked to do more work. Recently, she had been experimenting with standing very still to try and blend into the background like certain animals she had heard of, who could look just like a piece of tree bark or a blade of grass until they moved. Her success so far had, admittedly, been limited, but she was resolved to keep practising.

With a jolt, the train began to move again and they were out from under the Wall and into the lands on the other side. The Wastelands. Beside the tracks she saw tall poles with lanterns hung from their tops. And around them, at a distance, a barbed wire fence. She looked away, quickly. No-one wanted to think of the Vigil, not yet. In the window's reflection she saw all the three men beside her touch the amulets that hung around their necks, mutter a whispered prayer.

There would be no stopping now for the next twenty days.

Chapter 4: The First Night

*Travellers are advised to avoid looking out of the windows at night. Keep the curtains closed and the lights burning.*


Weiwei hated the first night. The passengers were argumentative or clingy or drunk and often all three at once. The train was wakeful, on edge. No-one wanted to close their eyes for fear of what they might see there – the thin fingers of nightmares crowding in at their eyelids; the stories, the rumours, and now the reality – that they were past the point of safety now; that the darkness outside was unbroken by friendly lights or open doors and welcoming fires.

She scurried around the saloon car, collecting glasses and sweeping up nut shells. She longed to go and feed the animals but there were too many people shouting for her. The
gloomy musician was playing melancholy songs on his violin. 'Play us something happy, for god's sake!' someone called, but Weiwei knew that none of the musician's songs were happy. They were all played in a minor key, and they all made her think of lost things.

'What's that?' a woman cried, her face to the window. Weiwei glimpsed a dark shape outside but it was hidden by their reflections, the lights catching the gold embroidery on the woman's dress, the reds and purples all doubled, both within the train and without.

'Close the curtains for goodness sake,' said Ah Pang. 'People are jumping at their own reflections.'

Weiwei tugged at the heavy red hangings and hid the darkness away. She had a brief glimpse of her own face, ghostly at the window, surrounded by golden lamps suspended in the night.

Mr Medven and Mr Li sat in one corner. Their neckties were done up very tightly, so that Weiwei imagined they somehow had mechanical heads which would turn like owls', independent of their bodies. They held their drinks as if they were uncertain of the correct etiquette for pouring liquid down one's throat. Vassily, who worked behind the saloon car bar, was eyeing them balefully. 'Best vodka in Russia,' he muttered, as Weiwei sidled over to steal a moment's rest and hopefully some olives. 'And they're letting it go warm.' He slid a bowl towards Weiwei and she grinned sympathetically, though she had so far failed to understand the seriousness with which Vassily and many others took vodka, which to her mind tasted of bitterness and grass.

'I'm afraid your two friends are not the kind of men for whom enjoyment comes easily.'

Weiwei turned. The speaker was the woman she had seen earlier from the platform, watching Wu Jinlu. She spoke in near-perfect Russian, and carried herself with the thoughtless air of someone who knew their own worth, and knew that others did too. Weiwei's well-trained eye took in her discreet jewellery and the expensive cut of her elegant black qipao, and moved closer, industriously polishing the already gleaming brass on the counter. Weiwei noticed that her silver hairpin matched the silver streaks in her hair, though her face was unlined and her age impossible to guess.

'Anyone who treats the drink I compose with so little respect is not my friend,' said Vassily. 'You, however, I see are a lady of discerning taste.' He presented her with a drink and an ingratiating smile. Weiwei rolled her eyes.

'Bartender, two glasses of champagne. No, why not make that a bottle!' A young man with blond hair and very blue eyes sauntered up to the bar. He gave a formal bow, one hand
behind his back, to the woman, and Weiwei's gaze flicked to Vassily just in time to see an expression of annoyance cross his face.

'Madam,' said the blond man, in English, though Weiwei thought his accent was probably French. 'I am charmed to make your acquaintance. My name is Guillaume LaFontaine. And this is my wife, Sophie.'

One of the most beautiful women Weiwei had ever seen was walking towards them. She had reddish-gold hair and eyes the colour of the topaz on temple walls. A necklace of rubies encircled her neck. Weiwei only realised she was staring, open-mouthed, when Vassily banged a glass of water down next to her.

'It is a pleasure to meet you both. My name is Lan Meihua. I must apologize that my French is rather rusty, so I shall have to keep to English.'

'My dear Madam, not at all. I'm afraid we speak not a word of your language, despite our travels this past month.'

Vassily mouthed 'Traversers' and raised his eyebrows. Weiwei watched them from beneath her lashes. Traversers were passengers who made the dangerous journey by choice. 'Idiots,' Alexei called them. 'Rich idiots, which makes them more idiotic still. Thinking they're being brave.'

'Perhaps being rich makes you brave,' Weiwei had said.

'Perhaps it makes you stupid,' replied Alexei.

The saloon car was in fact an addition to the train, made only after the Trans-Siberia Company realised the existence of Traversers. Weiwei had read in The Cautious Traveller's Guide; 'The fact that travellers would want to gaze out upon the emptiness of the wastelands had simply not occurred to the first builders. The train was a means to an end, an iron road between empires. It would move human cargo, yes, but more importantly it would move silver and silk and gunpowder; it would feed the greedy mouths of the capitals. Such a dangerous gamble; who would make it willingly?' Of course, it turned out there were many gamblers, so rich in money and time they had to find dangerous ways of spending it. Weiwei found that such travellers were careless of the beautiful things they owned. They had provided her with rich rewards on all her Crossings.

The Frenchman was being ingratiating. 'And you, Madam, what brings you on such a perilous journey?'

'I am fulfilling my late husband's wish,' said Lan Meihua, 'that I should explore the world.'

'How admirably modern of him,' Guillaume beamed.
'And was it your wish, as well?' Sophie spoke for the first time and her voice was richer and deeper than Weiwei had expected. Her eyes regarded Lan Meihua steadily.

'Yes,' said Lan Meihua. 'It was my wish as well.'

There was something in their expressions, in their voices, that Weiwei almost understood but was still just out of reach.

She was trying to inch closer to the little group, whilst pretending to be busy cleaning, when the saloon car door opened and Wu Jinlu entered, deferent and quiet. The Traversers didn't look up, but Weiwei's stomach suddenly dropped – the animals, she hadn't checked on them yet… Was he looking for her, to tell her that Dr Grey had decided on someone more responsible? She hurried out of his eyeline, and towards the door, then froze when he looked right at her. But his eyes passed over her and he continued to observe the room. Strange, thought Weiwei, even as she heaved a sigh of relief. It was clear that Dr Grey wasn't present – so who was he looking for? She frowned. She couldn't shake off that feeling of familiarity, some stirring of a memory.

No matter. For now, she had a more pressing task to attend to. She slipped out of the carriage, putting the Traversers and their wealth out of her mind for now, and along the long corridors towards the luggage car.

Unlocking the door with her very own key she felt a shiver of excitement. 'Sorry I'm late,' she said. A damp, peaty smell assailed her nostrils. She climbed over piles of hat boxes and shoved aside trunks. The stacks of trunks and boxes beckoned invitingly but the lizards flicked their tongues at her and in another cage, small furred creatures bounced over one another and clung onto the bars, their noses and whiskers quivering, and Weiwei forgot her training and failed to feel the twitch of need in her fingers or the hunger in her belly. 'Here you go,' she whispered to the creatures, pouring water into their little bowl, and sprinkling seeds on the floor of the cage. They jumped away from her hand, then edged forwards, eyes on the food. Weiwei sat on the floor, cross-legged, to watch them eat, fascinated by the way they grasped the seeds in their tiny, delicate paws. She fed the marsh lizards – keeping well back from their rancid breath – and the salamanders and the polecat. Closer to the back of the carriage were three mountain voles. They didn't like the light, Grey had said, so their cage needed to be kept in the dark and the damp. Weiwei lifted the heavy cloth, just a fraction, so she could peek inside. Two pairs of large green eyes blinked at her. 'Hello,' she whispered. In the darkness it took her a moment to work out what was wrong. Then she saw it. Huddled at the back of the cage was the third vole, motionless.
A sick feeling clutched at her stomach. 'Psst,' she hissed. The other two creatures cringed, but the third remained motionless. 'No, no, please no.' She had only left them alone for a few hours. They had barely begun the journey, surely nothing could have gone wrong with them so quickly? Carefully, she slid the cage door open. The two creatures chittered angrily, but she bit her lip and reached for the huddled heap of fur at the back.

The creature was cold. She brought it out and laid it carefully on her lap, though she already knew that it would not move. Nothing this cold would move. Its fur was softer than anything she had ever touched. Its eyes were still open, but clouded, like the marbles they played with in the alleyway outside Miss Yan's. And there was something sunken about it, as if all the living stuff had gone, leaving only an empty skin. She frowned. Peering closer, she noticed two little drops of blood on its neck, as if something with very sharp teeth had sucked the life out of it, then thrown it away.

It wasn't her fault, was it? It must have been one of the others, they'd turned on their sibling, perhaps wanting more food for themselves. There was nothing she could have done, nothing. But she couldn't help remembering Grey's words; 'I am trusting you.'

Should she tell him? Her heart sank to think of it. If she hadn't been late... She would be thought irresponsible, her job would be given to someone else, someone who didn't allow innocent animals to die, and she would be back to scrubbing and cleaning.

Slowly, she put the body back in the cage. She was untrustworthy. Unworthy altogether. Perhaps Miss Yan had been right – this was not the life for her. She belonged in the backstreets, in the shadows.

When she finally crept into her bunk she slept badly, troubled by thoughts of the two surviving creatures, there in the darkness, with the smell of their brother's body. Did they even see him as a brother? Or as flesh to be nibbled cautiously, then devoured, enjoyed? She tossed and turned through the night, falling hourly out of strange dreams.

Chapter 5: Debatable Lands

_We pass the ruins of a once-great city. From here, armies set out to ride and conquer, galloping across continents before the tide turned against them. Beyond the ruins, a statue, impossibly huge. It can still be recognised as the figure of a man, staring out towards the lands he sought to conquer. Now, of course, he stares only into desolate spaces no longer ruled by man but something much wilder._

_The Cautious Traveller's Guide_, p20
Outside the train were reminders of what happens to left-behind things. The skeletons of arches rose from the grasslands, as if they'd been left, forgotten. Other stones stood, in patterns that must have once made sense but had now lost all borders, of what the Wastelands could do. Weiwei never knew whether she was fascinated or horrified, but she couldn't look away. There had been a capital here, once. A place where the nomads had come to trade, a middle ground where Siberia and China had met.

Pale morning sun was lighting up the early mist over the grasslands as she padded the corridors, her arms full spare parts for the engineers and her head full of worries.

Usually, she loved the sensation walking in one direction whilst the train was travelling in another. It was so strange to be moving in two different ways at once, as if she had come untethered from the earth and its natural laws. Yet this morning, the feeling of movement simply made her feel sick. She couldn't concentrate on any of her tasks, and was even yelled at by Anya Koryovska for her lack of care. All she could think about was the animals, yet she dreaded looking in at the cages and finding another death.

'You look terrible,' said Alexei, when she dropped the spare parts at his feet. 'Surely you can't be railsick already?'

She mumbled something about bad food and scuttled away before he could ask any more questions.

'There's a spillage in Third, go and fetch a mop,' yelled one of the stewards, from down the corridor. She pretended she hadn't heard, and picked up speed in the other direction, but bumped right into another steward.

'Ah, Weiwei, go and ask an engineer why the lights are flickering in the saloon car,' he said, 'it's making the passengers jumpy.'

'And after that go and see what chef wants in the kitchen, he's on the warpath again,' said someone else. 'Oh, and Ah Pang wants to see you. Something about unmade beds…'

They both hurried off, looking busy and important in their red uniforms. Weiwei, on the other hand, stopped. She took a deep breath. Then she turned around, and walked briskly towards the luggage car. If you walked with a great sense of purpose and your head held high, she had found, then people were much more likely to leave you alone. And she wanted, very much, to be left alone.

The wet, peaty smell inside the luggage car was stronger this morning. Weiwei locked the door behind her and leaned against it, her eyes closed. The animals shuffled and squeaked, and a new, pungent smell suggested that someone had just panicked. But the scents
of the outside world, as unfamiliar as they were, seemed to anchor her more firmly to the present. The darkness calmed her. The animals needed her in a different way to the nervous, impatient passengers.

Then the darkness moved, quiet as a whisper.

Weiwei froze. She imagined herself to be one of the marsh lizards, poised, one foot raised, unmoving but for the flick of her eyelids. The seconds passed. Minutes. And she might have thought she'd imagined it but for the fact that the animals had stilled, too. As if they sensed a predator amongst them.

The darkness turned, and turned into a face, pale and framed by a deeper darkness. Two inky eyes looked straight at Weiwei.

Weiwei looked back. The long moment between two breaths stretched out, congealed...

…and was interrupted by a loud banging on the door.

'Zhang Weiwei! Are you hiding in there?' Ah Pang's Tianjin accent, more unwelcome than ever, continued, 'Don't think that you can slope off for naps just because you've got a new job!'

The two eyes didn't leave Weiwei's face. Didn't blink.

'Keep yer hair on!' shouted Weiwei. Then slowly, slowly, she slid a couple of boxes across, to conceal the gap at the back of the carriage.

'Have you got even lazier since last Crossing?' said Ah Pang, when she opened the door. He peered past her, his habitual suspicious frown wrinkling his forehead.

'I ate a bowl of Tianjin dumplings for breakfast and they made my brain work more slowly,' she said, straight-faced.

Ah Pang gave a grunt of disgust and pushed her into the next carriage.

'My Auntie says I'll never be the same again!' chirruped Weiwei, then ducked as he tried to aim a slap at her head. A lady in a long dress walked by, holding onto the wall, and looked scandalized. Ah Pang reddened. 'Ma'am', he said, touching his cap. Weiwei took the opportunity to scuttle away, one thought in her mind – stowaway.

A stowaway in the luggage compartment. An intruder, a thief. The rules of the train were very clear – stowaways would be dealt with severely, as would anyone found harbouring one. Buying a ticket – even a Third Class one – was expensive. Some families would save up for years to afford the fare. So the Trans-Siberia Company looked upon travelling without a ticket as a crime. The rules were: If a stowaway was discovered when the train was still outside the Wall, it would stop at the nearest station and the stowaway would
be escorted away by the police. If they were discovered when the train was in the Wastelands, they would be confined to a cell, and dealt with when the train reached its destination. It was thus Weiwei’s duty, as a member of the Company, to report the shadowy figure in the luggage compartment immediately.

But Weiwei couldn’t help thinking – hadn’t there been something not quite right about the figure in the darkness? Something about the way it had moved, about the way its eyes had opened and closed, something about the way the animals had behaved. It had made her feel shivery, as though she were prey.

Mr Medven and Mr Li were making themselves at home in their cabin (though it was quite possible that neither Mr Medven or Mr Li had ever really been at home anywhere). The Captain herself had shown them to it, and they had managed to thank her politely without ever meeting her eye. Although they knew that the Trans-Siberia Company employed females, due to a lack of workers willing to risk the danger, they saw no reason to acknowledge this any more than was necessary.

It was a First Class cabin, but shared between two gentlemen unlikely to ever call each other ‘friends’, for all its luxury it soon began to seem very cramped indeed.

‘Well,’ said Mr Medven, arranging a neat pile of papers on the table next to his bed, ‘we should begin our investigations. Why don’t you start with the First Class passengers, and I’ll start with the Third?’

Mr Li blinked and tidied his own papers into an even neater pile. ‘Perhaps, if we are to organise ourselves in the most efficient way, we should both begin with Third Class. That we can be assured of a thorough investigation.’

Mr Medven glared at him, but failed to think of a convincing counter-argument. It was the heat, that was the problem. He could feel beads of sweat trickling down his back and the ceiling fan was just moving the hot air slowly around. It made it hard to think logically. And the truth was, neither of them particularly wanted to talk to either the First Class or the Third Class passengers. The Third Class were loud and dirty, and the First Class eccentric and disdainful. Mr Medven and Mr Li were, by necessity and inclination, middle class. And like many men of their position, they felt that travel was both a luxury and an unpleasant chore, and in the face of this paradox, much preferred to stay at home.

‘As you wish,’ said Mr Medven. And then, in a fit of unaccustomed candour; ‘Although really, one cannot imagine that this ‘Crow’, if he is so clever, will show his hand in so confined a space as this.’
'But if that is the case, what are we to write in our report?' replied Mr Li, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

'We are sure to find evidence of wrongdoing somewhere,' said Mr Medven. 'Let us hope that it does not find us first.'

The encounter in the luggage car had unsettled Weiwei more than she would have liked to admit. It wasn't just the fact that there was a stowaway on the train, and that she should report it immediately (that she should have already reported it and that if she didn’t – and then the stowaway was discovered – she would inevitably be implicated in covering it up, for how could she not have noticed, going in there every day to feed the animals?); it was the feeling, scratching at the half open doors of her memory, that something about the stowaway was wrong. That it had moved in a way that wasn't quite human. That it wasn't just that it shouldn't be on the train, but that it shouldn't be here at all. Then how did it get on the train? And what would happen if someone approached it? The more she thought about it, the more she worried. Had it just been her mind playing tricks? The Wastelands did that to you, everyone knew – the endless miles, uncertain and changeable, they made you start to doubt your own mind, they turned you against yourself. She needed to go back and see for herself, but the thought of something waiting in the darkness chilled her.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't notice the small figure until he stood on tiptoes beside her, peering out of the window.

'Oh, it's you,' she said, suddenly remembering him from the first day; the young boy who Alexei had enjoyed tormenting.

The boy looked up at her with a dejected expression. 'That's about how most people sound when they see me,' he said, gloomily.

'Oh, no, sorry, I didn't mean…'

'I'm used to it,' he said, in such a tone of world-weary melancholy that she couldn't help bursting out laughing.

'How old are you?' she asked.

'I'm ten,' the boy replied. 'How old are you?'

'Fourteen,' said Weiwei, rounding up.

The boy looked at her respectfully. 'It must be exciting, working on a train.'

'It is, sometimes.' She looked down at him. 'Though to tell the truth, it's also sometimes boring, and hard, and people are always telling you what to do.'

He nodded sympathetically and rubbed his nose with his sleeve. 'I hate that,' he said.
Weiwei noticed he was clutching a rolled up sheet of paper and some pencils. 'Do you like drawing?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'Look'. He unrolled the paper and displayed it proudly. Weiwei stared. The paper was covered in tiny, intricate drawings of plants and trees. Some of them were finely detailed, others more quickly sketched.

'Some things are too far away,' he said, 'I can't see them well so have to guess.'

'They're really good,' said Weiwei. 'Really good.' As good as Rostov's drawings in The Cautious Traveller's Guide. Astonishingly good for a ten-year-old boy, though she was careful not to seem too surprised. 'What's your name?' she asked.

'Jing Tang,' he replied.

'I will look for your work when you become famous.'

Jing gave a sudden shy smile, which lit up his face and made him look more like a child. But it vanished just as quickly. 'My parents think drawing is silly. They don't think it means anything.'

'Your parents,' said Weiwei, 'are wrong.'

Jing gave another little smile, and they stood at the window in companionable silence. They were passing a statue, fallen and crumbling, but bearing all the marks of a man. His head lay on one side, his eyes forever gazing at the train tracks. It made her unexpectedly sad. Weiwei felt somehow that they should be acknowledged, marked, like the tombs they passed sometimes in quiet graveyards in Beijing, when they would bow to the dead before walking on. But the train passed through them without a pause.

'What happened?' said Jing. 'Did it just…' He trailed off. He had taken out his paper and pencils and was sketching, quickly.

Weiwei shrugged. 'They all left, didn't they? What would you do, living next door to monsters?'

Jing gazed around. 'But there's nothing here. It looks… safe.'

Weiwei looked out at the quiet ruins. The early morning mist was lifting and the sky was a perfect, pale blue. She knew what he meant. Sometimes passengers would try to get out. Look, they would say, Look how peaceful it is.

'Tigers look safe when they're sleeping, don't they?' she said to Jing. 'You can't always see it but that doesn't mean it isn't there.'

At that moment, two stewards entered the carriage.

'I'm telling you, she wouldn't let them on if she thought they were, you know…' one was saying.
'But it's not her choice, is it? It's the Company's. Even she's got to listen to them.'

The other one snorted. 'I wouldn't fancy their chances, if it came down to it.'

'But there's something up, you can't deny it – didn't you hear about the break-in–'

Seeing Weiwei and Jing, they stopped talking immediately, and walked past, looking officious. She smiled to herself. There were things to find out. On the train, information was power, she knew that. She would be listening closely.

But Jing wasn't listening at all, because sauntering down the corridor came Aloysha, swishing his tail elegantly. 'Oh, a cat!' Jing crouched down and started patting his jacket.

'Look, I have some food for you, cat.'

'Be careful,' said Weiwei, 'as soon as he knows you're a soft touch he'll be following you around like annoying, sneezy shadow.'

Aloysha delicately took the twist of dried meat from Jing's fingers, purring loudly, and rubbed himself around the boy's knees.

'Is he your cat?'

'He's the train's cat,' said Weiwei. 'Or rather, we're his. He was a stowaway – we were just out of Moscow before we found him, sniffing around the dining car as if he owned the place.' It had been a difficult crossing. Shadows on the line, storms on the horizon. But the cat had just gone about his business, calm as anything. 'Passengers started staying he brought good luck,' she went on, 'So we had to let him stay, after that. One of the cooks named him after her great uncle. Said the greedy look in his eyes reminded her of him.'

'He's lovely,' said Jing. 'All the cats in where we live... where we lived... Just looked scared and ran away. They wouldn't let you touch them. His fur is so soft.'

Weiwei eyed the cat thoughtfully. 'He does have a good feel for people. Knows how to get what he wants, anyway.'

Suzuki-san said that if you had a theory you should test it out. Even if it was a mad theory, and it didn't work, you might still learn something, he said.

Weiwei had a theory.

After Jing had slouched away, muttering about being unappreciated by everyone except a cat, she picked up Aloysha, who gave an annoyed huff, though refrained from digging his claws into her shoulder (for now, his posture seemed to say). There were some surprised looks from the passengers as a small girl carrying a large cat stalked down the corridors, but Weiwei ignored them, and made a couple of stops to pick up the other elements of her plan. When she got to the luggage car she paused, her heart beating uncomfortably
fast. Right. Try again, she told herself. She had a job to do, and a rail rat's pride to uphold. Finally, she unlocked the door and entered quietly, keeping a firm grip on Aloysha, who by this time was picking up on her anxiety, or was perhaps just disappointed by the lack of food. His demeanour changed instantly, however, as soon as they were inside. Ears upright, nose twitching, his tail began to swish from side to side and Weiwei felt sharp claws through her jacket.

There was, she realised, belatedly, an important flaw in her plan.

She had hoped that Aloysha, with his unerring judgement of character, would reassure her that whoever was hiding in the darkness could hold no danger. If, on the other hand, he refused to rub himself around the intruder's ankles and beg it for food, then she could safely assume that it was up to no good, and inform the Captain with no further feelings of guilt.

What she had failed to take into account was the number of other animal smells in the luggage car which were currently sending Aloysha into wild fits of crouching, pouncing, and cringing. He stalked between the crates, tail bristling, and she worried that he would be able to take a viciously clawed swipe between the bars before he even got near the darker end of the carriage.

'That way, Aloyshka, that way,' she whispered encouragement, throwing a piece of dried meat. He bounded after it and gobbled it down, then jumped backwards when a lizard flicked its tongue at him. He then began to wash himself with a great show of unconcern.

'Useless cat,' muttered Weiwei. She eyed the end of the carriage warily. Nothing moved, but she could have sworn that the wet, boggy smell was even stronger this time. Just the animals, she thought to herself. Nothing more. Stop being ridiculous. She approached the cages cautiously, and relief swept over her when one after the other proved utterly normal, the animals bored or nervous but alive and whole. Slowly, carefully, she filled up bowls of water and scattered seeds or – in the case of the lizards – dried insects which Dr Grey had given her. She worked her way towards the back of the carriage, murmuring under her breath to the animals, and ignoring Aloysha, who had decided that he didn't trust anything in here, and was instead staying close to Weiwei's ankles. Slowly, slowly, she moved towards the shadows.

Silence. The animals had quietened. Even Aloysha held himself very still.

'I brought you some bread,' said Weiwei, in Russian, her voice sounding shaky and over-loud. 'I thought you might be hungry.'

The silence grew.
'It's got seeds in it. And it was fresh yesterday...' Weiwei suddenly felt very foolish. Had she even seen what she thought she saw? Could it not have been just a trick of the light? The train did strange things to you, she knew that. Made you imagine things that weren't there. Made you... what was that word the Captain used... susceptible. She shook her head. Thank goodness she hadn't said anything to Alexei, he'd never let her forget this.

'What an idiot...' she started to say to Aloysha, then stopped. His ears were pricked up and he was holding his tail very high, and his nose was twitching. He was staring very intently into the shadows.

'And... And I have water,' said Weiwei.

The shadows moved, coalesced, turned into a girl.

'Water,' she said.

Weiwei had never seen anyone who's eyes changed colour before, but that was what happened when the girl in the luggage carriage – stowaway, intruder – drank from the mug of water that Weiwei held out to her, dumbly. When the girl first moved towards her, and into the light of the storm lantern, Weiwei thought her eyes were a kind of muddy dark green. But when she drank from the mug – thirstily, noisily, eyes closed and as if her whole body was drawing down the liquid – then passed it back, her eyes had turned to a clear slate grey, the kind of colour the sky turned on winter mornings in Beijing, when snow blew from the north.

'Thank you,' said the girl. She was taller than Weiwei, and although she was thin her hands looked strong and she held herself in a way that suggested tension and flight and speed. Her skin was very pale and her hair very dark and she was wearing a long dress, the kind that was fashionable in Beijing these days, with a high collar like a qipao but a full skirt, like a European lady's. The blue satin of the dress was crumpled, and there were stains down the front.

'Do you... do you want the bread as well?' said Weiwei, holding it out. The girl took it cautiously and folded it away in her skirt. She didn't take her eyes off Weiwei's face. Aloysha hadn't moved but seemed to be vibrating with suppressed energy.

'Are you... do you... Do you need anything else? I can steal... get stuff for you, if you want. I mean, if you need it, maybe you have everything. I suppose you must have some food and things, you must have planned all this, if you got on and managed to hide in here, so it's fine, if you don't, I mean.' Weiwei was horribly aware that she was talking too fast and making too little sense, and she wasn't sure if the girl was completely understanding her rough train Russian, because she was wearing a slightly glazed expression. (Weiwei had
noticed the same expression on a number of passengers when she was patiently trying to provide answers to stupid questions).

‘Why…’ the girl began, then stopped. ‘Why would you help me? You are a… You work here, on the train. There are… rules.’

There was something strange about the way she spoke. Her Russian was old-fashioned, but it was more than that – it was as if she were tasting every syllable on her tongue before deciding if it were suitable or not.

‘Well, yes, there are rules, obviously, but I…’ Weiwei paused. Why was she trying to help? She knew the rules, knew the punishment she could face. Why would she risk it for someone she didn't know, someone who – Weiwei stared at her – wasn't quite what a girl usually was. Aloysha seemed to feel the same – he hadn't approached her but he hadn't retreated either. She was something different, Weiwei thought. Something new.

‘My name is Weiwei,’ she said, eventually, as if that explained everything.

‘My name is Elena,’ said the girl.

Elena. Ye Lei Na, thought Weiwei. It was easier to say in Chinese than some Russian names, which had too many kovs and yos.

‘Did you kill that animal?’ she said, more loudly than she'd expected.

The girl's – Elena's – expression wavered, but she held Weiwei's gaze. ‘Yes,’ she said.

Weiwei looked down. She sniffed and pulled her sleeve across her nose. ‘Well don't kill any more,’ she said, without looking up. ‘I'll bring you food.’

‘Water,’ said Elena. Then, ‘Please.’

Weiwei nodded. ‘I'll come back,’ she said. She turned to leave. ‘Shall I… Shall I leave the light on?’ she asked, when she got to the door.

The girl spoke very quietly. ‘No,’ she said. ‘The darkness is… good.’

Outside the door Weiwei crouched down to stroke Aloysha, but he gave her a baleful glare and stalked away.

Chapter 6: Deep Water

A day's journey from the ruins, one of the marvels of the natural world appears on the horizon, shimmering like a mirage in the last of the evening sun. Lake Baikal, four hundred miles long and – some say – five thousand feet deep. The most ancient lake known to mankind. For hours the train runs beside it. The moon rises and the water
When Weiwei was very young, and new to the dark courtyard house in the North Beijing hutongs, she had been afraid of a door. It was an ordinary door, of thick wood, like all the doors in Miss Yan's house. But unlike the other doors, this one was not to be opened. 'Not under any circumstances', said Miss Yan, 'Not unless you want to suffer unspeakable punishment.' So of course, all of Miss Yan's girls and boys were desperate to know what was behind it, but too scared of Miss Yan to dare look. It was the first time that Weiwei realised you could be terrified of something and fascinated by it at the same time. She thought about it so often that she began to see it as she sidled and sneaked around the city. It would appear in the side of buildings, or in a temple wall, beckoning her to open it. Challenging her, hovering at the edge of her vision.

It was the same with the stowaway, Elena. Her name played over and over again in Weiwei's head, dancing over her tongue. And alongside those three syllables, the wash of inky blue in her eyes. Impossible. Inhuman. She should go to the Captain, before it was too late, should tell her everything and let her deal with the consequences.

In Beijing, she had opened the door, in the end. Had crept up the wooden stairs in bare feet (knowing where every creak was located, avoiding every splinter), had put her ear to the door and heard only silence. Had pushed, slowly, carefully, quietly.

And she had found the room empty, except for a low, red lacquer table, in the middle of which was a candied fruit and a letter, written in Miss Yan's flowing hand. Always open the forbidden door, said the letter.

Weiwei had sat on the floor and gobbled down the fruit. There was dragon fruit and plums and papaya and something she thought must be pineapple, which she had heard about but never seen. The fruit looked like jewels and the sugar cracked against her teeth. She had never eaten anything so sweet. When her stomach began to protest she filled her pockets with the jewels and took the letter. She still kept it rolled up in a locket around her neck, thought she would never tell this to Miss Yan, whose teaching style, Weiwei had grumbled to herself, even as she closed the door behind her and crept back to her bed, weighed down by sweetness, tended towards cruelty.

Always open the forbidden door, thought Weiwei. She had learnt her lesson well.

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Water. Elena wanted water. In the normal way of things this should not be difficult, but water was carefully controlled on the train. A recent and much-vaunted development had been the installation of a system of pipes and tanks, which provided running water for the kitchens and the First Class bathroom, as well as to the samovars at the end of each carriage. But there were restrictions on how much could be used at once, so as not to put a strain on the system. The bathroom, Weiwei thought, was probably the best place to try, as there were fewer people there keeping an eye on things. (She was also, like all the rail rats, still amazed by the bathroom, with its black and white tiled floor, and its bath with wrought iron feet, and the silver taps through which hot water ran, and steamed up the mirror on the wall).

As rail rat, one of her jobs was to take flasks of hot water to First Class passengers, so procuring a flask was not hard, and there was no-one in the bathroom to ask questions about why she was filling it up with cold water. She imagined that the passengers would be too busy looking out for the first glimpse of the famous lake. It was funny, she thought, the careful control the train took of water, when outside there was hundreds of miles of it. She glanced outside, but clouds were gathering, and the horizon was shrouded in grey. The lake would not be visible yet.

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It was when she was walking nonchalantly back through the carriage that the first murmurs of disquiet reached her ears.

'Just some peasants making a fuss.'

'Not their fault of course. Not enough education. Hardly surprising that these superstitions arise.'

'Really, there should be better opportunities. How are they meant to cultivate themselves if these kind of foolish beliefs and rumours persist?'

Weiwei frowned, then flattened herself against the wall as three carriage guards hurried past, faces grim. Then, as any good rail rat would do, she followed them towards Third Class to find out what the excitement was about.

'What's happened?' she whispered to Alexei, who could always be found on the scene of anything out of the ordinary.

'Look,' he whispered back. 'Look what it is.'

Weiwei followed his gaze to where one of the guards was examining the wall, whilst the other two were holding back a group of excited passengers.
She squinted. 'It's a scratch. Why are people making a fuss? I polished all that wood yesterday. You could see your face in it, practically. If anyone's making a fuss it should be me.'

'It's not just a scratch, stupid. Can't you see? Look.'

As the guard straightened up, a worried expression on his face, she looked closer. And the scratch resolved itself into meaning: Crow. She had seen it over and over again in Beijing – carved into walls, scratched in the dust, chalked onto tombs in temple grounds. Crow. A warning, a challenge, a secret sign of solidarity.

Weiwei frowned. 'Is it him? Here on the train?'

'Anyone could have made this,' murmured Alexei. 'Anyone trying to scare us all.'

'Hey, you,' one of the guards eyed Weiwei. 'Get this cleaned up.'

'I only cleaned this yesterday!' she exclaimed. 'Not my fault if people vandalise it.'

'Not our fault either,' grinned the guard. 'Or our job.'

'He's here!' shouted someone from back in the carriage. 'It's your job to keep us safe!'

The guards tried to usher the passengers away. 'Nothing to be worried about, ladies and gentlemen, just someone having a bit of fun.'

'I'm glad someone's having fun,' muttered Weiwei, and was about to turn to Alexei when a thump on the carriage roof silenced them all. She looked up through the window to see an orange eye amidst feathers and scales, great claws and wings spread wide.

Someone screamed. A woman standing near the window fainted dead away. But all Weiwei could think was how beautiful those wings were, pale purple and laced with red veins.

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Night. The corridors had emptied. Passengers were asleep or drinking away their fears in the salon car. At the door to the luggage car Weiwei paused. Fears of the stowaway now competed with the shadowy shiver of the Crow. For all the dangers outside in the Wastelands, the train had always been her way of leaving Beijing behind – its alleys and closed courtyards and violence. But now somehow here it was, its tentacles reaching through the thick walls of the train.

She took a deep breath. It was none of her concern. The Trans-Siberia Company could worry themselves about the Crow instead of thinking up new ways to torment its hard-working staff. She opened the door to the darkness.

The damp, peaty smell wasn't as unexpected now, though it was still strange to her senses. She rarely ventured into vegetation, only frequenting well-trodden paths in Beijing's
parks, where the rich were distracted from their purses by the ornamental gardens. Here, the smell was deep and rich, though mixed with the odours from the animals it was beginning to make her eyes water.

'Elena?' she said, in a low voice.

The marmots scuffled nervously and a marsh lizard flicked its tongue between the bars of its cage. The shadows shifted and a girl appeared, making Weiwei jump. 'Hello,' she said. 'Be welcome.'

'Thank you,' said Weiwei, recovering herself.

Elena came further out of the shadows and Weiwei thought there was something slightly different about her but couldn't put her finger on what it was.

'I brought you water,' she said, putting the flask down on a nearby case. She had brought a cup as well but Elena grabbed the flask and drank straight from it. Once again inky blueness flooded her eyes and Weiwei couldn't help but stare, fascinated.

'Thank you for your kindness.' Elena met Weiwei's gaze and lowered the flask, wiping away drips of water from her chin.

Weiwei shrugged awkwardly and looked down. Was it kindness? She felt, secretly, that she wasn't acting out of the good of her heart but out of that same fascination for what was behind the door. Even if it was scary, even if it held only danger, she couldn't resist stretching out her hand to push it open. She looked back up, a flippant comment forming on her lips, but stopped. Elena was shrugging – moving in so exact a mimicking of Weiwei's own movements – conveying awkwardness, a lack of words – that Weiwei just stared.

Elena stared back.

'Why… Why are you here?' said Weiwei, eventually.

'Here?'

'On the train. Here.'

Elena paused, her head tilted to one side in a way that reminded Weiwei of a bird, watching for food and danger at the same time. 'There is no here,' she said, after a while. 'While we are moving. We were there and then we are not. Again and again and again.'

'Yes, but…' Weiwei stopped, and thought, and tried again. 'Why are you hiding in the luggage car?'

'To be safe,' said Elena. 'To be not seen. To move through the grass and forests quicker. To find… somewhere else.' She wiped her lips, licked her fingers as if trying to find every last drop of moisture.
Weiwei nodded. 'Makes sense,' she said. And then she realised what had been bothering her about Elena. Her fingernails looked darkened (something Weiwei hadn't initially noticed, seeing as her own were permanently grubby, despite Ah Pang's repeated exhortations to clean them), and there seemed to be patches of discoloured skin on her arms and her face, greenish-brown, as if she had been left out in the rain for too long.

Unconsciously, Weiwei touched her own face, and a moment later Elena did the same. Slowly, Weiwei raised her hand to tuck her hair behind her ear, and Elena provided a perfect mirror image. Weiwei took a step back. Elena did the same.

'Stop it. Stop that!'

Elena froze.

'Why are you doing that? Copying…'

Elena put her head to one side in that bird-like way again, and looked, unblinking, at Weiwei. Then she frowned, and adjusted an invisible hat on her head. Weiwei gaped for a moment, then burst out laughing. 'The steward!' she said. 'That's exactly what he does, exactly! You must have seen us, the first day…' she trailed off. 'You're learning, aren't you? Watching and learning.'

Elena didn't reply, just crouched down and wrapped her arms around her knees. She seemed to notice the discoloured skin for the first time, and rubbed at it, frowning. Weiwei crouched down too. 'Do you need more water, is that what it is? Water to wash in?' She thought quickly – it might be possible to get to the First Class bathroom without being seen. If they could time it right, when the night steward was on his rounds at the other end of the carriage. Risky, but possible.

'Quickly!' Weiwei peered around the door to the carriage and saw that the coast was clear. 'Now, whilst the steward's gone, we're going straight down there.' She set off, Elena behind her. 'Quietly,' she said, but soon realised that Elena moved in such absolute silence that she kept having to look behind to make sure she was following. Her feet were bare and she moved with light, careful steps. It had taken Weiwei ages to find and memorise the places on the floor which didn't creak. Elena seemed to find them instinctively.

'Here,' said Weiwei. They reached the bathroom without catching sight of anyone, and she locked the door behind them. Lamps burned above the mirrors, casting their reflections in a warm, golden light. Catching sight of them, Elena stumbled backwards.
‘It’s just us,’ said Weiwei, waving. ‘Look.’ Though there was something unreal about the two girls in the mirror; trespassing, out of place. To shake off the feeling, Weiwei ran through her best faces until Elena began to smile, and then laugh – a dry, unpractised sound.

‘There is water here?’ she asked, finally.

Weiwei grinned, and with a certain amount of pride bounded over to the porcelain bathtub and turned on the taps. She never failed to be amazed by the clear, warm water which tumbled out, causing the pipes above them to clank and wheeze and the room to fill with steam. Elena moved towards the bath as if drawn by the water, and before Weiwei could stop her she had stepped in, fully clothed. The blue silk of her dress turned dark, and ballooned around her, but she didn’t seem to care. A peaceful expression came over her face and she lay down, her hair floating like the tendrils of weeds.

‘Is that… better?’ ventured Weiwei. Elena was completely submerged now, but her eyes were still open and the way she looked up made Weiwei think of some strange aquatic creature, watching patiently from the depths for ripples on the surface, for an unsuspecting water bird to land.

When Elena emerged the discoloured patches on her skin had disappeared, and she left behind greenish water. Even in the dim light Weiwei could see that her eyes were bluer than before. The water, she noticed, ran off her in a peculiar way, and her skin was soon dry, though her silk dress left dripping pools at her feet.

‘Now we just need to get back without anyone seeing us,’ said Weiwei, half to herself. ‘Because if they do they’re going to have some questions about people who bathe fully clothed.’

Their luck held out until they were half way down the corridor, at which point one of the cabin doors opened and a young man sidled out, slowly and carefully, then equally slowly eased the door shut behind him. Weiwei drew in a breath with a hiss of dismay, and the young man gave a start. It was the Traverser – Guillaume – wearing a fine silk dressing gown and embroidered slippers on his feet. Weiwei recognised his expression as that of a small boy caught in the act of sneaking.

So he has no right to question us, she thought, defensively.

But Guillaume, if he thought there was anything strange about a young girl in a soaking wet dress wandering the train in the middle of the night, showed no sign of it. With as much dignity as a man in a dressing gown could muster, he bowed to Elena and said, in English, ‘Mademoiselle, please excuse my state of déshabillé. I find that sleep will not come, so I go to perambulate.’
Elena inclined her head in a gesture that Weiwei knew very well. It's what I do when I don't understand but don't want to let on, she thought. It conveyed acceptance but was carefully calibrated to give no encouragement to further conversation. Guillaume, unfortunately, seemed disinclined to read it carefully. 'May I accompany you to your parents'…to your cabin?' he asked, gallantly, ignoring Weiwei entirely, as most passengers did unless they needed something. Her uniform, she had found, had the strange effect of erasing her entirely as a person – something which often had its uses.

A dark patch was forming on the carpet around Elena, and drops of water trickled down her dress from her hair, yet Guillaume seemed not to notice. Why is he not puzzled by her? Weiwei thought, or at least offering her a towel? But rather than look askance, he held out his arm for her to take. She hesitated, and looked at Weiwei, who realised in a distant, unreal kind of way that Elena must not have seen the gesture before – hadn't learned to mimic it yet – so didn't know what she was meant to do, and indeed, had probably not understood any of the preceding conversation.

Weiwei cleared her throat. 'I am escorting Miss…er, Mademoiselle… back to her cabin. I think it is more proper, perhaps.'

Guillaume flinched as if he had been scalded. 'Of course, of course. Forgive me, I meant no offence. Please, do not allow me to hold you up further. I shall take a turn around the train before bed.' He bowed deeply to them both, then set off, his dressing gown flapping around him.

Weiwei turned to Elena. 'How…' But she couldn't find the words to articulate what she wanted to say. 'You tricked him,' she finally managed, in a whisper.

Elena thought for a moment. 'No,' she said. 'I just acted, like them.' She waved her hand at the cabin doors. 'I watch. I copy. He is tricked.' She gestured at the departing Guillaume. 'Not you. You watch, too.' She paused. 'You see what is really there. He sees what he thinks is there.'

Weiwei nodded. She had seen it herself, the way the eyes of the First Class passengers slid right over her but could unerringly scry a title or a fortune just by the tilt of a head or the cut of a dress.

'We should go back, before someone more observant comes past,' she said. She thought she saw an expression of sadness flit across Elena's face, as the girl turned towards the window. The clouds had parted and the moon appeared, and the lake shone silver. Elena pressed her face to the glass, staring greedily at the water.

'You need it, don't you, the water?' said Weiwei. 'Not just a bit to drink. A lot.'
Elena nodded. 
'But we've got a lot of days to go, yet,' said Weiwei, with a shiver of anxiety down her spine. 'Will you be-

'Here there is water,' said Elena. 'Though it is strange water, inside water.' Weiwei wondered if they could keep it up, this sneaking, stealing baths when the train was asleep (because it was never really asleep, was it?). As the journey went on, water became more of a commodity, she knew this from experience. 

But to Elena she said, 'Yes, yes. It will be fine.' 

As they watched, the surface of the lake rippled. 'There's something there,' said Weiwei, peering closer. 'Something big.' 

A black shape broke through the water. A neck, or maybe another limb, a wing, a tentacle. Weiwei rubbed her eyes. There were Wastelands creatures which confounded vision. Perhaps you needed eyes like an insect's, prismatic, compound, in order to see them plainly. Human sight was not made for such things. 

'Are you not afraid?' said Elena, putting her hand to the glass. 

Weiwei shrugged. 'We are safe in here,' she said. 'They cannot get in.' 

'I got in.' Elena's eyes were water-sated, deep and blue. Her skin was drinking the moisture in, leaving it plump and bright. The tendrils of her hair, still wet, moved gently, though the air was still. 

'You are… different,' said Weiwei, though that dangerous little voice whispered to her – *Really? Do you really know what you have welcomed in?* 

Elena stared at the lake. The creature had vanished. 'Maybe,' she said, quietly. 'Maybe not.'