

MOVABLE TYPE
A Crescent City Short Story

by SG Wong

I

It didn't look like much to Ria. Maybe twelve by twelve of workspace hidden behind the house proper. The sunset, filtered through bright pink cherry blossoms, cast shifting shadows through the lone miserly window. She watched dust motes dance slowly in the still air.

The old man glowered. "Think you're a right Abercrombie, don'tcha?"

"Hardly, Mr. Ying. Know-it-alls don't make good reporters."

"Bah. You think I'm just bumping gums, eh? But you're wrong. This is a career-making story and I'm givin' you the chance to grab it and run with it."

Ria eyed him narrowly. "Well, you've gotta admit it's beyond most people. Frankly, not a lot of our readers will care how their paper gets printed. They just want to read about world news or the latest show business gossip."

"Bah. What are you, twenty? I can't tell with you people. Too old to be so dumb, anyway, especially in this business."

"It's rude to ask a lady's age."

"Maybe for you *gwai*. Not for us Chinese. We're obsessed with aging." He peered at her suspiciously. "Didn't you say you were born in Crescent City?"

Ria gestured dismissively. "Yes and that's neither here nor there. Can we get back to your so-called invention?"

"Fine, fine. Then pay attention." He puffed up his chest. "I can typeset a standard newspaper in half the time it currently takes. Your readers may not care how their news gets printed. But they certainly do care how quickly it gets printed."

Ria scribbled quickly in her notebook. "When did you do this?"

"Thirteen years ago."

She faltered to a stop. "And how is this an exclusive now?"

He glared. "I'm giving you proof."

"Of what?"

"That I know what I'm talking about."

Ria shook her head. "And what exactly are you talking about then?"

"A revolution in printing."

Ria cocked her head to one side. "You got a printing press hidden in here somewhere?" She gestured at the piles of greasy machine parts, the stacks of paper schematics, and the grimy worktable. "'Cause I gotta say, all I see is a hobby workshop inside a garden shed."

"For gods' sake, girl, what are they teaching reporters these days? Haven't you been listening?"

Ria silently counted to five. "So what's this proof I'm supposed to have?"

"Have you never visited the printing room at the *Herald*, Miss Monteverde? Seen the typesetters at work? Listened to the printing presses? Felt the heat? Tasted the ink at the back of your throat?"

Ria shook her head. "My editor still reviews my pieces."

Ying grunted. "I'm sure he does."

She let that one pass. "What *about* the printing room, Mr. Ying?"

"I'll get to that. First, you go back, down to the dungeon, look in December of 1921. Week of the twelfth, that's the Monday. Once you've done that," he pointed at the floor, "you come back here and I'll explain."

She did the math. "December, thirteen years ago? Is this why you, what, retired? Quit? Got fired?"

Ying ushered her out of the shed.

"Wait. Why me, Mr. Ying?" She waved her hand in the vague direction of downtown. "Why not Zhuang or Poon or even Chang? She's the current City desk ace."

Ying smirked. "Exactly. They're all known quantities. But you, you're not Chinese. No chance you're owned by the *Tong*, right? Unlikely you've got family ties to any of them gangs. You're new enough they haven't got to you yet. Plus you don't do the crime beat."

Ria raised a brow. "Have you even read any of my stories?"

"Oh yes, the one about my neighbour's daughter and her Ghost saving the family dog. Very touching. Inspiring, even. How do you think I found you?"

"So you just scanned the bylines until you saw a *gwai* name?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. I saw you. When you came to speak to Mrs. Chao next door. One simple question and here we are."

"Just hold on a damned minute." Ria pulled her arm from his grip. "I'm not going haring off on your say-so, mister. What's your history at the *Crescent City Herald* got to do with some special invention?"

Ying flapped his hands at her. "Keep it down, for gods' sake." He searched the surrounding yard, took a step closer. "Have you ever heard of a portable movable type machine?" he whispered.

Ria frowned, shook her head.

"It allows a person to create an entire document by using cast characters, just like we do for printing presses, instead of writing by hand."

Ria suppressed a sigh. "Mr. Ying, I hate to break it to you, but typewriters have been around for years."

He jabbed a finger in her direction. "Yes, for English and other European languages, but not for Chinese. Too many characters to put in one machine." He raised his chin. "Ours is not a language easily broken down into a palmful of letters."

"So you've done it?" The old man nodded. Ria peered around him. "Where is it? Can I see it?"

Ying shook his head. "No. You do your research first. Then come back. I need to know you can follow instructions."

Ria stared at him for a few beats. "What's in it for me to jump through your hoops?"

"The story of the century. Weren't you listening? Now," Ying tapped his pocket watch. "You better go. You'll have to be up early to catch Woodie in the dungeon. And

you'd better do it before you file your story on...the swimming octogenarian, isn't it?
Your editor will be sending you out on another scintillating story afterward, I'm sure."

II

"Yellow today, huh."

Dinwoodie Kwong touched his bowtie, offered Ria a shy smile.

"Good morning, Miss Monteverde. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Got a line on a story." She gave him the dates from Ying. "Not sure what I'm supposed to find, but." She shrugged, rubbed her fingers over the dark teak countertop. It was smooth and cool.

Woodie nodded. He pushed back from the counter, surveyed the shelving underneath, turning in a slow circle to encompass all sides of the square structure within which he spent his days.

He brought up a thick black ledger, grunting at the weight. Ria set herself up at one of the reading tables, close to the pool of warm light thrown by a brass-shaded lamp. Woodie piled dark grey ledgers on the tabletop for her, clicked on another lamp farther down the long table. She saluted him.

The ledgers were the same size as a regular newspaper, nothing unusual there. They were collated together by day, stitched into a cardboard cover, with hand lettered dates. She opened up the archived papers for December twelfth. The pages were yellowed and she wondered idly if she didn't ought to wear gloves.

Since Ying was a typesetter and his supposed talents were in printing, she reasoned she ought to pay close attention to appearance rather than content. She scanned the characters, the placement of columns, anything she could think of in terms of how the newspaper had been typeset.

Thirty minutes later, she had acquired dirty hands, a headache, and a new appreciation for how far women had come in thirteen years.

She closed the last ledger for that week, pushed it away. Mindful of getting ink on her face, she considered Ying's boast again. But how would the speed of his printing prowess show up in the papers themselves?

When she saw the flaw in her research, she just about planted an inky palm print on her forehead.

"Woodie, can I see the weeks before and after?" She thought for a moment. "Hells, just gimme the whole damn month wouldya?"

It took him four trips.

Ria eyeballed the stacks in front of her.

"Who had Tam's job when these were fresh ink?"

"Mr. Tam did."

"He's been here that long?" She paused, considering. "D'you know when he started?"

"He was the head City desk reporter before becoming editor-in-chief. But I don't know how long he's been with the *Herald*."

"Easy enough to ferret out," Ria muttered.

"Is there anything else I can help with?" He glanced at the ornate clock above the entrance. Ria followed his gaze, then pushed back from the table with a curse.

"Ah, sorry for the mess, Woodie. I'm late."

"That's all right, Miss Monteverde. I'm used to it."

III

Ria sat back, tossing down her pencil. She shuffled the pages back into order and started re-reading. While her brain reviewed the words in front of her, she shook out her hand, rotated her wrist, rolled her shoulders and neck. She grabbed her pencil, made one quick change, set it back down with a small smile.

"Nice work, kitten. Now you gotta run it to the setters."

Ria jumped in her seat, then cursed herself inwardly. She allowed herself one quick grimace before smoothing out her features.

"Aren't you gonna review it?" She twisted slightly in her chair, looked up over her right shoulder.

Tam shook his head. "Been reading it over your shoulder the last fifteen minutes." He grinned, his handsome face becoming boyish. "Looks pretty tight to me." He leaned forward, reaching out with his hand.

Ria slid her chair to the side, thankful for smooth casters.

Brushing past her shoulder, Tam picked up her pencil. He smoothed out her handwritten article then planted a hand on her desk, pencil hovering over the paper. He

struck a few things out, rearranged some others with arrows and circles and coded scribbles. "You can explain those easily, hm?"

Ria nodded, keeping her expression calm. She casually swivelled her chair side to side, while subtly moving farther away. "They gonna listen to me?"

Tam laughed. "Of course. I told 'em you'd be coming." He tossed the pencil on top of the papers. "Good job, kid. Quick work."

"Thanks."

He raised his brows. She suppressed a scowl. "...boss."

Tam grinned, saluting her. "That's the spirit." He made shooing motions. "Better hurry now."

Ria nodded curtly. "Excuse me."

Tam, still smiling, stepped back half a pace. Ria placed the papers between herself and his chest as she slid past him, bumping into the corner of Shen's desk behind her. She walked as quickly as she could for the stairs, lips pressed tightly together.

"Oh and Valeria?"

She turned.

"Tell Chang to use those long gams of hers to get back up here. I need to talk to her about the Ming interview."

Ria nodded and whirled back around before she said something she really wanted to say. She forced herself to concentrate on the piece she held tightly in her hand. She was here to learn, wasn't she, for gods' sake? She read everything over, had to admit that the changes were all improvements. Damn him.

She jolted to a stop two floors down. Evidently, her feet knew where she was going, even if her mind did not. She walked briskly down the left corridor. The sounds of metal clanking and voices shouting became louder as she approached the large green door at the end.

Shoving the sheaf of pages beneath an arm, Ria turned the lever handle clockwise, feeling the heavy mechanism within the door disconnect from its mooring. She pulled the metal door outward, freeing the smell of ink and hot paper into the hall. She cursed as the door continued on its arc, smashing into the wall with a crash she felt deep in her bones.

Her apology was lost in a chorus of shouts.

"Chang, you better teach this one fast. We won't have any wall left."

"Hey, *a gwai leuy*, how long've you been workin' here now?"

"How long's it gonna take before you remember how to open a door?"

"Yeah, yeah." She waved the crumpled papers. "Tam said you were expecting this? Who do I talk to?"

"Boss man sent down his pet today, eh?" The woman sat on the corner of the nearest worktable, her legs crossed and swinging idly. Full lips, sporting deep pink lipstick, almond eyes, glossy black hair pulled into a simple twist at her nape. She hopped off the table, brushed off her wide-legged trousers, pushed up the narrow sleeves of her striped sailor shirt.

"I'm not his pet." The rebuttal was lame by any standard, but it was all Ria had. She sold it with an icy glare.

"Hm. You may not think so, but it's not your opinion that really counts, is it, pet?"

"Cut it out, wouldya. I don't have time to flap jaws with you." Ria jerked a thumb. "He said he wants to talk to you about Ming."

Chang stared at Ria for an extra beat. She called back over her shoulder. "See you later, boys. Boss man's calling and I've got a new Commissioner of Gaming to interview." She brushed past Ria on her way out. Ria stood her ground, waiting until she heard the massive green door clank shut behind her. She raised her chin.

"Well? Who's setting the human interest section today?"

A wiry man with a moon face waved. His forearms were corded with muscle, his shirtsleeves grimy with ink. A smear of grease darkened his chin.

He worked in front of a long slab of workspace, scratched and gouged, the wood long turned grey. Behind him, cube shelving held stacks of metal casts. Ria stepped past the smirking man working at the closer end of the table. A quick glance showed he was working on the finance section.

Moonface beckoned her to hurry. "How long is it?"

She thrust the sheaf at him. He snatched it, fingerprints darkening the edges of the papers as he swiftly skimmed her piece. She noted that he kept his prints away from her writing, though. She didn't know the typesetters and printers much at all, but she guessed this one was at least a journeyman. To her right, down a little ways, the smirker gave her the once over. Twice.

She gestured to the tray of set characters in front of him. "Mind your numbers, genius. Or you're liable to cause another market crash."

The man startled, then frowned. His lips moved as he scanned his typesetting work so far. He dug out two sets of characters and switched them, scowling.

"You're welcome." Ria turned back to her typesetter. "Good?"

Moonface nodded absently. "Ignore Mah. We all do." He pointed, his fingers tapping lightly. Two faint smears of grey bloomed beside her writing. "Does he want these two switched or these two?"

"Those."

Moonface inhaled sharply. "Good. It'll be in." He brushed some sweat off his face with a forearm. "Murder! You like to cut it close, eh? This is gonna take me at least twelve minutes."

"Sorry about that. Got caught up by an old man with the story of the century."

He shook his head. "You gotta learn to put 'em off gently without taking out your notebook, rookie. That just encourages 'em."

"Thanks for the tip."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." He pulled a wood-framed tray toward him, held it in the crook of his right arm, then turned toward the shelves behind. Ria watched as he rapidly selected characters and laid them into the tray. He referenced her papers a few times, but for the most part, he zipped from one side of the shelving to the other, filling the wooden tray with a clatter of metal casts.

He slid the full tray back onto the heavily scarred tabletop.

"You still here?" He raised his chin at her.

"Curious to see how quickly you can work."

Moonface laughed, his fingers nimbly righting some characters and aligning others. "Here? Plenty fast. I trained on these shelves. Put me somewhere else, though, and

I'd be as lost as you." He snatched up Ria's article and compared it with his tray. "For a few weeks, that is."

"So every press has its own system? Of storing casts?"

He tossed the papers aside, gave his tray some final adjustments. "Maybe you're smarter than Chang says."

"Everybody's smarter than Chang says. She's got a low opinion of the rest of humanity."

The typesetter laughed again. "Right on the nose."

"When did you start your training here? Who was your mentor?"

"We don't have mentors." He sniggered. "Why are you asking me these questions anyway? If you're already that desperate for another story, you won't last long here, doll."

"Do you know Henry Ying?"

Moonface hefted his tray, walked it over to the large press. Ria followed him. He nodded, handing it off to another ink-stained man in greasy coveralls and shirtsleeves. He turned, grunting as he stopped short from bumping into her.

"Everybody here knows Ying. Why?"

Ria shrugged. "Just trying to dig up some background. He says he has a story for me."

"*He's* your old man with the story of the century?" Moonface waved dismissively.

"Doll, that river's been fished dry. Old Man Ying is a loon, full of crazy schemes."

"Such as?"

"Taking all of this—" He swept his arm at the twelve-foot tall shelving behind him. "And rearranging it, for gods' sake. Said it was too slow, our mnemonic was too complicated. Said he had a machine could get us to print twice as fast."

"It was a typesetting machine then? Not a press of some kind?"

Moonface nodded. "Damn thing was a ripper, I'll give him that. But it made all sorts of mistakes we had to correct anyway."

"So it ended up taking the same amount of time."

"Hey," said Mah, sidling over, "they still gave him a week, though, didn't they?"

Ria eyed the short little smirker. "What did you typesetters think of it?"

"It's gone, idn't it?" Mah's smile was filled with yellow teeth.

Moonface grinned. "And we're still here."

IV

"Oh gods, what happened to you?"

Ying smiled, then winced. "Tripped and fell down the stairs." He held the door open for her, ushered her into the sitting room, offered to take her coat.

She shook her head. "Can I make you some tea? Get you an ice pack? Or a Healer? When did this happen?"

Ying made his way arduously to a well-worn, wingback chair. Bracing himself on the arm, he sank gingerly to the seat. "Bah. Healers are expensive. Don't need magic for bumps and bruises, just bandages and ice."

"At least let me make you some tea."

"Yes, yes, if you promise that will end your fussing."

Ria bustled around in the old typesetter's kitchen, found a package of almond cookies and the tea things. She filled the kettle for two and clicked on the gas stove with a *whoomph*.

Ten minutes later, she returned to find Ying, eyes closed and breathing shallowly. Her alarmed shout caused him to open one eye and squint.

"Hush. You're making my head hurt." He pushed up to sitting, let her pour him tea, and settled back against the cushions with a sigh.

Ria saw his hands, watched the tea slosh ever so slightly in his mug.

She said, "I saw the archives. You were able to add another 50 per cent, I'd guess, to that week's editions, weren't you?" Ying stared into his tea. Ria saw his knuckles turn white around the cup. "I talked to a coupla typesetters. They remembered your experiment. So I concede. You know your way around machines and printing. Do I qualify to see this invention of yours now?"

After a few noisy sips, he looked at her. "I've changed my mind. This...story is nothing more than an old man's vanity. I'm sorry for your trouble."

Ria frowned, pondering the about-face. Ying watched her with a bland expression, the picture of calm imperiousness marred somewhat by the deep purple bruising and puffy right eye.

"That's quite a coincidence," she said. "You getting hurt and then changing your mind."

"No coincidence at all. I could've been dead, or dying. At the bottom of the stairs with no one to hear me calling for help. Really makes an old man reassess his...obsessions. His life." His gaze shifted. "What's left of it."

"Uh-huh. And nobody came by to talk to you after they got wind of this story?"

"Why? Who did you tell?" He grimaced. "It doesn't matter. What about Tam? Did you speak to him?"

Ria shook her head. "Chang's his top crime reporter. I'm a lowly rookie and certainly not allowed to tramp around on her beat. I'll be lucky to get to the City desk in a year as it is. Who knows how long it'll take if I'm on his bad side?" She paused, frowning again. "Did he do this to you?"

"I told you already, I fell." Ying laughed then, a wheeze that degenerated into a series of groans and rapid breathing. "Listen, I'm sorry I wasted your time." A faint grin. "Got your heart pumping though, eh? Dreaming of bigger, better things?"

Ria shrugged. She watched the old man for a few silent seconds, then placed her tea down, and stood. "Well, guess I better be getting back to the land of nonagenarian mah-jongg champs then. Those stories don't write themselves, sadly."

"Yes, of course. Sorry for your trouble." Ying shuffled her quickly to the door. She heard him slide the bolts in behind her.

Blinking in the bright sunlight, Ria clattered down the front steps and headed for the back of the house. No matter how rapidly the old man shuffled, she'd still have a few minutes on him. Plenty of time to pick a lock if she had to. Walking briskly along Ying's buckled cement driveway, she mentally reviewed the lessons given her on locks by her best friend, the private gumshoe.

But it was moot. She found the lock on the brown grass next to Ying's workshop, shattered and useless. She eased open the narrow double doors, flinching at the screech as

they swung unevenly on dented hinges. The cherry tree blocked most of the sunlight through the window, but Ria could tell things were awry even without the bulb on.

The shadows were all wrong.

She heard the slam of a door and the scrape of slippers on cement.

"Damn it, I told you I was done."

Ria spared a glance at Ying, wheezing next to her. He leaned on a cane, cradling his left side. The ointment around his black eye was shiny in the sunshine.

She turned back to the inside of the shed, surveyed the shredded papers and smashed machinery. The worktable lay on its side, two of its legs ripped from their joints.

"Did they tune you up before or after they made you watch this?"

He grunted. "After."

Ria picked up a stack of trampled schematics, smoothing out the tears and crumples. She thought of what he'd said about her Chinese colleagues. "Was it the local sugar boys?"

Ying shook his head. "I've always hated that term."

Ria pushed aside a torn table leg with her foot. "Aw c'mon, *Tong, tohng*, they're almost identical sounding. The irony is too rich to ignore."

"Irony is over-rated." Ying stayed in the doorway.

Ria discarded her attempt at light-heartedness. "So why would anyone threaten you now? It's been thirteen years. I was told your experiment was a bust. I mean, I saw it myself, in the archives. The *Herald* went back to its normal length the following week."

Ying grumbled.

"Drop it, Miss Monteverde. It's not worth my life. Or yours." He raised his cane, jabbed it at the ground. "And you learned your Cantonese all wrong. *Tong* doesn't sound like 'sugar.' It's a homonym for 'butcher.'"

V

"Woodie, didn't you refile those archives I was looking at?"

"Yes, Miss Monteverde. Right after you left."

"So they oughta be on this shelf, right? I saw you take them from right here."

"Which...? Yes...they should—"

"But they're not."

"I...don't know where they could be. I just tidied up. The tables are all empty."

"Never mind. One way or another, it'll be sorted."

VI

This time, she pulled the green door open just enough to slide inside, then hauled it closed behind her. The presses were in full swing, working on the evening edition. Ria carefully searched the cavernous space, mindful to keep out of the way of the frantic printer operators.

In the end, she stopped back where she'd started.

The long scarred worktables were still smeared with ink, trays stacked chockablock at the edges. The metal casts laid tidily in their cubbyholes. Scraps of paper were stuffed into a tall metal bin. No matter how long she stared, however, no one appeared.

"Why the long face, pet?"

Ria startled at the voice in her ear. "Chang, damn it, stop being a sneak."

"You need better ears. I've been following you for the better part of five minutes.

Who are you looking for?"

"A typesetter. The wiry one with the moon face."

Chang shook her head. "They're 'union,' pet. Strict hours."

"Union?" Ria frowned. "We don't have any unions here."

"It's the polite term for gangsters, pet. The sugar boys." Chang looked at her sideways. "I thought you were City-born and bred."

Ria assessed Chang openly as she mentally recalculated her options. She decided to go with her gut, changing tack.

"Then I guess I'll have to settle for you."

"I'm no one's second choice, pet."

"You've been here over ten years, right? Did you know Henry Ying?"

Chang laughed, surprised. "Are you mixed up with one of his crazy inventions?"

"Why did he leave? Was he fired? Or did he quit?"

"Quit. Right after one of his inventions cranked up production so high, it broke the presses. Literally."

Ria cocked her head. "They didn't fire him for that?"

"The owners loved him. He was a real live poindexter. A genius with anything mechanical. Saved 'em a lotta dough on repairs and new presses. Aside from which, he was their best typesetter. Fast and accurate."

"But why did he leave?"

Chang shrugged, palms up. "You'd have to ask him. Listen, let me give you some advice. Tam and Ying used to be real tight, but when Ying left, Tam soured on him fast. If you're snooping around a story on Ying, don't. Tam won't print it anyway." Chang turned away.

"Wait. What were you doing? Back when Ying reigned here? What kind of stories were you getting then?"

"Me? I was a custodian. Put myself through secretarial school. Joined the pool on the first floor. Six years of that and then finally up to the reporters' floor. I'm a regular success story, fifteen years in the making." She raised a finger. "But if he likes you, there is a fast track here, pet." Chang's smile didn't reach her eyes. "The question is what you're willing to pay for it."

VII

Ria stood, hands on her hips, staring at the shelves of grey-bound archives.

"So you're telling me they're all back."

Woodie nodded.

"When?"

"This morning. I went up to tell you straightaway, but Mr. Tam had some urgent research he needed from me."

Ria shook herself. "Well, I guess I'm glad the mystery got solved."

Woodie helped her pull down the archives for the entire month of December of 1921 again and left her to it. She started in order, reading every headline and checking all bylines. Going by instinct, she either skimmed or read articles, and she kept notes on

intersecting names and events. Every now and then, she heard voices and footsteps, chairs being dragged across the floor, the heavy thump of other ledgers being set down. But she stayed invisible, tucked away in her corner, working steadily through thirty-one days of old news.

Two hours later, she found herself at her desk upstairs, staring out a far window at the darkening twilight. She had the shadow of a revelation skipping at the edges of her mind. Chasing it around in her thoughts countless ways, she came to the same conclusion each time.

She picked up her telephone.

"I checked the archives again, Mr. Ying."

The old man sighed heavily. "I told you, it's over."

Ria kept her voice low. "I noticed a hitch in an evening edition. Friday the sixteenth. Columns were out of alignment and the spacing was choppy. I'm no expert, but it seemed to me there was some quick and dirty editing." She paused, giving him a chance to explain. Then, "It's not about the printing press at all, is it? You excised a story after a print run, didn't you? Had to go back and reset the page, re-run the entire thing."

"It's no use now, dredging up the past."

"He paid you off, didn't he, to cut out that one story? About Ming?"

"Listen to me good—"

"And your comment about the *Tongs* and the other reporters here. That was really about Tam, wasn't it? He's the one connected to them. Did you discover that when your typesetting machine became a threat to the 'union'? Did he threaten you then too?"

Convince you to quit for your health?" She paused. "Or maybe you just couldn't stand being reminded that you have a price."

"If you keep this up, girl, you won't ever live long enough to regret your choices."

He cut the connection with a crash.

Ria winced, jerking the receiver away from her ear.

"Your winning personality again, pet?"

Ria whirled around, trying to get a handle on her racing heart.

Chang smiled toothily at her. "One of your sources jam out on you?" She shrugged. "It happens. Someday," Chang paused, reconsidering. "Eventually, you'll learn to cull the rats." She sauntered away toward the stairs.

Ria shrugged off Chang's condescension. What choice did she have, after all? She was a rank newcomer, barely trusted to deliver paper copy to the print room, for gods' sake. Chang was the head reporter on the City desk, given first pick of the best leads because everyone knew Chang had killer instincts.

Ria sat up straight, her stray thoughts coalescing into a vague plan. She frowned, thinking hard about her next steps. Pushing aside her misgivings, she called out. "I need to talk to you about Ming." A pause. "And Tam."

Chang stopped, turning back. "Oh, are we bosom friends now?"

Ria made a rude noise. "You've been on this Ming story for over a week, since it leaked that he would be appointed the new Gaming Commissioner. That's plenty of time for you to do your magic."

"Flattery now, is it, pet?"

"But all you've written are fluff pieces. Not that Tam's seemed to mind."

Chang cupped an ear, forced a surprised expression. "Do I finally hear some rusty wheels turning? Is there life in that pretty little head of yours after all?"

Ria waved the comment away. "I know I can't trust you, but I think your self-interests might work in my favour this time."

"A resounding vote of confidence."

"It's the best you'll get from me. Now, are you interested in a career-making story or not?"

Chang raised a brow. "I'm way ahead of you, pet. The real question is, are you?"

VIII

Tam's club was in a six-storey brownstone, in the European style. It was gentlemen only, but the butler was civilized enough to show her into a small sitting room off the entrance. She supposed she ought to be grateful he hadn't simply shut the door in her face.

Ria paced the length of the room, clenching and unclenching her fists. She whirled as the door opened.

"Valeria. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" Tam smiled, his handsome features warm and open. He nodded to the butler, who withdrew, closing the door silently. Tam gestured to the caddy in the corner. "Care for a sherry?"

Ria held back her grimace at the thought of the sickly sweet liqueur he undoubtedly had in mind for her. "No, thank you. I'm sorry to bother you during your off hours...boss."

"Burning the candle at both ends, are we?" Tam chuckled. "I admire your ambition and work ethic, Valeria, but you must be careful not to overdo it." He looked down, brushed something off the breast of his blue silk smoking jacket.

"Just trying to make a good impression. Like Chang. You've got her interviewing Commissioner Ming plus she's still covering that bank heist. I thought it best to step up my efforts too." She did her best impression of a demure smile.

"Of course, of course. What do you need from me?"

"Well, it's about Commissioner Ming, actually. You wrote about him when he was a mah-jongg parlour owner, up for election as a City councilor. Thirteen years ago."

"Some of my best work. What of it? Chang has you doing her grunt work, has she?" Tam poured himself a finger of amber into a cut crystal tumbler, adding two ice cubes. He shook his head, expression indulgent.

Ria took a deep breath. "What did he offer you? To get an article taken out? You had to bribe Henry Ying too, I assume?"

Tam stilled.

"Aside from the fact that you've just made a dangerous accusation, Valeria, I have no idea what you're talking about." He sipped his drink. "But I'm fond of you, so I'll let you explain before I have you thrown out."

"You were writing a series investigating Ming's past as a parlour owner. You dug up everything you could find about his years in China, his early years in the City, his murky beginnings as a parlour boss. I mean, you had a real talent for explaining complicated bylaws and by-election regulations. You went after Ming, hammer and

tongs, for a solid week, but then, three days before the civic by-election, you didn't write a single thing about him."

Ria circled slowly, keeping Tam in her direct line of sight as he sauntered to the fireplace.

"The editor, Shin, lost interest." Tam shrugged. "You'll learn that the longer you work in this business, the less control you actually have. The editor-in-chief has all the power, Valeria. I learned that back in '21." He watched her over the rim of his glass as he took another drink.

Ria shook her head. "Ying told me everything," she lied. "You shouldn't have destroyed his workshop."

"You think anyone's going to believe a senile old man, notorious for his whacky inventions? Or you, for that matter? Another pretty face, trying too hard to prove herself in a man's world? And a *gwai* to boot." He paused. "Not that I need to prove anything."

"You want to play it this way, then?"

"Did you think I'd quake in my boots? Confess to you?" Tam laughed. "Those articles have been archived for years, for anyone to read. I've got nothing to hide."

"But you weren't sure, were you? You heard from one of the typesetters that I was asking about Ying. You found out from Woodie that I was looking at those archives. You intimidated an old man by destroying his life's work. Then you took those archived papers so no one would know you were looking at them. You checked the dates, you thought you were safe, so you returned them."

Tam frowned. "I know Ying didn't talk." He put down the tumbler on the marble mantle with a soft click. "And you cannot prove a negative."

Ria took a step back. "True enough. The excised story is long gone. What was it, just out of curiosity? Was it about Ming's second wife? The one with palsy? The one Number Three Wife drowned in the bath? But everyone thought it an accident."

Tam's frown deepened as he considered Ria's words. Then: "Chang."

Ria nodded. "She's tenacious and cunning. She discovered everything Ming tried to hide thirteen years ago. You were smart to promote her, but stupid to put her in Ming's path. Or perhaps it was just arrogance."

Tam stared at her for several moments, then shrugged. "Commissioner Ming's past has no bearing on me. You can try accusing me of failing to uncover that sordid tit-bit, but the worst I'll look is incompetent. And it was so long ago, I was just a callow youth. I've more than proven my worth as the City's best newspaper editor."

Ria took another step backward, felt for the doorknob. "I guess we'll both take our chances, won't we?" She opened the door.

Chang stepped inside. "Your butler is doing a deplorable job of keeping the riff raff out, Boss man."

Ria closed the door and leaned back against it.

Tam glared. "Neither of you will work for a decent paper again. I promise you that."

Ria raised her chin. "I'd rather work for a third-rate rag than you any time."

"Well, I wouldn't," said Chang. "Besides, pet, Tam here won't fire us. He can't."

"You've got nothing on me. I'm too smart for that." Tam picked up his drink, sipped it, the very picture of elegant ease, even slipping one hand inside the pocket of his smoking jacket.

"Actually, little Miss Valeria here gets the credit for keeping our jobs safe."

Ria kept her expression neutral, her mind whirring into high gear to figure out Chang's meaning.

"She's actually quite a good investigator, Tam. Killer instincts."

Tam narrowed his eyes.

"You can't fire us, see, or else we show the coppers your deep and long-standing ties to the Central City *Tong*. Your uncle runs that gang, doesn't he? Adopted uncle, but still. It's not your fault you were sold into the family before you were even born."

Ria struggled to keep the shock from her expression. She forced her brain to work out all the angles, but she was clearly miles behind Chang.

"Now before you say it's not a crime, to be related to bad people," said Chang, "just think how it will look to have the police swarming all over you. Do you honestly think dear Uncle Boss man won't be just the tiniest bit suspicious? I've never met the man, of course, but I'd guess he's somewhat mistrusting. Perhaps even paranoid."

"You can't talk if you're dead." Tam pulled his hand out of his pocket. Ria blinked. He was pointing a gun at them.

She froze, even as her heartbeat ratcheted up, thundering in her ears.

"Oh, it's the kiss off, is it?" said Chang coolly. "I hardly think your butler will help you cover up a double murder. Besides, I forgot to mention I sent your uncle a little bird. Apparently, someone's been skimming from Commissioner Ming's weekly payoffs."

Tam paled.

"Maybe your uncle's willing to believe the coppers are a smokescreen. But numbers don't lie, Tam. You'd best be thinking to your own future." Chang gestured to Ria. "Let's go."

Ria opened the door, mind numb, hands slick with sweat. She fisted them to still the trembling as she left the club through the front door. She turned left, unwilling to look Chang in the face, and strode away into the night.

IX

"Good morning, pet. You're tougher than your delicate looks suggest. I thought you'd call in sick today too."

Ria dropped into her chair. "I had a legitimate day off yesterday. And you can cut the chauvinist remarks, Chang."

"Oh so you'll take them from Tam, but not from me, eh? Why? Because he's a man?"

"Just your luck, I finally relocated my spine."

"Actually, it's *your* lucky day today, pet. You're being moved." Chang gestured with her chin.

"Stop calling me that." Ria followed the gesture to a cluster of desks in the far corner. She looked up at Chang, frowning. The other woman nodded.

"Big changes today, Monteverde."

Ria swivelled around. Tam's office door stood open. A workman in navy blue coveralls was scraping away the painted name on the glass.

"A new editor-in-chief? Where's Tam?" Ria lowered her voice. "Did he resign?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Who's the interim boss?"

"No interim. He named a successor. The owners approved unanimously."

"Quick work. Who is it?"

Chang grinned broadly.

"Oh gods." Ria groaned, cold blooming in the depths of her stomach. "How long have you been planning this?"

"Since I left the secretarial pool."

"And you were just waiting for the right sap to show up."

Chang's smile was fierce with satisfaction.

"All to get Tam fired." Something in Chang's expression pinged Ria's radar.

"What?"

"They found him this morning." Chang watched Ria closely. "Looks like suicide."

Ria's stomach roiled. She clamped a hand over her mouth and ran for the restroom. After, she rinsed her mouth out with cold water, splashed her face liberally. Staring at her pale reflection, she ran through fifty ways to tell Chang no. Every one threatened to empty her stomach again.

She returned to find her things in a box, sitting atop a desk in the far corner. She sat down gingerly, smiling wanly at Zhuang and Poon. They eyed her askance.

The telephone on her desk rang. She stared at it, eyes wide.

Poon said, "You gonna answer that, rookie?"

Ria slowly picked up the receiver.

"Monteverde." She swallowed. "City desk."