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The Trouble with Belonging

A novel

The Question

When Kehuan met Niki, he already had all the makings of a lone wolf. He was eight years old, his whole family consisted of one perpetually absent parent, and he had no friends at all.

The isolation wasn't entirely by choice, of course, but it also wasn't something he struggled with, as Kehuan didn't feel he really needed other people so much. He was of the opinion that being alone was his natural state and that it suited him quite well.

Enter Niki, and before he knew it, the notion became obsolete.

As their meeting had been pure coincidence, he sometimes wondered later, when he was much older, what would've happened to both of them had they missed each other on that day?

It was hard to deny certain disasters could've been completely avoided, and many things would've probably gone easier for Niki if she hadn't known him, but he chose to believe that all in all, she was better off as it was. As for himself, each time he lost her, he fought like crazy to find her back, and each time he found her, he swore he would never lose her again, and even if it wasn't possible to keep this promise in the end, at least it answered the question well enough.

And so he liked to think they'd have met anyway, in a different place and different time. After all, their second and third encounters had been also quite accidental, as if they were the spare occasions arranged just in case the first one hadn't worked out.

Normally, Kehuan was a staunch advocate of rational thinking, but he was inclined to make an exception in this matter and to believe that fate had its hand in it all because Niki was the one person he simply couldn't imagine not having in his life.

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Part One

What Was Before

It could be said that Kehuan's problems with belonging had started before he was even born. Not only was he a child of two people of different nationalities, but one of them just couldn't stay put in one place.

His father was Taiwanese, a brilliant international lawyer. He had spent a big chunk of his youth abroad, first living with his parents in London for several years, and then studying in Canada. He'd been into politics since his university days, and worked in this or that capacity at diplomatic posts of Taiwan for many years, moving from one country to another. He put his entire energy into the work, and, being a man of a western cast of mind, strongly opposed the pressure of traditional Chinese culture with its emphasis on familial duty. For many years, his personal life stayed limited to a few very discreet flings, and he was entirely satisfied with this state of affairs, forgive the pun. In the middle of his forties, however, during the time he worked at the embassy in Seoul, he met Kehuan's mother, and the situation changed radically almost in a day.

Lee Soojin worked as a secretary at the embassy, and she owed the prestigious position to her late mother, an immigrant from China, and her determination to educate her daughter in spoken and written Mandarin. Soojin was much younger than Chen Liang, but not so young as to not want to start a family as soon as they sorted out their feelings. The decision carried a hint of rebellion: her living family consisted of a fraternal grandmother

and a few aunts and uncles, and they were all less than enthusiastic about the marriage. Chen Liang could have been well-off, good-looking, educated, and successful, but the bottom line was he wasn't Korean, and they were sure Soojin could do better, just as they'd thought about her father some thirty-five years earlier.

Kehuan was born a year after his parent's wedding, and for the next couple of years, nothing interesting happened to them, if one can describe in such cavalier terms the everyday life of a happily married couple raising a healthy child. A significant change took place when Chen Liang was offered a new post in Europe. Soojin had never set foot outside of Korea and was feeling adventurous, and Chen Liang was getting a little tired of her meddlesome relatives, so he accepted the offer, and with the beginning of the new millennium, they moved to Berlin. In these new circumstances, Soojin's Korean-Chinese ancestry wasn't of much advantage, so she gave up working altogether and simply dedicated her time to raising her son. Chen Liang, who had been such a stringent opponent of the traditional family model of life for so many years, was quite content about it and not conflicted at all.

Although this was probably the most peaceful period of Kehuan's childhood, even then he was already alienated from other children. His father earned good money, and despite Soojin staying happily unemployed, they could afford living in a comfortable house in a very good part of the city, but there wasn't much going on around in terms of social life among young children, especially those whose parents didn't know each other. There were no common playgrounds in the neighborhood; each house had its own garden with its own facilities, separated from others by a solid fence and thick barrier of greenery. Children didn't play in the streets either, God forbid. They were invited from time to time to play in each other's houses, and that was that.

Unfortunately for Kehuan, Chen Liang was already doing all his socializing during working hours and had no time to befriend his new neighbors, and Soojin wasn't bold enough to accost people whom she only met at the local grocery store, and whose language she could hardly speak. As a result, Kehuan spent most of his time in the sole company of his mother.

Soojin had a lot of playfulness in her, and she didn't mind spending her

days finger-painting, solving puzzles, and building endless variations of spaceships out of Lego blocks. It certainly helped that Kehuan wasn't a difficult child. He was a little serious and smiled too rarely for his mother's satisfaction, but he also didn't make a fuss over small things, like many children. It didn't bother him what he was given to eat or to wear, or if his day was arranged in a different order than he'd expected. He loved learning new things. If something interested him, and Soojin sometimes thought everything interested him, he'd get totally engrossed in it and put all his attention to the one thing, until he understood, or did the task, or solved the puzzle, or finished whatever there was to finish to make him satisfied. He learned at amazing speed, and observing him brought her a lot of pleasure.

Soojin loved books, and they spent many blissful afternoons over classic children's stories from all over the world. They usually read in Mandarin, but she sometimes smuggled in some books in Korean as well, and Kehuan didn't mind, though she had to explain a lot, and it took much longer to go through a story in her mother tongue.

Both mother and son seemed perfectly happy, but at some point, Chen Liang started to worry about Kehuan's social development, and after a lot of fretting over the language barrier, it was decided the boy would go to kindergarten.

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On the day of Kehuan's kindergarten debut, Chen Liang cut his work short—an almost unheard-of occurrence—and returned home just in time for dessert. He entered the kitchen, kissed his wife on the cheek, and then looked at Kehuan at the table and raised his eyebrows.

"Chocolate ice cream?" he asked, feigning confusion. "Is this the end of the world?"

His wife smiled and waved the teasing words aside with a graceful gesture of her beautiful hand. "It's a special occasion," she answered. "Kehuan was very brave today. He didn't cry at all."

Kehuan glanced at his mum from over his bowl of ice cream, licking the

teaspoon, and wondered what she meant. He didn't recall anything happen during the day that would deserve shedding tears over it.

"Is that so?" Chen Liang asked, very pleased. "Excellent. Since that's the case..." And he produced the big box of Lego blocks he'd been hiding behind his back.

Kehuan was even more baffled now; his day at the kindergarten really didn't account for so much fuss. Some children had been a bit too noisy, the soup they'd had for lunch had no taste, and he got a little annoyed when the teacher tried to help him solve the puzzle with panda bears, but none of that bothered him much, and he had no complaints. But since his parents thought he deserved the present, he certainly wasn't going to protest. He turned over the box, examining the pictures of different constructions proposed by the producer, and decided he didn't like any of them.

"Can we make a space station out of it?" he asked, opening the set. He took out all the bricks and started to separate them into categories depending on their size and shape. Color wasn't really important, he decided after a short deliberation. "I don't know if there are enough pieces," he noticed a moment later with a slight frown. "I can bring more from my room..."

His parents exchanged amused glances over his head, and Chen Liang, still in his elegant business suit, sat down on the carpet next to his son.

"Let us see," he said. "Do you have a special project in mind? What are our objectives?"

It turned into a very pleasant evening, which later transformed in Kehuan's memory into some fantastic, magical event he kept replaying in his head again and again because it was the last happy moment he could remember for a very long time.

Just a couple of weeks later Lee Soojin noticed something wrong about her left breast, and their perfect world suddenly crumbled.

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The few months that followed were forever blurred in Kehuan's memory. He mostly remembered being always the last child to be collected from the

kindergarten, which he didn't like so much anymore, and terribly missing his mother, who wasn't there. He knew she was in hospital, but he was scared, and lonely, and confused by the sudden replacement of Soojin with a very friendly, but completely foreign babysitter, and so he began causing problems.

It started small. Kehuan got touchy and lost his easy-going attitude. He made trouble over things he'd never cared about before and got angry when someone touched his things or a toy he was playing with or sat at his place during lunch. He'd only just started learning German and couldn't properly argue, but he'd caught a few useful insults and used them like a weapon. Everyone was very understanding at the beginning, and even when he proceeded to shouting and pushing, adults were still quite patient, though children began to fear him. But then he started to hit, and kick, and bite, and while the teachers were still sympathetic, the parents gradually lost their goodwill. Kehuan was tall for his age, and he could pack quite a punch.

Chen Liang was more or less aware of the whole situation, though he kept quiet about it in front of his wife. But Soojin's condition kept deteriorating; they'd already tried radiotherapy, and two different types of chemotherapy, but nothing helped while it all cost a lot of money, and he had his work on top of that. There was so much to deal with already that Kehuan's kindergarten brawls didn't seem so important in comparison, so he didn't pay much attention to them until one day he received a phone from the headteacher who asked him to come and collect his son, and not to bring him anymore. This was a private institution depending very much on the parents and their good opinion, and Kehuan became, at the tender age of five and a half, a bogeyman of the neighborhood, scaring people off with his violent tendencies. Chen Liang tried to parley, but it was too late.

Kehuan returned home, and soon he was bored out of his mind.

His father was basically absent, either at work or in the hospital. The first babysitter, whom Kehuan had finally accepted, had already left by then, and another one took her place, only to quit as well after a few weeks. After that, he didn't really want to get to know any of his babysitters. In the end, they all left, and there was no point.

To be fair, it must be said that most of them started their work with the

best intentions, but Kehuan was a singularly unlikeable child those days. He discovered he had a real talent to repel people, and practiced this new skill with a vengeance on everyone he met. He'd caught quite a lot of basic German during his short stint in the kindergarten, but pretended not to understand a word of what was said to him, and ignored all requests and commands. He also learned that most adults were not inclined to hit him, even if he hit or kicked them first, though there were some exceptions. He didn't tell his father about the exceptions, choosing instead to spend more time on his own inside his room or outside the house, and accidentally making the life of his last German babysitter much easier.

That was the time when he really discovered books. During those reading sessions with Soojin in their happy days, he'd already learned quite a lot of Chinese characters, but it wasn't enough to let him read all by himself. Korean alphabet with its limited number of letters was much easier to master, but books written in Korean presented him with a different difficulty: he didn't understand most words.

A lucky accident helped his situation. Chen Liang wanted to buy some audiobooks for Soojin, who didn't have the energy to read anymore, and while his secretary was browsing through the online bookstore, she came across some children's books with audio version added on CD, and in a rare fit of initiative added to the cart a compilation of traditional children's fairy tales.

It wasn't the best choice for Kehuan, but he listened to the CD and read the book all the same, several times, scowling and sneering in turns at the naivete of the stories. After that he did some thinking, and finally initiated contact with his not-reluctant-to-hit-back babysitter, asking for more books with CDs. The babysitter had a problem understanding him and had to consult with his father, but Chen Liang said yes, of course. After that, they reached a truce of sorts: Kehuan kept out of her hair, reading in his room most of the time, and she ordered new books for him every time he asked.

It took him almost a year to shed the audio files completely, and start using dictionaries instead. About the same time, three months after he turned six, his mother died.

WHAT WAS BEFORE

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It wasn't really a surprise. Kehuan had known Soojin was going to die, even if nobody ever mentioned it to him. Or maybe people did mention it when they thought he wasn't listening. Anyway, he knew, and he'd already cried over it many times in his room and kicked and bitten many people for it. When it happened, he was sad, but it wasn't such a blow as could be expected because in a way his mum had already been gone for a long time by then.

At the beginning of Soojin's illness, Kehuan had been allowed to visit her in the hospital, and he couldn't wait for those visits, but he quickly became disappointed. His mother didn't play with him the way she used to, and she cried a lot instead of smiling. Later, as her condition worsened, the intervals between their meetings became longer, and finally, Chen Liang put a stop to them altogether because each time Soojin saw her son, she got very depressed afterward. When she died, Kehuan hadn't seen her for several months, and several months is an epoch in the life of a six-year-old. When he was told, he simply thought things weren't going to be so much different from what already was, only now it was clear they'd never change back again.

If Kehuan was grimly resigned and prepared for the news, Chen Liang was not. Soojin had been the love of his life, and he'd been in full denial mode, never allowing himself to even consider the possibility that she could die. When she did, it was a complete disaster. He took leave from work, returned home, took a bottle of whiskey, and locked himself in his study.

Kehuan also kept to his room, and his babysitter wondered if she should go home since the boy's father was present. Chen Liang had left his phone in the hall, and it kept ringing every few minutes, annoying her to no end, until it finally ran out of power and stopped, and the house became eerily quiet.

Her shift ended, and now she was actually supposed to go, but it wasn't sitting well with her to leave the boy alone, with his father locked away and incommunicado. It was true that she hadn't been reluctant to hit Kehuan back, but she still pitied the brat quite a lot. Though it was a relief to not have to deal with him very often.

She stayed in the end, made some simple food, checked up on Kehuan from

time to time, and waited until Chen Liang finally emerged back from the study two days later. She bragged to her friends about this sacrifice for years.

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Chen Liang quit his job and went with his son back to Taiwan.

He owned an apartment in Taipei, which he always kept empty, though he'd been told many times that renting it out would be more reasonable. It was on the seventh floor of a high-rise apartment block, and, unlike their former house in Berlin, wasn't located in any prestigious neighborhood. It was also small and cramped, as it dated from the times when he'd just come to Taipei from Canada, and had still been young and moneyless. The place had been a rental back then, but he bought it out some years later, both as an investment and for sentimental reasons. Now it came in handy.

They were living on his savings, and the money was melting away. There wasn't much left after Soojin's long stay in hospital and all the treatments, and Chen Liang was aware they couldn't go on like that forever, but he felt incapable of taking any action. The only thing he seemed to be able to do these days was drink.

He'd always liked alcohol, but kept his drinking habits firmly under control. In those past days with Soojin, he used to content himself with a single glass of whiskey in the evening, after returning home from work. She'd sit with him in the living room, and they'd hug, and play some music, and talk, and he'd feel good even if his day had been hard. It was all paradise lost now, so he didn't really want to think about it. Everything was bleak, without any prospects of change, and he felt broken inside.

Still, he made some minimal effort to take care of his son. When they arrived, the summer was just beginning, but Chen Liang enrolled Kehuan at a local school for the next school year. He also bought the boy some new clothes, better suited for muggy Taipei weather, and took him to a local store for a new haul of books. That was all. Anything more, like actually interacting with his son, was beyond him at the moment.

Around this time a guy from Soojin's Korean family contacted him. It wasn't

any member of the older generation, but some cousin from Busan whom Chen Liang had never met. The man called him several more times during the summer, trying to convince him to send Kehuan over for the holidays, but Chen Liang never agreed. He knew the proposal had its merits, but he had an unfounded, but strong premonition that if he let Kehuan go to Korea, he might never see his son again, and even in his current state of permanent stupor the thought terrified him.

Kehuan had no idea his mother's relative kept trying to invite him over for the summer. He was busy turning himself into a part-time street child.

He was finally able to understand what people were saying around him, more or less, and to communicate with other kids. In the beginning, he was glad about it and eager to socialize, but it quickly became clear that his inability to make friends in Germany had been caused by more than just the language barrier.

Kehuan discovered that he didn't really like other children. He'd spent his early years in the company of books and very intelligent adults, and he couldn't help thinking that children were stupid.

The truth was he had no common ground with most of his peers. The children in the streets didn't read many books, and he didn't understand their games and got quickly bored talking to them. Chen Liang and Soojin had shared an opinion that TV damaged children's brains and should be reserved for adults, so Kehuan had no idea about popular cartoons or anime serials. Any references to characters and plots flew right over his head, and it gave other children the much-needed ammunition: he thought they were stupid, but it turned out it was him who didn't have a clue. And he used strange words sometimes and had a funny accent, and he also didn't have a mother. At this point, things usually quickly escalated from a quarrel to physical fight because Kehuan was never averse to using his fists these days. He had a lot of anger bottled up inside, and the cork popped out readily on every occasion.

It kept happening along the same lines with every new group of children he encountered, and because he wasn't dim, it came to his mind very quickly that the problem probably lay with him, not them.

That was really annoying. If it had been their fault, he could beat them all up,

but Kehuan didn't know what to do when something was wrong with himself. He chose the simplest solution and stopped trying. He just wandered around, making larger and larger circles around his home, and getting to know the whole area: the housing estates, the shopping streets, the marketplaces, the bars, and entertainment zones. It wasn't a particularly bad part of the city, but it had enough of seedy alleys and corners, and if Chen Liang knew where his six-year-old son could be found at times, it's possible he'd sober up on the spot. But Chen Liang had no idea and never asked, so Kehuan walked wherever he wanted.

He observed people and learned quite a lot every day. Even if he didn't try to talk to others anymore, sometimes others talked to him, and every time a new situation unfolded. By the end of the summer he understood that most adults were nice, but some he should definitely avoid. He also found out that some older kids and teens could be truly vicious, and that not every fight was winnable, and how to fight dirty, and when to keep his opinions to himself, and when to run. He returned home every evening tired and hungry, and sometimes there was something to eat, but sometimes there was nothing, as Chen Liang was all about liquids these days. So Kehuan also understood that if he wanted to eat, he had to make sure there was food at home or to eat on the street, and he learned to count money, and not to count money when somebody was watching him because after that there might be nothing left to count.

You could say it was a very educational summer for Kehuan.

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In September, the school started. Chen Liang remembered about it at the very last moment and felt bad because of that, but Kehuan had known about the first day of school anyway because he'd overheard some children talk about it. He even knew he was supposed to wear a white shirt on this occasion, only he couldn't find any white shirts among his clothes, so he gave up and went in a white T-shirt instead. It had a picture of a dragon on it and wasn't entirely clean, but it was the best he could do.

His school was simply the nearest one to the apartment. The old Chen Liang would've never sent his son there, but it wasn't that bad, really. It was just a big, a little shabby, ordinary school in a hard-working, but down on its luck neighborhood.

Kehuan quickly decided he liked school. It gave some structure to his days, which was good, but mainly he liked it because he still had the same voracious appetite for learning. He especially enjoyed math, though the pace was somewhat slow in his opinion. But solving math problems was fun, and he could always solve more if he didn't feel like listening to the same explanations again.

There were more than a thousand children at the school, but he didn't talk to anybody and kept to himself, as usual. Still, he quickly discovered there were some kids who weren't completely stupid, after all. He started to hang around them and overheard some talks about the after-school classes they were attending. That caught his attention. Kehuan wondered what he'd like to learn or practice after school, and decided to consult it with his father, making Chen Liang feel again like a candidate for the worst father in the world award.

Chen Liang wanted his son to be able to learn everything he wanted, and in the past, he would've encouraged every interest and ambition Kehuan might have, but now the situation became a little tricky: they were almost out of money. He recognized he really needed to cut down on the alcohol and start looking for a job, but it was all easier said than done. He didn't want to go back to his old work, even if he had such a chance. He felt as if his work at the Berlin embassy had been somehow connected to Lee Soojin's illness and death, and though he knew it was irrational, he was absolutely sure he was done with diplomacy. At the same time, he'd worked in this field all his life, and had no idea what he could do instead.

The next morning after Kehuan had caught him off guard with his after-school classes dilemma, Chen Liang woke up with a slightly clearer head than usual. He took the long-overdue shower and ate some stale egg pancake rolls he'd found in the fridge, trying to remember when he could've gone out to buy them. Then he started browsing the contact book on his phone, in hope

that some course of action would present itself, and finally decided to call Liu Wen, an old acquaintance from his university days. They used to be good friends, and the guy was a lawyer like himself, but most importantly, he still lived in Canada. They hadn't talked for years, and Chen Liang hoped Liu Wen wouldn't know his recent history. He didn't want to talk to anybody who'd known Soojin, or even knew about Soojin.

It was a partial success. It turned out Liu Wen did know, and when he started offering his condolences, Chen Liang was seconds away from hanging up on him. But the man kept the condolences short, and soon they were talking about his job as a legal counsel for a construction company, and in the end, Chen Liang didn't find it so hard to ask for advice. Liu Wen promised to think about it and call him back.

Chen Liang didn't really expect anything to come out of it, but a few days later, he received a message saying a relative of Liu Wen wanted to meet with him in Taipei. He'd almost forgotten about the whole conversation by then, as it'd happened some three bottles of whiskey earlier, but decided to give it a chance. He dusted off one of his business suits and got on the bus to meet the guy in a downtown restaurant.

Later, he often thought of this meeting as one of the luckiest turnabouts in his life, right after meeting Soojin.

Liu Wen's cousin's name was Chen Xiao, and they both smiled when they first introduced themselves. Chen Xiao had a great smile, which made others feel at ease in his company, and Chen Liang suddenly remembered that he used to be brilliant at interacting with people and made an effort to dig out some of his charm. Soon it became clear they operated on the same wavelength, despite the age gap and different professional backgrounds.

Chen Xiao was a thirty-something computer whizz with a flair for business. His personal history seemed like a reverse to Chen Liang's: he grew up in Vancouver, and then came to Taipei to study computer science. After university, he'd started a small software company, which began to do well after obtaining a contract with a big client.

The client had several branches in Asia and Europe, and Chen Xiao's company had serviced them all from Taipei so far, but at one point, he

decided it'd work better if they had a subsidiary company in Europe. This required a lot of legal work on-site, though, and employing local people. Chen Xiao had found a few potential investors, including Liu Wen, but he had no experience in overseas business, and Chen Liang, with his international lawyer's experience, seemed to him like a godsend. Chen Liang knew of course it was exactly the other way round, but maybe they were godsend to each other, or at least he really wanted to believe it.

Later that day he hesitated for a moment over the bottle of whiskey he was holding in his hand, but in the end, he threw it away. This was his one chance to dig himself out of the hole. What's more, it was also a chance to dig out Kehuan, and that wasn't something he could pass up and forgive himself.

As soon as he shook off the alcohol haze, he took a first sober look at his son and their apartment and felt appalled. He wasn't sure Soojin would recognize her pampered boy in the scraggy, unkempt, scowling creature. As for the place, the less said the better. He couldn't believe he'd let himself live like that. At first, he wanted to do all the cleaning himself—it'd be a fitting punishment for keeping his son in this pigsty—but in the end, old habits won: he hired a local cleaning service, and they did the job. Cheng Liang in the meantime took Kehuan for a haircut, and then for a proper meal, and over dinner, he asked his son what after-school classes he'd like to take.

Kehuan was a little surprised, but he had it all thought out by then. He wanted to take up a musical instrument because he liked music, and English because everybody said it was important, and some martial art because he wanted to be a better fighter, and something to do with computers because computers were cool, but he had no idea how to use them, which caused him a lot of grief at school.

His father listened to it all and shook his head, laughing quietly, which stunned Kehuan all over again. A few days later he was signed up for piano lessons once a week, private English lessons three times a week, and taekwondo classes twice a week. Kehuan had expected it'd be Tai Chi, but taekwondo looked really fierce, so he was glad. As for computers, Chen Liang simply introduced his son to Chen Xiao, and if ever there were people destined to meet, they were those two.

Chen Xiao was absolutely enchanted with Kehuan, not because he was an enchanting child—he definitely wasn't—but because he was the smartest kid Chen Xiao had ever met. The problem of Kehuan's incompetence with computers was solved after an hour, and then it was into the land of computer games, the Internet, elementary algorithms, and computer programming for kids. Chen Xiao gave him one of his older laptops and made a point of finding time for him every Saturday, and Kehuan appreciated these sessions a lot.

They lost Chen Liang after the first two meetings. He'd never been particularly interested in technology, or good at it. He felt he belonged to the pre-Internet age, though since he'd started working for Chen Xiao, he'd been on a steep learning curve. But seeing how much his son enjoyed this new experience, he was very grateful to the younger guy, who in many respects understood Kehuan much better than himself.

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Kehuan enjoyed all his new classes very much, but he didn't fail to notice the different levels of importance his father put on each of them. He especially wondered about the amount of time allotted to English lessons. He didn't mind learning the language, since English often came in handy when he was playing online multiplayer games, but he couldn't help feeling a little uneasy, as Kehuan's logical thinking was always stellar.

The bomb detonated in February, just a few days after his seventh birthday.

Chen Liang announced he was soon leaving for Poland, to set about the opening of the company's new subsidiary. He didn't want to transfer Kehuan in the middle of the school year, so his son was to stay with Chen Xiao until June. Then he'd join his father, and after holidays he'd go to an international school in Warsaw.

Kehuan was furious. He began shaking, angry tears sprang to his eyes, and he couldn't even speak properly. He'd just started school. He'd just started his classes. He'd just...started. He felt utterly betrayed and couldn't understand how his father could do it to him.

Chen Liang had expected his son wouldn't welcome the news, but the

intensity of Kehuan's reaction gave him pause. He couldn't change the plans, though, as everything had been already set in motion, and besides, working at the subsidiary in Europe was the main purpose he'd been employed for. But it was difficult to explain to Kehuan that all the recent good changes in their life happened on the condition they'd move again, and finally, Chen Liang lost patience and got a little angry himself. He was doing his best, and he was doing it all for his son, and his son hated him for it.

They parted two weeks later in a rather frosty atmosphere, and Kehuan moved to Chen Xiao's place.

It was far away from his old apartment, so even with Chen Xiao driving him to school every morning, he had to get up much earlier to be on time for lessons, which didn't improve his mood at all. Even so, living with his computer guru had its perks: Kehuan could now ask questions about the ICT stuff almost as soon as they popped in his head. The apartment was also much bigger, and he had his own room, at least for the next three months. But he still felt betrayed and resentful.

Earlier, when things had started looking up, some of his anger towards the world evaporated, but now it was all back. He didn't want to go back to Europe and start all over again in another foreign country. He hated his father, and he hated his life. He hated other kids at school as well. He couldn't stand their constant giggling and babbling, and those stupid snots didn't know how lucky they were he had his taekwondo classes where he could hit and kick in an organized way. He hated Chen Xiao, too, because he finally connected the dots and realized the whole exile project was because of this guy and his stupid company, and he felt like a moron for not catching on to it earlier.

Finally, the anger fizzled out and left him empty. Kehuan hardly talked to Chen Xiao at home anymore, and when he was at school, he felt like a hundred-year-old surrounded by gurgling toddlers. From time to time he noticed another hundred-year-old in the crowd, but he never approached any of them. What would it help? Misery wasn't a team sport, and besides, he was leaving soon anyway. Even his after-school classes didn't feel like fun anymore.

Chen Xiao had an enormous flat screen in his living room, and Kehuan spent a big chunk of April and May staring at it, binge-watching cartoons, anime, children's films, and different documentaries his temporary guardian had programmed for him. In those two months he made up for all the popular children's culture he'd missed up on earlier, and now he could probably discuss with a flair all Disney, Pixar, and Ghibli plots and characters, and quote funny lines, only he had no one to talk to, and couldn't care less. On the days he felt rebellious, he went for adult content as well. Most of it wasn't so interesting, and some pieces were downright gross, but he enjoyed action and adventure films, and sci-fi sagas. But it was all just fiction, and reality still sucked.

At the beginning of summer, Kehuan finished his first grade, said goodbye to his piano and English teachers and the taekwondo *sabom*, packed his life into a middle-sized suitcase, and boarded a plane to Warsaw (to Istanbul, really; there weren't even any direct flights to this godforsaken place). Chen Xiao saw him off to the airport, and they parted on more or less good terms. Kehuan hadn't forgiven him for the exile, but he also hadn't forgotten all the help the guy had offered him. It all kind of balanced out, and Kehuan let it go. He didn't want any drama.

He had to switch planes twice, once in Istanbul and then again in Frankfurt, but it went without a hitch. The professionally smiling flight attendants and ground staff transferred him through the airports, and he slept through most of the long flights. Still, he was already seriously jet-lagged when they finally arrived in Warsaw.

He saw Chen Liang waiting for him behind the sliding glass doors and felt nothing, though in the past months he'd sometimes had to admit to himself that he missed his father, despite everything.

Chen Liang gave his impassive son an awkward hug and they went out of the hall. They took a taxi to their apartment, and Kehuan remained in the zombie mode during the whole forty-minute drive. Then he went to sleep straight away, and it wasn't until the next day that he finally gave his new surroundings a proper look.

He woke up at four in the morning if the clock on the wall could be trusted, and it was daylight already. The room wasn't big, but it had a big, floor-to-ceiling window on one wall, and Kehuan got up to take a better look.

The sky was pale blue, and he had a view on a wide river, visible behind a road and some trees. He could see thin wisps of morning fog lingering over the water, and the downtown on the other side. To the right, a long bridge crossed the river. Kehuan didn't think the city was as big as Taipei, but it still looked quite big and had a different feel.

He dressed up, unpacked his suitcase, plugged in his laptop, and went out for some breakfast. The kitchen was right next to his room, and he was pleasantly surprised to find actual food in the fridge.

Sometime later his father came to the kitchen as well and sat next to him at the table. Kehuan just ate on, keeping silent, and Chen Liang sighed and asked if he liked their new place. Kehuan said it was okay; with its big windows, toned-down colors and simple furniture it reminded him a bit of Chen Xiao's apartment in Taipei, except this place was much smaller; there were only two rooms. But it didn't matter, as long as he had his own space.

Chen Liang offered to show him the neighborhood, and Kehuan agreed with a smirk. He expected that soon he'd be doing a lot of walking around on his own again, and he didn't really need a guide, but whatever.

They went out of the apartment, and Kehuan saw it was located on the fifth floor of a low-rise apartment block. It was still morning, and the air was drier and much cooler than in Taipei, even though the day was sunny. A light breeze was coming from the direction of the river, but he couldn't see it now. There were a few similar blocks close by, all separated from each other by greenery and lawns. Kehuan didn't recognize the trees, but he was suddenly reminded of their old garden in Berlin, and he felt a pang. He hadn't thought about Berlin for a long time and didn't remember so much of it anymore, but Berlin meant Soojin.

They turned to the opposite direction from the river, and after a few minutes of walking entered a busy street lined with shops, offices, and small eateries.

Some places were still closed at this time of the day, and some were just opening. The pavements were wide, and many eateries had tables and chairs outside, though they didn't look like a permanent thing. In Kehuan's eyes, the whole neighborhood seemed rather fancy.

In fact, for all that Chen Liang had been crazy busy with work during those last months, he'd made an effort to make Kehuan's new beginning as smooth and nice as possible. He'd felt bad about the way they'd parted, but there was more to it: he didn't remember many details from the time they'd first arrived in Taipei, but what he did remember made him cringe, and he wanted to make up for it to his son. It looked like they were going to stay in this city for a long time, so he picked a place he thought Kehuan would like, cost be damned.

The apartment he'd rented was within a walking distance from the school Chen Liang had in mind for his son, though it would be a rather long walk. He'd already found an English tutor for Kehuan for the holidays, and also checked that the school offered extra classes on music. He'd even done some tentative research about martial arts for children in Warsaw and was surprised to find many options, including a few taekwondo clubs. All in all, he hoped Kehuan would see it wasn't going to be so bad, really.

After an hour of walking around, they went to the school. Kehuan was a little curious about it. He'd already known they had all lessons in English there, and he thought the two teachers who talked to him wanted to check if he'd manage. They called him Kehuan Chen, which sounded weird because he'd always been Chen Kehuan before, and they accented his name all wrong, but he didn't correct them. Finally, they said he'd do.

After that, his father stayed behind to finish the paperwork while Kehuan took a stroll around the school grounds. On the way back he grudgingly admitted everything seemed all right so far, and since he was still jet-lagged, he went back to sleep as soon as they returned home.

* * *

On the next day, Chen Liang had to go back to work.

It was very telling that he'd found an English tutor for Kehuan but didn't even consider hiring a caregiver or organizing his son's time in any way. If Soojin were still alive, Kehuan would be probably spending his holidays on some fancy theme summer camp, but Chen Liang was clueless in some respects. He'd never been the one who took care of their son when the boy had been younger, and he got so accustomed to Kehuan taking care of himself during that time in Taipei that it didn't even cross his mind that it might not be an entirely normal arrangement.

Kehuan woke up very early again, played online games on his laptop for a while, read a book, and then heard his father get up and leave. He went out of his room then, and while eating breakfast, he thought about what he could do. His English tutor was coming soon, and Kehuan decided to do some city exploring after that. He'd already seen the neighborhood and wanted to take a look at the downtown now, but it seemed a little far. The previous summer he'd sometimes walked for hours at a time, but he was older and wiser now, and besides, on the day before he'd already noticed the bus stops at both sides of that busy street.

The tutor came at nine. He was a university student on holiday, young and upbeat. His name was Tomek, and he told Kehuan to call him by it. He was pleased Kehuan could already speak some English using simple sentences, and they talked for an hour and a half about different stuff: Tomek wanted to know about Taipei, so Kehuan told him some, and Kehuan asked him about Warsaw and the buses, so they opened the map of the city on his laptop, and did some browsing together. Tomek was very interested in the keyboard with Chinese characters; he'd never seen one before. The local websites didn't have Mandarin versions, though, so they had to do all the research in English, which was all right, since it was supposed to be an English lesson. After that Kehuan had no problem with getting a day ticket at the machine next to the bus stop, and he got on the bus and took his first trip around Warsaw.

This was again a summer when he learned a lot. Warsaw was a very different city from Taipei, but some things were exactly the same. There were people who wanted to help him, needlessly, probably because they thought he was lost, and people Kehuan knew at once to avoid. There were many fantastic

places, beautiful in a totally different way from Taipei, and there were dirty alleys and nasty-smelling passages as well. The weather could be tricky at times, but after a few surprises Kehuan learned to check the forecast on his laptop in the morning, and he was set. Food was different, too, but he'd never been a picky eater, and besides, he quickly discovered there were many small places with Asian food around if he felt fussy. Though some of them were rubbish.

Kehuan didn't understand the language again, and it was a pain, but the letters were mostly the same as in English and German. He could at least read the names of streets and places, even if he had no idea how to pronounce them, and if he really had to communicate with somebody, his basic English and some gestures were usually enough.

But the most important new thing Kehuan learned was that he was a person of color living in a country of white people.

It took him some time to notice and to realize what it meant because he didn't know to look for the signs at first and didn't speak the language, and of course, it wasn't as if everybody in Warsaw was racist. But there were enough.

He first got the message when he was walking through the park not far from home, and stopped near a playground to watch some kids on the swings. Kehuan wasn't trying to join them; he just liked sometimes to look at other children. But the boys started sneering and shouting at him, and even if he didn't understand a word, he got the gist: they wanted him gone from there, and they thought he was trash.

It happened a few more times, and Kehuan didn't understand the reason for those attacks at first because he really wasn't doing anything when they happened. He made a mistake and asked Chen Liang about it, and it was the first time he saw his father truly angry. Chen Liang wanted to go out and find those punks at once, and it took some convincing to dissuade him from the plan. Kehuan decided to talk to Tomek instead, and he could tell his English tutor felt really bad about it. As if it was his personal fault somehow. Kehuan told him it was all right; he just wanted to understand.

Tomek was a history student, and the topic triggered a lengthy discussion

about different strange beliefs some people had about others, and how it sometimes led to really nasty stuff. Like in Europe in the past, he said, and Kehuan, quite curious, did some additional digging on the Internet later and got horrified and fascinated at the same time.

After that he became aware. He noticed when a woman on the bus didn't want her child to sit next to him, and when a shop assistant wiped his hand on the apron after Kehuan's fingers had accidentally touched his while taking an ice cream. He made an effort to ignore it, but it grated on his nerves all the same.

The boys were the worst. The very first group of little nazis he encountered turned out to be his curse. They lived in the same neighborhood, unfortunately, and they were a pack, while he was alone. Kehuan felt seriously tempted to try some of his taekwondo moves on them because after the first few accidental meetings the wretches started to follow him around, and he had to develop some weird strategies to avoid them. He sincerely hoped none of them would be at his new school because it would really suck.

And then September came and the school started, and hallelujah, they weren't there.

Kehuan was in the second grade, and his class had only twenty children in it, which was half of his old class in Taipei. The group was a real mix. There were two girls he'd thought might speak Mandarin, but they didn't (they were both Vietnamese) and a boy from India, a few Americans and Canadians, and children from different European countries, including Germany. And a scattering of Polish children, too. Kehuan learned all this on the first day when their form teacher asked everybody to introduce themselves for the benefit of the three new students in the class.

The lessons were fine. The American and Canadian children had an advantage because of the language, but Kehuan could already tell it wouldn't last. There were other very smart kids, too, who just needed to improve their English. As for math, he was the best again, hands down.

It should be said that Kehuan had made some progress in his social skills since the previous year. He'd already stopped getting into fights because he'd realized that this road usually led to nowhere, and he didn't think anymore

that all children were stupid. He'd understood at some point that most of them were simply...more children than himself. But no further change of habits followed this understanding because whatever the reason, the conclusion was the same: he had nothing to talk about with them, and felt no inclination to try. There were better outlets for his energy.

He started training taekwondo again, and since he was tall and strong for his age, and already had some skills, he got placed in a group of older boys, which was really cool.

Then there was music. The music teacher at the school was very earnest about her mission, and she called Kehuan's father to tell him he should buy a piano for his son to practice at home. Chen Liang, who didn't have a clue about music, and had never treated Kehuan's music interests seriously, was surprised and annoyed at the meddling. But the teacher had already found a second-hand acoustic piano for Kehuan, and Chen Liang had only to pay for it, and it wasn't expensive while being of good quality, and it was really important for a music student to have a good instrument. In the end, Chen Liang surrendered. He didn't know how to argue with her, and the teacher unknowingly hit upon the best strategy with him: ask him to pay, and let him forget about the rest.

Kehuan enjoyed his new-old piano very much, not to mention the kick he'd got out of hearing the music teacher bully his father. He'd only heard one side of this conversation, but it'd been hilarious.

Another thing was the after-school computer club. Kehuan hadn't expected much of the shaggy young man with a beard and thick glasses who was a teacher there, but he'd been completely wrong. The guy was just as brilliant as Chen Xiao, except his interests lay in different areas, like computer graphics and animation, and he was also working on this program translating between English and Polish which was supposed to work on mobile phones. It wasn't long before Kehuan started writing codes again under his direction.

Still, his life was far from perfect.

First, he had to study Polish at school, and it was a nightmare. No other language had caused him so much grief. If he could, he'd drop it on the spot, but alas, it was obligatory for all students. So he struggled and cursed, and

didn't make much progress at all, and it didn't console him that it seemed just as hard for almost every foreign kid.

But that was a trifle in comparison with the other matter.

The nazi boys had become the bane of his existence: he met them almost every day now. Kehuan suspected following him around was their main entertainment, and wanted to roll his eyes and ask if they really didn't have anything better to do, only he couldn't, of course, because he didn't speak the damn language. The public primary school they attended was halfway between his own school and home, and he had to invent different roundabout routes to steer clear of them. But then it was late autumn, and the weather turned foul, and when winter came, he became thoroughly fed up with it.

* * *

Kehuan was walking home on a frosty February afternoon when he spotted a whole group of the nazi boys standing in front of a small shop. He'd already learned that the more of them were together, the uglier it'd get, so he immediately changed direction and walked through a passage between two buildings into a small courtyard.

A few cars stood on one side, and on the other, there was a swing, a slide, and a sandpit, all covered with a thick layer of snow. Next to the slide Kehuan noticed a snowman, and stared: the small figure, though crudely made, looked unmistakably like Sid, the chatty sloth from *Ice Age*.

Kehuan sat on the rim of the sandpit, gazing at the snow Sid and shivering violently because he'd forgotten his hat and gloves that morning. He took out his phone and took a photo of the snow figure, and was gloomily pondering his options when someone suddenly poke his back.

He turned around swiftly, ready to face his stalkers and finally deliver some taekwondo, and instead looked into the strangest pair of eyes he'd ever seen.

They looked like a work of a CGI artist, enormous in a small triangle face, bright and clear like water, and striated with dark blue and gold. The creature the eyes belonged to looked somewhat strange, too. She was tiny—Kehuan was almost certain it was a she—and dressed in several layers of clothes

obviously too big for her, with a gray woolen shawl wrapped around her head and shoulders. In the outstretched hand, she held a big metal cup with a lid.

The creature said something in a melodic voice and beamed at Kehuan, who of course didn't understand a word, and for the first time regretted his aversion to learning Polish.

"I don't know what you're saying," he said in his own language and shrugged.

The little girl frowned, fixed him with the gaze of her improbable eyes, and impatiently repeated the same thing, shoving the metal cup in his hands.

Kehuan felt that despite the insulation it was a little warm on the outside. At this point, he was so cold that he didn't think much: he just opened the lid and took a swig of whatever was inside. It was hot, milky, and sweet, and he shivered and drank more, looking at the girl between the gulps. She started to bounce up and down, spinning around at the same time, and chanting one word over and over in her melodic voice, and Kehuan couldn't help laughing. He actually laughed, aloud.

The tiny creature stopped at that, grinned at him, and pointing to herself in a perfect me-Jane-you-Tarzan re-enactment, said very clearly, "Niki".

And Kehuan remembered it forever because, even though he didn't realize it then, it was the moment which separated his life from what was before.