

THE
TERMS
— OF HIS —
SURVIVAL

MONEY • POWER • CONTROL

— CHAPTER THREE —
ARRIVAL

HONG KONG

*A NEW COUNTRY
OFFERED DISTANCE.
NOT SAFETY.*

PORT TRINITY,
TEXAS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Chapter Three | Arrival

As the plane began its slow descent into Virginia, Taio felt the aircraft bank hard, the wing dipping into a sheet of rain that streaked across the window in long, trembling lines. Dark clouds pressed close, and something in his chest tightened. He was on the last leg of a meticulously planned escape — the moment of truth, the point where a bullet either hit its mark or vanished into the dark.

Genji's contact had been instrumental at every step. A man who specialized in quiet disappearances, he had given Taio a blueprint so detailed it felt like stepping into someone else's life. For months, Taio skimmed money from his stipend — the kind of small, careful theft no one would question. No nightclubs. No new clothes. No Uber Black. He took the MTR instead, head down, hands in pockets, telling friends he was exhausted, grieving, not in the mood for company. They accepted it without hesitation. Mourning was a language everyone understood.

By the end of four months, he had saved HK 50K without altering his lifestyle enough to raise suspicion. The amount was small enough to slip beneath the thresholds that triggered airport scrutiny in Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States.

During his seven-and-a-half-hour layover in Tokyo, he moved through the airport like a ghost, exchanging HKD for USD at

automated kiosks. He had mapped them out in advance, walking between them at a leisurely pace, exchanging HKD 5,000 at a time, always staying below the limit that required a passport scan. It was almost meditative — the quiet clicking of buttons, the soft whir of the machine, the small stack of bills sliding into his hand.

Looking back on everything that had unfolded in the year since he began planning, he felt his grandmother's presence settle over him like a familiar shawl. She had known before he did that this day would come.

After her death, a lawyer contacted him privately. His grandmother had saved and invested every dollar his father sent her after Leung-Yee banished her from the home following Rong-Hoa's birth. *No longer needed*, Leung-Yee had said. But Taio needed her. The time they spent together during school breaks, holidays, and summers was when he felt most himself — care, connection, wisdom, freedom. The quiet bond with nature she taught him to trust. He treasured those days more than anything else.

Knowing she had planned for his future still surprised him. He smiled faintly, thinking how the guilt money his father sent each month was now funding his escape. His grandmother, in her quiet way, had gotten the last word.

The plane began to slow, the engines shifting pitch, the cabin lights brightening in a soft, artificial dawn. Taio felt the weightlessness in his stomach, the familiar drop before landing. He thought of Genji — her certainty, her courage, the way she had believed in his escape long before he believed in himself. Without her, he would still be planning this in the privacy of his mind, rehearsing possibilities he never intended to act on. What neither of them knew then — what neither could have

imagined — was that Genji's movements were not as unmonitored as they believed. Their families were entangled in something deeper, darker, and far more powerful than either of them understood at the time.

Skidding onto the wet runway, the plane gripped, bounced once as the brakes took hold, engines reversing, slowing. Touchdown just before 4 p.m. Taio followed the passengers down the jet bridge into a confusing maze of decisions. He moved slowly, deliberately, intent on making every decision the correct one. Fatigued and ready to start his new life, he still had this last hurdle to overcome. He made his way to a mobile lounge, which took him and other passengers to the main terminal. A strange contraption — bumpy, slow, almost prehistoric. Taio wondered if what he had heard about America could be wrong. His first impression was certainly not one that felt like he had entered a modern, advanced society.

They traveled across the tarmac at barely twenty miles an hour, the mobile lounge humming and shuddering as it crawled past planes and support vehicles moving with a precision that made him feel even more out of place. Rain streaked across the windows in diagonal lines, blurring the lights into smears of white and amber. He stood near the back, gripping the metal rail, watching the terminal inch closer as if the building itself were reluctant to receive him.

When they finally docked, passengers spilled out into a narrow corridor and funneled toward an escalator and a ramp leading down into the U.S. Customs Hall. Taio chose the ramp, avoiding the slow descent and the feeling of being trapped on a moving staircase. He wanted space, movement, options — anything that made him feel less like prey.

The Customs Hall opened before him, massive and cavernous,

black nylon belts weaving back and forth in a maze designed to corral bodies and break spirits. Multilingual signs hung overhead, and agents pointed travelers toward the correct entrance. Voices in dozens of languages blended into a low, restless hum as the line inched forward at a pace that felt almost punitive.

Vigilance snapped him fully awake. He scanned the crowd for familiar faces, for watchful eyes, for anything that didn't belong. Every shuffle forward tightened something in his chest. By the time he reached the front, he could feel his pulse in his fingertips. A long row of elevated bulletproof desks loomed ahead, each one lit by harsh fluorescent lights that made everyone look pale and guilty. He removed his passport and documents from his backpack and held them in both hands, standing at attention, listening to the questions being asked, rehearsing his answers silently. He had practiced them on the plane, on the tarmac, in the line — over and over until they felt like muscle memory. When the stern-faced agent waved him forward, Taio took a breath that didn't quite reach his lungs. He stumbled slightly as he stepped into the light, aware of how tired he must look, how pale, how young.

This was the final hurdle. The database had to match. The hack had to be seamless. His answers had to be perfect. Any slip could mean secondary inspection — or worse.

Adrenaline cut through his exhaustion, sharpening everything.

The agent asked for his passport, questioned him about his stop in Japan, his layover, his reason for choosing the cheaper route. Taio delivered the money-saving story with practiced ease, and the agent seemed to accept it. Then came the request for the I-20 — proof of enrollment at Georgetown.

Taio handed over the physical document. The agent pulled on a

fresh pair of blue gloves and held the papers under a fluorescent blue light, running his fingers over the seal, the texture, the edges. Every second stretched. Every breath felt borrowed. He typed the SEVIS ID into the system. Active enrollment. Fees paid. Everything clean.

Then the agent asked, “Is Andrea Jones still the director of enrollment?”

Taio froze for half a heartbeat. He hadn’t prepared for that.

“Sir, I haven’t met her,” he said carefully. “I’ve only emailed with her assistant, Walter.”

The agent didn’t like the answer, but he had no grounds to push further. He asked for Taio’s thumb. Taio raised his hand, placed his thumb on the scanner — and it slipped immediately. Sweat. He could control many things, but not this.

The agent wiped the scanner, handed him a tissue, and told him to dry his hands. Taio rubbed them against his pants, willing them to stop shaking. The second scan held. The agent double-checked the screen, the photo, the documents.

Two heavy thuds as the papers were stamped and handed back.

“Keep this I-20 with your passport at all times,” the agent said. “If you lose it, you’re out of status. Welcome to America.” Taio pushed through the heavy one-way glass doors and stepped into the main concourse, hit immediately by a wave of sound and smell and movement that felt nothing like home. Voices layered over one another, accents he didn’t recognize, the faint scent of coffee and wet fabric, the echo of rolling suitcases on polished floors. He spotted the signs for ground transportation and followed them, letting the current of travelers pull him forward until the doors slid open and the summer air wrapped around him like a damp cloth.

Rain hit the asphalt in steady sheets, the smell rising up —

warm concrete, wet rubber, something metallic underneath. Headlights and brake lights cut through the downpour, casting long shadows that flickered across the pavement. He stood under the canopy for a moment, trying to get his bearings, scanning the lanes, the crowds, the lines of taxis inching forward.

He stepped into the crosswalk, heading toward the taxi queue, when he noticed two men standing off to the side — half-hidden by shadow, half-revealed by the glow of overhead lights. They weren't moving. They weren't talking. They were just... staring. Directly at him.

His pace quickened.

He reached the concrete barriers and paused, rain soaking through his shirt as he looked for signs, directions, anything that would tell him where to go. Panic rose in his chest, sharp and sudden. He couldn't tell if the danger was real or if the exhaustion, the ordeal, the unfamiliarity of everything was finally breaking him down.

He forced himself toward the taxi line, head down, shoulders tight. As he passed a row of men in suits, two of them lifted their phones — not casually, not like tourists — but pointed, deliberate, angled toward him.

He looked back. They were staring. Still staring.

Something inside him snapped.

Time wasn't on his side. He didn't think — he moved.

He broke into a run, splashing through puddles, weaving between travelers, and lunged toward the first empty taxi he could find. He yanked the door open, threw himself into the back seat, and shouted at the driver before the door had even closed.

“Go.”

The taxi pulled from the curb, the engine rising, tires slicing through the rain-soaked road, and for a moment that was all Taio could hear — that and the frantic, traitorous thud of his own heartbeat. He leaned close to the rear window, breath fogging the glass instantly, and wiped it with the side of his hand, desperate to see whether anyone had followed. The driver asked for the address before they merged onto the beltway, and Taio, reluctant to break his vigil, dug into his backpack and handed over the slip of paper with his dorm information. Then he went right back to watching, forehead nearly pressed to the glass, scanning the wet blur of headlights and shadows. He thought he saw a dark sedan pull out behind them, but the rain distorted everything, and he couldn't be sure.

He kept watch as they crawled through traffic, so focused on the possibility of pursuit that he missed the first hints of Washington — the monuments, the skyline, the sense of arrival he had imagined for months. All of it drowned beneath the fog of fear. Nearly an hour passed like that. The rain eased. The sky began to clear in streaks. No sedan. No signs of anyone following. Slowly, almost unwillingly, he let his guard drop. He noticed the trees first — tall, green, impossibly serene — and felt the strange ache of realizing that this place, washed clean by the storm, was supposed to be his new beginning, purchased through tragedy he still didn't know how to hold.

As they entered Georgetown, the world shifted. Old brick buildings appeared, warm and worn. Small shops with awnings still dripping from the rain. People everywhere — students, families, clusters of friends — moving with purpose, hauling boxes, laughing, arguing, calling out to one another. Taio watched it all with a kind of stunned wonder. He had seen pictures, read descriptions, imagined the scene a hundred times,

but none of it prepared him for the way it wrapped around him — alive and indifferent and welcoming all at once.

The streets glistened in the late light, the last of the rain turning everything reflective. Lamps flickered on in windows. The radio, tuned to the local college station, played some upbeat welcome-week chatter that felt impossibly far from the world he had just escaped. The taxi jerked to the curb, narrowly missing a group of students dragging suitcases across the road. A horn blared. “We’re here,” the driver said. Taio glanced at the fare and handed him the first crisp hundred-dollar bill from his stash.

He stepped out into the swirl of movement and noise, then drifted toward a small open space near the sidewalk where he could breathe. He reached into his backpack, found the move-in packet, and unfolded the campus map with hands that still trembled faintly. All around him, people moved in and out of buildings, carrying lamps, bedding, boxes, talking over one another with excitement. Parents hovered near their children, offering advice they hoped would land. For a moment, Taio felt the weight of it — the togetherness, the belonging, the easy choreography of families who had done this before. His own isolation pressed against him like a bruise. Grief rose, sharp and sudden, but he refused to let it pull him under. Not here. Not now. Not at the beginning.

Taio wandered in the direction he thought the map intended, though every building looked like a cousin of the last, and every path seemed to split into three more. He stopped again, turning the paper, trying to match the printed lines to the real world. Eventually he caught the attention of a pair of students who pointed him — kindly, impatiently — toward his dorm.

He followed the stream of bodies through the large wooden doors and into the hallway, letting himself be carried by the

momentum of people who belonged here. The lobby buzzed with families, boxes, laughter, the clatter of new beginnings. He crossed toward the staircase, checking his paperwork — third floor — and climbed slowly, weaving around mini-fridges, lamps, bedding, and the small comforts people brought to soften the shock of change.

The hallway was a living thing: music thumping from open doors, excited chatter, the rhythmic pounding of nails as someone hung posters. The smell of fast food — mostly pizza — hung thick in the air, warm and greasy and suddenly overwhelming. It hit him then that he hadn't eaten since... he couldn't remember. His stomach tightened in response.

He found his lanyard and keycard in the welcome pack and followed the posted signs until he reached his room. He hesitated. Should he knock? A roommate had been assigned to him — an unfamiliar concept, the idea of sharing space with someone who wasn't family, someone who might not understand him at all. A small, sharp nervousness ran through him.

He pressed the keycard to the reader. The lock clicked, and the door swung open into a small dorm room — smaller than he'd imagined. Two narrow beds. One shared desk under the window. Overhead shelving. A tiny closet space. Not much room for two people to exist without brushing against each other. He would make do. He always made do.

Then he saw the two large boxes waiting for him. Relief washed through him so quickly it made him lightheaded. On top of one box sat his new phone, the one with the U.S. number. He plugged it into the outlet above the desk, the foreign shape of the plug still strange to him.

Night settled outside. Shadows stretched across the quad, long and soft, and as he gazed out the window he thought he

saw movement near the large tree. A figure? A shadow? His eyes were tired, gritty. He blinked hard and looked again. Nothing he could name.

He lay down on the unmade bed, fully dressed, staring at the ceiling while the sounds of the hallway drifted through the door — voices, footsteps, laughter. He thought about where he had been just a day ago, how violently his life had shifted, how he was supposed to feel grateful and safe and excited, and yet something inside him still trembled. Still braced.

A small flutter of excitement surfaced anyway, fragile but real. Maybe things could be different here.

When the dorm finally quieted, he ventured into the hallway, found the communal showers, and tried to wash the journey off his skin. The water was too hot, then too cold, but it helped. A little.

Back in his room, he made the bed as best he could and climbed in, trying to adjust to the unfamiliar pillow, the thin mattress, the hum of a building full of strangers. Exhaustion pressed down on him, but sleep wouldn't come. His mind kept spinning, replaying the last twenty-four hours, the last year, the last lifetime.

Eventually, restlessness gave way to something like sleep.

A sound woke him.

He sat up, heart thudding, and looked toward the window. A faint glow illuminated the room — his phone. Maybe it was fully charged, he thought. Something simple. Something normal.

He crossed the room and picked it up.

What he saw froze him.

A single notification on WhatsApp. He tried to remember — had he installed it? Had he logged in? No one had this number. No one.

He opened the message.

Unknown Sender: *They know you're gone.*

His mouth went dry. His first thought was that it had to be a mistake, a wrong number, something meant for someone else. But the words were too pointed. Too precise. Too much like someone whispering directly into his ear.

He stared at the screen until a noise in the hallway snapped him back. Slowly, he unplugged the phone and held it closer, as if distance might change the meaning.

They know you're gone.

He checked the number. Blank. No photo. No status. No history.

A message sent from nowhere.

He felt the room shrink around him, the air thinning. He looked toward the window again, toward the tree and the shadows and the movement he wasn't sure he imagined. His pulse hammered in his throat.

He sat on the edge of the bed, the phone heavy in his hand, and waited for another message. A follow-up. A threat. A demand. Anything.

Nothing came.

Minutes passed. Or maybe they didn't. Time felt strange.

Finally, he powered the phone off. The darkness returned, thicker than before.

He lay back down, but sleep stayed far from him. The silence felt different now — listening, almost.

And beneath everything, a cold truth settled in his chest:

He hadn't escaped as cleanly as he hoped.