

THE DISASTER INTERVENTION AGENT

K. I. N. G. : 天災對策室

A second extinction has hit the Earth, caused by a deadly and untraceable energy source called Disaster. After Chung Hui's apartment building is destroyed in another attack, she moves in with her father. But the sudden disappearance of several high school students forces her to ask whether or not Disaster has found its way into her own family.

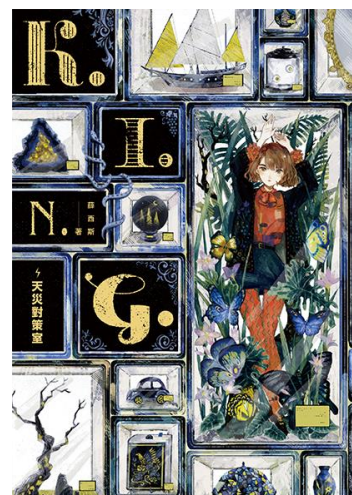
An unknown, malicious energy source, nicknamed Disaster, has been visiting unpredictable destruction on Taiwan for the last decade. Its first attack caused earthquakes and tsunamis that swallowed the Western half of Taipei; the second attack reduced the 101 skyscraper to rubble. No one knows how it will strike, or whom.

After Chung Hui's apartment building is destroyed in one such random and unstoppable assault, she moves back in with her father, who makes his living teaching students to paint. Just as rumors reach her ear about people on the street suddenly being vaporized, she witnesses her father pushing one of his students out of the window - then watches the body disappear into thin air.

Shortly afterward, Chung Hui is visited by a woman in black, who claims to work for the agency - code-named KING - that once controlled the Disaster. Chung Hui's father's behavior and the evaporation of people in broad daylight are somehow connected to the onset of the Disaster, and the mystery must be cracked before the weapon becomes permanently out of control.

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Xerses is one of the most exciting young novelists in Taiwan's science fiction/mystery community. Deeply inspired by Soji Shimada's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, Xerses is dedicated to incorporating the finest



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logical intrigue into her stories. Her novel *Lotus Reborn* won a Bronze Medal in the 2013 Kadokawa Fiction Awards, and *Avalon's Quest* was shortlisted for the 2015 Kavalan Soji Shimada Mystery Award. Her previous collaboration with Mitsuda Shinzo, JeTauZi, Xiao Xiang Shen, and Chan Ho-Kei - *Chopsticks* - has sold to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Thailand.

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By Xerses

Translated by Brendan O'Kane

Prologue: King Σ

*Light travels faster than sound by a factor of –
By a factor of what?*

But whatever the teacher was going to say next was drowned out by the bell ringing, though she could see his mouth shaping a long string of numbers. She turned the question over in her mind again after school. Reflected skyscrapers twisted and bent endlessly among the glass bridges. In a see-through city like this, without anything to get in light's way, she supposed it must be able to go pretty fast – but compared to sound? She played cautiously with numbers, adding and subtracting until the outlines of an answer began to take shape—

“.”

But in that instant, everything froze.

All that noise and she couldn't hear a thing. The sounds of the city vanished. Off to the east, she saw the skyscraper that stuck up like a candlestick go limp, and a glassy snow began to fall. The sharp edges of the snow sliced the moonlight into shafts of light and pierced her eyes as refracting prisms filled the sky.

Just then, a sudden – *something*, she didn't know what, but something she'd never seen in her life; an ordering to the world that radiated outward in layers and sharp edges, like a run on a great piano keyboard, black keys white keys black keys white keys, every one striking a clear, precise note—

She had it.

Light was 882,352 times faster than sound.

The realization produced nothing in her, save for the thought: But my light travels so much slower than my sound!

Traveling and traveling, on and on, until even all of the sounds fell silent, and then—

Then, finally, into my eyes.

Chapter 1: The Pied Piper

After crossing the last overpass, Skybridge lay far behind. The sun cast slanting shadows over her shoulders, and Chung Hui let out a long breath at the almost-unfamiliar sensation of standing on solid ground. It didn't used to be this hot.

It wasn't as hot in Skybridge, where strata of crisscrossing glass bridges filtered out the light. But Landside, even though the sun had already set, curls of heat still steamed up from the ground, and her cheap, flimsy cotton top, already so thin her muscles were visible through it, was soaked with sweat. She was carrying a lot of luggage, though it didn't seem like "a lot" if you considered that it was everything she owned, and that she'd had to borrow the big hiking pack on her back from a coworker.

The streets were still familiar, even after almost a decade, and a quick cut through the bustle of downtown brought her, after a few turns, into the lanes where people lived.

Dusk lent the neighborhood a comfortable tranquility. The locals had a laid-back, contented air to them, possibly owing to the fact that this was Landside, far from the Disaster. That unshakeable self-satisfaction was what Chung Hui hated most about the place.

A tangle of jasmine flowers spilled over the low wall of the house on the corner, their thick fragrance mixing with a smell of tar. There was a man with curly hair leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. He wore a wrinkled shirt and a pair of old jeans, and the ground around his feet was littered with cigarette butts. Their eyes met; Chung Hui recoiled as if she'd been scalded. The man looked at her piercingly, as if sizing up an enemy.

"Over from Skybridge, Miss?"

His tone was light, flirtatious. Chung Hui didn't reply. He tapped ash from the end of his cigarette and grinned crookedly:

"Careful, girlie – don't let the monsters in the fog don't eat you up."

Freak. Chung Hui straightened and sped up as she passed him.

Another turn, another little alley, and there it was: her father's studio. Ugly printed characters on a fading white acrylic sign read "Studio". Most of the black paint on the latch had flaked off and the mailbox was full of ads for auto loans. The space always gave off an air of deathly abandonment that was relieved only by the heroic efforts of a low pot of periwinkle by the door.

Chung Hui paused, feeling torn. She didn't want to go in there. She didn't want to have anything to do with him again.

But she had no alternative, and no money. Chung Hui ignored the doorbell and pushed open the front door, which never latched or locked properly and could be opened easily if you knew where to push. He wouldn't have renovated, would he? Not him, not the way he always lived in a little fortress of his own.

The first thing to enter her view was, as before, the unnerving moon on the wall.

The canvas covered most of the wall: a lonely moon at the edge of a dawn sky, cutting ruts of light across snow-covered ground.

The painting was titled *Sunrise*, but there was no trace of a sun in it, only the moon at dawn. Even less expected was the way there were almost no deep colors in the painting, just variegated grays. But under his cunning brush, the painting's each section was clearly separated.

Moonlight on snow. Eggshell horizon. Watermark moon. Spotless and dirty at the same time.

At the center of the painting was a black mass of shadows. Whenever Chung Hui saw the painting, she couldn't help trying to guess what it was a painting *of*. It looked like it could be a

dead tree, or a figure kneeling in prayer – but Chung Hui had a hard time imagining it as a person; her father had always been best at painting landscapes, especially snowscapes. It was as if he scorned humanity: in all of her father’s paintings, she couldn’t recall having ever seen a single human face.

They hadn’t used the first floor for much, on account of the uncloseable front door. Her father didn’t drive, so the space was useless as a garage: even now, it was dominated by bric-a-brac and art supplies. Her bike from junior high was still off in one corner, under a layer of dust and rust. Chung Hui started up the long, narrow stairs that were the house’s sole remaining patch of cleanliness. Her old bedroom was on the third floor, and she opened the door to find it transformed into a storage space. A cloud of dust came at her and set her to sneezing.

She could just about make out the light coming from the fourth floor.

Chung Hui took a deep breath and summoned the courage to keep climbing. He was still her father, her own flesh and blood, no matter how bad their relationship might be. And her home had been destroyed by the Disaster. And she didn’t have a penny to her name. Unless you counted debts as negative pennies. Who could blame her, under the circumstances, for turning to her last living relative for help?

But still she felt an instinctive fear of her father’s fourth-floor fortress, his studio. He spent most of his time in there, painting. There were wide French windows on the side that faced the street, and once upon a time her father had loved rising early on a winter’s morning to open the curtains and look out to where Skybridge sat shrouded in fog in the distance.

The door was ajar. Dim lamplight spilled out of the studio, and Chung Hui stopped at the sound of voices within.

“There’s no point going back to work on the darks now. Might as well leave off for today and come back to it once the pigments dry.”

“But it’s not even nine o’clock.”

“I’m already tired. And there’s no harm in leaving a bit early, considering all the awful things that have been going on.”

“It’s not like I’ll be going through Skybridge on my way back.”

“You think they’re going to stay in Skybridge?”

The voices were loud amid the stillness of the studio. Her father had always taught group classes – four or five students at the very least – so Chung Hui was startled to hear that there was only a single student in there now.

The student fell silent for a moment, then spoke again. “Teacher...do you think it’s people behind it?”

“What else would it be?”

“They’re saying it’s because of the Disaster.”

“Not anyone my age – we don’t believe that sort of thing. It’s just kidnappings, plain and simple. All right now – get going.”

There was an anxious impatience in her father’s voice. He shoved the door open and waved the girl out. Chung Hui had no time to dodge; the door hit her squarely in the face. “Ow!”

“You—”

Her father looked shocked to see her standing there. He stared at her in silence, as if struggling to recognize her. There was nothing Chung Hui could do but press one hand to her aching nose and greet him awkwardly. “Hi, Dad. Been a while.”

“Wh— Hui? What are you doing here?”

“I had a run-in with the Disaster. You didn’t see the news?”

“So?”

“My apartment was in one of the district embankments. The whole thing blew up.”

“In one of the embankments? What kind of place is that to live?”

Hui puffed out her cheeks in frustration. “Because apartments here on land are so affordable, you mean? The down payment was everything I had, and – look, I don’t have anywhere else to go. Let me stay with you a while, okay?”

“What about your job?”

“It hit the mall, too. The Disaster Area cops evacuated us. I’ll probably get my official redundancy notice in a few days, so...” She caught sight of her father’s expression and powered through before he could say anything: “I’ll leave as soon as I can find another job!” She darted past him into the studio. “And I’ll pay you back as soon as I can. I know you hate me, but do you really want to see your daughter sleeping on the streets?”

Her father was obviously holding his tongue, and Hui could feel his angry gaze burning into her back. But he said nothing – not wanting to air any more of the family’s dirty laundry in front of his student, probably.

When people first saw her father’s studio, they tended to be taken aback by the dimness – to wonder, even, how anyone could paint in such a space. The low light set it apart from other studios. Three walls were painted black; the fourth, facing onto the street, held wide floor-to-ceiling windows covered by heavy flocked curtains.

Lamps were set up around the room: her father could choose as he liked among four rails of track lighting on the ceiling, floor lamps, wall sconces, and table lamps of all varieties.

Thin strips of reflective foil on the pitch-black ceiling and rafters caught even the faintest illumination and turned it into strange flows of light.

Most unnerving of all, however, was probably the sheer number of insect specimens that covered the walls like paper: more than a hundred display cases, wedged tightly together to fill all available space, clearly the result of intensive premeditation, and looking like nothing so much as a museum of death.

Three lamps lit the room at varying intensities, presumably to produce the patterns of shade and illumination her father required. The curtains fluttered listlessly in a breeze that did nothing to disperse the thick scent of volatilizing oil paints. In front of an easel, Hui’s father’s student had just finished tidying up her equipment. She smiled faintly at Hui, each registering the other’s out-of-placeness in this space.

The girl had a narrow face, smooth skin, long, straight black hair that fell to her chest like a spill of satin, and lovely, upturning eyes. She wore a clean white short-sleeved shirt and a neatly

pressed black pleated skirt. Some sort of insignia that looked like a royal crest was embroiled beneath her student number: Hui didn't recognize it, but with an overwrought design like that it had to belong to some fancy private school for the aristos.

"I'd better get going, Mr. Shen."

"Mm," Hui's father said, absentmindedly. "On your own? Want to get in touch with your family first?"

"It's fine. The train stops five minutes away."

He thought a moment, then looked back at Hui: "Well then – how about you walk her to her stop?"

"Huh?" Her father had caught her off-guard.

"Kidnappings lately. Girls going missing. I don't want her going back on her own at this hour."

She stared. "I'm a girl too, you know."

"You should be fine – the ones who went missing were 16, 17. High-schoolers."

Father of the year, Hui thought. "And you think the creeps and the crazies are too picky to take me?"

"They're picky *because* they're creeps and crazies," her father said after a moment's silence. "Who knows what's going on in their heads?"

That was him, she thought – always arguing, no shot too cheap. "Why don't you take her yourself?" she shot back.

The girl sensed the tension building between them. "I can go on my own," she said politely, "Really – it's fine."

But Hui's father was not about to be moved. "You came back looking for help, didn't you? Are you really going to get into it with me over one tiny little request?"

Stung, Hui tossed her bags down by the studio door with a snort and took an umbrella.

The neighborhood was quiet at night. Glimpses of light and snatches of conversation and laughter drifted from the rows of houses. Hui hated the cozy family-feeling of it all. There weren't any "normal" residential environments in Skybridge: more than 70% of the adult population was single. Nobody with any choice in the matter would want to raise a family in a place like that.

The girl hung back, head lowered, a pace or so behind Hui. She said her name was Ying Shih-fei, and she went to Zhien Girls' High School nearby, and this fall she'd be in her third year there.

Even Chung Hui knew Zhien: that was where the monied young ladies of the area went. Zhongshan District, south of her father's studio, was home to most of the public and private schools. Zhien, Chongping Laboratory School, and the public Licheng High, referred to collectively as "The Triangle", were located close by one another, and shared a certain amount of student life.

Ying Shih-fei said she'd started going to Hui's father's studio at the end of the last year, after being introduced by her art teacher – another former student of her father's. But her father had stopped teaching not long before, making Shih-fei his last remaining student.

"Stopped teaching? How come?"

"You know, he's getting older, and his health hasn't been good. I guess he just hasn't been up to teaching too many students."

Hui had no response for that. She hadn't heard anything about her father's health: they hadn't had any contact after she moved out. The paintings he'd produced as a young man probably brought in enough for him to be comfortable even without the studio. But he'd invested his energies in teaching over the last decade, and his output had declined sharply.

"And besides," Shih-fei said, her topic changing, "he said he wanted to spend more time training me."

Even stranger, Hui thought: her father had always been demanding of himself and others, and was often impatient with his students. She'd never got a kind word out of him, and even his very best students seldom got that kind of attention from him. He'd never taught one-on-one classes in the past, and if he was making an exception for Ying Shih-fei then there must be something really special about her. She realized that she hadn't had a chance to look at Shih-fei's painting in all the back-and-forth.

"I never knew he had a daughter! He hardly ever talks about himself."

"Yeah - I moved out a long time ago."

"The two of you must be close, though - I've never seen him so animated."

"Did it *look* like we were close?"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't ever talk to my parents that way," Shih-fei laughed. "And Mr. Shen, well - he's one of those people who hides his feelings even when he's absolutely furious. I wouldn't have expected to see him arguing like that."

"I wouldn't call it arguing. Picking on me, more like."

The girl was right about her father's infuriating habit of keeping his anger to himself, but Hui wasn't so sure about the rest. "You guessed wrong, though. He and I don't have a good relationship. It's been seven or eight years since we saw each other."

"What? Why not?"

"Like I said - it's not a good relationship," Hui said, brushing the topic aside. "Anyway, what was that you were saying about kidnappers? Expensive neighborhood like this, I'd have thought it'd be safer."

"Not at all - the cases were all on the side of Skybridge."

"Skybridge?"

"You didn't hear about it? I thought you would've, since you're coming from there."

"Ha! Happens all the time in Skybridge; no way for anyone to keep track of it all." Hui did a double-take. "Wait, how did you know I was coming from Skybridge?"

"You said so just now."

Hui couldn't remember what she'd said to her father. She hadn't expected Shih-fei to be listening to their conversation while she stood there waiting and smiling politely.

"It was all students who went missing though, right? There are nearly no schools in Skybridge."

"They were there for work or vacation."

"Hold on," Hui cried. "You don't mean the 'Pied Piper', do you?"

"Yeah, I think that's what they've been calling him there."

Hui felt a little embarrassed. “What they’d been calling him” had been in large headline type on the cover of every tabloid. The Pied Piper was behind a string of disappearances in Skybridge that had started that June. Over the past two months or so, more than a dozen girls had vanished from busy places in broad daylight. Hui hadn’t particularly cared about it: Skybridge wasn’t a particularly safe place, and strange occurrences were the norm in the Disaster Area – the infamous “Badlands”, which even had its own police separate from Landside’s.

“You probably know more about it than we do.”

“Not— I mean, we don’t really pay much attention,” Hui said with an embarrassed smile. “Not much point, you know? Skybridge cops aren’t like Landside cops. When Disaster Area cops can’t crack a case, they just add it to the pile of things to blame on the Disaster.”

If you’ve gotta die, do it someplace else, people in Skybridge always said – that was the only way anyone might look at your case. Disaster Area cops would just wash their hands of you – but Hui judged that this might seem too cruel to a Landside high school student, and she kept it to herself.

“Why would you want to live in such a dangerous place? Why not come back and live with Mr. Shen?”

“Sometimes you’ve got to make trade-offs, you know? The cops in Skybridge aren’t great, but it’s not so dangerous as long as you know how to get around.”

“How to get around people, you mean. Or is there a way around the Disaster, too?”

“Sure there is. We’ve got our Disaster forecasts, and if that’s not enough then the cops will come and get you moving themselves! It’s just, with the disappearances, it’s hard to tell whether it’s the Disaster or just people.”

“They’re saying it’s more freak occurrences because of the Disaster.”

“Why’s that? Most of the disappearances in Skybridge are just regular crime.”

“Because it’s so *weird*! Those girls didn’t just go missing – they vanished into thin air!”

“Vanished?”

“Like a magic trick – they just disappeared, right in front of other people!” Shih-fei cocked her head as if she was trying to think of a better way of putting it. “I mean, maybe more romantic than just vanishing. I heard they just faded away like fog, until they were gone.”

Shih-fei had an incongruously faraway smile. No way was “romantic” the right word for it, Hui thought.

“How reliable is that, though? Couldn’t it just be their eyes playing tricks on them?”

“But that’s how it is with ‘freak occurrences’ from Skybridge, though, right? I haven’t been there much, but I’ve heard plenty of stories stranger than that! Like the Suit Monster, who has a ram’s head, or the line of streetlights that sings Beethoven’s Fifth, or the ghosts that patrol the bridges with rifles late at night, their bodies crackling with electricity...ooh, that’s not even the best one! I heard one time, gigantic cocoons appeared under the bridges, shiny as mirrors, and then at the stroke of midnight they opened and figures shaped like humans crawled out. Is that all for real?”

She just reeled those right off. Hui looked at the girl's excited face and reflected dully that for a Landsider kid, "freak occurrences" out of Skybridge must not be much different from movies. You had to live there a while to get a sense for all the ways Skybridge worked differently: it had taken Hui more than a decade of bumming around before she'd dared call herself a Skybridger.

And calling them "freak occurrences" in the first place was pure Landsider. Nobody in Skybridge called them that: they were simply a natural process, part of the Disaster. Skybridge and the Disaster were like two ropes braided together – they had started together, and perhaps someday they would end together too. They were going to celebrate the "50th Anniversary of the Founding of Skybridge" at the end of the year, which was of course the positive way of packaging it. Not like they could celebrate the "50th Anniversary of the Disaster" —

Same thing, of course. A few of the administrative districts in West Taipei had been hit hard at the start of the Disaster and were subsequently redistricted, supposedly because the massive forces that had brought on the disaster still hung over those areas. Officially, Skybridge was known as the "Kappa Energy Special Administrative Region".

Besides the vast swathes of devastation it caused, the previously unknown physical force was believed to be capable of "distortions to atomic orbitals, resulting in alterations to the composition of physical matter". Chung Hui didn't understand much of the science jargon, but that was what it had said in her middle school textbook and she had learned to parrot it along with everyone else. And she knew now what it meant for day to day life: she'd seen flower petals transform into beetles and fly away, had seen a high-rise dissolve instantly into a puddle of mud.

In Skybridge, such occurrences were too common to count – though most of them were less spectacular than that. Basically, as long as you listened to the Disaster forecasts and followed police instructions, it didn't affect your life too much. Her apartment getting swept into the Disaster was just her drawing the short straw.

The cocoons Shih-fei had mentioned: people in Skybridge called them "ghost maggots". Hui had never seen one herself, but her coworkers had talked about them far more than they ever had about any disappearances – because they were cool, because they were part of the minority of non-ordinary disasters. She didn't know if the disappearances had anything to do with the Disaster, but for the Landsiders, they were special somehow for having happened in Skybridge, fodder for the gossip rags.

She wouldn't have expected a well-bred young lady like Ying Shih-fei to take such an interest in urban legends.

Shih-fei crinkled up her eyes in a smile. "I bet you're thinking I don't *look* like the sort of person who would follow that type of gossip."

"Uh..."

"Actually I don't, not really. But even the schools sent home a letter telling students not to go to Skybridge over the break, so it's not like I could avoid the subject."

"Was it just students who disappeared?"

"Mostly, I think. Three students from Licheng and Chongping, and a girl who graduated from my school this year is missing too."

“Licheng...that’s a boys’ school, right?” Or had it gone coed in the last decade? But Shih-fei nodded. “I thought it was just girls they were taking.”

“There are boys too – just more girls, is all. But ‘Young Girl Kidnapped’ makes for juicier headlines, and it must really get the tabloid readers going when the girl who’s gone missing is from the Zhien School for Fine Young Ladies of Good Stock.”

Shih-fei said this without betraying any particular emotion, and Hui didn’t know how to respond to this unexpected barb. Awkwardly she decided to shift the subject of conversation. “Must be scary, right? Having someone from your school involved?”

“Scary?” Shih-fei sounded puzzled. “Why? I didn’t know the girl well. Even if she’s missing, it doesn’t make me feel much one way or another. I mean, I do care a bit, of course. The tabloids may be trash, but they didn’t make things up: she disappeared pretty much the way they reported, just vanished in front of a friend of hers. Everyone at school was talking about it.”

“In this case – listen to your school and don’t go to Skybridge, all right? Whatever’s going on, the Disaster can’t cross the bridge, so it hardly ever strikes Landside.”

Shih-fei stopped in her tracks. “So you think it’s the Disaster too?”

Chung Hui had seen plenty of strange things in Skybridge – even if it wasn’t always easy to tell whether the things of ordinary strangeness were the Disaster or human error. She didn’t spend much thought on such things: too much of that and you’d never be able to get on with your life.

“You said they disappeared, right? Like in a magic trick? Sounds like the Disaster, no?”

“But if it’s like a magic trick, then doesn’t that mean someone might’ve done something clever, something *tricky*, to fool the audience?”

Chung Hui thought about it for a moment – but without knowing any of the details, she couldn’t offer anything of value.

Ying Shih-fei spoke again: “Did you ever hear of the experiment where they had a magician toss a ball into the air three times? The first two times, he catches it in his hand – but the third time, it’s like the ball keeps going through the ceiling and vanishes in mid-air. Can you guess why?”

“Um...”

“Because the *third* time, the magician never even tosses the ball.” Shih-fei mimed throwing a ball and followed its imaginary arc with her gaze. “Our eyes and our brains are masterful liars. Human motion perception is lousy, so our eyes don’t follow the ball – they follow the path we *expect* the ball to take, which is also the path the magician’s gaze follows. That’s how magic works.”

“So you’re saying you think it’s humans behind it all?”

This had the feeling of something she’d also asked Hui’s father not long before. Hui didn’t know what answer the girl was looking for. That said, she didn’t think her father would put any stock in disasters or “freak occurrences”. He was a lifelong Landsider. There hadn’t even been a Disaster when he was a child. For him, the Disaster was like earthquakes or typhoons: nothing more than a new variety of natural calamity. That was as far as his imagination went. He would never understand how the Kappa Energy could topple mountains, raise tsunamis, melt high-rises into mud, or start streetlights singing.

Lights flashed on the screen wall, and the platform was in front of them: the next train would arrive in a few minutes. Hui had done her duty. Around them, groups of students, presumably fresh out of their cram school classes, chattered away in twos and threes. It didn't seem like there was anything to worry about here.

"Have you heard anything different?" she asked curiously. "What makes you think there are people behind it all?"

"I don't know," Shih-fei said, lowering her eyelids. After a moment, she went on: "But I'm always wondering if I'll be the next to disappear."

But before Hui could ask what she meant by that, the girl had passed through the turnstile, brushing past her with a clean scent of magnolia.

"Thanks for walking me, Miss Shen. See you later!"

"M—"

But the train was arriving. Shih-fei waved goodbye, smiling, then turned and hurried onboard.

Chung Hui's reply – "My name isn't Shen" – hung in the air a moment, unheard, before the wind dispersed it.

Skybridge had been suspended over the sea for as long as she could remember. Supposedly there was real land there once, but not within her father's lifetime.

If you said the word "Disaster" to people from her father's generation, the first thing they thought of was, invariably, flooding. Late on the night of August 6, 1972, countless people were jolted awake by a shaking that they initially took for the biggest earthquake anyone had ever seen. Which it was, though to say so was to err by comparing it to any other earthquake. It was a horror describable only by hyperbole and cliché: "Heaven-shattering", "Earth-splitting", A catastrophic fault dislocation along the course of the Tamsui River caused the ground to fall by more than five meters along the river from Beitou to Wanhua and as far east as Daan and Xinyi; east of Zhongshan, the ground buckled up like a mountain range. Accompanying the sudden shifts in the land were tidal waves that flooded the Tamsui River and inundated the Taipei Basin, surging into the newly sunken terrain. On top of the buildings that collapsed due to the fault dislocation, virtually every building lower than three stories was levelled. 400,000 homes were severely damaged, and more than 30,000 people were injured or killed.

But that nightmarish night was only the beginning. In the days that followed, similar freak occurrences cropped up all over the world, and the unfamiliar term "Kappa Energy" became a part of mankind's shared vocabulary. Nobody knew where this devastating force had come from – or where they could make it go off to. As long as it held stable, it caused nothing more than occasional harmless oddities – but when it was out of control, it could cause all manner of disasters: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, blizzards, conflagrations and evaporations. "Any form of energy release you can imagine," the experts said. Unable to name a monster so poorly understood, people took to referring to it all, collectively, as "the Disaster".

All of Taiwan was affected, but nowhere more cruelly than the Taipei Basin. Some of the city's western districts had been virtually wiped out, and the residents, knowing that their homes would forever be part of the Tamsui riverbed, moved to higher ground in droves.

But the drowned city was not so casually abandoned, and people continued to make repairs wherever they could. The initial emergency response was followed by the unveiling of a reimagined urban plan known as "Castles in the Sky". In addition to underwater engineering projects to reinforce structures against water pressure and decay, the plans called for innumerable bridges to be erected between the remaining high-rises, transforming what was left of the city into a vertical metropolis on the sea.

The bridges replaced roads as the main way of getting around the city. Any two buildings would be connected by bridges spaced at average intervals of five floors, with certain floors set aside as transfer levels for vehicular traffic. To prevent the dense mesh of bridges from blocking out the sun, the bridges were built as structures of steel and reinforced glass that allowed sunlight to reach the city's lowest levels.

The Disaster continued for the next fifty years, though only in Skybridge: according to the government, this was because that was where the bulk of the Kappa Energy was concentrated. It had grown far less intense by then: there were no more terrifying alterations in the crust of the Earth; merely occasional floods, explosions, and aberrations – the Landsiders' "freak occurrences". Researchers gained a greater understanding of the Kappa Energy, and with the development of forecasting technology, mankind gradually learned how to peacefully coexist with tyrannical Nature.

For people of her generation, the word "Disaster" brought to mind not flooding but explosions. This was the event that would later be known as "the Calamity". It was the most brutal disaster of the preceding half-century, and it erased the Castle in the Sky's proudest treasure, the Xinyi Special District, in the blink of an eye.

She was still in middle school when it happened.

School had just let out for the day, and she was planning to meet her mom in Xinyi, where she could do her homework in the small conference room. Her mother's company was a small one, and the few employees were comfortable enough with one another to bring their children to the office where they could keep an eye on them.

Chung Hui's parents divorced when she was in first grade. They reached an agreement without too much fighting: her mother had a determination that bordered on coldness. Once she'd made her mind up about something, there was no changing it, and as soon as the formalities had concluded she moved out, taking Hui with her, and changed Hui's last name to hers.

But her mother had no family for them to rely on, so from a very young age, Hui had no one to watch her after school let out. Mostly she stayed at school; once she was a bit older, she went to cram classes or to her mother's office to wait for her to get off work. She'd never cared for school or cram classes, and even if going to the office meant having to make awkward greetings to all the aunts and uncles there, she was still happier with her mother.

When she called that afternoon, her mother said she would probably be able to get out a little earlier than usual, and the two of them could go get a nice dinner at a restaurant nearby. Chung Hui set out for the nearest station: it was faster to use Skybridge's own suspension rail system than to go to Landside and take the long way around.

But the train was running late that day, unusually, and for some reason she was stuck waiting more than half an hour for the next train. She glared at the clock on the wall of her transfer station, thinking idly back on the day's lessons. The speed of light, the speed of sound – she liked Math, and she was quietly working out the difference between the two when suddenly with a massive roar, everything before her—

She still remembers the stabbing pain in her eyes.

The tall, candlestick-looking tower to her east fell like a domino.

In the next instant the beautiful city of crystal and steel in the sky turned into something that looked very much like cotton as it fluttered, as if weightless, to the bottom of the sea.

Ten years after the Calamity, the Xinyi district, once the most prosperous of the Skybridge cities, lay in ruins. She didn't even have a body to say goodbye to: they'd never recovered all the remains. The delayed train had been a tremendous stroke of luck. Chung Hui knew that. But sometimes she woke in the middle of the night, alone, to the thought that she had no one in all the world. She couldn't stop the thoughts from coming.

She wouldn't have to be alone if she hadn't missed the earlier train.

Fourteen years old and alone in the world, she had no choice but to move back in with her father, whom she hadn't seen since the divorce. The two of them didn't have much to say to each other, so they generally didn't. He kept her sheltered and fed out of a sense of duty. It was suffocating, and eventually she made her escape by testing into a school as far away as she could, relying on student loans and part-time work for the rest, and never going back again, not even once.

Blinding sunlight woke Hui up first; then she heard the alarm on her phone.

She hadn't seen the sun in a long time: unlike Landside, Skybridge seldom got direct sunlight. She hauled herself up from the floor, her back stiff as a starched shirt. Returning to her old bedroom the night before, she'd found it stuffed with cardboard boxes and junk and coated with nearly a decade's worth of dust. After much effort, she managed to clear a space big enough for her to curl up and sleep.

Her head ached like she had a hangover. It was too early. After talking with Ying Shih-fei, she'd spent most of the night reading about the disappearances online.

A social media site called *Chessboard Post* had been the first to come up with the name "Pied Piper". It was a Skybridge news site – Chung Hui found she was already subscribed to it. *Chessboard Post* featured dozens of articles: vox pops, Disaster forecasts, and freak occurrences from Skybridge for their Landside readers.

The Pied Piper seemed to be a favorite topic: the *Post* had run an ongoing series of investigative reports. The disappearances had begun in mid-June, and since then a total of fourteen people were believed to have vanished – Skybridgers and Landsiders, all young students. Because the disappearances had taken place in Skybridge, the case was currently under the jurisdiction of the Disaster Area police, who had not made any headway on the cases as far as anyone could tell. The journalist covering the cases had an obvious, white-hot hatred of the Disaster Area police, and devoted one out of every three or four articles to castigating them for their lack of transparency and general uselessness.

After reading about the cases until two or three in the morning, she still woke up at six o'clock. This was when she would usually have to get dressed, do her makeup, and head out to work. None of that would be necessary now, she thought, feeling the emptiness of unemployment settle around her.

She stayed in Skybridge after she graduated, working jobs at department stores from Wanhua to Datong.

Datong was one of Skybridge's few major commercial districts: the sort of people who lived in Skybridge tended not to have much in the way of disposable income, so the customers were mostly people who worked in Skybridge by day and then crossed back Landside at night. The local leisure and entertainment industry tended toward the small-scale and inexpert; the fanciest department stores were all Landside.