THE DEAD CHIP SYNDICATE

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Based on the author's novel

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FADE IN:

1. INT. AIRLINE CABIN - NIGHT

Crackling bolts of lightning flash-whiten the cabin, sending jolts through the plane. An air of doom suffocates the place. The lights flicker, inducing a round of desperate "Our Fathers" from the mostly Filipino, probably highly devout Catholic PASSENGERS.

STEPHEN WILSON -- forties, lithe, with penetrating eyes and handsome, Western features -- glances at a FLIGHT ATTENDANT strapped into her jump seat across from him. He recognizes her wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and flared nostrils as classic signs of fear. He smiles at her, projecting calm.

The MALE PASSENGER sitting beside Stephen flinches as a CLAP OF THUNDER incites more "Our Fathers" and a baby's SQUEAL.

STEPHEN

Probably not the best time to mention this, but you know the airport we're about to land in is the only airport in the world named after someone murdered on its tarmac.

The Young Male Passenger smiles politely, then nods.

MALE PASSENGER

Agreed, probably not the best time.

Stephen gives the raised fist sign of political solidarity, then glances out the window. The haloed misty lights of Resorts World Manila cut through a bank of thick fog as the plane descends towards the airport's slick tarmac.

A phone message PINGS in. Stephen pulls out his mobile, checks his WhatsApp message, seeing one from Detective Fonseca with a screaming headline...

SHOT OF MESSAGE: MR. WILSON, YOU'RE IN GRAVE DANGER. SEVERAL HITMEN HIRED TO KILL YOU HAVE BEEN ARRESTED IN ZHUHAI.

ON STEPHEN'S eyes widening in shock. After a moment to compose himself, he clicks on the call-back feature. Within seconds, Detective Fonseca answers:

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)

You're a very lucky man, Mr. Wilson. Someone hired a hitman to kill you. That hitman hired another hitman at half the price, who hired a third hitman at half his price, who then hired a fourth hitman who was so disgusted by the lowball offer he went to the Zhuhai police.
STEPHEN
But who ordered the hit?

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
You tell me.

STEPHEN
I have no idea.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Maybe a business partner you pissed off? Say, Cash?

STEPHEN
Of all the people I know, he’s the least likely. You’re suffering from confirmation bias, detective.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
In law enforcement, we call that "incarceration bias".

STEPHEN
Anyway, I have to go.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
We can offer protection.

STEPHEN
That won’t be necessary.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Where are you?

STEPHEN
Not in Macau.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Obviously. You just landed in Manila.

STEPHEN
If you knew where I was, why’d you ask?

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
A moral man doesn’t lie to the police, Mr. Wilson.

STEPHEN
It’s called being protective, detective. Not sure who I can trust at this time. Many view that badge you carry around with you as a license to steal, not something worthy of respect.
DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
If that’s so, I’ve been doing something wrong my entire career.

STEPHEN
Look at that, I just gave you a great idea for a side hustle. Literally.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
When do you plan on returning to Macau?

STEPHEN
Maybe never. Having a few contracts taken out on your life kind of takes all the fun out that black sand beach place.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
Wouldn’t blame you if you never returned, Mr. Wilson. Actually, I’d advise it. Make my life a whole lot easier.

STEPHEN
I’ll keep that in mind while I’m trying to stay alive, detective.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
I can put a notice out on you. Have you picked up for questioning.

STEPHEN
Please don’t. You know I’d be free within an hour, but with my wallet considerably lighter. And you know how we Americans hate having our freedom taken away.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
As do we Macanites, but, trust me, you get used to it.

STEPHEN
Never. Look, I’m as much in the dark about all of this as you are, but trust me, I’ll fly under the radar. Call me if the Zhuhai police beat a confession out of anyone.

DETECTIVE FONSECA (ON PHONE)
If you think of anyone who might want you dead, please let us know.

STEPHEN
You’ll be the first to know.
DETECTIVE FONSECA
You just better hope there's not a fifth -- hitman that is.

Stephen hangs up, glances out the window at the rain pelting the plexiglass so hard it's like bullets being fired from a machine gun.

Gunshots RING OUT (O.S.).

DISSOLVE TO:

2. EXT. AMMO NATION - DAY

A 100-yard shooting range with twelve positions. The firing lines have concrete floors, concrete benches, and wood targets. Stephen fires a Colt Marine Pistol at a bullseye.

The OWNER of the store, a middle-aged, portly Filipino man in his sixties, cocks an impressed eye as several bullets cluster around the center of the target.

STEPHEN
This for sale?

AMMO NATION GUNSHOP OWNER
Can't sell to foreigners.

Stephen pulls out a wad of American 100-dollar bills.

STEPHEN
Only foreigner here is our good friend, Benjamin.

3. EXT. CEBU MARINA - DAY

SQUAWKING SEAGULLS divebomb for scraps around several rusting FISHING TRAWLERS. Sweaty, dark-skinned, thin-as-a-rail FISHERMEN yell at one another in singsong Tagalog as they unload the day's catch, expertly tossing the fish from ship to shore.

In a nearby seafood market, auction BIDDERS shout offers for the Bluefin Tuna on beds of ice; one bid topping another.

Stephen loiters around the port, sweat beading across his brow, blue eyes squinting from the blinding sun. He studies each fishing CREW MEMBER unloading their catch on the dock. After a few moments, he approaches a GROUP OF SKINNY FISHERMEN working on a brightly colored BLUE AND WHITE BANGKA, a traditional Philippine fishing boat.

The OLD CAPTAIN, a lithe man in his sixties, with green eyes that radiate brilliantly from his darkly tanned face, disinterestedly glances at the ArgoTrak screen Stephen shows him.
STEPHEN
You know where this is?

The Old Captain nods noncommittally, his eyes roving back to his Crew Members chattering amongst themselves, all toothy smiles. He chides one of them in annoyed Tagalog.

STEPHEN
How long to get here?

OLD CAPTAIN
About an hour.

STEPHEN
Can you take me?

The Old Captain shakes his head and points at the charcoal black clouds swirling in the distant east.

OLD CAPTAIN
Typhoon's coming.

Point taken, but Stephen counters with a smile and five crisp hundred dollars bills that vanish as quickly as a buzzing fly gets snapped out of the air by a chameleon’s hungry tongue.

4. INT. BANGKA FISHING BOAT - DAY

Stephen dangles his legs over the bow, letting the splashing waves kiss his ankles, trying to ignore the GRINDING and PUTTERING ENGINE drowning out the serenity of the place.

Looking up, he notices the incredible beauty surrounding him; it’s as if some knowing hand had thrown a festival of dazzling Diwali colors across the crystal-clear waters of Kinatarkan Reef and the pigments had drifted down into the undulating depths, dissolving across the salty waters in a million hues of intermingling yellows, greens, and blues.

5. INT. BANGKA FISHING BOAT - DAY

THE GAMBLER, a forty-two-foot yacht, appears on the horizon, anchored a mile off Kinatarkan Island, with its sails down, bobbing lazily in the calm waters.

6. EXT. KINATARKAN REEF - DAY

The Fishing TRAWLER'S engine THROTTLES DOWN and the boat glides towards The Gambler. Once the boat’s starboard side almost kisses The Gambler’s stern, Stephen slings his backpack over his shoulder, then spring across the boats.
7. EXT. THE GAMBLER DECK - DAY

With his hands scaling along the boom to keep his balance, Stephen scrambles across the deck. His eyes scan for any sign of life or any indication of threat. He unzips his backpack, slips his hand inside it, releases the gun's safety, then slides his finger onto the cool metal trigger.

8. EXT. THE GAMBLER DECK - DAY

Stephen inches open the creaking cabin door. The stench of urine hits him like a punch in the face. He waves it away, glances in.

As his eyes adjust to the darkness, a dim blue light flickering somewhere inside reveals a disheveled mess. A GROAN of trouble rises. Stephen cups his hand over his nose, coughs a few times, then descends into the cabin.

DISSOLVE TO:

9. EXT. MACAU ROOSEVELT HOTEL - POOL - DAY

SUPERTITLE: NINE MONTHS BEFORE

FIFTY HIP, BEAUTIFUL, NOUVEAU RICHE, CHINESE MILLENNIALS sway to Johnny Cash's RING OF FIRE. Enjoying the riches that have flooded into China over the past decade, they don designer clothes, lavishly accessorized with expensive watches, sparkling jewelry, and bling, bling, bling. The vibe: young, carefree, deep diving into excessive self-indulgence.

Wearing a sharp suit, Stephen strides out to the pool, catching sight of CASH CHEANG at a table filled with chattering JUNKET GIRLS by the edge of the pool.

With expressive Tony Leung eyes made shadowy under a black L.A. baseball cap, Cash exudes a hip weirdness that is engaging in an odd and charming sort of way. Cash doesn’t seem the country music type, but the Johnny Cash lyrics roll off his tongue as if he’d sung them a thousand times before. He spots Stephen, grabs a racing form off the table, and approaches with a warm smile.

CASH
You find the place okay?

STEPHEN
Yeah. I know it well. I drove by a few times during its construction. It had a funny sign out front that said, "Historical Landmark: Coming soon."

Cash laughs.
CASH  
Another lost in translation sign.

Cash steps toward a small flight of steps. Stephen follows.

CASH  
Come, let me show you the view.

Cash leads Stephen to an infinity pool overlooking the Macau Jockey Club. In the shadow of Galaxy Macau’s massive integrated resort, the racetrack contains both a dirt track and an outer turf track. A grandstand by the finish line appears around a QUARTER-FULL with FANS excitedly watching horses load into the gate.

Stephen marvels at the view. He glances to the east, seeing the towering, glass-encased skyscrapers of Henquin Island about a mile away. Another Hong Kong rising along the banks of the Pearl River.

STEPHEN  
World-class.

CASH  
You like racing?

STEPHEN  
My preferred form of gambling, actually. That and betting against England at every major football tournament.

CASH  
Football is a game in which twenty-two men kick around a ball for ninety minutes and England loses on penalties.

STEPHEN  
Hundred-and-twenty with OT, but yeah, we lose every time.

Cash hands Stephen the racing form.

CASH  
One of my horses is running in the fifth. I thought this would be a great place to watch the race. Guess which one is mine.

Stephen flips to the fifth race, looks over the horses’ names. A Junket Girl hovering nearby digs out a handful of betting slips from her pocket. Offers them to Stephen.

CASH  
Here’s a clue.
Taking the tickets but not looking at them, Stephen spots the obvious horse in the program and says:

STEPHEN
Cowboy’s Sweetheart?

Cash nods with an impressed smile.

STEPHEN
Tell me, Cash, what’s with the country music fascination?

CASH
How can you ask -- a screenwriter like you? Every song tells a story. And don’t you just love the wit -- ‘I’m So Miserable Without You, It’s Just Like Having You Around’, ‘Live Like You Were Dying’, ‘Man, I Feel Like a Woman’? Someone as literate as you should respect those titles.

STEPHEN
I respect the titles, it’s the music underneath I have problems with. Shania Twain, really?

CASH
I was making a point about the song titles, not the songs. But you’re right, she’s trite, like most of today’s alt-country acts.

Another Junket Girl approaches with a pair of binoculars, which she offers to Cash with absurd aplomb.

CASH
Ah, the race is afoot.

Cash grabs the binoculars, then trains them on the track below. After a few moments, he announces:

CASH
They’re off. Cyrus says you pretty good screenwriter.

STEPHEN
Not good enough to get produced.

CASH
Not an easy business. Maybe one of the hardest to make money in, unlike the casino business.

A distant ROAR rises from the CROWD as the HORSES sprint into the first turn.
CASH
You want to write my story -- growing up on the mean streets of Macau -- that how you say it?

Stephen’s brow furrows, unsure what Cash means. Then he gets the reference and smiles.

STEPHEN
Yes, Mean Streets, like the Scorsese film?

CASH
Rising to success in Macau’s cutthroat gaming industry.

STEPHEN
Sounds fascinating, but there’s an old saying about biographies -- "Everyone has a book in them, but for most people, that's where it should stay."

Cash laughs in a chiding but not arrogant way as if to say "that won’t be a problem with my story."

CASH
I tell you story. You decide, but I don’t think it should stay here.

Cash taps his left pectoral.

STEPHEN
Maybe yours can touch that. But you’re not worried about leaving evidence?

CASH
Of what? I think you have the wrong impression of me. I’m not triad.

STEPHEN
Too bad, that could make it more interesting.

Cash smiles while chuckling.

CASH
True that.

STEPHEN
How do you know I’m a good writer?

CASH
Cyrus told me.