長相守

tangstory



Till Death Do Us Part

[ENG TRANS] 長相守BY Tangstory

Title標題: Till Death Do Us Part **長相守**

Author 作者: Tangstory **Translator 翻譯**: ayszhang (**溫哥在此**) **Genre 類型**: historical (Modern Age) **近代古風**, romance**愛情**, drama**劇情**

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He stared, transfixed, at Ch'in Ching standing in the storm waiting for him.

A deep-seated sense of fulfillment blossomed in his heart, With the haziness of what the French would call déjà vu – A man holding an umbrella.

The wet ends of his ch'angshan.

The rainy music from an old dream.

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Prelude

So that in thirty years our ten digits may intertwine even more tightly

So that in seven decades our fantasies may bloom with even more intensity

– Lin Xi, *Yam Bak*[0]

I

The chill still lingered in early March, but daylight stretched on longer. At six o'clock, twilight had only just begun to set in after the showing. The tickets to the T'ienkung Cinemas were cheap, and the seats were seven-, if not eight-, tenths full on regular days. Furthermore, it was the one year anniversary of the death of a Shanghainese actress named Juan,[1] so despite Tientsin being far up north, the major cinemas all dug out copies of the belle's films in time for reruns and sold-out showings.

T'ienkung was showing *Wild Flowers* which was first screened when Shen Liangsheng was still studying in England. He had seen a few photographs of the cast in a local Chinese-run newspaper. Now, the flower girl on the screen whose voice was more beautiful than that of a nightingale had long become mere ash, and the story of star-crossed lovers reaching a happy ending had become a joke.

After the screening, the place was swarming with people all clambering towards the exit. However, since Sun Ch'uanfang[2] had been assassinated at the Chüshihlin,[3] all the warlords situated in Tientsin, despite their different backgrounds, had become cautious. Even Shen Liangsheng was forced by Shen Sr. to bring bodyguards along whenever he left the house, and therefore it did not matter to him how crowded it was. With a bodyguard on each side clearing the path for him, Shen Liangsheng was not unlike Moses crossing the Red Sea.

He was nearing the entrance when a commotion from behind caught his attention.

Someone barked in the local tongue, “If yer in such a rush, why don’tcha just go to hell while yer at it!”

Shen Liangsheng looked over his shoulders to see that someone had lost something and was bent at the waist searching while being swept back and forth by the others. If he were to trip and fall, a stampede or something of its kind would surely ensue.

Finding the man quite pitiful, Shen Liangsheng found it in his heart after a moment’s hesitation to help, taking several steps back with his bodyguards to fence off a space of peace and quiet for him.

“If you could move out of the way… Um, sir, your foot…” The man kept his back and head bent while mumbling on in what was actually proper, unaccented standard speech. Sure enough, when he found what he was looking for and straightened himself, he had the look of a well-mannered and educated person. A young man judging from the face, he was tall and thin, clad in a blue traditional lined robe[4] and carrying a natural smile about his lips.

“Thank you very much,” the man spoke first, expressing his gratitude and cracking a joke while he was at it. “I figure we could cook up some sardine stew with people squashed in like this.”

“You’re welcome.” Shen Liangsheng nodded coolly noticing the thing in his hand: a pair of black-framed glasses. A lens was shattered and a temple was missing. Although recovered, they would no longer be of use.

“Ch’in-*hsiung*,[5] where did you disappear off to? I only lost sight of you for a second there.”

The crowd had begun to disperse by now. A round-faced young man pushed his way over as he called out, but his steps faltered when he spotted the men across from his friend.

“I’m fine, *Hsiao*[6]-Liu,” the man first answered his friend before bidding Shen Liangsheng farewell. “Mister…” He probably did not know how to address him, but he did not inquire either, only nodding with a smile. “Hope to see you again.”

“Enjoy your evening,” Shen Liangsheng replied, and the two went their separate ways. Curiously, Shen Liangsheng stopped in his tracks and looked back after taking ten or so steps from the theatre entrance.

The street lights had just come to life for the night. Shops lined the congested Twenty-First Avenue, yet he was able to spot with one look the back of that person from earlier. His slender figure fitted in a thin lined robe was taller than the more sturdy-shaped companion beside him by at least two heads and was bent slightly to listen to his friend’s words while walking. The figure that looked grey in the twilight merged in with the crowd to gradually disappear from sight.

“Did you know that man, Ch’in-*hsiung*?”

“No.”

The topic of discussion was none other than the man behind them who had halted and turned to look. The curious *Hsiao*-Liu followed with another question: “Then did you ask for his name?”

“You can tell from his dress that he’s not the same as us. Cottoning up to people just isn’t what I do.”

“Quit being a smart aleck, Ch’in Ching,” *Hsiao*-Liu joked and continued with an excited expression. “Well, I think I saw him on the *Tientsin Commercial Gazette*. He looked something like the second son of Shen K’echen.”

Since the fall of the Peiyang government, retired warlords who holed up in Tientsin were as plentiful as salmon during the run. Some still clung on with hope, believing that Tientsin was not a great deal off from Peip’ing, and they could still have the chance to rise again if the opportunity presented itself. Others had given up their political careers for commercial ones, and Shen K’echen would count as the top dog amongst them.

“You must’ve gotten the wrong man. If he really was Mr. Shen, he would be over at the Hsiaopailou.[7] Why would he be running around Ch’üanyeh Bazaar[8] anyway?”

“Well, P’ingan’s[9] always had its nose in the air and never screens home made films. You never know, maybe Mr. Shen was Ms. Juan’s fan and came

specially to commemorate the lady."

Ch'in Ching did not continue the banter and instead, with a depressed expression that spelled "darling, I'm so sorry," focused on his glasses that had a missing face and a missing leg.

"My goodness, could you please look at where you're going?" *Hsiao*-Liu grabbed onto his sleeve so that he wouldn't lose the man again in the blink of an eye.

Indeed, Ch'in Ching's eyes were not that great, and he constantly squinted to see clearly. Without the frame, the vermillion mole by his eye that had been there since birth became even more apparent.

On the subject of this mole, Ch'in Ching had been teased by a good friend in his class when he was still in school at Peip'ing Normal University: "This mole of yours is truly distinctive, and it's here out of all places.[9.5] It's obvious that you were a lady in your last life, and your lover made a mark with rouge so he could find you to continue your love after reincarnation."

Ch'in Ching may not have had good vision, but his temperament was superb, and he loved jokes. Upon hearing this, he was not offended at all and only said with a straight face, "Believing in superstition just isn't what I do." He then drew close to his friend and exclaimed with passion, "Yet I couldn't help but believe it e'er I met you. My dear sir, dost thou know how many years I have awaited thee?"

This made the friend jump away in fright and wave his hands dismissively while laughing. ""Tis most difficult to return the favours of a beauty. 'Twould be best if thou forgetest me!"

"Young master?"

Shen Liangsheng had stopped for so long that the bodyguards could not help feeling uneasy, suspecting that trouble was upon them. Their hands reached underneath their coats for their guns.

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

When they came to the parked car, one person jumped in the front while the other stood by the car and waited until Shen Liangsheng had entered before joining him in the back.

Shen Liangsheng used to drive a Chevrolet, but ever since the incident with Sun Ch’uanfang, Shen Sr. forced him to change to a Dodge that had been remodelled with bulletproof steel. One could easily see how much he cared for his younger son.

However, the reason behind this was inseparable from a bit of unpleasant history.

Shen Liangsheng’s mother was half-Portuguese, and her job was not exactly proper – a high-class prostitute when it really came down to it. Shen K’echen recognized her son but he couldn’t marry her because he could not afford to anger his in-laws. Therefore, he resorted to keeping her elsewhere. At first he provided some allowance money, but when she became addicted to opium he didn’t bother with her anymore fearing that her spending would become a black hole.

The woman, who had become frail and bony from the addiction, came to the Shen household every now and then to cause some trouble. She kept yelping Mrs. Shen’s name and something about ‘I’ll never let this go! *Ah*-Liang, if you still think of me as your mom, promise me you’ll never let her off easy!’

Out of regard for his past feelings, Shen K’echen merely had her removed each time. At one point, she came so many times that Shen Liangsheng had a hard time in the house. He was sent off to England at the age of fourteen. They called it studying abroad, but it was really the same as banishment. The family paid the tuition for the first two years, and the rest he had to pay for himself through working part-time. He returned after completing his education, not to go back to his roots and ancestry and not to avenge his mother. Honestly, he didn’t feel much towards his birth mother, towards Shen Sr. or towards his home country. It was rather because, after evaluating the situation, he found that he would have more opportunities back home rather than struggling by himself in a foreign land which might not even prove fruitful.

Especially after the downfall of the Peiyang government and, consequently, the once untouchable in-laws of Mrs. Shen, Mrs. Shen could no longer act high and mighty in front of Shen K'echen and left this world depressed before Shen Liangsheng returned home. The widowed Shen K'echen resided in Tientsin at the age of sixty, and his eldest son was a bit of a disappointment. He would dream in the darkest hours of the night about the woman he had loved and feel apologetic towards his younger son. When Shen Liangsheng wanted to come back, he welcomed him with open arms.

Having been through much hardship abroad, Shen Liangsheng held himself perfectly as a young master back in his homeland, but inside was actually a person who would do whatever it takes. He came back at this time with the plan to make as much money as he could before leaving for good. The world was a big place, and it didn't matter where he was.

He never thought of any place as home, so every place was foreign. Thus he didn't have any ties.

Shen Liangsheng's elder brother was originally "a bit of a disappointment" and felt more or less threatened when Shen Liangsheng returned. The two brothers got along just fine on the surface, but the elder brother was utterly defeated in the shadow games. The tiny bit of will that sprang to life was doused in water, and he grew more and more depressed, spending most of his days at the racing track. Later on, he became addicted to gambling, specifically pelota tournaments, and every time he went home it was to ask for money. In the end, "a bit of a disappointment" became "a complete disappointment." Shen K'echen's health declined by the year, and Shen Liangsheng had over half of the business and investments of the Shen family under his control by his fourth year back. To leave or not to leave, and when to do so, was all up to the situation at hand.

This was an embarrassing bit, but there were the occasional few who knew the inside scoop. When they discussed it amongst themselves, their comments on the second son of Shen never strayed far from "great barkers are no biters."

It was not that Shen Liangsheng did not know about this gossip, but he simply didn't take it to heart – and it was arguable whether he even had a heart. Even he thought sometimes that his name was really befitting.[10]

He definitely led a cold life.

The streets became quieter after the car turned out of Twenty-Fifth Avenue. Shen Liangsheng had a business dinner at Kiessling's[11] at eight o'clock and told the driver to pick up the speed so he could go home for a change of clothes. However, before they even made it past the second intersection, he shouted out, "Slow down."

The bodyguard in the driver's seat had great aim but was not too great in the chauffeur department, so he slammed the brakes when he heard the command. The momentum jerked Shen Liangsheng forward, but he was not angered and only remarked, "It's fine. Keep going."

The car continued along its path. Shen Liangsheng sat in the leather seat with his head propped on one hand. His face showed no signs of disturbance, but it was quite a different story inside.

For a split second just now, he had spotted a tall, skinny figure on the roadside through the window and blurted out, "Slow down." When he actually saw the person, however, it was not whom he had in mind.

What should have been an unplanned episode in the programme of some stranger he had never met was instead so unforgettable. This surprised Shen Liangsheng himself.

He closed his eyes and repainted that man's face in his head. The picture turned out as clear as an engraving, as if every stroke were cut out with a knife.

The man stood before him tall, skinny and quiet with a light smile about his lips. His eyes were slightly squinting, probably because he was used to wearing glasses, and the peach-coloured mole by his eyes made his expression look tender with love.

And in that moment, as though the brakes were slammed on while going full speed, Shen Liangsheng's heart dropped down, then swung back up, and he felt

a dizzying spell, as though an invisible hand shoved his heart down.

Shen Liangsheng overdrank, something he rarely did, at the dinner that night. He drifted to sleep with a light alcohol buzz after falling onto his bed and had a dream as real as any.

He dreamt that he was on top of a warm body, a man's or woman's he couldn't tell, nor could he see their face. All he remembered was that he had personally dotted that bright red mole by the person's eye.

It was only a dream, but the sensual pleasure was strong, stronger than that of any sex he had ever had. His heart was pounding wildly even after he came back to reality from the climax in his dream.

The curtains were tightly shut. The thick silk blocked out the light from outside and seemed to separate this room where a four-poster bed stood from rest of the foul world.

Everything about the room was just right, and it was dark enough for the heat to brew. Recalling the naked body from his dream, Shen Liangsheng began to get aroused.

This irrational desire was truly strange, so strange that the possibility that the person in the dream could be a man that he had only seen once wasn't even that important anymore.

The years abroad aside, he had seen all sorts of debauched acts at business parties after returning. Buying an actor[12] and messing around with men were actually considered innocent. Dwelling in concessions, countries within a country, in this age of glamour and chaos, one began to forget about morals and about right and wrong. All that was left to life was the crazy pursuit of fun and pleasure.

Shen Liangsheng watched unenthusiastically and felt he was a bystander most of the time, someone who could simply leave any time. However, there were times when he felt that he had already succumbed to it and was no different than any of the others looking for a good time.

For instance now, lying on his bed with his once-again hard member in hand, he travelled back to the intersection yesterday, watching the grey figure recede into the crowd. His heart felt oddly empty, and he regretted not taking the gentleman's name.

His hand moved more and more quickly, and the regret seemed to ferment and expand, its properties gradually changing into a carnal desire to conquer. The wickedness in his bones became restless and eager. It didn't matter if he had to wait for the prey to come to him or search through a haystack for that needle, he would only rest when he got what he wanted.

0Yam Bak is short for Yam Kim-fai and Bak Sheut-sin, two famous opera actresses who were most famous for working with one another. Yam plays the male role while Bak plays the female role in traditional Chinese opera.

1 Ruan Lingyu. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruan_Lingyu

2 A warlord nicknamed the "Nanking Warlord." For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Chuanfang

3 Chüshihlin was a type of Buddhist organization that originated in Shanghai in the 1910s and spread to other major cities. The name literally means "householder's forest." For definition of householder: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Householder_(Buddhism)

4 A double layered robe with no filling in between the two layers.

5 A suffix conveying the younger age of the speaker and respect and familiarity towards the addressee. This could be seen as the more formal, more outdated version of "ge".

6 A prefix conveying the older age of the speaker and familiarity towards the addressee.

7 Xiaobailou, one of the four traditional commercial district in Tianjin symbolized by the "little white building" (the literal name of the district in

Chinese) that is the Tianjin Concert Hall. This took up the southern end of the English concession and the north edge of the German concession.

8 The Quanye Bazaar is a perhaps the most famous shopping district in Tianjin, originally designed by a Frenchman in the 1920s. For more information: http://www.chinatravel.com/tianjin-attraction/tianjin-quanye-bazaar/

9 The old name of the concert hall which used to be a movie theatre.

9.5 A mole by the eye is said to be a symbol of love and makes the person more susceptible to romance and lust. More information here (note Ch'in's mole is likely #19) http://www.chinesefortunecalendar.com/FaceMoleReading.htm

10 "Liang" means "cool" and "sheng" means life.

11 A German patisserie founded by Albert Kiessling.

12 Traditionally, all opera actors were male.

II

Knowing that the man's surname was Ch'in and that he had the appearance of a student, Shen Liangsheng began to deliberate on whether or not to start the search from the universities in Tientsin. However, these thoughts only existed in the darkness of his room. When he drew open the curtains to illuminate it, they dwindled under the shining rays. The next time he thought of the matter, it was at the dining table after a morning of business. By that time, he found it ridiculous to invest so much to find one person.

The days of struggling abroad in his earlier years had transformed Shen Liangsheng into an egoist through and through. In his mind was a ledger of investment and profit. If he set his mind to it, finding the person with whom he had a chance meeting wouldn't be an issue, but it would not be worth it.

The hazy figure would present itself in his most lustful moments, but it would disperse like a vampire when the sun dawned. No matter how alluring the ghost in his dreams was, it could never be enough to rival a real living companion, which the playboy never lacked. As for the dream, he never had another as passionate.

Spring passed by and summer came. Soon it was the end of summer. The Great Theatre of China[13] was completed, and the opening ceremony caused a city-wide sensation. The very first performance was *A Gathering of Heroes*[14]starring many well-known actors. The tickets sold out long before the show. Many people came on the day of the performance hoping to catch someone who wanted a refund. Others shouting for standing-room-only tickets only added to the racket.

Shen Liangsheng was not interested in opera, but the Shen family had bought quite a bit of the stock of this theatre. It was only expected that he attend.

The car was stopped by a traffic jam when it turned onto Twentieth and moved forward in intermittent jerks. Impatient, Shen Liangsheng hopped out

after telling the chauffeur to stay with the car and headed towards the theatre.

Nearly a year had passed since the assassination of Sun Ch'uanfang, and nothing of the same nature had happened again. Shen Liangsheng no longer took bodyguards around with him, and only a female companion kept him company. There was also a good-looking secretary named Chou who was about thirty years of age. Not only was the secretary nice on the eyes, he was a helpful assistant, Shen Liangsheng's right-hand man.

The woman was dressed in the latest fashion, but her heels hindered her movements. With his experience abroad, Shen Liangsheng never slacked off with etiquette. He just strolled along leisurely like a gentleman with her in tow.

"About the gala I told you about last time, Vincent,[15] do you think you'll have time?"

Shen Liangsheng always asked his dates to call him by his English name.

"I'll see," he replied unenthusiastically.

The smart lady did not push for an answer and continued to walk. After a few steps, however, she realized that her money tree had halted his footsteps. She looked in the direction his gaze was pointed, but all she saw was a swarm of heads.

Shen Liangsheng had no clue how he had been able to pick out from a massive crowd someone whom he had not seen for several months.

It was the same tall and skinny frame, this time wrapped not in a lined robe but a blue cotton ch'angshan. The black framed glasses were sitting properly on his nose this time and hid his refined looks, making him appear a bit old-fashioned.

Sure, Shen Liangsheng did not actually search for the man, but he would not be Shen Liangsheng if he did not take an opportunity handed to him on a silver platter. In that moment, his heart quickened. He left the woman and headed over in large strides.

"You're here for the show too?" he blurted out.

Only after the words left his mouth did he realize how abrupt his question was. The man might not even remember who he was, so he added, “A few months ago at T’ienkung…”

“Why, yes.” Ch’in Ching nodded with a smile. “Pleasant surprise running into you here. Thank you again for last time.”

He remembers me too – for a second, that dizzying feeling hit him hard again. His heart raced, and he felt something like joy.

But regardless of what was going on inside, Shen Liangsheng always kept a straight face. He returned a nod and introduced himself. “The name’s Shen. Shen Liangsheng. And you are?”[16]

“Ch’in. Pleasure to meet you.”[17] Ch’in Ching answered politely but did not reveal his full name. Shen Liangsheng had been hoping to hear his full name, and when Ch’in Ching omitted it, he purposely did not continue the conversation. Things became a bit awkward.

“Are you here for the show, Master Shen?” Ch’in Ching was dressed in traditional oriental clothing but wore a western watch on his wrist. He glanced at his watch as though oblivious to the awkwardness and remarked with a smile, “There’s not much time. You should hurry if you want to make it.”[18]

Hearing him refer to him as ‘Master Shen,’ it became obvious that the man knew who his father was. He guessed that the man didn’t tell him his full name not wanting to befriend him because of the difference in status. But this wasn’t a perfect explanation. First of all, Shen Liangsheng did business in the name of his father and kept a low profile himself. Secondly, the Shen family was well-known for their close ties with England and the United States. It was not because Shen Liangsheng was a good man, but because the Japanese were too greedy. Doing business with them only meant losing money. Shen Liangsheng never planned to settle here, so he naturally wouldn’t sacrifice current profits for future plans. Therefore, the media’s comments on the Shen family were not harsh. There were also a few paid reporters who wrote some articles praising Shen Sr., so the general opinions were fairly good.

“Since you’re here for the show too, let us go together,” Shen Liangsheng

replied without missing a beat. Ch'in Ching skillfully evaded his previous question, but Shen Liangsheng was not going to let this chance go.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I'm not here for the show." Ch'in Ching still had a polite smile about his lips as he signalled with a nod. "The winds are strong at night, Master Shen. Don't make a lady wait."

Shen Liangsheng looked back in the direction of his nod to see his companion and Secretary Chou behind him, peering over from a short distance away. It was plain to see that she did not have enough layers on her as she hugged her shawl close.

"Give me a second."

With that said, Shen Liangsheng went over and told the secretary to bring the lady to the private box first. Then, he came back and began to chat on the spot with Ch'in Ching.

"Sadly, I'm an incompetent fellow and owe my success entirely to my father." Shen Liangsheng said straightforwardly. "It's only fair that Mister Ch'in finds me unworthy and doesn't want to be amongst my kind."

"Oh Master Shen, surely you jest."

Ch'in Ching definitely had wanted to slip away earlier, but the time it took for Shen Liangsheng to exchange a few words wouldn't have been enough to get him very far. Instead, it would have made his escape more obvious, so he decided to stay in the same spot. But who would have thought the young master would come back and blame him for acting like he was too good for anyone.

Hsiao-Liu claims to be the most well informed on the secrets of the elite, Ch'in Ching groaned silently, so why didn't he tell me that Master Shen is such an extrovert and is this hard to get rid of?

However, on another note, it was astonishingly the first time that someone as mild-tempered as Ch'in Ching was so against befriending someone – without a legitimate reason, too. He had only met Shen Liangsheng once. The man wasn't a Japanese sellout and had even given him a hand before. There was no reason to dislike this man.

What was more, the impression of this man was vivid after just one meeting, so much so that since *Hsiao*-Liu came across proof of his identity in an old newspaper, he would take a second glance at the paper if it had anything to do with the Shens.

From these points, it was clear that he didn't dislike this man but rather had positive feelings towards him. However, his first reaction from bumping into this man again after several months was that he didn't want anything to do with this person. He had a strong feeling that nothing good would come from getting closer to him. This sort of inclination was so absurd that Ch'in Ching himself found it ridiculous.

"Then what might it be that dissatisfies you, my good sir?"

Shen Liangsheng was dressed to the nines for this event. He stood in a white tuxedo, a startling contrast to the darkness of the night, and made more than a few heads turn. Not everybody could pull off a white suit, but the elegant attire seemed to gain more colour on Shen Liangsheng. Perhaps because of his quarter-Portuguese blood, he was an inch or two taller than Ch'in Ching and had a lean and towering build. He was the spitting image of a tuxedo model from a page in the fashion magazines. With his hands in his trouser pockets in a casual stance, he naturally gave off a playful, laid-back air.

"Please, you are a good-looking gentleman by all means…" Ch'in Ching knew that the man was merely joking, but it was still so uncomfortable for him that he couldn't finish the pleasantry.

"Surely it's not because I look like a monster?" Hearing his voice trailing off, Shen Liangsheng flashed a smile and continued to put him on the spot.

Appearance-wise, Shen Liangsheng was far from looking like a monster. The small hint of Caucasian blood was not exactly obvious with his dark eyes and black hair. Only his skin was a tad fairer than others, and his eyes were more deep-set. His nose was tall and his lips thin. When not smiling, he was as irreproachable as a Greek sculpture. When he did, however, his smile looked like winter thawing out under the spring sun. Half-hidden behind flowing lashes and the flashing neon were the windows to another universe. It was a face from

which one could not remove one's eyes even if he tried.

Ch'in Ching couldn't help but feel some butterflies in his stomach under the man's gaze. He frowned and let out a sigh. Why was a handsome devil like Shen Liangsheng so insistent on befriending him out of all people when he could easily make any sort of friend he wanted?

"We're sticking out like sore thumbs. Let's step aside." Shen Liangsheng stopped teasing him and clapped him on the back like an old friend before leading the way.

Without much thought, Ch'in Ching followed him towards the theatre. It took him a moment to snap back.

"I'm not here for the show. Honestly. You know how difficult it is to get your hands on these tickets…" And that was when Ch'in Ching realized where this was leading – no matter how difficult the task, it would only require a mere lift of the finger for this man before him.

It was unsurprising, then, when Shen Liangsheng glanced over with a somewhat sly look on his face. "It was fate that brought us together for the second time. It would be an honour for me to share my seat with you, only if you don't mind, that is."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to impose." But Ch'in Ching couldn't help but retaliate the teasing. "*I'd be a third wheel just rattling along*."[19]

Although Ch'in Ching was a Northerner, born and bred, his Cantonese was like his Mandarin, exact and effortless. The majority of overseas Chinese spoke Cantonese. Therefore, it was not hard for Shen Liangsheng to understand that Ch'in Ching was pointing out the female companion's presence and how he did not wish to be stuck between the couple. He did not force anything upon the other man but did not slow down either, only telling the other man to keep up.

Ch'in Ching thought that this man truly was a rich jerk who was used to getting his way. If he didn't comply soon, the jerk just might get upset. Instinct told him not to get involved with this person, but he felt reluctant, too, at the idea of upsetting him – it wouldn't please him to do so. Thus, he held his tongue

and caught up with the man.

Since the Shens owned part of the venue, there was staff whose sole job was to service them. Shen Liangsheng muttered something to the employee, who rushed towards the ground floor seats.

Meanwhile, in the brightly lit lobby, Shen Liangsheng moved onto the next topic of their casual conversation.

“You don’t look very old. Are you still in school?”

“You certainly have a sharp eye, Master Shen.”

“Which institute?”

“Sheng Kung.”[20]

Shen Liangsheng paused in silent confusion. If his ears were not mistaken, Sheng Kung was not only a secondary school; it was an all-girls secondary school.

Seeing the dumbfounded Shen Liangsheng, Ch’in Ching burst out in laughter. “I don’t study anymore. I teach at Sheng Kung.”

“Is that right? Then my calling you ‘mister’ was rather appropriate, wasn’t it?”

Shen Liangsheng did not appear to mind being fooled and only gave a light nod. It occurred to Ch’in Ching that he had yet to reveal his own name and no longer had the need to hide. He was on the verge on doing so when the staff member returned, bowing to the two.

“This way, please, sirs.”

Ch’in Ching knew that the first rows to these shows were never open for public purchase but rather were “courtesy seats.” However, he didn’t expect Shen Liangsheng to swap the ticket for one somewhere in the middle. Most likely, he was afraid that Ch’in Ching would feel uncomfortable in the front row “courtesy seats.” Though grateful for his sensitivity, it was not exactly easy to express, so Ch’in Ching merely gave a simple word of thanks. He watched Shen Liangsheng turn and head towards his private box on the second floor, and only then did he sit down in his own seat.

“One more thing.”

He had barely found a comfortable spot when Shen Liangsheng came back again. Bent over, he patted Ch’in Ching again good-naturedly, this time on the shoulder, and leaned into his ear.

“Be sure to tell me your name next time.”

It was but a kind tease. Yet somehow the warmth and amusement in his voice added a dangerous, suggestive tone to the quiet utterance. Dumbly, Ch’in Ching sat there until the lights dimmed and the performance began. Only then did he realize he had been blushing.

He chuckled at his own little embarrassment, wondering what was going on with him, and directed his attention to the stage. However, at one point he couldn’t help but look back towards the second floor.

The architects were Westerners who designed the building to imitate the European style. Likewise, the theatre was run this way. Viewing the opera was not unlike viewing a movie with the way the stage was lit with glaring lights while the rest was a blurry gloaming.

Despite the darkness, distance and number of private boxes, Ch’in Ching spotted the man with little effort.

It was the white suit: too noticeable. Ch’in Ching struggled to provide an explanation while the thought of the man, drawing him in like a lighthouse on a stormy night, haunted his conscience. He was no longer paying attention to the performance, but he managed to catch a few snippets.

“When a man chances upon a master with whom he can bare his soul in this wide world, the outer bond of ruler and subject and the inner bond of brotherhood shall be formed, and he is sure to obey every word and every thought, and share all fortune and misfortune alike.”

The actor playing Chou Yü[21] tonight was Chiang Miao-hsiang.[22] He recited the line with precision, and the words “fortune and misfortune alike” especially, were pronounced with much feeling and power.

With his mind wandering faraway, Ch’in Ching turned back to the stage and watched the scene play out. When the lights came back on during intermission, he turned around once again only to find that the man, who had only attended out of obligation, was long gone.

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13 Not to be confused with the Tianjin Grand Theatre. This building was completed in August, 1936, and the opening ceremony took place on September 19th.

14 An opera piece based on of Chapter 45 of Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

15 “文森” (wensen) is actually what she pronounces because she cannot speak English, so she tries to find the closest approximation to the original English pronunciation.

16 The exact meaning of his words: I don’t know your noble surname. This is a polite way of asking one’s name. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_honorifics#Strangers_or_social_encounter

17 The exact meaning of his words: Remove the ‘noble,’ my surname is Ch’in. This is a humble way to reply the question.

18 Because of the pronoun drop in Chinese, this sentence could also read as “We should hurry if we want to make it.”

19 The italicized section is Cantonese.

20 Sheng Kung was a Catholic school established in 1915 in the French concession of Tianjin as a primary school and later promoted to a secondary school in 1929. The nuns moved the school to Taiwan in 1949 along with the Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang. The remaining campus was renamed Xinhua Secondary School and still runs today. https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%87%BA%E5%8D%97%E5%B8%82%E7%A7

21 Also known as Zhou Yu, a general who served Sun Ce in the Eastern Han Dynasty.

22 An opera singer, 姜妙香.

III

Apparently, Shen Liangsheng had been joking when he told Ch'in Ching to introduce his full name next time. The night after the show, he asked Secretary Chou to search through the staff records at Sheng Kung. Chou did not disappoint either, delivering the information he had obtained to his boss's desk by the next afternoon. Not only did it include Ch'in Ching's name, age and class schedule, it also contained his family background, education and past social interactions.

Shen Liangsheng skimmed through it. While he did want to get this man into bed, he didn't have any plans for the long run. There was no need to delve so deeply.

His plan was to get this man, but he could not rush since it might backfire on him if he pushed too hard. Shen Liangsheng was of the opinion that, although the man did show some reluctance to befriend him at first, he did not harbour any dislike, judging from careful observation of his reactions. Hence, Shen Liangsheng had purposely left the theatre that night without notifying the man. It was not unlike casting a line into the water, a line that took two weeks to reach Sheng Kung Girls' Secondary in hopes of catching the man after his lessons and inviting him to dinner.

Sheng Kung was situated on Yich'ing-*li* in the French concession while Shen Liangsheng's office was on Bristow Road in the English concession. The two were not far from each other and were easily accessible by motor car. The lessons had not finished when he arrived, and he parked across from the gates. He rolled down the windows and lit a smoke, planning to wait for him in the car. After a cigarette, however, he changed his mind and headed into the school.

Noticing the sedan, the gatekeeper let the well-dressed gentleman in after only a brief questioning. Shen Liangsheng had Ch'in Ching's schedule, so finding the classroom in the moderately sized school grounds did not prove difficult. He stopped by the windows and peered in.

He had been wondering while puffing on the cigarette earlier how the man would look on the podium. Now that he was looking right at it, the sight was close to his imagination but also a bit off.

It was mid-September, but the Indian summer was especially noticeable, leaving the weather hot and humid. Ch'in Ching had the black-framed glasses sitting on his face as always but was dressed in Western attire. Due to the heat, it consisted of only a white collared shirt and black dress pants. His shirt was not buttoned up completely, and the sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. The tucked-in shirt accentuated his slim waist and legs. Shen Liangsheng's gaze lingered on the figure standing at the podium with a textbook in hand, lecturing about what might have been a work in Classical Chinese. As for which piece it was, it was beyond Shen Liangsheng, for his mastery of the Chinese arts was far behind that of the English. All that was going through his mind was that, like this city of which he had been an inhabitant for four years, the man was a distinctive blend of the East and West. The ancient incantations coming from his mouth didn't seem at odds with the imported fashion on his body.

Shen Liangsheng was not directly by the windows, but once one girl's eyes wandered and caught sight of him, she would tap on the girl in front of her after a short moment of surprise. Like dominoes, this quickly spread through the window-side rows, and soon none of them were listening to their instructor any longer. All they would do was sneak glances out the window.

At this point, Ch'in Ching could no longer pretend not to see Shen Liangsheng. He nodded at him with a light smile and then tapped the book against the podium.

"Focus, girls," he warned.

Unfortunate though it may be, the smile had not disappeared in time and made it sound more like a suggestion than a warning. What it did succeed in doing was to alert the rest of the students who had been paying attention to divert it out the window.

The students were not interested in the lesson, and the teacher's mind was not entirely on it either. Ever since Shen Liangsheng left without a peep, it was as

though his heart was a kite flying in the air. On the far end were his museful ideas, swaying unsteadily far from solid ground.

Although no farewells were exchanged, he had been of the opinion that Shen Liangsheng would come for him again. And thus, the kite had flown higher and higher, his spirits riding along the wind into the crisp, autumn sky.

However, after a week without any news, it occurred to him that the man could have merely said it in passing. They belonged to different classes after all. The fact that Shen Liangsheng had been enthusiastic meant little, and he most likely forgot about this matter afterwards. And thus, the wind current died down, and Ch'in Ching's heart, drifting along weakly, threatened to take a dive.

If the person in question had happened to be a lady, Ch'in Ching would have thought this to be a wrong love at the wrong time. But instead, it was a man. Ch'in Ching could only ask himself one question: You wanted nothing to do with him at first, and now you want to be his friend this badly. What's going on in that head of yours?

It was a pity that he had not gotten to the bottom of that question by the time he was actually faced with the man standing outside his classroom, basking in the glow of autumn. The man was still the same sparkling gem set against a background of cobble, and Ch'in Ching felt that perhaps he had no need for an answer.

The minds of both the lecturer and the listeners had wandered elsewhere. Fortunately, only about ten minutes remained, and Ch'in Ching managed to finish his lesson as the dismissal chime rang.

"Don't get too out of hand. There is a test next week so be sure to review at home. Don't come crying to me when you flunk it."

Ch'in Ching reminded as he tidied his materials, but the students were not listening at all. The girls quickly surrounded the podium in a frenzy.

"Mister Ch'in, Mister Ch'in, is that gentleman your friend?"

"Is he a movie star? How come I've never seen him in anything?"

“C’mon, tell us his name, Mister Ch’in.”

Ch’in Ching taught middle school, and the girls had grown very close with him. They could get very noisy and unruly after class.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself if you want to know so badly?”

Ch’in Ching lost the facade of a schoolmaster, too, after class, and didn’t find anything wrong with taunting a girl ten years his junior.

The poor girl took another look at the man outside. Sure, he was good-looking but also a tad intimidating. She pursed her lips and answered honestly, “He scares me.”

“Pfft!” Ch’in Ching couldn’t stop his laughter. He tapped her head lightly with the book. “Serves you right.”

Shen Liangsheng waited patiently as Ch’in Ching joked with the students. When the latter finally escaped, he nodded a greeting.

“I was in the neighbourhood, so I dropped by to grab a meal with you.”

“Really? You were in the neighbourhood?” They had only met twice, but already he felt close to this person. Ch’in Ching jokingly asked as he led the way to the staff room, “Are you sure you didn’t come just to see me?”

“That too.”

Hearing this, Ch’in Ching peered over only to find nothing revealing on Shen Liangsheng’s face. He couldn’t work out the verity of his statement, so he continued in a casual tone, “Then it would be my honour. Since you treated me to opera last time, Master Shen, allow me to do the same for you. Though I must warn you, it won’t be much considering this awkward time of the month. I only hope it will be enough to please you.”

“Why, of course.” Shen Liangsheng didn’t refuse the offer since the exchange would naturally lead to more interaction. This wasn’t some *fille de joie* with whom he could do as he pleased. It would take a few more dates to bring in the home run.

Soon, they had arrived at the destination, and Ch'in Ching immediately spotted someone sitting at his desk. With a round face, small eyes and a smile resembling the grinning Maitreya Buddha in the temple, it was none other than the idler, *Hsiao*-Liu.

"Well, well, well. Look who's finally done with his lessons!" *Hsiao*-Liu did not teach at Sheng Kung, but he came often to visit Ch'in Ching. Now he was sitting at Ch'in Ching's desk drinking tea and reading the paper as if he were at home.

"Well, well, well. Look who the cat dragged in." Ch'in Ching grew up with him, so he was not going to hold back. He snatched his cup back and took a sip from it. "I'd show you the way out, but I don't have time for you today, lad."

Shen Liangsheng had not followed him in but only stood by the door, hands clasped behind his back. When the person with whom Ch'in Ching was engaged in conversation looked over at him, he returned a polite nod seeing the face to be familiar.

"Jesus. I take my eyes off you for a few days, and this is what you bring home?" *Hsiao*-Liu asked in a hushed voice after blinking furiously. He wasn't told about the second encounter with Shen Liangsheng and thought he was seeing things when the businessman appeared before him.

"Quit acting so suspicious," Ch'in Ching responded as he sorted his things. "I'll tell you about it later. Like I said, I don't have time today. Say hi to mom for me. I'll go back for dinner on Sunday."

"C'mon, mate! Why is my ma first on your list? You should be looking out for me!" *Hsiao*-Liu's brows furrowed. "It's Wang-*shih'hsiung*'s[23] night, but he ate something bad yesterday, and it's been diarrhea the whole day today. He can barely get a word out, let alone stand. We're all countin' on you to save the day!"

"But there's Lee Hsiao-ch'üan."

"No, he can't make it. He has another show. Ch'in-*hsiung*, please, *O Mighty One*, there's no time to waste. Say yes!"

Some things had a higher priority. Ch'in Ching knew he had to do this but felt bad towards Shen Liangsheng. He went up to him with an uneasy expression, contemplating how to proceed.

"I am truly sorry, Young Master Shen, but could I please borrow him for just one night tonight?" *Hsiao*-Liu knew that Ch'in Ching did not know how to start, so he walked over too, explaining. "It's really an emergency. They say 'saving a show is like saving a fire,' and I'm *this* close to being burnt alive. There's no other way. I'm so, so sorry."

"Um, Mister…?"

"Liu. Liu Pao-hsiang. Just call me *Hsiao*-Liu, Young Master Shen."

"Mr. Liu. There is no need for apology. I have no urgent business with Mister Ch'in anyway." Shen Liangsheng did not seem too bothered. He continued politely, "Since saving a show is like saving a fire, please allow me to be your chauffeur."

"Oh, no. We couldn't. That's too much to ask of you, sir. No."

"Oh, but I insist, Mr. Liu."

"Aw shucks. Call me *Hsiao*-Liu, please. I feel downright horrible making you say 'mister.'"

"Please don't. I'd like it if we both eased up on the politesse."

The pair's back-and-forth left Ch'in Ching hanging awkwardly on the side. Once in the car, there was no stopping *Hsiao*-Liu. He could only sit there listening to his friend tell the driver practically everything about themselves.

"Say, why don't you save the talking for the stage?" Ch'in Ching interrupted at last, impatient with his friend sitting with him in the backseat.

"No way. You're the star of the night after all." *Hsiao*-Liu waved his hand dismissively as he turned his attention back to Shen Liangsheng. "You don't know, sir, how brilliant this fellow is at crosstalk.[24] My dad's always been comparin' me to him. Yet he ups and leaves the stage to be a teacher. My dad put blood, sweat and tears into training him. I can't even begin to describe how

upset he was.”

Shen Liangsheng had not carefully read the files that Chou prepared. He only vaguely recalled that Ch’in Ching’s parents had both passed away and that his father was a crosstalk comedian. Now, thanks to *Hsiao*-Liu’s talkative nature, he learned how both men’s fathers studied under the same master, which generation of performers they belonged to and how many other fellow pupils there were in the line of work.

Ch’in Ching was sure that Shen Liangsheng would have no interest in the topic, but hearing the man converse smoothly with *Hsiao*-Liu made him think differently. The man may have had a lofty appearance, but he wasn’t the persistent and pretentious rich socialite that Ch’in Ching initially thought he was. He was more of an experienced businessman who was clever and well-rounded, a jack of all trades.

The Lius owned a teahouse, conveniently named Liu’s Teahouse, in Nanshih. [25] It was not a large venue but enjoyed fame in the local scene.

Shen Liangsheng brought the car to a stop at the front. *Hsiao*-Liu disembarked first, and Ch’in Ching was about to do the same when Shen Liangsheng turned around.

“When does the show start?”

“Eight.” Ch’in Ching added apologetically, “But I need to read through the script first. I’m terribly sorry. I promise this won’t happen again.”

“Save a spot for me. I’ll drop by later.”

It took Ch’in Ching a moment to react with a raised brow. “Please. You don’t seem like one for crosstalk.”

“What, you won’t eat with me, and now you won’t let me enjoy crosstalk?”

“Of course not,” Ch’in Ching chuckled. “Be my guest.”

Nanshih was known to be the lawless zone, filled with a mixed lot. It was a place Shen Liangsheng seldom visited. He took a look around while searching for his meal. Bright and bustling, it was busy but in a different way than the concessions.

It was close to eight o'clock when he returned to Liu's Teahouse. Ch'in Ching was likely backstage rehearsing, and *Hsiao*-Liu was nowhere in sight, either. There was, however, a quick-witted clerk waiting by the entrance who greeted[26] him.

"My good sir, you must be Master Shen! Come right in, please!"

Shen Liangsheng was met with a room full of noise louder than the busy streets outside. Every table was taken. Not only were some patrons standing, some even brought their own stools. The business was simply wonderful.

The teahouse was too small to have private rooms, and Ch'in Ching thought Shen Liangsheng wouldn't appreciate the crowd and the smoke. He reserved a table not by the stage but by the windows. The evening breeze gently whistled past the solitary Shen Liangsheng and a pot of lungt'uan jasmine.[27] It was not top-quality tea but was especially fragrant.

The performance began at eight o'clock sharp. *Hsiao*-Liu and Ch'in Ching walked onto the stage together, both in long robes. One tall and one short, one fat and one skinny – their presence alone was enough to induce a few laughs.

First up was the play, *Tilit'u*,[28] about a man asking for directions. Ch'in Ching had the first line.

"You dun sound like yer from 'round here," he recited in Tientsin Mandarin so accurately that he seemed to be a different person from the schoolmaster who spoke standard Mandarin.

"I'm from Peking," *Hsiao*-Liu followed, sounding like a Peking native.

"And what brings you out here?"

"Came a-looking for someone."

"Who's that?"

“My brother.”

As the piece went on, it was Ch’in Ching’s turn to give directions to *Hsiao*-Liu. He delivered over a hundred place names with a clear and nimble tongue, with just the right intonation and pauses, attracting a thunderous round of applause.

Despite the cheers and whistles from the audience, Ch’in Ching knew he was nervous. It wasn’t for fear of making a mistake – he had learned this piece since he was a boy and memorized it far too many times to make any major errors – but because Shen Liangsheng was sitting amongst them. He felt nervous for no reason whenever his eyes wandered in his direction.

But then, Ch’in Ching saw him smile.

The man sat alone by the window with a hand propping his head and the other holding the tea cup to his lips. His lashes fluttering and his lips dancing upward, he drank the jasmine tea that Ch’in Ching had picked for him.

It was no more than an instant, but Ch’in Ching could have sworn he smelt the faint aroma of jasmine. He immediately felt peaceful, no longer on edge. All the praise in the teahouse couldn’t compare to that soft smile about the man’s lips.

Afterwards, Ch’in Ching performed a lengthy monologue. He skillfully planted the foreshadowing and executed the jokes, entertaining everybody in the house.

Shen Liangsheng did not smile again, but his eyes seemed to twinkle with amusement. He simply listened – not applauding and not cheering – just listened while sipping tea that had begun to cool.

Ch’in Ching occasionally shot glances at him before looking away, treating him like any other patron. Curiously enough, he had the most ridiculous notion that the room was filled with dummies, like the mannequins in department stores. The only person who was real and alive was that man by the window, and the piece that he was performing was solely for the ears of that man.

He even thought, for a split second, that as long as that man was keen to listen on, he was more than willing to continue telling him stories – one after another, each one as delightful as the next.

It was well past ten when the show came to an end. Ch'in Ching had lessons the next day so Shen Liangsheng drove him home.

Ch'in Ching did not live far from the teahouse. It took but two minutes by car. The engine had not even warmed by the time they arrived, and the two did not share many words during the ride.

They stopped on the road, the car unable to fit into the *hut'ong*[29] that made up the old part of town. Ch'in Ching told Shen Liangsheng to stay in the car but the latter still got out. The two walked shoulder to shoulder into the alley.

There were no streetlights in this tiny alley.

It was autumn, after all. No matter how hot it was during the day, the evening was still chilly. Ch'in Ching only wore a dress shirt and could not help rubbing his arms.

"Cold?"

"It's fine. We're almost there anyways."

The next thing he knew, he was in Shen Liangsheng's arms, though not like a lady. His arm was simply wrapped around his shoulder.

If he had to say, it wasn't over the line – when Ch'in Ching was in school he had even slept in the same bed with his good friend during the coldest nights, let alone an arm around the neck – but he still struggled a little.

"What? You don't expect me to give you my jacket, do you?" Shen Liangsheng teased as he pulled the other man closer. "I'd be more than willing if it were a mademoiselle. But you? No thanks."

"Wow, Master Shen. I didn't take you to be the superficial type."

Ch'in returned the banter after coming to the conclusion that there was

nothing to feel uncomfortable about.

Ch'in Ching still resided in the house that his parents left behind, a single unit near the end of the *hut'ong*. They trod along rather slowly. It was not a long walk, but it was too dark to see the path beneath.

Shen Liangsheng held the other man, feeling his warmth. Although his shoulders were bony, they were the shoulders of a man, without the weak, feminine dependency.

Yet, somehow, this man succeeded in arousing his desires. He had originally planned at least several more dates before getting down to business, but now he found that he couldn't wait that long. He even had the urge to pin the man against the wall this very instant, strip his pants off in this dark alley and fuck him from behind until he cried and begged for mercy.

"What's wrong?" Ch'in Ching inquired after he felt Shen Liangsheng's grip tighten. He glanced over and saw nothing due to the shadowy surroundings.

"Nothing. Stepped on something is all."

"Oh. I'll grab a flashlight for you on the way out."

"It's fine."

I'll let him off this time. But only this time.

While he told Ch'in Ching white lies, he began to contemplate how to get him to surrender without a fight next time.

Shen Liangsheng let go of Ch'in Ching when they finally made it to the gate and passed a paper bag he had been holding in his left hand. "I wasn't sure if you had time for dinner, so I brought you some snacks. Remember to heat them up."

"Oh." Not having noticed the bag, Ch'in Ching faltered before taking it.

"And you have yet to tell me your name."

"Hm?" When Ch'in Ching realized what he was referring to, he retorted,

“Don’t tell me you don’t know already.”

“That may be, but it doesn’t count until I hear it from you.”

“Ch’in Ching. *Ching* as in *chü ching hsing chien*.”[30]

“You could have simply said *ching* as in *kung ching*.”[31] Shen Liangsheng wouldn’t have known which proverb he was talking about or what kind of story was behind it if he had not researched beforehand.

“I believe you are in need of some schooling, Mr. Shen,” Ch’in Ching taunted before asking needlessly, “What about your name?”

“*Liang* as in *liang shui*.[32] *Sheng* as in *ch’u sheng*.”[33]

“A bowl of cold water, born at the wrong time.[34] What an auspicious name.”

“Hey. Watch it.”

The two chatted on for some time by the entrance until it finally came time for goodbye. Ch’in Ching unlocked the gate only after seeing Shen Liangsheng disappear into the darkness. He pushed the gate open and shut it behind himself.

There was only the weak creak of the rusty gate, yet Ch’in Ching was sure he could hear the footsteps receding into the distance. First, he realized that he had forgotten to find a flashlight for him and then, that he had forgotten to tell him to drive safely.

He held the paper bag against his chest. The contents inside had already cooled, but his chest felt warm.

This man was by all means good to him and treated him as an equal. As this thought surfaced, his heart felt a rush of heat. The cozy warmth relaxed his mind, so much so that he felt like a lotus floating idly in a lake being slowly swept by the breeze.

As he swayed along with the currents, a thought suddenly made its way into his head.

This man was so good to him that it seemed suggestive.

He hurriedly pushed it back as though avoiding something.

Hence, the second half did not make it into this world.

This man was so good to him that it seemed suggestive, and he clearly didn't mind.

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23 A suffix that signifies senior ranking, normally used by someone who shares the same teacher.

24 A traditional performance art of comedic talking. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crosstalk_(comedy)

25 Nanshih, literally the south market, was a commercial and entertainment area at the time of this chapter. It was mainly frequented by the lower class. Prior to the 20th century it was considered a lawless area, sandwiched between the Chinese sovereignty, the Japanese concession and the French concession. For more information (Chinese only): https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%8D%97%E5%B8%82_(%E5%A4%A9%E6%

26 Here, the clerk uses a formal greeting, done with a bow and hands held in front of chest. One hand is wrapped around the other closed fist.

27 In the North, jasmine tea is used to show that a guest is welcome.

28 地理圖, a crosstalk play written by Lao She, literally meaning "geographic image."

29 Hutong are residential alleyways that are symbolic of Northern China. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hutong

30 居敬行簡, a 4-character idiom taken from the sixth book of Analects of Confucius, meaning roughly "hold oneself with respect (conscientiously), execute with simplicity (efficiency)."

31 恭敬, a common 2-character word that means "to revere" or "to respect."

32 涼水, cool water, usually room temperature.

33 出生, to be born.

34 生不逢時, a way of saying that the person was born with bad luck and misfortune.

IV

This time around, Shen Liangsheng did not keep Ch'in Ching waiting for long – he didn't want to either – driving to Sheng Kung again a few days later for a casual dinner.

There were four cold dishes on the table when they arrived at the cozy, second-floor private room at Yühuat'ai.[35] The dishes looked simple, too, not like a feast, truly a casual meal.

"What a good man you are, Master Shen, watching out for my wallet," Ch'in Ching commented after taking his seat.

"You treated me to crosstalk last time. Let me treat you this time."

"I refuse to believe all it takes is a few jokes and some tea."

"Well, if you really feel the need to make up for it," Shen Liangsheng said as he poured a glass of yangho tach'ü[36] for him, "drink up."

"Very well. It was I who broke the promise last time. I should be drinking three glasses,[37] but now it's only one. I'm actually getting the long end of the stick." Without reluctance, Ch'in Ching finished the spirit.

"You're not getting off that easily." Shen Liangsheng filled it up again, adding, "It's still three glasses."

"Come on, three glasses, one glass, what's the big deal?" Ch'in Ching broke out laughing. The glass was not too big, and two more wouldn't make a difference, so he drank it all as told.

Yühuat'ai offered authentic Huaiyang[38] cuisine. Yangho tach'ü also originated from Chiangsu and had a deceiving, velvety finish. Ch'in Ching drank three glasses on an empty stomach and only felt the strength of the liquor after it settled in. His body began to heat up starting from his stomach. His head was still clear but his face had gone red.

"Have some food." Shen Liangsheng picked some things into Ch'in Ching's

bowl, thinking that alcohol was bad on an empty stomach even though his ultimate goal was getting the man drunk.

The two ate as they chatted, and Shen Liangsheng got a few more glasses into Ch'in Ching. By the time they finished three hot dishes, the schoolmaster was tipsy. When Shen Liangsheng filled his glass again, he quickly made an excuse. "I can't. I still have lessons tomorrow and papers to mark tonight."

"It's actually my birthday today." Shen Liangsheng did not falter the slightest. The clear liquid soon reached the rim of the glass. "*Accompany me at the cost of thy life*[39] just this once, Mister Ch'in."

"That's not how you use the proverb," Ch'in Ching laughed. "Plus, is it really your birthday? You're lying, aren't you?"

"You're the teacher. How dare I lie to you? It's you doing the lying."

"Just a second. You shouldn't accuse without proof, Master Shen. When have I ever lied to you?"

Frankly, Shen Liangsheng had not given too much thought to his statement but started to seriously consider after hearing Ch'in Ching's reply. His conclusion was: "You haven't yet, and I'd like to keep it that way. You're not allowed to lie to me in future."

"How old are you, mister? You're acting like a bratty child."

"I'll be twenty-six after today."

"Two years older than me, huh…. Wait, is it actually your birthday?" Shen Liangsheng's wholehearted answer made Ch'in Ching question with surprise.

"According to the Gregorian, it is." Shen Liangsheng kept a straight face while continuing the tall tale. "My family only celebrates the lunar birthday, so I only have Teacher Ch'in to keep me company on the Gregorian one."

"Yeah, sure," Ch'in Ching chuckled as he shook his head, but he still raised his glass. "Happy birthday."

The two clinked glasses. Afterwards, Ch'in Ching did not reject any alcohol that was poured into his glass. Shen Liangsheng was the birthday man after all, so he decided to "accompany him at the cost of his life" just this once.

Shen Liangsheng had built up a tolerance through business and social entertaining and was far from his limit. Meanwhile, Ch'in Ching was fairly drunk. Some drunks cry, but Ch'in Ching only smiled. A cute dimple found itself on his cheek.

His head was heavy making his vision blurry, too. He took his glasses off to wipe them but did not replace them, instead getting lost gazing at Shen Liangsheng's hand.

Shen Liangsheng had just put some prawns into his bowl when he noticed Ch'in Ching staring downward with squinted eyes. The red mole by his eye and the light blush on his cheeks aroused something deep within.

"What are you looking at?"

"Shen Liangsheng," Ch'in Ching looked up. "Has anyone ever told you, you have beautiful fingers?"

"No," Shen Liangsheng raised a brow. "But I have been told they are very talented."

"Talented?" Ch'in Ching was confused.

"Women tell me that in bed." Shen Liangsheng was being very straightforward now. "Do you get it now?"

"I honestly don't know how you say that straight-faced."

Ch'in Ching's face grew a darker shade of red. He put his spectacles back on awkwardly and dug into his food again. Somehow, he could feel Shen Liangsheng's heated eyes on himself but then thought it was merely because he was hot from the alcohol.

It was past eight o'clock when they finished eating. Ch'in Ching walked out of the restaurant after Shen Liangsheng. The cold wind cleared his mind a bit, but he stumbled before he could get anywhere.

Wind was the worst after drinking. The brief moment of clarity was not enough for him to walk properly. Shen Liangsheng dragged him into the car and said as he fired up the engine, "I can't let you go home like this. I live closer.

We'll get you sober there before I see you home."

"It's all your fault." Earlier, Ch'in Ching had been chiding Shen Liangsheng for being petulant. Now that he was drunk, he was starting to sound like a child himself. "I told you no more, but you just wouldn't stop. I hate you. I still have marking to do tonight."

"Yes, it's all my fault. Happy?" Shen Liangsheng didn't mind humouring his fractious quarry. "I'll even do the marking for you, all right?"

"You? The girls I teach would do a better job."

There was not another quip from Ch'in Ching after that. He appeared to have drifted to sleep in the passenger seat.

Shen Liangsheng did not live with his father. He maintained his own residence on Cambridge Road,[40] not far from Yühuat'ai.

Cambridge Road belonged to the English concession, but the manor's architecture was French and took up well over a quarter acre when the yard was included. Beside the few servants, Shen Liangsheng was the only one on the semi-deserted premises most of the time.

Shen Liangsheng stopped the car before the intricate metal gate, waited for the gatekeeper to open it, and then proceeded to park it by the limestone steps leading to the main building. Having napped in the car, Ch'in Ching was a bit more sober and could get out the vehicle without assistance. He took a look towards the house.

"What should I call Mr. Shen Sr. if I bump into him?"

"No need. My dad doesn't live here," Shen Liangsheng replied as he led his guest up the steps, past the antechamber and main lounge, and straight to the study. He made the man lie down on the couch. "Get some rest. I'll grade your papers for you. Not a single mistake. Guaranteed."

Ch'in Ching shot him a strange look. "You were serious?"

"Wouldn't want you getting angry at me again."

"You say I retort too much. I say you aren't so innocent yourself." Ch'in

Ching laughed as he took the bundle of papers from Shen Liangsheng and pulled out the answer sheet tucked inside. “Here you go. It’s all yours. Now, ten marks off for every mistake.”

“Is that for me or the students?”

“Both.”

A servant brought in tea and shut the door very quietly on the way out. Ch’in Ching lay on the couch facing the back of it. His head was still not on straight, but he wasn’t sleepy. He could only hear the light shuffling of paper behind him. He flipped over and looked over at the desk.

Sure enough, Shen Liangsheng was diligently marking the papers. The warm lamplight outlined his figure, still and flawless like a gypsum sculpture in an artist’s workshop.

The papers of two classes combined did not take Shen Liangsheng too long. After he tidied up and glanced over, he saw Ch’in Ching lying on the couch without his glasses, squinting at him. He approached, bent down and began massaging the man’s temples.

“How’s your head feeling?” He whispered as his shadow loomed over.

“Fine,” Ch’in Ching managed a murmur with his eyes shut.

Despite Shen Liangsheng’s hands never stepping out of line, the silence in the room and the hushed exchange between the two added a sensual undertone.

Ch’in Ching felt his heart rate quicken for some reason. He couldn’t help but clear his throat and evade his masseur’s hands. Putting on his glasses, he paced over to the bookshelf and began browsing with perceived interest.

Shen Liangsheng was a true believer when it came to realism. The principle applied with books as well. The shelves were dominated by books on economics and merchandising written in a foreign script, and not a single recreational novel could be found. Ch’in Ching was confident in English but had neither interest in nor familiarity with these subjects. He had difficulty

finding a common topic.

"What's this?" After a long search, he finally spotted a book that he, too, had read and slid it out. "I didn't think you would read this."

Shen Liangsheng came close to see him holding the collection of sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

"I haven't really," he said flatly as he stuck the book back in its place and closed the bookshelf.

Although the impassive behaviour was typical of Shen Liangsheng, Ch'in Ching could sense some displeasure coming from him, a reluctance to pursue this topic. However, it was Shen Liangsheng's own private matter whatever the reason. Ch'in Ching wouldn't seek any explanation but nonetheless, couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Do you know how to play billiards?"

"What?" Ch'in Ching was caught off guard by the sudden change of topic and took a moment before telling the truth. "No, I've never played."

"I'll teach you."

Billiards originated in England and had always been quite popular in its homeland. When he was in school, Shen Liangsheng was not fond of fun and games but was a socialite nonetheless, getting invited to anything and everything by his schoolmates. He had met the woman with whom he had the longest relationship at the pool table. She was a married woman, skilled at the game, and a generous spirit particularly with money. Needless to point out that Shen Liangsheng benefitted from the relationship. He didn't see any wrongdoing or shame in it – take and use whatever is available was his motto.

After graduation, he was determined to return to the homeland. The woman was persistent and sent letter after letter none of which Shen Liangsheng returned. He did, however, continue to play billiards, even setting aside a room for it right next to the study.

Ch'in Ching was wearing a tunic suit today that restricted his movements. The

two took off their jackets once in the room and stood beside the table. Shen Liangsheng chalked his cue and took the break shot. His perfect form served as a model for Ch'in Ching.

When it came time for Ch'in Ching to copy, his stick simply refused to listen. The cue ball only managed to skim the target ball before rolling to a sluggish stop.

"Lower your stance."

Ch'in Ching was about to get up when Shen Liangsheng placed a hand on his waist and reached around with his other to hold Ch'in Ching's bridge hand.

"Make it flat."

"What?" Perhaps because the other man was too close, Ch'in Ching felt uncomfortable and did not react in time.

"Flatten your hand."

Shen Liangsheng pushed down, making his hand spread out under his own –

"And open your fingers."

And then interlocked their digits.

"Stick close to me."

Shen Liangsheng led Ch'in Ching by the thumb, bringing both palms to a slight arch until they were in the correct position. Their hands separated for a moment before flanking each other once more. Ch'in Ching felt the stick against the back of his hand, dividing the two left hands. Smooth and cold, it contrasted with the heat from their palms.

"Um, Master Shen, I can't move the stick with you holding my hand like this, you know."

The discomfort grew by the minute, so he tried to poke fun at the other man.

"Let's get the position down first," Shen Liangsheng replied but did not remove his left hand. Instead, he wrapped his right around and took hold of Ch'in Ching's right hand. In this way, he had Ch'in Ching encircled in his arms.

"First with the marking and now teaching me billiards," Ch'in Ching tried to

brush it off again. “Say, you must be fond of being a teacher.”

He was uncomfortable all right, but he could not complain.

“And students should listen to their teacher.” Shen Liangsheng appeared to be going along with Ch’in Ching, but there was no hint of humour in his voice. “Relax your arms.”

Ch’in Ching wanted very much to relax, but the way the man stroked upward along his arm and rubbed him over the dress shirt made the feat nearly impossible.

“Spread your legs more.”

Shen Liangsheng had a strong hold around his waist but stepped to the side, sliding his right leg in between Ch’in Ching’s, making them even with his shoulders.

“Head lower, and look straight ahead.”

As he instructed, he lowered himself as if to stare at the tabletop with Ch’in Ching. He was practically lying on top of the thinner man, and his breath hit his ears as he spoke.

“Maybe it’s the alcohol, but I’m seeing double. How about we call it a day and try again next time?” The wish to play billiards was long gone after being pinned down like this, so Ch’in Ching found an excuse to escape.

“And when might that be?”

Shen Liangsheng purposely moved closer to his ear when he asked. Every word entered Ch’in Ching’s ear accompanied by a burning heat that seemed to sneak from his ear down to his abdomen.

“I…” Ch’in Ching had barely started when he felt the hand clasped on his waist transitioning into a caressing movement. The utterance stopped short as his head seemed to spin, and he lost all control.

“Yes?” Shen Liangsheng asked in a whisper, leaning in and pressing Ch’in Ching harder against the table.

If Ch’in Ching had been a bit embarrassed and a bit confused, now he was completely flustered. Shen Liangsheng’s leg was stuck between his and the

man's crotch was right against his hip – he could feel *it*.

Ch'in Ching wanted to feign ignorance, but the man's right hand advanced from his waist to his stomach. It began to rub his abdomen provocatively.

"I'm fine. It's your…" He paused, unable to complete the sentence, and chose a more subtle wording. "You should get some air if you're not feeling well."

"But I feel great." Shen Liangsheng did not stop while he continued talking in circles.

"All right, fine. I don't feel well." Ch'in Ching realized subtlety was not the key here. "Your um… You should get off before anything gets out of hand."

"Why? Is it pressing against you?" Shen Liangsheng asked even more straightforwardly. "Sorry."

Ch'in Ching didn't think an apology was the point. He struggled a little and wanted to speak when Shen Liangsheng muttered.

"Don't move."

He held his tongue.

"Are you angry?" Shen Liangsheng changed to sweet-talk after Ch'in Ching's silence. "Don't be upset. Just let me hold you."

"I…" Ch'in Ching never wanted to fall out over this. Also, he couldn't help feeling red in the cheeks from hearing the man's soft, alluring words. He was too scared to investigate and blamed it on the alcohol in the end. He replied quietly, "I really don't feel well like this."

"Where?" The next thing he knew, Shen Liangsheng reached down to his member and played with it over his pants. "Does it feel better like this?"

"Don't–" Ch'in Ching jumped at his private parts being grabbed. He tried to break away, but Shen Liangsheng held him down with dead weight.

"You are really skinny." Shen Liangsheng rubbed his manhood with his right hand and moved his left from the cue stick to his chest. He unfastened one button and reached in, sliding over and toying with his nipples. "I should take you out to dinner more and get more meat on this body."

Ch'in Ching could no longer comprehend anything he heard. All he could feel was the soothing itch on his chest and the welling pleasure from below. His hard member pushed up at the pant crotch, but his knees were going soft.

"You're like a girl, getting wet after getting your breasts fondled."

Ch'in Ching wasn't sure whether to take the man's words as flirting or shaming. The man easily undid his belt and reached in past the undergarment to stroke his member. Then, he switched to using three fingers to grasp the tip, kneading it between his digits. Although it was Shen Liangsheng's first time playing with another man's parts, he didn't feel disgust or anything near it. Rather, he thought it was adorable that the schoolteacher's manhood dampened his fingers with unquenchable desire.

Ch'in Ching led an abstinent lifestyle and had seldom done anything to himself, let alone been handled so skillfully by another person. The stimulation was so much that his brains were turning into mush. He wanted to tell the man to stop but was afraid that he might make shameful noises if he opened his lips.

"Do you feel good? Want more?" Shen Liangsheng released his grip as he asked. He flipped Ch'in Ching around and pinned him down against the green baize, the two now face to face. He ground their groins together. "Want to feel even better? Hmm?"

The stick had long fallen to the side. Without much thought, Ch'in Ching pushed at Shen Liangsheng's shoulders and took a good look at him. The man's words of passion were wild and naughty, but his face was cool and his eyes so calm that they were close to being arrogant. If Ch'in Ching had to describe them, they were a pair of rational eyes whose owner knew what he was doing and had the superiority of controlling the situation and, ultimately, the outcome.

"This was your plan all along, wasn't it, Shen Liangsheng?" Ch'in Ching said flatly, not sounding very angered. "You know, rich men like you usually go a-looking in the troupes when they need a little excitement. But not you, sir. You found yourself a crosstalker. Thinking outside the box, aren't we."

Shen Liangsheng got busted and should have gone along with more sweet-talking and lies to get what he wanted. His silence now wasn't because he knew shame. It was only that, for some reason, looking into Ch'in Ching's eyes and

hearing the man's implied meaning made him hesitant to do so.

"You should've at least asked if I wanted to be a part of your game." Ch'in Ching scoffed. "What were you going to do if I didn't go along?"

What was he going to do? Use brute force? Shen Liangsheng would be lying if he said he never considered that route. However, he changed his mind at the last minute, wanting to leave another way out. He didn't want to actually break it off with Ch'in Ching.

As he hesitated, his hold on Ch'in Ching lightened, and the latter easily pushed him away. He straightened himself and fixed his dress.

"It's getting late," Ch'in Ching began to bid farewell. "I…"

"I'll drive you home." Shen Liangsheng finished the sentence in hopes to lessen the awkwardness.

"No, thank you," Ch'in Ching replied politely but harshly. Shen Liangsheng didn't want to get on bad terms with the man, but the man gave him little room for alternatives. He went quietly with him back to the study to collect his belongings not attempting to offer him a ride again. He saw the man to the antechamber before wishing him a good night out of obligation, and the two went their separate ways with different thoughts weighing down on their minds.

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35 https://www.google.co.jp/maps/place/%E8%80%81%E5%AD%97%E5%8F%B7%

36 A famous spirit originating in the jiangnan region. For more information: http://www.yangheglobal.com/n/product/category/YANGHE_DAQU1/

37 It is customary to drink three glasses as punishment.

38 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huaiyang_cuisine

39 The story goes that Zuo and Yang became close friends and they decided to see King Zhuang of Chu (? - 591 BCE). The winter was harsh and the two did not have enough to survive. Zuo gave all of his clothing and food to Yang so

that his friend may reach their destination, and went into the woods to commit suicide. This is where the proverb came from. It literally means “giving (my) life (to) accompany (a) gentleman,” and used to express the behaviour of risking one’s all to accompany or follow someone.

40 Current, Chong Qing Dao

V

"Sir?"

Hearing no response, the girl tried again.

"Mister Ch'in!"

"What?"

Three days had passed since that night, and the two did not make any contact. Ch'in Ching went on with his daily routine – eating, sleeping and teaching – but from time to time, that man would pervade his thoughts. For instance, the chime had just struck, and his mind wandered again as he tidied his materials. He thought back to a day not long ago, the same day of the week, the same class. He had reached the last section of *Former Red Cliff Rhapsody* when he saw the man outside his window…

"Sir… There's something I wanted to ask you." Ch'in Ching turned his attention back to the girl slouching against the podium with a paper in hand. She continued hesitantly, "You didn't write this comment, did you?"

"Which?" Ch'in Ching had gone home and straight to sleep that night with a disconcerted mind. The lesson was first thing the following day, and he handed back the papers that Shen Liangsheng had graded without checking them over. It was only a quiz that would not be counted towards the final grade, so he thought it wouldn't matter even if it was wrong.

"This one here."

The girl raised the paper up to eye level. Ch'in Ching was quite amused when he read its contents. It turned out that the girl had not paid attention in class and did not know the answer to three-quarters of the questions. Feeling embarrassed of herself, she tried to appeal with a comment at the end of the examination:

"I'm sorry, Mister Ch'in. I promise I will listen to your lectures and review properly. This will never happen again."

Shen Liangsheng's feedback was interesting as well, responding to her

message in English:

"*Time and tide wait for no man.*"[41]

The words were short and to the point, and the cursive letters flowed neatly, like their author.

"Why? Do you think this is a false accusation?" Ch'in Ching could not say that he was not the one who marked it, so he chose not to answer the original question.

"I just knew it wasn't you." The girl had no fear of her teacher, even dropping honorifics. She giggled, "If it were you, you'd probably say something like, 'The sun and moon pass by; time doth not wait for us.' You wouldn't write English."

"Congratulations on your brilliant observation. Since you understand that, you should put more effort into your study and stop fooling around."

"You're changing the subject, sir." The girl had not given up on her original quest for gossip. "Who wrote this? Was it a friend?"

As expected, she received nothing but silence from her teacher.

"Was it the one who came to the school looking for you last time? The really handsome one?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Then it's true!" The girl slapped the table with glee. "I had better keep this safe so my children can have it as heirloom!"

A kid was going to be a kid. Ch'in Ching shook his head with a smirk while she skipped back to her desk and packed her things. He stepped out of the classroom with his documents under his arm and into the dazzling autumn sun. This time, however, there was no one waiting for him. He didn't want to admit, nor think about, the sudden disappointment that he felt. Instead, he fled to the staff room.

Some chit-chat with his colleagues seemed to help him get a hold of himself. When he had just strolled out the school gate, however, he stopped dead in his

tracks and backed away. He recognized the car parked across the road. He knew the man behind the wheel, too.

He had just been absentmindedly thinking of this man, but when said man actually showed up, he could only think of escaping. He turned tail and fled through the back entrance. As he walked he asked himself, *if he has those intentions and you want none of it, then you should tell him exactly that and never see each other again. Why the heck are you hiding?*

Ch'in Ching thought, because he had only appeared for a second and the students had just been dismissed, that Shen Liangsheng couldn't have possibly spotted him in the crowd from his car. The truth, however, was the exact opposite.

Shen Liangsheng had been smoking in the car. His eyes were half-lidded from the fumes, hiding his emotions. He chose not to go in looking for Ch'in Ching to give the teacher some room, and to observe his reaction to seeing him.

That Ch'in Ching would take the back door did not catch Shen Liangsheng off guard, but he did not chase after him either. The man was running away from him – when he reached this conclusion, the turpitude inside him began to stir.

Shen Liangsheng always had the upper hand in the arena of love. Even when he had neither money nor power, women gave him their complete loyalty, and he was the one who could end the relationship when he wanted to do so.

Although he had no serious feelings towards Ch'in Ching and his actions were far from decent, Shen Liangsheng didn't feel guilty at all. Rather, he believed that Ch'in Ching was thinking too highly of himself, rejecting his pursuit.

You can run, but you can't hide.

Shen Liangsheng patiently finished the cigarette and squashed the butt in the ashtray.

I promise you, Ch'in Ching, that you will one day come begging for me.

That day, Ch'in Ching ate a quick dinner after returning home. He sat at the

desk, trying to prepare for the next day's lessons, but his mind would not let him. First, he wondered how long the man continued to wait at the school. Then, he thought maybe he should have been straightforward with him, so he wouldn't waste any more time.

His hands kept busy, too, while his mind was whirling. He flipped through his book and stopped once again at *Former Red Cliff Rhapsody*. He stared at the classic that he could recite off the top of his head and thought of the *time does not wait* that Shen Liangsheng had written. He let out a sigh.

It was such an insignificant thing, but Ch'in Ching remembered it so vividly. He had been analyzing the line, "but only the clear breeze over the river and the bright moon between the mountains, when the ears catch one it creates sound, and when the eye meets the other it makes colour"[42] when he saw the man. He turned his head, and there the man was, standing outside the window, so charming that he outshone even the sun.

Now that he thought about it, he found that he had been hiding from this man, not only today, but ever since the beginning.

Perhaps humans had an instinct to approach good and avoid harm. He had a feeling that this person should not be tempted, and now this prophecy seemed to have been fulfilled – or perhaps it had not been.

What had been fulfilled were the man's particular intentions – but there was nothing the man could do to Ch'in Ching if he simply told him his thoughts. This wasn't a peaceful era, but the law was still the law.

What had not been fulfilled were his own intentions of which he himself was wary – there was no way that the man could have gotten as far as he did that night if Ch'in Ching had been strongly against it. He could put the blame on alcohol, but he would be outright lying to himself if he did.

In order to save electricity, Ch'in Ching had not turned on the main lights. There was only a desktop lamp projecting dim yellow light over a square writing desk. Sprawled across the desk were principles of right and wrong that only took the form of Mara[42.5] in the eyes of Ch'in Ching.

All he could think of were the words, “when the eye meets the other it makes colour.”[43] Ch’in Ching let his eyes close and his torso fall on the table. His cheek against the desk, he began to reminisce about the man’s face.

Staring into his eyes was like looking into the deep end of the ocean, cold and calm. Under his Grecian nose were thin, loveless lips from which sultry words as searing as his breath and fingers were uttered.

Ch’in Ching’s breathing hastened, and he knew he was aroused. After failing to ignore it, he reached down and copied the way the man had stroked him. The more he did, the harder he became and the tighter his pants felt. He felt constrained like his feelings inside.

He did know that a man could love another man, but if he were one of them, then the twenty-four years that he had spent thinking otherwise would have been a lie. He had had attractive friends and colleagues but had never felt anything or thought of them in that way.

Not even women made his heart beat, let alone men. When he was in school, a good friend often dragged Ch’in Ching along to drink away his sorrows from being rejected by his crush. His friend would envy how Ch’in Ching could put his mind to study without any stray thoughts or desires.

Ch’in Ching had no clue either as to why he simply had no feelings for anyone all these years. It was as though he had loved so much in his last life that he either used up his love for this life or came to fear love and refuse falling in love ever again.

Ch’in Ching knew reincarnation as an explanation was a big stretch, but ever since he met Shen Liangsheng, his heart had been falling for the man, slowly and steadily as if preordained, despite their few encounters. Honestly, he had enjoyed the hinted conversations and suggestive dates until that night when they had stepped over the line. He had not been against it and even for a moment had the urge to turn around and embrace the man, abandoning all of society’s taboos.

Meanwhile, his erection grew too hard to bear. He unbuttoned the fly of his dress pants and reached in to alleviate the fire in his groin. As he copied the

man's actions that night, he could almost hear his voice.

"Do you feel good? Want to feel even better?"

A shudder ran through him, and his member jumped as well, releasing a sticky mess into his underwear.

Ch'in Ching did not care to tidy up, however, and continued to lie on the desk, panting with his eyes shut and a bitter smile about his lips.

The prophecy that had yet to be tested was whether he would fall in love if they continued this game. Unfortunately, it was blatantly clear how little the other player thought of this relationship.

Secretary Chou was called into his boss's office early one morning, and when he came out, he was scratching his head out of frustration. He was amazed at how Mr. Ch'in, an average schoolmaster, managed to engage so much interest from this young master inside the room behind him. One investigation wasn't enough. Now, he was tasked with the investigation of this man's interests and hobbies, and it had to be done discreetly. Chou was stumped as to where to even begin.

After a tedious morning, Chou delivered some paperwork and added a piece of advice, "I thought about it, sir, and Mr. Ch'in is an academic. Why don't I go find some painting or calligraphy or something? Surely it would fit his taste."

"No, it's fine," Shen Liangsheng replied without looking up from the page.

Chou wasn't sure what he wanted and backed out of the office carefully. He was grateful for his missus who was absolutely delighted if she received a ring or necklace for her birthday.

Ch'in Ching sorted out his feelings last night but still had not figured out what to do by the end of the school day. Not seeing the black Chevrolet when he left through the front entrance, he let out a sigh of relief and then scolded himself for being such a wuss.

"Ch'in Ching."

Before he even finished reflecting, he heard a familiar voice call his name. He turned around stiffly and returned the greeting, “Master Shen.”

“Wow. You sure look different today.” Ch’in Ching was rather surprised to see Shen Liangsheng wearing a white shirt and beige trousers with a brown houndstooth jacket, instead of the impeccable tuxedo that Ch’in Ching had associated him with. The man had not styled his hair into a perfect shape with wax either, instead letting his bangs hang freely. He lost several years off his age and looked like a student.

“Why? You don’t like it?”

“No, I didn’t mean…” Ch’in Ching was uneasy. It bothered him that any little thing the man said would make him overreact.

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

Ch’in Ching hesitated to say yes because he really did not. He ended up not replying at all.

“Then let’s take a walk.” Shen Liangsheng decided for the two of them and started pushing a bicycle, further shocking Ch’in Ching. He had seen the vehicle behind Shen Liangsheng, but it didn’t occur to him that it belonged to the man – it was so incompatible with his rich playboy image.

“I couldn’t risk scaring you off with the car again,” Shen Liangsheng explained, sensing the puzzlement coming from Ch’in Ching.

Ch’in Ching was scared of the person behind the wheel, not the car, but it was his fault for not voicing his exact thoughts. He could do nothing but follow and hope for an opportunity to clear things up.

They strolled quietly along the street with the bicycle between them. They were in the English concession, and the architecture was English as well.

“I’ve been back for four years,” Shen Liangsheng broke the silence. “But sometimes I wake up at night and still feel like I’m out there, lost in the world.”

“What?” Ch’in Ching knew that Shen Liangsheng had studied abroad, but they had never discussed this.

“I hadn’t turned fourteen when I went to England, and I was twenty-two when

I came back…” Shen Liangsheng shook his head and did not continue, which was a rare occurrence for him.

“No wonder your Chinese needs work.” Ch’in Ching changed the focus of the conversation seeing the gloomy expression on Shen Liangsheng’s face.

“But you’ll give me lessons in the future, won’t you?” Shen Liangsheng shot a look at Ch’in Ching too quickly for the other man to read.

Ch’in Ching sighed as he made up his mind to not see this man again and make sure there would never be an “in the future.” After a few seconds, he finally spoke.

“Shen Liangsheng, I think we—”

“Ch’in Ching,” Shen Liangsheng stopped him. “Just hear me out first…it was my fault the other night, but could you…could you just wait a little longer?”

Ch’in Ching watched as Shen Liangsheng spoke without looking at him. The man’s eyes were cast down as he pushed the bicycle along. The body language, combined with his words, seemed like pleading.

“I…” Ch’in Ching started.

“You were right. I did you wrong.” Shen Liangsheng finally looked up with a steady gaze and said softly, “But I still want to see you. So don’t run away from me anymore, please?”

Ch’in Ching’s resolution dissolved under his gaze. He knew very well that Shen Liangsheng was putting on this facade for no other reason than to make him give in to his wishes. Sadly, Ch’in Ching couldn’t help but fall for his sweet words despite knowing this. He couldn’t gather the strength to say “I don’t think we should see each other again.” Again, he could do nothing but tell himself what a wuss he was.

They made their way past Tzuchulin[44] and turned on to Victoria Road. The street, lined with banks and foreign companies, was many times wider and busier with many sedans racing through. Even the patrons of the rickshaws were dressed respectably. On the other hand, the casually dressed Shen Liangsheng

pushing a bicycle with Ch'in Ching beside him stood out in the picture.

That the two of them were from different worlds had been one of his concerns. It might have been fine just being friends, but once sex was involved, Ch'in Ching became wary.

However, Shen Liangsheng had it all figured out. Not only did he dress up as a contemporary student, he even got his hands on a bicycle. He was evidently putting on a show, but even so, Ch'in Ching thought that at least he went to the trouble to do so.

"I worked as an intern at this bank until I graduated," Shen Liangsheng said when they passed by the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. "Boy, did they give me a hard time."

"Well, it's an experience." Ch'in Ching followed Shen Liangsheng's lighter tone. "All those Whites want is money. It sure feels good now that they're begging for your business, huh?"

"There you go again, you smart aleck." Shen Liangsheng put on a face that matched his words, but he secretly agreed. Of course it felt good to have someone begging for you, especially good if it was a part of your plan all along.

At the end of Victoria Road was Wankuo Bridge.[45] The two stood by the Hai Ho with the moist evening wind hitting their faces. A small steam boat chugged its way under the bridge, blowing its whistle as it sailed into the distance.

"It's getting late."

"Yeah, it is."

"Dinner?"

"Maybe another day."

"Sure."

Ch'in Ching did not deny all future possibility, and Shen Liangsheng did not push for anything more. He turned the bicycle around.

"I'll see you home."

“Are you serious? It must take forever to walk to Nanshih from here.”

“Why don’t you hop on, and I’ll take you?” Shen Liangsheng patted the backseat while watching him from the corner of his eye. It was the same ambiguous smile from that night, carefully controlled to be suggestive but not over the line.

Cautious about continuing down that path again, Ch’in Ching gave a reasonable alternative. “I’ll take the tram.”

“Then I’ll see you to the stop.”

Ch’in Ching wanted to refuse that offer but didn’t have the heart to say it to the man quietly pushing a bicycle with his head lowered. In the end, the two walked to the tram stop together. Shen Liangsheng waited with him, and only when the tram pulled up to the curb did he whisper au revoir.[46]

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41 This is written in English.

42 Translation taken and slightly altered from http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song/readings/su_shi.htm

42.5 A demon that tried to seduce Gautama Buddha with visions of beautiful women. http://buddhism.about.com/od/iconsofbuddhism/a/mara.htm

43 The character 色, literally colour, is associated with sex and erotic desires. For more explanation on this and extra information on colour symbolism in Chinese culture:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_in_Chinese_culture

http://www.fluentu.com/chinese/blog/2012/02/10/chinese-slang-101-color-wolf/

http://marketingtochina.com/symbolism-colors-china/

44 Tzuchulin Village lies on the west bank of the southeastern section of the Hai River which flows through Tientsin. It was where the English and French

concessions were first established.

45 Opened in 1927, the Wankuo Bridge spans the Hai River at the north end of Victoria Road.

46 “Until we meet again.”

VI

Au revoir, he said, which meant they were bound to meet again.

Shen Liangsheng really went the extra mile, toning down his usual exalted exterior. He dressed casually and took the bicycle with him whenever he sought Ch'in Ching out. The places they went to were average and did not reek of greed and wealth.

Ch'in Ching usually took the tram to work, but he hauled his dusty bicycle out of hibernation. The two of them wove through the ancient, narrow alleys and slipped past the London planes growing along the concession roads.

Late September and early October were the best times in the North if the gale did not hit. The temperature dropped, but it was a fresh, crispy coldness. The sky above stretched for miles and miles. The dry leaves on the sidewalk crunched softly under the bicycle wheels.

Shen Liangsheng never reserved seats at expensive restaurants again, instead letting Ch'in Ching pick. After trying several places, he decided his favourite was the pao shop not far from the schoolmaster's house.

The shop was owned by a Hui[47] man. Only beef and mutton pao[48] were on the menu, but they were as delicious as koupuli.[49] When the pao were served, the steam would force Ch'in Ching to take off his glasses to clean them. Meanwhile, Shen Liangsheng would take this time to pour vinegar into his dish for him. His eyes were on the dish, but his peripheral vision caught the man's lashes and mole as he looked down, wiping at his glasses with his slim fingers.

They met about five times in the next two weeks or so – not too many and not too few. The tension between them disappeared, and their interaction was like that of regular friends.

"Are you busy this Sunday?"

Ch'in Ching replied hesitantly, "I don't think so." He wasn't afraid of seeing Shen Liangsheng, but it was his Gregorian birthday on Sunday, and he couldn't

tell if the man knew.

"I was thinking we could visit Ningyüan."[50]

If this were the old Ch'in Ching, he would have made a joke along the lines of, "Two grown men going to a park – that sounds like a delightful time." However, now he only chuckled and fell silent. Then, he smiled and agreed.

His reaction confused Shen Liangsheng, who in turn raised a brow. "What?"

"Nothing."

Hence, the two went to Ningyüan on Sunday. Its name came from the proverb "*ning ching chih yüan*,"[51] and traditional architecture and sights filled most of the park with a few modern buildings as exceptions. There was also a modest zoo in the northeast corner housing a troop of monkeys.

The two watched the monkeys for a while and then climbed the Chih-yüan Tower. They analyzed the memorial written by the director of Peining Railroads, [52] Kao Chi-i.[53] They then moved from Kao Chi-i to Chang Hsueh-liang.[54] Their conversation flowed smoothly as they strolled along the long, winding gallery on the lakeside.

"Care for some boating?" Shen Liangsheng invited, looking over at Ch'in Ching when they came upon the boat rental office.

"Sure."

Surprisingly, Ch'in Ching did not object. They rented a wooden boat and headed for the centre of the lake.

It was the season for outings, but the lake consisted of twenty-some acres, and the boats were sparsely spread out.

Ch'in Ching complimented Shen Liangsheng on his rowing. The latter confessed proudly that he had been a substitute for the school's rowing team and that the wooden boat was a walk in the park.

Shen Liangsheng stopped rowing when they reached the centre and left the boat drifting along with the current. The cozy afternoon sun and the moderate breeze made it easy to fall asleep.

“Can you swim?”

“No.”

“Ah, yes. Not many Northerners do,” Shen Liangsheng realized. He added quickly, “Not to worry. I’ll save you if the boat tips.”

“Hope I won’t ever have to take you up on that offer.” Ch’in Ching flashed a smile while resting against the gunwale.

The smile made Shen Liangsheng want to lean in for a kiss, but he knew it wasn’t time yet and held back. He went on to tell stories of his school days. He talked about Cambridge, about the River Cam, about the cherry blossoms in spring and weeping willow in summer.

Ch’in Ching listened while his eyes wandered down to the man’s cuffs.

Shen Liangsheng was wearing a grey woolen coat that he had bought as a student and kept as a memento. The size still fit after five or so years, but it had become worn and was especially pale around the cuffs.

Ch’in Ching stared at the fainted ring of cloth. Shen Liangsheng must have dug out the antique from the back of his wardrobe. It was impressive that he had kept it all these years. Perhaps that meant he was a sentimental person?

With that, Ch’in Ching felt his heart flutter again. It concerned him that he might not be able to keep up his last line of defence if he continued this ambiguous relationship with the man. However, it also occurred to him that perhaps the man wasn’t as heartless as he had assumed. He had held on to a piece of clothing for so many years. So perhaps…

That was when Ch’in Ching caught himself before he wandered too far. He chuckled at himself and averted his eyes to the water. Why bother thinking so much when the man might just get tired soon and stop all this flashy courtship?

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing.”

Ch’in Ching glanced at Shen Liangsheng and spotted a rare look of puzzlement. He couldn’t help but play a prank.

“There’s a fish. A gigantic one,” he said, pointing to the water.

“Where?”

Shen Liangsheng leaned out to look. They were sitting across from each other on one side of the boat, and when he did so, the boat tilted. Ch’in Ching reached for the gunwale for balance but instead grabbed Shen Liangsheng’s hand by accident.

He faltered at the cool touch of the skin, its coolness possibly due to the breeze. He tried to draw his hand back, but Shen Liangsheng had already taken hold of it. After pulling and failing to break free, he gave up so as not to start a childish tug-of-war. He looked up at the man holding his hand.

However, after a few moments, Shen Liangsheng let go first, afraid to upset Ch’in Ching.

“Hey, relax. No one’s looking,” he whispered.

Ch’in Ching could feel the boat bobbing gently, swaying left and right like his fluctuating emotions.

“Ch’in Ching…” Shen Liangsheng called his name softly but switched to Cantonese, “*You know I’m trying to win you over, right?*”

Crosstalk was an art of speech and wordplay, and the Cantonese that Ch’in Ching knew was learned for the sole purpose of performing. On the other hand, the Cantonese that Shen Liangsheng spoke was quick and muddled, so he could not catch the entirety of his utterance. Nevertheless, he could guess what the man must have meant.

His tone had been a bit playful and gave off a feeling of intimacy, just enough to lure Ch’in Ching in, just enough to give him a taste of sweetness.

Ch’in Ching was too afraid to dwell on that feeling and continued to feign interest in the water. Shen Liangsheng did not speak either. The boat eventually came to a lazy stop in the middle of the lake.

Amidst the stillness, Ch’in Ching suddenly recalled one essay, *Autumn in the Ancient Capital*, in which the author[55] described the autumn in Chiangnan[56] as something one could neither see enough of nor experience

completely. For some reason, he felt as though he were living through autumn in Chiangnan right now despite being in the North. It was such a vivid sensation that Ch'in Ching thought he must have lived there before.

Perhaps it was because the author's portrayal was an exact fit for his current situation – "the feeling of a bud in half-bloom, of wine half-drunk."

With the gentle waves below and the cloudless sky above, the two of them in this moment for but a fraction of eternity, it was as though they were lovers like any other, embarking on the journey that was love.

In that precise moment, Ch'in Ching came upon his long-awaited answer. He had fallen in love with this man, and no matter where the path led, he wished to share the journey with him.

He knew the world was unpredictable and humans even more so, but in this moment, he wasn't fazed at all.

Maybe it was the sun shining upon him.

The darkness that was the unforeseeable future was totally bleached by the sunlight. All that was left was a sweet nostalgia like the faded cuffs and loose threads around the collar of an old coat from memory lane.

After they left Ningyüan, Shen Liangsheng proposed watching a movie. Ch'in Ching made a guess with a smile, "You bought the tickets already, didn't you?"

Not showing one bit of embarrassment for being caught, he nodded and even added, "What should I say in this situation, Mister Ch'in? *I came prepared* or *better safe than sorry*?"[57]

"Yeah, save it."

"I learn from the best. What can I say?"

Of course, Shen Liangsheng did not buy the tickets himself. It was, as always, Chou who ran his errands. The poor secretary couldn't figure out why his boss

wanted to go to the tiny T'ienkung instead of the more appropriate P'ingan or Tahua. What a strange boss.

Chou did not understand, but Ch'in Ching knew exactly why. About halfway through the movie, his thoughts started drifting again, this time to when he first met Shen Liangsheng. He had thought at the time that it was merely a one-time chance meeting, but he was proven wrong when they met the second time. It appeared that fate was in the works. With that, a line from *Dream of the Red Chamber* popped into his head: "Retribution is not to be taken lightly; separations and meetings are all foreordained."[58] But why did such an ominous line appear in his mind?

With the bit of illumination from the screen, Ch'in Ching peered at the man beside him – a view that could not have been any more appealing. It was as beautiful as a Western oil painting. This led him to think of what Chia Pao-yu[59] had said, "a maiden as beautiful as a fairy," and consequently burst out giggling.

"What are you laughing at now?" Shen Liangsheng asked, leaning a little towards Ch'in Ching while keeping his eyes on the screen.

"Nothing."

"I find your behaviour recently quite suspicious."

"In my defense, Master Shen, we are watching a comedy film. You're likely the only one in this theatre who isn't laughing."

Hearing this, Shen Liangsheng drew a bit closer, eyes still on the screen and face frigid. However, his utterance was quite the opposite of his proper appearance. "Mister Ch'in, why don't you lend me your hand for a bit? I am certain it'll rub off."

Ch'in Ching wasn't sure how to respond.

It had been more than half a year since they first met. Early spring had become late autumn, but the business at T'ienkung was still brisk. Once he finished speaking, Shen Liangsheng sneaked his hand under and found Ch'in Ching's. Wary of the other patrons around them, Ch'in Ching did not struggle and quite honestly didn't want to either. Shen Liangsheng, on the other hand, actually kept

his word, only holding his hand without any further action.

After a few minutes, Ch'in Ching took a glimpse at his expression and teased, "Well? Where are those pearly-whites?"

The next thing he knew, Shen Liangsheng turned and a ghost of a smile appeared on his face. It was not much, but Ch'in Ching couldn't look away.

Their eyes stayed locked for a bit before he felt Shen Liangsheng opening his palm and writing five words on it.

The faint scratches crept from his hand to his brain, messing with his head, but somehow he was still able to understand the words. He quickly looked away and took his hand back. He watched the screen, but his face was burning. In the end, his ears became red too.

What he wrote in his hand was –

I want to kiss you.

Night had set in by the time the film ended. The two picked up their bicycles and pushed them at a leisurely pace along Twenty-First. Shen Liangsheng suddenly stopped when they passed by an eyeglass shop.

"I'm allowed to get you something for your birthday, right?"

So Shen Liangsheng did know, after all. "It's fine. I only celebrate my lunar birthday," Ch'in Ching replied.

Seeing that Ch'in Ching did not slow down, Shen Liangsheng caught up to him and asked, "What's your prescription?"

"What?"

"Your glasses."

"It's fine."

"I don't have a good excuse to buy you a gift if not for your birthday." Shen Liangsheng sounded casual, but there were hints of hurt and discontent. "Could you make an exception just for today, please?"

Ch'in Ching didn't know what to do with this fellow. He sure was learning

fast, even knowing to act nice and innocent now. He let out a light sigh but proceeded to tell the man his prescription. He also added, "One good turn deserves another. Now could you tell me when your real birthday is?"

"Long ago. I'll notify you ahead of time next year."

Once off Twenty-First, they got on their bicycles. Shen Liangsheng saw Ch'in Ching home as far as the *hut'ong* entrance.

"Here's fine. It's dark and bumpy in there."

"All right."

Ch'in Ching said his goodbyes and turned into the alley with his bicycle. However, before he made it very far, he saw the other man park his vehicle to the side and follow him in.

"What's the matter?" Ch'in Ching asked, surprised.

Shen Liangsheng did not reply. He stopped only when he was very close to Ch'in Ching and gazed at him.

The streetlight managed to illuminate where they stood, and the sound from the nearby streets could be heard.

"Where are you headed, sir?" There was a rickshaw driver hollering for customers, a bicycle passing by going *ding-ding* and a few kids out past their curfew giggling and fooling around.

The light was behind Shen Liangsheng, and Ch'in Ching could not see his face well. He looked into his deep-set eyes and was reminded of the silent confession in the theatre. His heart began beating faster and faster.

"People will see…" He thought Shen Liangsheng was going to kiss him and blurted out the warning without much thought, but he realized right away it sounded as though he were wishing for it to happen.

Shen Liangsheng still did not answer and only continued to hold his gaze. When he finally leaned in, it was not for the kiss on the lips that Ch'in Ching had been expecting but instead a light touch on his forehead. The man then wished him good night and left.

He left Ch’in Ching alone in the half-lit alley, eyes closed and pulse slowing in the chilly autumn wind, with a strange void in his heart.

47An Islamic ethnic minority recognized by the PRC. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hui_people

48A bun-like dish with stuffing found throughout China. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baozi

49A type of baozi, or pao, that originated from Tianjin. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goubuli

50 A traditional Chinese landscape garden in Tianjin originally built by Yuan Shikai as a holiday palace for Empress Dowager Cixi. http://www.tjtour.cn/ResDetail.aspx?res_id=2566, https://www.google.co.jp/maps/place/Ningyuan+Park/@39.16783,117.215936,15z

51 This is the motto of Zhuge Liang and means, roughly, “one must be calm and have no stray thoughts in order to achieve greatness.”

52 A Tianjin-based railroad company that was created by combining two existing railroad companies. This company funded the rebuilding of Ningyuan after the imperial era ended.

53 高紀毅, the first director of the Peining Railroads Company and a close ally of Chang Hsueh-liang. https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%AB%98%E7%BA%AA%E6%AF%85

54 A warlord who essentially ruled most of northern China until he was imprisoned by Chiang Kai-shek in late 1936 and held until his official release in 1975. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhang_Xueliang

55 Yu Dafu 郁達夫, “Autumn in the Ancient Capital” (故都的秋)

56 A geographic area with great historical significance. Located in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, some of China's most important cities are here.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiangnan

57 He used two very similar proverbs, 有備而來 and 有備無患.

58 Translation taken and altered from (pg 13)
http://lib.hku.hk/bonsall/hongloumeng/5.pdf

59 The main protagonist of the story. He is talking about his love interest.

VII

The following week, Shen Liangsheng asked Ch'in Ching out to dinner again. He subtly mentioned during the meal that the spectacles were ready and asked him to come over on Sunday to pick them up.

Shen Liangsheng made it sound casual, but the schoolmaster read between the lines – the glasses were ready, but he hadn't brought them over. Instead, he wanted him to come to his private home. Not even Ch'in Ching could pretend to be oblivious at this point.

"Mhm," Ch'in Ching replied as he swallowed a pao as though unconcerned. Shen Liangsheng, on the other hand, glanced up at him when he heard his consent before returning to his congee and moving on to the next topic.

As agreed upon, Ch'in Ching went to Shen Liangsheng's manor on Sunday. A servant told him that the master had an unplanned visitor and politely asked him to wait.

Ch'in Ching had been sitting in the main lounge drinking tea for less than half an hour when he heard voices drawing near. Shen Liangsheng walked into the room with a middle-aged man, the two exchanging pleasantries the entire way. Seeing Ch'in Ching, the former gave a curt nod while the latter took a longer look at the stranger. He didn't recognize this friend of the young businessman, but he did not request an introduction.

Shen Liangsheng came back only after seeing his other visitor to the car. He patted Ch'in Ching on the back and took him upstairs to the den. Shutting the door behind him, he told his guest to have a seat while he brought over a case from the fireplace ledge.

Instead of doing as he was told, Ch'in Ching followed the man and watched as he opened the case and took out a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. "Did you pick those?"

“Yes. Try them on?” Shen Liangsheng passed them to him and removed the pair sitting on his face. “And I’ll be keeping these.”

“What do you want those for?” Ch’in Ching put the new spectacles on and started to blink from the initial discomfort.

“Pray to them every day. Thank them for bringing you to me.”

Ch’in Ching was at a loss for words. He shook his head and chuckled weakly, but stopped at the sight of Shen Liangsheng staring at him.

“What is it? How do they look?” he asked uneasily.

Shen Liangsheng refused to answer and stared into his eyes. Their eyes stayed locked in silence.

Shen Liangsheng was back in his usual attire today, possibly because of the earlier visitor. Even at home, he was in a crisply pressed suit, his hair meticulously held in place with pomade. Having seen him in more casual clothes, Ch’in Ching had a hard time readjusting to this stiff, patrician version.

It was the last day of October, and winter was creeping in to the North. The fireplace in the den was lit, and a white tiger pelt was spread before it. It was easy to see from the colour and texture alone that the rug was worth its weight in gold. Beauty came with a price – a deadly one.

Shen Liangsheng reached up and slid his finger along the frame, across the leg and finally to Ch’in Ching’s face. He stopped at the rouge mole, gently stroking it.

“The first time I saw you, I thought to myself, what a beautiful mole,” he breathed.

“Is that why you gave me these glasses?” Ch’in Ching’s eyes closed at his touch. Before he realized it, he had taken a step towards the man.

“What say you?” Shen Liangsheng stepped closer as well. They were not far to begin with, and now they were so close they were breathing as one.

“What do you want me to say?” Ch’in Ching’s question sounded like blissful sweet-nothings in Shen Liangsheng’s ears, and the latter replied in the same

manner.

"Say you want this."

The tension rose to a maximum, but the two stood their ground. Shen Liangsheng looked into his eyes from up close, his fingers still brushing the mole. He had made up his mind not to act but instead to wait for the other man to initiate the kiss.

Ch'in Ching held his gaze in silence. Curiously, despite the desirable looks and affectionate eyes, he sensed a hint of aloofness from the man for a split second. He knew for what the man was waiting. It was none other than his kiss, his willingly falling into the web – the web woven, thread by thread, from three words.

Not the words: I want this,

But the words: Shen Liang Sheng.

After much suspense, Ch'in Ching finally leaned in, tilted his head and sealed Shen Liangsheng's lips. He licked along the crack between them, and when they parted he wiggled in and teased the other tongue inside.

Instead of deepening the kiss, Shen Liangsheng moved his hand down from Ch'in Ching's face to his chest and gave him a sudden push.

Ch'in Ching didn't know why he was being pushed away, but before he could dwell on that thought, he was shoved on the shoulder. He lost balance and fell face up on the tiger pelt.

"Shen Liangsheng…." The fall made the reason apparent to Ch'in Ching, but he wasn't angered. He merely looked up at the man and chuckled, "You really like it rough, huh."

"Why? You don't want this?" Shen Liangsheng didn't understand and thought he was having last minute regrets. He quickly fired back, "You're the one who started it this time. Don't you think it's a little selfish not to finish what you started, Ch'in Ching?"

“What I meant, Master Shen, was that I wouldn’t mind going along and putting up a fight if it satisfies your needs,” he explained with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. “It’s just that I simply can’t take it upon myself to reject a view as stunning as this. I really don’t want to fight it. What can I say?”

It was said in a mocking tone, but the delighted sparkle in his eyes made the question sound mild and also playfully inviting.

“Are you trying to say I’m attractive, Mister Ch’in?” His words had succeeded in arousing Shen Liangsheng. He narrowed his eyes and said, “Then take a good look at this.”

Shen Liangsheng took a step back and began to unbutton his suit jacket while keeping his eyes on Ch’in Ching. He threw the garment aside.

Pushing his torso up, Ch’in Ching watched as the man tugged at his tie with just the right speed. He did not take it off, however, and only unfastened it to reveal the top shirt button. He undid it but ceased to proceed any further.

Shen Liangsheng had dressed formally for his visitor earlier. The garment inside was a slim fit French dress shirt which accentuated his tall, slim figure.

Ch’in Ching watched as he removed cufflinks and wrist watch, tossing them onto the nearby armchair. Then, he moved down to the belt, unbuckled it, and drew it out slowly before flinging it to where the jacket now lay.

Ch’in Ching thought the shirt would be next, but the man unfastened his pants first. Only then did he tug the ends of the shirt out and start unbuttoning from the bottom up.

The pants slipped till they caught his hipbones and revealed an inch of white waistband and a tight, defined abdomen. He could faintly see a nipple past the dangling ash grey tie and unbuttoned shirt.

Shen Liangsheng’s head snapped up, and they continued eye contact. At last, he took off the shirt and the tie in one fluid motion, exposing the elegant streamline that stretched from his jaw to his collarbone. What was more beautiful was his iliac furrow, painted by perfectly positioned muscles, which enticed one to explore – not with the eyes but with fingers.

“A hand, Ch’in Ching?” Shen Liangsheng said as he came closer, paying no attention to the quality pelt under his leather shoes as he stood beside Ch’in Ching.

Ch’in Ching didn’t know what he needed help with at first but realized in the next moment. Shen Liangsheng stepped on Ch’in Ching’s thigh, signalling the man to untie his laces. However, he did not remove his foot even after the laces were undone. Instead, he proceeded to toy with the meat between Ch’in Ching’s legs with the toe of his shoe.

“Hard already?”

Indeed, Ch’in Ching was already aroused. He was wearing Western pants that did little to hide the fact, but he didn’t feel embarrassed at all. He merely looked up at Shen Liangsheng, whose skin was a shade fairer than most. “I’d be concerned if I wasn’t after seeing this beautiful work of art before my eyes.”

“Spread your legs.” Shen Liangsheng nudged his leg before switching feet. This time, he stepped right on the hardening erection, kneading it back and forth with the sole of his shoe.

Ch’in Ching helped him with the laces and patted his ankle. “Bad boy.”

The words were meant for misbehaving dogs or cats, but his voice was slightly hoarse from desire. Shen Liangsheng did not respond and only retracted his foot. He removed his pants along with his shoes and socks. All that was left on his body were a pair of the briefs that Westerners came up with. He stood proudly before the schoolmaster asking, “Like what you see?”

Ch’in Ching did not answer, but he couldn’t help but stare. The trace of Caucasian blood did not show on Shen Liangsheng’s face but was demonstrated truthfully in the size of his member. The white briefs wrapped snugly around its currently indistinct shape, a huge, full bulge. The sheer fabric was not enough to conceal the thick hairs underneath. The faint shadows somehow reminded Ch’in Ching of a poem.

“Bed drapes as thin as cicada wings loomed over a bed blooming forth with flowers of gold and patterns inconspicuous.”[60]

His face flushed, and his mouth felt a bit parched. He could blame it only on the fireplace burning too vigorously and raising the temperature in the room.

"Ch'in Ching, are you going to undress yourself, or do you want me to?" Shen Liangsheng asked softly.

Ch'in Ching was still a bit distracted, so he blurted out, "I'll do it." He quickly realized what he had just said and cleared his throat in an effort to cover it up. However, he did begin to unbutton his shirt collar.

The weather was cooler, and Ch'in Ching had a wool sweater over his shirt. He unfastened the top two buttons before pulling the thicker garment over his head. His hair stuck up from the static adding some silliness to his look.

Ch'in Ching did not care about his hair, but he was not as open as Shen Liangsheng. He did not take off his shirt after the sweater, but moved on to his socks and shoes and then to the belt. His hand lingered on the buckle, then the shirt buttons, in conflict as to which to remove first.

Patiently, Shen Liangsheng flattened his wild, flying hair and took another step closer, pressing the man's head towards his crotch and rubbing himself on his face.

Ch'in Ching's hands froze in the middle of removing a button, failing to complete the action. He felt blood rushing to his face. He couldn't tell which was hotter, his own face or the meat against it. He closed his eyes and heard a suppressed gasp from Shen Liangsheng. Soon, the muscle beneath the thin cloth hardened, scraping past his lashes, nose and lips.

Before he knew it, he had tilted his head and kissed it through the underwear. He planted feather-light kisses starting from the base and moving all the way up.

These did not bring much stimulation, but seeing the man's drunken expression along with the red mole behind the silver-rimmed glasses that he picked for him, Shen Liangsheng felt something snap. He grabbed the man's shoulders and pushed him down to the floor. He quickly joined him and latched onto his Adam's apple. He yanked the man's tucked shirt out and splayed his hand across the stomach, then the chest. He began playing with the right nipple

roughly while thinking this tiny thing aroused his desire to explore it carefully with his lips, tongue and teeth more than a voluptuous pair of breasts.

Ch'in Ching couldn't have been less bothered that his shirt was suddenly ripped apart and buttons scattered everywhere. Shen Liangsheng sucked on his nipple until it was wet, and then nipped the areola.

"Does it feel good?" he mumbled while licking the marks he had made.

Ch'in Ching felt pain but only furrowed his brows.

Getting no response, Shen Liangsheng looked up and studied his face while experimenting with both nipples.

The coals in the fireplace burnt brightly and sent waves of heat to hit him on the face. Eyes closed, Ch'in Ching thought back to the intoxicated night at the dinner table when he had complimented the man on his good-looking fingers, to which the man had said…

Now, he got to experience it firsthand.

At last, he lay there willingly as the pair of talented hands did as they wished with him, teasing into life the lust that he wasn't supposed to have. They treated him just as they would a woman, rubbing or squeezing the nipples, sometimes scraping and flicking, other times pressing and kneading. They brought forth an abnormal sense of pleasure.

"Do you like it?"

Ch'in Ching kept quiet.

"Do you?"

Indeed, Shen Liangsheng had no previous experience with men, but his actions were not because of a lack thereof. Rather, he was purposely, with ill intentions, treating Ch'in Ching like a woman. It gave him a warped sense of satisfaction to see the man's brows knit tighter and tighter, his neck arch back and his Adam's apple bob up and down.

He leaned in as he pinched the man's alert nipples and commanded, "Tell me, Ch'in Ching, that you want me to fuck you."

When he heard this, Ch'in Ching had the most peculiar feeling – as though Shen Liangsheng did not feel fond of him, but rather disgust.

He opened his eyes, lightly panting as though having awoken from a nightmare, and searched for the other man's eyes.

"Shen Liangsheng…" he called lightly. He didn't know how to continue.

Shen Liangsheng faltered when he saw confusion and what might have been grievance in his eyes. He released his grip and patted Ch'in Ching's cheek. "Don't look at me like that. I'll go easy on you, all right?"

Ch'in Ching did not know what he looked like, but when pointed out by Shen Liangsheng, he felt awkward and tried to ease it with banter. "You cocky little…" he said as he patted the other man's face as well. "You think you can get away with anything…" He slid his fingers down along the curvature of his face and lifted up his chin. "Just 'cause you have this pretty face."

"Is it just my face?" Shen Liangsheng grabbed the schoolmaster's mischievous hand and pinned him down, poking him not-so-subtly with his erection. Their lips brushed against each other as he hinted, "I'll let you figure out yourself what else is good about me."

Ch'in Ching chose to reply, not with words, but with his lips, letting the other man in. The two flexible muscles interlocked in a sensual dance with the lips – their first deep kiss.

The kiss that started as a cute tease became charged with lust after a few minutes. Ch'in Ching opened his legs allowing their bodies to come closer and began grinding his own hardness against the other man's groin. Their tongues clashed roughly as well and fought for each other's fluids.

"Lift your legs." Shen Liangsheng ended the kiss and gave a hoarse order. He eased Ch'in Ching's lower garments down past the knees before flipping him over, face down against the rug, and pinned him down once more.

Only after their bodies overlapped one another did Ch'in Ching discover that the other man had gotten rid of his last bit of clothing. A burning rod now poked at his butt. He thought the man was going to force his way in and

protested worriedly, “Don’t–”

“Don’t move,” Shen Liangsheng interrupted. His words were not far from what Ch’in Ching intended to say. He added in a quieter voice, “I’m so hard it hurts. Let me rub one off here first.”

Shen Liangsheng was so straightforward that it made Ch’in Ching embarrassed to the point he ceased to struggle. He let the man spread his butt cheeks, bury his bulging muscle in between and thrust back and forth.

After nearly five minutes, Shen Liangsheng was still hard and showed no signs of release. Meanwhile, things weren’t looking so good on Ch’in Ching’s side.

Below him was the pelt of a dead beast, but with Shen Liangsheng gyrating on top and his body rubbing back and forth against the rug, the desire within him was more alive and vigorous than ever. His chest tingled from the stimulation from the soft fur, and his nipples, having already learned pleasure and forgotten shame, itched and begged for rough treatment from their owner or the other man.

But his buddy down there was in a worse situation. The fully erect member rubbed against the tiger fur. A numb, itchy sensation ran down its length to the scrotum. It wasn’t the usual itch, but the kind unique to sex that made one yearn, the kind under one’s skin from which there was no escape. His dick was leaking, and from time to time, the fur would brush right over the hole and induce a shiver down his spine.

“Shen…stop…” He could no longer stand it.

“Are you sure?” Shen Liangsheng knew exactly what was going on with the man below, but he continued to torment him. “Don’t you feel good?”

“…mmm.”

“Is that a yes or no?”

“Really…stop. I can’t take it.”

“Do you want to come?”

“…yes.”

Ch’in Ching had yet to remove his shirt. He wanted to relieve the irritating urge between his legs with his own hand, but he was suddenly jerked back by the garment. The next thing he knew, the shirt was pulled down to his wrists and tied into a knot. His hands were crossed and unable to move.

“Let’s have a look.”

Ch’in Ching heard something from the man behind him but before he could comprehend anything, he was flipped over to expose his current state. He was a hot mess. His pants were piled at his knees, and his arms were tied behind him with his shirt. His dick was standing tall and alert, a swollen, leaking length.

Shen Liangsheng was completely naked but seemed much more at ease than Ch’in Ching. He trailed a finger along the erection that arched towards his abdomen and asked intentionally, “Want me to help you with that?”

“Do you?” he questioned once more when he received no answer.

He refused to proceed without Ch’in Ching’s consent. He merely watched idly as the lonely cock nodded pathetically under his gaze despite the lack of physical stimulation. The tip was oozing a sticky fluid that dripped onto his stomach, connecting the two with a dewy string.

“How ‘bout you get yourself off?” Shen Liangsheng suggested calmly. He turned Ch’in Ching over again with one hand and slapped his butt. His fingertips slid down the crack and pressed on the hole, only briefly and not entering, before reaching the scrotum. He began to rub the sac in circles.

Ch’in Ching had been trying to hold back, but not anymore. He pushed his crotch forward into the rug, and as suggested, began to hump the fur. He hid his face in it as well, so as not to see the other man’s reaction.

Shen Liangsheng watched as Ch’in Ching, eyes lidded, twisted and writhed to pleasure himself, bare buttocks tensing and relaxing. He cupped his sac gently with one hand and reached the other to his entrance. Without any lubricant, he shoved his middle finger in.

With the exhilarating pleasure, Ch’in Ching did not feel much pain from his ass. There was only the dry friction that couldn’t count as gratification but rather

was an additional stimulant. He couldn't suppress his grunt as thick cum gushed out and onto the rug.

Shen Liangsheng had known that Ch'in Ching was about to come from the spasms that ran through the sac in his hand. He waited for the man to ride out his orgasm before taunting in a lukewarm tone, "You like it up the ass, don't you?"

Ch'in Ching couldn't object even if he tried. With his face still buried in the rug, he felt the finger slide out. Seconds of quiet later, he was yanked up by the hair, forced to look up. Against his lips was a burning rod. He heard the man say, "Lick it."

He closed his eyes. He could smell the unique stink of male arousal. After a brief moment of hesitation, he opened wide and took in the head. It was already wet and slick and not as unappealing as he had thought. His tongue brushed the sensitive hole unintentionally, and he began to lick it, evoking a low sigh from the man.

"Take it in and use more tongue."

Shen Liangsheng taught the man how to please him. The man listened well, taking him in deeper and wrapping his tongue around his cock. He felt the satisfaction of finally getting what he wanted.

He had had many partners in his past relationships who were more skilful than this man. He couldn't say why exactly and concluded it was because this person was a man like himself. Perhaps the satisfaction simply came from the fact that a man had submitted to him.

"That's good."

After ten minutes or so, Shen Liangsheng pushed his head away when he felt his release upon him. He climbed over to thrust his cock between his butt cheeks again until the climax, and unloaded his cum on his hole.

Ch'in Ching felt the moist warmth and thought it was over, but Shen Liangsheng forced his way in before his member wilted with nothing but the cum as lubricant. Ch'in Ching cried out in pain and bit down on his lip.

He wasn't the only one in pain. Shen Liangsheng didn't get much pleasure either from having only a third of his member in. It was constricted uncomfortably by the narrow opening.

But he wanted no lubrication. The pain was what made it real, what truly made this man his. The pain was in itself gratifying.

He had promised to go easy on him, but he now turned a deaf ear to his own words. He rocked his hips forward and buried himself in the shorter man. He then pulled out, almost entirely, before ramming himself back in. Brutal and ruthless, he continued to abuse the bleeding hole.

His penis was now stained red like a deadly weapon. Shen Liangsheng had an odd desire for this man's blood, to make the crimson his possession and to fuse it with his own – so that they might be one even in death.

This notion gave Shen Liangsheng a fright that knocked some sense back into him. He seemed to have been possessed by something that caused him to think of death during sex.

It was afternoon when Ch'in Ching had first arrived. After all the foreplay, the sky was nearly lightless. The only light in the room came from the glowing coals in the fireplace which illuminated a small area and, within it, two bodies engaged in violent intercourse.

He was in far too much pain to think. He stared dumbly into the darkness that shied away from the embers. Before long, a mirage appeared. Vines seemed to burst forth from the shadows with tendrils and leaves, growing at an alarming speed and racing towards him as though to devour him. When they drew close, however, they spread out into a massive web – a web woven, tendril by tendril, from three words.

Not the words: I want this,

But the words: Shen Liang Sheng.

60 A poem by Li He, 石城曉, or “Dawn in Stone City.” Stone City refers the capital at the time. This poem is written from the perspective of a courtesan for whom dawn meant loneliness. This specific line describes seeing the brighter and fainter patterns on the bed filtered through the sheer bed curtains and pops into Ch’in’s mind when he first sees Shen’s penis and pubic hair through the thin fabric of his underwear.

VIII

If the late Mrs. Ch'in had been asked to give her two pennies worth on her son, it would have to be: simple-hearted and stubborn like a mule.

After the family cat eloped with some stray cat during the mating season, the first thing Ch'in Ching would do after coming home from school was ask his mom, "Did A'Mao come back yet?" After hearing disappointing news, he would drop his backpack and go out searching for her until it got too dark to see. Only then would he drag his feet back home for supper. This continued for two weeks. Ch'in Ching looked high and low through the streets and alleys of Nanshih but found no cat. All he got in the end was a scolding from his mother.

"You ought'a know bett'r at fifteen than to be a naive li'l sucker," she said as she prodded her son's forehead.

Papa Ch'in was an interesting character. He jumped in to defend his son when he saw his son's forehead turning red.

"He has some brains to be doin' well in school, but yer gonna knock out what little smarts he has in that head of his the way yer jabbin' at 'im."

Then, he turned around and wrote a story about his son's quest to find his cat to tell at the teahouse. Since the cat's name was A'Mao, the piece began like this:

"When I say 'China,' you'd think of a place of talent. Let's not get ahead of ourselves and start with somethin' closer to home. We got ourselves a famous author[61] from 'round here…"

Ch'in Ching was sitting on a folding stool[62] he had brought from home, listening. When he heard this introduction, he rolled his eyes. As he expected, his father brought in the story of Hsiang-lin-*sao*[63] searching for A'Mao from *The New Year's Sacrifice*.[64] Before long, the focus turned to him.

"That A'Mao was at least taken by wolves. My boy may have grown big and strong, but it's safe to say it's more brawn than brains that he's grown…"

Although he was embarrassed by the fellow on stage, it was his father nonetheless, and he could do little about that. Even he couldn't help but laugh

along with the crowd when his dad imitated the voice of a boy going through puberty.

"Where are you? Where are you, A'Mao?"

"Hogwash, I never said that," he mumbled under his breath.

Thus, for some time during Ch'in Ching's teenage years, the neighbours would poke fun at him whenever they saw him. "Still lookin' for yer A'Mao, Ch'in-*sao*?"

The Lius' second son took it to another level, grabbing Ch'in Ching's hand for attention and taunting him whenever they came across a cat on the street. "Look! A'Mao would be 'bout this big if she were still here!"

Ch'in Ching's father passed away from an acute disease a few years later. Ch'in Ching was studying in Peking at the time. After the wake and funeral, he was determined to quit and return to Tientsin out of concern for his mom. This brought around another scolding.

"We ain't broke, son. You think we don't got enough for yer school? Or is yer mom really that useless in yer eyes?"

Then, she sighed and rubbed the red marks that she had left on his forehead.

"Yer dad always said you got brains. Go back to school. Yer dad, may he rest in peace, would be happy for you. Listen to me, son. Stop being so simple-hearted. Could you do that for me?"

Mrs. Ch'in pushed on for another two years before following in her love's footsteps. Ch'in Ching had a premonition that it would happen. His dad and mom were in love from beginning to end. Since she was of weak health, she had had to fight for Ch'in Ching to be born because if it were up to his father, he wouldn't have let her go through any pain even if it meant ending his own bloodline.

Ch'in Ching didn't know about other families, but his parents truly never had a fight or an argument. They were in love, honestly and simply, until the very end.

Now, back to the present, there no longer was someone to poke his forehead, telling him he was simple-hearted and stubborn, but that did not change his nature. He simply didn't find any fault with Shen Liangsheng despite the man treating him so roughly.

Firstly, Ch'in Ching thought that, between two men, the one at the bottom was bound to suffer – sticking something three sizes too big into the tiny hole back there was going to hurt no matter what.

Secondly, he wasn't actually a simpleton. Although he didn't know what Shen Liangsheng saw in him, he did understand that the man didn't actually like him as much as he had pretended to in the weeks prior. However, understanding that did little to stop him from falling.

So just bear with the suffering,[65] he said to himself. You wanted this yourself after all – you're the one who fell for him.

He did get what he deserved, but he still felt upset. It wasn't anything ridiculous. It was a dull feeling similar to that when the cat he had raised single-handedly ran away with another cat. 'Ch'in-*sao*' had wondered glumly why she ran away when he was so good to her.

As such, it was obvious that Ch'in Ching had not bettered himself after nearly ten years.

Simple-hearted as always, he more or less expected his feelings to be appreciated by the other person.

Ch'in Ching had lost track of time when the movement inside him ceased and the intruder left. He felt the heavy weight disappearing from him almost instantaneously.

The den was attached to the master bedroom. Shen Liangsheng walked through the door past the bedroom and into the bathroom. He flicked on the lights and turned on the hot water.

As the water ran, he stood at the sink and stared at himself in the mirror. After a moment, he grabbed a towel and stuck it under the tap. The blistering water soaked through the cloth and along his hand down the drain.

Ch'in Ching lay in the dark, still in the same facedown position. He wiggled his hand to find it still confined in the dead knot. The tugging brought about a sharp pain in his behind as if a small knife were placed against it. Every movement made the blade sink deeper.

Therefore, he gave up. He lay there, soundless, like part of the decor of the room. No breathing. No speaking.

Shen Liangsheng returned with the towel and knelt on the rug. He began to wipe the bloody stains by the luminance of the fireplace. This time around, he was the exact opposite. Carefully and gently, it was as though he were cleaning a priceless, delicate antique upon which would be a sin to lay even a finger.

"Shen Liangsheng, could you untie the shirt first? My shoulders hurt."

Although he was a bit upset deep inside, he did not sound so. Rather, hearing his good-natured negotiation, Shen Liangsheng faltered with the towel before tossing it aside. Wordlessly, he untied the knot and then removed the pants that lay in wrinkles around his ankles for him.

"Just hold on."

Shen Liangsheng left the den in the bathrobe he had put on earlier, and ordered a servant to buy ointment from the pharmacy.

He especially chose someone who was tight-lipped. She was a Russian woman who had followed her master to China after the Bolshevik Revolution. Despite having lived there for more than ten years, her knowledge of the language was still quite limited, and she normally only spoke English with Shen Liangsheng. Upon hearing why the ointment was needed, she only could keep a straight face and awkwardly answer, "Yes, sir."

“Wait,” Shen Liangsheng called after her and then added, “Get me the cashmere blanket first.”

Ch’in Ching was not very cold, and the blanket that Shen Liangsheng had carefully wrapped around him merely made him feel too warm. He wiggled around for a moment and managed to ease it down a little.

Shen Liangsheng, however, mistook his motion for displeasure at his previous actions, assuming that he was acting up after the deed was done. He paused for a moment before getting up and going to the coffee table to light a cigarette. When he returned, he settled beside Ch’in Ching and puffed on the smoke without speaking. The glowing end slowly grew until the ashes flaked off onto his bathrobe.

Ch’in Ching had his head turned to the side towards Shen Liangsheng. Seeing his eyebrows furrowed in what seemed to be discontent, he hesitated but still inquired, “What’s wrong?”

Shen Liangsheng did not expect Ch’in Ching to speak first and turned to look at him. It came as a surprise that there was no sign of annoyance on the schoolmaster’s face, though his eyes were slightly red. He was unsure whether Ch’in Ching had cried just now or the gentle flames from the fireplace were playing a trick on his eyes.

“Nothing. Did it hurt that much?”

“No.” Ch’in Ching blinked a few times in confusion, and the next thing he knew, Shen Liangsheng was closing in to kiss him.

His glasses had long since been removed and forgotten while they were fooling around, and Shen Liangsheng was able to kiss him gently right on the eyelids. In a low voice, he promised, “Don’t cry. It won’t be like this next time.”

“But I didn’t cry.” Ch’in Ching almost reflexively closed his eyes as he relaxed and let Shen Liangsheng kiss him as he pleased. The melancholy he had been feeling dissipated as he melted into the kiss, and he could not help but whisper his thoughts. “I just miss my mom.”

The moment the words were out of his mouth, both of them froze. Ch’in

Ching was too abashed at how inappropriate it was to start thinking of his mother in this situation. As for Shen Liangsheng, he was too aware of the workings of humans, and unlike Ch'in Ching who could not comprehend the logic of his own mind, he could easily understand the schoolmaster's train of thought. Ch'in Ching was like a child who thought of his mother the moment things started to get difficult.

And so what if he was? Shen Liangsheng remembered then that this man had no parents or siblings and lived a life in solitude.

The cigarette burned to the end and scorched Shen Liangsheng's hand, and he turned to cast the butt into the fireplace. He stayed silent for the next few seconds before reaching over to hug Ch'in Ching around the shoulders. "My mom left a long time ago too," he said in a mutter.

"Oh." Ch'in Ching forced himself to turn to the side and stretched out to pull him close. There was a sudden, muddled sense of codependency between them, and the pain was quickly forgotten.

"Shen Liangsheng." After embracing for a while, Ch'in Ching came back to himself and found a small problem. He addressed it in tiny voice, "You're…."

"I'm…?"

"You're quite sprightly down there."

It took Shen Liangsheng a moment to realize that Ch'in Ching was referring to how he was still hard. He had stopped before reaching his climax and now held the other man, his bathrobe open and his member resting against the soft cashmere. The heat from the fireplace was also keeping him comfortably warm. None of the above was helping him hold back his arousal, but he had no intentions of actually doing anything about it.

Shen Liangsheng chose not to answer and kept quiet, but Ch'in Ching understood. While his hole stung with pain, there was no sticky feeling inside, which must mean that the other man had not come. He paused before asking uncertainly, "You didn't, you know, just now?"

"Didn't what?" Seeing him so vague, Shen Liangsheng decided to tease him.

“Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“I didn’t do it because I was afraid your body couldn’t take it.” Shen Liangsheng went with the flow and continued on, “Not that I was worried about you or anything like that.”

“I really couldn’t tell.”

“Just wait till next time. I’m going to make you feel so good…” Shen Liangsheng closed the distance between them and sealed Ch’in Ching’s lips. In between kisses, he pestered on, “that you feel it both in the front and at the back.”

“Yeah, sure.” Shen Liangsheng’s words became more forthright, and he had even sneaked his hand under the blanket, lightly caressing Ch’in Ching’s hip. Ch’in Ching quickly interrupted Shen Liangsheng and pulled his hand out the blanket, “Don’t you dare.”

“Stay the night. You can’t really walk anyway.” Shen Liangsheng was serious all of a sudden and gripped his hand. “I’ll help you apply some ointment later. Call the school tomorrow morning and take a few days off. You can rest here in the meantime.”

“A few days? I don’t think so.”

“So you think you can stay standing for an entire class?”

Ch’in Ching eventually grasped the seriousness of the consequences of their actions. Taking that into consideration, he got annoyed and pushed Shen Liangsheng away, sternly saying, “The students’ lessons cannot be put off, and it’s not like I can keep asking others to substitute. I’ll go in the day after tomorrow. Next time…” He paused for a moment and added, “Next time you want to do it, pick Saturdays. That way, it wouldn’t cause any problems.”

Even though Ch’in Ching looked unhappy, Shen Liangsheng could tell that this man truly liked him from what he had said in the end. If that were not that case, he definitely would not have bothered mentioning that last part. He couldn’t help but feel pleased, to the point that it was odd.

“It won’t be like this next time. Promise.”

Shen Liangsheng repeated his words, and the matter was quickly dealt with and forgotten. Shen Liangsheng helped Ch'in Ching apply the ointment and waited for him to fall asleep facedown on his bed. Only then did he go to the bathroom for a wash. There were still traces of dried blood on his member, and the scarlet stained the warm water, distinct against the white porcelain. It disappeared down the drain quietly.

Shen Liangsheng stepped out of the bathtub naked, and just like before, he stood in front of the sink and stared at his face in the mirror.

He asked himself the same question once again: "What do you want with this man?"

Ch'in Ching seemed to have overslept the following day. Shen Liangsheng had already called the school and asked for two days of leave.

The ointment was quite effective, and the pain in his butt had reduced after a good rest. Ch'in Ching went to the bathroom and washed up while Shen Liangsheng stood in front of his wardrobe to choose a set of clothes for Ch'in Ching. He picked out a light blue shirt and grey trousers coupled with a cream cardigan, a fresh combination.

"Shen Liangsheng, have you seen my glasses?"

Ch'in Ching squinted as he asked Shen Liangsheng after he dressed. He was looking everywhere for his glasses, but they were nowhere in sight.

"Stay right there. I'll get them for you."

Shen Liangsheng went to the den and picked up the pair of silver-rimmed glasses from the rug on the ground. He glanced at the rug that still held evidence of their games the night before, a hint of blood stained the pelt. Hesitating for a moment, he bent forward, rolled up the blanket and threw it into a corner of the room. He had no intention of sending it to be cleaned and would later ask a servant to keep it in the storage room.

Ch’in Ching stayed in the Shen manor for the next two days, and with constant application of the ointment, the pain in his butt quickly diminished. He looked to be in good health, too, despite being unable to take in solids. The large amounts of congee that went into his stomach must have been extremely nourishing. On the third day, he felt well enough to return to school and was mercilessly teased by his colleague, “Aren’t you looking good? You seem to be thriving off your illness, or perhaps something happened while you were sick?”

“What could have possibly happened? How about you try falling sick too?” Ch’in Ching tried to hide his embarrassment by joking along with him.

“I don’t know. Maybe a lovely lady serving by your side day and night, meeting your every need…”[66]

“Now, just a second, mister! You’re just a brat teaching mathematics, and you’re trying to beat me at my own game?” Ch’in Ching could tell what he was implying at and immediately interrupted him. It wasn’t because he felt guilty for whatever reason; it was to help his colleagues save face.

It was class time, and there were only a handful of teachers who were on break. Amongst them was a woman called Fang Hua who seemed to have feelings for him, although she had yet to act on them.

Moreover, the teacher who had teased Ch’in Ching earlier was sweet on Ms. Fang. If one were to sum it up, it was an awkward three-way relationship between them. While the buddy seemed to be joking around with Ch’in Ching on the surface, he was actually trying to take this opportunity to show the lady that she had no chance with Ch’in Ching. It was obvious that he was tactless, and it was no wonder he had been unable to gain her affection.

Miss Fang was seated at her own desk grading assignments with a red pen, not bothering to look up even though she could hear their conversation. When she heard Ch’in Ching speaking up for her, she faltered for a split second before continuing to the next question.

Fang Hua taught mathematics, and her next class was beside Ch’in Ching’s.

When it was almost time, she left the room with a stack of workbooks in her arms and a set square tucked to her side. Ch'in Ching walked a distance behind her, and just as he was about to reach his classroom, the person in front of him suddenly halted and turned around, looking as if she had something to say.

She stood there without a word, and it was instead Ch'in Ching who started the conversation.

"Miss Fang, your book's going to fall." He pointed to the top-most book in the stack and smiled as he warned.

Fang Hua lowered her head and adjusted the book, and instead, the set square slipped from under her arm and fell with a clunk. Ch'in Ching went forward to pick it up and placed it flat on top of the stack.

Fang Hua did not speak for a while again, and when she finally did, it was merely small talk. "You got new glasses, Mister Ch'in?"

"Yes. A gift from a friend."

"They look good on you."

After complimenting Ch'in Ching, she shyly turned and continued down the hall. However, she did not get far before stopping in her tracks. She looked over her shoulders and gave him her thanks.

Ch'in Ching knew she was not thanking him for picking up the set square, but knowing was not the same as acknowledging.

The field was noisy with girls trying to make the most of their last few minutes of break. Ch'in Ching paused to watch them for a while. He sighed, shook his head with a smile, and then ambled to his classroom.

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61 Lu Hsün was one of the most prominent and celebrated authors of modern

literature. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lu_Xun

62 It seems these devices are called “folding camp stool” nowadays. A specific term exists in Chinese for these chairs. https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%A9%AC%E6%89%8E

63 A suffix that means the person is a married woman.

64 For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selected_Stories_of_Lu_Hsun#The_New_Year_Sac Read translation here: https://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1924/02/07.htm

65 The title for the prequel, 活受罪, is used here.

66 The subject is literally “a beautiful person” but is most often used to refer to a woman. Also, the math teacher used a series of four-character expressions that are characteristic of a person well-educated in language arts, which leads to Ch’in Ching’s subsequent remark. The literal translation is as follows: “A beautiful person beside you, not even taking the time to change, bringing you tea and water, a beautiful girl helping you with your office work.”

*This chapter was translated in part by Ying.

IX

The truth was that the “lovely lady,” Mr. Shen Jr., was not so diligent as to serve Ch’in Ching every second of the day but was quite considerate during those two days nevertheless. He only went to the office for a quick patrol each morning and returned home to Ch’in Ching at noon. They chitchatted, read the papers and played chess – the loser had to smooch the winner. These all gave an impression of infatuation.

Only at night were they separate because Ch’in Ching was too bashful to sleep with Shen Liangsheng again with the servants around. Shen Liangsheng did not pressure him, either, and got the servants to clear a guest room for him. They would wish each other sweet dreams when night fell and go to sleep on different beds with different dreams.

Nor did Shen Liangsheng slack off when Ch’in Ching went back to work two days later. He drove to Nanshih in the morning to pick up the schoolmaster and brought along a vacuum flask with soup from his own kitchen for him to drink on the way.

In the evening, Shen Liangsheng picked him up and drove him home, taking the opportunity to interrogate Ch’in Ching about his lunch. He warned the man against eating off-limits foods. Ch’in Ching found the nagging businessman amusing and couldn’t help mocking, “Yes, mom. I promise I’ll only eat congee and nothing else. Happy now?”

Ch’in Ching sounded so sincere calling him “mom” that Shen Liangsheng just about mistook the breaks for the gas pedal. He managed to keep a straight face, but he reached over with his right hand and pinched the man’s thigh. Then, he slid up and patted his crotch. “Next time you start being cheeky, I’ll be pinching this buddy instead.”

Ch’in Ching was skinny but healthy, nonetheless, and was alive and kicking after a week of care. He refused to eat any more congee and swore to have a feast on Sunday.

“What do you feel like? Nothing spicy or fried. Anything else is fine.”

“Who said I’m eating with you? I need to go over to my actual godmother’s house for dinner. You know, *Hsiao*-Liu’s house.” Ch’in Ching took this opportunity to act superior. “You can go do your own thing.”

Hearing “my actual godmother,” Shen Liangsheng knew he was referencing the joke from before. He shot a look over to the passenger seat, and the schoolmaster immediately behaved, fearing the consequences of tempting the taller man. Ch’in Ching quickly added, “I really do have something to do. It’s winter now, so I have to head over and help *Hsiao*-Liu with some chores. Can’t count on him to finish it all on his own.”

“What kind of chores?”

“Probably making briquettes.”

“I see,” Shen Liangsheng responded casually, but he didn’t feel so great inside. It was not because of missing one meal with Ch’in Ching or concern over his injuries, but because of his possessive nature. He drove him around and cared for him for a week and thus took the liberty of declaring his ownership over this human being. He wished he could just keep Ch’in Ching to himself like an owner would a pet and not let him be involved with anyone else.

Ch’in Ching spent Sunday morning making briquettes at the Lius’. After lunch, he chatted with his godmother, and only when she left, yawning, for her afternoon nap did he tell *Hsiao*-Liu he wanted to wash off the sweat at the bathhouse.

“Sure. Let’s go together. You go back and get your clothes, and I’ll wait for you by the road.”

Accordingly, Ch’in Ching returned to gather a change of clothes. Just as he was picking out a pair of clean socks, he heard a knock at the gate. Thinking *Hsiao*-Liu was getting impatient, he shouted out, “Come in. It’s open.”

“Can’t you hang on for just one second?” Ch’in Ching complained as he

walked out with his clothes only to find Shen Liangsheng in his yard wearing a short, black coat, hands behind his back. He let out a gasp of surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Why, sick of seeing me?”

“No, but you would’ve missed me if you came any later. I was just about to leave.”

“To do free labour?”

“What? No, it’s not free labour.” Ch’in Ching shook the net bag in his hand. “It’s the afternoon now. I’ve finished. I’m on my way to the bathhouse.”

If he wasn’t too happy about Ch’in Ching helping *Hsiao*-Liu with chores, there was no way that he would be happy to hear of Ch’in Ching being stark naked in front of other men at a bathhouse. He immediately walked over and took the bag of clothes from Ch’in Ching. “You can bathe at my place. And eat supper, too.”

“Sure. Let me go tell *Hsiao*-Liu.”

Ch’in Ching didn’t think much of it and told Shen Liangsheng to start the car while he found *Hsiao*-Liu at the entrance of the *hut’ong* to notify him.

The Lius lived adjacent to the road, and *Hsiao*-Liu saw the black automobile when it first pulled up, finding it familiar. Then, his eyes narrowed in suspicion when he saw his childhood friend walking out side by side with Shen Liangsheng.

The Lius owned a teahouse, and *Hsiao*-Liu had been in charge since the passing of his father. He knew more about how people worked than Ch’in Ching and was not as simple-hearted. The previous time he’d seen them he could tell that the two were relatively close, but he’d thought that the businessman had no reason to cheat them and didn’t take it to heart. However, this time Ch’in Ching had nothing in his hands while Shen Liangsheng was carrying his friend’s clothes for him. The intimacy made *Hsiao*-Liu stop to think twice.

However, Ch'in Ching did not look at all feminine, nor had he any other traits to make one think in that direction, so *Hsiao*-Liu didn't consider it, either. He only thought that his friend was an honest person and feared that Shen Liangsheng would take advantage of him.

"Ch'in Ching, you're pretty close with Mr. Shen Jr., aren't you?" he questioned straightforwardly.

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Well, I'm gonna come right out and say it. The rich can be cunning. You should look out for yourself. Don't be a gullible li'l lamb."

"Mhm, I know."

"So if he wants you to sign anything, don't do it. Come to me first."

"Pfft," Ch'in Ching had been nervous but now burst out laughing. "No way."

"Nothing wrong with being cautious. Your ma left you in our hands. The only way I can redeem myself if anything happened to you is to kill myself on your ma's gravestone."

"My goodness. Knock on wood."

Shen Liangsheng sat in the car and watched the two old friends talk and laugh on the other side of the road. His hand seemed to act on its own as he honked at the schoolmaster to leave.

"*Hsiao*-Liu said his mom's making stewed pork feet." Ch'in Ching was in the car, but his mind was on food. "So, how are you going to make it up to me?"

"How do you want me to make it up to you?" Shen Liangsheng started the engine. His left hand was on the wheel while his right reached for Ch'in Ching's. He locked their ten digits and ran his thumb gently between the man's thumb and forefinger.

Though they had last seen each other two days ago, their relationship was at the stage where they couldn't bear to be apart for even a minute. Ch'in Ching's heart fluttered at Shen Liangsheng's touch, and he brought his hand up to his lips.

Shen Liangsheng glanced over with an enigmatic smile and did the same, planting a kiss on the man's hand.

The car rolled into the Shen manor. Ch'in Ching went straight to his guestroom to bathe, and Shen Liangsheng told the kitchen to add a pork foot to the menu, emphasizing to make it tender.

There was a boiler built in when Shen Liangsheng purchased the manor, and pipes ran throughout the house. The water came quickly and warmed the entire room. Ch'in Ching let out a sigh of relaxation as he soaked in the hot water. He reached for the shampoo and was about to spread it on his head when Shen Liangsheng suddenly came in wearing only a shirt and long pants.

"What are you doing?" Ch'in Ching questioned warily as he felt threatened in the nude.

"Calm down." Shen Liangsheng approached and patted him on the head. "Just wanted to see if you wanted anything else for supper."

"I am calm." Ch'in Ching let out a shaky laugh and began to apply the shampoo onto his hair with his head down. As he lathered, his legs that had been splayed apart closed on their own.

He was right in that Shen Liangsheng had special intentions. Shen Liangsheng felt his groin burn seeing the man close his legs unintentionally. He rolled up his sleeves and sat down on the tub ledge. Not minding getting his clothes wet, he joined Ch'in Ching in cleansing his hair, their intermingling fingers giving rise to soft foam.

Ch'in Ching let the man help with his eyes closed. It was only a hair wash, but Ch'in Ching felt arousal upon him. He shifted uneasily into another position to hide it.

"Don't move." Shen Liangsheng brought the shower head over and rinsed out the lather. He suggested softly as he watched the white bubbles dissolve into the water, "Let's get a new tub of water."

"Fine." Ch'in Ching was waiting for the chance to escape the man's hands and quickly leaned away for the plug.

“Turn over.” Shen Liangsheng laid a hand on his back.

“What?”

“Let me see if your wounds healed.”

“I thought we agreed,” Ch’in Ching declined nervously, “that we wouldn’t do it today regardless.”

“No one said anything about that. I just want a look. Come now.”

The water glided down the drain to reveal a wet, naked body. Ch’in Ching couldn’t go against Shen Liangsheng and proceeded to kneel down on the porcelain while holding onto the ledges for stability.

Shen Liangsheng leaned in and began caressing his hips with his right hand. His fingers slid to the hole between the butt cheeks and explored the areas around it. “Seems fine.”

Ch’in Ching had felt a bit chilly without the hot water but now began to heat up again.

The fingers behind him wandered around his hole, kneading it softly at times and scraping along the crack to his sac. They did not proceed any further, nor did they skip over to his member in front, but Ch’in Ching saw it harden under the feather-like touches, stretching taller and taller.

“Are you hard?”

“…yes.”

With the reply, Shen Liangsheng sprang up. He began to unbutton his shirt while plugging the drain and turning the water back on. Soon, his clothes came off, and he stepped into the tub taking a seat across from Ch’in Ching.

The guestroom tub was not as large as that of the master bedroom, and two tall men proved too much for it. Ch’in Ching sat between Shen Liangsheng’s legs but had to open his legs, too, to let the other man in. Their groins touched and their semi-hard dicks rubbed against each other unintentionally.

“Come closer.” The taller man pulled him closer and held his waist, caressing

the curves.

Abashed, Ch'in Ching looked down, not wanting to make eye contact, only to see the two members flanking one another. Their pubic hair tangled together, gently hovering in the rising water.

"Look up."

As though a puppet to Shen Liangsheng's voice, Ch'in Ching lifted his head up and was met with the man's kiss and heavy breaths. His lips were pried open and his mouth explored by the invading tongue. His own tongue was taken and thoroughly sucked on.

He couldn't help hugging Shen Liangsheng and reciprocating his passion with his own tongue. They were joined at the groin, their dicks engaged in a heated dance of their own. The sacs rubbed against each other underwater, and the hard erections poked at each other's stomachs from time to time.

"W-wait." Ch'in Ching was faintly aware of the water reaching the top and overflowing. He patted the other man's back, interrupting, "Close the tap first."

As though he couldn't bear to part from his lips, Shen Liangsheng grabbed the schoolmaster's head and forcefully resumed the kiss while reaching around to turn the water off. Afterwards, he stretched into the water and began beating their dicks together.

Shen Liangsheng was endowed down there, but Ch'in Ching was not bad either. The two cocks were too much for one hand to hold, and one would always slip out, adding to the frustration. After a while, he opted to only stroke the tips, cradling the two heads in his palm. The dilated urethra leaked juices of passion only to melt into the hot water.

The stimulation on his sensitive head made Ch'in Ching groan out loud. The sound was muffled by their kiss and came out more like an ecstatic moan during orgasm. This succeeded in pumping more desire into Shen Liangsheng's swollen member. He pressed harder on Ch'in Ching's head and stuck his tongue deeper into his mouth. He felt the man reciprocating fervently, and it was as though the bathroom became completely sealed in with boiling waves of lust instead of air. They were suspended in the hazardous substance, and the only way to survive was through their kiss.

The tingly sensation on the head contrasted with the lack of stimulation elsewhere. Ch'in Ching reluctantly retracted his arms around Shen Liangsheng and reached his right hand into the water. He stroked the two members consecutively before continuing down to their sacs and cupping around them, kneading gently.

He could feel from his fingers and balls the other man's balls through a thin layer of skin. The pleasure was beyond words and raised the tension by the second. He tried to hold it in but could no longer. He grabbed Shen Liangsheng's wrists and broke free from his lips.

"Stop," he husked.

"Why?" Shen Liangsheng stopped his hands and asked quietly, "Does it not feel good?"

"No," Ch'in Ching closed his eyes and frowned. He gave a suggestive reply. "I can take no more."

"What do you mean no more?" Shen Liangsheng wanted him to say it even though he knew what he meant.

"I…."

"Yes?"

After seconds of deliberation, Ch'in Ching finally abandoned all rational restraint. He leaned into Shen Liangsheng's ear and whispered the most indecent words. Hearing them made Shen Liangsheng's stomach tighten and his member twitch with lust. He felt just as the man had said – he was no longer able to stand it.

"Ah!" He ducked down and latched onto the perky, little nub before his eyes. The sucking and biting made Ch'in Ching yelp out loud. He felt a sting on his right nipple that also tingled. After the initial pain, what remained was the erotic tingling that seeped into his bones. Abandoning the last of his shame, he thrust his hips up and moaned, "Down there…I want it there, too."

Shen Liangsheng gave the dick that was nearly touching its owner's stomach a good jerk before instructing huskily, "Get up."

Only after standing on his feet did Ch'in Ching feel weak in the knees. When Shen Liangsheng took him into his mouth and began sucking, he could barely stand and managed by holding the wall. His thighs, however, were shuddering uncontrollably, and his moans intensified and echoed in the bathroom.

It was Shen Liangsheng's first time blowing a man, but he did not feel any discomfort. What he did feel was a wilder arousal that only multiplied with every sound the man made. He knelt in the tub performing oral while he jerked his own erection furiously, coming at nearly the same time as the other man.

Ch'in Ching managed to remind Shen Liangsheng before he came but still did not pull out in time. Most of his thick, white cum fell on the man's face.

As he rode out his orgasm, he looked down – he stared, transfixed, at Shen Liangsheng masturbating with a frown and his sperm on his face, and at the white tendrils unfurling in the tub a few moments later – and could not look away for the longest time.

"Are you going to pick at your food the entire night, Ch'in Ching?"

Ch'in Ching was not himself even by suppertime and tried not to look at Shen Liangsheng – he would think of the scene from the bathroom earlier – whereas Shen Liangsheng behaved normally. He brought over some food to Ch'in Ching's bowl and tapped on it with his chopsticks.

The servants had been dismissed by Shen Liangsheng, and the two of them sat across from each other at the dining table. Ch'in Ching put his chopsticks down and rested his elbow on the table.

"Shen Liangsheng…." he sighed with his hand on his forehead.

"What?"

But Ch'in Ching did not finish. He only let his eyes flutter shut while a smile found its way on his lips.

It was a smile that only those totally lost in happiness would sport.

As sweet as the wind in August carrying the scent of sweet osmanthus in full bloom.

X

Ch'in Ching was to stay the night at the Shen manor. The servants were mindful and prepared the usual guestroom for him, laying out new sheets and quilts. After the two said good night at the top of the staircase, Shen Liangsheng followed the man with his eyes as he walked toward the guestroom. He blurted out, "Why don't you sleep with me tonight?"

Ch'in Ching halted his footsteps and looked back. His lips spread into a smile, and he nodded.

The layout of Shen Liangsheng's room was simple. A Western four-poster bed took up the centre of the room. The curtains were of foreign cut as well and covered an entire wall – it was likely for aesthetics and insulation since the windows were nowhere as large – like the curtains at the theatre.

While Shen Liangsheng was washing up in the bathroom, Ch'in Ching parted the heavy cloth and peeked outside. The tall and slim French windows framed a peaceful night sky painted with faint stars and a half moon.

Ch'in Ching expected the other man to do something, but nothing happened. They just lay side by side listening to each other's breathing and let sleep come to them.

He had not shut the curtains completely earlier, and the moon cast a sliver of light onto the floor that stood out in the dark room.

"Shen Liangsheng," Ch'in Ching muttered, "you might not be good at Chinese, but even you know 'Moon light by the bedding shines,'[67]right?"

Shen Liangsheng turned over and nuzzled Ch'in Ching's shoulder with his chin.

Ch'in Ching turned too and lay face to face with the other man. "Did you miss home while you were away?"

“No.” Shen Liangsheng’s answer did not sound forced but rather a casual statement. “I actually wouldn’t have minded never coming back.”

This man’s past was still a mystery to Ch’in Ching. He recalled the gloomy air when they last discussed this topic, and he couldn’t help but ask, “How so?”

Shen Liangsheng did not avoid the question and briefly explained his background. However, he didn’t want the man to pity him, so he left out many of the unhappy bits.

“This place never left a good impression, so I didn’t miss it.”

Although Shen Liangsheng had not gone into detail, Ch’in Ching could imagine the things he had to go through – a boy living under someone else’s roof with no one to turn to in hard times – and felt bad for him. However, he couldn’t show it and opted to shift the focus. “So you’re a quarter White. You can’t tell just by looking, though.”

“It was more obvious when I was young.”

“Do you have photographs?”

“I think a few.”

“When are you going to show them to me?”

“I’d need something in return.”

“I was just being polite. Didn’t think you were serious about showing me.”

“There goes your smart mouth again.” Shen Liangsheng reached down to the man’s crotch and grabbed it. “I remember someone was crying and begging me to–”

“Let’s not bring that up again.” Ch’in Ching wiggled away as his face began to heat up.

“You did it but won’t let other people talk about it.” Shen Liangsheng took his hand back and teased quietly, “Ch’in Ching, you little rascal.”

“Good night.” Ch’in Ching turned to face the ceiling once more and ended the conversation. Sure enough, Shen Liangsheng fell silent, and soon his breathing slowed as though he had fallen asleep.

Meanwhile, Ch'in Ching lay there, eyes closed, thinking that he wouldn't have met him if he had not come back. Then, he found that he wasn't sure if meeting him was better than not meeting him. In the end, he summed it up with the proverb: "no gain satisfies a greedy mind."[68]

Hsiao-Liu's warning earlier was not entirely accurate, but he had meant well. He was of the opinion that Ch'in Ching was still the good-tempered and loyal, but dumb, boy who would not be angered by his jokes about the runaway cat and who would still take the blame for him the next time he got into trouble.

But Ch'in Ching was twenty-four now and had learned to read people. He had long realized what sort of person Shen Liangsheng was and that their relationship was like that of a monk and bell – take it one day at a time.[69] He took it literally. He would take what he could, and when it came to an end, that would be it.

Unfortunately, knowing is different than doing especially when it comes to romance, and plans never work out the way one wants. Ch'in Ching was lying beside Shen Liangsheng wishing he could keep ringing this bell when he came upon a serious problem. He wanted to keep ringing it, but that depended on whether the bell wanted to be rung or not.

Regardless of what lay in the future, Shen the Bell rather liked being rung as of now. They had dinner on Wednesday as usual, and Shen Liangsheng drove Ch'in Ching home afterwards. He parked on the road and walked the man to his door. He even took the opportunity while the man was searching for his keys to pin him against the gate and steal a kiss.

Ch'in Ching was taken aback by the sudden action. Although the alley was dark, there was no guarantee that a neighbour would not walk out and barge into their romantic scene.

"Shen…mhm…." Ch'in Ching didn't want to make too much noise and could only protest with mutters while trying to win the upper hand in the struggle. His unwillingness only made Shen Liangsheng even more excited. He held the man's jaw with one hand and his waist with the other, refusing to let go.

“Stop it alrea–” Ch’in Ching had a good temper, but this was pushing his limits.

“Shush,” Shen Liangsheng suddenly hissed. “Someone’s coming. Hold still.”

Ch’in Ching froze and held his breath to listen. Surely, he heard faint footsteps, followed by a light creak of gates. Only when he was sure the person had entered their house did his heart drop down from his throat.

“For goodness’ sake.” The interruption made it hard to get mad, so he just sighed. “There’s no one home. You could’ve at least waited until we got inside, instead of making it seem like….”

Ch’in Ching wanted to say “like a secret affair,” but he was reluctant to use those embarrassing words. He instead gave Shen Liangsheng a push. “Get off of me.”

“If we really go inside, it’s going to take more than a kiss to satisfy me.” Shen Liangsheng did not stop there and continued to speak in a suggestive way that was opposite of his reserved expression. “You don’t have anything in your house, and if you get hurt again, I’m going to have to wait another two long weeks. You wouldn’t wish that on me, now would you?”

“You can just wait until Saturday….” Ch’in Ching stopped midway to find himself in Shen Liangsheng’s trap again. He paused, finding the situation amusing. He couldn’t stop himself from taunting the other man. “Oh, Master Shen, last time I checked, we were both grown men and an active part of society. Are you telling me you can’t even wait for three days?”

“But, Mister Ch’in, you’ve kept me waiting and waiting.” Meanwhile, Ch’in Ching had already opened the gates and Shen Liangsheng followed him in, still rattling on. “How can you bear to see me like this?”

Honestly, Ch’in Ching thought that he himself could be quite ridiculous when he wanted to win an argument, but he had to admit this man could put him to shame. He didn’t have a retort, so he went along, leaning into his ear. “So are you coming in or not? I sure can’t bear to see you like this.”

“No, thank you.” Shen Liangsheng turned into a gentleman right after he teased the other man enough. He only held him in his arms and whispered, “I’ll

save it all for Saturday.”

“Then why are your hands still on me?”

“Cheeky again, I see.” Shen Liangsheng gave him a smooch. “Not afraid of punishments, are we?”

Ch’in Ching was about to retort when the man sealed their lips in a deep kiss. The only warmth in the winter night was from their connected lips. Their tongues were like snakes rushing to hibernate, worming through the frosty soil into the dark moisture beneath.

When Saturday finally rolled around, Ch’in Ching met with Shen Liangsheng after work and returned to his house on Cambridge Road to have supper. After the meal, they each had a cup of Ti Kuan Yin[70] to help with digestion. The sweet, teasing scent resembling that of orchids seemed to suggest that the leaves were picked during autumn in Anhsi County.[71]

They went upstairs at almost nine o’clock and took a shower together. The porcelain tiles that covered the walls were so shiny that reflections could be seen from within. The water sprinkled down and filled the room with vapour. Standing across from Shen Liangsheng, Ch’in Ching recalled what had happened last time and became aroused. On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng had already been hard when they were undressing. The hot water dribbled down and left the erection standing out from a bed of wet hair. The sight parched Ch’in Ching’s throat as he felt a forbidden craving.

“What’s on your mind?” Shen Liangsheng raised a brow with a smile as though he could see the man’s desires. He rubbed the soap on Ch’in Ching’s chest and played with the slippery nipples.

“Nothing.” Ch’in Ching didn’t want to tell him, and he didn’t push either. He slid the soap around his back and down his butt crack. When he was satisfied with the lather, he stuck his middle finger in with it as lubrication. He asked as he pushed his finger in and out. “Does your ass feel good?”

Ch’in Ching did not feel anything in particular other than a slightly stretched feeling, but what he couldn’t stand was the man’s tone that sounded just as

vulgar as it was chaste. The last syllable danced up like a hook trying to lure in its prey and made Ch'in Ching feel psychological pleasure from the fingering. The ring of muscle tensed and suckled on the man's finger.

Shen Liangsheng's breathing became ragged, and he pulled his finger out, replacing it with the shower head to rinse off the lather. He rushed to clean Ch'in Ching off and grabbed a towel for him. "Get out and wipe yourself off. Don't go anywhere."

Ch'in Ching's behind felt scorched by the hot water, and when he stepped out of the tub, some of it trickled out from his ass, making him blush. He was drying himself with the towel when Shen Liangsheng came back. His face burned even more, and he quickly averted his gaze, not letting out a peep.

The taller man had a pair of white briefs in hand which he held up to Ch'in Ching's crotch. He eyed the size before asking. "Put them on for me."

Ch'in Ching had never worn this type of undergarment, but that was not what made him go red – it was the fact the briefs were clearly not new. The man had purposely picked a pair that he had worn, and that in itself added another meaning to the act.

"Leg up." Shen Liangsheng bent down, grabbed Ch'in Ching ankles and helped him step into the briefs. He pulled them up and moved Ch'in Ching's erection to stay tucked under the waistband, flat against his abdomen. He left the head poking out, however, and began rubbing it with his thumb.

Before long, he felt juices overflowing from the tip, and he wiped it on the man's nipples. He stepped forward to stand face to face with the man and rubbed his dick with the other one wrapped in his own underwear. He reached around, grabbed the bottom hem and pulled upward.

The fabric around the hips turned into a thin rope biting into Ch'in Ching's crack and exposing the two buttocks.

Ch'in Ching could feel the cloth dragging across his groin, and his sac stung as though it were being whipped by a tiny flog. The pain filled him with shame, but his member only got harder, and hot juices kept oozing out from his peehole. Some dripped onto the other man's dick while some dribbled down the length, wetting the waistband.

Shen Liangsheng pulled at the garment with one hand while playing with the man's butt cheek roughly with the other. He asked as he grinded his own erection against the other man. "Do you want it? Hm?"

No reply came.

"Speak."

Ch'in Ching didn't make a sound since he probably thought actions spoke louder than words. He held onto Shen Liangsheng tightly and kissed him desperately while pushing him out the bathroom as though they were conjoined.

Shen Liangsheng had no problem with this and kissed him back as they backed towards the bed and eventually toppled on top of it. They fell into the four-poster bed, kissing and rolling over each other. The underwear that he had put on Ch'in Ching was now being stripped off by him. The two naked men clung to each other in a thirsty frenzy, grinding their genitals on each other's bodies but not finding full satisfaction.

Ch'in Ching was the one to wave the white flag and drag Shen Liangsheng's hand to his crotch. "Touch me. I'm so hard it hurts."

"Earlier in the bathroom, did you want to lick this?" Shen Liangsheng pulled his hand to his own member, too. "Do you like it?"

Ch'in Ching had his dirty little secret uncovered and wasted no more effort trying to hide it. He climbed on top of the other man and planted kisses down his chest to his groin. He sucked on the bulging sac before licking up the length crawling with veins. He pressed his tongue against the tip and lapped at it.

Shen Liangsheng let out a low moan and propped himself up to see the man kneeling between his legs, blowing him while jerking himself off. The ceiling light left everything in plain sight. Shen Liangsheng fell back onto the bed, surprised that he had nearly reached orgasm just from seeing this. It made him feel powerless that he could never seem to control himself around this man. He decided to stop trying to do so and began to thrust his hips up in rhythm with Ch'in Ching. Soon, he came in the man's mouth with a groan.

The semen in Ch'in Ching mouth wasn't disgusting, but he didn't know what to do with it – to swallow or not to swallow. Shen Liangsheng lay there panting for a few moments, and when he opened his eyes again, he saw the man still on his knees with his semen in his mouth. He didn't know what had taken over him when he leaned over and kissed the man while stroking his erection. He sucked his own semen from the man's mouth, an experience that none of his women ever had the privilege of having.

By the time Ch'in Ching came back to his senses, the two had switched places. He was on all fours with his butt in the air, a rather shameful position. However, he didn't want to escape from the tongue on his entrance, teasing him like a dragonfly skimming the water only to leave the entire pond rippling in its wake.

Shen Liangsheng parted his butt cheeks and let the white fluid dribble out of his mouth into the crack. Then, he spread it with his tongue, wetting the sac and even the hairs before reaching the tight entrance. He licked it, toying with each and every crease until the cute little hole opened and closed as though it was beckoning at him.

"Does it tickle?"

"Does it?" he asked again when he received no answer.

"A…little."

"Do you want me inside you?"

"…mmhmm."

The murmurs in the bedroom were the most seductive, and listening to these, Ch'in Ching prepared himself for the sharp, tearing pain. He realized that he chose this willingly and gladly – even if it was pain waiting for him.

"Hey, take it easy." Shen Liangsheng could sense the man's tenseness and kissed his butt as a reward for behaving. He pulled open the drawer beside the bed and took out a jar of Vaseline from the pharmacy as he joked good-naturedly. "It might be just pain for you, but it's heartbreak for me to see you like that."

It was a joke, but it was quite romantic coming from Shen Liangsheng. His hand worked in the same loving manner, applying an adequate amount of jelly

on his fingers before sticking one digit in. After some stretching, he added another and asked while sliding them in and out, “Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“How about now?” Shen Liangsheng bent his fingers a little as he explored the soft wetness inside.

“No.”

“Do you feel anything else?”

“Hm?”

“Tell me when you do.”

“All right.”

Silence ensued as Shen Liangsheng continued probing until…

“Just now…” Ch’in Ching hesitated for a few moments before finishing, “It felt a bit…”

“Good?”

“I don’t know. It’s just…ah!”

Ch’in Ching cried out weakly. Shen Liangsheng’s fingers touched a spot that sent an electric spark through his body. It felt different, but excitingly good.

Shen Liangsheng had done some research beforehand and learned that even the bottom could feel good if the right spot was found. Seeing the man’s reaction, he continued to finger that spot, pressing and drawing circles. The man’s cries became thick with desire, and his hole clamped down hard around his fingers. Shen Liangsheng shoved his other hand between the man’s legs to find his erection livelier than ever, a clear sign of pleasure.

Shen Liangsheng could no longer stand the ecstatic moans coming from him. He slid his fingers out before putting jelly on his own member that was rock hard despite having already come once. Trying his best to control the speed, he pushed into the man and stopped halfway to ask, “Does it hurt?”

“Not too bad.”

“Almost there…” Shen Liangsheng could barely hold himself back, but he continued slowly. He let out a deep breath when he was fully buried. “You’re so tight.”

The words made the schoolmaster turn crimson. His entrance felt a little sore, but it was not terrible. He could almost make out the shape of the cock deep inside him and thus derived some pleasure from the discomfort.

Shen Liangsheng gave the man a minute to get accustomed before starting to thrust. He inquired in the same manner, “Does it hurt?”

“Not really.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me if it does.”

“Fine.”

Ch’in Ching couldn’t take his questions. Only now did he learn that his heart was made of clay – each word the man uttered pressed into it like fingers, marking every inch of it with the man’s fingerprints.

Shen Liangsheng thought the man to be ready and finally let go of his restraints. He felt the hole that he explored with his fingers earlier around his member, wrapped tightly around his head. A tingle crawled along his length to his sac before spreading to the rest of his body. He couldn’t help but pick up speed. The penetration was accompanied by wet sloppy sounds, and despite knowing very well it was the jelly, he sneered, “You’re wet, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Shen Liangsheng didn’t expect a straightforward answer and became even more aroused. However, he slowed down, probing for that spot with his tip. Once he had found it, he rammed into it while coaxing with words, “Does it feel good?”

“…yes.”

“Do you like me fucking you?”

“Yes…”

In the end, it was Shen Liangsheng who became more aroused. With the possessive part of him lit with lust, he reached down for Ch’in Ching’s shuddering dick and stroked it furiously. “Do you want to come?”

“I do…ah….”

Ch’in Ching pushed his hips back in time with Shen Liangsheng’s thrusts. His dick was swollen and felt as though something was forcing itself through the tiny hole. The length tingled and burned, but at the last second, the man let go of it. He even pinned his hands down so he couldn’t touch himself.

“I heard some men can come from the ass alone. Do you want to try it?”

“No…ah….”

Ch’in Ching paid no attention to what the man was saying. Not only did his dick feel swollen and tingly, the same unbearable feeling was inside his ass as well, and it climbed up his spine to his head. He needed release so badly that he begged, “No, no more…. Stop….”

“You don’t want to come anymore?”

“Yes, I do…. I want to come…want to…”

“Come from your ass?”

“Mmm…can’t.” Ch’in Ching was starting to lose his mind. He nodded for some reason, “Let – ah! Let me touch it…”

The truth was that Shen Liangsheng could not last much longer, either, so when he heard this, he brought the man’s hand between his legs and began stroking his member together. From the head to the sac, they left nothing unattended, even tugging at the hairs. Soon, the man climaxed with a sharp cry. He had held it in for so long that he shot out load after load, leaving wet blotches all over the sheets.

Ch’in Ching’s mind blanked as he reached orgasm, and he didn’t even know

when Shen Liangsheng came. The boiler kept the room warm, and the two were dripping with sweat. The exhausted men stayed connected as they panted, and eventually Shen Liangsheng pulled out. He touched the other man's crotch and taunted, "You're wetter than a girl."

"No way." By this point, Ch'in Ching didn't feel the need to be embarrassed anymore. Only now did he feel the stickiness inside of him. Shen Liangsheng must have come a lot inside. He lay face down, panting. "You're the one who made it wet. Not my fault."

"Can you walk?" The culprit planted a kiss on his shoulder. "Let's take a bath together."

"Don't want to move."

"I'll clean you off in a bit, then."

"All right."

The room fell quiet as Shen Liangsheng got a cigarette from the bedside table. He left the bed for the bathroom and washed himself off swiftly after finishing the smoke. Afterwards, he came back to the bed with a hot towel to wipe Ch'in Ching clean.

"Shen Liangsheng."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to say it."

Shen Liangsheng couldn't help but pat his head at the adorable behaviour.

"Ch'in Ching," he blurted. "How about you move in with me?"

"Huh?" Ch'in Ching was nodding off but was awoken by this invitation. He glanced at Shen Liangsheng and shook his head, chuckling, "No can do. *Hsiao*-Liu's sure to get to the bottom of it if I do, and he's the type who can't keep a secret. If my godmother catches wind of it, she'd hunt me down and grind me to pieces with a cleaver."

"Fine." Shen Liangsheng didn't seem to mind and casually changed the topic.

“Don’t fall asleep yet. Get up and let me change the sheets first.”

The two lay down together once more on top of the new sheets. Shen Liangsheng hooked an arm around Ch’in Ching and brought the man’s head into the nook in his neck. After a while, he leaned down and began kissing the skin behind his ear.

“Stop it already,” Ch’in Ching mumbled as he fell asleep. “Go to sleep.”

That left Shen Liangsheng in the dark with his eyes wide open, sleep refusing to come to him. He was starting to doubt himself.

What he said earlier was entirely impulsive, and he had regretted it the moment the words escaped his mouth. That Ch’in Ching refused only meant relief for Shen Liangsheng.

He suspected that the man had turned him down because he could see this, but maybe he was reading too much into it.

Nevertheless, those impulses meant something even though they were nothing but impulses. The invitation for the schoolmaster to move in acted as a fuse that forced him to rethink his feelings – he was indeed too possessive towards this man, so much so that it felt like the prelude to a serious relationship.

Loving someone was no big deal for him – Shen Liangsheng could proudly admit that he had been in relationships. He had a fixed ideal for women that was not strict at all: a decent face, above average height and easygoing attitude. That was it. Considering this, Ch’in Ching was a match if it were not for his gender.

Simply put, relationships were nothing more than the waltz in the ballroom to Shen Liangsheng – the constant change of partners was the norm. As for with whom he would settle down, that depended on which song was playing when he reached the right age. Whoever was the partner then would be the one.

But, curiously, as he held Ch’in Ching in his arms, the two in bed together, he felt this inexplicable sense of agitation.

It was as though a ballroom host were shouting at him in a high-pitched voice,

urging him.

"Changing partners!"

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67 The first line of Li Bai's poem, "Lamentations in the Tranquility of Night." This poem is one of the first to be learned by Chinese children. Translation borrowed from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quiet_Night_Thought

68 This proverb comes from a folktale. One day, a boy named Xiang found a snake and took it home as his pet. The snake seemed to understand humans and lived harmoniously with the family. Many years later, Xiang's mother grew ill, and the doctor prescribed snake liver as an ingredient in the medicine needed to cure her. Unable to find another snake, Xiang turned to his pet and friend. The snake understood and unhinged its jaws for Xiang to climb in and slice a part of its liver off for the medicine. Xiang's mother recovered but Xiang worried that the illness might return after the snake died. He grabbed a knife and forced the snake to unhinge its jaws once more and climbed in. He cut into its liver again. The snake writhed in pain but Xiang would not stop. He cut off piece after piece until finally the snake could not take it and closed its jaws, swallowing Xiang whole.

69 This is a special kind of proverb called xiehouyu. The literal translation of the expression is: Ring the bell once for every day one is a monk – the number of times one does is the number of times one gets. A monk's duties include studying scriptures, caring for the temple and such, while ringing the bell is only a superficial ritual that one must do every day.

70 One of the most famous teas, its name literally means "Iron Bodhisattva of Mercy."

71 The origin of Ti Kuan Yin tea, a county in Fujian Province.

XI

The weather in Tientsin this year was a bit unusual. First, the Indian summer was hotter than usual, and then winter came colder than ever with a huge snowfall at the end of November. The elderly probably would have said something like, “even the gods change for the worst when the mortal world is in turmoil,” but the kids didn’t have a care in the world – snow is great!

The snow began to fall at noon, starting with sparse, powdery dots that slowly built up. By the end of the school day, the field was loosely covered with a few inches of snow. The class was no longer paying attention to the lecture and was anticipating the end of the lesson so they could play.

It was at times like these that Ch’in Ching seemed not to be a proper teacher; he was too lax with his students. He glanced at the time – fifteen minutes left of class – and shut the book, announcing, “Let’s end here today. I’ll let you out for a bit, but on one condition: go home right away afterwards. The roads can be dangerous when it snows, so don’t make your families worry.”

The girls sang praises for their teacher as they ushered him out the classroom. Fang Hua was teaching maths in the next classroom and was nearing the end of her lesson. She was giving questions for the students to complete in class when she heard the commotion from the field. She looked out the windows and shook her head, chuckling, “All right. You can go out and have fun, too. Don’t forget to do the questions at home.”

“You couldn’t keep them under control either?”

Ch’in Ching was standing at the edge of the field, making sure the girls did not run too wild, when he saw Fang Hua letting her class out early as well. He greeted her with a smile.

“It’s not that.” Fang Hua took her place with Ch’in Ching on the side. “I didn’t want *Lao*[72]-Wu to give you trouble. The law cannot be enforced if everyone is an offender, can it?”

The *Lao*-Wu that Fang Hua spoke of was the vice principal and head of Academic Affairs at Sheng Kung. He was a just, easygoing person and asked the younger staff to call him *Lao*-Wu. In reality, they would not get punished by *Lao*-Wu for the likes of ending the lesson ahead of time. Fang Hua had only been joking, but the joke seemed a bit too intimate for their relationship. Ch'in Ching wasn't sure how to reply and chose to return with a chuckle.

"It's been rather cold lately." Despite the lack of a response, Fang Hua brought up a new topic for their small talk.

"It has indeed."

"Um…." Fang Hua faltered but found the courage to continue. "I was bored, so my mom had me learn to knit, and I made a pair of gloves, but they turned out too big. So, um, you could have them if you don't mind."

Ch'in Ching didn't know what to say. He knew that she must have knitted them especially for him. If he straight-out rejected her kind efforts, it would turn unpleasant for both of them. But, at the same time, not rejecting them might give her false hope.

"I feel younger just watching them play." Fang Hua quickly changed the topic again because she sensed his reluctance, or perhaps because she was shy.

"You're younger than me, aren't you, Miss Fang? I haven't even begun to feel old, so you of all people shouldn't let it get to you," Ch'in Ching replied naturally right before a few students ran up to them asking them to join in their snowball fight. The two jumped into the action, and the uncomfortable atmosphere disappeared.

The roads were indeed dangerous when it snowed, and the trams were affected, too. Shen Liangsheng considered this and left the office early to pick Ch'in Ching up from work even though it was not a day on which they usually met.

He was nearing the school when he was forced to park the car and walk the rest of the way due to the number of adults waiting for their children outside.

It had been two months since he last came to the school looking for Ch'in

Ching, but the gatekeeper still remembered him and let him in after some small talk. Shen Liangsheng took a few steps in to see the field as chaotic as a barnyard at feeding time. He easily picked out Ch'in the Rooster amongst the chicklets, but still looked at his watch, wondering why the kids were out and having fun this early.

Snow days were different. The sky was gloomy, but the snow reflected the light so that it was brighter than usual. As he turned, Ch'in Ching caught sight of Shen Liangsheng in a long, black coat and a matching fedora, walking towards him with his hands in the coat pockets and the pigeon grey twilight as background.

Ch'in Ching stood, dazed – no matter how many times he had seen this man already, his heart would miss a beat every time.

The girls were too engrossed in the snow to notice Shen Liangsheng, but one saw Ch'in Ching standing still and took the opportunity to hit him in the back with a solid ball of snow.

"You lost again, sir," she giggled.

"Yes, yes, you've won. I surrender." Ch'in Ching chuckled as he dusted the frozen bits off of his back. Soon, his hand was replaced by another – Shen Liangsheng had reached him and was wiping at his clothes for him.

"Oh…." Only then did the girl notice the visitor. She remembered seeing him before and that he had written on her paper, too. With that, she became excited but was embarrassed at having lost face in front of him. After some hesitation, she still gathered the courage to continue. "Sir, you're Mister Ch'in's friend, right? I-I didn't do well on the examination last time…."

"Ah, yes." Shen Liangsheng thought of the paper with the clever and winsome plea, and finding the girl cute, he decided to put on a stern face and tease her. "So, have you been studying?"

"Yes, I have, sir." Shen Liangsheng's emotionless face proved daunting and made the girl take his words seriously. She tugged at Ch'in Ching's sleeve

timidly. “Mister Ch’in is my witness. Aren’t you, sir?”

“Stop scaring her.” Ch’in Ching patted her head in reassurance. “And you, don’t be afraid of him. There’s no need.”

“Listen to your teacher, and don’t bully him.” Shen Liangsheng patted her head, too, after Ch’in Ching ruined his act. He added suggestively, “Your teacher is really sensitive to pain. You’re going to hurt him if you keep hitting him like that.”

Instantly, the schoolmaster in question blushed and glared at the man for being so inappropriate with his student. The girl naturally did not find anything strange with Shen Liangsheng’s warning. She did, however, turn red from his touch on her head and ran off, abashed. As she did so, she bumped into Fang Hua and decided to hug the teacher around the waist.

“Miss Fang,” she called endearingly.

With an arm around the girl, Fang Hua looked over, smiling. She saw and nodded towards Shen Liangsheng whom she took for a friend of Ch’in Ching’s.

As the chimes rang, she pointed towards the staff room signalling her leave. Ch’in Ching returned it with a smile and nod.

The staff room was empty when Fang Hua arrived. She quickly pulled out her desk drawer and took out the gloves that had been finished for some time but that she not yet had the chance to gift. She then hurried to Ch’in Ching’s desk on which there was a pile of workbooks and stuck them between two books.

She thought she had to be brave – if she liked him, then she had to be. She wanted to give her feelings to him, every stitch and every thread of them.

She wanted to, even if she might not receive anything in return.

Ch’in Ching was still stuck on the field herding the chicklets back to the classroom for their belongings and thence out the school gates and on their way home.

Shen Liangsheng was patient and waited for him before heading to the staff

room together.

The stack of workbooks was assignments that Ch'in Ching had to grade. He noticed the knitted gloves between the books and glanced over at Fang Hua. He just chose not to say anything and proceeded to pack everything away into a fabric bag.

"What are you up for tonight?" Shen Liangsheng asked as he fired up the engine.

"Anything is fine. What do you want?"

"How about hot pot?"

"Sounds splendid."

The man turned the car around in the direction of Cambridge Road. The two had not eaten out since establishing a relationship more or less to avoid unnecessary attention.

Ch'in Ching knew that he was more than likely going to stay for the night at this rate. However, they had slowly gained experience and not gotten themselves into the same situation as the first time. And as long as it did not interfere with the next day's lessons, Ch'in Ching honestly enjoyed it too much to oppose.

They had been on the road for a few minutes when Shen Liangsheng asked out of nowhere, "Why don't you take a look?"

"Huh?"

"She put so much work into it, and you just stuff it in your bag?"

Ch'in Ching was astonished that the man was observant enough to tell the gloves were a gift. He retorted jokingly, "I didn't want make anyone jealous."

Shen Liangsheng shot a mild glance at his passenger without replying. It was Ch'in Ching who ended up smiling awkwardly while scolding himself for not keeping his loud mouth shut. Why did he have to dig himself a hole?

The truth was that Shen Liangsheng did not mean to shoot a look at Ch'in

Ching for thinking too highly of himself – because if he truly weren't concerned about it, he wouldn't have asked in the first place.

A saying goes that getting into anything is better than getting into a relationship. One either turns stupid or extremely mindful and more sensitive than necessary.

However, this sensitivity is not useless. For instance, Ch'in Ching could see that Shen Liangsheng's earlier invitation to move in with him was only a whim. Well, he did not *see* – not with those nearsighted eyes of his – he merely sensed that the man regretted saying it and accordingly found a reasonable excuse to decline.

Unfortunately, Ch'in Ching was not one for romanticism no matter how sensitive he was, and nothing could keep him from sleeping like a log after turning down Shen Liangsheng.

And now, he might feel a bit blue thinking that he had overestimated his own importance to the man, but after the hot pot, all that blueness went into his stomach along with the mutton and bok choy and was never heard from again.

When bedtime came, Ch'in Ching was in bed first since he had already washed up and was reading the newspaper by the bedside lamp. Shen Liangsheng walked out of the bathroom drying his hair as he sat down on the bed. Noticing the quilt pulled up to Ch'in Ching's stomach instead of a bathrobe, he guessed that the man had on nothing underneath and stuck a hand under the quilt. He remarked as he touched his thighs, "You sure are candid today."

"Saves the trouble." Ch'in Ching replied half-heartedly as he was still reading. The paper crinkled as he flipped to the next page.

Shen Liangsheng did not remove his hands but proceeded to the inner thighs. Ch'in Ching couldn't help but laugh from the tickling caresses on his tender skin. He hadn't the eyes for the news anymore, but he pretended to keep reading and only focused his senses on the man's touches. The fingers had finally reached his crotch and began to gently tug on a tuft of hair. As they teased along the nook, they scraped by his soft member moving in a smooth, nimble manner

as though writing an English word.

"Didn't I see you just two days ago?"

"Yeah?"

"And you still want it this badly?"

"…yes."

Shen Liangsheng's original motive was to make fun of how easily aroused the man was, but when the man replied so frankly, it was he himself who lost control of his steady breathing. His jest turned into teasing.

"Then what do you do when I'm not around?"

Ch'in Ching felt the other man stroke his growing erection and let out a quiet moan. His legs parted to let him work his magic.

"What do you do?"

"No…thing."

"Have you touched yourself?"

"Mmhmm."

"While thinking of me?"

"Yes."

Ch'in Ching was still holding the paper in front of his face. This way he would not have to see Shen Liangsheng because somehow it made it easier to admit that he had secretly masturbated to the thought of him on the days he could not see him.

Shen Liangsheng pumped his hardened length at a steady pace. He couldn't tell if the other man's face was red or not since it was behind the newspaper, but the fingers holding it were trembling with pleasure.

"Stop pretending. You can't still be reading."

"Well, as they say, 'while the night is still young.'" Ch'in Ching threw away the paper after Shen Liangsheng saw through his act. "You're right, Master Shen, time waits for no man."

Shen Liangsheng removed his glasses for him and placed them on the bedside table. Ch'in Ching pulled the quilt off of himself to reveal his own naked body. It was skinny but not without muscle, He had a slim waist and straight legs between which his manhood was standing proud, swelling red under the warm lamp light.

Ch'in Ching watched as the other man stripped off his bathrobe and climbed on to the bed naked. He immediately leaned in to kiss him but was pushed down onto the bed.

Shen Liangsheng straddled the man over his chest, delivering his own erection straight to the man's mouth.

Ch'in Ching understood this as a request for a blowjob and proceeded to lift up his head and open his mouth to take the man in.

However, Shen Liangsheng pressed a finger to his lips and rubbed on them gently before moving to his brows and eyes.

This made Ch'in Ching close his eyes. He lay there quietly as if he were offering himself up for sacrifice.

He felt the man on top of him replacing his fingers with his member, slowly tracing every detail of his face with his manhood. The head delicately drew over his brow, scraped the mole by his eye, teased his lashes and slid along the bridge of his nose down to the lips and jaw.

Shen Liangsheng worked gently and slowly, but behind his actions lay a brute, possessive force. Like a male beast marking his territory, he purposefully patrolled the face with his manhood, branding it with the clear fluid oozing out of the aroused length.

To be completely honest, Ch'in Ching couldn't tell if Shen Liangsheng treated their relationship seriously or not.

Sometimes he could sense that the man was not actually invested in it, or that he was ready to leave whenever he wanted to.

But other times he could distinctly feel the possessiveness the man had for him.

So strong was this that Ch'in Ching almost thought Shen Liangsheng actually cared – that he actually cared about whether Ch'in Ching liked him or not, and whether he would like someone else instead.

And at one point, the words of confession threatened to slip out of Ch'in Ching's mouth.

"Shen Liangsheng, I love you."

But the words got swallowed back down before that could happen; he found that he couldn't let them out. Perhaps it was because he feared the silence that would envelop them after he said so.

Ch'in Ching's late mother had two pennies on her son, but *Hsiao*-Liu had three, the third being "dare devil." When they were young, the neighbourhood kids all would run off to the cemetery with a candle to tell scary stories. More often than not, Ch'in Ching would be the only one left still calm and composed. If the ghost of a hanging victim[73] appeared, he would have had the guts to tie a bowtie with its tongue.

Sadly, everything has its vanquisher, and since he met Shen Liangsheng, his guts had vanished from sight. Even Fang Hua was braver than he – he was too scared to say the three words, "I love you."

He feared that the words would only bring about silence, and then time would just burn away in that silence until it all became ash.

He would rather not clarify anything because at least the desire in the present was alive and warm as they held each other in this undefined embrace.

Perhaps due to these thoughts, Ch'in Ching had a peculiar dream that night in which he was actually at a temple ringing a bell.

It took place during sunset in what appeared to be an ancient monastery. He climbed up the winding wooden staircase of the bell tower, alone, to announce

the end of the day.

The odd thing was the hands that supposedly belonged to him. The pair of hands that he saw was so skinny that the knuckles were protruding. The sleeves of his clothes did not appear to be those of a monk's robe but rather those of a Confucian student of the old days, draped over the wooden striking beam. The garment and the spotted wood along with the pair of hands imbued the scene with a strange sense of desolation.

He heard the chime as it echoed throughout the empty hills, reaching the bloody red skies beyond.

Meanwhile, he heard his own silent utterance.

"Shen Liangsheng, I love you."

The bell of Buddha rang on, and gradually, all he could hear was the word, "Sīla."[74]

The amount of physical exercise and the ridiculous dream from the previous night left Ch'in Ching a bit drained the next morning. Shen Liangsheng tried twice to wake him but to no success.

Shen Liangsheng saw the man was still curled up in bed after he did his morning routine and, lighting a cigarette, decided to smoke him out.

"Ch'in Ching, are you getting up or not?" he asked as he blew a puff of smoke right in the man's face.

"Ye–" He coughed from the fumes and got up from bed. He shuffled over to the bathroom like a member of the undead.

As Shen Liangsheng smoked, he went to the windows and swung them open for fresh air. The world outside was completely white due to it having snowed through the night. The icy air gushed into the room, the temperature seeming lower than yesterday.

"Close the windows, Shen Liangsheng." Ch'in Ching finally woke up after washing up. He shivered because he had on only a bathrobe. "I swear people are

going to be dying if it keeps getting colder."

Shen Liangsheng was just reaching the end of his cigarette so he threw the butt out the window before closing the windows as the man had requested. As he turned back around, he saw Ch'in Ching about to get dressed. "Dress warmer today."

The schoolmaster had worn a thick lined robe yesterday that was enough to handle the cold. He watched as Shen Liangsheng opened the wardrobe and picked out an outfit for him. From the underwear to the coat, everything was his, and the wool sweater smelled like him, too. Ch'in Ching didn't even want to refuse. He didn't even care if it would attract attention at school.

The clothes make the man. Ch'in Ching looked like an honest teacher in his lined robe but in wool sweater and suit pants and the silver-rimmed glasses, he looked like a player in scholars' gown.

Said player also had a faulty memory. He had scolded himself for not watching his mouth, but today he could not stop his cheeky mouth from poking fun at Shen Liangsheng again. "C'mon, it was only a pair of gloves. Do you really need to retaliate with all this?"

"What do you think?" Shen Liangsheng said with his usual cool face as he buttoned the shirt for Ch'in Ching, who thought the taller man was actually in a good mood.

"What do I think?" he continued confidently, "I think this is all a man can ask for from his dear wife."

"And I think you can walk to work today, Mister Ch'in."

"No, Master Shen, please have mercy. I was foolish to speak so brutishly."

By the end of the banter, Ch'in Ching was fully dressed, prim and proper. The topmost button proved uncomfortable for him, and he unfastened it.

"What's wrong?"

"It's too tight."

Shen Liangsheng found a grey checkered wool scarf for him before instructing, “Don’t take this scarf off today.”

“Why?”

“Bite marks.”

Ch’in Ching had been teasing the man this whole time but easily turned crimson at one utterance from him. “You really are a dog, aren’t you?”

“Right you are, Mister Ch’in,” Shen Liangsheng replied, unflustered. “You were born in Year One,[75] right? And I’m two years older. You do the math.”

Ch’in Ching was born in the Year of the Rat, and two years before Rat was indeed the Year of the Dog.

Not knowing how to retort to that, Ch’in Ching grabbed the coat from the back of the chair and went downstairs for breakfast.

Then, he lived in the man’s presence for the rest of the day.

The coat was in dry-cleaned condition and only smelled of camphor from the wardrobe. The sweater, however, had already been worn once and emanated the scent of tobacco and cologne, just faintly enough to be detected but never fading away.

Shen Liangsheng was a meticulous person and had chosen only dark, unflashy clothes whose price the average person could not discern. The colleagues only complimented the schoolmaster. “Looking sharp today, Ch’in!”

Ch’in Ching chuckled, not even attempting to explain. Perhaps those in love always become a bit foolish. Despite it being a taboo relationship, he was unwilling to hide the sweet delight inside and so was secretly cheerful the entire day.

And when he thought of that absurd but strangely realistic dream again, all he could think was…

As long as he could be with this man like this, forever and ever, he wouldn’t trade it for all the money in the world. Begone with Sīla!

72 A prefix that shows the relative old age of a person or that they have been doing something (occupation, business, research, etc.) for a long time. Mostly used for men.

73 A specific kind of ghost usually depicted with a long hanging tongue. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_supernatural_beings_in_Chinese_folklore#

74 This means “abstinence” or the act of not indulging in materialistic things. Since this word is culturally charged, I chose the original Indian term. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_ethics

75 The calendar of the Republic of China, still used in Taiwan, begins in 1912, the year of the founding of the Republic. 2016 of the Gregorian calendar would be Year 104.

XII

It was Saturday, a day on which Shen Liangsheng would make time to see Ch'in Ching if there was no urgent business. Thus, despite having seen him last night, he still left the office early to pick up Ch'in Ching from school. Even Chou could see that the young master was very close with the schoolmaster and seemed to take a fancy to him, more so than any of the previous women.

Chou was not exactly a genius, but he did have an eye for people. If not, he wouldn't have gone to Shen Liangsheng's side all those years back. If Ch'in Ching had been a woman, considering that Chou was a bootlicker, he would have said good words to his boss in hopes that his thoughts would reach the ears of that special lady. If they ended up together, then she would be Mrs. Shen Jr. – one should not underestimate the power of pillow talk.[76]

Unfortunately, Ch'in Ching was a man. It was not that Chou looked down upon relationships between men – he was a veteran in the game of power and thought himself to be an open-minded person. No one had the right to look down upon anybody else – but he had never heard of two men with a happy ending. No matter how much he fancied him now, they were bound to break. If Ch'in Ching was not going to be "Mrs. Shen Jr.," then Chou wasn't going to waste efforts to suck up.

Ch'in Ching spent the day in secret joy, and when he got off work, he saw Shen Liangsheng's car parked outside the school. He hopped in and looked at the driver with a smile on his face.

Shen Liangsheng fired up the engine and turned onto the road leading back to his manor. As he drove, he could feel the schoolmaster's smiling gaze on him. "What's the good news?"

"Nothing."

The traffic light ahead had just changed and Shen Liangsheng stepped on the brakes, taking the opportunity to stare back at his passenger. Their eyes met for a few seconds, and the bashful Ch'in Ching looked down first. The smile did

not leave his face, and Shen Liangsheng felt his heart flutter at the sight.

He thought Ch'in Ching really liked to smile. The man wasn't exceptionally good-looking, but his smile was just nice on the eyes. He was very cute with his eyes cast down in silence, too.

With his clothes and the glasses that he had picked, the man was his.

Regardless of Shen Liangsheng's acknowledgement of whether he was in love or not, the truth was that he behaved like any other idiot in love. Unusually for him, a silly thought occurred. He didn't want to go home like this. He wanted to change the atmosphere – to a public one, to one with others present – like a child who wanted to flaunt their new toy for others to see.

"Ch'in Ching, let's eat out tonight."

"Oh, sure. What do you want?"

"How's Kiessling's?"

"Permission granted."

"Can you stomach it?"

"I don't mind…" Ch'in Ching was a bit distracted by the faint ghost of a smile about the driver's lips. This was only the fourth time he had seen the man smile in the three months he had known him. He kept note of each one because of the rarity.

"I don't mind if I can stomach it or not," Ch'in Ching elaborated after he came back to himself. "Even if my stomach doesn't get full, I can get full just by looking."

"Huh?"

"It'll be a feast for my eyes."

Shen Liangsheng didn't continue the banter. He thought as he turned at the intersection that life had become some sort of crosstalk ever since he met this man. The meaningful yet trivial back-and-forth could be a bit garrulous but was entertaining nonetheless.

Kiessling's was the oldest of the Western style restaurants in Tientsin. Located near the Hsiaopailou, it was a ten minute drive from Yich'ing-*li*. The founder was German, but since the Bolshevik Revolution the number of Russians in the area had increased to the extent that the menu at Kiessling's steadily changed to suit the Russian palette more.

Nevertheless, the restaurant was in China after all, so the dishes were modified accordingly. However, Tientsin locals grew up drinking water from the Hai Ho that was a bit bitter and salty even when boiled. Over time, their tolerance built up, and Ch'in Ching found that even the modified dishes were too light for his liking.

Ch'in Ching did not mention this minor detail. Sitting across from the person he liked with candlelight dancing between them, he could have been served a plate of plain boiled bok choy and still stuffed it into his stomach with delight. However, Shen Liangsheng somehow knew and called over a Russian waiter for some table salt.

Shen Liangsheng spoke English with the waiter. Ch'in Ching understood but chose not to say anything about it. He only glanced up at the man and smiled.

In that moment, he found the confidence to believe that the man loved him, too.

"Even though you never say it, Vincent, I know you love me."

As a matter of fact, Ch'in Ching was not the first person to think this. Shen Liangsheng had been in a three year relationship with the lady who played billiards well when he was studying in England. With his cold nature, he wouldn't have stayed for so long if it was only for monetary benefits and he actually had not been fond of her.

She was lying on his chest listening to his heartbeat after they had sex in the flat that they rented for their secret affair. She asked, "I love you, Vincent. Do you love me?"

"What do you think?"

“Even though you never say it…” She knew that he was the kind to answer questions that he didn’t want to address with a rhetorical question, but she continued confidently, “I know you love me.”

Later, Shen Liangsheng graduated and decided to return to China. The night before he left she asked him again, “I will get a divorce for you, Vincent. Will you stay for me?”

“What do you think?” It was the same question, but this time she hadn’t the confidence to say, “You will.”

Afterwards, she sent a dozen letters to him without receiving a single reply. In the last letter she wrote, “Even now, I still think that you loved me. But I think you love yourself even more. Farewell, Shen.”

After he read it, Shen Liangsheng shredded it with scissors, as he had the dozen that came before it, and threw it in the bin beside the desk.

It really did not matter if he cut it up or not. Their relationship had been over, and there was nothing of which to be wary. It was just that Shen Liangsheng was always thorough and decisive.

He followed his own principles meticulously, weighing everything on that scale of his – great benefits awaited him upon his return to China while a relationship was all that would result from him staying – after the weighing, he would cast away the lighter side without ever sparing it a second thought.

“Did you have enough to eat?”

“Huh?” Having finished his meal, Shen Liangsheng was drinking coffee with a lit smoke in hand. Ch’in Ching was still lost in that unspeakable joy when the other man’s question brought him back. “Yeah, I think.”

The “I think” at the end made Shen Liangsheng chuckle. “You think?”

“Yes, I did.” Ch’in Ching corrected himself accordingly before turning to look out the windows.

Truthfully, he really wasn’t sure if he were full or not. His heart, on the other hand, felt stuffed to its brim. It felt a bit like the times when he got sick as a

child. His mom would make noodles and serve them, hot and fresh, in one of those huge bowls with two sweet poached eggs on top. Once it went down to his stomach, it made all his illnesses go away better than medicine.

Ch'in Ching had knelt before his parents' graves and touched his head to the ground, telling them to leave without worries and not to miss him. He promised them that he was going to be fine by himself.

However, he couldn't help but have the illusion from time to time when he came home from work that his dad and mom were still here and that it wasn't just an empty house awaiting him.

He moved into his parents' room. He would have a silent conversation with them when he couldn't find sleep. He would tell them what he ate that day, what lesson he taught, which student forgot their homework again, until he grew so tired that he fell asleep.

However, the times when he was alone had been decreasing since he grew close with Shen Liangsheng. It was as though a hole in his heart had been refilled with soil and a sapling. The sapling sprung up a few inches every time they met, and eventually, flowers more fragrant than the osmanthus bloomed, growing into fruits sweeter than honey.

It surprised Ch'in Ching that loving someone made him such a prolific poet.

Shen Liangsheng didn't know what was going through Ch'in Ching's mind, but somehow the gentle expression on the man's face as he gazed out the windows curiously reminded him of his mother, of whom he rarely thought.

There had been good times – Shen Liangsheng had spent the first six years of life with his mother, and when he was finally allowed into the Shen household, Shen K'echen would take him back to see her twice a month.

That was when Shen K'echen still wanted to take care of her and when she still loved the man without complaint. She waited in that house, willingly and alone, for the two meetings every month.

Shen Liangsheng's mother was half-Portuguese but could speak only English and Chinese. Perhaps because she held a longing for the home to which she

never returned, she took a special liking to *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

That was when Shen Liangsheng would play new piano pieces he had learned for her during their visits, when she would sit by the piano and read poetry to them, and when the three seemed like a family.

Shen Liangsheng was a smart boy growing up with a great memory. He could still recite all the English poems he had learned in childhood, yet he failed to remember that his mother had once been beautiful, too. The image that had the deepest impression was that of an opium addict. She had waited and waited, and perhaps one day, the waiting proved too much for her psyche.

However, he remembered now how beautiful his mother had been. He remembered how, with that gentle expression under the bright afternoon sun, she had read out the sonnets and translated each line into Chinese. She was teaching him poetry on the surface, but it was in reality a secret plea to his father.

"Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand

Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore

Alone upon the threshold of my door

Of individual life, I shall command

The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand

Serenely in the sunshine as before,

Without the sense of that which I forbore –

Thy touch upon the palm."

Silent introspection fell upon the two men sitting across flickering candlelight. Shen Liangsheng was the first to recompose himself after the cigarette and beckoned the waiter over to pay the bill.

"Your bill has been paid for, sir."

Surprised, Shen Liangsheng looked in the direction in which the waiter was

pointing. After momentary hesitation, he walked over and greeted politely, "Uncle."

"*Hsiao*-Shen, it's been quite some time, hasn't it?"

The man who paid for Shen Liangsheng was Wang, another major player in Tientsin. He was different from Shen K'echen who had started fresh in Tientsin with the assets that he had amassed from his political career. The Wangs appeared low-key, but no matter how the board shifted in these decades, they were truly the versatile piece that found alliance with whomever they deemed beneficial. Because of these mysterious connections of the Wangs, Shen Liangsheng was willing to call Old Man Wang "uncle" despite the few interactions the Shens had with them.

"No big deal. Just supper." Seeing Shen Liangsheng about to say thanks, Wang waved his hand dismissively. "*Hsiao*-Shen, this is my little girl. She just came back from America." Then, he turned to the seat across from him and scolded superficially, "You just had to drag me here to this hell of a place when you had all that good Chinese food to eat. *Hsiao*-Shen, tell me I'm not alone in this!"

"Can you not always embarrass me, Dad?" Miss Wang here probably had a close and casual relationship with her dad. She did not look flustered at all as she stuck out a hand and introduced herself again. "I'm Wang Chih-chih." Then, she rolled her eyes at her dad and added, "Call me Jenny. My dad wasn't thinking straight when he named me. *Chih-chih*? More like *cha-cha*."[77]

"Shen Liangsheng." He shook her hand and added as well, "Vincent."

That was how they met. Old Man Wang was sixty-four, but Miss Jenny had only turned twenty. The man had always spoiled his baby daughter who came to the world in his middle age, but he couldn't bear to upset his little princess and sent her out abroad for foreign education as she wished. However, his longing proved too much, and he made her take a year off and come back to Tientsin.

Annoyed at her controlling dad, Jenny had been trying to cause him grief since she came back. She knew he hated Western cuisine but still dragged him to Kiessling's for dinner. By chance, she spotted Shen Liangsheng, and her heart skipped a beat. She kicked her dad under the table.

“Dad, over there by the windows.” She sighed, “How can someone be so good-looking? Why didn’t you make me look like that, Dad?”

Old Man Wang glanced over to find someone he knew. Although he disliked how open and straightforward his daughter was, he thought it would be good to introduce the two young’uns to each other. He knew of the capabilities of the younger son of Shen, and the lad was indeed handsome. If his daughter really did take a fancy to him, she wouldn’t need to go back to that silly school – a perfect deal.

The sly old fox paid for Shen Liangsheng and waited for the lad to walk into his trap. The three of them chatted for a bit before he announced, “I’m feeling good tonight. Let’s go to St. Anna[78] – it’s on me!”

“Apologies, Uncle, but I’m here with a friend today. How about another day? I’d love to take you and Miss Wang out.”

“Ask your friend to come along.” Wang had seen Ch’in Ching, but he didn’t find it strange that two men were eating at a Western-style restaurant. He thought it must have been proper business. “Four makes the party!”

“We’re not playing mah-jong, Dad,” Jenny interrupted quickly. “Plus, what kind of father brings his daughter to a dance hall? You’re probably the only one!”

“You get a boys’ haircut behind my back, and now you call yourself a daughter?” Wang stood his ground, but Jenny turned her attention to Shen Liangsheng, helping him out of the situation.

“You carry on with your own plans, Vince. Don’t mind my dad. We can meet another day.”

Wang Chih-chih was always a frank tomboy, and the two years in the United States only reinforced this. Even though Shen Liangsheng called her Miss Wang, she closed their distance by calling him Vince. Shen Liangsheng knew what she was trying to do, but he only replied, “Of course.”

As Ch'in Ching observed the conversation from his seat by the windows, he could more or less guess the content. Truthfully, he wasn't upset by it. Rather, he was suddenly aware that time was fleeting. If he had known it would turn out like this, he would have definitely asked him for his name at their first encounter. He would have introduced himself, too, and asked to meet again. Perhaps then they would have had another spring and another summer together.

"Let's go."

Shen Liangsheng did not make any explanation after he finished business and returned to their table. Only when they had left the restaurant and were waiting for the valet to bring the car around did he speak again.

"Are you cold?"

"It's all right." Ch'in Ching shook his head and joked, "I mean, the ladies are wearing dresses."

Shen Liangsheng followed the other man's gaze. St. Anna was not far off. Three Russian hostesses, or maybe prostitutes, were standing beneath the neon sign chatting while they grabbed a smoke. Their coats reached past their knees barely far enough to hide the sheer stockings on their legs as they kicked at the remaining snow on the ground with their heels.

Some of the Russians in China were well off, but there were also many in poverty who would do anything for a meal. Amongst these people, there just might have been some descendants of czars or czarinas. They had lost all their wealth and power in one revolution but nonetheless were lucky to have survived. There were many hostesses working at St. Anna using their former titles as advertisement. The patrons loved it, too. They would call them "my Duchess" with proper manners before breaking into nasty guffaws.

After they arrived back at the manor, Shen Liangsheng asked the kitchen to make shrimp wonton for Ch'in Ching since the man did not seem to have filled his stomach earlier.

Later that night, Shen Liangsheng was also very lax with Ch'in Ching in bed. The reason was clear to both of them, but neither laid it out in the open. Perhaps

the mood was supposed to be both passionate and sorrowful, but Ch'in Ching honestly was not the kind to reminisce about autumn whenever he saw a fallen leaf. All that was going through his mind when the compliant man let him touch him all over, his chest gently rising and falling as he panted and his eyes irresistible like the misty hills in spring or a still, silvery lake at night, was how to be on top for once.

"Ch'in Ching." As the schoolmaster's hands began to tread into dangerous territory, Shen Liangsheng warned in a low voice with a frown, "That's enough."

"Master Shen." Ch'in Ching refused to get off and leaned into the man's ear, negotiating, "How about I top once? I promise it won't hurt."

Shen Liangsheng reached for his head, stroking his hair gently as he replied even more softly, "Not even in your dreams."

Before Ch'in Ching could get out a single syllable in retort, Shen Liangsheng pushed him down and sealed his mouth with his own. All his efforts turned into inaudible moans.

Shen Liangsheng kissed him with care, reaching every single spot in his mouth before sliding to his ear and playing with the canal.

Ch'in Ching's ears were his weak spot. His bones went limp, but his member stuck up high in excitement that was also evident from the already slick head.

Shen Liangsheng knew the sensitivity of the man's ears. As he licked, he reached for the container of Vaseline beside the pillow. With the jelly on his fingers, he entered Ch'in Ching from behind.

Having lost his ground in the battle, Ch'in Ching simply gave up and opted to enjoy it.

"Mhm, Shen Liangsheng…" The tingling in his ear spread to the rest of his body causing him to beg in a whisper, "Don't just lick there."

"Here?" Shen Liangsheng clearly knew what the man wanted but pretended not to know as he kissed his collarbone.

"A li'l lower…."

The sight of the man sticking out his chest in an effort to deliver his nipples to his mouth excited Shen Liangsheng so much that he forgot about his plans to tease the man. He opened wide and took the entire areola in, pressing on the perky nubs with his tongue while sucking and playing.

Ch'in Ching had long learned the magic that was Shen Liangsheng's tongue. A man's nipples were not supposed to feel stimulation like this, but somehow Ch'in Ching grew addicted to the feeling. His nipples became more and more sensitive, too, and when the mood was right just having them licked would send shudders down his spine.

There was one other place that had become more sensitive. Ch'in Ching had never known that he could feel such sensations from his ass. He couldn't put a finger on it, but there was one spot that, with the lightest contact, made him shake with so much pleasure he couldn't stop his cries if he tried.

"Ah…st-stop…."

It appeared that Shen Liangsheng had planned beforehand to extend the foreplay. He already had three fingers widening the entrance as they slid in and out, but he did not move on to the next step. He kept biting on the man's nipples till both sides were swollen. Every lick made the man beneath him shudder till finally he began to plead.

"Can't take it anymore?"

"No." They had already done it at least eighty, if not a hundred, times, and Ch'in Ching was no longer as bashful as he had once been. He spoke frankly, "I kind of want to come, so hurry up and get inside me."

Ch'in Ching said this because he knew that the other man especially liked to constrain him, not letting him come until he did so himself. Better to let the man inside sooner and make him feel good so he could feel good sooner, too.

Shen Liangsheng did take his fingers out but refused to replace them with his manhood. He leaned into Ch'in Ching's ear. "How much do you want to come?"

"Very much…."

"And you want me inside?"

“Yeah.”

“Want to try coming without touching your dick?”

“That’s impossible.”

“We can always try.”

“You’re kidding.”

Ch’in Ching wouldn’t submit verbally, but after Shen Liangsheng entered him and worked for a few minutes, he was so woozy he was muttering nonsense.

It was not discomfort, but he had always felt at least a dull, stretching pain. Perhaps because the foreplay this time was longer than usual, he did not feel such pain. Instead, each thrust only brought pleasure that kept escalating and filling his member with more desire, beckoning him to touch himself.

Sadly, Shen Liangsheng was determined not to let him do so, restraining his hands while he observed his reactions in time with his thrusts. The man’s length was sticking straight up in exhibition of the pleasure and, after ten minutes or so, began to show signs of orgasm as it jumped every time he pushed into him.

“S-stop…ah…I’m gonna….” Ch’in Ching was so delirious that he protested and fought against his restraints to relieve his swollen erection, but he was too depleted to do anything.

The ecstatic bliss that the man was experiencing broke all of Shen Liangsheng’s self-control. He began thrusting into the man as if his life depended on it and witnessed him come with violent spasms from his penetration alone for the first time. He felt satisfaction beyond description and quickly found release deep inside of the man.

They had the lights off tonight, and Shen Liangsheng could not see Ch’in Ching’s face clearly. He was also distracted by his own orgasm so that he did not notice anything wrong until he had panted for almost a minute. He reached for the man and found tears as suspected.

A strange, conflicting feeling arose. He found it so satisfying that he wished he

could make the man cry every time, but at the same time he felt bad and wanted to just hold him in his arms and comfort him.

Shen Liangsheng couldn't help it, and a few seconds later, he wrapped his arms around the shorter man and pulled him in, face to face. He inquired in a soft whisper, "What's wrong, baby?"

The truth was that Ch'in Ching was fine. It was just that the stimulation and lack of control from being fucked till orgasm was too much. The tears were tears of pleasure, too, and not from being upset.

Shen Liangsheng's question just now was fine, but the quiet, sweet "baby" made him speechless for some time. When he finally got a hold of himself, he replied stiffly, "Watch it."

"Answer me once?" Shen Liangsheng was the master of keeping a straight face while saying ridiculous things. He planted a kiss on the mole near Ch'in Ching's eye and called him softly again, "Baby?"

Ch'in Ching stayed silent.

"I've used it only with you. Are you really going to ignore me?"

"…all right."

Shen Liangsheng called and Ch'in Ching answered – and that was how the silly nickname came to be.

It was in that second that Shen Liangsheng decided that even if Old Man Wang had intentions and tried anything funny, he would not agree to it.

He wanted to wait a little while longer. Although he was bound to get married to someone who could bring him more benefits, it was too early for that. They had only been together for three months, and he didn't want to lose him that soon.

In that moment, Shen Liangsheng finally admitted that he fell for this person.

He took out his scale and weighed the two sides – at this point in time, his baby was the heavier one.

76 This refers to the influence that a wife has on her husband because she is the person beside him every night before sleep.

77 These two combinations are the common onomatopoeia for bird chirps, also used to describe a noisy, talkative person.

78 St. Anna Ballroom was a dance hall located in the English concession that featured American jazz played mainly by Russian émigrés. The little information I could find was from Dolly Beil's memoir, Growing Up Jewish in China and from Andrew F. Jones' essay, 'Black Internationale: Notes on the Chinese Jazz Age,' appearing in Jazz World.

XIII

Not wishing to get involved with Jenny Wang, Shen Liangsheng did not call and arrange a date with her. However, Miss Jenny was more open than expected and rang the Shen manor first.

Although he did not wish to establish any kind of relationship with her, he had to put on a proper act for the sake of Old Man Wang. He never rejected any of her proposals, but his behaviour was mild, not too close and not too distant. It was polite enough so that not one fault could be found but still made the lady hot around the collar from frustration.

After a few days, though, it became clear to Jenny that the man most likely had no interest in her. His mask of kindness was only to avoid creating hostility between the two families. All he was waiting for was for her to become bored or annoyed and just leave him alone.

If she were another girl, perhaps one with a soft disposition, she might have sighed, “I shall leave you be if you haven’t the heart for me.” If she were a stubborn one, she probably would keep fighting, pushing harder after each failure until she came to a dead end. If she were a sassy diva, she would go right up to Shen Liangsheng with her finger in his face demanding, “Yes or no, you better lay it out right this instant!”

However, Miss Jenny Wang was in fact a roguish mischief-maker. Once the dreamy eyes disappeared, she saw through Shen Liangsheng’s calm facade. When she guessed his true intentions, she could not believe that he had been constantly living his life under that disguise.

Thus, Miss Wang finally gave her old man a break and instead bugged Shen Liangsheng in her free time. As though playing with a dog or cat, she used Mr. Shen Jr. to combat her boredom while wondering how long this masquerade would last.

On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng eventually understood the situation at hand. He was eighty percent sure that Jenny Wang was no longer romantically interested in him and that she simply wanted someone to play a game with her to

relieve her boredom. Hence, he dropped some of his act and even mocked her once when she got on his nerves.

"Our chef must be terribly talented for Miss Wang to be here for dinner all the time."

"Well, the grass is always greener on the other side." Jenny acted crass and graceless, exactly like her dad. She sported a tomboy cut and on this occasion even wore men's fashion. She sat unladylike in the lounge in Shen Liangsheng's home asking, as she ate sunflower seeds,[79] "Is my dear Ch'in-*keke*[80] coming tonight?"

"Since when was he your brother?" At the end of the day, this was what bothered Shen Liangsheng the most. As Jenny often came to his house and most of the time without an invitation, running into Ch'in Ching became inevitable. She knew that he was the businessman's close friend. The first time they exchanged names, the second time they got to know each other, and somehow by the third time, "Mr. Ch'in" had become "my dear Ch'in-*keke*."

The reason for this was Ch'in Ching's friendliness. First of all, Ch'in Ching thought that Jenny didn't like Shen Liangsheng in that way, and secondly, even if she did, he didn't think it would be right for him to bully a girl.

Jenny was not stupid; she realized that Ch'in Ching was an honest, straightforward person, unlike that ambiguous, half-hearted Shen Liangsheng. She didn't care that he was not a son of wealth and wanted to be his friend in spite of that. During their chat, she found out that he was a crosstalker and began to pester him with requests to become his pupil. She claimed that she had artistic talent and could do a perfect imitation of Chaplin. She then performed an act, and it was not half bad.

The Wangs were native to Tientsin. Jenny was abroad for two years but was nonetheless a Tientsiner born and bred. When she and Ch'in Ching came together, nothing could stop their banter. Shen Liangsheng could have sworn that he was a bear with a sore head when he overheard their ridiculous chitchat in the Tientsin dialect. In addition, he had to stay wary in case Miss Wang decided to give up on him and instead go for Ch'in Ching. Out of the three, he was the only one troubled and constantly worried. He wished he could go on

strike and force Old Man Wang to keep a stricter watch on his baby daughter so that she would stop invading his peace and quiet.

December came to a trouble-free end. From Christmas to New Year's Day, anyone who was anyone held gatherings. Naturally, Shen Liangsheng could not escape the tradition. He picked a date, sent out the invitation cards and waited for the guests to show up, have fun and leave.

Sheng Kung was considered a Christian school since the investors of Sheng Kung were mostly priests and devout members of the Church. Thus, the school was closed for Christmas. Shen Liangsheng was annoyed that Jenny had been getting in the way of his spending time with Ch'in Ching and so was keeping the schoolmaster in his manor from the beginning of the holidays until the new year.

The party was set for New Year's Eve. Jenny regretfully announced that she already had plans that night. Shen Liangsheng nodded, agreeing that it was a shame, while thinking secretly that it really was a shame she didn't hurry up and get back to America and her education.

Without Jenny, there was no one to keep Ch'in Ching busy although he liked the peace and quiet, too. Disregarding the party downstairs, he stayed in the bedroom reading. He did not know any of Shen Liangsheng's friends or acquaintances anyway, nor did he want to. Shen Liangsheng never introduced him to anyone, either. It was as though a line were drawn with Shen Liangsheng standing at the top; to the left was a crowd – his social connections – and to the right was one person – his secret, taboo love.

"Have they all gone home?"

"Not yet."

"Then what're you doing here?"

Ch'in Ching was sitting on the bed reading some book he had brought over. He looked up when Shen Liangsheng came into the room before quickly returning to his page.

Shen Liangsheng approached the bed and sat down, but he did not speak.

After Ch'in Ching read a few more lines, he noticed that the man still had not said anything and kept staring at him, so he put the book down and stared back. Only then did he find that the man's composed face was a bit pink. "Did you have too much to drink? Want to lie down for a bit?"

"No, I'm fine."

"If so, then go downstairs," Ch'in Ching said as he massaged his forehead for him. "What's the host doing leaving his guests unattended?"

Shen Liangsheng grabbed his hand and pulled the man into his arms. He replied in a slightly drunk voice while softly nuzzling his hair with his chin, "I missed you, wanted to see what you're up to."

This took Ch'in Ching by surprise, but he quickly recovered and began to bask in his own glory. The taller man was acting so adorably that he couldn't help but be wooed. He immediately took the opportunity to hug the man close and tease him. "If only I'd known that Young Master Shen would be so endearing after a few drinks…."

Tired of the schoolmaster's pointless quips, Shen Liangsheng went straight for the kiss and pushed the man down onto the bed. Ch'in Ching could taste some alcohol and tobacco from the kiss as he licked the other man's tongue. When Shen Liangsheng teased him back, he returned the favour.

They kept toying with each other, back and forth, and before it got out of hand, Ch'in Ching pushed the other man and urged in a whisper, "You should go downstairs, leave this for later."

"It's late now." Shen Liangsheng actually was not going to do anything. He backed away and gathered his breath but still returned with banter.

"True." Ch'in Ching sat up straight and looked at his watch. "Maybe I should go to bed."

Shen Liangsheng stood up and shot a look at the man while he fixed his clothes.

"If you want me to wait for you, just say it. What are you rolling your eyes at

me for?" Ch'in Ching snickered as he burst his bubble without hesitation. Noticing the crooked Windsor knot around the man's neck, he got up as well and adjusted it for him.

Looking down at the man fixing his tie for him and hearing the faint music coming from downstairs, Shen Liangsheng hooked an arm around the man's waist and spun him around in an improvised dance.

The heater was turned high in the room. Ch'in Ching was wearing a shirt and dress pants but only satin slippers on his feet. On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng was clad formally like the second time he met Ch'in Ching – the full white tuxedo made his hair appear especially dark and his eyes mysterious.

The schoolmaster had started out smiling as he let the man sway him. He had underestimated how romantic this man could be despite his usual stern and cool appearance. But slowly he began to feel dazed as though he had become drunk as well, and the smile faded from his face.

Ch'in Ching looked into those bottomless eyes, and all the sounds of the people and of the music slipped far away. All that was left was the pair of eyes, deep like a well undisturbed for centuries awaiting that one person in dire need of water.

He couldn't stop himself from initiating a passionate kiss with the taller man. He stretched out for his tongue and swallowed his fluid in hope of becoming that thirsty person.

Shen Liangsheng's ears buzzed as the lust he had just managed to put out began to burn stronger than before. He returned the frantic kiss while rushing to unfasten his own belt. He pushed his pants and underwear down and sat down on the bed, pulling Ch'in Ching down to his knees. "Suck it. Take it in deep."

Ch'in Ching knelt on the floor and ducked down to take the man deep into his mouth until he felt the hairs tickling his face. His nose was filled with his scent and his ears his muffled moans. This made him suck harder so that he could perhaps hear the man lose control. The thought drove blood into his own member and wetted the fabric wrapped around its head.

Shen Liangsheng was mostly self-possessed in bed. He would not lose his last line of self-restraint no matter how mad he drove Ch'in Ching. However, perhaps because he really had had too much to drink tonight, he recalled that euphoric night long ago as he drowned in the ecstatic stimulation. He had also gotten drunk on the night he first met him and had an intense wet dream.

Now, the person in his dreams was kneeling between his legs, sucking him hard and loud as if his life depended on it. The satisfaction and excitement of his dream becoming reality eventually hit him with an impact large enough that his mental barricade collapsed. The waves once trapped pushed through the broken dam with no signs of stopping. He felt like his member was going to melt in the man's mouth. The warm flesh and nimble tongue tended to his manhood, stimulating each sensitive spot, and soon, he let his voice go just as Ch'in Ching had wished.

Shen Liangsheng had a nice voice, deep and chilled like a glass of amber spirit on the rocks, cool but extremely easy to get drunk on. Ch'in Ching pressed his tongue along the length and licked down to swirl his tongue on the perineum. He sealed his lips around the bulging sac and sucked as seductive moans escaped from the man above. Hearing them made his own abdomen tighten and his erection harden even more – he almost wanted to come right then and there.

"Suck it…ah…." Shen Liangsheng could feel his release upon him and pushed his hips forward as he teased breathlessly, "Do you like it?"

"Mhm, I do," Ch'in Ching purred before taking the head in again, hollowing his cheeks and sucking. He felt the shaft shudder from the imminent climax and began playing with his balls in rhythm.

Shen Liangsheng could not hold back any longer. With a blissful cry, he exploded in the man's mouth. By the time he was himself again, he realized the man had swallowed all his cum save for the smudge by his lips that was evidence of his loss of self-control.

"Why are you so well-behaved lately?" Shen Liangsheng pulled him up by the hand and sat him down on his lap. He kissed the remaining traces of him from his lips while rubbing the bulge in his pants. "You must really like it to be this

hard just from blowing me."

"Shut up." Ch'in Ching was able to say those things because the man's sultry voice made him lose his mind, but now that he was back to normal, his cheeks flushed from the very thought of having admitted that he liked the man's member. He quickly changed the topic. "Just go back downstairs and tend to your business already."

"What're you going to do if I leave?" Shen Liangsheng moved backwards and pushed Ch'in Ching into the spot between his legs before reaching to undo his belt.

"Stop it already. Someone might come looking." Ch'in Ching lay in his arms and warned softly, but it was not a real refusal since he was yearning for release as well.

"I just want to see if your knees are red. What did you think I was going to do?" The taller man pushed his bottoms down past the knees and massaged the kneecaps as a reward for kneeling for so long. "Does it hurt?"

"No." Ch'in Ching was sitting between the man's legs half-naked with his erection in plain sight. The thought of the man staring at it aroused him so much that the head started to ooze more juices.

"Does it hurt here?" Shen Liangsheng finally put his hands on his member and began stroking it.

"Yeah, it's swollen." Ch'in Ching couldn't resist anymore and relaxed into the man's embrace. He breathed, "But it'll stop hurting if you touch it for me."

"If I just touch it?" Shen Liangsheng teased softly in his ear as he reached out for the lamp and brought it closer to shine on the schoolmaster's manhood. "I'd better take a closer look. We can't have it developing further complications, now can we?"

Under the soft glow of the lamp, Ch'in Ching watched as the man's slender digits slid along his shaft. He tried to thrust his hips up but he had no strength in his waist as if all the bones in his body disappeared, the only thing left still strong was his erection.

"Does it hurt here?" Shen Liangsheng was carefully examining his member,

poking the slit on top with his finger.

"No…oh…."

"What are you groaning for then?"

Ch'in Ching held his tongue.

"How would I know what's wrong if you don't tell me?"

"Nothing's wrong." Ch'in Ching couldn't take the teasing anymore and grabbed his hand. "You have to finish what you started. You were the one who was making such sexy sounds."

"It appears there is no problem. See for yourself, it's hot and wet…." Shen Liangsheng ignored the man's complaint and grabbed the man's hand to continue stroking together. All the meanwhile he whispered sweet-nothings in his ear. "You're so cute, baby, even this little guy…."

"Mhm…faster…." Ch'in Ching wasn't in the mood for any of his embarrassing nonsense and instead immersed himself in the pleasure. However, at the last moment right before his release, he felt something blocking it. He buckled in discomfort, "Don't…ah…hurts…."

"Does it really?" Shen Liangsheng sped up with his hand while pressing on the slit. The length in his hand pulsated, but his words were cruel, "Hang in there a bit longer."

"No…." Ch'in Ching was too weak to dislodge his hand. Then, from out of nowhere, he heard someone speaking on the other side of the door and remembered that it had not been locked. He stiffened from fright and bit hard on his lip to hold in any noises.

"Tell them I'll be down momentarily." Unlike the man, Shen Liangsheng had heard clearly. He did not stop his hands and only let go after he had dismissed the intruder. He watched as the man shook in his arms and climaxed with a cry. Quickly, he dipped down and kissed the teary corner of his eye, comforting, "It was someone from the house. Nothing to be afraid of."

"Shen Liangsheng…." Ch'in Ching sat, panting. He realized that the person had been one of the servants, and their relationship had long been an open

secret in the Shen manor. However, he was still annoyed that the man tormented him at a time like that. “Get out of here. I don’t want to see your face.”

“I just cured you, and now you want me to leave?” Shen Liangsheng caressed his half-hard member while kissing his crimson earlobes. “*Burning the bridge after you cross*; *tossing me away like a used rag*.[81] Tell me, Mister Ch’in, did I use them correctly?”

Ignoring the question, Ch’in Ching climbed out of the taller man’s embrace and into the sheets. He pulled them over his head and played dead.

“All right, you don’t have to wait for me if you’re tired.” Shen Liangsheng stood up and straightened his clothes before patting the man’s head through the quilt. He still joked with him, “My baby has everything in the world anyways, well, except for a caring heart.”

“I’m not sleeping.” Ch’in Ching not only was missing a heart, his shame was nowhere to be found either. He had just told the man to leave, but now he poked his head out from under the covers and made a silly face at Shen Liangsheng. “I’m going to wait for my dear Shen-*keke* to come to bed.”

The origin of “Shen-*keke*” came from Jenny Wang’s “Ch’in-*keke*.” Shen Liangsheng warned her against creating familial relations when there previously were none, but Ch’in Ching and Jenny in turn began to bully the businessman.

“Do you see what I’m seeing, Ch’in-*keke*? There’s a big green-eyed monster stomping around.”

“I’ll be damned, you’re right!”

“The poor fellow probably just wants to be called *keke*, too.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“But if he wants people to call him *keke*, he shouldn’t act like he’s a tough bloke all the time. I mean, who’d have the courage to do it to a face like that?”

“Hah, stop it already. He’s on the verge of tears!”

“Oh, there, there. Don’t cry. We’ll call you Shen-*keke* if it makes you happy, all right?”

“C’mon, Shen-*keke*. Show us those pearly whites.”

Of course, the so-called green-eyed monster did not bother to retort, or perhaps he was too frustrated to.

Now, Shen Liangsheng was watching by the bed as Ch’in Ching wrapped himself up like a spring roll with only his head poking out. Seeing his hair flying wild and hearing the playful tone when he called him *keke*, he almost didn’t want to leave him.

Sadly, even so, he had to go. Tientsin was not quite China but not quite foreign, either. They were celebrating the Gregorian New Year, but the customs were more or less Chinese. The guests were all waiting downstairs for Shen Liangsheng to make the New Year toast in celebration of nother smooth year in business and in anticipation of more wealth and prosperity in the year to come.

“Ch’in Ching,” Shen Liangsheng reached forward to flatten the messy hair. “It’ll be next year when I see you again.”

“What?” Ch’in Ching faltered, but after he thought about it, he chuckled, “Oh yeah, you’re right.”

“See you next year.”

“Yeah, see you next year.”

After Shen Liangsheng left, Ch’in Ching lay on the bed, and soon drowsiness threatened to take him. In order to stay awake, he began to look for things to think about.

In the end, all he could think of was Shen Liangsheng – he was lying on his bed, wrapped in his quilt, smelling his scent – every thought revolved around him.

He was still half-naked and the sheer friction against the soft sheets made him hard again.

While he reprimanded himself, he flipped over and hugged the quilt that smelled like the man. He thought of the man as he lay amidst his scent, grinding his hips with frustration from his new erection but refusing to use his hands to relieve it.

He wanted to wait for his return, for his hands and for the feeling of his manhood deep inside him….

Ch'in Ching sighed with his face red with embarrassment as he ducked back under the covers again. He really was becoming shameless, and there was no helping him.

The countdown might have passed already as it became very noisy downstairs with celebratory cheers and screams that seemed both strange and distant for some reason.

Ch'in Ching looked up and out the window. It was like a picture framed behind icy glass, one of the silent night with faint stars and a waning moon.

Then, flowers bloomed from between the lonely celestial bodies – someone probably lit up fireworks in the garden. A few exploded high by the window, illuminating the night.

The flowers of fire budded, bloomed and withered within mere seconds of existence in the night and in his eyes. When he thought back to this scene later, it seemed as short as everything they had had between them, and as long as the rest of their lives.

However, in the moment, he could only think of what Shen Liangsheng had said earlier: See you next year.

For some reason, his eyes felt sore and he wanted to cry, but in the end a smile appeared on his face.

As he smiled, he was reminded of a classic poem.

The ancients died long ago, but their poetry had a new ring to it every time it was read. Every letter and every word just seemed to fit perfectly.

One in particular:

Being with him month after month, year after year

The long night seems even longer yet.[82]

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79 This is not a very graceful and polite thing to do and is usually done in the privacy of one's own home or that of a close friend or family.

80 Older brother.

81 The proverb actually means "killing the donkey (that was pulling the millstone) after taking apart the millstone."

82 This is a line from a poem called "行路難" (lit. walking the path is hard) by Wu Jun (469 – 520). The title has no meaning as it is used regardless of its content, as long as the rhyme and structure follow those of the original poem. The entire poem tells the story of a dead wutong tree being made into an exquisite pipa (music instrument) and discovered by the emperor. From then on, it forgets about its lowly origins as it is showered with splendours by the side of the emperor. It is a political satire of the gentry class who appear grand and elegant but are actually dead wood on the inside. The line that Ch'in Ching quotes can be misunderstood as a statement of love, but the "him" actually refers to the emperor in the original context.

XIV

Although the Republic had implemented the Gregorian calendar since establishment and set the first of January as New Year's Day, the year did not end for the people until the traditional date[83] came and went. Only then did a new Wong Lik[84] replace the old.

Shen Liangsheng was going to spend New Year's Eve at his father's for a year-end reunion dinner. Ch'in Ching had his own plans, too – since his parents passed away, he had spent the last day of the year at the Lius' and this year was not going to be any different – so the two met once on the twenty-seventh[85] before going off to their own business.

Shen Liangsheng returned to his father's mansion in the afternoon on New Year's Eve. A servant took his coat and hat when he entered and informed him, "The master is in the shrine.[86] He asks that you see him there."

Shen Liangsheng nodded and headed for the shrine. He knocked and entered after he heard Shen K'echen's permission. Immediately, he was bombarded with the thick and slightly stinging smell of incense.

Perhaps Shen K'echen realized his earlier sins and grew to treasure his life in his later years. He knew of the capabilities of his younger son and saw in him an heir to his own legacy. Thus he gradually let go of the reins. He took on the attitude of a devout Buddhist so that he could avoid any bad karma and live a few more years.

It goes without saying that Shen Liangsheng did not believe in this sort of thing, but in order to please his father, he greeted him with much respect and only sat down for a chat after making an offering of incense to the Buddha.

Shen K'echen was in his late-sixties but did not put on much weight like most others his age, and he was in good spirits because of good care for his body. Initially, he hadn't thought highly of Shen Liangsheng – mostly due to bloodline ideals, for keeping a lover and raising a son were two different matters – and had let his wife banish the boy to a faraway place in the name of giving him a

good education. Now, however, this boy was the only hope for the Shen legacy to carry on, so he had to abandon his "purist" beliefs and act as the loving father regardless of whether it was too little too late.

Luckily, the Caucasian blood in Shen Liangsheng was not very apparent. He mostly took after his mother's complexion, but there were definitely ghosts of Shen K'echen in him. This made the older man content, and together with the intention to make up for his wrongdoings, it was clear that the kindness that he had displayed for the past few years was indeed sincere.

The father and son first talked about current politics and business, from their own textile factory to the recent actions by the Japanese in the Tientsin Chamber of Commerce. They listed all the companies that had established relations with the so-called "Hsingchung"[87] Company and with the Japanese zaibatsu, headed by the Oriental Development Company. Then, they analyzed the state of affairs for the upcoming year, and only then did Shen K'echen start hesitantly, "Well, from what I see…."

But he never finished the sentence. What Shen K'echen was thinking was that working with the Japanese was going to be inevitable if they wanted to keep the money flowing in. He wanted to drop a few hints for his son but was wary of his choice of words. His courage had been decreasing as he aged and since he converted to Buddhism – the bodhisattva was looking from the altar, after all, and he didn't want his traitorous intent to come around and bite him from behind.

"Rest assured." Shen Liangsheng knew all too well what the older man was thinking and took the initiative. "I'll see and act accordingly."

Shen K'echen was delighted that his son was so observant and nodded with approval. "I never worry when it comes to you." Then, the focus shifted to Shen Liangsheng's private matters. "That reminds me, I heard that you've been spending time with Wang's little girl."

"Miss Wang is an intriguing character." Although the two were as far from romance as can be, Shen Liangsheng did not make it clear and only replied superficially.

"I've seen that girl before. Nice-looking girl, she is." Shen K'echen drank his

tea with a smile. “Lively one, too. Makes up for what you lack.”

“Mhm.”

“You’re turning twenty-seven this year. It’s about time to settle down….” Shen K’echen put the cup down and looked up at his son. “But then again, I was the same when I was your age. I’m just saying that games are only games. Best not let them get in the way of matters at hand.”

Shen Liangsheng’s own servants were not related to his father’s in any way, but a few deliveries back and forth between the two residences and some gossip-loving soul was bound to let something slip through their lips. His father more or less picked up something about a new “friend” and thought it was someone from the opera houses. He didn’t pay much attention to it, not even bothering to ask for the name of this “friend.” He had once been the playboy too and had played with actors and such. He merely wanted to warn his son; he didn’t care about his games, but they shouldn’t get in the way of his life.

And Shen Liangsheng understood this, but he also could tell that his father did not think much of this. Otherwise, the older man would not have gone over the subject so carelessly. So he just nodded and put on a facade of nonchalance.

“Anyway, I trust you completely,” his father emphasized once more before sighing, “Unlike that brother of yours….”

Then, he faded into silence, thinking it was karma. This piece of shit elder son was sent by karma to get him back.

Shen Liangsheng had comforted his old man half-heartedly when there was a light knock on the door. A servant announced the arrival of Shen K’echen’s elder son and daughter-in-law.

“Master, the young master and mistress have arrived.”

Shen Liangsheng’s brother was nearly ten years older than him. He and his former wife were supposed to have a baby girl, but the little one had died when she was still in her diapers. This led to the missus developing depression and

then eventually passing away.

With his elder son never ceasing to cause him trouble, Shen K'echen had to spend more time and effort on him. He picked out another appropriate marriage for him, but sadly, after eight years, the new couple still had no children. It was more than likely that the relationship was nothing more than a title to save face for both families.

Despite his son's many failures, Shen K'echen did not want to ruin the merry mood for the holidays. While they were waiting for dinner, the family of four sat down and played a game of mah-jong, quite peacefully if one must say. The woman's maiden name was Li Wan-hsien,[88] but it fit neither her appearance nor personality. If one were to say, she would definitely be labeled a clever and stingy woman. A divorce was unlikely, but the two were leading separate lives and even kept different chequebooks.

As they sat at the mah-jong table, Shen Liangsheng eyed her lavish fashion and was almost blinded by the lamplight dancing off of the diamond ring on her finger. On the other hand, his brother did not even seem to make an effort to dress properly for New Year. His suit was a bit old, and the collar had not even been ironed flat. It was obvious that he was not only a ne'er-do-well, but he received no respect at home, either.

Shen Liangsheng sat across from his brother in the game and shot a dismissive glance at him. The elder brother had noticed and looked right back at the younger man.

Their eyes engaged and it was the elder who backed down by cracking a smile. He knew his brother looked down on him but dared not oppose him. Interestingly, he still remembered the young Shen Liangsheng who had a doll-like face and rarely spoke or laughed. The boy would sit there in his lap and not cry no matter how much he pinched his cheeks for amusement.

Sadly, those days were long gone. Now, he could not beat him. The only thing he could do was to lick his boots, but he didn't even know how to start doing that. His brother truly had struck fear into his heart.

After the family dinner, Shen Liangsheng's brother timidly requested a talk in

the study with his old man, most likely about money. This left Shen Liangsheng in the living room with his sister-in-law with no conversation between them.

Li Wan-hsien sat decorously on the couch shelling peanuts with her rouge-painted fingers. She peeled the layers off with care, completely ignoring Shen Liangsheng. She loathed this fake marriage that felt like a prison sentence and despised each and every member of the Shen family.

Shen Liangsheng did not try to initiate small talk with her either and flipped through the newspaper. Then, he frowned and looked towards the study.

Li Wan-hsien heard the noise, too, that sounded like an argument. Her lips curved up in a smirk, and she looked as if she were getting ready to watch a show.

"Out! Get out of my sight! All o' you!" The door to the study finally banged open and played a boisterous concert with Shen K'echen's bellows.

Li Wan-hsien had no interest in viewing the rest. She stood up brushing off the flakes of peanut shell as she asked the servants to retrieve her coat, following her father-in-law's orders to the letter.

That left the innocent Shen Liangsheng, but he couldn't be bothered to cheer his father up. The man had a terrible temper that, once triggered, no one could mollify, and he was not about to attempt that. He just sat in his seat until his brother scuttled out to the living room. Then he got up and offered casually, "Sister already left with the chauffeur. How about I give you a ride?"

The man sighed after a moment of thought and nodded weakly.

It was truly strange that he had the guts to argue with Shen K'echen but not with Shen Liangsheng. It was clear that he would not have had resorted to this if Shen Liangsheng had remained abroad, but he hadn't the nerve to protest. Then, eventually, he lost the nerve to be angry, too.

Shen Liangsheng had driven his own car tonight. The two brothers got in and drove for a while in silence. Shen Liangsheng reached for a cigarette, and just as he stuck it between his lips, his brother held out the lighter for him.

In the lighter's luminance, he caught a glimpse at his older brother. Shen K'echen and Mrs. Shen were good-looking people, and their son took after them despite his failure at life. Although he was in his thirties and still had not accomplished much, he was a handsome fellow. One really could say fair without, foul within.

Shen Liangsheng knew why his brother was sucking up to him now and found his efforts to appear small and pitiful rather comedic. He spoke after a short silence. "Drop by my office after the holidays. I'll write you a cheque."

"I knew I could count on you, *Ah*-Liang." Perhaps the shameless gene ran in the family; the older man cracked a beaming grin and continued good-naturedly, "*Ah*-Liang, did you lose weight?"

Shen Liangsheng frowned with the cigarette between his lips. He hated being called by his nickname, so he did not reply.

It was past ten o'clock by the time he returned home. Most of the servants had gone home for the holiday leaving the manor deserted and deprived of the season's spirit.

Shen Liangsheng did not observe the tradition of welcoming the traditional New Year. He bathed and went to bed but could not find sleep yet. He recalled the conversation with his father and considered sorting out the staff in his manor after the holiday.

Shen Liangsheng held the executive power to the Shen family business, but the properties and stocks were still under his father's name. Shen Liangsheng's original plan was to take it as it came, but now under these promising circumstances he would not rest easy until he had amassed it all for himself.

Shen Liangsheng would not act outrightly against his father for the sake of his will, so marriage was a certainty. It might even be as soon as this year. The day of engagement would also be the day he and Ch'in Ching went their separate ways.

Considering this, he didn't feel much sadness – one must lose in order to gain. When one side of the scale weighed heavier than the other, he must let go of the

latter. He knew this rule better than anyone and could always let go without hesitation.

He also knew he couldn't sell the cow and drink the milk, but he did feel that time was fleeting. He had lived in the same city as him for four years, but alas, their meeting proved too late.

With that in mind, he shot up and sat in the dark for a bit before getting dressed once more and driving to Nanshih.

Ch'in Ching ate dinner at the Lius' and then welcomed the New Year and ate dumplings in celebration. Then, after the fireworks, he teetered back to his house half-drunk. He fired up the furnace and left a small window open for circulation before getting ready for bed.

He was making the bed when he heard a knock on the gate outside. He paused, thinking he had misheard, but the repeated knocks confirmed his suspicion. For some reason, he guessed that it was Shen Liangsheng and he ran to open the gates with a pounding heart.

"It's late already, you should at least ask before you open." Displeased at the careless behaviour, Shen Liangsheng started with a scolding instead of explaining why he had shown up.

"Happy New Year, Master Shen." Completely ignoring the reprimand, Ch'in Ching leaned in with a grin and planted a loud smacker on the man's cheek.

"I think you're the Dog here." Seeing the schoolmaster running to him like his very own puppy, Shen Liangsheng's mood took a turn for the better, and he swept the man off his feet and into his arms. He did not forget to evaluate as he carried him into the house. "Seems like all the food we've been feeding you has been going to waste. Tell me, when are you going to get fat enough to sell at the market?"

"Hmm…a few more days, I suppose." Ch'in Ching returned the banter after he landed on solid ground indoors. "But I won't sell for much anyway, so just keep me for good. Don't be so stingy."

"Did you have a lot to drink?" Shen Liangsheng guessed from the giggles and

red cheeks.

"Oh boy, did I ever?" Ch'in Ching was wordy when he was drunk and began to complain to the other man. "You know my godmother. My goodness, can that lady drink. She downs erhkuot'ou[89] like it was juice. Then after dinner, she made me drink with her when we had dumplings, said something like 'drinking and dumpling is the best coupling.' As if that was…."

Shen Liangsheng found the incoherent mumbling quite entertaining and interrupted it with a kiss.

"Did you miss me, baby?" His words were muffled by the kiss.

"Uh-huh." Another thing the schoolmaster did when he was drunk was to be extremely naughty. He nearly hung himself on the other man while murmuring against his lips, "Missed my dear Shen-*keke* lots and lots."

That was a blatant lie because he had been busier than a bee the past few days cleaning his own house and the Lius' house and purchasing all the festive foods and drinks for the celebration. There was no time for him to miss Shen Liangsheng, but now that the man was here, he did feel like he had missed the man – or perhaps it was because he wished he had spent the holiday with him instead.

"You adorable li'l devil." The drunken man's words succeeded in coaxing Shen Liangsheng's desires into roaring flames. The taller man caught him in a frantic kiss, and when Ch'in Ching began reciprocating just as fervently, their hands worked together to strip each other naked before they both tumbled onto the bed.

Ch'in Ching had left only the bedside lamp on since he was getting ready for bed. The warm yellow light lit up a small circle in the room.

Shen Liangsheng was on top and pulled the quilt loose to cover their naked bodies. Their skin rubbed against each other beneath the dark, warm shelter while their faces fell under the shine of the small patch of light as they shared feathery kisses.

Ch'in Ching let out a moan as he realized this was the first time they were

doing it at his house, and his face became even redder. Perhaps it was because everything in this house, the table and the chairs, the bed and the sheets, were all familiar. Fooling around in the place in which he had grown up made him feel very self-conscious.

"You feel good?" Shen Liangsheng was playing with his nipples underneath the covers. Seeing the needy man writhing beneath him, he was already fully aroused but felt compelled to interrupt, "How am I supposed to get inside when you've nothing at home?"

Ch'in Ching did not respond but Shen Liangsheng did not let it go. He asked in his ear, "Didn't you say you touch yourself while thinking of me? How do you do it? Hmm?"

And when the man did not reply, he urged.

"Touch yourself for me."

Shen Liangsheng drew back and pulled the man's legs apart.

"Spread your legs.

"More.

"Now, hold it open yourself."

Ch'in Ching did as commanded, exposing everything for the other man to see. He began stroking his own erection with his right hand while his left clutched the sheets tightly. Being scrutinized by those eyes, in a place he called home, he was hit by the sensations stronger than ever. His entire shaft was aching like crazy.

Shen Liangsheng observed for a minute or two before hinting, "What about here?"

"When you do this again," He grabbed Ch'in Ching's left hand and brought it to his own lips. He licked the fingers thoroughly before guiding the man's hips up and sliding the moist digits into the entrance. "Don't forget about this."

Ch'in Ching's breath had hitched when the taller man was sucking on his fingers, and he had even stopped masturbating. The image was far too

provocative for him, and he almost wanted to come right then and there.

"Ahh…mhm…."

It was past twelve o'clock, and the only sound in this silent night was the sporadic moans coming from this room. Under the man's continuous gaze, he stroked his member and pumped his fingers inside his hole at the same time. Eventually, he reached his limit. "I can't…I wanna…."

"Come for me. I'm watching."

Shen Liangsheng was rock hard himself, but he refrained from touching it. He only stared at the schoolmaster's swollen member and watched it jump by itself as cum shot out of the slit. He waited for the end of the orgasm before dipping down and licking off the milk that was left on the head.

"Ah!" Ch'in Ching cried out from the stimulation on his still sensitive member.

Shen Liangsheng gathered all of his cum and used it to join the man's own fingers in widening the entrance. After feeling that it had loosened up, he pulled out and patted his butt lightly. "Ride me."

"I hate you, Shen Liangsheng." Ch'in Ching understood – the man wanted nothing but to see him fuck himself on his dick – but he mumbled his protest and still climbed over the man. He knelt above the man and guided his manhood to his own entrance before sitting down, impaling himself on the hard length.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not too bad…."

Shen Liangsheng was actually looking out for him. The lubricant was inadequate, and this position was easier and less likely to be painful for the receiving partner.

"Start moving then if it doesn't." Shen Liangsheng caressed the man's waistline with one hand and toyed with his nipple with the other.

With his arms around the taller man's neck, the red-faced Ch'in Ching rolled his hips warily. He sped up after the discomfort disappeared and secretly tried to locate that one spot inside him with the burning shaft like the man had done the countless times before. When he found it, he felt his strength abandon him and the legs straddling Shen Liangsheng began to tremble.

"Feeling better now?" Shen Liangsheng knew that the man was beginning to enjoy himself, evident from the member between his legs hardening once again. He patted his head lightly. "You little liar, you love this. Why do you say you hate me?"

By now, there was no need for Ch'in Ching to be shy, so he leaned into Shen Liangsheng's ear and whispered, "'Cause you're too big."

The taller man had been holding back, but this proved to be the last straw. He ended up cursing in English as he thrust his hips up, practically slamming himself into the man, over and over again. Seeing the man arch his neck back in ecstasy, he started sucking on the Adam's apple bobbing up and down and left rosy love bites on it.

"Oh, do you really now? I thought bigger the better?"

"Mmm, I don't…hate…ah…."

"Say you love it."

"I, ah, lo…love it."

Their words of affection and moans of pleasure echoed in the room. They tried every possible position on the bed, but it was not enough. Shen Liangsheng dragged Ch'in Ching off and stood him in front of the wardrobe mirror before going to turn on the light. Then, he pushed back into the man from behind, pumping furiously.

"T-turn it…turn it off…the neighbours'll…."

"They're all asleep. No one's looking."

Shen Liangsheng was absolutely right. It was two or three in the morning; the only ones still up and about were these two.

Ch'in Ching already had come twice, and he only managed to stay standing because the other man was holding him up by the waist. Under the bright lights, he saw himself in the mirror being fucked until climax once again. The two strings of cum dripping lazily along his length and the glaring red spots on his neck were like permanent markings that, along with the house, were recordings of all the wild passion between the two of them.

Shen Liangsheng did not wake up until almost eleven o'clock the next morning due to the late bedtime the previous night. Ch'in Ching was still asleep with his head resting on his chest. The gentle puffs of air against his skin aroused a tender sentiment in him.

Shen Liangsheng lay quietly under an old-fashioned cotton blanket. It was heavy and not as warm as the imported down blankets, but it felt more down-to-earth.

He stared at the first rays of the brand new year as they crept in over the window sill. He closed his eyes after a while and the sun became a round glowing spot in the back of his eyelids that then broke into a thousand dots, dancing around like tiny flies.

In that moment, he had to admit he felt guilty – he was bound to leave him one day and he felt sorry for that.

But what use was his regret? It would just be ironic.

"Ch'in Ching, Ch'in-*hsiung*, you awake?"

Shen Liangsheng thought the voice coming from outside sounded like *Hsiao*-Liu and quickly pushed his feelings away. He nudged Ch'in Ching as he rummaged for their clothes. "Hey, get up."

Ch'in Ching had been minutes away from stirring, and *Hsiao*-Liu's loud voice and Shen Liangsheng's prod immediately woke him up. He quickly shouted back, "Not yet. Hold on a minute."

The problem was that the two of them had completely forgotten about locking

the gates last night when they were fooling around. *Hsiao*-Liu was a frequent visitor too and entered the yard without the owner's permission. He began protesting outside the house.

"Jesus, hurry up. It's so cold my nose is about to fall off.

"C'mon, I've known you for all your life, seen you in your birthday suit a gazillion times, all right? Wouldn't wanna see it even if you paid me.

"Now, could you please explain to me why you didn't lock your gate *and* your door? Are you not afraid of…of burglars…."

Unable to stand the cold, *Hsiao*-Liu had twisted the doorknob to find it unlocked and invited himself in. Meanwhile, Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng had managed to get more or less dressed but had not gotten around to tidying the bed yet. The schoolmaster wanted to tell his friend outside not to come in but could not think of an excuse. In that moment of hesitation, *Hsiao*-Liu already came in past the entrance and saw all that there was to see. He would have to be brainless not to understand the current situation.

"I'm, uh, I'm gonna head back now. I'll come by later." This was the first time that *Hsiao*-Liu did not address the businessman politely as Young Master Shen. After his stiff utterance, he turned right around and saw himself out, leaving everyone present a way out.

"I think I'll go, too." Shen Liangsheng frankly was not bothered by this, but he knew he would only add to the trouble if he stayed any longer. Before taking his leave, he reached out to touch the schoolmaster's head, but the other man turned away unknowingly.

Shen Liangsheng's hand was stuck in midair for a moment before he retracted it and added, "I'm going to be busy with New Year stuff for a few days, but I'll come by on Sunday afternoon."

"Yeah." Ch'in Ching had a lot running through his mind in the moment and did not realize he had avoided the other man. He did not comprehend what he had said, either, and answered half-heartedly.

"I'm here if you need anything."

"Yeah."

Shen Liangsheng couldn't find anything else to say and heaved a rare sigh. He wanted to give him a hug but was afraid the man would evade him again. He did not find any pleasure in a forced hug, so he just left it at that.

There was one thing, however, and that was that he would not split with Ch'in Ching because of this, not even if Ch'in Ching wanted to.

Just moments ago, he had felt guilty that he would one day have to leave the man, but now he was being unreasonable. His irrational decision was that Ch'in Ching could not leave him because of someone, or something, else before that day came.

He simply would not allow it.

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83 Chinese New Year was on Thursday, Feb 11th in the year 1937.

84 Wong Lik, or Huang Li, is the colloquial term for Tung Shing, a divination guide used widely by the Chinese people.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tung_Shing

85 The twenty-seventh day of the twelfth lunar calendar month, Feb 7, 1937.

86 Families usually had a room, or at least a space, specifically for worshipping ancestors and/or Buddhist deities.

87 The two characters literally mean "vitalize China," ironic because it was a subsidiary of North China Development, an operation whose goal was to exploit resources in Northern China.

88 "Wan" means restrained or indirect; "Hsien" mean elegant. These are traits of a traditionally good wife.

89 A type of baijiu, or grain liquor, around 56% alcohol by volume.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erguotou

XV

When *Hsiao*-Liu came around later, he looked calmer. Perhaps the cold wind and the laps around the neighbourhood did him some good. He plopped down in a chair and jumped straight in. "Ch'in Ching, please tell me that wasn't what I think it was."

"It was…." Ch'in Ching mumbled his answer. He knew his friend was here for an explanation.

"All right, I didn't do my job right." The shorter man sprang up from his seat and began pacing about the room. "I guess there's no way to redeem myself other than to kill myself before your parents' graves!"

Ch'in Ching's face paled at this exclamation. He knew very well that he was letting down his parents by being involved with a man, and *Hsiao*-Liu went straight for the soft, white underbelly of his emotions.

But *Hsiao*-Liu was like his mother, a soft, kind spirit under a tough shell. After a long silence, he turned to find his friend sitting on the bed with a dazed expression, and he immediately thought his words had been too harsh. He sat down beside his friend and tried to explain. "I wasn't…I didn't…." He heaved a sigh. "Goddammit!"

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sayin' sorry to me?!" This apology made *Hsiao*-Liu furious once more. He grabbed his friend's arm and fired a string of questions. "You tell me, what is this *thing* you have going on here? What is it? Can there be a future? Are you stupid? He's got everything he'd want. He's just playin' a game with you! Is this how you treat yourself?"

Ch'in Ching stayed quiet. There was one thing that he couldn't say to Shen Liangsheng, but he ended up spilling it to *Hsiao*-Liu.

His gaze lingered on the cold winter sunlight that had crept up his canvas shoes. It was glittering gold but not very warm. And he said it for the first time. "I love him."

“But….” *Hsiao*-Liu could barely get a sentence to form in his frustration. “Like that means a shit!”

Ch’in Ching refused to speak, and the two fell silent. As *Hsiao*-Liu sat panting, it dawned on him that he had no chance against the stubborn mule that was his friend.

Must he threaten him with their friendship? But he couldn’t bear doing that to his friend. He could feel his temple pounding from the dilemma.

“Ch’in Ching….” With a frown, *Hsiao*-Liu sighed, and with nothing else to say, he cracked a joke. “What can I say? I got three sisters, and my ma’s always hoping that our families could become even closer. She’d never have thought she’d lose her future son-in-law and have to marry off her godson, too.”

“Don’t you dare tell your mom.”

“O’course not. Don’t need you telling me that.”

“Save it. You’ve never been a good liar.”

“Why would I need to lie to the old lady? I just won’t bring this up.”

“Just worried about that big mouth of yours.”

“Shut your trap.”

Before long, the usual atmosphere between the two friends was restored. *Hsiao*-Liu glanced up at the clock and gave his friend a jerk. “Hurry up and come home with me. The old lady got up early to make k’oujou.[90] See, that’s why she couldn’t wait ‘til dinner and wanted you over for lunch.”

“Never had lunch with you on New Year’s Day before though….” Ch’in Ching murmured. Shen Liangsheng had only stayed over at his place once, just this once, but they just had to get walked in on. His cheeks finally flushed crimson from the delayed embarrassment.

“Jesus, can you please wear something with a taller collar?” *Hsiao*-Liu couldn’t help but chide him after noticing the marks on the man’s neck.

A blushing Ch’in Ching went searching for clothes beside the wardrobe.

When he caught sight of himself in the mirror, he couldn't help but recall the reckless activity that took place before the mirror last night. He quickly averted his gaze while wishing he could drag Shen Liangsheng back and take out his embarrassment on him by taking a bite or two.

After he changed, the two headed out. *Hsiao*-Liu stood behind his friend as he locked the gates.

"Say," the shorter man suddenly spoke. "He hasn't bullied you, has he?"

"Huh?" Ch'in Ching somewhat regained his composure as he clapped the lock shut. His tone returned to its usual playfulness. "What do you mean? I'm the bully."

"You?" *Hsiao*-Liu rolled his eyes. It was blatant that the young master wasn't a kind soul, so he still reminded, "If he dare hurt you–"

"You'll throw bricks at his window." Ch'in Ching finished the sentence for him as they shared a smile. They both thought back to their childhood, when *Hsiao*-Liu would always stick up for the other boy if some stupid asshole bullied him, despite *Hsiao*-Liu being younger by a few months. The younger boy would chuck old bricks at the glass or paper[91] on the bully's window. They were busted a few times and chased around the yard by Mrs. Liu with a broomstick.

They got into trouble together, got punished together, and practically grew up eating from the same bowl – no matter what happened, they were not going to let a brotherhood like this end.

Soon, Sunday came around. Ch'in Ching slept in past eight o'clock and was reading a book when someone knocked on the gates. He faintly recalled Shen Liangsheng saying he would come on Sunday. He put the book down and went to let him in.

"Well, you sure are…." he said as he pulled the gates open.

Ch'in Ching was going to say "You sure are early," but he froze when he saw the visitor outside. It took him a few seconds to find his tongue. "Miss Fang."

“Pardon me, Mister Ch’in, for dropping in like this.” It was Fang Hua. She was dressed sharply for the New Year’s season – a short bamboo green coat with a baby yellow wool scarf – along with the two hanging braids that made one think of youth and spring.

“That’s quite all right.” Ch’in Ching turned to let her in. “Just a surprise seeing you here, you know. It’s just that, well, my house isn’t in a presentable state now. Would you mind holding on for a minute while I tidy up?”

“No, there’s no need for that.” Fang Hua giggled at the bewildered man and added kindly, “I just hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Of course not. Happy New Year, Miss Fang.” Ch’in Ching chuckled too, acting like it was just a colleague visiting for New Year’s wishes and concealing the fact he was wary about her intentions in coming to his house.

The two went indoors, and Ch’in Ching showed her to a seat before getting the water boiling for tea. While he was in the kitchen, Fang Hua scanned the room from where she was at the table in an effort to calm her nerves. She only looked calm, but she had butterflies in her stomach. She had spent quite some time cheering herself on at home before paying him this New Year’s visit.

“Careful, hot.” Ch’in Ching came back in with the kettle and two clean glasses. He put in the tea leaves and poured a glass for her before sitting down across from her.

“Thank you,” Fang Hua said softly. She cupped her hands loosely around the glass as her heartbeat sped up again. He gave her some hot tea, and she felt as though her heart was letting off just as much steam as the liquid.

“Sorry, I didn’t prepare for the holidays, so I don’t have anything for you.”

“That’s fine.”

“How has your New Year’s been?”

“Good.”

“What about you, Mister Ch’in?”

“Not too bad myself.”

The conversation died after the small talk. One was feeling awkward while the other was trying to find a topic. Then they both started at the same time. “You–”

“You first,” Fang Hua laughed lightly.

“You look good.” Ch’in Ching chuckled as well and chose something that pleased the ladies but was not too out of place.

“Likewise.” Regardless of how anxious she really was, she put on a mature appearance. She returned the compliment with a smile. “You seemed to have put on some weight during the holiday.”

“Oh, is that right?” Ch’in Ching pinched his own cheek. “Because just the other day I was told that I never put on weight no matter how much I eat.”

Fang Hua just looked at him with a smile – her gaze was more or less straightforward in conveying her feelings. Ch’in Ching met it but still continued casually, “How are your parents?”

“They’re doing well. My brother and sister-in-law, too.” Fang Hua teased him with her head tilted. “I have a younger brother who’s doing well, too. Anything else you’d like to know?”

Chuckling, Ch’in Ching shook his head while making up his mind – he could not let this drag on. He had to clear things up sooner or later, and better sooner than later.

“Oh, right.” Fang Hua pretended to have forgotten about it as she took out a few containers from her cloth bag. “I knew that you…”

She faltered as she mustered the confidence to finish.

“…that you live by yourself, so I brought a few things I made myself. I hope you like them.”

She knew his parents had passed away and was worried that he did not have a proper New Year’s meal. Guessing at his preferences, she had made several dishes for him and brought them over. They were nothing expensive, but the sincere feelings behind them were too much for Ch’in Ching to accept.

He dare not accept but did not reject her right away. He even opened one and took a sniff, praising with enthusiasm, “You’ll make a great wife.[92] I’m envious of whomever gets to marry you. Meanwhile, I have to keep my dear intended out of the kitchen so it doesn’t burn down.”

Fang Hua had somewhat expected it – women were the most sensitive when it came to objects of their affection. She had sensed that Ch’in Ching met someone special recently, but she wouldn’t rest until she found a definite answer, like solving one of her math equations.

The glass in her hands gradually cooled as she stared at the rim. The tea had turned cold by the time she finally spoke again, “Even so, you still care for her, right?”

Ch’in Ching had just rejected her indirectly, and now he could only finish the job. “I do, very much.”

Silence ensued as Fang Hua fought back her tears. She told herself that she mustn’t cry, not during New Year’s.

“It’s getting late, Mister Ch’in. My family’s waiting for me to join them for lunch.” As soon as she managed to hold in her emotions, she stood up and said goodbye. “You can have the food, and don’t worry about the containers. It can wait until we get back to work again.”

“I’ll see you out then.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I insist.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“…but I insist.”

Fang Hua was too scared to refuse again because she was on the verge of tears. The two walked in silence until the entrance of the *hut’ong*. Ch’in Ching wanted to ask her how she came, wondering whether he should call a rickshaw or see her to the tram stop. However, Fang Hua spoke first.

“Ch’in Ching….” she called softly.

“Yes?” He was the one who turned her down but felt a bit bad, nonetheless. It was probably the first time – and possibly the last – she did not refer to him as “Mister Ch’in.”

But she did not say another word. She turned towards him, took a step forth and rested her forehead on his chest. The tears that she had been holding back trickled out without a sound.

There were other pedestrians, but she couldn’t care less – this was the only time anyway, so they could think of this however they would like.

Hesitantly, Ch’in Ching raised his hand. He knew he should not give her false comfort, but he couldn’t help patting her gently on the head.

“You’re just too kind.” Fang Hua straightened herself right away and said, with her eyes cast down, “And I’m just not fortunate enough.” Then, she turned and walked away briskly without turning back.

Ch’in Ching stood in the same spot watching her lonely green coat disappear as her walk eventually turned into a run. He was worried about her going home like this, but he could not go after her. In the moment of his dilemma, he noticed a familiar black sedan parked across the road and its owner, who had been standing there watching for some time. When the man noticed his gaze, he hopped into the vehicle without hesitation, stepped on the gas and sped off.

Shen Liangsheng would not have come to see Ch’in Ching this early if not for the dinner he had to attend that night. That was why he headed out in the morning, hoping to eat lunch with the man.

He had just reached his destination and was about to make a u-turn to park on the other side of the road when he spotted Ch’in Ching walking out from the *hut’ong* beside Fang Hua. Then, he witnessed all the drama that ensued.

The girl was long gone, yet Ch’in Ching was still standing there like a dummy, looking like he was deliberating whether to run after her or not. Seeing this, Shen Liangsheng decided to step out of the vehicle and wait to see how long it would take for the other man to notice him.

And when Ch'in Ching finally did notice him, Shen Liangsheng no longer wanted to see him because of the unusual anger that he was experiencing. He closed the car door with a slam and drove off.

Shen Liangsheng was not to be fully blamed for misunderstanding the situation. See, while the two were acting out a scene of farewell, the audience across the street understood the male lead to harbour lingering feelings towards the woman who had left him behind. Furthermore, Shen Liangsheng had no idea whether things were sorted out with *Hsiao*-Liu and then witnessing all this only added to the confusion. It was in fact hard for him not to over-think the matter.

It was not that he actually believed something was going on between the two schoolmasters, but it was that he realized at that moment the man had many other options available. He certainly was not living a life of solitude. He had friends; he had a woman who fancied him. If Shen Liangsheng let him go, the man could easily find someone else and live on without pain.

That night, Shen Liangsheng had dinner with the shareholders of Nakahara Company, and afterwards they continued the gathering at Seventh Heaven, the dance hall at Nakahara Department Store.[93] Chou was trailing behind his boss when he suddenly leaned in to ask, "Sir, would it be all right if I took the rest of the night off?"

Shen Liangsheng glanced at his secretary. "What for?"

Chou had worked for his boss for four years. He might have acted subservient most of the time, but he and his boss were closer than one might have expected. He heaved a sigh and told the truth. "The missus and I had a fight right before I left home today, so I was thinking to get her something from the shop downstairs before they close."

"Fine." Shen Liangsheng knew his secretary was henpecked but extremely close with his wife nonetheless. The next moment, the young master had an idea, and he called the secretary back. "Pick a few things up for me too, while you're at it."

Chou kept a straight face and nodded after noting down the items that his boss

requested. He knew it. He knew that those two were not going to last long, and now it seemed like the boss had already moved on.

Shen Liangsheng was oblivious to Chou's inner dialogue and added more details to his instructions closer to the secretary's ear. When he finished, he noticed the other man's slightly dumbfounded expression. He inquired with a raised brow, "What's the matter?"

"Well, young master…." Chou tried to keep it in, but he broke out in chuckles as he replied humorously, "No, I was just here wondering what to buy my wife, and you just gave me a push in the right direction."

"Less talking, more doing." Shen Liangsheng was not polite at all, but his voice carried the playful tone that men shared with each other.

Chou was delighted that he aimed for the goose but hit the gander, because it appeared that his boss took a liking to his comment. However, after the initial delight, he felt regret. The two men were still together and the affection was still strong – they wouldn't be playing these games otherwise. If things kept going down this road, he was going to have to figure something out even if Mr. Ch'in could not become the mistress of the Shen house.

On the other hand, Ch'in Ching knew there was a misunderstanding, but he did not give chase and try to explain himself – legs could not beat wheels, after all. He could only rant and rave silently while cursing the petulant young master….no, it was downright the behaviour of a spoiled princess who would never make a good wife.

But even so, Ch'in Ching couldn't stop himself from caring for him. He sighed and decided to give the other man a day to calm down before going over to cheer him up.

Ch'in Ching went to the Shen manor early next morning, but Princess Shen was not home – probably busy with social engagements during the holiday. However, the schoolmaster was no stranger to the house and made himself right at home waiting for the owner the whole day. It was not until well past nine that he returned.

After hearing the servant's report on the presence of Mr. Ch'in in the manor, Shen Liangsheng headed straight upstairs. When he opened the bedroom door, unsurprisingly he found Ch'in Ching reclining against the headboard reading, wearing only a bath robe. His hair was still damp, too, so he must have just taken a shower.

"You sure rest easy."

"Says you." Ch'in Ching crawled off the bed with a naughty expression and hugged the other man around the waist. "I get uneasy if I don't get to see you."

Shen Liangsheng did not show any displeasure on his face and even planted a kiss on the man's cheek as usual. "I'm going to bathe."

"All right," Ch'in Ching replied quickly but trailed the other man into the bathroom. As Shen Liangsheng undressed, he explained that there was nothing more to his relationship with Fang Hua than that of colleagues and that there was nothing to worry about regarding *Hsiao*-Liu. He wanted to get the message across to the young master, Mr. Shen Jr., that everything was all right and there was no reason to stay cross.

"Is that all?" Shen Liangsheng was standing under the shower head, flipping his wet hair back as he shot the other man a look.

"T-that is all." Ch'in Ching loved watching the man flip his hair, and even though he had seen the man in the nude more times than he could count, the sight was still too hot for him to handle. He shot out the room and closed the door behind him to cool down.

After bathing, Shen Liangsheng walked out with nothing but a bath towel. He stopped at the wardrobe and with a finger beckoned at the man reading on the bed.

"Come here, I have something for you."

"No such thing as a free lunch." Ch'in Ching followed his directions obediently and went up to him, but his mouth was as mischievous as ever. "You must be up to no good."

Shen Liangsheng did not pay attention to his quips and proceeded to open the wardrobe, taking out an unwrapped apparel box. Inside the box was a set of pink women's pajamas consisting of a knee-length spaghetti strap nightgown and a Western-style robe with floral print around the edges.

Ch'in Ching, of course, had no experience shopping in the women's section and hadn't the slightest idea what the heap of pink stuff was until Shen Liangsheng took out the satin dress and asked him to lift up his arms. He instantly backed away with a pink flush on his face.

"Don't take this too far, Shen Liangsheng. I told you, nothing's going on between me and her. You can't do this just 'cause you're upset."

"So what if I do?" Shen Liangsheng closed the distance, hooking an arm around the other man's waist while trying to put the garment over his head.

"Hey–" Ch'in Ching broke away from his arm with a face red in what was most likely anger. "I'm not a woman. Stop it already."

"I know you're not." Shen Liangsheng was not fazed at all and snaked his arm around the shorter man's waist again, coaxing in his ear. "Just put it on for me to see. Would you do that for me?"

Ch'in Ching was so offended that he did not wish to continue this conversation any further. He just wanted to leave on the spot.

"Come now." Shen Liangsheng knew the other man was mad. He kissed a blood-filled earlobe and whispered secretively, "I do wish you were a woman, though. That way I could make you mine and keep you in my arms for the rest of my life."

The speaker's face was the same poker face, and his voice was calm as usual, but somehow his words lingered and sneaked in through the tiny, winding crevices of the listener's heart. Ch'in Ching didn't know if he was angry any longer, but he stayed quiet with his face still crimson.

Shen Liangsheng continued what was by now a fib, "And you know what I told the store clerk when I bought it?"

He leaned in until his lips brushed the other man's ear.

“I said it was for my wife.”

“What did I do to deserve this from you?!” Ch’in Ching exclaimed after moments of staring at the ground. He snatched the dress from Shen Liangsheng and began stuffing himself into it. He realized he was beyond the point of no return – he might as well always have been. Hearing the taller man’s sweet, sweet words, he couldn’t help but feel a bitter emotion so strong that he didn’t mind going along with the act and playing out a night as his wife.

“You’re just a child who can’t even dress himself properly, aren’t you?” Shen Liangsheng grabbed his arms. “Hold still.”

He stripped the bath robe off, put on the satin dress properly and adjusted the skinny straps on his shoulders. Then, after flattening the messy hair, Shen Liangsheng hugged the man around the waist and gently brought him close.

“Beautiful,” he hummed.

“No way. Don’t take me for a fool.”

“It’s beautiful if I say so.”

“You are just full of hot air, aren’t you?”

Shen Liangsheng had given specific instructions for Chou to buy the largest size available, and it was imported fashion as well. Ch’in Ching was also quite skinny so the dress fit despite his being a man – and it was not too tight either.

He was, however, taller than most women, so the knee-length dress only reached halfway down his thighs. His skin might not have been as pale as Shen Liangsheng’s but was nonetheless whiter than most men, and the colour pink did not clash with it. The satin dress had no extra design on it, only lace hemming in the same colour. The taller man slid his hand lightly over the lace while guiding the man’s hand under his own towel.

“What do you mean hot air?” Shen Liangsheng retorted. “If you weren’t beautiful…”

Ch’in Ching let out soft pants as he felt the swollen manhood in his hand. The

man continued in a whisper, "…then why would it get like this as soon as it catches sight of you?"

"Touch it nice and slow, baby. You said you liked it the best–" Before Shen Liangsheng could finish, he felt the grip around his member tighten. He abandoned his previous thought. "Be gentle, Mrs. Shen, or else your future sex life is going to be doomed."

"Shut up." Ch'in Ching mumbled grumpily. He couldn't listen to this anymore. His face was probably hot enough to make pancakes now.

Shen Liangsheng knew when to stop, but he did not let his mouth rest. He carefully licked the other man's ears while his right hand slid under the dress to cup the schoolmaster's bare ass roughly. From time to time, his fingers would probe the hole between the cheeks. His member began throbbing painfully at the feeling of the opening sucking on his fingers like a tiny mouth.

"Stand over there by the bed." Shen Liangsheng suddenly pushed him away and went to the bedside table. After finding the lubricant, he took off the towel around his waist and sat down on the bed.

"C'mere," he said while patting his own thighs.

Ch'in Ching had become fairly unreserved in bed since he acquainted himself with the act with Shen Liangsheng. However, the humiliating outfit tonight seemed to have formed some sort of constraint on him. He was uncomfortable and moved like a stiff puppet to Shen Liangsheng's voice, and after straddling the other man, he had no idea what to do next.

Shen Liangsheng had bought the dress and made him wear it as a punishment – he was just furious seeing the man with a woman, and that fury was not going to disappear until he had tormented him one way or another – but now the man was sitting compliantly in his lap, looking shyer than their first time together. The man did not know what to do or where to put his hands, and Shen Liangsheng found this so cute he just wanted to bully him some more.

"Now you're behaving, I see. Where have you been this whole time?" Shen Liangsheng opened the lid, scooped out a lump of jelly and warmed it in his

palms before applying it gently to the entrance.

"What're you talking about?" Ch'in Ching grumbled as he tugged awkwardly at the dress, but the tingly sensation inside made him clench down on the taller man's fingers.

Shen Liangsheng's breathing hitched, and he worked his fingers faster. He had noticed that his self-restraint had been on the decline day by day ever since meeting this man before him. God damn, he did not deserve this, either.

"Shen Liangsheng…."

"Yeah?"

"That's enough, I think," he muttered with his head down. He was wet and fully aroused from the two fingers sliding in and out of him.

"Get up a li'l," Shen Liangsheng wouldn't have been happier if the schoolmaster had said anything else, but he added another request. "And lift up the skirt."

"But it's not in the way." But despite saying so, Ch'in Ching still lifted the back of the dress up, exposing his bare buttocks. He let out a light whimper as the other man spread his cheeks and entered him with that hot, thick shaft.

"You're so wet." Shen Liangsheng knew it was because of the jelly, but he still commented like he would to a woman. "You like me fucking you, don't you?"

"Yeah…"

"Want to feel even better?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me something I want to hear."

"Like what?"

"How 'bout…" Shen Liangsheng pulled the man's head close and kissed the mole by his eye. "Tell me you won't marry anyone else but me."

They were sweet words of affection but his eyes started stinging. The confession "I love you" threatened to leave his lips again. All the talk about

marriage and love were just jokes, but he still was here dressed like a woman, being penetrated like a woman, for no reason other than the fact that he loved him.

He even thought that if Shen Liangsheng were to get married,[94] he wouldn't leave him as long as the other man did not break it off with him first. This was so pitiful and degrading that he wanted to slap himself across the face for it, and thus, the confession stayed unsaid.

Noticing the man's red eyes, Shen Liangsheng thought he had gone overboard with the teasing and began to soothe the man by rubbing his back. "There, there. No more of that."

He ducked down and began kissing the man's nipples over the satin, nipping and playing them with his teeth and tongue. He thrust up in the direction of that sensitive bunch of nerves until the man replied by shaking with pleasure. Then, he let go of the perky nubs and caught a glimpse of the tent in the dress made by the man's excited member. The silky satin was wet with fluids oozing out from the head. For some reason, he saw beauty in the sight – a warped beauty.

Shen Liangsheng's own climax and pleasure was warped that night as well. He had made the other man come twice, evident from the dress now spotted with cum, and he had shot his load deep inside the man, too. But he was not satisfied yet.

He threw on a bath robe and retrieved from the study downstairs the pair of scissors he used to open letters. He laid Ch'in Ching flat on the bed and proceeded to cut holes in the now wrinkly dress around the nipples and crotch area. He took out the limp member through the hole in the fabric and knelt on the bed playing with his nipples while blowing him. He did his best to please the man and watched the man writhe uncontrollably and cry as he came in his mouth. Shen Liangsheng was still hard, but for some reason it felt like he had climaxed too.

As he enjoyed the peculiar rush of pleasure, he ground their members together, not stopping even after Ch'in Ching came for the fourth time. He kept using his own manhood, mouth and hands to torture the poor muscle that could

not get erect again, until the man did not even have the strength to tremble anymore. The man ended up whimpering as a bit of urine leaked out. Fully satisfied, Shen Liangsheng shot his load onto the man and lay panting with him in his arms.

Ch'in Ching was overworked and barely conscious by then. Shen Liangsheng cleaned him up with a hot towel and wrapped the quilt around him tight and snug. Then, he sat against the bed board and smoked as he watched the man sleep.

As he watched him sleep, a silent voice spoke to him: If you let this man go, you'll never get him back again.

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90 A dish made with steamed pork usually with salty pickled vegetables, taro, or kudzu.

91 Traditionally, windows were covered with paper.

92 Please excuse the cringe-worthy misogynistic phrasing, though Chinese is a very misogynistic language. The closest translation in current English is "wife material" but this doesn't fit in with the time period of this story…

93 A department store built in 1926 with the encouragement of the Japanese Consul at Tientsin, located on Asahi Street in the former Japanese concession in Tientsin (current Heping Road). It was once the tallest building in Tientsin, standing at seven stories. Floors one to three sold merchandise, four to five contained entertainment facilities such as dance halls, theatres and restaurants, and six and seven were open air gardens. The current building was rebuilt after the Tangshan Earthquake in 1976.

94 This is the version of "marry" describing a man making a woman his wife.

XVI

Ch'in Ching spotted a photograph of the late actress named Juan on a poster sometime in March, and it reminded him that he had met Shen Liangsheng around this time last year. He still remembered the situation – he was bent over looking for his glasses with a stampede of feet before his eyes. The next thing he knew, it became quieter. He found his glasses and stood up, and there Shen Liangsheng was, hands clasped behind his back. Despite his bad eyesight, he could see everything brightening. He had felt a bit lightheaded, and his ears rung a little perhaps due to having bent down for too long. His heart skipped a beat, and he felt nervous for some reason which is why he chose to make a joke to hide it.

Now that he thought about it, it almost felt like fate; this world full of evanescence and meaninglessness suddenly went quiet, and when he looked up, *it was him*.

It was then that he looked up to see the rippling water at Ningyüan. They were strolling along the lakeside to see the peach blossoms that bloomed early this year.

A group of senior high students were taking advantage of the nice weather and rehearsing in the peach tree garden. Ch'in Ching stopped for a moment to eavesdrop to find that it was a scene from *Thunderstorm*.[95]

Ch'in Ching had attended the showing of *Thunderstorm* in Tientsin two years ago. He had also followed Ts'ao Yü's *Sunrise* in *Literature Monthly*[96] and completely agreed with the author's afterword.

Shen Liangsheng was not interested, but he would listen if Ch'in Ching wanted to talk. The two ambled amongst the trees, and Ch'in Ching talked about novels and dramas and a quote from the afterword of *Sunrise*.

"I thirst for a ray of sunlight. I have not the chance to see the sun again, yet I wish that I can see hellfire rain down upon the earth and crush the phantoms and the ghouls overrunning it, even if that means land shall sink into sea."

The two mostly indulged in romantic affairs and rarely touched on politics. Ch'in Ching could more or less tell that Shen Liangsheng harboured little love for this country – it was reasonable seeing that his childhood in China left few good memories and that he went abroad at such a young age. He did not want to condemn the other man, so he simply avoided this topic. He feared that they might get into a fight if they delved too deeply because no matter what reason the man had, Ch'in Ching could not and would not agree with his views.

Meanwhile, Shen Liangsheng did not take this to heart as much as the schoolmaster did. He only kept a close eye on politics for business, not for dating. Furthermore, he had learned the Western mindset of allowing everybody to have their own opinions. Therefore, even if they did discuss it in detail, he would not get into an argument with Ch'in Ching.

Hence, Shen Liangsheng did not pay much attention to the rare display by Ch'in Ching regarding his political stance. He only thought the man looked rather quiet and wistful as he stood under the flowers in traditional ch'angshan staring at the sparkling ripples not far off, his expression not as grand and noble as the quote had sounded. Shen Liangsheng saw before him a watercolour painting on rice paper reminiscent of the ancient times, and he had the urge to kiss the man. But they were in public, so he instead teased, "Remember, you can't swim, Mrs. Shen. I can save you if you fall into the lake, but if the land becomes sea, we'll just have to stick it out at the bottom of the sea together."

With that distraction, Ch'in Ching couldn't stay worried about the state of the nation any longer. He grumbled, as he glared at the other man with a blush, "Hush, you."

Speaking of the month of March, Shen Liangsheng had a swell time. The fact alone that Miss Jenny Wang had convinced her old man, with her persuasive tactics, to secure a ticket back to the United States was enough to make him a very happy man.

"Ch'in-*keke*, I'm going to Shanghai to see some friends first before taking the ship back to the States. Do you think you'll have time to see me off at the train

station?"

"No, he's busy," Shen Liangsheng quickly answered for the man, for he absolutely hated it when Jenny acted close with Ch'in Ching. Then, he added with a funny tone, "But in view of the splendid occasion, I'd love to take time and see you off before your trip."

"But Master Shen, perhaps you forgot that you're supposed to be the poor lad who was dumped by me." Jenny never backed down from a battle of the tongue and continued her retort, "If you see me off, you should at least put on an act and spare a few tears, yes? But can you? I'd probably cry from laughing too hard when that happens, if it even does."

Shen Liangsheng shot her an indifferent look and did not reply since he could not be bothered with her quips. He actually suspected that a quick-witted person like her most likely already saw the true nature of his relationship with Ch'in Ching. However, she did not tattle to Old Man Wang or spread gossip around town. At least all the free food that he had given her had not gone to waste.

Despite the previous conversation, the two men still went to the station when the day came. Shen Liangsheng probably did it for social etiquette, but Ch'in Ching wanted to see her one more time because he truly liked this "sister" of his.

Old Man Wang was to accompany her until Shanghai, so he did not seem overly emotional at the station. Believing his baby daughter rejected Shen Liangsheng, he blamed her for having such high expectations and also felt a bit sorry towards the suitor, but he could not express it because of his status as the elder. In the end, he patted Shen Liangsheng on the shoulder and said good-naturedly, "My daughter's still just a little girl, and she's finally on her way after pestering you all these days. I guess we'll both have some peace of mind, huh."

"Oh no, I enjoyed her company very much."

After the politesse, Shen Liangsheng waited for the older man to board before joining Jenny and Ch'in Ching.

"Hurry Shen-*keke*, if you don't cry now, you won't get another chance to," Jenny teased him, and then turned to Ch'in Ching. "But don't you cry, Ch'in-

keke, or I'll be heartbroken."

"Quit fooling around. Take good care of yourself in America, and be careful of the friends you make. Better change that trusting attitude of yours, too." Shen Liangsheng did not actually dislike her because, if he were being honest, sometimes her personality was similar to that of Ch'in Ching. The claim of a sibling relation was not entirely false. This point alone made it hard for the businessman to dislike her, so in the end, he wanted to leave her a few reminders.

"Can you not be so serious?" Jenny had nothing left with which to combat Shen Liangsheng when he became sincere. She looked down and mumbled, "I'm still coming back after I graduate. Don't make it seem like it's the last time."

"It's not." Ch'in Ching sensed sadness from the girl and patted her on the head. "You'll be all grown up when you come back."

"You…I hate you two…." Jenny had been all smiles, but tears started to flow after the schoolmaster touched her head. "I didn't want to cry…hate you…."

But the crying did not last more than a few sobs, and a smile reappeared on her face. She boarded the train, and after it began moving, she even stuck her head out, waving.

"Shen-*keke*! Ch'in-*keke*! Au revoir!"

That was the year Twenty-Six[97] of the Republic. When the three youths waved goodbye as the train blew its whistle, none of them would have guessed that this would be really be their last time.

Afterwards, Jenny Wang never returned home due to the developments in the country, and the news of her fatal car accident at the young age of twenty-seven did not make it across the ocean either since the Wang family moved to the United States and never made contact again.

The world is an unpredictable place, which is why sometimes au revoir becomes an ironic goodbye.

The temperature spiked suddenly in mid-April. Shen Liangsheng came up with appropriate excuses to fire the loose-mouthed servants. The remaining staff learned their lesson and kept their mouths shut so nothing would travel to Shen Sr.'s mansion. Thus, Ch'in Ching continued staying over often at the Shen manor. Before long, he grew close with the servants in the manor on account of his easygoing nature. Every time he came over, the kitchen made only dishes that he liked making Shen Liangsheng taunt at the dinner table, "Wow, Mister Ch'in, you sure are popular."

"Hah, I'm a people person, if I do say so myself." Other than in the bed, Ch'in Ching never gave up without a fight when it came to battles of the tongue. He tapped the other man's bowl with his chopsticks. "Eat your food, Master Shen. We don't want the green-eyed monster coming back, now do we?"

It stayed stuffy and humid for days until finally a storm hit. The rain started around two in the afternoon in a continuous drizzle of varying degrees. Ch'in Ching was sitting in the staff room after his only class in the morning, listening to the drip-drop of the rain. He just could not settle down for some reason.

It had been a wonderful day during the morning with not a cloud in the sky. The Chevrolet that Shen Liangsheng usually drove was sent in for a check-up, and the reinforced Dodge left abandoned in the garage was likely low on gas. Shen Liangsheng had moved his office to a building he rented out on Hong Kong Road,[98] just a stroll away from Cambridge Road. Hence, not wanting to waste time, the two left the house together in the morning, Ch'in Ching taking the tram and Shen Liangsheng walking to work.

Now the schoolmaster was sitting at his desk, remembering that the man did not take an umbrella with him. Then, he realized that there must be a car and a chauffeur at the office or some other arrangement to keep their young master out of the rain. There was no reason for him to worry about it, but he continued to brood. After nearly an hour of hesitation, he finally asked for the rest of the day off and left school early.

Ch'in Ching always kept an umbrella in the staff room. He got off the tram and walked to Shen Liangsheng's office. He scoffed at himself for doing

something that he knew was unnecessary, but he couldn't help but want to pick the other man up. It was usually the businessman who picked him up, but he wanted to do it, too, once in a while. He wanted to walk home with him under one umbrella in this endless downpour.

A new office meant new security. New brooms sweep clean, and this new guard was no exception. He treated his well-paying job with great care and questioned every person who came through the door so that he would not let any trouble in.

Ch'in Ching was a stranger whose dress was average. The blue ch'angshan and canvas shoes were not the attire of a businessman. Also, the person he was looking for was the big boss upstairs, but he had no appointment. The guard was not going to risk letting him in, but he was polite and told the man to wait while he notified the boss.

Ch'in Ching did not take any offence and did not go into the roofed entrance, either. He stood outside the metal gates holding his black oil-paper umbrella.

Coincidentally, Chou was out on errands today, and because of his tight lips, no one else in the company knew of Ch'in Ching. Another secretary reported to Shen Liangsheng that a Mr. Ch'in was here to see him. The pen in the boss's hand faltered before he walked over and took a glimpse out the window.

"Thank you, you may leave."

Seeing the boss's unexcited reaction, the secretary did not make the unnecessary effort to invite Ch'in Ching into the office and out of the rain.

The rain left the sky gloomy, but Shen Liangsheng only had on a desk lamp to read his files.

He stood by the windows of the dark room, half-hidden behind curtains, as he stared, transfixed, at the man awaiting him under an umbrella.

He looked past the pale mist and saw the man standing in the rain, the umbrella hiding his head. All he saw was his figure, a tall, slim and solitary

figure clad in greyish blue ch'angshan.

Late spring in the North could be quite warm but also surprisingly cold when it rained. Shen Liangsheng knew the man had come for him and was bound to get sick from not having dressed warmly enough, but he deliberately did not invite him in.

Small droplets of rain clung to the glass window, making the pane look like perspiring ice. Shen Liangsheng's reflection in the glass appeared strangely pale and ghostly, his eyes just as cold as ice. He stared, transfixed, at Ch'in Ching standing in the storm waiting for him. A deep-seated sense of fulfillment blossomed in his heart with the haziness of what the French would call déjà vu –

A man holding an umbrella.

The wet ends of his ch'angshan.

The rainy music from an old dream.

Though Ch'in Ching had never said it outright, the schoolmaster's feelings were no secret to Shen Liangsheng. He knew Ch'in Ching truly loved him, and it wasn't that he did not have feelings for the man himself. It simply pleased him to see the poor man waiting for him in the rain – every little thing that was proof that Ch'in Ching had fallen for him gave him that much more pleasure.

As one would expect, Ch'in Ching had a low-grade fever that night. Shen Liangsheng personally fed him medicine and undressed him before tucking him under the covers. He held the snugly wrapped man in his arms and planted soft kisses on his burning forehead – the man getting sick for him and his taking care of the man also gave him much pleasure.

Ch'in Ching was lying in Shen Liangsheng's embrace when he had the urge to act like the three year old baby that the taller man was treating him as. He couldn't hold back his devious giggles.

"What're you laughing at?"

"Nothing."

The fever made him feel drunk, a bit dizzy but also a bit fidgety. Ch'in Ching went along with the feeling and took a bite of the taller man's chin, then his Adam's apple, licking and biting like a teething puppy. His nose was not affected by the fever and was cool like that of a dog. He made up a lame excuse as he nuzzled the man's neck.

"You smell so good, Shen-*keke*."

"You're sick. Stay still." Frowning, Shen Liangsheng turned away from the pestering puppy but tightened his arms around him anyway.

But Ch'in Ching had not had enough fun yet. He teased again, asking breathily in the other man's ear, "Are you hard?"

And when he got no answer, he asked again, "Well? Are you?"

The schoolmaster's tone was very childish, but his words were blatantly provocative.

Shen Liangsheng was fully aroused but decided to bear with it since the other man was sick. While the puppy was still kissing and licking all over the place, he tried to leave and release himself in the bathroom, but the puppy just would not let him go. Shen Liangsheng began to suspect he had fed the man the wrong medicine, and now the man could not think straight.

"You asked for it," Shen Liangsheng growled dangerously, but he did not actually act in the same manner. He stripped himself naked and jumped under the covers with Ch'in Ching. After taking off the man's underwear, he only slid his aching erection in between Ch'in Ching's legs from behind and began thrusting. Hearing the man's soft mewling, Shen Liangsheng really wanted to use *Hsiao*-Liu's reference for the schoolmaster: Jesus! He was not doing much to the man, so the seductive sounds he was making must have been intentional.

"Hmm…mhm…."

Ch'in Ching would agree that he had taken the wrong medicine. He felt weak but oh so very horny. He ground his hips against the taller man's abdomen and guided his hand to his own swelling member.

"Put it in…," he continued in a soft voice. "Put it in…please?"

By now, Shen Liangsheng felt like he was burning with a fever too, his temples pounding with every syllable out of the schoolmaster's mouth. He coated himself with lubricant and pushed his swollen manhood into the other man. He could not suppress a low moan as he did so.

"Oh, baby, it's so hot inside you."

"No duh…I have a fever." It was as though Ch'in Ching suddenly remembered that he was a sick man and that he had the rights of one as well. He did not care that Shen Liangsheng would suffer and commanded in moans and gasps, "Feel really weak right now. Don't you dare go fast."

With that, the taller man could only do as he was told and pump himself into the man slowly while taking care of the man's member at the same time. For once, having sex was worse than not having sex, and all he wanted to do was help "Jesus" reach his orgasm as soon as possible.

Thankfully, Ch'in Ching did not last long due to the fever and presently came in Shen Liangsheng's hand. The taller man was just about to pull out and stroke himself off to relieve the suffering when Ch'in Ching reached around to the place where they were connected.

"No…" he panted weakly, "Want you to come inside me."

Shen Liangsheng could not stop himself from swearing – this time in his mother tongue. Perhaps he had heard far too much from his father these last few years, and now he was finally applying his knowledge. He was certain now that this man was sent by karma as payback. He thrust his hips forward and entered the man once more, but he could not move fast. Only after a long half hour did he reach his climax, and when he did, he took a hard bite on Ch'in Ching earlobe, asking, "You want me to come inside so bad, is it because you want to have my babies?"

"Go get your own baby…." Ch'in Ching was already half-asleep, but he still managed to form a retort with his last burst of energy. He suspected that he came again during the last half hour, but the sensations were not very distinct. On the other hand, he felt strangely satisfied feeling the man inside of him, their two bodies joined as one.

By the time Shen Liangsheng had cleaned him up, Ch'in Ching was dead asleep. The taller man finished a cigarette while watching him sleep before going downstairs to the study to retrieve the inkpad and the documents that he had had prepared for some time.

Since the Chinese New Year, Shen Liangsheng had been considering giving a house to Ch'in Ching. He had gone back on his word – he really cared for this man, and this relationship was wilder and more intense than any of his previous ones. Accordingly, he decided to remove the weights on either side of his scale and stop evaluating. Now all he wanted to do was to find a way to keep the man so that he did not fall into someone else's hands.

Shen Liangsheng knew there was an expression in Chinese, "hiding a mistress in a golden palace."[99] He had no interest in the story behind it because, in his dictionary, it had only one meaning – buy a cage and put Ch'in Ching in it so that he can have both the cow and the milk after he gets married himself.

In fact, Shen Liangsheng's mother could count as a victim of the "golden palace," too. Like father, like son; their selfish ways were no different from one another. If one were to say, the son was better in that he was willing to put Ch'in Ching's name on the property. This way the house could act as a sort of compensation if the love disappeared and the two ended up splitting.

One could also say this was even more despicable. Shen Liangsheng recognized that the schoolmaster was currently deeply in love with him, so he was taking advantage and using that love to build the man a "golden palace." He was even going to engrave Ch'in Ching's own name on the door to show just how willing the man was for all this.

Secretary Chou had spent much effort trying to find the perfect property. A Western-style single house was too much, but the boss thought traditional housing was not good enough. He found a nice place called Anle-ts'un[100] in the English concession, but when his boss went and took a look, the choice was rejected because the numerous neighbours posed a threat to privacy.

In the end, Shen Liangsheng took the matters into his own hands and decided on a luxury suite in the Maoken Apartment.[101] Each floor consisted of only

two units, and the tenants were mostly foreigners with little interest in their neighbours as they spent a year or two exploring China before returning to wherever they called home.

Shen Liangsheng had connections and completed the entire contracting process, even the affidavit, without Ch'in Ching. All that remained was for Ch'in Ching to sign his name and stamp the document with his fingerprint.[102]

Having retrieved the contract and an inkpad, he sat with his legs hanging off the bed and looked at the oblivious man. The schoolmaster's cheeks were still pink from the fever, and there was a driblet of drool by his lips.

Shen Liangsheng gently wiped the fluid away before carefully guiding the man's finger, first to the inkpad and then to the paper.

Now there was one last thing. The signature could be forged, but there was no meaning in hiding this matter. Thus, Shen Liangsheng did not wipe the red ink away with the towel. He wanted to leave it there as a conversation-starter when the man woke up the next morning.

By the next morning, the fever had retreated, and Ch'in Ching felt revived and in good spirits. The only thing was that his back was a bit sore which was surely the result of indulging during an illness.

He did not notice the red mark on his finger until he was brushing his teeth. He poked his head out from the bathroom with the toothbrush still in his mouth.

"What's this?" he questioned with curiosity.

"Brush your teeth first," Shen Liangsheng replied with a cigarette between his lips as he finished tying his tie, his expression giving nothing away.

"All right, what did you do behind my back?" Ch'in Ching had a fairly good guess, but he did not seem upset when he finished brushing his teeth and stood before Shen Liangsheng.

Instead of answering, Shen Liangsheng pulled the other man into his arms for a kiss as they had done for the many mornings they had spent together. The flavour of tobacco and toothpaste was so familiar to the two men that it had

nearly become a part of their life together.

"I sold you off," Shen Liangsheng finally replied calmly after the kisses. "After all this time under my care, do you want to guess how much you sold for?"

Ch'in Ching was wordless for a moment, for this man had the same expression on his face at all times, whether joking or serious. However, Ch'in Ching did spend quite a bit of time with him, and he realized that this was definitely not a joke.

"You're a smart man, Ch'in Ching, and you should know without me having to tell you." Seeing the schoolmaster stay quiet, Shen Liangsheng cut to the chase and announced for the first time, "There will be things that will come between us two."

He did not confess his feelings but instead took the man's hand and placed it on his heart. He spoke as he looked deep into his eyes. "But I don't want to leave you because of those things."

"I have my own problems," he continued when Ch'in Ching stayed quiet. "And I don't ask that you understand…."

"I only ask that you don't leave me" was never ever going to come out of Shen Liangsheng's mouth. He let go of Ch'in Ching and grabbed the documents from the dresser. After passing them to the man, he gazed into his eyes and said softly, "Sign here if you want…and if you don't, just throw it away."

Ch'in Ching still had not said a word. It felt as though he had gone back in time, back to the time when he had just met the man.

This man had done the same thing back then. He had set up a trap with his sweet and gentle words and lured Ch'in Ching into jumping into the trap himself.

But this time, things were different. Ch'in Ching was indeed clever and understood with only a glimpse at the papers in his hand that he would actually be selling himself away with this signature. With the signature, he would promise to be the immoral lover lodged between Shen Liangsheng and his spouse and would be selling his principles away for love, lust and greed.

“Let’s discuss this again later, Ch’in Ching.” Shen Liangsheng did not want to push him into a corner. He looked at his watch and changed the subject. “It’s time for breakfast now.”

Ch’in Ching had woken up later than usual because of the fever, and then the above conversation ensued. He glanced at the clock and was reminded of his schedule that day. If he did not leave now, he would not make it to the first class, so he did not have time for breakfast.

Luckily, the chauffeur had tidied up the Dodge and filled up the gas tank without his boss’s reminder. As usual, Shen Liangsheng drove the schoolmaster to work after passing the lunchbox and thermos that the kitchen had prepared to Ch’in Ching. “Eat it on the way.”

His mind racing, Ch’in Ching had no appetite and sat in his seat with the bag in hand while staring out the window. Shen Liangsheng did not urge him either and only reminded him to take the food with him and not to stay empty-stomached until lunchtime.

Shen Liangsheng’s concern was justified. Ch’in Ching never cared for his stomach during his years away from Tientsin, and his eating habits simply went haywire after his parents had passed away. Shen Liangsheng had witnessed an episode of stomach cramps early on in their relationship, and ever since then, he had been supervising almost every one of Ch’in Ching’s meals.

Despite the things weighing on his mind, Ch’in Ching’s stomach had become accustomed to having food in the morning and started acting up after the first class. Ch’in Ching opened the bag to find a few pieces of paper stapled together. It was none other than the nearly complete property contract. Only someone like Mr. Shen Jr. would place such an important item in such a place.

The lunchbox was wrapped in thermal fabric, and the buns inside were still steaming. Ch’in Ching paused in shock at the smell which belonged to the buns from the shop that used to be near his house.

The shop had gained popularity and moved to a larger storefront farther away. Afterwards, Ch’in Ching rarely had the chance to go and just the other day had been complaining to Shen Liangsheng about missing the Hui buns and needing

to arrange a date to visit the new shop.

Ch'in Ching didn't know when the young master had the servants fetch the buns, but considering what happened this morning, it was likely all a show put on to please him.

But then again – the man had taken to heart a careless comment of his.

And one could not put on a show like that unless he put some heart into it.

As he munched on the buns, Ch'in Ching stared at the stack of papers. His vermillion fingerprint was on it already; all that was missing was his signature.

His eyes lingered on the blood red fingerprint on the white paper. The memories of their first encounter flashed through his head – *he* created a small world of peace and quiet for him, and when he looked up, *it was him*.

The one clear autumn day where *he* spoke teasingly sweet words to him on a rowboat in the middle of a lake.

The words that *he* wrote in his palm in the dark theatre and the faint smile that appeared on *his* face.

The pain of their first night that ensnared him like a web, closing in more and more tightly until he could no longer escape.

The number of times *he* kept asking in that gentle voice in the following night – does it hurt, does it hurt?

The picture morphed and changed as the frames whizzed by. Strangely, the last scene was of *Hsiao*-Liu warning him.

"Ch'in Ching, I'm gonna come right out and say it. The rich can be cunning. If he wants you to sign anything, don't do it. Don't be a gullible li'l lamb."

"Liu Pao-hsiang. Oh, Liu Pao-hsiang…."

Swallowing the last bit of the buns, Ch'in Ching picked up the pen, twisted the cap off and quickly signed his name on the page.

"You just had to jinx me, didn't you?"

95 An influential drama written by Chinese playwrite Ts'ao Yü (1910-1996). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thunderstorm_(play)

96 A left-wing monthly literature journal founded in Shanghai in 1932, now headquartered in Shenyang.

97 1937

98 Currently, Mu Nan Road

99 In his childhood, an emperor was asked by his aunt, the Eldest Princess, if he would take a wife one day. He replied yes, but he did not care for anyone except for Jiao, his aunt's daughter,. He said, "if it is A-Jiao, then I shall keep her in a house made of gold." https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E9%87%91%E5%B1%8B%E8%97%8F%E5%AC

100 Anle means "easy and happy," and ts'un means "village." The neighbourhood still exists today. https://www.google.co.jp/maps/place/An+Le+Cun+Xiao+Qu,+Heping+Qu,+Tian

101 An apartment building built in 1937 located on Colombo Road (current 121 Chang De Road). It is now the location for a hotel chain, Jinjiang Zhi Xing.

102 This was the traditional way of signing a legal document in China.

XVII

Ch'in Ching handed the signed papers to Shen Liangsheng without a word when they met again the next week. The latter had given the other man a couple of days to think about it. Now that he finally got what he wanted, he did not seem overly delighted, only telling the schoolmaster, "You hold onto it."

Maoken Apartment was only recently built on Colombo Road in the English concession. There were only four floors to the private property, and it was supposed to be exclusively for rent. Since he already made the effort, Shen Liangsheng bought out the entire top floor. However, he did not tear the wall down in case the two of them split up. It would be easier for Ch'in Ching to sell or to rent if the properties were kept in their original condition.

The apartments were only cleaned up and ready for move-in at the end of May. Shen Liangsheng took Ch'in Ching for a look around. They walked into the lobby and up the stairs. The soles of their leather shoes knocked sharply against the glassy marble floor and echoed in the seemingly empty building.

Ch'in Ching had locked the contract in his drawer since he had signed it and only found out there were two units now. He asked in a joking yet self-pitying tone, "Is the other one for you?"

Standing on the wooden floor, Shen Liangsheng had nowhere to flick his ash, so he went to the fireplace in the study to smoke his cigarette. Meanwhile, he replied in the same lighthearted tone, "Just in case. Who knows, you might get mad at me and kick me out. I'd need a place to sleep, wouldn't I?"

The house had not yet been furnished, and its walls stood naked. From the living room, Ch'in Ching heard Shen Liangsheng's voice coming from the study, and because of how bare the interior was, he could almost hear echoes.

He only chuckled and stood by the windows, looking out at the road. The thick layers of leaves on the trees provided shade on either side of the quiet street – a common and familiar sight in the concessions. But, for a split second, he didn't know where he was in space or in time.

"Why? Don't you like it?" Shen Liangsheng walked out after the smoke only

to see the schoolmaster's lone silhouette by the windows.

"Yes," Ch'in Ching didn't want him to misunderstand so he continued the joke. "But I mean, there are two bedrooms. You can always sleep there, duh."

Shen Liangsheng did not reply and wrapped his arms around the man's waist while leaning in to kiss him.

Wary of being seen from being so close to the window, he quickly broke free, but his forehead hit the glass hard at the same time.

"You have to smarten up, dumdum."

Shen Liangsheng rubbed the spot on his forehead guiltily, not because he caused the injury but because he thought of the future. He would have to put on a show for the parents after he married, and he wouldn't have much time for this man. Considering that, he felt a bit unhappy, but he still saw the irony of the situation which rendered his guilt little more than hypocrisy, like a crocodile's tears.

Sadly, Ch'in Ching had no awareness of the crocodile, and he did not hear the implied meaning. He pulled out the latch and pushed openthe windows for some fresh air.

The early summer sun was wonderful. Lush, gentle shadows of the trees made up nearly the entire view from the fourth floor. Paying no attention to other man, Shen Liangsheng hugged him again and leaned forward so that their cheeks touched. He blinked on purpose, brushing his lashes near those of Ch'in Ching.

Finding nobody on the road, Ch'in Ching did not evade the embrace again. He let his eyes close. "Yes, we all know you have long lashes, all right?"

The taller man shut his eyes too, and listened to an early-born cicada singing from the trees. Soon, the lonely insect stopped after finding itself too early for the rest of its brothers and sisters.

After inspecting the house, Ch'in Ching did not want to move in right away and did not act like the owner either, simply letting Shen Liangsheng handle the

interior design.

Shen Liangsheng normally had no interest in these things, either. His secretary was the one who had arranged everything for the manor in which he lived currently. However, he saw this house as his honeymoon suite with Ch'in Ching and found the rare interest for these matters.

Ch'in Ching didn't care for these things, but he didn't want to spoil the fun for the other man. He dared not gloss over the subject with "Whatever" or "Do as you see fit." It was just that his mind couldn't help but wander off as they discussed the pattern of the wallpaper or the furniture design. He felt emotionally exhausted for some reason. Originally, he had wanted to keep ringing the bell, but now that the bell was here to stay, he didn't feel the excitement at all. Rather, he felt a strange sense of fatigue whenever he thought of the future that lay ahead.

It was July by the time everything was settled. Ch'in Ching's junior high class had written their exams, so although summer break had not begun officially, he had a lot more time to spare and spent many consecutive days at the Shen manor. The manor's gardener was a man in his fifties named Lee. His family all lived in the country, and he had asked Shen Liangsheng for permission back at the end of June to let his grandson experience the city for a few days. Shen Liangsheng was not a tough boss and readily agreed to the matter. After the boy was brought to the manor in early July, Ch'in Ching began teaching the boy to read and telling him stories. He even told the boy to call him "*keke*" but to call Shen Liangsheng "*shushu*".[103]

The kitchen had bought two watermelons for hsiaoshu[104] and stored them in the icebox. After dinner, Shen Liangsheng went to the study to check over the company books while Ch'in Ching took the boy outside. They munched on the watermelons in the coolness of the garden, and the schoolmaster taught the kid to recite, "One call from the cicadas, two flowers[105] on the pagoda tree."[106] The boy's grandfather enjoyed no such literary pleasures and only found the cicadas noisy. Afraid that the bugs would disturb the boss upstairs, he found a long bamboo stick to bat them down from the trees.

The study's window faced the garden, and right outside it was a pink silk tree. [107] While the old man poked at the cicadas, Ch'in Ching became a spectator with the boy in his arms. One thing about cicadas was that they excreted a bit of liquid when frightened.

"Look, they're peeing on you!" Ch'in Ching pretended to scare the boy by holding him up closer to the tree.

Shen Liangsheng had been inspecting the books devotedly and had not heard even a peep from the cicadas. However, the commotion now prompted him to leave his seat and lift up the curtains for a peek.

Many feathery, pastel petals of the silk tree were beaten down by the stick and became colourless, fluttering shadows in the dim twilight glow. After a while, Shen Liangsheng let the curtains down and returned to his work. He didn't find it disruptive at all. Rather, the liveliness surrounding him filled him with much joy.

Ch'in Ching did not have to go in for work the next day and slept in a little. When he went downstairs, however, he found Shen Liangsheng still home, sitting at the dining table with a cup of coffee and the papers.

"Morning," he greeted. He found it strange when Shen Liangsheng did not reply. It was rare for the other man to be in such a daze that the coffee cup stayed in midair. He seemed not to be reading the newspaper but thinking about something.

"What's wrong?" Ch'in Ching asked as he walked closer. Brought back to himself by Ch'in Ching's utterance, Shen Liangsheng placed the cup and papers on the table before standing up.

"Why…." Ch'in Ching was about to ask him why he had not left yet when his eyes caught the contents of the newspaper. It took him a few seconds before reacting and picking it up for a closer look.

It was probably an extra emergency edition that had no time for illustrations.

Our army shall live and die with Lukou Bridge[108] *- if die we must, this bridge shall be our grave.*

Let resistance be our answer to invasion and blood be the defence for our country.

The tension in Northern China for the past half a year had been actually less than the previous one. The papers had reported the military demonstration in Fengt'ai[109] by the Japanese army in June, but no one dared say it was the signal of imminent war. Now that it had come to this, it was uncertain whether Peip'ing and Tientsin could even stay under Chinese control.

"Stay home today if you don't need to go to school. And don't go anywhere." Shen Liangsheng didn't want to leave Ch'in Ching alone at home, but he had his own problems to tend to. His father was already getting antsy and had called once asking him to go over.

Still staring at the papers, Ch'in Ching did not answer.

"Ch'in Ching…." Not getting a reply, Shen Liangsheng felt a bit impatient but didn't want to say anything harsh. He only sat the man down and said soothingly as he would to a child, "You can do that for me, right?"

"Yeah…." Ch'in Ching finally reacted and gave a stiff nod.

Shen Liangsheng wasn't sure if the man had really taken his words seriously, but the telephone in the living room began ringing again. A maid answered it but didn't fetch the young master.

After a few moments, the servant came in and reported after assessing the dynamics in the room.

"They asked if the young master had left yet," she spoke smartly. "I told them that you've just left, sir –"

"Thank you," Shen Liangsheng interrupted her. Ch'in Ching was still sitting there like a statue, but Shen Liangsheng wasn't sure what to say anymore. After quietly leaving orders for the servants to keep a strict watch on Ch'in Ching, he drove himself to his father's house.

Shen Liangsheng's original plan was to take as much money as he could and

run, but there was a limit to how much cash he could bring with him. He wasn't going to easily let off a chance to take the entire Shen establishment with him. He had been hoarding as he went along, persuading his father to transfer the assets out of the country. Unfortunately, Shen Sr.'s view was that the Shens would fare well in China as long as they watched the tides and sailed accordingly, whereas the same might not apply in a foreign country. However, now that the war had begun seemingly without a warning, he was starting to regret not having pulled out sooner. The numerous properties, stock investments and the lucrative factory, none of which he could bear to part with, were not easy to sell off in a short time.

He had been anxious before seeing his son, but after seeing Shen Liangsheng's calm composure, his own nerves settled down too. The father and son had a chat in the study and reached consensus that the two northern cities would most definitely be lost if a peace treaty could not be made. Shen Liangsheng was blunt too, saying that once Peip'ing and Tientsin fell, it would be futile to try to secure their foundations if they worked against the Japanese. He also believed that the factory could continue running since he had dealt with the Japanese twice, but the profits would have to be split with the Japanese. Once they controlled the entire North, raw materials would not be able to make their way up without their permission, and production would be out of the question.

After hearing this, Shen K'echen felt much more confident. The Shen family would not suffer since Shen Liangsheng was able to establish good relations with the Japanese in these times. The factory production would carry on, the money would keep rolling in, and he could continue being a rich retiree – what could he possibly have to complain about? The more he thought, the more certain he was that the future of the Shen name was safe. The only worry he had was fear that the bodhisattva was watching, but he quickly reassured himself that this was the only thing he could do given the circumstances, not to mention that this was just commercial business, not politics, nothing a few more incense offerings in the future couldn't fix.

After consoling his father, Shen Liangsheng could not return home just yet. When he arrived at the office, he saw Chou pacing in front of the building like a

cat on hot bricks. The first thing the secretary said was, “What took you so long, sir?” Chou also reported that the people from the Chamber of Commerce had been waiting for over half an hour. He added in a low voice that there was a Japanese man whom he had never seen before.

As calm as always, Shen Liangsheng nodded as he continued into the building without a halt.

Normally, Chou would always take notes on the side during meetings, but today he only followed his boss in to refill the tea before locking the door and giving them privacy. The meeting room stayed closed until nearly an hour later. He didn’t know how the meeting went, but everyone’s expressions were good-natured. As Chou accompanied his boss in seeing the visitors off, he noticed the Japanese man stop before boarding the car. The man shook Shen Liangsheng’s hand and spoke in English without the need for an interpreter.

“We must catch up another time.”

After the two cars left the premises, Chou followed Shen Liangsheng back into the building. Though he was very curious as to this “catch up” the Japanese man had mentioned, he dared not bring it up. Chou locked the door once they were inside Shen Liangsheng’s office.

“Well, sir….” Chou tried to choose his words, but he didn’t even know how he wanted to proceed. In the end, he sighed, “So it’s war, huh.”

Shen Liangsheng had never kept the fact that he was going to cooperate with the Japanese a secret from this secretary of his. Chou was not a naive soul either, but the news this morning still seemed strange and unrealistic.

The room fell silent as Shen Liangsheng’s mind seemed to wander off. After a few minutes, he shot up from his seat.

“You keep a watch here. Call me if something comes up. I’m going home.”

Before leaving this morning, Shen Liangsheng had been wary of civil unrest in the Japanese concession after the news broke out. Considering Ch’in Ching’s temper, he was worried that the man would act recklessly. And when he came home early, his fears had come true. Sure enough, Ch’in Ching had not stayed

put.

The servants pleaded that they could not stop Mr. Ch'in from leaving, and when Shen Liangsheng glared at them, they explained that they had rung the office but he was busy in a meeting. Doing his best to keep his anger in check, Shen Liangsheng turned around and drove to Shengkung and then to Ch'in Ching's house. After failing to find the schoolmaster in either of these places, he had no other choice but to try the teahouse since he did not know exactly where the Lius lived. To his dismay, the teahouse was not even open, but luckily, a worker from the countryside lived at the teahouse and answered Shen Liangsheng's knocks. After getting the Lius' address, he finally found *Hsiao*-Liu.

Sadly, *Hsiao*-Liu did not know where his friend was either and quickly became worried too. He put the grudge between them aside and began listing the possible places where Ch'in Ching might be.

"Let's talk on the way."

Impatient, Shen Liangsheng got *Hsiao*-Liu into the car and drove to a friend of Ch'in Ching's whose address *Hsiao*-Liu knew. Martial law had been imposed temporarily in the Japanese concession, but the roads leading into the concession were still quiet, and they saw no protesting crowds outside the barricades. Only afterwards did they find out about the active display by the Japanese army of over a hundred cannons and three dozen tanks around Chint'ang Boulevard[110] in the Second Special District.[111]

In the end, Shen Liangsheng did not find the man. When he finally drove *Hsiao*-Liu back to Nanshih, he dropped by Ch'in Ching's house to see the lock still on the gates. By now, they had found out about the tank exhibition, and Shen Liangsheng could feel his own composure breaking.

"If he comes back, tell him not to go anywhere. I'll come again tomorrow."

Shen Liangsheng drove back to Cambridge Road after leaving *Hsiao*-Liu with the message only to find the man whom he had been searching for the whole day sitting in his lounge. His worries vanished, but his anger burst into flames. Not even considering the presence of the servants, he greeted Ch'in Ching with

a scowl and a bark.

“What did I say about leaving?! Did you not hear a word I said?!”

Shen Liangsheng had had his mask on for so long that emotion never showed through to his face. No one in the room had ever seen him in such a rage, and all stood frozen in shock. Ch’in Ching’s mouth was gaping, but in the end, he was too scared to speak.

“And then you just come strolling back.” Shen Liangsheng had more to say, but seeing the man’s lowered head, he stopped himself. After moments of silence, he ended the tension himself. “Let’s have dinner first.”

It was at that moment that the paralyzed servants came back to life and began serving the food. Slowly and carefully, they tried not to make any unnecessary noise or movement in fear of the young master’s wrath.

The meal was eaten in silence, and the subject was not touched upon again. Ch’in Ching waited until bedtime, when he thought Shen Liangsheng had cooled, to tell him, “I’m going to school tomorrow.”

“Fine.” Shen Liangsheng had no intention of confining the man, but he added, “When are you coming back? I’ll pick you up.”

“No, it’s fine.” Ch’in Ching paused before explaining, “I think I’ve a lot to do at school these days. I won’t be coming over.”

Sure enough, Shen Liangsheng did not get angry again, and his tone was neutral as well. “Isn’t the school year almost over? What could you possibly have to do?”

Ch’in Ching had not prepared a reasonable excuse. Incidentally, he had gone to see a friend in the afternoon who was teaching at Nank’ai Secondary.[112] Many in his circle had the same thoughts. They couldn’t fight the guns and cannons of the Japanese with meat cleavers, but they felt they had to do something, anything, to stand up in resistance.

“Ch’in Ching.” Seeing the hesitation in the other man, Shen Liangsheng could guess his intentions, but he still remained calm. “You are free to do what you

want, but if you're not going to stay here for the time being, then you don't ever have to come over again. What you did today, I don't think I have another one in me."

With that said, Shen Liangsheng went to the bathroom, leaving Ch'in Ching sitting on the bed with his mind so tangled that he couldn't breathe easily.

After Shen Liangsheng had finished bathing, he saw the schoolmaster still in the same position, and he softened his tone. "It was in the heat of the moment. Don't take it seriously." He pulled him up to his feet. "Don't just sit there. Go wash up."

That night, the two of them lay in bed, awake even long after the lights went off. They both knew the seriousness of Shen Liangsheng's statement, and they only blamed it on "the heat of the moment" so that they both had a way out. Ch'in Ching stared at the canopy draped around the bed, as thin as a spider's web yet as white as a cocoon.

The newspaper coverage the next morning had a different ring to it. The Japanese army had adopted a strategy to "not escalate the event and solve the problem where it stands" and actively contacted the Hebei-Chahar Political Council for a meeting. The eleventh of July, news came from Peip'ing that a draft of the agreement had been made, but before anyone could react, Japan had a sudden change of heart. They rejected all the conditions made so far and increased the troops stationed in China. The twelfth of July, two Kantō independent mixed brigades and one division arrived at Tientsin. The thirteenth of July, two more infantry regiments were added, and all transportation hubs were occupied. The military exercises seemed to go on continuously in the Japanese concession, and construction began all over the place.

Under such circumstances, even the English and French concessions grew quiet, the usual extravagant scene gone for good. The Tientsin Student Union and the various nationalist organizations had not yet organized students, teachers and the general public in a direct confrontation with the Japanese army, but rather sent out telegrams to the 29th Route Army in support of resistance in

addition to fundraising and donating money and resources to the best of their abilities. Ch'in Ching helped out at the Student Union with his friends from time to time while staying home the rest of the time. Shen Liangsheng didn't stop him from it, and the two reached a compromise.

The situation remained tense day after day. By the next week or so, Shen Liangsheng heard that the Tungchützu Airport was now filled with Japanese fighter jets and brought up the idea of moving the Lius temporarily to an empty house of his in the French concession since the English and French concessions were the safest as of now.

Hsiao-Liu shot down the idea as soon as Ch'in Ching suggested it because he didn't want Ch'in Ching to owe the businessman a favour. He knew that favours had to be repaid sooner or later. He had nothing the young master wanted, so his best friend would be the one to repay it. Ch'in Ching, on the other hand, was not going to debate with him. He cut to the chase and said that they were moving whether *Hsiao*-Liu liked it or not. Mom was old, and *Hsiao*-Liu had three sisters to take care of. What was *Hsiao*-Liu going to do when the war came to them?

In the end, they moved. The property on Petite de Ceinture[113] was originally given to the company to pay off debt. It was far from brand new, and the exterior did not attract much attention, making it perfect for a temporary hideout. Shen Liangsheng wanted to help the move with his car, but Ch'in Ching quickly refused. He had told his godmother that the house belonged to his colleague, but if Shen Liangsheng showed up and waltzed around, the old lady would be sure to see through the lie. Hearing this, Shen Liangsheng did not press the offer and patted the schoolmaster on the head.

"I haven't seen your smile lately."

"Well, it's not because of you…." Ch'in Ching felt kind of bad and kissed the taller man on the cheek.

The two of them had not been active because Ch'in Ching had not been in the mood. Shen Liangsheng pulled the man closer for a deeper kiss and began exploring with his hands, but Ch'in Ching had plans with a friend. He had to leave soon and told the other man to save it for the night.

The friend was a senior of Ch'in Ching's in university. The two were not close at the time, but after Ch'in Ching returned to Tientsin, he found that the man had not gone back to his home in Shantung. Instead, he began teaching at Nank'ai, and since then, the two gradually grew closer.

Shantung men were known to be bold and straightforward. He had always made Ch'in Ching drink when they met up for dinner. Ch'in Ching feared this the most because he got drunk easily. However, the two only had time for serious business recently, and his friend had stopped making him drink – until this day, that is. The rendezvous was at his friend's dormitory at Nank'ai. Ch'in Ching noticed the appetizers and alcohol already prepared on the table.

"What're you plotting today?" he questioned curiously.

The other man chuckled and sat Ch'in Ching down for a drink before answering. "I signed myself up yesterday."

Ch'in Ching stiffened at the utterance. He realized that his friend had joined the army.

"No pressure. I just wanted to let you know. Plus, they only accept the ones who've been through military training and know how to fire a gun. You'd be wasting your time."

Ch'in Ching only lifted his glass up to toast his friend without another word. He drank one glass, then another, and then another. The liquor burned his stomach but his head was as clear as ever.

Most of the trams had stopped running. Ch'in Ching had come by bicycle, but he only pushed the vehicle along. It was not because he was drunk. In fact, he was very sober and just wanted to take a walk.

Lately, Shen Liangsheng had often been called to talk with his father and came home even later than Ch'in Ching. By the time he did, the schoolmaster had already washed away the stench of alcohol and sweat, and his face looked normal.

But when bedtime came around and Shen Liangsheng tried to kiss him, the man wouldn't cooperate. Annoyed at the man's changing attitude, he asked with

limited patience, “What is it this time?”

Ch’in Ching hesitated, not knowing how to start. Shen Liangsheng was never a very patient man, and his patience had worn thin recently. Without any more delays, he went straight for the kiss while holding the man’s jaw still.

Ch’in Ching could not turn his face so he began struggling with the rest of his body. With more skin showing during summertime, the more Ch’in Ching writhed the more aroused Shen Liangsheng became, and soon, the latter was practically forcing himself on the other man. Ch’in Ching had had no time to explain earlier, but now he didn’t even want to explain. The alcohol seemed to act up now, and he felt extremely agitated. He began fighting back with everything he had until the taller man strangled his neck and pushed down on him. Eventually, he ran out of air and he had to go limp like a dead fish.

Shen Liangsheng let go after the man stopped struggling and felt he had been too rough when he heard the painful coughs. But he didn’t want to apologize.

“What else do you want from me, Ch’in Ching?”

What did he want from him? Ch’in Ching only shook his head after he caught his breath. Shen Liangsheng was still hard and was intent on finding release. He quickly applied lubricant and inserted himself. His movements were not as violent as earlier, and after ten minutes or so, he reached for the other man’s member to find it very much alive. With that, he stopped holding back.

Although it had been more than half a month since their last affair, Ch’in Ching’s body was used to the process and began to take pleasure in the act after the initial dull pain. The sounds of skin against skin filled the dark and stuffy room. Ch’in Ching lay on the bed with his face down. He knew the bed beneath him. He knew the man above him. He also knew the lust inside himself.

Yet, he had the strange feeling again that he was lost in space and time. It was as though he had been blindfolded as he wandered along the path, touching each blade of grass and each tree trunk until his destination, but when he turned around to look back at the way he had come, what he saw was not what he had pictured in his mind’s eye.

Early morning of the twenty-ninth of July, the war became full blown. The Chinese army at Tientsin finally received orders to fight back and arranged a war strategy overnight to attack while the Japanese were focused on Peip'ing.

The sky had gone from dark to light, but the Japanese were gaining the upper hand. The most intense of battles took place near Haikuangssu,[114] and the sounds of guns and cannons were weak by the time they reached Cambridge Road. Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng sat across from each other in the lounge from the middle of the night to midday without a single word exchanged.

The Japanese jets reached Tientsin just past two o'clock in the afternoon as expected. The concessions were countries within a country, and the Japanese dared not and could not bomb them. Even so, Shen Liangsheng had had the servants clear out the cellar in the garden ahead of time. When he heard the planes in the sky, he decided that the house was not safe. He gave commands to lock the doors and hide out in the cellar for now.

Ch'in Ching had no objections and followed the man outside, but he looked like a soulless puppet – his mind had already wandered off to some faraway place.

Seeing the dumb man, Shen Liangsheng grabbed his hand. As they reached the garden, the first bomb dropped at last.

The explosion could have been heard no matter how far away. In that moment, Ch'in Ching stopped dead in his tracks. He looked towards the direction of the boom as though his soul came back. Shen Liangsheng pulled him, but he wouldn't budge. The taller man was about to speak when he saw the expression on the schoolmaster's face.

It was as though he had come back to life with the explosion for a mere instant before dying again.

Then, with the next explosion, he came back to life again – only to die once more.

A low-wattage light bulb was the only light source in the cellar. Ch'in Ching

did not sit down so Shen Liangsheng stayed standing as well, joining the other man in staring at the metal door. But it was just a door. Nothing was going to pop through simply because they were looking.

The only response they received were the continuous explosions.

For four whole hours.

The twenty-ninth of July, the Chinese army engaged in battle for fifteen hours. Due to heavy casualties and the increase of Japanese troops in Tientsin following the fall of Peip'ing, the Chinese army retreated from the city centre at four-thirty p.m. to Chinghai[115] and Mach'ang.[116]

The thirtieth of July, Tientsin had fallen.

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103 Uncle, specifically the younger brother of one's father. This term is now used for any adult male (usually middle age) a generation older than oneself.

104 The eleventh of the 24 solar terms, literally means "minor heat." This was July 7th in the year 1937. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiaoshu

105 The flowers of the pagoda tree grow in bunches almost like grapes. Here the poet means two of these bunches, not individual flowers.

106 The first two lines of a poem by Bai Juyi (772 – 842) titled wen xin chan zeng liu er shi ba, roughly "Heard newborn cicadas (and wrote this poem to) gift to Liu Ershiba". Ershiba means twenty-eight and may be the man's nickname, alias or the unlikely order of his birth.

107 European languages call this "silk tree" because the Romans thought this was where silk came from. The two common Chinese names are "night close" 夜合 or "happy together" 合歡because the flowers closes at night. Because of the second name, the flower also represents love in Chinese literature.

108 Also known as Marco Polo Bridge. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marco_Polo_Bridge_Incident

109 A district in Beijing. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fengtai_District

110 A main road in the former Austro-Hungarian concession.

111 The name that the Chinese gave to the Austro-Hungarian concession after they regained control of it.

112 One of the first modern secondary schools in China. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tianjin_Nankai_High_School

113 A street in the French concession, now Xinxing Road.

114 An area in the Japanese concession near where Haikuangssu (Haikuang Temple) stood before the Eight-Nation Alliance destroyed it.

115 A district in Tientsin to the southwest of the city centre.

116 A famous army base in history located 60 km south of Tientsin.

XVIII

Life had to go on no matter how hard the times got.

The Japanese army followed their strategy to control China using its own people. As soon as they occupied Tientsin, they established a puppet organization called Tientsin Peace Preservation Committee at a speed so quick it would have been impossible if they had not plotted beforehand. The Chamber of Commerce had been under Japanese control long before, and the visitors on the seventh of July had come looking for Shen Liangsheng to talk him into becoming a member on the Committee. The Japanese had come for Shen K'echen's name. The member list of the Committee consisted entirely of former warlords hiding in Tientsin after the Peiyang government had fallen. These men and their unfulfilled ambitions finally had an opportunity to obtain power and wealth, and they were all more than happy to comply. Those who weren't good enough to make the list by the Japanese' standards even felt disgrace.

The Japanese came looking for Shen Liangsheng, but he kindly declined, for he was even more devious than the Japanese. He knew that this golden opportunity came at a dire cost; like drugs, starting is easy but quitting is hard. Therefore, he used his father's old age and his own limited abilities as a mere bookkeeper as excuses to refuse the post.

"You're being modest, Mr. Shen." The director of the Chamber had come to persuade Shen Liangsheng and feared upsetting the Japanese boss. He quickly tried to mediate. "Everyone in the business knows you're a graduate of a prestigious English university. You're just being humble with us. Haha…."

While the director was still laughing awkwardly, the Japanese man interrupted in English, "Mr. Shen, did you study at Cambridge?"

Though a bit surprised, Shen Liangsheng kept his face straight and nodded. "Did you study there as well, Mr. Kobayakawa?"

"You'd already graduated when I was studying under Professor Berger." Kobayakawa had found that Shen Liangsheng looked familiar, and now that it had been confirmed, he smiled and added, "I've seen your photograph with the

professor. He thinks very highly of you."

"It's not like Professor Berger to be showing his personal photographs to people. He must think highly of you as well." Shen Liangsheng was skilful with his words and made Kobayakawa feel quite happy. Also, the Japanese man had read several of Shen Liangsheng's reports during school and had a good opinion of him. Thus, he did not force the man to become a part of the Committee and thought to postpone the matter until the Japanese army took total control of Tientsin first.

The others from the Chamber noticed that Kobayakawa was not upset and let out a sigh of relief when they found that the two were actually fellow alumni. They said with a smile that the road ahead was long and there would be more opportunities to work together again. That is why the atmosphere had been amiable when Chou saw the group once again.

Shen Liangsheng had not even informed his father of this, so Ch'in Ching naturally had no idea either. On the day of the bombing, the Japanese army flattened the entire Nank'ai school grounds including the secondary and primary schools because of their hatred for its nationalist stance. Luckily, the teachers and students who had joined the army formed a separate unit whose job mainly was to direct traffic. The silver lining was that the casualty number was not high, and Ch'in Ching's friend was unharmed as well.

During this devastating time, Ch'in Ching was of course helping his friends with all he had, being away from home for most of the day for a week straight. Shen Liangsheng had been strict with him before but now didn't seem to care anymore, only reminding him to be careful and eat regularly. He made sure that the kitchen prepared soups for him to drink every day. Ch'in Ching appreciated the kind act but didn't mention his thanks. He thought words of gratitude would actually seem out of place in their intimate relationship.

There was another thing Ch'in Ching didn't mention but which was weighing on *Hsiao*-Liu's mind. Nanshih was the lawless zone, but due to its proximity with the Japanese and French concessions, it survived the bombing in one piece. Seeing the streets return to normal and his house still intact, *Hsiao*-Liu told

Ch'in Ching that he wanted to move back and, while he was at it, asked when Shen Liangsheng would be available. Petite de Ceinture was on the far west end of the French concession, and he had witnessed numerous families trying to find shelter in the concession but being blocked off. The Lius owed quite a big favour to Shen Liangsheng, so even though he didn't even know how to repay the man, he wanted to thank him in person.

Ch'in Ching was a smart person. He knew that Shen Liangsheng was good to him, even going as far as taking care of his friend. Even if he didn't say thanks, he couldn't take this for granted. Therefore, he passed on the message to Shen Liangsheng that night. He also said thanks on behalf of his friend, and relayed that *Hsiao*-Liu would like to come say it himself if he was free tomorrow.

"No need," Shen Liangsheng replied as he switched off the lamp and lay down on the bed. "It's no big deal."

Ch'in Ching didn't agree that it was no big deal, but he knew Shen Liangsheng never liked to repeat himself. If the man said there was no need, then there was no need. It was just that he still felt bad and was thinking of another way to bring it up.

"If he really wants to thank me," Shen Liangsheng added as though he could read the schoolmaster's mind, "Tell him, when they reopen their teahouse, to invite me when you two perform another piece."

"That's it?" Ch'in Ching was surprised by this request that sounded like a joke. He chuckled easily for the first time in a long time. "You are still so easy to please."

Shen Liangsheng smiled, but Ch'in Ching did not see it because they were lying side by side in the dark. He only heard the taller man say, "I've only heard you that one time."

"Oh please, you don't actually like it." The two seldom had relaxing times like these lately, so Ch'in Ching continued the light banter. "You think I'm too wordy."

"I don't actually think so. You're an entertaining person."

"Was that a compliment?"

“That time I went looking for you, I saw you on the podium all teacher-like. Then you were great in the crosstalk performance. And I was wondering how you’d be in bed, and with that quick tongue of yours, how you’d be great at oral.”

Shen Liangsheng’s words became more and more lewd, but because of his voice – mild, nostalgic and even a bit wistful – they seemed chaste and pure. The man seemed to be reminiscing times in the distant past which were never coming back, and it made Ch’in Ching fill with sorrow.

They were never coming back. Things were bad back then too, but at least…. The rest of the thought pained Ch’in Ching. He turned over and hugged Shen Liangsheng around the waist, hiding his face in the nook of the man’s neck. After some silence, he recovered and continued the previous conversation. “We’d just met and you already had such indecent thoughts.”

“It’s summer for goodness sakes.” Shen Liangsheng did not seem to want to continue, and he patted the arm around his waist. “Lie back down and go to sleep.”

“All right.” Ch’in Ching also thought it would be too suggestive if he kept clinging to the other man. He was not in the mood to begin with, so he lay back down and closed his eyes in preparation for sleep.

“Ch’in Ching.” After tossing around, Ch’in Ching was almost asleep when he heard a faint utterance from behind. “You don’t have to return the favour, and you don’t have to worry about it, either.”

Usually, this would be a very normal thing to say, and it sounded perfectly fine. However, Ch’in Ching lost all desire to sleep after hearing it. His heart seemed to give a loud lurch, and then he felt a frightening emptiness for which he did not know the reason. He contemplated but reached no answer. In the end, he came to the conclusion that he was half-asleep and something must have gone wrong with his head.

Since *Hsiao*-Liu had moved back, Ch’in Ching thought it was about time to tidy up his own house. He told Shen Liangsheng that he would sleep at home for a few days while he gave the house a total cleanout. The other man did not

object and offered his help, but when Ch'in Ching declined, he did not insist.

Frankly, it did not take that long to fix the house, but Ch'in Ching was worried that Shen Liangsheng would decide that living outside the concessions was too dangerous and urge him to move to Maoken. Ch'in Ching didn't really want to move, but he didn't want to cause any more bad feelings between them. Hence, he thought it would be good to give the house a thorough repair. Even if he did move out, this was still his parents' house and where he grew up. He loved each brick and each tile. Tidying it up would be a kind of early farewell.

During the next several days, Ch'in Ching swept the small courtyard, added new putty to the windows, laid the shingles again, and filled the rat holes that had long existed in the bedroom that now served as storage. Only when he could see nothing that needed to be fixed did he return to Cambridge Road.

The first thing he saw after entering the gates of the Shen manor was Lee, bent at the waist, cutting the China roses in the planter box at the entrance. The flowers knew naught of the human world and still bloomed beautifully. However, Lee seemed to be in an extremely bad mood, and he worked in a vicious manner, his scissors going *snap snap snap*.

"Oh, Mr. Ch'in!" Lee's face brightened after he saw the man, and he greeted him with a nod.

"Um, is everything all right at home, sir?" Seeing the bad mood, Ch'in Ching was concerned that something had happened to his family in the country in the past few days.

"Same old, same old. Everything's all right, but thank you for asking. The other day my younger son came into the city saying that grandson of mine's been crying to come back to see Ch'in-*keke* ever since he got home…." Lee had just started, but he stopped his own talkative mouth. "You should go inside. Don't hang out here in the sun with me."

Ch'in Ching nodded with a smile and was about to head inside when Lee added hesitantly. "But, Mr. Ch'in, if you're looking for the young master…." He glanced towards the house and pressed his voice low even though he could not be heard from inside. "There's a Jap here. Second time in the past few days

already. No idea what for."

Only then did Ch'in Ching notice the extra car beyond the limestone steps by the side entrance. He walked until he could see the car, and lo and behold, there was the goddamn fried egg flag on the hood.

"You're not going in, sir?" Lee asked after Ch'in Ching came back.

"No, I think I'll stay out here with you and the flowers."

Ch'in Ching was straightforward, and Lee understood his intentions well. He continued talking about everyday things as he worked. About ten minutes later, Shen Liangsheng walked out with another man beside him. They could only be friends judging from the way they chatted.

"Then it's settled, Vincent. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Brilliant, though you really shouldn't have come all the way here for that. Just ring me next time."

"It's fine. I'm not very busy these days."

This visitor certainly was no stranger. After their first encounter, Kobayakawa had arranged a date to catch up, and they had eaten dinner several times after that. Kobayakawa was actually two years younger than Shen Liangsheng, but he had gotten his current job assisting with the army finances in Tientsin because of his father's position in the Japanese army.

He had only arrived in Tientsin about two months ago and already had bad blood with Shigekawa Hidekazu.[117] Everything seemed normal on the surface, but his power had been more or less stripped from him, in turn making him feel unfulfilled. Kobayakawa looked down upon Chinese people, but he took a liking to Shen Liangsheng because the Chinese man was neither a boot-licker nor a distant bystander. Also, both of them had read economics at Cambridge, so it did not take long before the two became well-acquainted.

Shen Liangsheng caught sight of Ch'in Ching as he exited the house, but he kept a straight face and saw Kobayakawa to his car. After watching the vehicle

drive out the metal gates, he stayed in the same spot, looking at Ch'in Ching as though to beckon him over.

Ch'in Ching looked back at him from where he stood by the planter box. The summer sun in August was so strong that steam was rising from the ground.

He looked at him across a distance not far though not so close, either. The light was so bright that he couldn't see the other man's expression. His body seemed to have confused the sensations of hot and cold after such a long time under the broiling sun. It was so hot that he wanted to shiver.

It was Ch'in Ching who walked over in the end, but Shen Liangsheng started talking first in his usual tone. "Let's talk inside."

When they entered the lounge, Ch'in Ching thought they would talk elsewhere, but Shen Liangsheng stopped and pointed to the couch.

"Take a seat," he said as though it were the schoolmaster's first time here.

"Shen Liangsheng…."

The truth was that nothing serious had crossed Ch'in Ching's mind. The papers had yet to release the names of the Peace Preservation Committee, but he had heard rumours that it was essentially made up of former Peiyang people. He had thought that the Japanese were probably looking for Shen Liangsheng for this, and he wanted to have a talk with him to dissuade him from working with the Japanese.

"Ch'in Ching, I've never hidden anything about my family from you," Shen Liangsheng interrupted with a seemingly unrelated statement as though he wanted the schoolmaster to deduce it himself.

But Ch'in Ching could not. His mind was stuck, and he did not reply for minutes. He wasn't informed about the business side of things, and the taller man had never spoken about leaving the country sooner or later. He only knew about the internal conflicts between the family members. And then what? Ch'in Ching sat there pondering but found no answer.

"I have things that I want, Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng laid out the cards

after seeing the other man's dumb expression for so long, thinking there was no hope in waiting for him to find the answer himself. "I'll be honest with you. I don't want to get into politics, but I'm going to have to work with the Japanese for the business. If you can accept it, good. If you can't, then we'll just leave it at that."

Ch'in Ching only nodded in acknowledgement. Shen Liangsheng did not tell him to think about it or take a few days if he needed. The taller man reached for a cigarette from the coffee table and sat back on the couch, smoking.

The servants could tell that something was going on and left the two men alone. There was not a sound in the large, deserted lounge. The only thing alive was the smoke, gently hovering and then fading away.

Shen Liangsheng finished the cigarette and got another one. Ch'in Ching followed suit and lit it between his lips. Ch'in Ching was not a smoker, but occasionally after sex, he would join in the fun as Shen Liangsheng sat against the headboard smoking. He would crawl into the taller man's arms and find a comfy spot to suck the smoke from the man's mouth into his own before spitting it out. He would even ask mischievously, "Smoking's not good for you. How are you going to thank me for helping you out?"

Although Ch'in Ching lit the cigarette, he only breathed in once in the process of lighting it and let the rest burn away on its own. Afterwards, he spoke, but it was something unrelated.

"Try not to smoke so much anymore."

When Shen Liangsheng did not respond, he crushed the cigarette butt and continued as he got up, "Then let's just leave it at that."

Shen Liangsheng nodded and stood up, too. He heard Ch'in Ching say, "I'll find a time to…." He knew it was regarding the apartment, and he cut the schoolmaster off. "It's fine."

"I'll find a time to give the contract back to you," Ch'in Ching finished his sentence while gazing at him. "Let me know if there are any other procedures with the transfer."

“Fine.” The truth was that Shen Liangsheng knew the schoolmaster wouldn’t take the properties, so he didn’t waste his breath. The tone he took was that of a business negotiation: the conditions were agreed upon, and now it was time to go.

Ch’in Ching did not waste his breath either. He nodded, not giving a word of farewell, and walked out the door.

The lounge door was wide open, leading to a blaring whiteness outside. As Ch’in Ching stepped towards the blinding sunlight, he suddenly thought of what Shen Liangsheng had said to him the previous night about not having to return the favour. Now he understood – Shen Liangsheng had likely known that this day would come, and those words were meant as an early farewell. This way they owed each other nothing.

And they would have nothing to do with each other anymore.

Standing behind the departing man, Shen Liangsheng had little emotion on his face, let alone expressions of sadness or longing. If one were to say, it was a face so stern as to be lifeless.

Indeed, he had known this day would come. Ch’in Ching would never accept his working with the Japanese. However, it was not the case that there was no way out of the situation. Words came easily, but it was the way they were used that mattered. Ch’in Ching did not understand the workings of business very well, and it would have been possible to fool the man into thinking that Shen Liangsheng had no intentions to cooperate but that he was forced to. After the lies, he simply had to act and speak smartly to eventually win the man back.

Shen Liangsheng did have self-awareness. Selfish, stonehearted, materialistic – none of these were false accusations, but honestly, he did not care. He would admit that he cared for Ch’in Ching, but while he did, he was calculating. Even helping his godmother’s family had been preparation for the future.

However, Shen Liangsheng found that his plans changed in the four hours he had spent with the man.

Standing with him in the dark cellar, listening to the explosions from afar, he

caught glimpses of the man's expression and was reminded of the one spring day when they had gone to see the flowers by the lake. He recalled the man telling him something which he had totally forgotten due to a lack of concern. All he could remember was the man's expression.

The peace and love then, and the excruciating pain now caused by the continuous explosions.

Shen Liangsheng was incapable of feeling such love or such pain, but he finally realized then that he could not possibly trick the man this time. If he had felt anything sincere towards the man, he would not fool him regarding this matter. He had to give him that at least.

And it wasn't hard. It was just four words:

Easy come, easy go.

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117 A colonel in the Japanese army stationed in Tientsin in charge of espionage. He had been sentenced to the death penalty in a trial in Beijing in 1947 but was released after the Republic reached a negotiation with Japan for his release along with many other war criminals.

XIX

It was Monday the next day. Shen Liangsheng went into the office as usual and went out for dinner with Kobayakawa. When he returned home at ten o'clock, a servant told him Mr. Ch'in had dropped something off in the afternoon. Shen Liangsheng already knew the man would come while he was absent, so he only nodded his head in acknowledgement.

The servants dared not misplace whatever Mr. Ch'in had brought, so they left it on the coffee table in the lounge. Shen Liangsheng walked over to find not only the property contract but also an eyeglass case. The latter more or less took him by surprise, for he had nearly forgotten he was the one who had given Ch'in Ching that pair of glasses.

Well, things turned out like this, and there was no use dwelling on details. Without much thought, Shen Liangsheng locked both the contract and the case into a drawer in his study that he rarely used. As for transfer of ownership, it had not even crossed his mind. The heart was made of soft vulnerability, and no matter how he might have appeared on the outside, his heart was bound to hurt for some time. Shen Liangsheng did not regret anything, but he did not wish to speak of Ch'in Ching or be reminded of anything about the man – out of sight, out of mind.

The servants did not know about the entire ordeal and only thought their boss had a fight with Mr. Ch'in. It didn't seem like a small one either, and so they stayed wary for the next couple of days in fear of tempting Shen Liangsheng.

Then, after a few days, they still did not face Shen Liangsheng's fury. He looked just like before, and although he had a stern face all day long, he was not hard to serve. Therefore, they all relaxed and returned to their normal routines.

A month passed without much drama. In mid-September, Shen Liangsheng received a letter from Jenny Wang in the States. Incidentally, she had already sent a telegram not long after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, but she probably had felt that was insufficient and wrote this letter to say everything she wanted.

It was no short letter, taking up several pages, but the main message did not stray far from this: she could not return due to the situation in the country right now, and all she could do was worry. Luckily, her family were all well, but she had not been able to reach one of her friends in Peip'ing and that drove her crazy with concern. She also wondered if Shen Liangsheng was well, if Ch'in Ching was well. She wanted them to send her a telegram if anything happened to them.

While thinking that sending her a telegram wouldn't help anything, Shen Liangsheng did see her worry. He suspected that the faint blots on the pages were from her tears, so he wrote a few words of comfort and said he was doing well. Then, after a pause, he continued.

"Ch'in Ching is also well. He wants me to ask how you are doing and tell you to take care and not worry about us too much."

The truth was that Shen Liangsheng had no idea whether Ch'in Ching was doing well or not. It was just that there was no need to explain to Jenny that they had not been in touch. However, there was also no need for him to tell such white lies.

Shen Liangsheng read his reply once after completing it and kind of wanted to write a new one. However, after staring at the two sentences, he sealed the envelope without making any changes and placed it with two other letters waiting to be sent.

It was autumn by mid-September. The heat had left, but the chill had not set in because it had not rained yet. It was Sunday, and Shen Liangsheng was home for once. After writing the letter, he sat for a while.

The window in the study was open, and the room was filled with the mild warmth of early autumn. However, somehow it felt as though it were winter. Shen Liangsheng always had strong self-control. He had already wiped away the pain in the beginning and did not miss the man much. But perhaps because of the letter from an old friend, or because of his little white lie, the door to his heart opened just a crack. As he sat there, he could almost hear the laughter and joy from the distant past. The end of the happy times glided over with the fresh

chill of the previous winter and took a stroll through his inner house before gently floating away.

Finally, the rain hit a few days later, and the temperature dropped. It started raining in the middle of the night. Ch'in Ching had not closed the windows and only had a light blanket, so the cold kept him from sleeping well. Amidst the drowsiness, he realized he had forgotten something very important, something to do with the weather.

It was cold. And autumn had come… Oh no! Ch'in Ching suddenly remembered that Shen Liangsheng had told him his birthday was in July. Then, all that stuff happened in July and he completely forgot about it.

Surely, Shen Liangsheng would be upset that he'd forgotten about his birthday, right? He should visit the shopping centre tomorrow after school and get the man a present to make up for it.

Ch'in Ching didn't realize until he was contemplating the choice of gifts that he didn't need to buy anything – they'd already split, and they had nothing to do with each other.

Ch'in Ching flipped to the other side. He wanted to get a thicker cover but was too lazy to move. The rain grew from a drizzle to a downpour. He pulled the thin blanket tighter around himself and fell asleep listening to the rain. When he woke the next morning, his nose was a bit stuffed like the beginning of a cold. His eyes were a bit puffy and wouldn't open as though he had wept, but his pillow was dry.

The temperature continued to drop. One day, Shen Liangsheng came home, had dinner and went upstairs. Soon, he came back down again.

"Who laid out the rug in the den?"

The servant he asked was not entirely sure and replied saying she laid it out because it had gotten cold.

"Was it sent in for dry cleaning?"

“Yes, but it wasn’t me….”

“Fine. Thank you.”

The servant walked away confused, wondering why the boss was suddenly interested in the interior decor when he never had been before. She was afraid that the rug was a taboo for Shen Liangsheng, but then she thought that the expensive rug would be a waste gathering dust in storage.

When Shen Liangsheng visited his father at the end of October for one of their usual talks, he noticed that the older man’s voice was hoarse. He asked if it was a cold and if so, whether he had taken any medicine.

Shen K’echen waved his hand in dismissal. “It’s been like this for a while now. It hurts whenever I swallow.”

He told his son that he had taken quite a lot of traditional medicine, but it did not help much. He thought the incident this past summer caused him too much stress, and the anxiety built up, so it would take more than a day or two to get his body back to normal. He let out a long sigh. “This is what old age does to you.” With that said, he actually did appear older.

“Maybe Western medicine will do you some good instead. I’ll ask Louis to come by tomorrow.”

Louis was a doctor trained in Western medicine and Shen Liangsheng’s personal friend. He had been recommended by Shen Liangsheng to be Shen Sr.’s family doctor, but Shen K’echen thought Western medicine was toxic and not as mild as Chinese medicine. In the end, he never really called for Louis’s expertise.

The next day, Louis came and recommended Shen Sr. have a laryngoscopy after hearing of the long-lasting symptoms. Shen K’echen was not too willing but consented to it after some persuasion on his son’s part.

However, nothing significant came back on the results, and the ordeal ended with the prescription of some anti-inflammatory drugs. Then, nearly a month later, Shen Sr.’s coughing worsened to the point he coughed out blood one day. Only then did he panic and undergo a complete examination.

This time, the doctor only told Shen Liangsheng the results, and this gave the older man some warning ahead of time. The doctor explained the illness, avoiding the horrible details. Laryngeal cancer was difficult to detect in its early stages, and surgery could be a possible option to consider.

Tired of the euphemistic talk, Shen Liangsheng interrupted him and asked for specific information on the risks of surgery. In the end, he decided resolutely, “Then let’s have the operation.”

To his father, Shen Liangsheng left some of the condition unsaid, saying there was a small tumour in his throat that just needed to be removed. But Shen Sr. was not stupid and knew more or less exactly what it was.

Shen K’echen might have become fearful in recent years, but he had been a man who had been through hell and high water. In the face of trouble, he became rather calm and accepted the proposed operation with an implicit and optimistic sense of hope for recovery.

After much inquiring, Shen Liangsheng hired an American surgeon from Shanghai at a high price, and the results were satisfactory. The illness appeared to have come under control. Shen K’echen thought that it was the light at the end of the tunnel and was fairly high-spirited after the surgery.

The Provisional Government of the Republic of China[118] was established in Peip’ing in December that year, and after a branch was set up in Tientsin, the Peace Preservation Committee was dissolved. Kobayakawa still wanted to persuade Shen Liangsheng to join politics and work for him, but Shen Liangsheng had been busy arranging for his father’s operation. The latter first said he was not in the mood for this, and then he asked to push the issue until his father’s health recovered. One thing led to another, and the matter stayed unaddressed even by February in the next year.

However, not all of his words were excuses. Technically speaking, his father’s illness meant that Shen Liangsheng was one step closer to what he wanted, but he didn’t feel a single hint of happiness.

As they say, dying men don’t lie. However, what was running through his mind as he waited outside the operating room while his father went under the

knife was not how Shen K'echen had mistreated him in his childhood, but how good he was to him afterwards.

Spring came again in March, the time of rebirth, but Shen Sr.'s condition took a turn for the worse. This time around the doctor did not recommend a second operation, nor was Shen K'echen strong enough to undergo another. The only way he could stay alive was through intravenous medication day in and day out.

Home was always better than the hospital ward, so Shen Sr. left the hospital in April. He hired two home nurses, and Louis began making home-calls every day. Shen Liangsheng moved back to the old mansion, and his brother began dropping by every day, too. As for whether his brother was sincerely concerned or just doing it for the estate, only he himself knew.

Shen K'echen knew he was going to meet his end, but he didn't want to see it as karma. He believed in the afterlife, and if this were karma, then he would have to suffer in the next life as well. Shen Liangsheng read his father's thoughts and hired an enlightened Buddhist monk to read him scriptures. The monk spoke consoling words to him, all but promising him a good reincarnation and next life.

While he was still conscious, the cautious Shen Sr. invited trusted confidants to Tientsin in addition to hiring lawyers in preparation for his will. His elder son, though greater in age, was lesser in brains and began snooping around trying to find details of the will. Meanwhile, Shen Liangsheng stayed put. The mediators were all loyal to their old man. How could his older brother pick up any clues if Shen Liangsheng hadn't already?

Expectedly, Shen K'echen found out about his son's sneaky behaviour almost right away. He was so enraged that he was slapping the bed, but because he was too weak to make much sound with his hands or to scold anyone with his voice, he ended up wheezing. Louis quickly gave him a shot of tranquilizer and made sure the man was all right before leaving.

When the man woke up the next morning, he could just about make out the silhouette of the person by his bed, a silhouette that he loved. He reached out

feebly for the person's hand and breathed in a raspy voice, "Chen-chen."

Shen Liangsheng was sitting by the bed when he felt his father's hand on his. He did not catch what the older man said, and he leaned down, asking softly, "What was that?"

But his father did not answer. The man only shook his head as tears streamed down his face. Then, he closed his eyes tiredly and seemed to slip into slumber once again.

It had been two days since Shen Liangsheng last went into the office, so he had to go today. He called over the nurses after watching his father for a few minutes. Walking out of the room and down the stairs, he lit a cigarette.

Halfway down the staircase, Shen Liangsheng stopped in his tracks when he realized what his father had said – he had nearly forgotten that his mother's Chinese name had the character "chen" in it.

It was in this moment that Shen Liangsheng finally admitted he was alone. The people in his life left him one after another, and he thought he didn't care to the point he had almost forgotten his mother's name.

Perhaps one day he might actually forget all their names, the names of those who had left and those who had yet to leave. However, he now felt afraid in this empty house filled with death, afraid that his mind would one day become empty as well.

He finished his smoke on the staircase. For just a second, he wanted to drive to see someone just to tell him that he missed him.

However, he only drove to the office in the end. On the way back to his father's mansion, he dropped by his own manor on Cambridge Road and grabbed from the study *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the only thing of his mother's that he had left.

If he had to miss someone out of all the people who had left him or had yet to leave him, it would be his mother.

Shen Liangsheng placed the slightly worn poetry collection by the pillow. He flipped to a random page that night before bed and began reading from there. He stopped at the end of a certain poem and read it over several times before closing the book, locking away the words that brought forth memories that had nothing to do with his mother.

"But I look on thee – on thee –

Beholding, besides love, the end of love,

Hearing oblivion beyond memory;

As one who sits and gazes from above,

Over the rivers to the bitter sea."

The end of June, Shen Sr. finally went to meet his maker. When Ch'in Ching saw the obituary, he sat there clutching the newspapers, repeating to himself: "You were the one who ended this relationship. You cannot go back to see him."

Hsiao-Liu had seen the obituary too, but he did not mention anything about the dead man when he visited Ch'in Ching that night. He brought over a meal for his friend whom he nagged, "What the hell are you doing these days? You're always saying you can't come over for dinner, and I always have to bring you the food."

His words were harsh, but the thought behind them was good. *Hsiao*-Liu added after making sure his friend ate his food, "You weren't even gonna eat if I didn't bring it for you. Just look at yourself. I'm three times your size!"

"Horizontally or vertically?" Ch'in Ching laughed as he tidied up the dishes to wash in the kitchen.

Seeing that his friend could still make jokes, *Hsiao*-Liu felt more or less relieved and tossed away the idea of persuading him to go see Shen Liangsheng. He was actually happy to see them split. Although Ch'in Ching had lost a lot of weight in the past few months, he was in good spirits. As they said, better a finger off than always aching, and life could readily go on without that finger.

The reason for the schoolmaster's weight loss was actually his busy schedule. Things were looking bad in Tientsin, but Peip'ing had it worse, and all the nationalist organizations in Northern China relocated to Tientsin last year. All schools in Tientsin refused to stop Chinese lessons and to modify textbooks in defiance of the Japanese attempt to enslave China through education. Sheng Kung was a girl's school and had few students to begin with, but now things were even harder. But in the words of *Lao*-Wu, the lessons had to go on, and the bigger the better. No way in hell were they going to let Chinese children speak the tongue of the devil.

For the past few months, Ch'in Ching had been helping out at the Student Union while working for *Lao*-Wu, secretly distributing anti-Japanese pamphlets and the Anti-Japanese Tabloid published by the Communist Party in Tientsin. When it got to the point when no one would print the pamphlets and papers anymore, they began copying them by hand.

Many years had passed. No one called him Ch'in-*sao* anymore; the author of *The New Year's Sacrifice* had passed away, too. However, he left behind words that would last for generations:

"What is a path? It is what we create with our feet from where there is no path. It is what we establish from where there are only thorns and bramble."

At their father's funeral service, Shen Liangsheng, dressed in a black suit, was behind his brother, not shedding a single tear. Meanwhile, his brother was wailing, as though the more he cried the more of the estate he would get.

The contents of Shen K'echen's will were not surprising. The man was not going to let his elder son suffer no matter how much he hated him for being a good-for-nothing. Although he did not give him the executive rights to the family business, he passed on half of his real estate. If the son could just quit gambling, he would not have to work a day for the rest of his life.

The elder son had no problem with this decision. He knew the properties were not liquid, but he had not been part of the family business for some time and was content with this settlement.

On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng was not exactly discontent, but if he was

correct in his judgement, his brother was a leopard who could not change its spots – the houses and the land would not stay long in his hands. Shen Liangsheng had not done much to his brother when their father was alive, even going as far as occasionally helping him out. That was because he knew that their old man was watching and that it asn't the right time.

Now that the old man was dead, there was nothing holding Shen Liangsheng back from tearing apart his own blood. The things he did in the light and in the dark in the following months were so despicable that the late Mrs. Shen would surely push open the gates of hell and take Shen Liangsheng down with her if she found out.

Shen Liangsheng had had no intentions of exacting revenge for his mother when he came back to China, but six years later, he did exactly that. Shen Liangsheng's brother died in the end of that year from opium addiction. As for how he became addicted and how he died from it within a mere few months, it was a secret that only one man knew.

Shortly after Shen Sr.'s death, Li Wan-hsien returned to her own family in a rampage and finally ended her meaningless marriage as she had wished. Afterwards, when she heard the news of her ex-husband's passing, she realized she had left him too early and did not receive as much of his estate as she could have. However, after the initial regret, she got the chills when she thought about the spooky matter more carefully. That ex-brother-in-law of hers likely had something to do with the death, and she finally understood for the first time the true meaning of a heartless devil.

The January of Year Twenty-Eight[119] was especially cold. The skies had been continuously overcast, signalling an imminent snowstorm.

Shen Liangsheng returned home one day and was taking off his coat and hat when the servant told him there was a Miss Ts'ui looking for him. "She wouldn't leave, and it was really cold outside, so I let her in."

The reason why the maid made this explanation was because of the boss's established rule to ask all strangers to leave and not let just anybody into the

house.

Shen Liangsheng could not think of a Miss Ts'ui that he knew.

"Where is she?" he asked with a frown.

"Right there in the lounge."

It was only then that he noticed a person sitting on the couch. The lady was sitting there in silence. She was supposedly here for Shen Liangsheng, but she was on the verge of tears clutching a teacup in her hands while her mind was completely in another world.

Shen Liangsheng examined her as he approached and was certain he had never seen this person. But he did understand why the servant had let her in – her belly was round, and it simply was not right to let a pregnant woman stay out in the cold.

The lady did not realize until Shen Liangsheng was in front of her. She shot up from her seat and looked at him with anxious eyes, forgetting to even greet the man.

"How can I help you?" Although she was a stranger, it would be rude to kick her out. He sat down, and when she remained standing, he added kindly, "Take a seat."

"I am Ts'ui…."

"Yes, please sit." Seeing that she had only managed to get three words out after so long, Shen Liangsheng could only try to be patient and inquire again. "How can I help you, Miss Ts'ui?"

"Young Master Shen…."

Still standing, she managed to say another three words before tears began trickling down her face. She could not speak well through the sobs and made it seem like Shen Liangsheng was the one at fault here for knocking her up.

Though confused, Shen Liangsheng knew he had never done such a thing. Still, he could not do anything but ask the maid to fetch her a handkerchief. With his limited patience, he kept asking questions and eventually figured out

the situation.

Miss Ts'ui was not a Tientsin local. Her name was Chao-ti,[120] a name so common that it could not be any more common. Her appearance was nothing extraordinary, just a fair-skinned girl, but her soft disposition made her seem extra pitiful.

She had come to Tientsin with her master as a servant. Shen Liangsheng's brother took a liking to her and kept her as a mistress in secret from Li Wan-hsien. The man had just about abandoned her before he had even died, and now that he was dead, he left behind a pregnant woman with no legitimate claim to his estate. She had managed by pawning her belongings for two months. Her landlord was going to take back her house soon, and with the risk of not having a roof over her head, she finally gathered the courage to look for Shen Liangsheng.

Shen Liangsheng did not know if the baby was really his brother's – it didn't matter to him either way since he had already disposed of the man – and he cut to the chase. "Name your price."

"No, I don't want any money." Ts'ui Chao-ti was destined for a hard life because of her soft nature. Somehow she ended up staying with Shen Liangsheng's brother after he had taken advantage of her. Now she was all tears, saying she didn't want money but was not really sure herself what she wanted instead.

Shen Liangsheng was ruthless towards his own brother but did not want to bully a woman. He let her cry to her heart's content and smoked in silence from his seat. In the end, he suggested gently. "Don't cry. Let us have some food first."

He showed such kindness to her for no reason other than something that he didn't want to admit himself. It was nothing more than the small mole by her eye. She looked nothing like that certain someone, but because of the mole, he couldn't bear to feel annoyed at her as tears fell from her downcast eyes.

“I…I don’t want much….” After hearing the man’s gentle invitation, she stopped sobbing, but the words coming from her mouth were still jumbled. “I’ll raise the child myself. I’ll be the best mother…. I just want a ticket home.”

Ts’ui Chao-ti never went to school and didn’t speak or act in a logical manner. She did not come looking for the Shens for two months because she had thought they would take the child away from her to raise as their own. She had paid someone to write a letter to her family to the south of the city, and her mother had agreed to take her back. She now had a way out of this, but then she found that she had no money for a ticket back home. She didn’t want to ask her family for it but had nowhere to borrow money. Only then did she look for Shen Liangsheng. Asking around for his address was probably the bravest thing she had ever done.

Hearing her story, Shen Liangsheng found the rare urge to be kind. This time it had nothing to do with the certain someone but rather with the urgent tone in which she spoke about her unborn child. No matter who the father was, hearing a mother’s concern for the child tugged at Shen Liangsheng’s heartstrings. After he found out that she had nowhere to stay, he decided to go the entire way. He planned to have her stay in a guestroom for a few days until he bought a ticket and found someone to escort her back.

Ts’ui Chao-ti was not a strong-willed person and went along with whatever the young master had decided. She settled in the manor with her small bag of clothes, never stepping out of her room unless necessary. Eating at the same table with Shen Liangsheng was naturally out of the question, too. However, she sincerely thought he was a good man unlike his older brother.

Of course, Shen Liangsheng was far from a good man. He hadn’t expected this when he killed the man, and with that, he had indirectly brought this upon her. All he could do was to compensate her monetarily.

At first, she didn’t take it, but Shen Liangsheng insisted. “Just take it.”

Thus, she did, and her opinion of him grew even better.

The train ticket was for the twenty-second of January. A heavy snowfall hit the city on the night of the twenty-first which the Wong Lik predicted perfectly as Tahan.

The twenty-second fell on a Sunday, and Shen Liangsheng, with nothing better to do, tagged along for the ride to the station.

The escort that Shen Liangsheng had found was a secretary whose home was also to the south. He was absolutely delighted after hearing that he was off all the way through to Chinese New Year, and best of all, he was still getting paid full wages. On the day of departure, he arrived with two bulky suitcases in tow and a beaming smile. Even Shen Liangsheng teased him. “Are you moving out to the countryside?”

“Of course not. Just bringing some things back to the family.”

The secretary was an outgoing man in his early twenties. He was going to spend the rest of the trip with Miss Ts’ui, so he began talking with the lady and even helped her with the luggage without waiting for the chauffeur. The truth was she had little luggage, but Shen Liangsheng added a few things for her after knowing she had pawned all of her winter clothes.

She might have been pregnant, but she had only just turned nineteen. Too shy to talk but too embarrassed not to reply the young man, the poor girl kept her head down and would only reply when spoken to.

Seeing this from the side, Shen Liangsheng thought the two looked a bit like adorable newlyweds. He was turning twenty-eight that year, but he felt old all of a sudden. Watching them was like watching the next generation and made him feel like their elder.

They got into the car after the bags. The secretary sat in the passenger seat while the boss accompanied Ts’ui Chao-ti in the back.

“Take care on the road,” Shen Liangsheng added like the elder he felt he was.

The girl nodded. The vehicle drove past the manor gates and had made a left turn when Shen Liangsheng suddenly twisted around to look back the way they had come.

“Stop the car!” he commanded.

The chauffeur stepped on the brakes, but due to the snow, the car slid for several yards before stopping. Caught off guard, Ts’ui Chao-ti lurched forward, and her hands flew to protect her bulging stomach.

She had no idea what had happened. Though she had not spent much time with Shen Liangsheng, in her mind she had already placed this man on a pedestal like a bodhisattva in the temple. He was high above in the sky, in the light, above the mortals, devoid of all emotions.

She watched this man nearly stumble as he hurried out of the car only to stand stiffly by the vehicle. She found the rare burst of courage from the shock and edged closer to the window, straining to get a look.

They had left early in the morning to catch the train, and Cambridge Road was a quiet street to begin with. Aside from their car, there was only one man standing at a corner further up the street.

She guessed Shen Liangsheng was looking at that person. It must have been someone he knew, but then why was he just standing there? Why didn’t he go up and greet the man?

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118 The puppet government in 1937-1940.

119 1939

120 ‘Chao’ means “to beckon” and ‘ti’ means “sister-in-law” but is a homonym for “young brother.” Many families named their daughter this if they wished to have a boy after her.

XX

Ch'in Ching had come looking for Shen Liangsheng on a life-or-death matter, but it was for *Hsiao*-Liu rather than himself.

Hsiao-Liu had not actually done anything outrageous. The man was always grinning like Maitreya, but there was a side to him that was bold and loyal. It was only because of his mother's old age and three unmarried sisters that he had to stay a "good citizen" and shoulder the weight of the family. Ch'in Ching never shared anything about what he had been doing with his friend and even stopped visiting the Lius so frequently out of fear that he would drag them into any trouble he might get into.

Word still managed to make its way into the occupied areas despite Japanese controls on the news and speech. The crimes of the Japanese army in Nanking were enough to make each and every one of them suffer a painful death a thousand times over. However, *Hsiao*-Liu couldn't actually do anything, and he only kept the resentment inside. Later, he and several colleagues in the business decided to write a play to satirize the Japanese sinners and Chinese traitors. Both the performers and the audience knew what the "fictional story set in ancient times" really portrayed, but they left it unsaid and instead cursed profanely out of anger.

Then, the "police" came to the teahouse the previous October and took *Hsiao*-Liu back to the station for questioning without any solid proof, obviously looking for a ransom. Frightened, *Hsiao*-Liu's sisters asked Ch'in Ching for help, and Ch'in Ching rushed over with the money and got his friend out with a bunch of sweet talk and fake smiles. *Hsiao*-Liu was careful not to perform those dangerous plays, but unexpectedly, he was arrested again after two peaceful months.

This time the matter was more serious, and *Hsiao*-Liu was not the only one who was in trouble for no reason. The Japanese had detected the underground routes for supplies and medicine run by the Communist Party in the Peip'ing and Tientsin region and demanded that the culprits' hideout be found. In attempt to please their Japanese masters, the "police" began arresting people left and

right, and the teahouse eventually came under their radar. Not even money was enough to buy his way out this time. After asking around, Ch'in Ching found that those arrested were all transported to the Japanese police headquarters. As soon as he ensured that his godmother was safe with the sisters, he came looking for Shen Liangsheng for ideas.

Ch'in Ching went to Cambridge Road early on the twenty-second, but when he saw the familiar metal gates, he stopped at the street corner feeling a bit guilty for doing this. He was the one who had drawn the line with Shen Liangsheng, not even paying the man a visit when his father passed away. He was only here now because he needed the man's help. He didn't know what Shen Liangsheng would think of him.

If it were Ch'in Ching's own problem, he would never bother Shen Liangsheng about it, but it was his friend's life on the line here. After moments of consideration, Ch'in Ching was just about to continue walking when the gates opened and a vehicle drove out. He did not know if Shen Liangsheng was inside or not, and was still thinking of what to do when the car slid to a sudden stop. The man got out of the car and looked over at him from his spot by the vehicle.

The streets were quiet. Ch'in Ching couldn't see the other man's face well from over a hundred yards away, but he traced every single detail of it in his mind.

There were no take-backs once choices were made. He never regretted it, but he knew very clearly that he still had feelings for the man. He shouldn't, but he did nonetheless.

The feelings did not seem like much because he never saw him. The busy routine of everyday life kept him from thinking about the man very much. On those rare occasions when he felt down, he would remind himself that he had personally chosen this and would feel all right again.

However, now that he was looking at him again…

Ch'in Ching felt a sudden pain in his chest. It wasn't a figment of imagination

but real pain that followed each beat of his heart. It made his head dizzy and his vision white like the sunlight on the day of their farewell, like the street in front of him paved with snow.

Ch'in Ching had been looking at the man for a minute or two when he finally came back to himself and started walking over.

Shen Liangsheng had already cleaned up his own panic from earlier when he stopped the car. As Ch'in Ching approached, he began walking too with his hands tucked into his coat pockets. His steps grew quicker than usual but remained very firm. When he reached the man, he greeted him properly.

"Long time no see."

"…yeah."

The bits of Ch'in Ching that had come back became scattered again when he heard the man's voice. He was dumbfounded and didn't even think to say something fitting for the occasion.

"You're looking for me?"

"Yeah…."

"Let's talk inside."

The clever secretary had followed his boss out of the car and was standing by the vehicle. He saw Shen Liangsheng wave his hand and got the message that the boss wanted them to leave without him. He ducked back into the car and said to Ts'ui Chao-ti,

"Miss Ts'ui, the boss has another guest. Let's go on ahead so we don't miss the train."

"Um, could you hold on for just a second, please?"

"Excuse me?"

The secretary thought the woman wanted to wait for Shen Liangsheng and wanted to advise against that idea, but she had already gotten out of the car. Then, after standing by the vehicle for perhaps half a minute, she got right back

in without his reminder.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said quietly before lowering her head and falling silent.

She did not have the courage to love him. He was so high in the sky, in the light, that she dared not even harbour the notion. However, she knew that she would never again in this life have the chance to see him, so she found the rare burst of bravery to look at him one last time. She also had the tiniest hope that he might take a glance at her and wave goodbye.

Shen Liangsheng did see Ts'ui Chao-ti leave the car but had no desire to even uphold the most basic of manners. As he walked with Ch'in Ching back to the gates, he spotted the man's hand hanging by his side and the fingers that were red from the cold. He felt an irritation that urged him to scold the man for not wearing gloves in the middle of winter, but then he realized it was not his place to say such things. Feeling such frustration, he didn't care about anyone else.

Shen Liangsheng saw her, so Ch'in Ching naturally spotted her, too. He had never seen Ts'ui Chao-ti and didn't know who she was to Shen Liangsheng, but he did see her leaving the car and looking over in their direction with a hand on her stomach. Her eyes were filled with tenderness, but she looked down shyly when their eyes met and got back into the car without a word.

Had he married? Probably not. If he had, the papers would have reported it. Perhaps he could not get married since his father had died less than a year ago. [121] But if they were having a child, there would at least be a banquet[122] later.

Ch'in Ching's mind was spinning restlessly as he walked into the house with Shen Liangsheng. His chest had been hurting earlier, but now he felt fine, nothing at all.

When the two entered the lounge, the maid was shocked to see Ch'in Ching and couldn't help but smile at the schoolmaster when serving tea. Ch'in Ching smiled back at her, and the smile had not left his face when he turned to face

Shen Liangsheng, whose heart skipped a beat at the sight.

"What can I do for you?" The businessman lit a cigarette – more or less to hide this restiveness – and asked flatly.

Ch'in Ching explained the situation straightforwardly and studied Shen Liangsheng's face for his reaction.

"I understand. Rest assured, and wait for good news." Shen Liangsheng agreed to help without raising any conditions or stalling him with nonsense.

"Sorry for asking such a big favour."

"It's nothing."

After the serious business, the room had fallen silent for a moment when the two men started speaking at the same time.

"I–"

"Why don't you stay for lunch?"

"No," Ch'in Ching shook his head. "I should go now."

Shen Liangsheng stared at the schoolmaster. Ch'in Ching looked back for a few seconds before repeating, "I'm going to go. Thanks again."

"I won't see you off then." Shen Liangsheng stood up and gestured with a hand. "This way, please."

Although Shen Liangsheng's expectation when they broke up was "easy come easy go," the reality was a bitterness that his pride would not allow him to admit. He would be lying if he said he had not hoped that he would be more important to Ch'in Ching than anyone or anything and that the man would choose to stay with him.

Now, back to the present Shen Liangsheng did not blame the man for coming to him only to ask for help. He did not blame the man for wanting to leave right after business, either. He did not feel discontent. Rather, he felt delighted, for he had needed just one glance to tell that the man still had feelings for him. Afterwards, when Ch'in Ching saw Ts'ui Chao-ti when she got out of the car,

Shen Liangsheng knew very well what misunderstanding would result from that. However, he did not explain anything so that the matter would weigh on the man's mind for a few days.

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng had said he would not see the man out but still walked to the front door, even leaving him a kind reminder. "You look thinner. You take good care of yourself now."

Ch'in Ching was a step ahead of the businessman, and his footsteps faltered at the gentle utterance. However, he did not look back and only hummed in reply.

Shen Liangsheng said no more and thought merrily as the other man walked across the garden towards the gates,

Ch'in Ching, you're only causing yourself pain if you try to move on when it's obvious you cannot.

Ch'in Ching left the manor behind and kept walking along the quiet street, not even stopping when he passed the intersection that would take him to the tram stop.

The leftover snow from yesterday was still hanging in the gloomy clouds above, filtering the sun so that only a bluish light showed through. It loomed over the snowy earth like a gigantic overturned bowl, suffocating those trapped under it.

Ch'in Ching had not felt too bad. His logic had been clear and his head not muddied when he was speaking with Shen Liangsheng earlier.

It was only now when he put some distance behind him and let his nerves relax that he felt a bit disoriented. It had been a year or so since they last met, and now the man had a wife and a child. After all, they were at that age. He should've seen it coming and not been surprised when presented with the news directly. How idiotic of him.

Then he remembered the man reminding him to take good care of himself, as though…as though….

The next thing Ch'in Ching thought of was his mother telling him, back when

she still was able to recognize him, “My dear, you’re on your own now.” Afterwards, she forgot who he was and fell into unconsciousness. She passed away without having taken another look at him.

Ch’in Ching suddenly felt aggrieved. However, it was not because of Shen Liangsheng. He was the one who had left the man in the first place, and it would be absurd to expect the man to keep missing him. He simply felt aggrieved, and since he couldn’t blame Shen Liangsheng, he went crying to his mother like a fussy child.

“How do you expect me to manage on my own when both you and Dad are leaving me?”

Aggrieved he was, but his heart did not ache at all. He had walked some more when he suddenly felt sick to his stomach. It was not the usual pains that he experienced. He had not had much to eat that morning, but he felt more and more nauseous.

He hurried to a tree on the side, and just as he touched the bark, he puked. There was neither food nor acid in his stomach. What came out was a mouthful of brownish glob. It took Ch’in Ching a moment to realize that it was blood.

It was not fresh, scarlet blood, but rather an old rusty lump nestled in the previously undisturbed snow under the tree.

It was as though something inside him had died and vanished from sight, and only now did the moldering corpse meet the light of day.

Ch’in Ching had felt a little dizzy earlier, but after throwing up, his head was clear again.

Holding onto the tree, he looked at the blood for a moment. He spread the stain out with the tip of his shoe, covered it with some snow nearby and then continued along his way.

Although Shen Liangsheng planned to leave Ch’in Ching hanging on account

of his bitterness, he did not delay in the more serious matter – *Hsiao*-Liu was released early Tuesday morning.

Ch'in Ching didn't want his friend to feel indebted and did not tell him he had gotten help from Shen Liangsheng. He only told his friend that money had worked wonders. *Hsiao*-Liu thought his friend had given up his entire life savings for him since he was still in a state of shock and could not think properly. Face red with shame, the shorter man kept apologizing and even said he would sell the teahouse to pay back the debt. Ch'in Ching stopped him with one rhetorical question.

"How are you going to manage without the teahouse?"

"Then…I'll…. You…."

"Believe me when I say I didn't have to pay that much." Ch'in Ching knew his friend would not believe it if he said it was his godmother's money, so he told his friend an average sum while flicking him on the forehead. "I only have one mouth to feed, and I didn't have any use for the money lying around. I don't need it back anytime soon. You can worry about it after your sisters get married and you find yourself a wife."

The conversation did remind Ch'in Ching that although he could not return the favour that he owed Shen Liangsheng, he had to try to compensate financially. He had no idea how the man managed to get his friend out, but he was sure more was needed than just a few connections. He didn't know what the exact amount was, and the man probably would not be honest about it either, but he thought he had to return as much as he could.

Ch'in Ching went to the Shen manor to express his gratitude in the evening of the same day. He purposely chose to go right before suppertime when he thought Shen Liangsheng was most likely to be home. However, it turned out that the businessman had plans and would not be home for some time. The servants wanted to serve supper for Ch'in Ching while he was waiting, but Ch'in Ching thought it would be inappropriate to dine in the absence of the owner. Thus, he declined the idea and waited until half past nine.

The first thing that Shen Liangsheng saw when he arrived home was Ch'in

Ching sitting on the couch with a maid with whom the schoolmaster was close. The two were chatting merrily.

The maid's attention was drifting away from the conversation, and then she noticed Shen Liangsheng in the lounge. She immediately stood up and backed to the edge of the room. "Young master."

The schoolmaster stood up along with her and nodded at the other man with a smile.

"When did you get here?" The chilly air from outdoors still clung to Shen Liangsheng, but he felt something warm inside. As he was inquiring, he stepped closer to the other man, and his tone was not as distant as the previous time they had met.

"Just now."

"Have you eaten?"

"Yes."

"What did you eat?"

"Uh…."

Shen Liangsheng did not actually believe the schoolmaster's words and only wanted to play with him. He shot a questioning look at the maid on the side who understood his inquiry and in turn shook her head honestly.

"Let us have some more. I didn't eat much for supper myself." Not bursting the lie, Shen Liangsheng proceeded to ask the servants to prepare a meal. Meanwhile, he sat down on the couch nearby.

Ch'in Ching did not want to eat with the man, nor did he want to sit so close to him, but he did not switch seats since he had to speak with the man.

"Let's leave that for after the food," Shen Liangsheng interrupted. He then took a glance over at the man and made a seemingly casual remark. "Is it me, or did you get thinner since I last saw you?"

"I don't know…." The comment made Ch'in Ching more and more uncomfortable, and he finally edged away and got some distance between them.

Shen Liangsheng was not bothered by this. After all, there was still the misunderstanding between them, and considering the schoolmaster's temperament, it would have been strange if he had not moved away. Furthermore, Shen Liangsheng really did think Ch'in Ching looked unwell and began regretting having purposely teased him. Shen Liangsheng now wanted to tell the man everything so he wouldn't over-think things and be sad by himself.

"Last year my dad…. I'm sure you saw it in the papers."

Thus, he began from the passing of his father and talked about his brother's death. He was obviously not going to be honest about it and told Ch'in Ching his brother had died smoking opium. Then, he talked about the unborn child that his brother left behind, explaining everything about Ts'ui Chao-ti.

"Shen Liangsheng…." Ch'in Ching did not doubt his words. There were many opium dens in Nanshih, and occasionally there would be a body lying on the side of the road. He offered his sincere condolences. "I'm very sorry to hear that."

Ch'in Ching sounded very genuine, but Shen Liangsheng was not too content – this wasn't the reaction he had been looking for. There was no change in the schoolmaster's face after hearing that Ts'ui Chao-ti had nothing to do with him, and it was even harder to tell whether the man was glad or not.

"Ch'in Ching–" Shen Liangsheng started but was cut off by the maid serving the meal. "Let's eat."

Ch'in Ching had gone to the doctor for his stomach and had taken medicine. He had followed the physician's directions to stay empty-stomached for half a day before easing back in with plain congee. He was hesitant to start eating the various dishes on the table, but he didn't want Shen Liangsheng to know that his stomach was unwell. He ate a bit here and there but quit when he began feeling sick.

Seeing the man stop with a pale face, Shen Liangsheng thought the food was upsetting his stomach because he had stayed hungry for too long. He did not push the man to eat, but rather fetched a bowl of soup for him. He asked softly as he watched the man finish the soup, "Does it still hurt?"

“Not anymore.” Realizing the other man had seen through his act, Ch’in Ching nodded as he replaced the bowl and stood up. He had made up his mind to say what needed to be said and leave. “Thank you again for what you’ve done for *Hsiao*-Liu. I can’t possibly return this favour, and this isn’t the only one I owe you….”

“Ch’in Ching.” Shen Liangsheng stood up too and walked around the table, his eyes focused on the man the entire time. “I told you before. You don’t need to return anything.”

The previous time he had said this was meant as a farewell, but this time, it was said with some intention of getting back together.

Shen Liangsheng thought that this incident involving *Hsiao*-Liu was an impetus. The flames in his heart were roaring once more as though new wood had been thrown onto a dying fire. Now that he had the intention, the problem was getting his thoughts across. He was hesitating as to how to start when the other man spoke.

“I know ‘thank you’ isn’t worth much, but I don’t have anything else to offer…. Anyway, thank you for saying I don’t have to return the favour. And well, there’s the money, too…I could….”

“No, it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. I can’t let you spend your money on this.”

“Why….” Shen Liangsheng wanted to explain that he did not spend a penny getting *Hsiao*-Liu out, but it frustrated him very much that Ch’in Ching insisted on drawing the boundary between them. In the end, he questioned directly, “Why are you acting like a stranger with me?”

But Ch’in Ching only shook his head, the meaning of which was not clear to Shen Liangsheng. The two fell silent for a few seconds before Ch’in Ching spoke first, “It’s late. I should go.”

“I’ll drive.”

“No, thank you.”

“I’ll–”

“No, it’s fine.”

Shen Liangsheng wasn’t sure what to say anymore, and he became a little anxious. He walked with the man to the front door like last time and wanted to keep going, but Ch’in Ching spoke again.

“Good night.”

The boiler was on, but the lounge was large and was not very hot. Despite this, a thin layer of sweat had gathered on Ch’in Ching’s forehead after staying for so long in his cotton robe. Shen Liangsheng didn’t want him to rush out into the cold like this and grabbed him by the arm.

“At least go after you dry off,” he said, trying to be as patient as possible.

“I’ll just use my scarf.” Ch’in Ching only wrapped his scarf around his neck twice and nodded curtly at the other man before continuing his way out.

The winter night was cold. The snow-covered street was the same, but this time Ch’in Ching did not have such a hard time walking down it.

He had recognized Shen Liangsheng’s intentions to get back together, and he realized Ts’ui Chao-ti was a misunderstanding. However, he had made up his mind not to turn back. The misunderstanding served as a preview for Ch’in Ching. Sooner or later, Shen Liangsheng would have to get married and have children. He had thought in the midst of fervent romance that he could disregard that and turn a blind eye to things, but this illusion was dispelled by the sneak peek.

As for Shen Liangsheng’s relationship with the Japanese, Ch’in Ching realized he was no longer one to judge since he himself had taken advantage of it. However, he was determined not to stop his current work. In the end, it all came down to the fact that they were from different worlds.

They were never the same to begin with. Indeed, they had been in love, but it was a love that had no future to speak of. In the end, it quietly died from within, and its corpse was expelled along with a mouthful of blood the colour of old murky rust.

Ch’in Ching ambled along the street, his body warm and his head as clear as day. The scarf around his neck was knitted by his mother for him before he left Tientsin for school. It was made out of the best yarn and was still thick and warm after many years of use.

In reality, his family had never been far. They were still holding him dearly, keeping him warm.

Since Ch’in Ching wanted to pay Shen Liangsheng back financially, he decided to sell his house. He actually did not have much savings, and what he had saved he had already donated. Now that he wanted to amass this fund, there was no other way but to sell the house.

The school was on winter holiday, but there was still socialization amongst the staff. After hearing the news, his colleagues began asking around for buyers. Ch’in Ching also thought it would be best to sell through a mutual acquaintance. He might even be able to go back and visit the house in the future.

In early February, Fang Hua got married to the tactless, yet persistent, colleague. As they say, “all things come to those who wait,” and the man finally got what he strove for for so long.

The guests at the wedding consisted mainly of family, friends, and of course, colleagues who formed one table on their own. Ch’in Ching joined in the merriment but did not touch alcohol. He knew that he could not aggravate his stomach any further.

“Ch’in Ching, you won’t drink to the others’ toasts, but you have to drink to mine.”

After several rounds, the groom came up to Ch’in Ching and put an arm around him. “Thank you…. I really need to thank you. If it weren’t for you–”

“You stop right there.” Ch’in Ching could tell the man was drunk and what he was about to say. He quickly interrupted and clinked their glasses together. “Just keep it to yourself while I take this.”

“No, I insist. You listen now….” The man was not discouraged at all, evidence of his drunkenness. He grabbed Ch’in Ching’s hand after drinking his glass and said wholeheartedly, “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have had the chance to marry her.”

“You need to stop drinking, mister,” Ch’in Ching chuckled as he patted the man on the back.

Indeed, Fang Hua had noticed after he left Shen Liangsheng and made another attempt only for Ch’in Ching to reject her again. She finally gave up after that.

Ch’in Ching had felt sorry but did not want to ruin her future either. Despite having already decided not to go back again, Ch’in Ching still thought he probably could not fall in love with another person again in this lifetime.

If he couldn’t fall in love with her, then he shouldn’t get in the way of her happiness. This man she was marrying now was in fact a good one. Men were proud creatures, and regardless of the man’s drunken state, it took sincere love for him to say what he had said.

Towards the end of the banquet, a group of guests were planning to storm the newlyweds’ chamber.[123] Ch’in Ching did not want to participate and chose to stand by, watching them in amusement.

“Not going to join them?” *Lao*-Wu asked amusingly. The man was on friendly terms with the rest of the staff, but he was a generation older after all and did not participate.

“No. ‘A beautiful night is worth a thousand gold.’ I’ve always been an observant man myself, so I won’t get in the way of their riches.”

Lao-Wu chuckled before asking another question. “I heard you’re looking to sell your house.”

“Yeah, it’d be great if you could help me ask around.”

“Fine, but where are you going to live afterwards?”

“*Hsiao*-Li said his friend has a room attached to his house available for rent. I’m just one person, so it’s no big deal.”

“Ch’in Ching….” *Lao*-Wu started hesitantly and quietly. “Well, I wanted to ask you this for a long time.”

“Yes?”

“I know about your parents, and I know I shouldn’t be asking you this when you’re the only son, but….”

“Yes, yes. Get to the point, please.”

“*Hsiao*-Ch’in, how would you like to go to Shanpei?”[124]

“Huh?” Surprised, Ch’in Ching turned to look at the older man. He opened his mouth but closed it again.

“I have friends over there,” *Lao*-Wu dropped his voice lower and continued. “They were thinking to build a few more schools, but there aren’t enough teachers to staff the place. And you know the situation now. The war is not going to end any time soon, and the logistics–”

“Sold,” Ch’in Ching interrupted and began nodding his head. “I want to go.”

“You really do?”

“Yes!”

Lao-Wu looked Ch’in Ching in the eye and found genuineness. He nodded back with a smile. “I just wanted to get your opinion. The earliest will have to be September or October later this year. A few students of mine in Peip’ing also want to go. You can keep each other company and keep each other safe on the road.”

“Sounds perfect.”

A smile appeared on Ch’in Ching’s face too, and he was suddenly filled with a feeling of delight and freedom.

That’s right; he would go to support the logistics. He could teach, or he could do something else. There would surely be lots he could do.

There were no more shackles holding him down. The world was his to explore.

He had once been in love, and perhaps he would have loved only that one

time, but he had long since buried this love in the winter snow, abandoned under the tree in his hometown.

And with the thousands of others fighting for their home, he would devote the rest of his life to this vast and glorious motherland that provided him with life and sustenance.

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121 It is considered disrespectful to have “red” events such as marriage immediately after a “white” event such as the death of immediate family.

122 A banquet is held for important life events such as first birthday and marriage. For upper class citizens like Shen Liangsheng, these events are often known to the public.

123 A tradition originating from the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 226 AD) involving embarrassing tasks with the bride and/or groom done to “add to the festive atmosphere.” In some regions, this has developed to involve a substitute “bride’s maid” to participate in the bride’s place, and sexual harassment is common place.

124 Literally, the north of the Shaanxi province, which was at the time the centre of anti-Japanese education.

XXI

Shen Liangsheng had not seen Ch'in Ching for more than a month since he last left, and he did not go looking for the schoolmaster, either. He wanted to get the man back but could tell that it would not be an easy task persuading him. Thus, he thought it would be best to sort out his own feelings and then figure out what he wanted to do with the man.

Shen Liangsheng thought Ch'in Ching had been so uncooperative because of his relationship with the Japanese, and this was not an unsolvable problem. His father was dead which meant that Shen Liangsheng no longer had to be mindful of the will nor to prove to anyone he was capable of shouldering the family estate. Should worst come to worst, he would withdraw the investment from the joint-venture factory with the Japanese, and that would be the end of that. After all, there would always be more money to make. Firstly, Shen Liangsheng did not want to stay in China for the long term, so the factories had to go sooner or later. Secondly, the Japanese were no longer satisfied with the joint venture and their share of the profits. Kobayakawa had been pressuring Shen Liangsheng on the business side of things after failing to convince the man to join politics, and Shen Liangsheng had grown tired of this.

Shen Liangsheng was willing to give up some monetary benefit in order to get the man back because Ch'in Ching was worth it to him. The question then became whether or not to take the man with him when he left the country. Ever since he finished his brother, Shen Liangsheng had formed solid plans to move abroad deciding to give himself a year or so to wrap things up here, but he was not sure what to do with Ch'in Ching.

If he decided not to take Ch'in Ching along and left the man after getting back together for a year or so, he also thought that "despicable" would be too benign a word to describe his actions. However, if he were to bring Ch'in Ching with him….

Being completely honest with himself, Shen Liangsheng knew he cared deeply for the man now and wished very much to take him along, but he could not guarantee that his feelings would last.

Now that his father was gone there was no one rushing him to get married, and he was not anxious to do so, either. During the months of his father's illness, Shen Liangsheng recalled a lot of the past, his mother's pain and sorrows that he witnessed. Upon reflection, he finally realized that he did not want to visit the same suffering upon his partner. He thought he should treat Ch'in Ching well if they were to get back together. He did not plan to get married to some woman while being with the man, but he also knew this decision was made only because he still had feelings for the man.

But how long would these feelings last? Two years? Five? Ten? Were he to bring this man to a foreign land because of his feelings in the present moment, and then revert to his "easy come, easy go" mentality because these feelings had dissipated and he wanted to instead get married and have children…. He would really have to be a monster to do such a thing.

Seeing the affection in Ch'in Ching's eyes, Shen Liangsheng immediately had the urge to get back together. However, after that initial reaction, he thought about it carefully and found himself in a rare dilemma. Certainly, he was not a man with much conscience, but what little he had was directed towards Ch'in Ching. He remained mired in these deliberations, and soon March came around.

Ch'in Ching had kept the sale of his house a secret from *Hsiao*-Liu. Only when the sale was settled in early March and he could stall no longer did he tell his friend. He dared not say that it was to repay Shen Liangsheng or that he was going to Shanpei. In the end, he lied that he simply was going to teach in another place.

"What in the world are you talking about?!" *Hsiao*-Liu was startled. "What's wrong with teaching here at home? The job's the same anywhere."

Ch'in Ching did not respond. He put on a passive attitude and an expression that said 'Whatever you say. I've already decided.'

"All right, even so…." *Hsiao*-Liu was pounding the table as though he were pounding on Ch'in Ching's head to see what was going on in that brain of his. "Even if you're leavin', you didn't have to sell the house! How could you just sell the house your parents left behind? Plus, aren't you gonna come back?

Where are you gonna live then?"

"With you and your wife, of course," Ch'in Ching replied with an obnoxious snigger.

"No way in hell!" *Hsiao*-Liu cussed angrily. Then, when the initial anger settled, the wheels in his brain started turning again. He realized Ch'in Ching was not one to act so rashly. There must have been another reason for his friend to sell the house. He then remembered his incident, and it immediately became clear to him.

Since he had suspicions, he became determined to get to the bottom of this. Ch'in Ching put him off with nonsense for a while, but seeing that his friend was about to give him a beating if he stalled any longer, he confessed. "It's to pay *him* back, too."

"…'cause of me?"

"Not just because of you," Ch'in Ching lied so he would not feel bad. "I already owed him some from when we were together. I'm just trying to pay back as much as I can."

Hsiao-Liu naturally did not buy this. Minutes ago he had wanted to beat his friend, but this time he gave himself a slap across the face. He could not apologize – it's not as though 'sorry' would fix anything – so he poured all his strength into this slap. His cheek immediately reddened, showing five bloody strikes.

"My goodness!" Ch'in Ching grabbed his friend's arm. He realized he could not fool around anymore and told *Hsiao*-Liu honestly, "When I said another place, I meant Shanpei, you know…. Anyway, I was planning to sell the house even if you hadn't gotten into trouble. Just believe me this one time, please?"

It was around dusk, and the lights were not on. *Hsiao*-Liu sat with Ch'in Ching in the dimming room for some time before breaking the silence with a hoarse voice.

"Are you comin' back?"

“Yeah,” Ch’in Ching gave his word with a nod. “I’ll come back when we win the war.

“And don’t you keep thinking about the money,” he continued when his friend stayed speechless. “That’s what friends are for. Plus, you owing me is better than me owing him, right?

“You just stay here and run that teahouse of yours. Hurry up and find yourself a wife so I can play with my godsons when I come back.” Ch’in Ching rubbed his friend’s head. “A goddaughter would be good, too. Boys are too naughty. Girls are better.”

Unable to hold his tears any longer, *Hsiao*-Liu began sobbing with his head down and snot running down his face. Ch’in Ching thought it would be better to let his friend cry now since it was bound to happen anyway. This way the farewell later would be easier, so he sat by the shorter man as he cried. Finally, he fetched a clean handkerchief and comforted him, even calling him by his baby name. “Don’t cry, *Hsiao*-Pao. I’m coming back.”

The truth was that Ch’in Ching himself did not know if he even could come back, but no matter where he lived or where he died, it was enough having the memories of his home in his heart.

After handing over the keys to the new owners, Ch’in Ching picked a Sunday morning to visit the Shen manor. It was ten o’clock, and Shen Liangsheng was home for once. Hearing the servant’s report that Mr. Ch’in was here, he headed towards the lounge feeling a bit nervous because he had not yet made up his mind.

The temperature had risen a bit by mid-March. Ch’in Ching was wearing a dark blue lined robe and a pair of black-framed glasses. He flashed a smile at Shen Liangsheng when the man entered, and the latter felt a little disoriented – he was suddenly reminded of the spring day when they had first met, Ch’in Ching dressed in the same attire.

Amongst a crowd of people, he had looked up and smiled at him, and then three years went by.

“Shen Liangsheng,” Ch’in Ching greeted him with a smile. Without further ado, he passed over the money he had received for the house. He was the one giving, yet he appeared to be embarrassed. “I don’t even know if it’s enough…. Well, I don’t have any more anyway. You’ll just have to make do.”

Ch’in Ching’s words sounded lighthearted, but Shen Liangsheng did not feel that way at all. The taller man frowned and replied a bit sternly, “Take this money back to where it came from, and don’t make me repeat myself.”

Ch’in Ching did not seem to mind this attitude and only smiled again as he placed the money on the coffee table. He saw Shen Liangsheng about to speak and interrupted, “I didn’t come just for this. It’s also to say goodbye.”

Shen Liangsheng froze on the spot and forgot everything he was about to say.

“I’m going to teach in another part of the country….” Ch’in Ching was obviously not going to tell the man where exactly, so he picked his words wisely, “and I probably won’t get to see you again. You–”

“Ch’in Ching, I….” It was only then that Shen Liangsheng snapped back to reality. His hand shot forth to grab the schoolmaster’s hand. He had a thousand things he wanted to say, but he did not know where to start. All he could manage was to hold onto the man’s hand tightly while urgency began to show through his face.

“I’m not leaving right now, but probably in the fall.” Ch’in Ching did not pull his hand away but placed his other hand on top of that of Shen Liangsheng. He gave the man’s hand a squeeze. “I’m just here to say goodbye beforehand. Take care of yourself from now on.”

Shen Liangsheng lost the strength in his hands after being squeezed and could only watch as the other man slid his hands back. With an expression that almost seemed helpless, he looked into the man’s eyes and merely repeated his previous utterance. “Ch’in Ching, I….”

“Au revoir, Shen Liangsheng.” Ch’in Ching had known that the other man would have difficulty accepting the sudden announcement, but he also knew that even the Gordian knot could not stand up to a quick swing of the sword. He

took a resolute step back and repeated, “Take care now. Au revoir.”

Without any delay, Ch’in Ching turned around and walked out the front door.

As Shen Liangsheng watched him go, the last bit of his inherent pride kept him from stopping Ch’in Ching. His mind went blank, and the thousands of words seemed to slip through his fingers like running water, never to be recovered.

It was only several hours later that he came back to himself. He jumped to his feet and headed out the door, only to turn back to fetch the money Ch’in Ching had left behind before rushing to Nanshih in his car. He had finally come to a conclusion – regardless of the future, he had to tell the man one thing, for the thousands of words boiled down to a mere seven.

“Ch’in Ching, I love you. Don’t leave.”

It was suppertime when Shen Liangsheng reached Nanshih, and smoke was drifting out from the chimney. A bunch of kids raced past Shen Liangsheng. They were taking the opportunity to play some more since their parents had not called them home for supper yet.

Shen Liangsheng walked briskly to Ch’in Ching’s house and rapped on the gates. They swung open soon after, and he parted his lips to call the man’s name only to see a woman standing at the gates. He stared at the stranger for a second before speaking, “I’m looking for Ch’in Ching.”

“Ch’in Ching?” The woman was confused for a second, too. “…Oh, you mean Mr. Ch’in. He doesn’t live here no more. If yer lookin’ for him…. Hang on a second.”

Shen Liangsheng stood at the entrance, watching the woman step into the yard and shout, “Hey, ya know where the fellow who sold us the house lives? Somebody’s here lookin’ for him.”

“How should I know? Who’s lookin’ for him?”

“I don’t know. He just….”

The couple had only exchanged a few words, but when she looked back, there was no one at the entrance. She grumbled as she shut the gate again, “At least tell us yer leaving.”

Shen Liangsheng walked back out of the *hut’ong*. The kids from earlier were running back, and he stepped to the side to let them pass.

He sold the house. He must be serious about leaving.

He must be serious.

As he reached this realization in his mind, strength seemed to seep out of his body.

He was only able to come on account of that rush of adrenaline. However, when he saw a stranger standing behind the familiar gates, the rush disappeared, leaving him rather drained.

Shen Liangsheng did not retrieve his car and instead walked to the Liu’s Teahouse. Business was not as good as before, and *Hsiao*-Liu had had to fire a worker and work in the front himself.

“Young Master Shen.” *Hsiao*-Liu spotted the businessman as soon as he had stepped in and quickly approached, thinking the man was here for his friend. “Ch’in Ching–”

“Isn’t here. I know.” Shen Liangsheng finished the sentence calmly as he gave Ch’in Ching’s money to the shorter man. “You give this back to him and tell him I don’t want it, and don’t try to give it to me again.”

“Oh, all right….” *Hsiao*-Liu scratched his head as he took the money. He thought it would be rude not to serve him since this man had done him a huge favour. “How about you join us tonight if you’re free? About my–”

“It’s fine,” Shen Liangsheng interrupted. “I was just on my way out.”

Yet, he did not move an inch. He stayed staring at the stage at the front of the teahouse.

It was too early for a performance, and the stage was empty. There were not many patrons, but Shen Liangsheng could hear the bustling crowd and laughter, followed by applause and cheering.

He saw the teahouse packed to the brim with customers. There were not enough seats, and some were standing while some were sitting on their own folding stools.

The performer on stage was wearing a long robe and held a fan in hand. His solo crosstalk was engaging and sounded a bit like one of those story-tellers in the old days with just the right rhythm and pace.

There was a pot of lukewarm jasmine tea. It was not top-quality but was especially fragrant.

Hsiao-Liu stood with Shen Liangsheng while the latter stared at the empty stage in silence. He had been against Ch'in Ching getting involved with this man, but looking at the man's profile now, he felt a bit sorry.

"Sir…" He started hesitantly. "How about um…. Is there anything you'd like me to pass on to him?"

"…No." Shen Liangsheng lowered his gaze and shook his head before repeating his answer. "No, there isn't."

Then he turned around and left.

Hsiao-Liu lifted up the curtains for him and watched the man until he had gone into the distance.

The man's silhouette was definitely not hunched, nor was it lonesome, but for some reason, it seemed pitiful.

He had nothing to say to the man but went to see him one day. He asked Chou to find Ch'in Ching's new address through discreet methods, and then one night he drove over. He parked on a nearby street and sat alone in the car for hours.

He went to see him, not because he really wanted to meet him, but because he merely wanted to be somewhere near him – for just one night, just this once.

After numerous cigarettes, the air inside became hazy. Shen Liangsheng rolled down the window, letting in a bit of the evening breeze.

The house that Ch'in Ching was renting was near the Hai Ho. Shen Liangsheng listened to the overnight freight boats sailing up and down the river, the sound of their horns drifting, closer and then farther, into the car along with the wind.

That night, Shen Liangsheng had a dream after going to bed.

It was summertime in the dream. He was sitting with Ch'in Ching on the couch in the lounge; it seemed to be the scene of their first farewell.

However, what he said were the words he could not say the second time around….

"Ch'in Ching, I love you. Don't leave."

"But Shen Liangsheng," the Ch'in Ching in his dream retorted as though surprised, wearing a peculiar expression. "Why would I want that?"

He didn't know how to answer and, indeed, felt there was nothing more to be said.

Oh, so that's not what he wanted.

But if his heart was not what the man wanted, then he really had nothing else to give.

The sky was still dark when he awoke from the dream. Shen Liangsheng lay in the dark, feeling a little ridiculous.

What he found laughable was not the dream but rather the fact that he was a naïve fool still wet behind the ears.

He had finally recognized his own implicit belief. See, the thought that they would be separated for good never even occurred to him after he parted ways with Ch'in Ching.

Being the childish idiot that he was, he had thought of the year without the man as some sort of cold war. Each was merely waiting for the other to give in

first, and they would get back together after making some compromises.

He had thought that their feelings were mutual, but he only came to the painful realization after the dream that, in fact, Ch'in Ching did not love him anymore.

Perhaps he had already seen it on the day of their second farewell but chose to turn a blind eye, to deny the truth, which he was able to do until he had the dream – as he opened his eyes, his dream ended, too.

The man no longer cared for him, so they could not be together again.

End of story.

Shen Liangsheng felt like laughing, so he did. Then, he wept for the first time in a while.

A really long while, wasn't it? Twenty years? Perhaps longer.

He let the tears fall and dry on his face, and he heard Ch'in Ching saying au revoir.

Come to think of it, the first time the man said farewell, he had not actually said au revoir.

The man had not said au revoir, but it felt like they would see each other again.

This time the man did say it, and Shen Liangsheng knew they would not see each other again.

So be it. He couldn't make up his mind, so the man did it for him. That was fine, too.

If the man could forget him, then he could, too.

As he lay in the dark, Shen Liangsheng told himself:

You must forget him before you turn thirty.

XXII

This year, Shen Liangsheng spent a good half of the spring and summertime in the South. Since he decided to leave the country, he had to do what had to be done, and fast. He wanted to sell the factory, and there was no other buyer available except the Japanese. He could not object to the low price since the industrial sector in the North had been monopolized by the Japanese, leaving no room for English or American investors. However, there was no reason to liquidate the remaining securities and real estate at distressed prices, so Shen Liangsheng visited Peip'ing in April and Shanghai in May. After wrapping up business matters, he did not rush to return to Tientsin and instead stayed in Shanghai for a month or so. He thought of it as a long break for himself, and it seemed that the farther he was from Tientsin, the sooner he would forget the man.

Several storms hit the North in July raising the water levels of all the rivers and streams in the region at an alarming rate. Eventually by the end of the month flooding occurred, and the farms to the north and south of Tientsin suffered the worst. The Shen factory was located on the outskirts of the city but was not endangered as it was on the west side. Erring on the side of caution, Chou rang the hotel where Shen Liangsheng was staying. He told him about the flooded farms and asked the boss to return and personally attend to matters.

Hearing this, Shen Liangsheng did not hesitate and placed an order for a return ticket to Tientsin, but he did not take the news very seriously. Indeed, Tientsin was one of the most important strategic points for the Japanese in northern China, and thus the dummy government would not let the flood get to the city, no matter how useless they were. Should worst come to worst, they would destroy the dams and redirect the water, securing the city even if that meant flooding all the land around it.

Not only was Shen Liangsheng, who was out of town, not worried, the residents of Tientsin themselves were not particularly apprehensive about an impending disaster. Tientsin was situated at low elevation to begin with and had

flooding problems every now and then. Once it became a frequent spectre, the people dropped their guard. The worst case scenario was some inconvenience for several days caused by clogged streets.

Just as the civilians had no sense of urgency, the dummy government did not take any action other than releasing a notice for households to build small dams in front of their doors or at the mouths of the *hut'ong* so that their homes would not be flooded.

It was early August when Shen Liangsheng embarked on his return trip. Halfway through the journey, news came that the flooding had become serious. Then a little farther down the road, the announcement came that the rails entering Tientsin had been flooded making it impossible to enter the city, so the train had to go around to Peip'ing.

The transportation system was in utter chaos, and the train kept making stops. The passengers could do nothing but pray for the government in Tientsin to blow the dams so the water did not actually enter the city.

This time around, the Japanese did not sit idly by and ended up sending the army to blow the Yungting River Dam. However, not only was the location wrong, the timing of the explosion was wrong, too – they had chosen the day of the highest tide according to the lunar calendar. The Hai Ho could not redirect any water out to sea, so when the waves came tumbling down from upstream, they crashed into the city inundating it in the blink of an eye.

It was a disaster like none had ever seen. The scene when the monstrous waves hit was surreal – pedestrians were still strolling along the streets when a thunderous roar from afar mixed with shrieks saying, "It's here! Run for your lives!"

But legs could not possibly outrun the water. People could only watch as the flood gushed forth pushing up waves higher than a grown man as it turned the street corners in pursuit. With nowhere left to run and the water at their heels, some climbed on top of nearby vehicles while others climbed up trees. In the end, even the electricity poles were full of clinging people.

Ch'in Ching was on summer holidays at home reading a book on the bed

when he heard a noise he had never heard in his life. Before he could react, the water had already entered the house instantly reaching the top of the bed. The house he rented was located in a depression by the Hai Ho, one of the areas most affected by the flood. Thankfully, it was daytime and he was awake. If it had been during the night, he probably would have been washed away in his dreams.

Luckily, the house was made of bricks unlike the clay houses in the farming villages, so it did not collapse even after being hit by such a strong wave. Ch'in Ching could not swim and only managed by holding onto the table. Amidst the struggle, with water in his nose and ears, he somehow caught the door frame and hauled himself up to the roof. He wasn't sure how he even made it up there. Although he did not have anything with him, he felt fortunate that he had not been swept away by the water.

Shen Liangsheng arrived in Peip'ing in the evening whereupon he learned that the entire city of Tientsin had been flooded earlier in the afternoon. Telephone calls to the office did not go through, so he had no idea what was going on over there. All he knew was that transportation by land was completely cut off; the only way to enter Tientsin now was either by boat or by swimming.

Shen Liangsheng contacted his friend during the night for boats. His friend thought he was worried about the properties and factory, so he admonished while searching for available boats, "What's the use going back now? It's all sitting under water and there's nothing you can do about it. You know, I heard it's a big mess in Tientsin now, a lot of people dying from the water or from being trampled. Life is worth more than money. Why don't you stay here, safe and dry, while you wait?"

Shen Liangsheng shook his head without answering. He only smoked one cigarette after another, his face pale and his fingers icy cold despite the summer temperature.

Tientsin was not a true port city, so the number of boats was more limited than one might have expected. Peip'ing would not and could not watch idly as

Tientsin suffered and sent any watercraft they could manage to scrounge up, even pressing pleasure boats into service.

The next day, Shen Liangsheng entered Tientsin around noon with the first rescue team and found the situation worse than he had imagined. The water came higher than a man's waist at the lowest point and could cover his head at the highest.

Due to his connections, Shen Liangsheng was escorted all the way to Cambridge Road. Possibly out of fear of plunder, two men were given this job, and they even left Shen Liangsheng with his own boat and a kind-hearted reminder.

"Please stay safe, Master Shen."

Cambridge Road had become Cambridge River by then, but because the house was far from the water source and its foundations were quite high, only the basement was in bad condition. The first floor had gotten wet, but the servants blocked the doors and swept the water out, leaving it in satisfactory condition. Shen Liangsheng did not say a word when he returned. He went straight to the second floor and took out from a drawer in the bedroom a handgun he kept there for personal safety. He stuck it in his pants and hurried back down the stairs again, leaving just as swiftly as he had come and without telling the servants his destination.

Indeed, he wanted to search for Ch'in Ching, but not knowing where to start, he had not been able to ask the rescue team to go around looking with him. However, now he had a clear idea – first the man's home, then the school, then high places and places where people had gathered. He was going to search through every single one until he found the man.

The boat Shen Liangsheng was rowing now was a recreational one from a park. There was a number painted at the tip with red paint. It likely had been redone recently because the colour was as pure as blood.

He felt that he was calm and that his arms were not shaking at all. He even recalled the time long ago when he went boating with Ch'in Ching – the man fibbed about there being fish in the water but stopped fighting after Shen

Liangsheng grabbed his hand.

It was noontime. It had been raining continuously the past weeks, but now the sun came out. The glaring sun shone down on him and on the water. All sorts of floating debris littered the calm water including a few bodies of chickens and cats.

And one human one, too – but Shen Liangsheng calmly concluded that this was not fresh. It was most likely someone who drowned upstream and had been washed down by the flood, only floating to the surface after several days of soaking. It was bloated, and the gender could not be determined. It had drifted until it came across an uplifted tree toppled to the side. Trying to continue forward but failing to do so, it writhed desperately as though the ghost still possessing the body were trying to find a replacement for its cursed existence so that it could continue along the cycle of reincarnation.[125]

Naturally, Shen Liangsheng did not want to consider whether the man had also been washed away by the flood.

Someone who could not swim would surely lose his footing when hit by the wave. If he were to get water in his nose or an injury to the head, then most likely he would never find his footing again. Afterwards, he would become a floating corpse and quietly drift along to who-knows-where only to rot under the sun….

Shen Liangsheng dared not have such notions.

Even so, his mind seemed to split into two. One side told him,

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

While the other kept reminding him,

But you have to think. What if he's dead? What if he….

But if he's dead, then what?

Shen Liangsheng felt as though his brain were being baked by the sunlight. His consciousness was fading in and out. He could not for the life of him muster

an answer.

His back was soaked with sweat from the heat, or perhaps it was cold sweat. The hands on the oars were still icy cold as they performed the mechanical actions of rowing.

The water had flooded the city the previous afternoon, but the bogus government could not organize the proper rescue missions. With nothing else to rely on, some of the braver civilians jumped into the water and swam. The more cowardly ones stayed put even if they could swim for fear of being sucked down a lidless sewer or something.

Someone like Ch'in Ching who could not swim could only stay on the roof. He stayed crouching from night to day and lay under the sun without food or water for the entire morning. His lips were peeling, and his head was spinning.

His surroundings had become a sea. The rooftops almost all housed people. The child of one family nearby most likely had been outside playing when the water hit and disappeared in an instant. The father had swum out looking for the child while the mother stayed on the roof crying. Ch'in Ching had spent the previous night listening to her sobs until she had nothing left in her to cry.

He looked at the murky water around him not knowing what to do, either. The next thing he knew, there was a rhythmic thumping sound like that when someone bangs their head against the wall.

After a night of anxiety and fear, his head was not on straight. He thought someone was trying to end their own life, so he pushed himself to his knees and looked down over the edge. What he saw was not a person but a coffin that had drifted here from somewhere – maybe from a cemetery upstream. Like a boat carrying death, it had drifted until stopped by the wall and then began to knock against it. *Clunk-clunk-clunk* – it rang like the death knell.

When Ch'in Ching looked up again, he saw Shen Liangsheng. Well, his glasses had fallen into the water long before, and his vision was a blur. However, he somehow knew when he saw a small boat coming towards him

that it was Shen Liangsheng.

He shot up to his feet only to fall down before finding solid footing due to his legs being numb from crouching. Instinctively, he held onto the tiles nearby but did so too forcefully. The tile cut a long gash on his palm. Blood gushed out, but he did not feel any pain.

Shen Liangsheng had good eyesight and spotted Ch'in Ching from afar. His anxiety had barely settled down when he realized the man was wobbling on the rooftop. Worried once more despite having found the man, he sped up his paddling. Once he reached the house, he stuck out his hand and called out hoarsely, "Come, I'll catch you."

The water level here was much higher than a grown man, and the boat was not far from the rooftop. Without having to actually jump, Ch'in Ching more or less was dragged into Shen Liangsheng's arms. He had barely caught his balance when the other man lurched and brought both of them down on their knees.

"Shen–" Kneeling face to face, Ch'in Ching was in Shen Liangsheng's tight embrace. He had barely said the man's name when he felt a warm wetness on his neck which stopped him from forming any words.

Shen Liangsheng cried in silence. He held the other man tightly, perhaps too tightly as he was trembling. Ch'in Ching hugged the man back, watching his own blood dirtying the man's clothes. Only after his palm touched the wet shirt on the man's back did he begin to feel pain. It was a pain that reached his heart and made him want to cry as well.

Face buried in Ch'in Ching's neck, Shen Liangsheng soon regained control of himself but continued to embrace the man for a while before letting go. He grabbed the man by the wrist and spotted the gash on the palm. He wanted to touch it but dared not.

"Just a small cut. I'm fine," Ch'in Ching quickly assured him, his voice just as hoarse.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"No. I'm all right. You, on the other hand–"

“Ch’in Ching….”

There were no sign of tears on Shen Liangsheng’s face, but his eyes were still a bit red. It was an expression of vulnerability bordering on helplessness which Ch’in Ching had never seen on the man before.

He heard the man continue,

“Come with me, I’m begging you, to England, to America. We’ll go wherever you want to go. Please?”

The utterance left Ch’in Ching completely dumfounded. Shen Liangsheng had never told him about his plans to leave the country, but that was not what surprised him. It was the word “beg.”

Even after all his time with this man, he had never known the man to beg anyone for anything. Hearing the word “beg” now was like a knife stabbing into his heart. The handle was sticking out, sealing in the blood, the pain, and also the answer “yes” that almost sneaked past his lips.

“Shen Liangsheng….”

Ch’in Ching stared dumbly at the man kneeling before him and then at the water around them that seemed to have no end.

War, disaster, one calamity after another – it was as though the world really were caving on itself and the land sinking into sea.

They said thinkers were the most useless, and indeed, as a teacher, the things he could do were limited. Yet, when he was confronted with the request, he knew he could not bear to leave this place behind.

“Shen Liangsheng…I can’t do it.”

Perhaps he could if there were peace. But sadly, there was not. He could not leave precisely because there was not. Even if he was of no use and there was not a thing he could do, there was one last thing he wanted to do.

It all came down to the saying, ‘My motherland gave me life and sustenance,

and I shall in turn live and die with her.'

"But you should…just go…. I…."

For a moment, Ch'in Ching wanted to tell the man,

I love you. I can't leave, but I will love you and you only for the rest of my life. No matter where you might be, no matter where I might be, I will remember you every day I am alive and miss you forever and always.

But he couldn't say it. He couldn't leave with the man, so saying those words would only be rubbing salt into his wounds.

He did not speak, but the knife began to move. From head to toe, it tore through him inch by inch until he became two bloody halves. Never before had he truly wished to be cut into two so that one half could stay behind and the other could leave with the man.

"You say I should go…."

Shen Liangsheng was on his knees like Ch'in Ching and was at a loss. Then after what seemed like minutes, he asked in a puzzled tone as though he really did not know the answer,

"But with you here…where else do you expect me to be?"

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125 It is believed that the spirit of someone who dies from drowning will turn into a water demon (or ghost) and cannot enter the cycle of reincarnation unless it drowns someone else and finds a replacement.

XXIII

When the water showed no signs of receding, the local government did not act and neither did the Japanese. Soon, the Tientsin Chamber of Commerce received appeals from major figures such as Ts'ao Ju-lin[126] and Wu P'ei-fu[127] recommending the creation of a self-rescue organization.

Six days after the disaster, the Chamber finally established the Tientsin Flood Relief Commission. There were some who participated out of genuine kindness, and of course there were those superficial ones who donated enough in order to buy themselves a good name.

That day on the boat, Ch'in Ching had been speechless after Shen Liangsheng's question. He stayed in silence with the other man, watching the vulnerability leave his face. Eventually, the man he was familiar with returned and began to plan.

"You can't stay at your house anymore, so come with me for now. I'm going to the factory later in the afternoon, but I'll get someone to go to *Hsiao*-Liu's with you. If their house is no good either, then get them to move to the house in Petite de Ceinture."

After faltering, he continued,

"And if you don't want to stay with me, feel free to move in with them."

Still kneeling in the same spot as Shen Liangsheng spoke, Ch'in Ching watched as the man sat up and began rowing. The boat shot forward, and Ch'in Ching swayed along appearing a bit disoriented.

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng glanced at the man while rowing and added in a tone not quite cold but definitely stern, "Think nothing more of this than a friend helping another friend. If I have anything else to ask of you, I'll tell you directly. But if I don't, don't fret about it."

In the end, Ch'in Ching did not move in with *Hsiao*-Liu. First of all, the second-floor apartment did not get flooded but was a place so small it was a bit cramped with just the Lius there. The sisters had not married yet, so it would not do for Ch'in Ching to stay with them no matter how close they were. Second of all…Ch'in Ching wasn't sure what the second thing was. He said he couldn't leave with the man, but at the same time he felt that he owed Shen Liangsheng too much to ever repay him and felt extremely guilty.

The truth was that Ch'in Ching had no idea whether Shen Liangsheng was fine with him being around or would rather not see him so that he might have some peace of mind. In the end, he couldn't figure it out and decided to ask the man himself.

Ch'in Ching asked quite vaguely, but Shen Liangsheng understood his true question and replied casually, "I'd worry if you stayed anywhere else, so just make do here with me in the meantime."

It should have sounded a bit suggestive, but because of the man's seemingly careless attitude, it truly seemed like a friend caring for another friend.

Thus, Ch'in Ching settled down in a guest room in the Shen manor. Shen Liangsheng got his hands on two more boats through connections, one for the servants to shop and one especially for Ch'in Ching. He even asked the secretary from the south, who happened to be a good swimmer, to supervise Ch'in Ching for a few days and make sure the man could work the boat before letting the man go out on his own.

Ch'in Ching helped move the Lius to the new place while also helping the school with transporting equipment and supplies out of the affected areas. As these two projects were wrapping up, he heard about the newly formed Flood Relief Commission. He had planned to help out at the Student Union, but before he could report it to Shen Liangsheng, the man came to him.

"If you have time, could I get you to come help out at the office?"

It was not an unreasonable request, and Ch'in Ching readily agreed. But only when he arrived at the office did he find that the job consisted of managing some paperwork for the Commission.

Ch'in Ching was no fool; he easily read the meaning behind this. It was likely

that disease would develop from the flood. Shen Liangsheng probably did not want him to be in a populous place but was also hesitant to leave him alone with nothing to do, and thus the man found him this job.

And it was exactly because he understood that he felt even worse. The man was so good to him taking even the smallest details into consideration, but in the end he had let the man down.

The room Ch'in Ching moved into was the same one he had stayed in when he first came to this manor. Three years had passed. Not much had changed when he looked out the window, but he felt vastly different on the inside.

For the first few nights, Ch'in Ching would lie in bed with this nervous feeling mixed with shameful hope that the man might burst into the room any minute. He knew it was best that they not overstep the boundary. Yet, he secretly harboured hope….

He was kept restless at night by a desire to abandon all self-restraint one last time before either the man or he left. On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng appeared totally at ease, only interacting with Ch'in Ching as a close friend, not distant but never too close.

During meals, sometimes Ch'in Ching's eyes would secretly stray from the food to the man's fingers holding chopsticks, and the food in his mouth would lose its flavour. He simply yearned for the man's voice, fingers, lips, and skin, but his remaining rationality would push these impulses away every time and remind him sternly,

This 'one last time' you are fantasizing would only end up hurting both of you.

The people of Tientsin fought with the expanse of water for half a month before, in late August, the water levels appeared to drop in some of the places with higher elevation. However, some people had already become ill. One would occasionally spot black smoke in the sky from houses, having lost their tenants to the disease being burnt down in efforts to disinfect.

One night, Shen Liangsheng attended a gathering he could not miss. The dinner was held on a pleasure boat. Some people had realized that the dance halls could not be reopened anytime soon and subsequently found recreational boats, hiring show girls for entertainment and parading the boats up and down the flooded streets every night. The bogus government did not restrict such crass activities but rather opted to make money off of them, collecting entertainment taxes and an additional watercraft tax per vehicle.

Sitting on one such boat, Shen Liangsheng exchanged polite small talk every now and then as he looked out at the water rippling under the illumination of the lanterns and of the moon.

"I say, this sight is comparable to that of the Ten Mile Ch'inhuai,"[128] he heard another guest exclaim, and soon after, an interpreter translated it for the Japanese soldiers present.

Shen Liangsheng may have known little about the country, but even he knew that 'Ten Mile Ch'inhuai' referred to the scenery of the city of Nanking.

Nanking, the city that had been raped by the Japanese army.

If he were being honest, Shen Liangsheng would not call himself a good person. He willingly participated in the relief efforts despite the Shen factory's losses due to the flood, not because of a sudden sense of nobility, but for selfish reasons. Firstly, it was to find Ch'in Ching a secure job. Secondly, he felt a sincere need to do something whenever he recalled the distress he had felt when he was searching for Ch'in Ching during the flood. Perhaps he had finally learned pain through this calamity and consequently felt empathy.

Although the philanthropy began on account of his own reasons, Shen Liangsheng was a perfectionist who followed through on his word. If he said he would, then he would do his best. Coincidentally, he had come to this gathering partly hoping to fundraise for the very cause.

However, he was now filled with doubt as he looked back at the guests on the boat after looking out over the ripples on the water. As though he were having an out-of-body experience, he observed the party taking place around him for the first time. Some of these people were Chinese, some Japanese, and some

were his friends – it was the circle he had lost himself in for a long time. For all these years, he had let himself fall into this game of power and wealth. He was no different from them….

He was just as disgusting.

The singer at the front of the boat began singing "When Will You Return" as the man from earlier continued the topic. "You know what, this street and this water doesn't look like Ch'inhuai but rather the Venice you see in magazines. Mr. Shen, you've studied abroad. Have you been there? How does it compare?"

"No," he heard his own nearly bitter reply. "I've not been to Venice."

That night, Shen Liangsheng left early with the excuse that he was not feeling well. Ch'in Ching was not in the lounge when he returned, so he went to the guestroom. He waited a few seconds after knocking but heard no reply.

The servants had said Ch'in Ching was home. His hand faltered on the doorknob before he slowly twisted it open. He saw the man sleeping on the bed with his clothes on, perhaps having been too tired, and the book that he presumably had been reading was lying on the floor.

Shen Liangsheng crept over quietly and pulled a light blanket over to cover the man's stomach. He stood by the bed for a bit before bending down to pick up the book and place it on the nightstand. Then he tiptoed back out without switching off the lamp.

Shen Liangsheng closed the door behind him without a sound but did not stray far. He stayed in the hall leaning against the wall and took out his cigarette pack. The bitterness inside that he had been feeling for the past few hours had finally dissipated, replaced by tranquil and reassuring warmth from the lamp inside the bedroom.

Tonight he stood outside Ch'in Ching's room just as he had many nights ago, smoking quietly, content simply to be in a place near the man. A maid walked by and, having noticed the master putting out the cigarette butts where he stood, felt awful about the floorboards. She hurriedly found an ash tray and swept up the ash and butts around him.

“I’m turning in for the night. You all may go to bed now,” Shen Liangsheng ordered in a soft voice. His tone was so gentle it made the maid’s hairs stand up and made her wonder what in the world had gotten into her master.

Shen Liangsheng stood in silence in the hall lit with a wall light, smoking one cigarette after another while the idea that had been under consideration for several weeks rose lazily along with the smoke up to the ceiling before circling around like a bird and finally settling down to solid ground.

When Ch’in Ching awoke, he glanced at his wrist watch with bleary eyes to find that it was past midnight. He wanted to undress before going back to sleep, but he froze after undoing just one button.

In reality, he could not have smelled any of the cigarette smoke from inside the room, but he was somehow certain that Shen Liangsheng was outside. His heartbeat began to quicken as he hesitantly walked towards the door. After several seconds, he finally reached for the doorknob and opened the door.

“Oh, you’re still up?”

“Yeah.”

Ch’in Ching peered at the ash tray in the man’s hand; it was obvious how long the man had been standing there from the number of cigarette butts inside. He was unsure of what the man was trying to do, but he was even less sure of how he felt about it. After facing the man for some time, he blurted out of nowhere, “I’m hungry. What about you?”

A smile appeared on Shen Liangsheng’s face, and the rare sight made Ch’in Ching’s cheeks flush. Luckily, it was dim in the hallway, so the man probably did not notice.

The servants had all retired, and there was nothing to eat on the kitchen counter. As Shen Liangsheng opened the icebox, Ch’in Ching was about to say any small snack would do when the man brought out a plate of wontons which the kitchen had probably prepared as the next day’s breakfast.

“Do you know how to cook wontons?” Shen Liangsheng asked as he found a pot to boil some water.

Ch’in Ching nodded, and the other man stepped aside, leaning on the counter watching him. It was not the case that the businessman did not even know how to boil wonton since he did live abroad for many years. He simply wanted to watch the man working at the stove, for it gave him a sense of being at home.

The two finished the food fairly quietly, after which Ch’in Ching volunteered to tidy up. Shen Liangsheng was standing by the sink watching the man wash dishes when he suddenly spoke. “Ch’in Ching, I want to sell the factory.”

“What?”

“The joint factory with the Japanese. I don’t want it anymore.”

When he got no reply from Ch’in Ching, he elaborated,

“But there’s no one to sell it to now other than the Japanese. I don’t want to keep the money, either. Maybe I’ll donate it. I think you know what I mean. So maybe you could consult someone trustworthy about this for me.

“I’ll try to get the rest done as soon as possible. When you said autumn, which month did you mean?

“I was thinking if I don’t get it done in time that I’d go with you first and sort the rest out later.”

Shen Liangsheng had no idea that the place Ch’in Ching was planning to go to was Shanpei. He thought the man was just going down south to find a more peaceful region in which to teach. The man wouldn’t leave with him, so the only way was for him to go with the man since he didn’t want to be separated from him again. The calm exterior that he had exhibited lately was precisely because he had made up his mind and was able to find peace with himself.

“Shen Liangsheng….” Ch’in Ching paid no more attention to the dishes allowing the tap to run and the water to splash on his hands. The man was talking as though they were merely discussing what they were going to have for lunch tomorrow. Ch’in Ching felt as though the water was dragging his ability to

think down the drain with it. Long minutes later, he managed to form a reply, “You really don’t have to…. I….”

Shen Liangsheng did not respond immediately, either. Honestly, even he was uncertain if Ch’in Ching still had feelings for him. His usual confidence had long abandoned him since the man said au revoir. He knew that although he had decided to go with the man, whether the man was fine with him coming along was a different story.

Shen Liangsheng understood that the man was trying to dissuade him, but he had already made up his mind. He opted to avoid the indirect rejection and, after moments of silence, spoke as though he had misunderstood, “If you meant the donation, I must confess that I have my own reasons for doing so.”

“No, I –”

“When I first returned, my father took me to listen to Buddhist lectures at Chüshihlin,” Shen Liangsheng interrupted and began talking about an old story as though he were talking a trivial everyday matter. “He believed in Buddha and even asked the lecturing monk to read my destiny. I didn’t believe in it, but I remember the monk telling my father behind my back…” He paused for a moment and then continued, “I can’t recall his exact words, but basically he said that he saw malice in my life, and if I don’t collect good karma I will probably meet a horrible end.

“Well, I didn’t believe this superstitious stuff before, but now I kind of do. So I think it’s time I did some good, and maybe then I will be able to live longer.”

Though he did not get any acknowledgement from the man, he pushed on,

“And another day alive means another day I get to see you.”

Because the tap was still running, Shen Liangsheng did not realize Ch’in Ching was crying. Only several minutes later did he notice. He shot forth and placed a comforting hand on the man’s back while using the other to close the tap.

Indeed, he had chosen his previous words partly in an attempt to rouse Ch’in Ching’s emotions, but the part about the fortune telling was no lie, and his last utterance was entirely sincere. However, he would have never said it if he had

known it would make the man cry. Shen Liangsheng was patting his back, still trying to find the right words to cheer the man up, when he was pushed against the counter. The back of his shirt became wet from the water on the edge of the sink.

His lips were wet too with something faintly salty.

Ch'in Ching held the other man tight as he dove in for a kiss so deep his tongue could almost touch the back of the throat. Still, it was not enough. He rubbed against the man as though he wanted their two bodies to merge as one. The kiss was spiraling out of control. Their teeth knocked against each other missing the tongue by a sliver of an inch.

Shen Liangsheng circled his arms around the man's waist and let the man kiss as he pleased. Then he brushed his hands up and down his back in an effort to soothe the man and slow the tempo. He gently sucked on the man's tongue, playing games with it and taking in the juices that oozed from it.

They stayed connected by the kiss for so long that they both began to feel lightheaded. It felt like a dream, for the last time they had held each other and shared a kiss was so long ago that they could not bear to part for even a moment.

Eyes closed, Ch'in Ching leaned on Shen Liangsheng. He was so engrossed that he forgot to breathe. Soon, his legs caved in, and he slid downward.

Shen Liangsheng caught the man by the waist and gave what might have been a chuckle before lifting the man up into his arms. The schoolmaster was skinny but was nonetheless a man not that much shorter than Shen Liangsheng. Yet somehow, Shen Liangsheng found the strength in himself to carry the man across the spacious lounge, up the staircase and into the bedroom, not letting the man down until he reached the bed. He soon joined the man there and began unbuckling his belt while locked in another kiss.

Welcoming the man, Ch'in Ching opened his lips but pushed himself up switching their positions. He pinned the man's hands and asked in pants, "Shen Liangsheng, I want to…."

"Ch'in Ching." Without waiting for the full request, Shen Liangsheng smiled and touched their foreheads together. He rubbed the tips of their noses with one

another as he whispered his answer,

"I'm yours."

Something snapped in Ch'in Ching's mind, and he had no recollection of how they stripped naked. What he did recall was the sigh of relief when they were at last skin to skin. He nipped Shen Liangsheng's neck and began licking and sucking the teeth marks until red blots appeared. Then he moved downward, kissing down to the chest inch by inch, and latched on a nipple. First he scraped against it lightly with his teeth before nudging it around with his tongue.

Shen Liangsheng lay there letting the other man do as he pleased. He could sense from the man an overwhelming possessiveness. Ch'in Ching always had been quite passionate in the bedroom, but this was the first time he showed such possessiveness.

In that moment, Shen Liangsheng knew he need not worry whether Ch'in Ching still cared for him. His senses did not lie. He could feel the devotion and yearning coming so strongly from the man.

"I love you," they said. "I want you."

Ch'in Ching's kisses trailed down to Shen Liangsheng's tight abdomen, and his tongue traced the curvature of the muscles before dipping down along the waistline past the iliac furrow to lick at the hairs. He nuzzled the swelling member like a puppy trying to get attention from its master before taking it deep into his mouth.

The immense pleasure made Shen Liangsheng gasp aloud. He could feel the warm wetness around him, the tongue gliding over his shaft and then moving further down. His perineum tingled from the stimulation, and his entrance twitched, as well.

He tried to relax as Ch'in Ching licked it and slid in a digit with his saliva as lubrication. He even lifted his bottom cooperatively as though offering himself as tribute – he wanted to open up his very being to this man withholding nothing from this point on.

Keeping in mind this was his first time, Ch'in Ching glanced up as he slowly slid his finger in and out, and asked softly, "Is there any Vaseline? I don't want it to hurt."

"That's long gone," Shen Liangsheng replied straightforwardly. "Maybe there's something we can use on the dresser."

Ch'in Ching rummaged through the dresser and found a bottle of what might have been face cream. He poured some onto his palm to warm it before pushing it into the entrance. Eventually, he could fit two digits in and cautiously slid the third one in. This entire process took nearly fifteen minutes as he feared causing Shen Liangsheng any pain.

Ch'in Ching's erection had been standing tall this entire time, and Shen Liangsheng felt bad just looking at it, so he spoke up. "That's enough. Are you coming in, baby?"

It had been so long since the man had called Ch'in Ching that, and his heart skipped a beat. He could no longer hold back. After taking his fingers out, he patted the man's hips signalling him to turn over.

"Let's just stay like this." Shen Liangsheng took a pillow and tucked it under his hip. He even reached to the lamp on the bedside table turning it on. "I want to see you."

Ch'in Ching did not reply but his face became even redder – which puzzled him. He was the one on top this time, so why was he the one being bashful? Meanwhile, his hands did not rest; he poured a bit of the cream onto his own member and spread it out before slowly sinking into Shen Liangsheng. While doing so, he kept eye contact with the man.

"Does it hurt?" he asked softly.

Shen Liangsheng shook his head, but his brows furrowed the slightest. His unfocused eyes looked back at Ch'in Ching rendering the latter utterly speechless and his heartbeat wilder and wilder.

Ch'in Ching knew it must have hurt, but at the same time, the sight before him was irresistible. It was just as he remembered – eyes like the misty hills in spring

or still, silvery lakes at night and long, fluttering lashes – and he could not help but plant feathery kisses on them.

"How can you be so good-looking?" He went as far as to demand an answer.

"It doesn't hurt that much, really."

Amused, Shen Liangsheng reassured the man while pushing his hips upward to tell the man to hurry it up. There were no promises as to who would be on top if this adorable behaviour continued any longer.

Ch'in Ching had yearned for it for so long that it almost seemed surreal now he was actually inside the man. He slowly rocked his hips while pecking the man's lips, occasionally calling out his name between kisses.

Shen Liangsheng held Ch'in Ching's head with one hand as their lips and tongues joined in an erotic dance with one another. The other hand was on the man's waist and then trailed down to the place where they were connected caressing the man's groin.

Not wanting to cause pain, Ch'in Ching had been holding back his desire to move faster but could no longer when his erotic zones were being stimulated so. He gave a few quick thrusts but stopped shortly. "Mhm…don't…."

"You feel good?" Though his entrance felt painfully stretched, Shen Liangsheng could bear with it and still had strength left to tease Ch'in Ching not only verbally but physically. His one hand slid along the crack and slipped a finger in using the excess cream nearby as lubricant. He asked as he pumped it in and out a few times, "I bet this feels even better, huh?"

Lying on top of Shen Liangsheng, Ch'in Ching was completely enveloped by the man on one end feeling as though he would melt any second while the man was also inside him on the other end. Although it was only one finger and it did not reach the right spot, the stimulation added something extra to the act. He couldn't suppress his wanton moans as he resumed thrusting, going faster and faster. His nipples perked up, and the man began squeezing them with his left hand. He felt as though he was on fire, and his hole twitched uncontrollably around the man's finger.

“Did you miss it?” Shen Liangsheng brought Ch’in Ching’s hand to his swollen member.

“Yeah,” Ch’in Ching murmured an answer. He held the shaft and began stroking it in time with his thrusts.

Out of nowhere, he added, “I’ve missed you, Shen Liangsheng.”

Shen Liangsheng immediately slid his mischievous finger out and hugged the man with both arms, pressing him tightly into his arms. He lay silently breathing into the man’s ear for a few seconds before replying hoarsely,

“I’ve missed you, too.”

After the lovemaking, the two bathed together and spent a long time snuggled in bed talking.

Shen Liangsheng told Ch’in Ching about his childhood, about his mother. As he embraced the man and kissed his forehead in the dark, he recited for him Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poems of love. His tone was flat and held little emotion, but the words themselves were rich and earnest and spoke of a lost legend from a faraway land, a story that had nothing to do with them.

It seemed their story had long begun, or perhaps it had only just begun.

But all stories about two people began with the first sonnet –

Straightway I was ’ware,

So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move

Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;

And a voice said in mastery, while I strove –

“Guess now who holds thee!” – “Death,” I said. But, there,

The silver answer rang, “Not Death, but Love.”

126 A former politician in the Peiyang Government and part of the pro-Japanese movement.

127 A general and major player in the Republic of China from 1916 to 1927.

128 This is a four-character saying taken from a famous poem writing about the beauty of Nanking and the Ch’inhuai River. This saying is used to refer to the beautiful scenery of the river.

XXIV

The other man appeared to be asleep when Ch'in Ching awoke. He paused and studied the man's face for a moment before grumbling, "Quit acting." And as expected, Shen Liangsheng's lips twitched; he was already awake.

They had not shut the windows last night, and the curtains were billowing in the morning breeze. Since it was summer, they had been replaced by a set with cooler tones, a pale green that appeared bleached by sunlight mixed with beige undertones. The section bulging out from the wind looked like a fat, round goldfish. Ch'in Ching stared at this for some time and then spoke abruptly. "How about we don't go anywhere?"

"I'm fine with whatever. You just think about it some more, all right?" Shen Liangsheng had an appointment that morning, so he did not stay in bed with Ch'in Ching. He replied in a casual tone as he dressed himself, not appearing glad at all, as though he did not care the slightest what Ch'in Ching's decision was.

Shen Liangsheng asked Ch'in Ching to think about it, but the latter did not need to because he knew life in Shanpei would be arduous. Most people were like this; they may be fine with anything themselves but could not bear it if their object of affection were to suffer through the same.

Accordingly, he laid out his previous plans before Shen Liangsheng when the other man came home that night. "And that's why I can't make you come with me. Let's just stay here, yeah?"

Shen Liangsheng merely nodded. He brought the other man into his arms and planted a kiss on his forehead.

Shen Liangsheng knew the schoolmaster had his ideals and aspirations and also agreed that loving someone meant helping them fulfill those. However, the particular risks involved were more than he could handle.

If the man were dead – this had once crossed his mind, but now that he thought about this again, he realized it was not entirely impossible for him to live on without the man.

Life would merely become a process of waiting – caught in the prison that is life waiting for a spirit that might not even come for a visit at the darkest hours of the night.

He loved the man and wanted to spend the rest of his life with him. He could not fulfill the man's ideals, so he wanted to find a compromise and to do what he could for the man.

The first thing Shen Liangsheng did when he went into the office the next morning was ring Kobayakawa and tell him about his intention to sell the factory.

For the past two years, the Shigekawa faction had been walking all over Kobayakawa preventing him from accomplishing much. His father had not been satisfied with him and was planning on transferring him back to Peip'ing for further instructions. Shen Liangsheng notifying him first was his attempt to do one last favour for the Japanese man in order to clear the books.

Acquiring the Shen factory would count as a small achievement, so Kobayakawa was more than willing. Of course, he pushed the price lower on account of the damage during the flood. Shen Liangsheng did not want to waste time haggling but was also wary of raising suspicion by being too eager to consent. After several days of bartering, they finally reached a mutually agreeable sum. They drafted the documents and closed the deal with signatures and stamps from both parties.

After seeing Kobayakawa out, Chou followed his boss back into the office. Locking the door behind him, the secretary lingered by the couch apparently deliberating whether to speak or not. The company was largely founded in order to manage the factory, and now that the factory was sold, there was no longer any need for its existence. Shen Liangsheng thought the secretary was worried about his job, so he spoke first. "Rest assured. I've spoken with the Japanese, and they need a Chinese manager who's familiar with the facilities. It's a great

opportunity, so I recommended you for the managerial–"

"Sir." Unexpectedly, Chou interrupted his boss before continuing in a tentative tone, "I understand what you mean…. And that's what I wanted to speak with you about. I'm not too thrilled about taking that job."

"*Lao*-Chou," Shen Liangsheng started humorously. "You've been working for me for all these years. There's no need to be polite with me."

He knew the secretary was a glib and unctuous man and thought he was using this opportunity to save his boss's face by feigning loyalty. With that said, Shen Liangsheng sincerely wanted to give the man one last assist considering the man had served him for eight years.

"No, sir…." Chou chuckled weakly. "I'm not being polite."

"Then what is it? If there's a problem, you can tell me." Shen Liangsheng thought he had a good eye for people. He not only knew that Chou was smooth-tongued but also that deep down this man, like himself, only had profits in mind. All these years of loyalty were largely because working for Shen Liangsheng proved very lucrative. He strongly doubted that the secretary had no interest in the incredible opportunity being offered now. He guessed there must have been some concern stopping the man, so he wanted an honest answer in order to solve the problem and get this over with.

"I know how you look at me, sir," Chou began, speaking more firmly. "I beg your pardon for saying this, but you probably look down on me. And to be totally honest, I kind of look down on myself, as well…."

"Don't say that, *Lao*-Chou." Shen Liangsheng frowned at the secretary's confession as he left his seat and walked to face the man. At the same time, he lit a cigarette and then passed another to Chou. He did think of this man as a clever minor character in the background who was involved in dubious dealings behind his back. However, it was plain to see that it was all for his family, so Shen Liangsheng turned a blind eye to the secretary's shady business as long as it was reasonable. Rather than saying he looked down on Chou, it would be more accurate to say he never even looked at the man as an equal.

"What I'm trying to say is I've been working for you, and I do what you do, sir. Now that you're quitting, I'm quitting, too." Chou's expression had been full

of doubt a few minutes ago but now appeared determined. “Please don’t laugh at this almost forty-year-old man only now trying to find his backbone. At the end of the day I am Chinese, so I won’t be taking the job.”

Shen Liangsheng was slightly taken aback, and the two men stood in silence. After finishing their smoke, Shen Liangsheng patted his shoulder and said, “All right then. We’ll figure the rest out in time.”

Shen Liangsheng had listened to many Buddhist lectures with his father and knew of the Buddhist enlightenment, but he did not believe in the Buddha and thus did not believe in the Buddhist ways. However, on this day it was as though he opened his eyes and observed –

perhaps not enlightenment but more the simple fact that, after experiencing empathetic pain during the flood, the veils over his eyes had been drawn back one by one

– and having observed, he saw himself, saw the others, saw his country, his home.

That night at home, Shen Liangsheng told Ch’in Ching about having signed the papers and sold the factory. Just to be on the safe side, he had to refrain from touching the money from the sale, but he had several offshore accounts that he had prepared in anticipation of emigrating. He was considering donating some of these funds using a front, such as an overseas Chinese, if there existed a discreet way to arrange the transaction.

“Shen Liangsheng….” Ch’in Ching had just finished their bedroom exercise and was lying there panting when the other man began talking about the serious topic. He wasn’t sure what to say. “If it’s ‘cause of me…just know you don’t have to….”

“When will you stop having such a wild imagination?” Shen Liangsheng joked as he pulled the man into his arms. He then proceeded to tell the man about Chou and what he thought of it.

Ch’in Ching stayed silent even after Shen Liangsheng finished. Then he

abruptly announced his discovery, “You’ve never talked to me like that before.”

And it was a valid one. Shen Liangsheng was a distrustful spirit, and even when the two had been at the best point of their relationship, he had been careful and restrained with his words for the most part. But now he said whatever was on his mind and was so frank that Ch’in Ching had a little trouble adjusting.

“That was before. It’s different now.” Shen Liangsheng understood what the other man was implying. He flashed a mischievous look at Ch’in Ching before leaning into his ear and teasing him. It took Ch’in Ching quite a while to process and retort, “Who said? I never agreed to that.”

“Whether you agree or not…that’s the way it’ll be….” Shen Liangsheng suddenly shifted over and spread the man’s legs apart sinking his renewed erection back into the entrance that was still slick. He aimed his thrusts at the sensitive nub inside and watched as Ch’in Ching’s member jolted to attention. He then brought the man’s hand to the place where they were connected and asked in his ear, “Do you really not agree? Can you live without it?”

Ch’in Ching let out a wanton moan and rocked his hips so that the man could get deeper inside. He fondled with the man’s sac before looking him right in the eyes. “It’s you I can’t live without.”

Shen Liangsheng stopped what he was doing and planted a kiss on his eye, his tongue sliding along the lashes until it lapped lovingly at the rouge dot by his eye.

– Of course it was different.

He loved him and wanted to spend the rest of his life with him.

At the end of September, Ch’in Ching brought Shen Liangsheng to a secret meeting with *Lao*-Wu. After the three discussed the main matters, Shen Liangsheng spoke up again after glancing at Ch’in Ching. “Mr. Wu, I’ve another favour I would like to ask of you.”

Due to the flood in Tientsin, *Lao*-Wu had not had the chance to bring up the subject to Ch’in Ching about moving out in the fall. But just because the vice

principal did not bring it up did not mean Ch'in Ching should pretend the problem didn't exist. He had to inform the older man that he had no plans to leave, but he felt so guilty he didn't know how to start.

Knowing this, Shen Liangsheng wanted to take this opportunity to do it for him. "I'll be honest with you, sir. *Hsiao*-Ch'in and I are actually distant relatives, and he should really be calling me *piaoke*[129] accordingly. My aunt asked me to take care of him before she passed away, but he never remembers to discuss things with me before deciding. Regarding what you'd discussed with him previously, I'm earnestly too concerned to let him be so far away from home. There is no wine here, but please allow me to ask for forgiveness with tea instead."[130]

Ch'in Ching had mentioned to *Lao*-Wu only that Shen Liangsheng was a trustworthy friend, so he was surprised to hear the young master lie so blatantly. He had to keep calm, so he just kept his head down and drank his tea.

On the other hand, *Lao*-Wu did not react negatively and actually said to Ch'in Ching after a round of politesse with Shen Liangsheng, "*Hsiao*-Ch'in, our school is looking to expand some more. It'd be good if you stayed. You can work with me and make our school bigger and better. When this generation grows up, they'll become the new lifeblood of our country."

"You hear that?" Shen Liangsheng shot another look at the schoolmaster. "You wouldn't listen to me, but you have to listen to your principal, right?"

Meanwhile, Ch'in Ching was sitting there like a cat on hot bricks because he feared that the vice principal smelled something fishy. He knew that despite *Lao*-Wu's open and cheerful attitude with the staff, the older man had a deadly sharp eye for things from all his years working underground. Afraid to even breathe too loudly, he mumbled an affirmation.

"My mom asked you to take care of me? You have some guts to say that." Only when they were on the way back to Cambridge Road did Ch'in Ching start to jokingly scold Shen Liangsheng. "If my mom found out about you, she'd beat you like there was no tomorrow!"

"No, she wouldn't," Shen Liangsheng replied calmly. "Isn't there a saying that

goes, ‘the more a woman looks at her son-in-law, the more she takes a liking to him?’ ”

When he got no response, he looked over to find the schoolmaster laughing silently.

“What’re you laughing at?”

“Oh, *piaoke*, stop bickering and watch the road. You missed the turn!”

The lie was, of course, a lie, but Shen Liangsheng really did want to take care of him. Having sold the factory, he didn’t want to dabble in light industry anymore because he undoubtedly would come into contact with the Japanese were he to get anywhere near those areas. Shen Liangsheng discussed this with Chou and decided to start some type of everyday business such as department stores, the target not being to make a profit but to have something to do.

And since he decided to leave the limelight and lead a stable life, he found the manor on Cambridge Road to be too conspicuous. He wanted to move to Maoken with Ch’in Ching. The ownership of the properties there had not been transferred when they broke up previously and still belonged to Ch’in Ching. After two whole years, there were probably several layers of dust on the white sheets covering the furniture. Shen Liangsheng took Ch’in Ching over one day. As expected, when they opened the door the air was so stale and musty that it made both of them cough.

Shen Liangsheng stepped in first, heading towards the windows to open them. The floor was covered in dust too, and he left tracks with every step he took. Ch’in Ching followed suit, and as he faced the other way to shut the door, he heard the other man.

“I’ll find someone to knock down the walls between the two units. That way we’ll have more space.”

“Fine,” Ch’in Ching answered as he joined Shen Liangsheng in opening all the windows that could be opened. He came upon a short shelf and hesitantly lifted the sheet over it. He rubbed his fingertips on the carved borders.

“Now, now. You’re getting your hands all dirty,” Shen Liangsheng walked

over and reminded him like he would a child while patting the dust off from the man's hand.

"I remember we picked this together," Ch'in Ching laughed. "But I haven't even seen it inside the house."

Shen Liangsheng fell quiet. He was suddenly aware of the distance they had covered to arrive at the place they now were. He interlocked their fingers tightly and teased softly, "Well, I planned for this to be our honeymoon suite…so how about we put up a few 'Just Married'[131]banners?"

"Oh, stop it already," Ch'in Ching grumbled but pulled the taller man's head down and planted a gentle kiss.

The brisk late October wind gushed in through the wide-open windows blowing the dust up into the air. As the cold air and dust danced around them, they were locked in a silent kiss with their eyes closed. When their eyes opened again, it was still the two of them, but the floors were sparkling clean and a porcelain vase stood on the short shelf. Ch'in Ching was wiping at it with a cloth, and when he finished, he wiped the shelf as well. Shen Liangsheng had come out from the study to get a cup of water when he spotted the other man wiping at the shelf meticulously and found it amusing. He wrapped an arm around the man and kissed him.

"The Chous are our friends. They've come over for dinner more times than I can count. Must you always clean the house whenever someone comes over? You're usually not this diligent."

"If you're not going to help me, fine, but at least don't get in my way," Ch'in Ching chided. He was already frustrated with the shelf – it was Baroque. Dust loved to settle in the corners and edges and once settled in it became difficult to get back out. "Go get your water in the kitchen. And while you're there, check if the tungku[132] are ready, and if they are, put them in the strainer."

It was now the summer of Year Thirty of the Republic.[133] The road outside was overhung with the luxuriant green boughs of trees full of noisy cicadas

taking turns singing.

Since Shen Liangsheng ended his former business operations, he had stopped interacting with most of the friends he had met through the vanity fair. At first, some still had memories of the old glory of the Shen house and spoke pitifully of Shen Sr.'s misfortunes. The man had two sons, but both were useless. One died, and the other lost his estate. However, once enough time passed, there was no one left who still remembered the Shen house that was no more.

In the last two years, Shen Liangsheng and Chou joined hands and opened two average sized restaurants. He provided the funding, and Chou was responsible for running them. It was nothing grand because they were simply looking for stability. No matter what happened, people had to eat and drink. Additionally, he began importing some foreign goods with an American friend residing in China, mainly as a diversion.

Chou had always been aware of his relationship with Ch'in Ching, and now even Mrs. Chou knew. She was brought up in a fairly affluent family and later married Chou. She had never been through much hardship and still kept a few girlish traits at the age of forty. She listened to her husband tell the story, and because of his colourful and exaggerated depiction, she had the impression that it was somewhat a legend. When she first met Ch'in Ching, she looked up to the man with complete awe, observing the two men as though they were two characters in a story. She even told her husband that looking at them was unreal, like watching a play.

Unfortunately, as the two families became closer the actors came off the stage, and her awe became admiration. Every time they visited the men she would complain to her husband, "Look at Mr. Shen. See how good he is to Mr. Ch'in? You need to start treating me better."

"What do you mean?" Chou would always retort unhappily. "Mr. Shen doesn't help out at home at all, but I at least do the dishes."

In reality, Chou was stretching the truth. In the beginning, Shen Liangsheng had not wished to have an extra person in the house since the property was not that spacious and only kept the tight-lipped Russian woman. She would clean

the house a few times a week but did not live with them. Nearly a year had passed when the woman quit. Shen Liangsheng did not hire another worker and willingly helped Ch'in Ching with the chores – tidying the house, buying groceries, washing the dishes. They lived as any other couple would, and he did not feel the difficulty of easing into a life without servants.

However, they were two men after all, a taboo relationship. This completely restricted their social circle, and they only had regular interaction with the Lius and the Chous.

Hsiao-Liu had married early in the previous year and brought a baby Liu to this world a few months ago. Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng became the boy's godfathers, and the latter gave a hefty sum as the boy's Hundredth Day[134] present. *Hsiao*-Liu kept saying he couldn't take it but accepted it after Shen Liangsheng convinced him in his usual cool tone. "It's for the boy. Don't be polite with me now."

Later, the new father asked his childhood friend in privacy, "If you two go on like this…well, I know you, but what 'bout him? You going to watch his bloodline end like that?"

Ch'in Ching had not answered, but that did not mean the matter did not remain on his mind. On the one hand, he couldn't bear the thought of Shen Liangsheng not having children to inherit his name and really wanted to ask the man if he had any thoughts. On the other hand, he had no idea how to bring this subject up.

"Watch the knife. Don't cut yourself."

Because the Chous were coming over for dinner today, Shen Liangsheng joined Ch'in Ching in the kitchen.

He usually did not cook, but Ch'in Ching's culinary skills only went so far. Shen Liangsheng did not complain, but he would sometimes play around with the recipe books and then ask for tips and tricks from the chefs at the restaurants. The result was that now he could cook better than Ch'in Ching. Thus, whenever they had guests over, Ch'in Ching would just prepare the ingredients and then let Shen Liangsheng take over.

Ch'in Ching had finished cutting the stems off of the tungku, so he began watching the man slice the ham. Shen Liangsheng neatly covered the lean meat with shallow criss-crosses before adding Shaohing wine and water to the tray and placing the entire thing in the steamer. Ch'in Ching heaved an exaggerated sigh – Shen Liangsheng's ham and tungku was delicious, but the man just didn't bother making it for him regularly.

"What? It's not going to cook faster just because you stare at it," Shen Liangsheng teased after seeing the other man's intent gaze on the steamer.

"Nothing. I was just thinking the man upstairs isn't being fair letting me get all the good things in life." Ch'in Ching quickly began to suck up to Shen Liangsheng to ensure tasty food in his near future. "Not only is our *Ah*-Liang handsome, he's smart and picks everything up without breaking a sweat. Oh, how brilliant."

Shen Liangsheng glanced at the man from the corner of his eye, and unwilling to encourage this behaviour, he decided to turn back to the counter to prepare the sauce for braised fish.

"What are you rolling your eyes at me for? I speak the truth." Ch'in Ching was almost thirty years old now, but because he had been doted on by Shen Liangsheng for the past two years, he acted childish with the other man even more so than before. He flanked the man from behind and hugged him around the waist, speaking into the man's ear, "Tell me, is there anything you can't do?"

The taller man let the spoiled rascal wreck mischief behind him as he finished mixing the sauce. He took a small spoonful and stuck it in Ch'in Ching's mouth. "Too salty?"

"No, just right," Ch'in Ching answered with the spoon still in his mouth. Seeing Shen Liangsheng turn around to face him, he couldn't stop his fearless self from leaning forward and poking the man's face with the spoon handle.

"You're right. There's nothing I can't do." Shen Liangsheng took the spoon out of his mouth and leaned in for a kiss. Then he joked, "But I can't have babies, so I was counting on you for that."

Now that Shen Liangsheng broached it, Ch'in Ching was reminded of what his friend had said to him. He fell silent and decided this was a good chance to

discuss it with the man. He started tentatively, “Speaking of which, look at our godson. He’s already crawling. Haven’t you thought about….”

“About what?” Shen Liangsheng slapped his butt lightly and continued to tease him while keeping a straight face himself. “Don’t tell me you want to have my babies. Is that even possible?”

“I’m being serious here,” Ch’in Ching mumbled with his head down.

“Save it, you.” Shen Liangsheng didn’t know what *Hsiao*-Liu had said, but he could tell it was troubling Ch’in Ching. He added more sternly, “Don’t worry about things you don’t need to worry about. You’ll just end up tiring yourself out.”

Seeing Ch’in Ching quiet with his head down, Shen Liangsheng patted his head lightly.

“And you know I don’t like children. Noisy little things don’t leave you any peace and quiet. Plus, I have enough on my hands taking care of you. I don’t have it in me for another child in the family.”

“Oh, that’s the ham.” Shen Liangsheng made a seemingly careless remark after sniffing the air, but Ch’in Ching felt tears welling up. He stuck his face in the taller man’s neck and asked in a muffled voice, “When’ll it be ready?”

“Hmm, when, you ask?” Shen Liangsheng caught the heavy nasal tones in the man’s voice and brought him into his embrace as though he really were cheering a child up. He brushed his hair while rattling on about nothing in particular. “It has to steam for an hour…then you add the tungku soup and steam for another hour…and then….”

Ch’in Ching listened to the man’s low, soothing voice explaining to him how to make the dish, and very soon his tears broke free. He found it embarrassing that he was acting like this at his age, but he was simply filled with so much joy that he couldn’t care less about the waterworks.

He really felt that he had received everything good the world had to offer.

And it all was contained in these four words:

They met each other.

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129 The son of your father’s female siblings or of your mother’s siblings who is older than you.

130 It is customary to drink wine as a punishment or as a way to make up for past mistakes (as Ch’in Ching did in chapter 4)

131 In order to make the dialogue flow, I changed the cultural reference here to an equivalent one in English. It is tradition for newlyweds to stick up red paper cut in the shape of the character 囍 (double joy), often with other designs around it.

132 A type of high grade shiitake mushroom that is almost always dried and rehydrated before use.

133 1941

134 The Hundredth Day celebration represents the wish that the baby will live a hundred years, and it is tradition for friends and relatives to give gifts.

XXV

That year, Japan launched campaigns to strengthen security throughout northern China under the slogan, “liberate East Asia, eliminate Communism in self-defence, and work industriously to increase production.” Consequently, the tension in Tientsin heightened as well.

A massive raid was conducted in spring[135] and once again in late summer.[136] Although *Lao*-Wu’s cover had not been revealed, the administration[137] arranged for him to retreat from Tientsin in fear for his safety. In the last two years, Shen Liangsheng had transferred several sums of money in support of logistics through *Lao*-Wu’s connections. The latter appreciated his contributions, but it proved too risky to say aloud during their farewell. He later asked Ch’in Ching to pass on the message: “I don’t know when I will be able to return. You must be very careful in the future. Don’t interact with anybody else. I thank you on behalf of the Party, and Vice Chairman Chou[138] also asked me to thank you personally.”

Ch’in Ching delivered the entire message word for word before adding, “Come to think of it, Vice Chairman Chou is half a Tientsiner.”

“Oh, a fellow Tientsiner.”

“I should be saying that, not you.”

Shen K’echen had moved to Tientsin after the Peiyang government fell and the Shen ancestry traced back to the Northeast,[139] so Shen Liangsheng was not a true Tientsiner. But upon hearing this, Shen Liangsheng only turned over a page of the newspaper and retorted, “But I married into a Tientsin family. Why can’t I call myself a Tientsiner?”

Amused at how the man had become cheekier as he aged, Ch’in Ching shook his head smilingly and sat down beside the man. He skimmed through the page that Shen Liangsheng had just finished reading but did not find the column he wanted. Then he realized it was in the man’s hands and proceeded to hold out his hand in demand.

“I’m still reading. Wait your turn.”[140]

Ch'in Ching simply looked at him with a smile on his face. Very soon, Shen Liangsheng could only wave the white flag and toss the papers over to him. He asked a question to which he didn't expect an answer, "Are you the most obnoxious or what?"

The paper that Shen Liangsheng was reading was *New Tientsin Gazette*,[141] which was previously known as *Tienfungpao*.[142] The specific page that they were fighting over was the literature section in which the newest chapters of *The Legend of the Shu Shan Swordsmen*[143] were being released. Ch'in Ching was a devoted fan of Huan Chu Lou Chu and thus would not miss even one chapter.

Originally, Shen Liangsheng did not read for leisure, but since he had settled down with Ch'in Ching and become used to domestic life, his tastes began to change. With time to spare, the two men tended to a few plants here and there, and on idle days, they would make a pot of tea and sit across from one another each with a book in hand for hours at a time.

Perhaps all men had a secret love for wu-hsia in their bones. Seeing Ch'in Ching following every single release of *The Legend of Shu Shan Swordsmen* and praising its story, Shen Liangsheng thought he might as well buy the printed books from Lili Press[144] and read the story from the start. After catching up, he followed the new releases with Ch'in Ching and even engaged the man in discussion afterwards.

The Legend was a hsien-hsia novel with an extensively elaborate world. There were characters both good and evil, and each had wukung more powerful than the last. They could soar the skies and burrow through the earth. They could travel on their swords. Their abilities were strange and fascinating, never failing to surprise the reader. Regardless of how much his tastes had changed, Shen Liangsheng did not lose his fastidious and methodical nature. Even though it was a novel, he had Ch'in Ching accompany him in sorting the relationships between the always increasing character set, debating who had the better wukung and more useful magic items and whether good would prevail against evil or vice versa. In this, Ch'in Ching lacked the studious attitude of the other man but nonetheless found this serious way of reading fiction rather interesting. He gladly joined in the discussions, and before he knew it, he, too, had become

quite serious. Occasionally the two men had opposing opinions, and neither could persuade the other. At times like these, Ch'in Ching would threaten menacingly, "You disagree with me one more time and you're washing the dishes this week!" While saying so, it didn't occur to him that it was rather immature for two grown men to fall out over a fictional novel.

Despite it being fiction, the author's captivating prose made the world come to life – as though such a place with a different sky and earth truly existed. In that wondrous world, the air was full of flying swordsmen, and characters came and went. But whether they became realized immortals or fallen demons, one thing never changed: no barbarian[145] dared invade.

"Ch'in Ching, what are your plans now that *Lao*-Wu has left?"

Ch'in Ching was intently reading the new chapter when Shen Liangsheng suddenly asked. He replied lightheartedly, "What do you mean plans? Of course I'll keep teaching."

Shen Liangsheng didn't pursue the subject, dropping it as though it had only been a spontaneous question. He didn't bring it up again until they turned in for the night. With the lights off, he started in a rare tentative tone, "I've been thinking about the current situation, Ch'in Ching…. What if I said I want you to switch schools…maybe to an elementary school, how would that sound?"

Shen Liangsheng's concern was justified – Sheng Kung had been expanding, and fame came at a price. As with Yaohua,[146] Sheng Kung had been on the Japanese radar for some time. Back in the day, Nank'ai had suffered greatly for its anti-Japanese stance, and later on, the principal of Yaohua was assassinated by a Japanese agent in broad daylight. Shen Liangsheng was anxious because first, he had been inactive for a long time and broken off contact with the world of politics, and second, Ch'in Ching had worked for *Lao*-Wu. And who knew when the so-called "security strengthening campaigns" would come to an end? He knew the probability was low, but even that scared him. Should anything happen, he was afraid that he couldn't protect the man, and thus he thought it would be best if the man transferred to a less prominent elementary school.

But then again, since they had moved in together, Ch'in Ching had stopped all

other activities other than teaching out of concern for safety. By making this request now, Shen Liangsheng felt as though he were eating away more and more of the schoolmaster's aspirations. Honestly speaking, he would by all means tie the man by a rope and keep him by his side if he could actually do that, not letting him go anywhere or do anything. He would only rest easy if he could keep the man at home every single day.

Shen Liangsheng himself thought the request was too much and didn't plan to force the man to quit the job at Sheng Kung. He only wanted to make the suggestion, and if the man didn't agree then he would let the matter go. But unexpectedly Ch'in Ching patted his hand under the sheets after seconds of silence.

"Fine," the schoolmaster said quietly.

Ch'in Ching understood the other man's intentions perhaps all too well. In the past two years, the man had donated all of his savings in offshore accounts using the identity of an overseas Chinese – what was the purpose? Certainly, this was partly because of the sentiment that the man had developed for this country and the wish to support the fight against Japan, but there also lay within a desire to make amends to him. They had left this unspoken, but only a shameless bastard would not have read between the lines.

"Of course it's fine." After not receiving any response from the man, Ch'in Ching patted his hand again and added reassuringly, "It's the same job no matter where I go. Don't worry about it."

He asked the man not to think too much about it but had a strange dream himself.

The beginning was very normal and even had a sexual undertone to it. Ch'in Ching dreamt he was fooling around with Shen Liangsheng in the bedroom, their hands on each other's bodies hinting at foreplay. Then, Shen Liangsheng pushed him up against the floor mirror in the corner. His back was against the icy glass but his groin was burning. He shut his eyes in the comfort of being fellated as a few moans escaped his lips.

But soon he felt a pair of arms circling him from behind in a nearly suffocating hold. Where did the arms come from? Ch'in Ching was horrified at the thought of the arms of a phantom reaching out from the mirror and grabbing him as though to drag him into it.

"Shen–" He wanted to cry out for help only to find the man who had been kneeling before him gone. He buckled against the clutch and turned around. The person, or perhaps ghost, had fully stepped out of the mirror and stood face to face with him. Blackness enshrouded them obscuring the apartment he was familiar with, but the face before him he knew well. It was none other than the man to whom he had cried for help.

"Shen Liangsheng…." Ch'in Ching called in a daze. Perhaps he had been reading too many wu-hsia novels; the man he knew so well for some reason was dressed in clothing from ancient times. His long hair was black and his attire even darker; only the man's pale face stood out in the darkness. It was a face that harboured no emotions, but as they looked into each other's eyes, a silent tear trickled down the man's face.

"Don't–" Ch'in Ching reached out in a panic. He wanted to tell the man not to cry but found he could not. He couldn't even wipe away the tear for him – the tear seemed to hold within it an excruciating sorrow. He must have caused the man so much pain that this overwhelming agony, torn between love and hatred, could be seen in his eyes.

Ch'in Ching was so unnerved he didn't know what to do – watching the man in pain made him hurt as well. He couldn't squeeze out even a single word of comfort. He just stared at the man before him like a statue, afraid he would vanish if he so much as blinked.

"Ch'in Ching? Ch'in Ching?"

Ch'in Ching could not move in the dream, but in reality he was restless in his sleep, constantly trembling. As though he could sense it, Shen Liangsheng awoke and realized the man was having a nightmare, so he began shaking the man.

Still in a stupor, Ch'in Ching lay there for a few seconds before he suddenly

rolled over and wrapped his arms tightly around Shen Liangsheng pressing his face against his chest. Moments later, he was clinging onto the man with both arms and legs as he muttered something under his breath so softly Shen Liangsheng could not catch it.

"There, there. It's all right now…." Shen Liangsheng didn't know what Ch'in Ching had dreamt about and found the man's actions a bit amusing, but he couldn't say that. He hugged the man back and gently brushed his back while comforting, "Did you have a bad dream? It can't hurt you now that you're awake. Don't be afraid."

"Why do you sound like my mom?" Coming back to himself, Ch'in Ching felt a bit embarrassed and grumbled in attempt to cover it up before pushing himself off of the man.

"Already getting cheeky with me, are you? I say you deserved that nightmare." As though he had not had enough of Ch'in Ching, he pulled the man back into his embrace. "What did you dream about?"

"I dreamt you were a ghost and ate me up." Ch'in Ching continued his cheeky remarks, but after a while, he couldn't keep it bottled up inside and told everything to Shen Liangsheng. Finally, he asked in a whisper, "When did I do something terrible to you?"

"Yes, when indeed?" Shen Liangsheng kissed his forehead and sneaked a hand downward into his pyjama pants. "The second half was a nightmare, but the first half wasn't, was it? I say you had that dream 'cause we haven't done it enough this week."

"Quit it. It's the middle of the night…." Ch'in Ching refused quietly, but he soon became aroused because his body had gotten used to the man's touch. As the lust remaining from the dream was relit, he gave up trying to dissuade the man.

"All right, if you say so." Shen Liangsheng purposely stopped after the other man was fully erect and patted him on the butt. "Go to sleep."

"Oh, come on. Don't be like that." Ch'in Ching lowered himself and began nibbling on the taller man's chest and lapping at the nipples. He reached under the sheets himself and slid his own bottoms down before bringing the man's

hand to his own bare hips. He led the man's fingers to his entrance and deliberately flexed his muscles there while grinding his own erection on the man's thigh.

"You hopeless[147] rascal," Shen Liangsheng scolded superficially as he rolled over and stripped the man in mere seconds. He started kissing Ch'in Ching from head to toe in efforts to arouse as much desire as possible until the man could no longer stand it. Only when the man spread open his own legs pulling his own cheeks apart and begging him to enter did he ram himself into the body he could not be any more familiar with. Even so, the sex never failed to be exhilarating, and they never grew tired of it.

"Isn't it strange? Why do you reckon I had that dream?" After the sex, Ch'in Ching had recovered from the scare but still could not forget about the dream. He asked Shen Liangsheng in a puzzled manner, "What if I really did owe you in the last life?"

"You actually believe in reincarnation?" Shen Liangsheng lay with the man in his arms as he caressed his sweaty back. He thought to himself that the man probably had the dream because of the request he had made before bed. He truly was confining the man as he had in the dream, dragging the man to a place for just the two of them and selfishly forgetting about the war, about the present turmoil. It was just as the sonnet said, "Let us stay rather on earth, beloved – where the unfit contrarious moods of men recoil away and isolate pure spirits, and permit a place to stand and love in for a day, with darkness and the death-hour rounding it."

"To be honest, I don't…." Ch'in Ching paused wanting to continue but decided his mind was simply running wild at this hour of the night. In the end, he found a comfortable spot in Shen Liangsheng's arms and hummed softly, "All right, good night."

"Ch'in Ching, I have nobody left in my family. You, too." With the man in his embrace, Shen Liangsheng spoke about what had been going through his head quite straightforwardly, "It's just the two of us from now on. I will take good care of you, and we'll stay like this until the end, yes?"

“Yes,” Ch’in Ching answered quickly. He looked up and stared at the man up close. Childishly but earnestly he added, “And I will take good care of you, too.”

“Good boy. Now, sleep.” Shen Liangsheng chuckled and planted a kiss on his eye, and the two drifted asleep in each other’s arms.

Even if they did not forget about the war and the present turmoil, they might not ever be considered selfless anyway. The amount that Shen Liangsheng donated was a number that the average citizen could not even dream of, but in the context of a long-lived war, it was but a drop in an ocean, a mere symbol of support. Compared to the truly selfless people who had shed their blood on the battlefield, their contributions appeared miniscule. However, in the end Shen Liangsheng simply wished to live with the man for the rest of his life, which was why he had to save his life for himself and for the man no matter what. Not only would they be each other’s companion, they would be each other’s parent, brother, and child; they would be all of the most intimate of relationships to each other. And together they would stay till death did them part.

“Is that you? Did you get the noodles?”

“I didn’t go at all.”

“Why?”

“I passed by the grain market, and the line was so long I thought they’d sell out by the time it was my turn. Let’s make them ourselves.”

That was August of Year Thirty-Four of the Republic, nineteen forty-five by the Gregorian. After the news of Japan’s unconditional surrender had spread through Tientsin, the city fell into a joyous frenzy. The vendors of fireworks and firecrackers were stupefied when their inventory proved insufficient for the demand that was higher than even the New Year’s season.

Firecrackers aside, even common household items like noodles were in short supply. Every household celebrated the Japanese retreat to their godforsaken country by observing the custom of eating lao mien[148] to rid one of

misfortunes. At first, everyone was more or less in disbelief after hearing the news of surrender. Only after eating the noodles did their worries settle down, along with the noodles in their stomachs.

Ch'in Ching poured some flour into a bowl, and Shen Liangsheng stood beside him adding water for him. While Ch'in Ching worked on the dough, he prepared the vegetables and the gravy.[149] The two men then stayed by the stove waiting for the noodles to cook. After the noodles were done, the men transferred them into bowls, careful not to break even the ends hanging outside the bowl as was the tradition for longevity noodles.[150]

And eating the long noodles was like taking in the long happy years of the foreseeable future.

The two men ate noodles by themselves that day and went to the Lius' place for another celebration the following day. On the way, they passed by a photography studio where Ch'in Ching stopped in his tracks. He looked over to Shen Liangsheng with a smirk. "Shall we?"

Actually, neither of them liked to take photographs. Moreover, they were together day in and day out, so it never occurred to them to buy a camera to take a photograph every now and then. It would be the first time they went to a studio together.

The studio storefront was not grand, but the 'Just Married' banners on the door attracted much attention. Seeing the owner was rather young, Ch'in Ching assumed he had recently married and greeted good-naturedly, "Congratulations on the marriage!"

"Oh dear. Lots of people have been saying that," the owner replied with enthusiasm. "I married two years ago and had lots of these banners left over from then. It's such a festive time now, I thought I'd put them up."

Ch'in Ching was in a good mood to begin with, and the owner was a nice man, so he began engaging in light conversation. When the man asked if Shen Liangsheng was his friend, he looked over at the taller man and answered smilingly, "We're cousins."

“Cousins, eh. Good, good….” The owner stood behind the camera and gave them instructions as he peeked through the viewfinder. “A bit closer, my good sirs…come now, why are you standing so far apart? Closer…put your arm around him…yes, now that looks like two cousins! Now look here…and smile…perfect!”

Having taken the photograph and received the receipt, Ch’in Ching reached for his wallet, but the owner shook his hand. “Free of charge! How could I ask for money on a day as happy as today? I’m providing free services every day this week!”

“No, we couldn’t.” Ch’in Ching placed the money on the counter. “You can’t lose profit just because you’re happy, can you?”

“I said it’s free!” The owner chuckled merrily as he stuffed the money back into Ch’in Ching’s pocket and ushered the two cousins out of the studio. Pointing to a paper slip on the door, he said, “See, it’s written here. Happy times have been so hard to come by I’d gladly lose profit!”

Indeed, Ch’in Ching and Shen Liangsheng had not noticed the paper below the banners. Neatly written on it were these words:

Providing free services in celebration of the motherland’s victorious resistance.

The day they retrieved the finished product, Ch’in Ching took it out once more before bed even though he had already seen it earlier in the day.

“What are you smiling at?” Shen Liangsheng had just gotten out of the shower. Seeing the man looking at the photograph with a silly grin on his face, he sat down beside the man and wrapped an arm around him.

“I heard that the good-looking ones don’t look good in photographs, but you look just as good in the photograph as you do in the flesh.” After praising Shen Liangsheng, he shamelessly added for himself, “But I have to say, I don’t look too bad myself.”

If this were any other day that Ch’in Ching acted narcissistic, Shen Liangsheng would certainly make a few mocking remarks. As he held the man, however, he

felt touched seeing himself holding the man in the same way in the photograph and the two men inside smiling at the two men outside.

"Let's develop a bigger one and put it up." Shen Liangsheng reached for Ch'in Ching's hand and held it tightly and added, "to make up for our missing wedding photograph."

That night they made sweet, sweet love. It was not very passionate but rather mild and long-lasting as though they were floating on water, gently drifting down a warm river to a place too far to glimpse.

In the year of the victory against Japan, Shen Liangsheng was thirty-five, Ch'in Ching thirty-three. They didn't notice the age in the other person because they saw each other every day. The men in the photograph also appeared young and spirited.

However, the fact of the matter was that a long time had passed. After the lovemaking, they lay side by side holding hands. Ch'in Ching gazed at the foot of the bed where a sliver of moonlight peeked through the nearly shut curtains making him realize just how much time had passed.

He seemed to remember that once upon a time he had lain beside the man watching a sliver of moonlight fall upon the floor, a glowing beam creeping past the foot of the bed amidst the gloom. It was like a silvery white thread that wove through nearly ten years of their lives.

Ch'in Ching flipped over and gazed into Shen Liangsheng's eyes. He brushed his hand along the man's hairline and commented softly, "Haven't seen any white hair on you."

"It'll come soon. I'll have to ask you to help me pluck them." Shen Liangsheng guessed what was on Ch'in Ching's mind and replied in the same soft voice. He reached out his hand too and touched the mole by the man's eye while continuing to joke, "But I won't be able to help with these two creases."

Ch'in Ching loved to tell jokes and to smile. Probably because he smiled too much, there were two faint wrinkles by the corner of his eye.

"Wow, you already think I'm old, don't you?" Ch'in Ching made a fake pitiful

face, but in the next moment, he seemed to have thought of something else and snickered, "Remember what the novel said…."

Most of the books that Ch'in Ching had read Shen Liangsheng had read with him, and thus the latter knew exactly to which novel the schoolmaster was referring. As expected, Ch'in Ching began talking about the prose of a certain female author by the name of Chang[151] from Shanghai who had gained quite a bit of popularity in recent years. It was a metaphor for love and marriage that was both playful and relentless:

"Every man will probably have two women like this in his life, at least two. If he married the red rose, sooner or later, the red would become a smudge of mosquito blood on the wall while the white stayed the moonlight by the bedding;[152] if he married the white rose, the white would become a grain of rice stuck on his clothes while the red became a rouge mole on his chest."

"Come now, as if I'd ever think badly of you." Hearing Ch'in Ching bring up this story, Shen Liangsheng was extremely happy – he had treated their photograph as a belated wedding picture, so the man treated himself as his wife. Even if it was a joke, it made Shen Liangsheng fill with joy.

How could he think badly about this? All he wanted to do was rejoice.

Perhaps it truly was the good karma that he had collected in the past life that would allow him to be together with this man till their hair whitened, till death did them part, so that he could caress all the laugh lines that would appear on the man's face.

Because of this happiness, he eased closer to the man. Amidst the continual weave of moonlight and time, he kissed the mole by his eye and said in a sweet, endearing tone, "You're my rouge mole, Mrs. Shen, and also my moonlight."

Shen Liangsheng remembered the title of the novel on marriage as *Red Rose, White Rose*. The author gained a huge wave of popularity from her serialized releases on *Wan-hsiang*,[153] but they had read her works only after the various chapters were collected and bound. The entire collection had few stories with

themes of happiness and reunion, but it had a spectacular name.

It was called *Legend*.

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135 The first of the campaigns in March-April, 1941.

136 The second of the campaigns in July-August, 1941.

137 It is implied to be the Communist Party administration.

138 Zhou Enlai. He studied at Nank'ai Secondary and was editor of the Student Union Bulletin. Because of his involvement in the city's affairs, Ch'in Ching is referring to him endearingly as a Tientsiner despite him not being from Tientsin.

139 Usually refers to Manchuria or the three provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning.

140 The literal translation is, "don't cause a racket" and is often said to misbehaving children, pets and sometimes adults (e.g. wife to husband in a humorous tone). The previous time this appeared was in ch. 7 when Shen stepped on Ch'in's crotch and Ch'in said, "bad boy."

141 I could not find much information on this other than its publication was inconsistent and several famous writers had their works published there.

142 Literally, Heavenly Wind News.

143 One of the most acclaimed wuxia works in history, it ran from 1932 to 1948. The author stopped writing after the Communist Party came into power in Mainland China and banned the genre. Recent movie and television adaptations have been titled, in English, "The Legend of Zu." https://www.amazon.com/knight-errant-swordsman-biography-Traditional-Classics-ebook/dp/B00BRRLUZ4

144 Very little information regarding this publishing company could be found from the internet. Sources from literature sites say Lili Press in Tianjin was the

first one to print the story in book form following its release in Tienfengpao in 1932. No known copies exist from Lili Press.

145 The historical name that China used to refer to all other civilizations nearby. Here it specifically refers to Japan.

146 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yaohua_High_School

147 Shen actually used an adjective used mainly by elders when reprimanding their children for not bettering themselves. Here, he is referring to the fact Ch'in has resorted to begging for sex.

148 Though in the North, this type of dish is usually called pan mien (拌麵, stirred/mixed noodle), the traditional Tianjin dish is called Tientsin lao mien (撈麵, stirred/mixed noodle) and is another name for ta lu mien.

149 Ta lu mien is a way of eating noodles traditional to Beijing, Tianjin, and the Hebei, Shandong and Northeast Provinces. 'Ta lu' means the sauce or gravy that is poured over the plain noodles and is what Shen is preparing here.

150 A dish served on birthdays and New Year's that symbolizes the wish for long life. It is thought to be bad luck to break the noodles in the process prior to consumption, so although the usual practice is to break the part of the noodle that is hanging out of the bowl with chopsticks, you do not do this with longevity noodles.

151 Eileen Chang, one of the most influential modern writers whose works lacked the political nuances that most authors at the time had.

152 A reference to the famous poem by Li Bai. See footnote 65. Moonlight is often used in Chinese literature as a symbol of nostalgia.

153 A publishing company that published literary journals.

XXVI

The second time Shen Liangsheng and Ch'in Ching visited a studio for a photograph together was in early spring of the year of liberation.[154] Ch'in Ching didn't want to go but gave in after the other man insisted.

After the war against Japan came a civil war that lasted four years. Ch'in Ching was naturally glad that the fighting was finally coming to an end, but he was still vaguely uneasy.

The apartment in which they resided had always belonged to Ch'in Ching, but last October[155] Shen Liangsheng suddenly wanted to transfer the property. Shen Liangsheng was the one who had made the purchase, and Ch'in Ching had long ago suggested transferring the ownership. However, due to Shen Liangsheng's opposition, he had dropped the matter after a few attempts.

Shen Liangsheng's sudden change in attitude naturally aroused Ch'in Ching's curiosity, but the former only replied "better safe than sorry" suggesting that things would be fine as long as they did as he said.

Ch'in Ching understood Shen Liangsheng better than anyone after having lived together for so many years. Shen Liangsheng had been in charge of all matters small and large in the family, and Ch'in Ching had become used to this. He had a mild temper to begin with and thus did not get into arguments over having his decisions made for him. He didn't ask too many questions about the transfer of ownership, but the issue weighed heavily on his mind.

The truth was that Shen Liangsheng had known the liberation of Tientsin was inevitable. Every cent and every dime in Ch'in Ching's chequebook had clear origins, but this house appeared out of nowhere. For this reason, he thought it best that the property be transferred to his name.

Honestly speaking, he did not anticipate life after liberation being particularly harsh. On the other hand, there were those in Tientsin who became apprehensive and began looking for ways to escape. Most of them were those with a different political agenda than that of the Communist Party. As for the businessmen who did not dabble in politics and even those who ran their own

operations, all of whom were likely to be labelled “capitalists,” many were composed – or perhaps they had accepted that there was no use in worrying. It was unbelievably difficult to leave at that point. Running might actually bring trouble where previously there was none, so it proved beneficial to stay put rather than to act.

Human beings eventually acclimate to their environment. Having stayed in Tientsin, Shen Liangsheng’s sentiment towards the city grew as time went by, and he also came to regard Ch’in Ching’s home as his own. During the war, the notion of leaving had crossed his mind more than once, but no time seemed like a good time to do so. After so many years, he finally had a place he could call home and someone with whom to share each and every day. Once his heart settled, he became more reluctant as well. Compared to venturing out into the unknown, even Shen Liangsheng couldn’t help but think, no matter how clichéd, that there was no place like home. Eventually, the chance to leave became more doubtful so that now, even if he were to go all in, it was uncertain whether it was possible. Thus, he opted to stay put and bide his time. Should worst come to worst, he would donate everything he could and give the state what it wanted, not hiding or lying about his assets. The Party was, after all, for the people; it would surely leave them a way out.

However, he did not want to share these thoughts of his with Ch’in Ching under any circumstances. The man had spent most of his life in school and had a significantly more naive worldview compared to him. And during all these years of being looked after by him, Ch’in Ching never really had to use his head for anything other than for his teaching job. Telling the schoolmaster about all this would only make him uneasy.

Afterwards, Tientsin was besieged. *Lao*-Chou had leased one of his properties to a general in the Kuomintang and could not get rid of the man. When he was racked with anxiety, Shen Liangsheng in turn comforted him.

“You’re right,” *Lao*-Chou sighed with puckered brows. “They said that they plan to surrender when the Communist army arrive and not engage in guerrilla…. I heard there were rumours among the ranks that they would be fine as long as they surrendered. I reckon we’ll be fine, too, if the Kuomintang is, right?”

The situation after the liberation of Tientsin was not far from Shen Liangsheng's predictions, the policies being rather lenient. Consequently, he was still in the mood to go for a commemorative photograph with Ch'in Ching. The two men in the photograph were dressed in tunic suits, and like the one in nineteen forty-five, he had an arm around the other man, their lips curved up in sincere joy.

Initially, Ch'in Ching had been slightly troubled but settled down after several months passed peacefully. After China was completely liberated, *Lao*-Wu was transferred back to Tientsin to manage education affairs, and he arranged a meeting with the two men one day.

Lao-Wu had not reached fifty years of age when he left, but when he returned, his hair was already white. He was in great spirits, however, and joked with Ch'in Ching that he was still young and had a lot of fight left in him.

He had had his suspicions about the two men's relationship all those years ago, and the puzzle pieces came together naturally after he heard neither man had married. However, he did not make any remarks and appeared rather undisturbed by this, only exclaiming, "No matter what, it's fortunate for us to have made it and witnessed China's liberation. Am I right, *Hsiao*-Ch'in?"

"Goodness. Why are you still calling me that? Look at me…." Ch'in Ching responded clumsily. He wasn't sure what else to say as he was bombarded with emotions.

Without holding back, Shen Liangsheng pressed a reassuring hand on the schoolmaster's shoulder before turning to *Lao*-Wu to discuss the more serious matters that were on his mind. In the previous month, the Administrative Council[156] passed the 'Provisional Regulations Governing Public-Private Jointly Operated Industrial Enterprises.'[157] Although Shen Liangsheng's business was not sizable enough to meet the criteria for joint operation, he had a handful of residential and commercial properties regarding which he wanted to consult with the older man. He planned to donate them to the state without having the Party remind him so as to send a message of loyalty.

Shen Liangsheng had never discussed this with Ch'in Ching, so the latter

could only listen in mild shock.

"*Hsiao*-Shen." *Lao*-Wu had once called him 'Mr. Shen' but now used a totally different tone as though he were his elder. "I believe your decision is a good one." He continued after a pause and said frankly since the three were alone, "You have to give some to get some. You're a smart man, and our government's an open-minded one. Rest assured. Plus, I'll give you my word. You can come to me if you run into any trouble, and I will do my best to resolve it for you."

Lao-Wu said "give to get," and Shen Liangsheng could not agree more. Following the trend of forming joint operations, Shen Liangsheng swiftly dealt with this matter, and lo and behold, the result was as expected. The Party did not give him any trouble but instead praised him.

However, active donation did not mean one had to give everything away – the goal of the Party was not to transform all private property into state property. The problem was that every other unit in the Maoken building had been turned over to the government by owners who had the same intentions as Shen Liangsheng, so naturally they could no longer keep the apartments there.

Ch'in Ching was quietly packing for the move – he had been rather reserved lately. Shen Liangsheng knew what was on the man's mind but did not say it aloud. He knew that if he did, the man would feel even worse.

"Shen…." When the packing had nearly finished, Ch'in Ching could no longer keep silent. His throat was a bit hoarse when he started to speak, so he lowered his head and coughed.

"Go see if there's anything left in the kitchen," Shen Liangsheng interrupted flatly, and when the man did not move, he pushed, "Go already."

Hearing this, Ch'in Ching really did turn into the kitchen, but he couldn't find anything else to pack. He stayed dumbly in one spot, and soon, his hands began to tremble violently.

"Ch'in Ching," he heard the man call him from behind and turned around. He saw Shen Liangsheng at the kitchen entrance, his upright figure the same as always and his tone as calm as ever. "Do you know how old I am this year?"

Shen Liangsheng was a Dog born in nineteen ten. It was December of nineteen forty-nine, and they had met in nineteen thirty-six. Other than the two years they had not seen one another, they had been together for more than a decade.

"Ch'in Ching." Shen Liangsheng simply stood there without approaching and asked him slowly and clearly, "At forty, a man has no doubts.[158] Do you think these things still matter to me?"

Shen Liangsheng could say some of the most charming words when he was young, but he would no longer do so at this age. He only brought Ch'in Ching along and moved into the small house in Petite de Ceinture, living life as best he could one day after another. In fifty-two, the state began the Five-anti Movement,[159] and many who had been capitalists prior to the liberation were affected. Shen Liangsheng, however, was not because he had received praise before and was even amongst the first to be named "Model Law-Abiding Business Owner" due to his modest restaurant ventures and honest tax payment.

On the other hand, Ch'in Ching was transferred to a newly established elementary school in Hepei District as vice principal. *Lao*-Wu originally wanted the schoolmaster to be principal, but the latter strongly refused saying that he had taught for half of his life and knew nothing other than teaching. Administration was out of the question, and even his title of vice principal was simply a title; he still actively taught lessons and acted as homeroom teacher for a class.

"*Hsiao*-Ch'in, we're on our third game[160] now. When is *Hsiao*-Shen going to be here?"

"Soon, I think. Should be on his way now."

Lao-Wu had two daughters. The elder married early, and the younger joined the army as a medic and later died on duty. In the past several years, he had frequent interactions with the two younger men and began treating them as his own sons, constantly trying to safeguard the rest of their lives for them while he

still had his position.

Although Shen Liangsheng survived the Five-anti Movement unscathed, his political makeup was questionable. *Lao*-Wu thought working for the state was better than running his own business and wanted to find him a position in a state-run factory through his wartime comrades. The state needed talent like him, too.

When *Lao*-Wu brought up his proposal at the dinner table, Shen Liangsheng did not object, only thanking the older man for the consideration. *Lao*-Wu, however, dismissed this saying there was no need for such polite talk between them. He confessed that Shen Liangsheng was overqualified to be a mere accountant, but a stable life was better than anything else, and working for the state would be less troublesome than running his own restaurants.

Lao-Wu found Shen Liangsheng a post at No. 1 Textiles[161] because it was close to Tienwei Road Elementary where Ch'in Ching was teaching, only fifteen minutes away by bicycle.

In order to live closer to their workplaces, the two men also moved to a house on Tienwei Road. It was very similar to the house in which Ch'in Ching had lived in his early years, two compartments in the larger structure with a smaller one attached for storage space.

Ch'in Ching was afraid that Shen Liangsheng would not be used to living in traditional housing after having lived in Western-style mansions, but the latter only mockingly called him "worrisome."

"Do you still remember what I told you before?"

It was in the midst of the civil war. Ch'in Ching was certainly on the communist side but became depressed, nonetheless, at the thought of Chinese people killing each other. If he had felt a sharp pain when they were fighting the Japanese, then the pain now was a dull sensation that tore at his ability to describe it.

Shen Liangsheng knew the other man's stubbornness and didn't bother trying to convince him with reasoning, only saying the war would have to come to an end eventually. When it did, they would find a cozy house[162] with a nice view

in the country, perhaps in Chi County,[163] and they would have a garden and some chickens. That would be delightful.

However, the land reforms[164] after liberation that threatened the landlord class had discouraged them from even thinking about leaving the city. Now that they actually had a yard, they couldn't keep any chickens or ducks, but at least they could keep a few plants. They were nothing rare or exotic but were colourful nonetheless. Amongst the rhododendron, scarlet sage, and morning glory there was a date tree with a crooked trunk that reminded Ch'in Ching of the short essay by Lu Hsün: "Over the wall from my back garden you can see two trees. One is a date tree; so is the other."[165]

"First of all, this tree's in our yard," Shen Liangsheng poked fun at the schoolmaster, brows slightly furrowed. "Second of all, use your math. Where's the second one?"

"Tsk, tsk." Ignoring the man, Ch'in Ching remarked as he looked disappointedly at the tree. "Say, this is one ugly tree. You think it can bear any fruit?"

"If you don't give it any love, then it definitely will not bear any for you," Shen Liangsheng teased as he stood by the man, absentmindedly rubbing the trunk with his hand.

"Well…maybe it's not that ugly."

"Wow, really, Ch'in Ching?"

"Don't 'wow, really' me. When my dates come, I'm not sharing any with you."

The people of that era were simple. The neighbours liked to visit each other and chit chat and initially thought it strange that two men were living together. However, they found the situation to be quite normal after hearing that Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng were cousins who both had been married but, having lost their families to the war, preferred keeping each other company as two brothers to starting new families.

Four peaceful years had passed by when the Anti-Rightist Movement[166]

began in fifty-seven. Even the average elementary school where Ch'in Ching worked had to conduct meetings, and the textile factory where Shen Liangsheng worked was actively under investigation for model rightists.[167] There were criteria for a rightist that had no connection whatsoever to whether one was truly 'right' or not – you were 'right' if they said you were, end of story.

In the beginning, the two men were distressed, but thankfully *Lao*-Wu had not retired and could provide some protection that allowed them to make it out in one piece. In the second year of the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Great Leap Forward began. Backyard furnaces were set up in the streets to melt scrap metal and make high quality steel. Eager to display their support, Shen Liangsheng and Ch'in Ching searched high and low and gave away all metal items including their pots and pans in support of this. There was no need for the kitchen tools anyway since they ate at the commune cafeteria nearby.

"What the heck can you make from those furnaces anyway? All I see are pathetic looking black lumps…." Ch'in Ching dared not say these things in public and opted to whisper them in Shen Liangsheng's ear before bed.

"Whatever. Just let them play."

In the end, this "play" resulted in three years of hardship. During the Three Years of Natural Disasters,[168] the entire country had to tighten its belt. Tientsin was comparably well off in terms of material supply, but that only meant white rice porridge for dinner and unrefined grains for the other two meals.

The eldest son of *Hsiao*-Liu – now *Lao*-Liu – worked at the meat processing plant and had a secret staff benefit of sneaking a few cans of meat home. Mindful of the favours he had received from Shen Liangsheng, *Lao*-Liu gifted all of the cans to Ch'in Ching instead of eating them himself. When Ch'in Ching refused, he would even get testy with his childhood friend.

The truth was that the cans that the staff could smuggle home were substandard. The thick tendons could not even be bitten through or used in other dishes, so Ch'in Ching drained the fat by cooking it and ate it with cornbread, making the yellow bread a little more flavourful.

If someone had told Shen Liangsheng twenty years ago that he would be living like this, he never would have believed them. But one thing led to another, and he ended up in a present where he actually had trouble recalling his days of glamour and riches.

It was not that he wanted to avoid those memories, but rather those memories felt unreal to him – like flowers in a mirror, the moon in the water, or the mirage in a desert, they were beautiful yet so distant and transient. Now every evening the two of them would come home after work and heat up some water to wash up. In the summer, they would pull out a small table in the courtyard and eat plain porridge under the dimming twilight listening to the sounds of the neighbourhood; in the winter, they would shut the doors, bake two sweet potatoes with coal ash and eat them while they were hot. These days, on the contrary, made him feel joy and stability.

He had said he would take care of the man and spend each day with him as best as he could. This was the promise he had given, and he had kept it. It made him feel like his life had been worthwhile.

And he felt no regret.

However, neither of them knew that the series of political movements would intensify past the point of no return.

After the Cultural Revolution began, Shen Liangsheng's background was finally exposed. There was no escaping. *Lao*-Wu could do nothing other than comfort Ch'in Ching. "There'll be a way…. Don't worry. Let me keep looking…." The old man was in his seventies. His hair had turned fully white and lay knotted near his scalp due to lack of care. After consoling the younger man, he repeated the same phrase over and over again with trembling lips, "Who would've thought…who would've thought…."

Ch'in Ching was restless, but *Lao*-Wu was even more so – not only for Shen Liangsheng, but for several of his wartime comrades who were subjected to struggle sessions[169] and put into quarantine, a torturous place between life and death. But why?! They were all men who had put their lives at stake for the country! In the end…in the end….

There was nothing more he could say. Merely saying “who would’ve thought” seemed to have drained the life out of the seventy-year-old.

But he had to look for help no matter what. He would fight to protect every single one of those men. He knew there was no use in asking for favours from insignificant figures now, so he contacted all the connections he had and risked his life to ensure his message would get to the top.

Truthfully, he didn’t know if it would work, so at that point it was left to the mercy of the gods.

Shen Liangsheng had been called for interrogations twice, and on the day he was finally taken away to quarantine, Ch’in Ching was home, too. The school had closed, and the schoolmaster was also asked to go in for questioning. However, the education system had not been totally involved, and he had little relation to Shen Liangsheng on the family registry. Thus, he was not taken in for investigation.

But he would rather have been the one taken away.

He was standing at the gates watching as they took Shen Liangsheng, pushing the man along while holding his arms behind his back. Ch’in Ching wanted to tell them that they couldn’t do that to him, that he wasn’t anti-revolutionary, that he had done good…. But he could not say a thing. All he could see was the last look Shen Liangsheng struggled to give him. That one last look….

Shen Liangsheng had been mentally prepared when he was first called in for a questioning long ago . He had thought of the worst case scenario but did not speak a word of farewell to Ch’in Ching, let alone leave a will of any sort – he knew saying certain things would be equivalent to killing the man. He had decided that he would not look back, but when the time came, he couldn’t stop himself from taking one last glance.

He saw Ch’in Ching standing at the gateway, a scrawny, hunched shadow that looked like an eighty-year-old but also like a child looking at him with big, round eyes, as though he were an infant being abandoned by him. Shen Liangsheng turned away and began to weep. He was not afraid of beatings and torture, nor did he fear being killed. Rather, he was afraid that Ch’in Ching

would not be able to handle this, and he wondered if the man would be able to continue to live on by himself.

He had wanted to spend the rest of his life with the man – as a companion, as a brother, as a parent, as a child – and have no regrets no matter the difficulty or pain. But in the end, it was just a simple promise that he could not keep.

After Shen Liangsheng was taken away, Ch'in Ching sat in the house for several days not eating or sleeping. In the end, it was *Lao*-Liu who pried open the gates and forced the schoolmaster to eat before dragging the dumb man to bed. He sat by the bed watching his friend, waiting for the man to shut his eyes before turning around and wiping at his own tears.

The suffering lasted for nearly a week before *Lao*-Wu received good news. The premier[170] had signed a document himself clearly forbidding false accusations against a comrade who had helped the fight against Japan.

In reality, *Lao*-Wu had little hope when he asked for his message to be passed on. First of all, the premier was a busy man. Moreover, Shen Liangsheng's donations had been decades ago, and there had been many nationalists who had done the same. He had not expected the premier to remember, but the premier really did remember every sum and every person.

When Shen Liangsheng came home after being released, Ch'in Ching did not appear cheerful, nor did he speak much. Perhaps the devastating experience had killed his ability to react. After what seemed like hours, he pushed out a screechy sound through his hoarse throat, "I heated the water…for you to wash up."

But Shen Liangsheng only said, "Later…. Come lie down with me," for he had bruises and wounds from the beatings, and he did not want to traumatize Ch'in Ching.

Perhaps he truly was exhausted. He had not slept properly for days and fell asleep almost immediately after reaching the bed. With quivering hands Ch'in Ching removed the man's shoes and tucked the man in. He lay down beside the man wanting to be closer but feared he would wake the man. In the end, he

curled up like a fetus beside the man. His face was still numb, but the rest of him was shaking like a leaf.

Shen Liangsheng had gone to bed in the morning, and it was the middle of the night when he awoke. He reached out blindly but did not find the man. For a split second, he thought that he was still locked up and that seeing Ch'in Ching again was just a dream. He stiffened in devastation. Then after a few moments, he realized he really was home. He really was home.

At first he thought Ch'in Ching was not in bed because he had to use the toilet, but when the man did not come back, he sensed something was off. He crept out to the other room in the dark and, with the bit of moonlight coming from the windows, he saw a figure huddling in the corner. It was Ch'in Ching hiding in the cranny like a phantom afraid of the light. The man was just crouching there, not even bothering to sit on a stool, with his head between his knees sobbing and whimpering quietly because he did not want to awaken the sleeping man. It was so quiet Shen Liangsheng did not recognize it until he came closer. It was the most heartbreaking cry he had ever heard.

Shen Liangsheng rushed towards the man, stumbling as the lights were off. When he finally made it, he reached out to grab and lift the man up, but Ch'in Ching kept shrinking into the nook as though he did not want the taller man to touch him. Only when Shen Liangsheng took a strong hold on him did he begin speaking in the same way an animal wailed moments before death, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

He felt as though he had caused nothing but misfortune for Shen Liangsheng. So many years, so many events, so much regret, it all rushed into his head and threatened to drown him. He wished he could cut himself into a thousand pieces to redeem himself, but not even his life was enough to repay the man. He regretted it with all his being. He regretted that the heavens had let the man meet him.

He regretted meeting the man.

"How could you say that?!"

The roaring exclamation was eerily loud in the silent night. Ch'in Ching froze in fright, and his tears also stopped. Certainly, the two of them had had their fair share of trivial arguments and quarrels throughout the years, but never had they truly been in a fight; Ch'in Ching had never heard Shen Liangsheng speak to him in such a way. Dumbfounded, he gaped at the man. His hair was dishevelled, and tears and snot ran down his face. The man in his fifties looked as pitiful as a five-year-old as he feebly grabbed onto a corner of Shen Liangsheng's shirt.

"Don't say that…." Shen Liangsheng crouched down in front of the man, his bent back making him appear ancient. He wrapped the man's hands with his own two and patted them. He let out a soft sigh and began lecturing the man as he would a child, but his logic had apparently escaped him,

"You can't say that. I'm too old for something like that. Don't ever say that again."

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154 The term used in the PRC referring to the Communist Party's victory over Kuomintang, which was in the year 1949.

155 October, 1948

156 Government Administration Council of the Central People's Government, the highest executive branch of government from October 21, 1949 to September 27, 1954.

157 A law passed on September 2, 1954, no longer in effect.

158 A quote from Analects of Confucius. http://www.cnculture.net/ebook/jing/sishu/lunyu_en/02.html

159 A campaign whose main objective was to target the capitalist class. The guidelines were purposely vague so that any accusation of crime would be possible. 1) bribery; 2) theft of state property; 3) tax evasion; 4) cheating on government contracts; 5) stealing state economic information

160 A board game of some kind, most likely xiangqi, Chinese chess.

161 Hengyuan Textile Mill, a factory established in 1920 and located on Tienwei Road in Hepei District, was given the name No. 1 Textile Mill after the establishment of the PRC.

162 Traditional housing with a courtyard.

163 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ji_County,_Tianjin

164 Land reforms in an attempt to redistribute land to the farming class resulted in the death of a million private land owners.

165 From Lu Hsün's short essay, Autumn Night (秋夜). Translation taken from http://202.194.48.102/englishonline/culture/ChineseCulture/Chineseliterature/autu

166 A series of campaigns from 1957-59 whose alleged goal was to purge rightists. The actual result was that anyone who expressed ideas opposing the government, usually for capitalism and against collectivism, was persecuted.

167 Little scholarly information could be found regarding this term, so I will do my best to explain using anecdotal information. For a given organization, in this case, a factory, there might be a certain quota of "rightists" that must be reported and persecuted to be made an example for future. These people, labelled as "model rightists," were often the ones in the group who met the most criteria, who stood out the most or who accidentally did something that could be seen as anti-communist.

168 The term that the Communist Party uses to refer to the Great Chinese Famine from 1958 to 1961 that was caused by the previously mentioned political movements.

169 A form of public humiliation and abuse based on forced self-criticism, struggle sessions were used during the Cultural Revolution to identify and persecute class enemies. The concept was borrowed from the West, specifically the former Soviet Union, and represented a departure from the traditional Chinese concept of saving face.

170 Chou En-lai/ Zhou Enlai, see earlier footnote.

XXVII

It was a catastrophe lasting for a full decade that plagued the entire country. Towards the end, even the education system was involved. Even Ch'in Ching, who was only a symbolic vice principal at an average elementary school and only a few years shy of retirement, had to be subjected to struggle sessions.

Struggle sessions in the city, struggle sessions in the district, struggle sessions even in the schools – fortunately, the public municipal and district struggle sessions only took place twice or so every month, and he was surely better off getting judged in school instead.

The students of the small-scale school all lived in the same neighbourhood, meaning everyone was neighbours outside of the classroom. No matter what conflicts went on between the adults, they did not add insult to injury. Behind closed doors, the parents would remind their children not to hit their teachers.

When the school term ended, however, the children were set free and became naughty. They had no evil intent, but kids were unruly to begin with and, under the influence of their environment, gathered in gangs to cause trouble all day long. Many a time, Ch'in Ching would be cornered by them in the streets, and they also used the glass windows at the back of the house for target practice. Once the glass broke, the men did not bother to reinstall new panes and instead opted to cover the windows with paper.

One afternoon, neither the school nor the textile mill was holding struggle sessions. Ch'in Ching was home writing a self-criticism report while Shen Liangsheng sat beside the man watching. The taller man did not run into much trouble after the previous incident since he had protection from high places – apparently, the incident had been a blessing in disguise.

Ch'in Ching had become very skilled at writing the so-called 'admission of guilt' that consisted of the same old stuff every time. He could even carry on a casual conversation with Shen Liangsheng while writing it.

It was the dog days of August. Shen Liangsheng was fanning the schoolmaster

with a tattered cattail fan, reaching out to stroke the man's head playfully every now and then.

Ch'in Ching had the "yin-yang cut" like many fellow teachers: one half of his head had hair while the other half was shaved bald. A short fuzzy patch had grown back lately and was prickly to the touch.

"You'd better not make that a habit," Ch'in Ching joked as he wrote his report without looking particularly crestfallen or dispirited.

Shen Liangsheng knew the man's temperament, and if he were to name one fault, it would have to be the man's excessive optimism. The man would constantly think well of any situation. One might call it positive; another might call it naive and dreamy. A leopard cannot change its spots – Shen Liangsheng did not bother to try to change this problem, and at that time, it was probably better that the man was optimistic.

In reality, it was because Ch'in Ching had found peace. He was content as long as this man beside him was well. If the country was in a bad state, then so be it. He didn't care that he was subjected to struggle sessions. Heck, having his head shaved was perfect for the summer heat.

He didn't feel aggrieved even when he was writing the admission of guilt. He did not believe that he had taught his lessons wrongly, and thus he did not allow himself to feel aggrieved.

Ch'in Ching was writing when he heard the sound of rain. It was not actually raining; the kids were throwing things at the windows in the back. Perhaps they were scolded by their parents, so they stopped throwing bricks and stones and instead threw clumps of dirt that scattered once they hit the paper, making a light shuffle that sounded like rain. Ch'in Ching was not angered since kids were going to be kids, and he couldn't really get mad at kids who simply wanted to fool around but were too scared to do so.

Hearing the noise, Shen Liangsheng stood up from his seat with the fan in hand to take a look. He had a naturally stern complexion and still did not like to smile at this age. Therefore, he was the mean old man that the children of the neighbourhood feared. Every time Shen Liangsheng as much as stepped outside

with that his stony face of his, the rascals would scatter in a burst of exasperation as they turned to their next victim.

"Oh, don't bother. What's a sixty-year-old doing terrorizing a bunch of kids?" Ch'in Ching put down his pen and chided smilingly. When the other man really did sit back down, he picked up the pen and resumed.

The three o'clock sun shone in through the windows onto the worn surface of the desk. The desk had been in use from the time they were living in Petite de Ceinture, and they had brought it over when they moved. It was not an antique, so it had survived the confiscation raids. Ch'in Ching had marked homework and prepared his lessons on it for more than a decade, but he never would have guessed he would be writing self-criticisms on the very same desk. There were countless teachers like him who had taught until their hair grew white but nevertheless ended up in the same situation.

Ch'in Ching could find peace partly because he knew he had done no wrong but mostly because he had Shen Liangsheng with him. As long as this man was with him, everything was worthwhile.

However, there were many who could not feel the same. As they wrote the admission of guilt they soon found it impossible to continue living – "It takes only three days for the demise of six generations of prosperity, and only seven lines to spell out my blood and heart"[171] – some hung themselves by the neck while others jumped in the river.

After Ch'in Ching finished writing his self-criticism amidst the real sunlight and the unreal rain, he turned to Shen Liangsheng with a smile and asked, "What shall we have tonight? How about some congee?"

January eighth, nineteen seventy-six, Premier Chou En-lai passed away before he could see the end of the Cultural Revolution and the resurrection of China. The Gang of Four did everything in their power to suppress mourning amongst the people, but the people paid no heed to them. With no more fabric ration stamps, Ch'in Ching could not buy black cloth, so he shredded a black robe and made two armbands[172] for Shen Liangsheng and himself.

They would remember his kindness for the rest of their lives. It was now impossible to express their gratitude in person, but the least they could do now that he had passed was to wear an armband, even if that meant they would be criticized for it.

July twenty-eighth of the same year, a massive earthquake in Tangshan shook the entire North, causing much damage in Peking and Tientsin.

Shen Liangsheng and Ch'in Ching were awakened in the middle of the night as the sky spun and the earth rumbled. The initial horizontal shake changed into a vertical one, and things started falling, the lighter furniture all toppling over. They had never experienced an earthquake and hurried outside instead of hiding under the bed.

Naturally, they could not go very fast. Shen Liangsheng had only a slightly stockier build than Ch'in Ching when he was young but surprisingly had enough strength to carry the schoolmaster for a long time in a bridal carry. Now he was old, however, and was powerless to carry or protect the man. He could only hold the man's hand tightly and stumble clumsily towards the door with him.

As luck would have it, the traditional housing was sturdy enough to withstand the quake. The two men successfully left the building but were wary of standing near the walls. They stood in the middle of the yard, hand in hand, face to face, dumbfounded even long after the primary wave.

They did have lingering fears, but only a little. They had been through so much that a measly earthquake did not even faze them. They were not even worried that the subsequent waves would bring the house down – as long as they had each other, hands joined together, they had nothing to fear.

Those were the darkest hours before the break of dawn – natural disasters, manmade horrors, one after another until the skies seemed to bleed and the earth seemed to burst.

Then, the skies lightened, and China rose once again from the ashes.

Nineteen seventy-seven, the Cultural Revolution officially came to an end, and

it was followed immediately by the Reform and Opening.[173] The world was renewed in what seemed like a blink of an eye.

For so many decades, they had endured through long wars, experienced flooding and earthquake and survived sweeping political movements. After all of that, they could finally enjoy truly peaceful days and were grateful for each and every one.

The plants in the yard had been uprooted during the Cultural Revolution,[174] but they replanted them all. The crooked date tree was still standing, however, and they had grown fairly attached to it after seeing it for so many years. As though it were their child, they didn't mind its deformities nor did they complain about the fact it had never bore any fruit.

At the time, stamps were still required for the purchase of most products, but the variety had increased substantially. As usual, the two men would pull out a table under the tree in the summertime, boil some soybeans[175] with salt, slice off a few dimes' worth of chitterling and drink a glass or two together. Or maybe they would just chitchat, or drink while Ch'in Ching performed crosstalk.

See, the pieces that Ch'in Ching performed were full of history – with no books to read during the Cultural Revolution and few entertainment outlets, he would lock the doors and quietly tell crosstalk stories to fight the boredom. Some stories were the ones he had learned long ago, and others were new ones that he had created himself and kept alive until now.

These stories were told by one man and listened to by another – he talked while he listened. Some he had heard many times, but he didn't find it repetitive.

One story after another, each one as delightful as the next.

Afterwards, more literature became available. They began a subscription to *Short Stories Magazine*[176] and read romance stories by writers like Chang Hen-shui, but what they loved reading the most was wu-hsia. After the reforms, a large wave of new works flooded in from the south, many of which were

brilliant. But the elderly perhaps were prone to nostalgia, for they still had a special spot for Huan Chu Lou Chu. They bought a new edition of *The Legend of the Shu Shan Swordsmen* and read it again from the beginning.

The author had passed away long ago, and no new chapters had been released since the Liberation, meaning there would never be an ending.

But that didn't matter to them. Rather, they thought that a book like this was better off without an ending.

Lao-Liu had moved to the Hut'ong District two years ago. It was not far from their home, and the two families had frequent interactions. *Lao*-Liu had suffered during the Cultural Revolution because of his profession as a crosstalker. Perhaps he was naturally endowed, but not even that had been successful in bringing his weight down. Now at this age, he was plumper than ever before. Sometimes when the three men got together, Shen Liangsheng and Ch'in Ching would nag him, urging him to exercise rather than staying at home repeating the act of eating and sleeping – he had to do something about that stomach of his!

"Oh, you two leave me be!" The term "kidult" was the perfect description for *Lao*-Liu. Whenever he heard such criticism, he would pout and put on a face of hurt as though the other two men were ganging up on him.

On the other hand, Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng enjoyed walks after supper, especially when it was warm. They would stroll along the streets outside their home while greeting and chatting with the neighbours they were close with or take folding stools to the empty field in front of the Temple of Great Compassion and sit there under shelter from the heat. The temple was also situated on Tienwei Road, very close to the elementary school where Ch'in Ching had taught. It was not a grand shrine but a fairly popular one. It was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution but rebuilt later on. The two stone lions at the entrance were curiously aged, the balls beneath their paws being extremely smooth to the touch. Kids would skip and scurry around the lions while the adults sat in the field in front of the gates and chitchatted. Although the temple was supposed to be an uncontaminated and holy sanctuary, the joys of the mortal world were everywhere the eyes could see.

Despite the struggle sessions during the Cultural Revolution, Ch'in Ching still felt a fondness towards the school where he had taught and would take Shen Liangsheng back for visits.

The gatekeeper had never changed and knew that Ch'in Ching used to be the vice principal, but because he had always taught lessons, most of the acquainted staff still called him "Mister Ch'in." Of course, the schoolmaster in question also preferred this title.

An old mulberry tree stood in the schoolyard near the podium.[177] The mulberries ripened in summer and hung abundantly on the tree branches. Shen Liangsheng knew Ch'in Ching liked eating mulberries and that the man probably picked this time for a visit specifically to eat them, but actually seeing the man sneak into the school after classes had ended to steal the mulberries made him want to snicker.

The tree was old and had grown very tall. Ch'in Ching had shrunken a little due to old age and looked shorter and even a bit hunched over. Once during a struggle session, he had received an injury in his lower back and was unable to recover due to a lack of hospital care and medicine. After that, he had had trouble straightening his back without experiencing pain.

On the other hand, Shen Liangsheng still had a towering figure, and knowing the shorter man's wishes, he stepped onto the podium and picked off some from the low-hanging branches. When the man took the berries and was about to put them straight into his mouth, Shen Liangsheng chided, "Please, at least wait until we get home and wash them before stuffing yourself."[178]

The Hai Ho was near Tienwei Road. Sometimes, when they were energetic enough, they would amble eastward along the river all the way to the train station. There they would stand by the Liberation Bridge[179] watching the passing vehicles and ships and listening to the horns coming from the water, a sound that remained unchanged for all these years.

Liberation Bridge and Wankuo Bridge are one and the same. Stories said that

the blueprints were drawn by the master who designed the Eiffel Tower. Prior to Liberation, this bridge had belonged to the French concession and was indeed built by the French, but the stories were no more than stories. However, this bridge was rather similar to the Eiffel Tower in that it was made entirely of steel. Throughout the years, most bridges along the Hai Ho had been repaired. This one received nothing but a new coat of paint, and it was still as sturdy as ever.

Ch'in Ching would stand with Shen Liangsheng by the bridge and gaze at the other bank – Liberation Road. It was once called Main Street and had been lined with foreign shops and banks, its visitors the upper echelons of Tientsin society at the time.

Once when they were standing there, it suddenly occurred to Ch'in Ching that they had walked through Main Street together many years ago and stood by the river looking over from the other side.

They had been looking from the left bank to the right, and now they were looking from the right to the left. Ch'in Ching could almost see two men with a bicycle in between them, standing on the other bank watching them – they were the young versions of themselves.

Disregarding the others around them, Ch'in Ching grabbed Shen Liangsheng's hand.

He held his hand, watching the two young men standing on the other side of the river. It was as though they had crossed a bridge together hand in hand, walking across four decades.

The summer of nineteen eighty-three came hastily; midday in May was already too hot to bear. Shen Liangsheng seemed to be suffering from heat illness and had had little appetite for weeks.

One afternoon Shen Liangsheng woke up from his nap to find the bed empty. He left the bed, and when he came to the door of the bedroom, he saw the man sitting on a folding stool with his back slightly turned to him. There was a large bowl by the man's feet filled with water and half a dozen fresh lotus seed pods that the man somehow got his hands on. Wearing that pair of bottle-bottom glasses of his, he was painstakingly shucking the lotus and did not hear the

footsteps behind him.

If this were any other time, Shen Liangsheng would certainly lend a helping hand for a task that was taxing for the eyes, but this time, he did not. He merely stood at the doorway, silently watching Ch'in Ching peeling the seed pod, picking out the seeds and separating the bitter germ and the white parts into two white porcelain bowls.

He watched as the afternoon sun stretched into thin, long rays across the spotless concrete floor and fell upon the man's nearly all white hair, and he had a sudden sense of gratefulness – no matter how much he suffered, he felt grateful for this life.

"Oh, you're awake?" Ch'in Ching finished shucking and turned around to find Shen Liangsheng standing at the doorway. He spoke with a smile, "This is good for the heat. I'll make some congee with the seed white, and if you don't like the bitter germ, you can put them in your tea. The tea leaves will cover the bitterness very well."

Shen Liangsheng nodded back with a gentle smile, too. "Fine."

Retrospectively, Shen Liangsheng thought he had seen it coming. Ch'in Ching thought the other man had discomfort in the throat and had little appetite because of the heat, and Shen Liangsheng had thought so, too. It was only when the feeling of his throat being stuck became more and more prominent that he was reminded of his father's illness.

If there was something that Shen Liangsheng had kept as a secret from Ch'in Ching for all these years, it would be the throat problem that his father had. At the time, Louis had told Shen Liangsheng straightforwardly because of their close relationship that laryngeal cancer was inheritable and encouraged the businessman to quit smoking.

Although inheritable disease was an uncertain probability, Shen Liangsheng had been unwilling to tell Ch'in Ching. If he had told the man, the matter would linger on his mind more or less. Later, as he lived with Ch'in Ching, he did gradually quit smoking, and as time went on, he forgot about this matter himself. But he eventually thought about it again now that his throat felt more

and more uncomfortable even after taking traditional medicine.

Since he had his suspicions, he thought he should visit the hospital. He feared going with Ch'in Ching, so he spoke about it with *Lao*-Liu first, asking for his godson's company.

"Don't scare me, *Lao*-Shen." *Lao*-Liu had stopped using "Young Master Shen" a long time ago. Before Shen Liangsheng even finished, the plump man began lashing out, "Don't you jinx yourself like that. We'll go get you examined, but you can't scare me like that!"

Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng were together day in and day out, so the hospital visit could not possibly take place without his knowledge. Consequently, they ended up going together. Shen Liangsheng said their godson was there only because having a bicycle was more convenient, but Ch'in Ching knew this man better than anyone. The man had always been meticulous with all matters and had thought of resolutions even before Ch'in Ching had noticed the issue. Thus, Ch'in Ching was very anxious on the inside, but he showed none of it. He acted in the same usual way even while they awaited the examination report, eating and sleeping as he should.

Because he was too scared to think about it.

As though the two of them would be able to continue in the same way if he did everything the same as before.

Their godson volunteered to pick up the report on the day it was ready, but Ch'in Ching insisted on going, too.

Naturally, Shen Liangsheng could not stand by idly, so the three of them went to the hospital together. The young Liu was cut from the same cloth as his father and had the same friendly personality. He did not stop speaking on the way to the hospital, telling his godfathers about his work, about his eldest daughter, doing his best to lighten the atmosphere.

Only when it was their turn and the doctor came out asking for the family members did he shoot up from his seat and hurriedly reply, "Here." Before

Ch'in Ching could respond, the young man had entered the doctor's office to view the results.

Shen Liangsheng had always belonged to the textile mill, and healthcare was paid for by the state at the time. They were lucky to have had a considerate doctor who felt sympathetic after seeing the two older men sitting outside and who did not linger on the question of whether the young man was immediate family. The doctor explained the scans in detail, but the young man did not understand the terms – nasopharynx and hypopharynx – only asking with wide eyes after the doctor had finished, "So, is there a way?"

"Yes, of course. Surgery is a possible choice in addition to other less intrusive methods…." The doctor paused but proceeded to fulfil his duty as a doctor by explaining the various methods and risks of each. In the end, he gave his kind-hearted suggestion. "Keeping in mind the gentleman's age, surgery is not impossible, but I've told you the probabilities of recovery. Why don't you think about this some more and come to a decision after discussing with the family?"

But how could he discuss this? The young man sat, slumped in the chair, with his eyes red, too scared to walk out the doctor's office.

But he had to talk.

Lao-Liu had not gone with them but was waiting for their news at home. When he saw the three men and the heavy silence about them, he stiffened with apprehension.

Insistent on being straightforward, Shen Liangsheng told his godson to lay it all out. The four men sat down, and the young Liu reported what the doctor had told him. Then, his eyes flickered between his father and his two godfathers as the uneasiness brewed within him. It took all his will to stay seated in his chair.

By then, *Lao*-Liu was already stupefied, but Shen Liangsheng had the same old expression on his face. Even Ch'in Ching appeared rather calm, for he had prepared himself on the way home. If everything was fine, his godson would have told him at the hospital. Only a serious result would have had to wait until they came home.

“I think I’ll pass on the surgery.” Shen Liangsheng was the first to speak and made his stance clear. He then talked about his father’s illness and concluded, “There’s no use going under the knife. I don’t want the fuss.”

Snapping back to reality, *Lao*-Liu looked at his childhood friend sitting quietly beside Shen Liangsheng without a word of refusal or any signs of anguish, and he felt himself stiffen again.

In the end, things went as Shen Liangsheng wanted: no surgery and no hospital care, either.

It was not because they could not afford hospital treatment. Although public healthcare had just been implemented that year and the state-owned organizations set incremental plans to provide benefits for their workers, the administration of the textile mill had given word after knowing Shen Liangsheng’s condition that all medical fees would be covered. Ch’in Ching had also received a sum of wages owed since the Cultural Revolution, so money was not their worry. Shen Liangsheng just didn’t want to go.

He had lived his life dotting every “i” and crossing every “t”. Never had he been immature or reckless until this matter, so Ch’in Ching listened to his wishes totally. Their godson married early, and his eldest daughter had already begun working. She disregarded all of Ch’in Ching’s efforts to find a home nurse since she was a nurse herself. There was no need for outsiders.

Therefore, everything from fetching prescriptions to administering injections became the duty of the youngsters of Liu. Shen Liangsheng felt terrible for this, but *Lao*-Liu forced a smile on his face and retorted, “They don’t call you dad and granddad for no reason. You let them do what they’re supposed to do for their elders. Don’t you start arguing with me now. Not with that throat of yours.”

Ch’in Ching, on the other hand, was not doing badly, either. It was just that he did not allow anyone to help with the daily chores. Like a hen protecting a chick, he lashed out at anyone who tried to take the job away from him.

In reality, there was no one who did that, for they all could see that this was Ch’in Ching’s motivation. *Lao*-Liu watched as his friend took meticulous care of Shen Liangsheng and began to fear for the day that this force would run dry

and his friend would fall apart at the seams.

Shen Liangsheng's condition was as the doctor had predicted – this type of cancer was not easily detectable in its early stages, but it developed very rapidly, and nothing could be done – by late autumn, pain-killers had to be administered. The amount of time that Shen Liangsheng spent asleep began to increase. One day he woke up at some hour of the day and turned to look for Ch'in Ching only to find *Lao*-Liu sitting by the bed. He signed with his hands asking where Ch'in Ching was.

"He said he was going out for a walk," *Lao*-Liu answered appearing casual while he was actually burning with concern on the inside. Ch'in Ching had said that he was going for a walk and asked his childhood friend to keep watch for him. Unable to stop his friend, *Lao*-Liu could only let Ch'in Ching leave. But it was now well past four in the afternoon, and there was no sign of the man. He became more and more nervous and began praying for his granddaughter to end her shift early and come over so she could go out looking.

Shen Liangsheng still had a clear head and could tell from *Lao*-Liu's expression that something was troubling the plump man. He gave a small nod, not fretting at all.

He was not afraid, for he was certain the man would come back – as long as Shen Liangsheng was here, the man would not go anywhere. He would never be far.

Frankly, Shen Liangsheng felt guilty because he would have to leave Ch'in Ching behind, but he could not say that aloud. Indeed, he had not spoken about this, but he took advantage of the opportunity while Ch'in Ching was not present. He asked *Lao*-Liu for pen and paper, and he wrote, "Take good care of him for me."

Lao-Liu held back the tears and agreed. Ch'in Ching had not shed a tear yet, so he dared not shed any himself. Shen Liangsheng made a gesture that said, "Rip it up," and *Lao*-Liu quickly complied. But even then he felt uneasy and decided to stuff the pieces in his own pocket.

Sure enough, Ch'in Ching had not gone far. He had only gone to the Temple of Great Compassion and knelt there from morning to afternoon. First he begged the bodhisattva to lessen Shen Liangsheng's suffering, and then he knelt there repeating a line from *The Book of Songs*:[180] "Ju k'e shu hsi, jen pai ch'i shen."

– If I could take your place, I would die for you a hundred times over.

That day, Ch'in Ching returned home a bit after five o'clock before anyone had to go out searching for him. Although his figure was even more hunched over from hours of kneeling, his face appeared normal.

Shen Liangsheng had already fallen back asleep. *Lao*-Liu let out a breath of relief as he sat with his childhood friend next to the bed. After some silence, he tried to talk some sense into his friend. "They say seventy-three and eighty-four are two years of great difficulty. See, he's seventy-three this year…. But you know what, we're close, too. We might not make it two years from now…so you just hang in there for two more years. It'll pass by in a flash, and then you two can reunite in the netherworld…he'd surely be waiting for you."

"I don't need him to wait," Ch'in Ching answered calmly but then realized his words could be interpreted wrongly. He corrected himself, "He doesn't need to wait for me."

Lao-Liu looked up at his friend. He saw Ch'in Ching sitting in the dim room with a flat expression, but the eyes that were gazing at the sleeping man were filled with affection.

"Believe it or not, *Lao*-Liu, I will know when he leaves, and when that time comes, I will have to go with him."

"You probably don't believe it, *Lao*-Liu, but I do."

That night, *Lao*-Liu left in a complete stupor with his granddaughter in tow. The entire trip back home felt unreal to him. Each step he took felt like stepping on clouds.

Throughout the years, the two families certainly were close, but the relationship between Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng was a secret after all. Mrs. Liu knew, and her children could more or less guess. The grandchildren, however, truly thought the two men were cousins.

Once the lies were told enough times, even *Lao*-Liu seemed to have forgotten that Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng were not cousins.

He had a carefree and forgiving personality and was too lazy to recall the past – remember this, remember that – what was the use in that?

But on that day, it all came rushing back to him. Every event, every ordeal, the stories of the two men had taken place right beside him. The characters were people who were close to him, but his recollections seemed surreal as though those stories were far, far away from him, as far as legends, as far as the fictional pieces that he wrote commentaries on after quitting crosstalk.

He was just a commoner who told stories, but the people in the stories were not.

After he walked home and ate supper in a daze, *Lao*-Liu turned on the radio and continued his dumb state as opera began playing on the airwaves.

It was *A Gathering of Heroes* – the boisterous instruments were playing – *clang clang clang clang clang*.

"When a man chances upon a master with whom he can bare his soul in this wide world, the outer bond of ruler and subject, and the inner bond of brotherhood shall be formed, and he is sure to obey every word and every thought, and share all fortune and misfortune alike."

Lao-Liu sprang up from his seat as though the opera dialogue had awoken him. In a loud but off-key voice, he sang along for a while before hollering for his granddaughter in the opera voice, "Ying-*er*,[181] go and fetch your grandpa some wine and drink with me!"

Mrs. Liu and Liu Ying shared a look before both rolling their eyes.

"What's wrong with Grandpa now?"

"Who knows with him?"

As winter came, Shen Liangsheng could no longer eat solid foods and survived through intravenous drips that left him unbearably skinny. Although Liu Ying was young and had minimal experience on the job, she had skills and was both accurate and steady with her hand. If she could do it in one shot, she would never do a second, saying that she couldn't bear for Grandpa Shen to feel unnecessary pain.

But nobody knew whether it was painful since the man was rarely awake. He was little more than bones, but he had a serene expression and was even easy on the eyes.

"Sometimes I regret it." Liu Ying sat down with Ch'in Ching to talk after hanging up the medication. She kept a sweet smile on her face since she wanted to comfort the old man. "Why wasn't I born as Grandpa Shen's real granddaughter? If I had Grandpa Shen's looks and was a bit skinnier, the boys would be lining up down the block to date me, and I wouldn't have such a hard time finding someone."

"Don't say that about yourself. Those boys don't know what they're missing." Since that one autumn day, Ch'in Ching had improved and did not appear to be pushing himself. He patted Liu Ying's hand, smiling. "Plus, it's good fortune for girls to have a little meat."

"This isn't a little meat, okay?" Seeing the man's smile, Liu Ying doubled down on her self-degrading joke and raised her arm. "Look at this. They might as well be pig arms. I can't lose weight no matter how much I control my intake. It's so frustrating."

"You haven't seen him at his best," Ch'in Ching continued the topic and stood up as though to present her with a treasure. "Hold on, I'll get the photograph for you…."

The truth was that Liu Ying had seen the photograph several times, and moreover, there was little to see, anyway. During the Cultural Revolution raids, they feared keeping any photographs and burned even the photograph they had taken after liberation. The only one they could not bear to burn was the one taken after the victory against Japan, so they tucked it away in a tin box and

buried it in the yard. Old film was easily corrupted, and the humidity underground was even worse for it. The faces on the photograph were so blurry that the young Shen Liangsheng's face could not be distinguished.

Learning from his childhood friend's behaviour, Ch'in Ching wanted to act like a kidult and show off his belongings. Liu Ying naturally would not ruin the fun and began looking even though she had seen it before.

"I must say even this wasn't his best…." Ch'in Ching had shown the photograph to the youngsters, but he had feared letting something slip. But now he no longer cared, or perhaps he had eventually forgotten about the need for secrecy. As he held the old photograph, he became immersed in nostalgia. "The first time I met Grandpa Shen…no, that was the second time…you know the Great Theatre of China, don't you? That day, I was going to watch a show, but there were more people than sardines in a can, and I couldn't get a ticket…then I was standing by the road, thinking I'd see what would happen…and then…."

Liu Ying listened attentively. It was a story of the distant past, but because of Ch'in Ching's talent, the story was brought to life. The packed crowds of people, the neon lights on the buildings, the man in white tuxedo, everything seemed to dance by before her very eyes. The girl had a soft heart and felt the tears welling up. Taking advantage of a pause in the story, she excused herself to check on the kettle in the kitchen and left the room.

In the kitchen, she tried her best to push back the tears as she didn't want to cause more trouble for her grandpa. It was when she settled down that she realized something was amiss, and when she thought about it a little more…. Wait a second, if Grandpa Shen and Grandpa Ch'in were cousins, how could they have only met in their twenties?

In that moment, it was as if an entire new world opened up to her. For a minute, she stood in a daze, and the next thing she knew, she began sobbing. Afraid that the men in the room would hear her, she immediately slapped a hand over her own mouth. For some reason, she felt horrible, and she cried so hard that she squatted down and could not get up.

Sitting by the bed looking at the photograph, Ch'in Ching did not hear any

sounds from the kitchen. He didn't even realize Liu Ying had used the kettle as an excuse as he was totally absorbed in his memories. He etched out Shen Liangsheng's young complexion while gently brushing the man's presently bony face.

He was so good-looking…when he came to the school looking for Ch'in Ching, he made the class of girls starry-eyed just by standing there…but nobody could say he wasn't good-looking now.

With a tender smile, Ch'in Ching tucked the quilt for Shen Liangsheng. He still thought every single person in the world put together was not enough to compare with this man before him.

No matter when, his dear Shen-*keke* would be the best-looking one, and no one could ever compare.

New Year's Eve, nineteen eighty-three,[181.5] for the first time since liberation China broadcast a live year-end concert. By then, black and white television sets were fairly widespread in the big cities, but colour television sets were still few. The colour set in Ch'in Ching's home was given to *Lao*-Wu's wife by her eldest daughter. *Lao*-Wu was older and had not lived past the Cultural Revolution, but his wife was quite a few years younger and pulled through. Moreover, *Lao*-Wu's case had been redressed[182] early on, so the family was better-off than others. *Lao*-Wu had treated Ch'in Ching and Shen Liangsheng like sons, but they called Mrs. Wu "Big Sis." They were not successful in hiding Shen Liangsheng's illness from Big Sis, and the woman instructed her daughter to bring the colour television set to Ch'in Ching's house. The meaning behind this was obvious, and Ch'in Ching could not easily refuse, but he had no time to watch it.

But New Year's Eve was different, especially when Shen Liangsheng appeared very energetic that day. The man slept until the evening, and when he awoke and heard there was a live concert, he sat up a little and leaned on Ch'in Ching. The two of them turned on the television and watched the festivities.

Lao-Liu wanted to bring the year-end supper to Ch'in Ching's house, but the latter refused fervently, saying that the Lius should celebrate together and leave

the two of them some peace and quiet. Therefore, *Lao*-Liu delivered the New Year's dishes and left, thinking he would come on New Year's morning to wish them a good year.

The clock on the wall slowly ticked to nine o'clock, but Shen Liangsheng was still awake watching the concert with Ch'in Ching. When the crosstalk performance began, he pulled a smile.

With the man in his arms, Ch'in Ching easily caught the smile and guessed the meaning behind it. Going along with it, he leaned into the man's ear and asked shamelessly, "Shen-*keke*, who do you think is better, them or me?"

Shen Liangsheng still had the smile about his lips as he looked over slightly. He then nodded weakly as though to say "You are better."

Ch'in Ching giggled in delight and was about to continue when Shen Liangsheng pulled his hand over and began writing on his palm with what strength he could muster.

As Ch'in Ching waited patiently for the man to finish, the smile on his face deepened. He pushed back the words that were about to escape his lips and closed his hand around that of the man, locking into his own palm the word "good"[183] that the man had written along with the lifetime that they had shared together.

The clock slowly ticked past ten o'clock, and Shen Liangsheng had finally grown tired and fallen asleep in Ch'in Ching's arms. Ch'in Ching gently laid him flat on the bed before lying down next to the man, hands still connected. It did not even occur to him to turn off the television. He drifted into slumber with the man beside him, not letting the celebration from the television set or even the thunderous firecrackers at midnight awake them.

When Ch'in Ching awoke again it was already bright outside, but Shen Liangsheng was not beside him. He thought it strange that the man was missing even though they had been sleeping together just now.

Confused, he left the bed and put on his shoes before heading outside. Only when he left the house and the yard did he find himself wearing a blue short-sleeve shirt, not feeling cold at all – it was already summer.

The scenery outside the yard was nothing out of the ordinary: a rather narrow mile-long *hut'ong* with residential units on either side. Strangely, he did not see a single neighbour, only the dazzling sunlight raining down on the street silently yet so intensely that he had to look away.

It was then that Ch'in Ching knew he was dreaming, but even though it was a dream, he had to find the man. Just as he came to this realization, he glimpsed a familiar figure in front of him – it was none other than Shen Liangsheng.

Ch'in Ching hurried after the man and called his name, but Shen Liangsheng did not answer and only kept pushing forward.

The mile-long *hut'ong* seemed to stretch on forever in the dream. He watched as the figure that appeared pale white under the blaring light slipped farther and farther away, but even when it became smaller than a needle point, he could still see it.

Ch'in Ching was, however, on pins and needles, afraid that the silhouette would vanish in the blink of an eye. Therefore, he dashed after it. He ran until his shoes flew off, until he was panting so hard he could no longer call his name.

At last, Shen Liangsheng seemed to have noticed someone had been following him and stopped to look. He frowned when he saw Ch'in Ching and began shooing him away like a mean old man would a stray cat or dog. "Go back! Don't follow me! Quick, go back!"

Ch'in Ching was in such a hurry he could not cry, but now that Shen Liangsheng was chasing him away, he broke out in tears and began sobbing like a pitiful child trying to win back the adult's love.

Unable to bear this, Shen Liangsheng turned and took a few steps towards the man, but he did not close the distance. He looked at the crying man, at a loss of what to do.

"Shen Liangsheng…." Not getting any response from the man, Ch'in Ching

realized the tears were of no use and began calling the man's name between sobs. He wanted to say something else but didn't know exactly what. In the end, after choking on his sobs for a while, he blurted out, "I love you, Shen Liangsheng."

It was a strange yet fantastical dream.

When he spoke the words "I love you," the dream seemed to come to a complete standstill. The two men stood frozen in place. Then, they both burst out in laughter.

"Come here."

He reached out a hand while he began walking towards him.

With every step, they seemed to become one year younger so that when they stood face to face, what each man saw was a youthful version of the other.

Strangely yet fantastically, they had not only become younger, but their attire had changed, too. They looked like characters out of a wu-hsia story. Ch'in Ching was wearing the long blue robe of a Confucian student. Shen Liangsheng, on the other hand, was in elaborate dress, an ink-coloured robe embroidered with silver clouds along the hem, but he appeared more like a vicious deity than an elegant noble because of a cold complexion that carried not wrath but death.

However, Ch'in Ching was not afraid, nor did he find their attire bizarre. Rather, he leaned in mischievously as he always had and reached for the man's hand.

Shen Liangsheng did not seem surprised, either, and took Ch'in Ching's hand before leading him forward along the path.

Under the blinding summer sun, they walked side by side until the end of this mile, and they would keep going –

Whence they had come.

Till the end of time.

FIN

171 A part of the monologue by Zhou Shixian, the romantic interest of Princess Changping in the Cantonese opera, Di Nü Hua. The two lovers, played by Yam and Bak (referenced in the prelude) in the 1957 edition, drink poison together on their wedding night.

172 The tradition was to wear white belts after the death of a family member, but after the 1950's people began tying black cloths around their arms instead.

173 The literal translation of the term for the Chinese economic reforms initiated in 1978.

174 Having plants could have been used as evidence of being counter-revolutionary because: 1) it meant the owner had free time to care for the plants (free time should be dedicated to helping the country/community); 2) having beautiful flowers was disrespectful towards those not fortunate enough to have flowers (everyone should be equal; there should be no competition); 3) decorative flowers could be seen as a symptom of bourgeois tendencies; 4) if the plants were edible it would create inequality in the food distribution among households.

175 Better known in English by the Japanese term edamame.

176 Translated from 小說月報 (xiao shuo yue bao), the first and most popular literature magazine in China running from 1910 to 1932. At the peak, monthly subscriptions ran 1.8 million.

177 A podium is common in the schoolyard because flag-raising assemblies are held regularly (daily or weekly).

178 The literal translation of this utterance is: "Say, you are not a reincarnation of a soul that had died from starvation. Eat after you go home and wash it."

179 Name of Wankuo Bridge after 1949. "Jie fang," or Liberation is used for

many streets, buildings and monuments in the PRC.

180 Also known as Classics of Poetry, or shi jing, the oldest poetry collection in the Chinese language with poems dating from 11th to 7th century BCE. This line comes from the poem *Huang niao* in the Book of Qin.

181 Diminutive suffix.

181.5 Feb 12, 1983

182 Political rehabilitation. Wu had probably been accused of crimes against the state and punished accordingly, but eventually his name was cleared.

183 This can also be a sign of consent similar to English where “good” is sometimes used as an affirmative response.



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I hope that this novel was not only enjoyable for its romance but also for its historical and cultural value. This is something I strive for in all my translation works. However, the true beauty of this story remains in its original language, in Chinese, and I encourage those who are thinking about or are in the process of learning Chinese to continue your study so that one day you may appreciate stories such as this in its true form. Or perhaps you should add Tianjin to your travel bucket list! I'd also like very much to visit all the places that our lovely protagonists have been to.

I'm bad with ending these things, but I guess I will leave with a quote from Young Master Shen's dearest literary treasure:

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.