FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU



CASE FILE

COMPENDIUM

Bing An Ben

4

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Chapter 89:
His Thirteenth Year

"IF THE TRUTH is the last thing that I can restore to you, if this truth can give you some final relief—"

"……"

"—I'll tell you."

Nineteen years ago.

Yanzhou.

With his backpack slung over his shoulders, a thirteen-year-old Xie Qingcheng walked down a narrow residential street in the dead of winter.

He held a Nokia phone with a green screen in his hand—this was the most expensive thing he owned.

His parents were already several months gone.

For these past few months, Xie Qingcheng had been like a lost soul abandoned in the mortal realm. One shocking blow after another had left his heart hollowed out and rotted away. He had broken down and despaired; he had erupted into furious arguments countless times.

But what was the point?

He had startled awake in the middle of the night over and over, jolted out of nightmares of the day he was told about his parents' deaths.

That day, it had been pouring in Huzhou. He had been in his classroom taking a math test like any other ordinary student.

Then his homeroom teacher had walked in, greeted the math teacher, and said a few words in a quiet voice. The math teacher

immediately gasped in shock.

The students only glanced up woodenly for a moment, the afterimages of equations and numbers drifting before their eyes, before they looked back down and continued to fight against the clock to complete the problems.

Xie Qingcheng hadn't even looked up. He was checking his work on the very last major problem.

The girl sitting next to him kept sneaking glances at him—she could have been trying to look at his answers, but she could equally have just been staring at this handsome boy's face.

Suddenly—

A shadow fell over Xie Qingcheng's test.

Xie Qingcheng's pencil stilled. He looked up, frowning slightly when he saw that the person who had walked over to his seat was his homeroom teacher.

He wasn't like the other students, and that was clear to see from his eyes—a pair of eyes that were keen, calm, and clear, rarely showing any signs of confusion or paralysis. No subject could stump him, and the pursuit of knowledge never seemed to torment him. Instead, he took everything on board with ease.

No teacher could dislike a student like that.

This was the first time that Xie Qingcheng had met his homeroom teacher's eyes and found her unsmiling.

He started slightly in surprise. He didn't understand what was happening; he wasn't the type to get into trouble.

"Xie Qingcheng." The homeroom teacher patted his shoulder with a strange look on her face, like she was trying her best to repress something. Her thick glasses just happened to reflect the fluorescent lights, hiding most of her expression. But Xie Qingcheng could hear a faint tremor in her voice, like the lingering echo of a plucked string.

"Come out with me for a moment."

This time, all the students were shocked; their exam didn't seem important anymore, and they all craned their necks to watch as Xie Qingcheng followed the homeroom teacher out of the classroom.

"What's going on…"

"Why's he getting called out right now?"

"D'you think he did something wrong? Did he cheat?"

"Don't be ridiculous… As if he needs to cheat…"

Everyone kept on muttering amongst themselves until the math teacher rapped on the table. "What are you all whispering about! Focus on your tests!"

But after he scolded them, he couldn't help but stare after the two people who had disappeared into the hallway—if the students had looked closely, they would have seen that the math teacher's face had turned bloodlessly pale.

Grabbing the thermos on his table with trembling hands, the math teacher opened it and took a gulp of warm water. The liquid heat flowed down his throat, but it barely warmed his chest, gone cold since he heard the news.

He knew—

It would be a very long time before Xie Qingcheng's heart would warm up again.

"Laoshi, did something happen?" Xie Qingcheng felt compelled to ask as he followed the homeroom teacher up the stairs.

The homeroom teacher remained silent until they reached the door to her office on the top floor. Before she pushed it open, she took a deep breath and turned around to look at this student she'd always been fond of.

In the light cast through the windows from the dreary gray skies outside, Xie Qingcheng could see that the muscles in her face

had gone tense, and he was stunned to find that, behind her thick glasses, there were tear tracks rolling down her face.

Those tears were the ominous opening notes. The next moment, a roll of thunder shook the school building, raising the curtain to reveal the unfolding tragedy.

Xie Qingcheng's heart stuttered in his chest.

"There are visitors for you inside. They'll tell you…"

The homeroom teacher's wrinkled hand settled on the door handle and pressed down.

The door opened.

Lightning flashed beyond the window, yet the dark atmosphere inside the room seemed even heavier than the clouds outside. Thunder and lightning cut through the towering rain clouds, just as Xie Qingcheng's steps into the room cut through the darkness there —

A sea of navy blue.

Police officers crowded like clouds gathering before the storm.

At the head of the group was Uncle Zheng, who was closest to his parents. When they heard him come in, they all turned their heads, but nobody spoke.

Instead, Xie Qingcheng heard his own voice, hollow like the shell of a forgotten cocoon left behind on a dead tree.

"What happened to my parents?"

There was no response.

He spoke clearly, stayed fully composed, and asked again. "Uncle Zheng, what happened to my parents?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't really remember listening to Zheng Jingfeng explain what had happened. But in his blurry memories, he remembered being extremely calm. So calm it was like he was already dead—as if the thing standing there listening was a clay sculpture. Or a corpse.

It wasn't just that moment. For two weeks, Xie Qingcheng remained frozen and numb, like a dead boy walking. He'd broken down and cried bitterly when he saw his parents' bodies with his own eyes, but in the dozen or so days that followed, he was like a machine, a symbolic standin—constantly signing, signing, and signing one ruthless document after another.

Cremation…

Inheritance…

The death certificate…

Living, breathing people became nothing more than words on paper, ashes in the furnace.

His sister was still young. She didn't know much about the world, but she knew that Mommy and Daddy hadn't come home for a long time, and she threw a great sobbing tantrum, and…

And there were other things that Xie Qingcheng didn't even want to remember.

When someone endured so much suffering that all the tears in their heart dried up, being able to properly feel sorrow was a great mercy granted by the heavens. Xie Qingcheng was unworthy of receiving even this bit of mercy.

The car drove forward on its own, and its cabin exploded after it ran over its victims… How could it have possibly been an accident?

It was as though both his body and spirit had been crushed beneath a massive weight, just barely held together by each passing breath. He kept running to the police station to try to get ahold of any of the uncles or aunties he knew, obstinately saying to them again and again—

"My parents were murdered."

My parents were definitely murdered.

I want to know the truth…

Please help me uncover the truth…

At first, these people were sympathetic and even shed tears for him, but as time went on, they grew annoyed by the child's incessant nagging.

"How many times have I told you?" they'd say to him. "We're investigating it carefully, but there's no evidence right now. We have to follow the proper procedures, all right?"

"Give us a little more time."

But how much was "a little more time"?

Xie Qingcheng eventually learned that it was a full nineteen years.

Back then, he didn't know how long he would have to wait, but he already understood that there was no way for them to prove that his parents' deaths were anything other than a freak accident. There was no way for his mother and father to be buried in their uniforms and honored as heroes who had died in the line of duty.

In the end, he could only pick out a snow-white dress shirt for his father. It was the nicest shirt his father had bought himself since their family fell on hard times.

But his mother wore a qipao dress personally sewn by Li Miaoqing—the policewoman couldn't be sent off with the blaring sirens of a police car escort, but on the day of her funeral, not only her colleagues, but many of the people she'd helped over the course of her life—the rich and the poor, the criminals and the victims alike—all came to pay their respects…

She treated every life equally and never looked at anyone's soul through the tinted lens of discrimination. She had always been willing to reach out to those struggling in the depths of a quagmire, as long as they were willing to turn back.

Thus, she earned their unconditional respect.

But when she was buried, the question of her death still went unanswered.

And so, Xie Qingcheng decided to investigate it himself.

Even though he was just a middle schooler, even though the clues he had were very scant…he refused to abandon the chase. He used every spare moment to investigate the motive behind his parents' deaths.

Perhaps the saying was true: that providence never turned its back on those who persevered.

He learned from an uncle at the police station that prior to his parents' car accident, they had visited an extremely shady nightclub in Yanzhou.

"As for what exactly they did and who they met, it was all kept secret, so no one knows for sure—but not long afterward, the higher-ups received multiple reports that they were both corrupt, that they'd accepted bribes. The reports even came with evidence… though not enough to truly support the claims against them. The higher-ups didn't rule out the possibility that someone was trying to frame them—but at the time, there was a crackdown going on, so they ended up getting demoted once again.

"Over these last few years, the two of them were suspended and investigated twice. All in all, they took part in a couple dozen major cases that involved some hundred individuals. If you want to look further, those hundred individuals are connected to maybe a thousand more people—it would be impossible to investigate every single one. It'd be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

The uncle clapped Xie Qingcheng on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it too much, kiddo. We're still working on it. Leave it to us to find the answers to these questions."

But Xie Qingcheng didn't know how long he would have to wait for the truth if he relied on them. Perhaps he would never see the day when the truth would finally come to light.

And so, when winter vacation came around, he arranged a place for his little sister to stay and headed to Yanzhou alone, setting out for the nightclub that the uncle had mentioned. He wanted to see where this trail of clues would take him.

That was when the accident happened.

With considerable effort, he managed to reach a waiter who knew something of the situation. Although the man was very scared, he wasn't completely heartless. When he saw how pitiful the child was, he agreed to meet with him. They arranged to meet on a weekend afternoon in a small hotpot restaurant at the entrance of a narrow residential street.

"I don't know who they were meeting, either. They were very secretive, and even our boss wasn't too clear about what they were doing. But I was in charge of cleaning up the private room, and after they left, I found an earring inside… You can take a look and see if it's your mom's. If it isn't, then maybe it belongs to whoever it was they were talking to…"

Before the waiter met with Xie Qingcheng, he had kindly texted him a photo.

Back then, slow data transfer rates made downloads on Nokia phones very slow. When the photo finally finished downloading, Xie Qingcheng sat on the curb and tapped it open.

It was an earring with a very peculiar design.

The delicate gold earring had been fashioned in the shape of a cross made of bones, with a ring in the middle. The ring was inlaid with a tiny, blood-red gemstone surrounded by three letters: R.I.P.

Rest In Peace.

Even though phone displays back then were extremely low-res, similar in quality to the old analog AV cables, the exquisite make of that earring was still evident on the screen. Given its masterful craftsmanship and highly detailed design, it clearly wasn't a trinket one could buy at any random roadside stall. But famous jewelry stores like Chow Tai Fook or Lao Feng Xiang would never make an earring with such a baffling design.

The wearer likely had it custom-made.

Earrings were special in that their posts remained in contact with the wearer's ear for extended periods of time, rubbing against the person's sweat and secretions, even layers of their skin. If he brought this earring back to Zheng Jingfeng to be tested, perhaps the entire case would be blown wide open.

"To be honest, I'm not a good person—I'm an opportunist. When I found this earring, I was planning on selling it for some cash, so I didn't hand it over. But that day, when I heard you talking to my boss…I thought it might be better to give it to you.

"I know it's not much, but…I lost my mom pretty early too. I get it."

Those few lines of text were the waiter's final words to Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng caught sight of the towering flames before he reached the hotpot restaurant where they'd arranged to meet that afternoon. Waves of sound and heat crashed into him; the crowd of observers was like an incoming tide. He rushed over, giving several elderly onlookers quite a fright as he did.

"Aiyo, watch it, little buddy! What are you pushing us for?"

"How impudent. Whose kid is this…?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't take in anything else that was said as he made his way to the very front of the crowd, right next to the police cordon. He watched the firefighters carry several bodies out of the building as jets of pressurized water pummeled the burning restaurant…

He stood there frozen in place, the raging flames reflected in his eyes.

He had come too late.

Once the fire was extinguished and they gave up on the rescue operation, the horror continued. He watched as corpse after corpse

was carried out of the building, each wrapped in a stark white body bag.

Overwhelming guilt washed over him—the feeling lunged toward him like a snarling tiger hurtling out of the jungle, striking him in the heart and roaring into his ear.

For the first time, he realized just how childish, how simplistic, how meaningless his investigation was. He'd never even considered that it could bring harm to others—he felt like every single dead body was his fault.

He crumpled into a sitting position at the intersection, his arms wrapped around himself, clenching that Nokia cell phone with the picture of the earring in his sweaty hand. Despair filled him; condemnation struck soundly against his heart as he sat on the curb with his head bowed, like his soul had fled his body.

And so he didn't notice the black, privately owned car with fake plates parked on the street amongst the slowly dispersing crowd. A bearded man in a baseball cap sat inside, smoking a cigarette as he watched him from a distance.

When Xie Qingcheng finally stood up and silently left the site of destruction, that car started up. It followed him as he boarded a bus headed for the place he was staying by the outer ring expressway.

After getting off at his stop, Xie Qingcheng still had to walk a long way to reach the hotel. He didn't have much money to spend, so the hotel was dilapidated and out of the way. Back in the 2000s, Yanzhou's surveillance camera system was still far from comprehensive, and the area near the outer ring expressway was full of blind spots.

In the darkness of night, the bearded man tugged the brim of his cap lower and spat out the butt of his cigarette. Gripping the steering wheel, he slammed down on the gas, and as the headlights flashed and the engine roared, he drove straight for Xie Qingcheng's back—

Deathly silence followed.

“I was hit by a car,” Xie Qingcheng said to He Yu in the flooded film studio. It was the first time he’d ever fully revealed his untouched scars. “That man was probably supposed to kill me and dispose of my body, but I noticed at the last second and dodged to the side, so I didn’t die on the spot.

“The wheels of the car ran over my legs again and again—and then I saw him get out of the car…

“But at that moment, a group of construction workers who had just gotten off work happened to pass by—the man didn’t have the time to get me into the car before he fled the scene. He only managed to take my phone.

“Those workers brought me to the hospital… The doctors there said I was in critical condition. I was semi-conscious a couple times, but I couldn’t feel my body.” Xie Qingcheng relayed the story as though it were all trivial. “I knew that I was about to die.”

He spoke of his suffering and near-death experience with complete indifference, as if it hardly mattered to him.

It was only at the very end, when he mentioned the name of an older man, that emotion stirred slightly in his eyes.

He said, “As I waited for my death, I met someone.

“Qin Ciyan.”

Chapter 90:
His Secret

QIN CIYAN WAS the Director of Neurosurgery at the First Affiliated Hospital of Yanzhou University.

He was still quite young for a doctor at the time. At age forty-five, he was at precisely the stage in his life where he possessed both sufficient knowledge and the daring to carve out his own path. He could tackle surgeries that were impossible for other doctors, and he wasn't afraid to take on cases that others wouldn't touch.

He was revered with the entirely deserved title of "Yanzhou's Number One Neurosurgeon" by patients and doctors alike.

There really wasn't much difference between Qin Ciyan back then and Qin Ciyan at age sixty. The forty-five-year-old Professor Qin was already the sort of person who didn't really follow the rules.

When he accepted the case of the orphaned Xie Qingcheng, a severely injured boy whose health insurance wasn't even registered in Yanzhou, he treated him just as he would Yi Beihai's mother in the future. He took on the case of a patient on the verge of death and defended him against all naysayers.

Xie Qingcheng had more than twenty injuries all over his body. The most severe were to his legs and his spine—his spinal nerves had been almost completely destroyed. The doctors from other departments on the diagnostic team all said, "Even if your abilities as a surgeon are unsurpassed, Professor Qin, it will still be impossible to successfully treat this patient."

Xie Qingcheng couldn't move as he lay on the hospital bed in the ICU, his entire body covered in tubes and incisions. The times he was awake, he heard the family members of other patients say—

"That poor boy…"

"How terrible. Is there even a single part of his body that hasn't been damaged?"

"I heard that his parents have passed away and there are no adult relatives they can reach. His medical expenses are being paid for by Professor Qin."

"Professor Qin is such a good person."

"Of course he is. But if you ask me, this child will only suffer if he survives. Even if he makes it, he'd still be paralyzed. Might as well pull the plug and end his troubles… Really, it's not that I don't have a conscience, but I remember my old man's last month before he died from lung cancer. He wasn't even comfortable lying down, and it took all the strength in his body just to breathe—living like that is barely worth it…"

The IV drip swayed before his eyes, and the bedside monitor beeped next to his ear.

Xie Qingcheng would often wake up briefly before falling back into a deep sleep for a very long time. Every time he woke, he tried his hardest to stay alert for as long as possible, afraid that if he closed his eyes, he'd never get to open them again.

Every time he fell into that deep slumber, his subconscious struggled to yank him back from the path to the Yellow Springs through sheer will.

"I don't want to die…"

His chapped lips opened and closed as he muttered it over and over.

At long last, he woke to see a middle-aged doctor at his bedside. The doctors all looked the same to him in their isolation gowns, but that day, when he lifted his eyes and the figure checking on him flooded his field of vision, it was as if a stroke of great fortune cleared the fog from his mind. He cried out in agony—

"Doctor Qin…"

For a moment, the doctor froze. Then his masked face turned toward him, a pair of compassionate eyes meeting a pair that were filled with desperation.

Xie Qingcheng had never seen Qin Ciyan before. He had only heard about his attending physician from others during his short bursts of consciousness. But at that moment, seeing that man for the first time, he knew that it must be him.

This was the ordinary mortal who was as strong as stone, as compassionate as Mother Earth,[1] the one who guarded the gateway to eternal rest and grappled with the god of death.

The boy gazed at him in a daze, wanting to reach his hand out, wanting to move, but he couldn't do it no matter how hard he tried.

He stared and stared until tears streamed down his lacerated cheeks.

"Doctor Qin, save me… Save me, please… I don't want to die… I can't die yet…"

The teenager sounded like a grievously injured kitten on the verge of death, wretched and pitiful. But beneath that pitifulness, there was a hint of something that other terminally ill patients didn't possess.

Qin Ciyan's heart was struck by it.

He noticed that the boy had finished by saying that he "can't" die, not just that he didn't *want* to die.

At that moment, though, he didn't think too much of it. Worried that the patient's condition would worsen, he hastily tried to comfort him.

"Everything's fine, child, everything's all right. Focus on living and leave the rest to me. You still have me, child; I'll protect you. I'll save you."

He grasped Xie Qingcheng's icy hand—

Xie Qingcheng suddenly closed his eyes, tears streaming onto the pillow.

"I'll protect you."

"You still have me…"

The man clasped the child's hand like a father returning to the mortal realm in the wake of a torrential downpour, holding a son who was still struggling bitterly in search of an answer in the world of the living.

How long had it been…?

Xie Qingcheng thought back to the day when Zheng Jingfeng and the other officers had notified him of his parents' accident—remembered following the police cars to the scene afterward.

The crime scene had been very close to the school, and when he got there, the forensic investigators were still collecting evidence from the bodies. Zheng Jingfeng had asked them to cover the bodies with white cloth, but Xie Qingcheng arrived before the investigators could get there.

He had seen his parents with his own eyes, their crushed bodies and shattered epaulettes.

It was at that moment, seeing that ghastly sight, that he truly understood—his mother and father were really gone. They would never come back.

He lost control completely. His parents' coworkers held him back and kept him from rushing over, but he broke down and cried in front of everyone at the scene. Standing before his parents' broken bodies…that was the last time he had shown any sign of childlike weakness.

Xie Qingcheng never cried like that ever again.

Even during the cremation service and the sorrowful funeral where he bid his parents farewell, he didn't shed another tear.

He knew that their family's older generation was gone. From that day on, the first person who would need to stand up and face all the world's sufferings, torments, dangers, and even death, would be him. As the eldest in the family, he needed to protect those standing behind him.

It was only now, in the hospital bed, that Xie Qingcheng had received another glimmer of mercy from the heavens—he was allowed to be that thirteen-year-old child again. Tears coursed endlessly down his cheeks.

A full six months after his father passed on, someone finally took his hand and said with complete sincerity to this thirteen-year-old child—

"I'll protect you."

Drowning in pain and helplessness, Xie Qingcheng called in a voice choked with emotion…

"Dad…?

"Are you back…?

"Please don't leave… Don't go out again… It's raining…

"It's raining so hard, Dad… I don't want you and Mom to leave again… Don't go…

"I'm begging you…

"Come home…"

Qin Ciyan froze. Xie Qingcheng mumbled vaguely for a little longer, and then slipped back into unconsciousness. He didn't see that, at that moment, Qin Ciyan's eyes were wet.

On the eve of the Lunar New Year, when he'd miraculously hung on for more than ten days, Xie Qingcheng's condition suddenly and rapidly deteriorated.

As he was being wheeled into the trauma bay, he watched the nightscape flickering by through the hallway windows in a daze.

It was snowing in Yanzhou.

Snowflakes the size of goose feathers floated and drifted through the air. He'd always lived in Jiangnan, so he'd never seen this kind of snow before, glittering brightly.

"My little sister's name means snow," he murmured. "She's only five… She's so little…"

The surgery had preserved Xie Qingcheng's life for the time being, but the administrators of the First Affiliated Hospital of Yanzhou University decided that they couldn't continue to treat the child.

This was a patient who was liable to die at any moment. He ought to be sent home—it would be better for him than dying in some unfamiliar place.

Of course, there were other reasons, but they didn't sound nearly so dignified.

Despite Qin Ciyan's celebrated reputation, he had yet to reach a position where he could stand against the majority. The hospital director sought him out to talk about it as if he wanted an open discussion, but in reality, the decision was already set in stone.

When Xie Qingcheng was forcibly transferred out of the First Affiliated Hospital of Yanzhou University, Qin Ciyan contacted an old acquaintance in Huzhou and arranged for him to stay at a private hospital. The day he was admitted to the hospital, Qin Ciyan personally attended to all his needs.

No one knew why he paid so much attention to this child. Perhaps Qin Ciyan admired the impressive strength of this child's willpower, perhaps his pitiful fate inspired Professor Qin's unprecedented compassion—or perhaps the sorrowful "Dad" that a barely conscious Xie Qingcheng had uttered reminded him that he, too, was a father.

If he died, and something like this happened to his daughter, how much would his heart ache as he watched from the heavens?

Or perhaps…

He didn't finish the thought, because the youth suddenly called out to him—

"Professor Qin. Am I going to survive…?" Xie Qingcheng lay on the bed in the private hospital in Huzhou. He had wasted away so dramatically that his body was barely there; his thin frame barely disturbed the thick blankets. His entire person was haggard and defeated.

But those dark eyes were still so bright, their gaze unwavering as they met Qin Ciyan's—

"I don't want my little sister to become an orphan. I don't want her to live in an orphanage… Please save me… No matter what it takes… I'll do anything…

"I'm begging you…"

After struggling with himself for days on end, Qin Ciyan finally came to a decision—he was going to do something extremely risky.

He and Xie Qingcheng were basically the only people who knew this—they'd even kept it hidden from Qin Ciyan's wife and daughter. But while Qin Ciyan was in America, he'd met many prodigiously talented pharmaceutical researchers, one of whom was an old schoolmate he was quite close with. This schoolmate worked at a life sciences research institute in America and oversaw a project on cell regeneration.

Cell regeneration was a towering obstacle in the human quest to conquer illness and death. Once, strolling down the streets of Brooklyn together, that former schoolmate said to Qin Ciyan with an air of profundity:

"We've made more progress down that road than any other institution in the world."

At the time, that old schoolmate had wanted Qin Ciyan to stay in America and work with him on his project. He'd originally had an extremely capable physician on his team, but that researcher had

died during a lab accident a few years earlier. And while his position had been filled, the abilities of his replacements were unfortunately rather lacking. Qin Ciyan's old schoolmate was eager to recruit him.

However, Qin Ciyan wasn't interested in such extreme, risky research projects, so he tactfully declined his schoolmate's invitations every time. Despite the rejections, his schoolmate asked his superiors for permission to give Qin Ciyan a tour of one of the company's laboratories before the latter's departure.

There were several patients in that lab, all suffering from different grave afflictions, who had volunteered to serve as research subjects. There, Qin Ciyan witnessed firsthand the astonishing restorative powers of the unique drug called RN-13.

When he leaned over to examine the effects of RN-13 on the skin regeneration of a severe burn victim, his former schoolmate asked him with a smile, "What do you think? Have you changed your mind? This kind of drug might alter the course of medical history. Lao-Qin, surely you're far too impressive to spend your whole life as a doctor."

Qin Ciyan adjusted his glasses and straightened up. He looked at the test subject, who was clearly homeless, and then said, "I'm not very fond of your…methods. Granted, this type of research might be legally acceptable in this state. But you know me."

He smiled courteously at his old schoolmate. "I'm an ordinary person—and a coward. I prefer to go by the book, researching and prescribing drugs according to established rules. It would be very difficult for me to be like you, to be a…how should I put it? An innovator?

"I'm very sorry, but this is my final decision."

He Yu's expression changed the moment he heard "RN-13."

That was the name of the drug that Lü Zhishu had taken when she was pregnant with him—the drug that had saved her life. His father had told him it was a type of drug that had been developed to

harness the power of cell regeneration, and that, in a way, it truly was a miracle drug that could bring people back from the brink of death. But modern medicine hadn't reached that stage yet; RN-13 was severely unstable and there were grave risks in taking it. It hadn't been reviewed by any ethics boards, nor had it undergone large-scale animal testing; needless to say, clinical trials were severely lacking.

After taking RN-13, Lü Zhishu's physical appearance had begun to distort, and her personality changed dramatically. Even the child she carried suffered serious side effects, as He Yu's nervous system exhibited abnormalities from birth. Then, when he grew older, it was confirmed that he suffered from the rare disorder psychological Ebola. These were all consequences of using RN-13.

He Yu couldn't help but ask Xie Qingcheng, "You… Are you also…"

"After that kind of a car accident, no ordinary person could stand again, have their wounds healed and their appearance restored—have their cells regenerated," Xie Qingcheng said. "That's right. In order to save me, Qin Ciyan broke his own rules—he asked those Americans for a full dose of RN-13…"

Under the pale cold light, he slowly closed his eyes.

"And as for me, I took all of the medication."

"You took RN-13—?! Then you…you…" Even He Yu's voice was shaking. "Are you…"

The words that He Jiwei once said seemed to echo through He Yu's ears again:

"But RN-13 wasn't a fully developed drug to begin with. It was too ambitious—the problem of cell regeneration is the biggest challenge in human disease. With the limitations of modern medicine, it's completely impossible. It was true that this drug had powerful regenerative capabilities, to the point that it could even reverse organ damage, thus allowing the patient to recover. But its side effects became apparent in both your and your mother's bodies.

"Even though the pharmacist prescribed a very small dosage and administered it in a very cautious way, it was still impossible to avoid.

"Your illness was caused by RN-13."

He Yu suddenly flipped upright in the water and grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the arm. At this point, they were only half a meter away from the ceiling.

Only a single step away from death.

And it was only at this very last step that Xie Qingcheng was finally willing to tell him the truth.

He Yu felt like even the marrow in his bones had gone cold, but not because of his impending fate. His pupils contracted—

"You…"

Xie Qingcheng's eyes were still closed. He didn't look He Yu in the face. The hair scattered over his forehead was covered in glistening drops of water, and one droplet slid from the tail of his eye, falling into the damp hair at his temples.

Xie Qingcheng went on, "I took a higher dose of RN-13 than anyone else. In our country, the medical records include case numbers one, two, three…and you, number four—you were all affected by this drug and became psychologically disturbed… But He Yu, have you ever noticed that there's a case missing from those listed? Medical cases aren't documented starting from one, but rather from zero. I wasn't the first person to take RN-13, but I was the first to complete the entire course of treatment."

Like the collapse of a colossal mountain, massive boulders tumbled down and rent heaven and earth.

He Yu's pupils had contracted to dots. It felt as though Xie Qingcheng's words were coming from somewhere far, far away—

"I'm the same as you—I'm a psychological Ebola patient, the only other one still alive in this country who can completely control

their mental state, whose mind has conquered the disease. My case…was designated the first."

He Yu paled abruptly.

"You're—the First Emperor?!"

Chapter 91:
His Dream Recast

XIE QINGCHENG STARED at He Yu.

"…You know about the First Emperor?"

"My dad told me, but—" He Yu stared closely at Xie Qingcheng's pale face.

He Jiwei's words swam through his head:

"No normal person could endure the torment of a full course of treatment with RN-13."

"The First Emperor was only a digitally simulated person."

"By simulating a person who had taken a full course of RN-13, the data showed the efficacy of treatments for various diseases."

Xie Qingcheng seemed to know what he was going to say. He calmly replied, "Everyone thinks that the First Emperor isn't a real person—that it's a virtual human and that all the test data is generated through calculations—but that's not true. No computer simulation could be that accurate. The person who underwent RN-13's full treatment process, that was me. But besides the two of us, there's only one other person who knows this—and he's already gone. He was the one who used this method to save me."

His words were devastating.

"So, yes. I'm the first. That is, the one that everyone calls…the First Emperor."

Once again, time rewound to nineteen years ago.

Or rather, eighteen years ago.

The Lunar New Year had already passed. As the first apricot blossoms of spring quietly unfurled, Xie Qingcheng recovered and

was discharged from the hospital.

Over the course of three long months of treatment, he had been immersed in a tank of fluid and connected to an oxygen chamber, taking RN-13 continuously. Within the specimen tank, Xie Qingcheng endured an inhumanly torturous medical procedure—the full course of treatment with RN-13. As a subject in a secret research study, he became yet another person whose life was saved by RN-13.

But as the saying went, a gift bestowed by fate always came with a hidden cost.

Xie Qingcheng's recovery was astonishing—he was young and in excellent health to begin with, so the regeneration of his cells was far more successful than any of the previous cases. However, there were still some subtle changes.

It was as if his surface regeneration had used up too much of his life force. After his wounds healed, he began to scar very easily, so that even a gentle pinch would cause a red welt on his skin.

He developed allergies; not just to mango, but to many other things as well. For example, while he could drink quite a bit without getting drunk, his body couldn't tolerate the alcohol itself—he would feel burning hot all over, his strength sapped away.

And there was also the matter of his physical strength…

Xie Qingcheng had once been a formidable athlete, a martial arts champion and skilled wrestler known for his explosive power and endurance. Even as a child, he'd put great effort into his training, knowing it would be necessary to attain his ultimate goal of becoming a police officer.

But although RN-13 let him regain normal, everyday mobility, training at such a high level was now impossible.

He was still talented, but he could no longer be the very best.

"A person's body can only perform a finite number of metabolic processes over their lifetime. Think of it as spending twenty or thirty

years of your lifespan in advance, in exchange for your current health," Qin Ciyan had said to him. "There's no way you can be a police officer in the future. You must look after your health carefully, otherwise your body will deteriorate much more quickly than normal. It sounds cruel when I say it like this, but this will impact the rest of your life, so I need to tell you the truth—Xie Qingcheng, your life expectancy may only be forty years or so. If you don't take your health seriously, you could die from organ failure before you even make it to forty."

Sitting on the neatly made, snowy-white hospital bed, Xie Qingcheng calmly listened as Qin Ciyan spoke these words to him—words that no other person on earth would ever be privy to. Spring sunshine glimmered through the glass window panes, spilling into the clean, tidy ward and illuminating Xie Qingcheng's crystal-clear face.

RN-13 was truly beyond ordinary human comprehension. His body showed no visible traces of the calamitous accident he'd survived.

The only scar that remained was a tiny red mole on the nape of his neck: a residual blemish marking the site where the cytolytic drugs had been injected into his spinal cord while he was immersed in medicinal solution for three full months.

It was as though all his suffering had been a nightmare that hadn't left a single trace behind, aside from that spot of cinnabar—a spot that would never fade away.

Xie Qingcheng returned home.

Moyu Alley in early spring was filled with tiny golden flowers in full bloom. Countless sprays of blossoms turned into waterfalls of gold spilling over the walls, their petals falling like pearls of rain with every gust of wind.

Auntie Li and Xie Xue were waiting for him beside a wall of flowers.

As soon as they saw him, the woman covered her face with her hands and wept, while the girl's face broke into a huge smile, revealing a missing baby tooth.

"Gege. Gege, pick me up!"

None of them knew what exactly had happened in Yanzhou. At first, it was because Xie Qingcheng didn't have any identifying documents on his person, and they couldn't ask him too many questions when he was almost always unconscious. Later on, the doctors and nurses learned that his parents had already passed, and since he didn't have any close adult relatives to speak of, they didn't know whom to contact.

And after that, Xie Qingcheng had been transferred to a private hospital and became a test subject for RN-13.

This was something that absolutely could not be divulged. Qin Ciyan had taken an immense risk to treat him, so Xie Qingcheng understood that this was a secret he needed to take to the grave. To fill in the several-month gap, he told everyone that he had simply undergone nerve block therapy. There was no need to worry.

Xie Qingcheng took little Xie Xue from Auntie Li's arms. No one knew that he had given up thirty years of his life for this: a tender reunion on a gentle spring day.

"Xiao-Xie, does it hurt? Did it leave any scars?"

"It doesn't hurt," he said. "As for scars…nothing visible. It's not so bad, Auntie Li."

"Gege, kiss." Xie Xue was still much too young—no matter how much she'd wailed and sobbed when he left, she was still overjoyed the moment she was back in those familiar arms, her smile unfolding like a flower. She clung to Xie Qingcheng's neck with her warm hands. "I want kissies."

Xie Qingcheng turned his face to the side.

His little sister kissed his pale, nearly transparent skin, right on the flesh that had been a horrifying, mangled mess just a few

months earlier.

In the cool breeze, the little girl gently lowered her lashes. As if sensing something, she carefully touched Xie Qingcheng's face.

"Gege, it won't hurt anymore."

From that day forward, Xie Qingcheng abandoned his investigation into the truth behind his parents' deaths.

The truth was very important—it would never be meaningless. But more important than the truth was life itself.

He had paid with his health, his dreams, his longevity…he had shed blood and tears to return to the world of the living, a world filled with Xie Xue's tinkling laughter.

He knew that he would always feel shame for failing the departed. He could give them neither the truth nor an explanation.

But he couldn't let down the living again.

There were almost thirty years until he turned forty… He just wanted to live well until then. And so, with that in mind, he turned on the lamp in the middle of the night and picked up a pen, spreading out a detailed plan before him. As he calculated his and Xie Xue's ages, he thought that if he could live peacefully until the age of forty, he really wouldn't have anything to regret.

The last words he wrote in the open notebook were:

Me, 40—Xie Xue, 32

She should be married by then.

I'll have nothing to worry about.

Xie Qingcheng turned around to see his young sister curled up on her little bed, sound asleep, hugging her teddy bear, thin blanket kicked off and onto the floor. He closed the notebook and walked over to her bed, tucking her back in…

At first he thought that his days would all pass peacefully, just like this.

But he had yet to pay the full price that RN-13 demanded for his rebirth—far from it.

Xie Qingcheng soon found that his body was withering much faster than expected. Although his mind was still sharp, physically, it was a completely different story. In the two months after he returned home, he had multiple high fevers—and when his temperature surged, he was disturbed to discover a thirst for blood and violence.

He wanted to destroy things, wanted to ruin himself.

Even more terrifyingly, he realized that his senses had begun deteriorating rapidly. Pain, stimulation…what had once been highly distinctive sensations became more and more difficult to feel.

Once, he accidentally cut his hand. The wound was deep, slicing through flesh and dripping with blood, but incredibly, he didn't feel much pain at all.

His temper also grew more and more uncontrollable. He often became inexplicably angry over trivial things. A few times, he even got mad at Xie Xue for simply fussing about wanting chicken soup wontons.

Terrified, the little girl froze in place as she was scolded, her throat thick. Then, after a long while, tears began to roll in huge droplets down her face.

"Wah… Gege, why are you being so mean…? You're not Gege, you're not Gege!"

When Xie Qingcheng thought back on it, he knew Xie Xue had probably meant that her older brother wouldn't treat her that way, that he had always been very patient when taking care of her. But for some reason, at that moment, a malevolent fire sparked to life in his chest.

He had been feeling unsettled by these strange changes for a while—to the point that when he looked in the mirror, he felt frightened by the unfamiliar person staring back at him. Xie Xue's

harsh words had not just stabbed into his ears, but through his heart as well, piercing it until it shuddered.

He turned abruptly, with a twisted expression on his face.

"That's right. I'm not your brother! Your brother is dead! He should've died a long time ago! Why am I still alive? Why am I suffering so much just to keep living? Is it for myself? Is it so you can criticize me like this?"

His face was frantic, deranged.

Xie Xue was terrified into dazed silence, unable to utter another word. In her wide, vacant eyes, Xie Qingcheng saw his own reflection…

He looked like a ghost who had been resurrected into someone else's body.

Each time this happened, once he sobered up again, he felt incredibly remorseful. He couldn't comprehend why he would do such things. He wondered if he'd lost his mind. His moments of unhinged madness became increasingly frequent, and during each flare-up, he would lose more control, and his emotional state would fall to new depths.

He realized that something was wrong.

Perhaps that drug had some unanticipated side effects…

After yet another mental collapse, Xie Qingcheng curled up helplessly for hours, shuddering against the lingering pain, then finally dialed the number that Qin Ciyan had left him.

This was the first time Qin Ciyan heard that RN-13 could cause psychological symptoms.

He immediately flew back to Huzhou and took Xie Qingcheng to undergo a series of examinations. All of his levels were normal, but Xie Qingcheng was still ill.

At the time, the psychological disorder caused by RN-13 didn't have a name, and there were no detailed case studies.

Consequently, Qin Ciyan believed that Xie Qingcheng was simply under too much stress. He referred him to a psychiatric hospital in Huzhou for psychotherapy.

The doctor there could hardly be called irresponsible; the course of treatment he prescribed was systematic and by the book. Xie Qingcheng took copious amounts of psychiatric medication. Some of the drugs made his mind slow and sluggish, muddling his thoughts, but they were fundamentally incapable of alleviating his emotional suffering.

But once he stopped taking them, he would only grow even more depressed, even more unhinged.

The days went on and on, until finally, Xie Qingcheng couldn't stand it anymore. He had always been tenacious, never allowing physical pain to wear him down, but in the end, the psychological torment was what destroyed him.

On a dark, stormy night heavy with desolation, after another flare-up where he frightened Xie Xue to tears, after hearing once again that the police bureau hadn't made any progress…Xie Qingcheng finally broke down.

Mental illness was like an omnipresent demon, capable of rotting away the heart of a formerly indomitable young man.

Xie Qingcheng's cognitive faculties didn't even seem to belong to him anymore as he took hold of a knife…and pressed it to his wrist.

"I want to live."

"I want to see her grow up."

"Doctor Qin, can you save me…?"

That resolute voice already seemed like an echo from another lifetime.

The blade slashed down ruthlessly.

The slash was very deep, sending blood spurting out…

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes.

As it turned out, to someone whose heart had endured so much torment, dying was incredibly easy.

Blood dripped from the wound.

In the middle of the night, at the mouth of a deserted alley, beneath the wide eaves blocking the curtain of rain, Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and allowed his life to drain out of that wound, drop by drop.

He felt like he was no longer Xie Qingcheng. He was only an empty shell, a rotting carcass…

"Xiao-Xie! Xiao-Xie!"

He vaguely made out the shape of a man getting out of a taxi.

That man was tall and imposing and held a large black umbrella. He looked so much like his father…

Qin Ciyan could have never imagined that his return to Huzhou, simply passing Xie Qingcheng's house on the way from the airport, would show him such a sorrowful scene.

He rushed out of the car and reached out a hand to the youth sitting curled up on the steps.

"What are you doing? Doesn't that hurt?"

Xie Qingcheng lifted his head to look at him, like a small animal without a home.

His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Qin Ciyan propped him upright and lifted him onto his back. The doctor tilted the umbrella, paying no mind to the torrential rain soaking his clothes as he carefully adjusted it to cover the child lying across his shoulders. "Let's go. It's going to be okay. I'm taking you to the hospital.

"I'm taking you to the hospital, Xiao-Xie. Hang in there."

From that day onward, Qin Ciyan knew that Xie Qingcheng's illness wasn't an ordinary psychological issue.

He gave his old schoolmate in America a call. After listening to his story, his schoolmate flipped through the relevant medical records to discover that similar cases had appeared among subjects who had taken the drug in America.

But none of those people had lived very long.

Their bodies and minds were ravaged too severely. In the end, they spent every waking moment struggling against the most negative human emotions.

Emotional despair was even more frightening than physical pain.

When their conversation ended, Qin Ciyan stood alone on his porch for a very long time.

He truly liked Xie Qingcheng very much. Anyone who had witnessed that child's perseverance and maturity would find it impossible not to like him. If anyone could ultimately conquer the suffering of the human heart, Qin Ciyan thought it would surely be Xie Qingcheng…as long as he had someone who could genuinely understand and care for him.

By coincidence, Qin Ciyan had been temporarily transferred for work. He could remain in Huzhou for over half a year.

And so, he made a decision. He decided to keep Xie Qingcheng by his side, to treat him like his adopted son.

However, this matter couldn't be made public—after all, if his colleagues at the First Affiliated Hospital of Yanzhou University found out that Xie Qingcheng was the child from that disastrous car accident, he would surely come under investigation. RN-13 was a prohibited drug, so never mind Qin Ciyan's career—Xie Qingcheng would face the terrifying threat of becoming a research subject.

Because of that, hardly anyone knew about the close relationship between Qin Ciyan and Xie Qingcheng.

Qin Ciyan was half a father to Xie Qingcheng. He gave Xie Qingcheng a new life, gave a youth on the brink of death the courage to live on. He gave this dead boy whose soul had rotted away a new sense of meaning.

Over the course of those long months that they spent in each other's company, Qin Ciyan became Xie Qingcheng's psychological pillar.

No matter what negative emotions Xie Qingcheng experienced, Professor Qin accepted them all and soothed them.

Qin Ciyan's wisdom, his erudition, and selfless healing also gave Xie Qingcheng, who had lost his dream, a radiant new gleam of light.

He couldn't become a policeman.

But perhaps he could become a doctor.

A doctor like Qin Ciyan.

As days turned into months, Qin Ciyan taught Xie Qingcheng to regulate his emotions with painstaking patience, while simultaneously taking him under his wing as a scholar, guiding him on the path to become a doctor.

Just as He Yu had immersed himself in hacking, the young Xie Qingcheng found a distraction he could focus on by burying himself in his studies. Using this method, he was gradually able to bring his symptoms under his control.

Qin Ciyan gave him the opportunity to study at his friend's research institute as an ordinary student. That chance was the encouragement he needed to keep conquering his hardships.

That research institute was sponsored by He Jiwei.

No one knew that Qin Ciyan and Xie Qingcheng were close—they behaved indifferently in front of other people, like acquaintances who only ever nodded to each other in passing. Whenever Qin Ciyan wanted to give Xie Qingcheng an academic opportunity, he did so under the pretext that he was organizing

special interest groups for the younger generation, rather than directly asking his friends to allow Xie Qingcheng to join their research labs.

Meanwhile, Xie Qingcheng never failed to live up to Qin Ciyan's high expectations—a prodigy through and through, he quickly understood and mastered every new concept that came his way.

It was as if RN-13 had made him even smarter. Over the course of the next decade, Xie Qingcheng learned more than any ordinary person possibly could have as he followed in Qin Ciyan's footsteps.

In addition to medicine, Xie Qingcheng also achieved astonishing distinction in the life sciences. He even began to privately research adjuvant drugs for RN-13 and, as a psychological Ebola patient, started investigating the pathology of the disease.

And then one day, Xie Qingcheng had an unexpected realization—

He himself would make an excellent test subject.

Since he had taken the full course of RN-13, thereby being designated as the first case, his body could handle pharmaceutical testing that no ordinary person could endure.

Through those experiments, he could seek answers to research problems related to many common illnesses, leading to new treatments—just like Shennong testing hundreds of herbs on his own body.[2]

Xie Qingcheng felt like his short life might not be meaningless after all.

He could no longer be the Xie Qingcheng of the past—he'd been forced to abandon his first dream and gave up his pursuit of the truth behind his parents' deaths—but at least he was no longer useless.

He could let scarlet stamens bloom from his suffering, let his own life be a light for those who lived in pain and lead them out of

the endless, suffocating darkness.

He recorded, stored, and organized the data, stained with his own blood, which later became what some called the First Emperor Data, or the First Emperor’s Dossier.

Chapter 92:
He Was a Beam of Reclaimed Light

FROM THAT POINT ON, Xie Qingcheng worked around the clock conducting experiments, forgoing food and sleep…as if it was the only thing keeping his mind at peace.

This was the only way he could feel that his life hadn't been completely destroyed, that it still had value.

But the problem with constantly using his own body to perform experiments was that, even as someone who'd been perfectly repaired by RN-13, there were still instances where it was impossible for him to withstand the physical pain.

Even though patients with psychological Ebola had duller senses than ordinary people, this kind of bone-searing pain was still too much to bear.

Xie Qingcheng always conducted these experiments without Qin Ciyan's knowledge.

Until the day when Qin Ciyan came over to fetch something and inadvertently walked in on him using his own arm to test a new burn medication—that was when his self-destructive research methods came to light.

Absolutely furious, Qin Ciyan immediately halted his studies at the research institute.

"Is your life not a life?" he asked Xie Qingcheng. "Who are you trying to torture, acting like this?"

"It doesn't hurt."

"The people who benefit from the results of your experiments will feel hurt!" Qin Ciyan said, livid. "Do you know why I rejected my friend in the United States? Do you know why I didn't participate in the research and development of RN-13?! It's obvious that this drug

can save people, and it has clearly saved several experimental subjects, but I still think it's not a good thing! Do you know why?! Because no medical experiment is more important than human life. Saving lives may be one of the purposes of scientific research, but not when it's founded on the blood of living people!"

Xie Qingcheng wrapped gauze around his wound before slowly lowering his snowy-white sleeve. Then he rose to his feet, met Qin Ciyan's eyes, and said, "But Laoshi, this is the only thing I can do now. Since I got sick, I feel like I've become a complete waste of space. I can't do any of the things that used to come so easily to me anymore.

"Can you understand how helpless I feel when my strength fades away, no matter how much I struggle to hold onto it? It's like facing time, or gravity—facing everything that cannot be defied.

"I tried to get used to it, but I can't… My body is completely healed, but my heart feels like it's been rotting away ever since that car accident that should have killed me. I often wake up from my dreams and feel like my chest is hollow… I want to cut open my own chest with a knife and see what's still left inside.

"I feel like I'm just a dead soul borrowing a corpse to inhabit. I'm not useful for anything else, besides taking care of my family."

As Xie Qingcheng said this, he closed his eyes.

"But I can't even take care of my family members properly. My sister is just a child, and I know she meant no harm, but she's told me on multiple occasions that she feels I've changed. She thinks that I'm…" Xie Qingcheng's voice choked up, and he paused for a long time before saying with difficulty, "She thinks that I'm…not her dage."

At that point, no matter how much he tried to resist, the rims of his eyes still turned red.

The reason he'd persevered and fought to stay alive to begin with was his baby sister. But now, even his little sister accused him of this.

The girl was only five years old. She didn't calculate her words, she just said whatever she felt. Her verbal assault wasn't intentional; rather, it stemmed from a child's distress and unease.

Xie Qingcheng felt like he was stained all over with blood, like he was covered in invisible pathogens from head to toe. After a while, he'd stopped daring to even pick her up.

At night, he sat dully by her bed and gazed down at that little living being through the hazy moonlight.

She loved him. That was why her words cut him the deepest.

It was like after the crash tore him apart, he'd painstakingly gathered up his heart from the bloodbath, and, cupping it in his hands, he'd sewn his destroyed body back together like he was patching up a tattered teddy bear. No matter how shattered he was, he still wanted to return to the girl's side.

Covered in filth and obvious seams, that teddy bear crawled clumsily out of the trash and back to his home. He lifted his big hands and slowly beckoned toward the little girl he cherished the most.

No one knew how much he'd paid for this chance to wave clumsily at her.

But she said, "*You're not him.*" She looked at that ragged cloth bear and said, "*You're not Gege.*"

"Look at you. You're trailing loose threads; you're all torn up."

"I want Gege…"

"Gege's whole and unharmed. Gege wouldn't be covered in such frightening wounds."

"Gege wouldn't scare me."

"I've returned from hell. But I think I lost myself," Xie Qingcheng said quietly. "I wasn't like this before my injury. Before, I never lost my temper with her. Before, I had the strength to carry her on my back all the way home. Before…"

While Xie Qingcheng spoke, his expression remained largely blank. It made him seem very heartless, like he had no emotions at all.

But now he trailed off, unable to continue. The back of his throat tasted unspeakably bitter.

Qin Ciyan knew it wasn't that he didn't feel sorrow, but rather that his return from the gates of death had stripped him of the emotions he was owed as a human being.

To stay alive, he had to constantly remain calm. Every intense emotion triggered his mental illness, and every time his illness flared, his condition worsened.

Xie Qingcheng paused for a long time. Then he said numbly, "I don't think there's any reason for me to keep living. I can't bring her happiness, and there's nothing of value I can give to anyone. I don't want to be a burden, but I also don't want to pass from this earth without leaving behind something meaningful. I was in such deep despair—until you brought me to the lab. Until I discovered that…my mind, my body…can endure an unnatural degree of stress. In certain areas of disease research, I can use this numb body to go further than anyone else.

"It really doesn't hurt, Laoshi. Blood and pain don't mean much to me; what scares me the most is the death of my heart. What scares me is not being able to do anything, to live as a complete waste of space. I don't want to be like that."

He looked up to gaze at Qin Ciyan, and those peach-blossom eyes seemed to be filled with great swathes of withered branches.

"Laoshi, I'm miserable. I don't want other people to go through the same misery. Last weekend at the lab, I met a child with brain cancer. He was very little, maybe seven or eight years old—his parents were heartbroken, but they refused to give up hope… Humans cannot defeat sickness, but the impossibility of victory doesn't mean we should give up without a fight.

"I don't want to succumb to suffering either. Maybe it's over for me, but at least in these invisible battles against disease, I can do what normal people can't. I think this might be the reason for my survival…for the next twenty years of my life. Even if I die, I'll die standing. Even if I die, I'll do the things that I ought to do. Laoshi… this is my reason to keep living."

Blood seeped out from under the gauze.

"I'm very sorry for keeping this from you for so long."

Qin Ciyan couldn't put a name to what he was feeling at the time.

Anger? Heartache?

Neither seemed to be an adequate word for what he was feeling.

He thought, *What exactly is life? What is the core that gives every person the support to keep living?*

It was your existence, and your values.

It was the things that you did, and the amount of passion you poured into them.

Life was never about receiving things—that kind of support could let people live better, that's all. But no matter how many things you obtained, when it was time to dance with death, the reaper would take away everything you ever had along with your decaying corpse.

The things that remained on earth, the things that could help you conquer death? That could only be what you put out into the world.

That was what would separate from you upon death and remain in the realm of the living when you were gone. Those things originated from you, but because you selflessly offered them to the people of the world, they no longer belonged to you. Not even death could take them away.

These were the mightiest feats that could be accomplished by the most insignificant of mortals.

Xie Qingcheng had always understood this very clearly. For someone like him, becoming a useless good-for-nothing, unable to do anything or take on any responsibilities, was exceptionally painful. That kind of pain was more agonizing than death by a thousand cuts. It tore through his heart, through his very core.

So when he realized that he still had some value, he threw himself into his work at the research institute. He toiled day and night as he used his own flesh to light that lamp in the darkness.

That was why he used his own body to conduct experiments.

Qin Ciyan heaved a long sigh. Xie Qingcheng saw that the doctor's eyes were brimming with tears behind his thick glasses.

"What about your parents?" Qin Ciyan gazed at him, gentle yet sorrowful. "You said that you don't want to see the parents of children with brain cancer in pain, that you don't want to see other people suffer like you did. But Xie Qingcheng, can't you see those two pairs of eyes in the sky? You haven't been alone since birth. Your parents may be gone, but they once loved you so much. Never mind how I feel—if you treat yourself like this, how brokenhearted do you think they would be?"

The doctor walked over to his student—their relationship kept secret, a conversation no one else heard.

In this chilly laboratory, a merciful warmth thawed the cold.

Qin Ciyan lifted a hand and stroked Xie Qingcheng's hair.

"Do you know why I did what I did—why I disregarded the rules, the danger, everything—in order to save you? I've never told you, have I? In addition to my daughter, I also had a son. He died in a car accident. Before he passed, the last thing he said to me was 'Dad, I don't want to die.'" Qin Ciyan closed his eyes. "I'll never forget those words, or those eyes, for as long as I live.

"If it were possible to bring him back, even if he were in a vegetative state, even if his personality changed drastically, I would be willing to do anything. There's nothing more painful than seeing your own family die before your eyes. Xiao-Xie, your parents didn't have a choice when they left this world, but you have one. You shouldn't debase yourself like this. Living well and experiencing all the beauty and vitality that the world has to offer would also be a meaningful life.

"Xie Xue is still young—the only reason she said those things is because she doesn't understand anything yet. Children are unembellished and forthright, but they also don't know how to express themselves perfectly. You'll always be the most important person in her heart. If one day you can no longer return to her side, she'll be overwhelmed with grief and helplessly lost."

Seeing that Xie Qingcheng was about to speak, he shook his head, as if he already knew what the boy wanted to say. In a voice that was gentle and sorrowful yet brooked no argument, Qin Ciyan said, "I think I'm qualified to speak to you like this. I can understand your feelings—over the course of our lives, you lost your parents, while I lost my child."

Standing frozen in place, Xie Qingcheng saw the faint glimmer of tears hidden in the wrinkled corners of Qin Ciyan's eyes. After a while, the doctor's long-suppressed tears finally slid down his wizened face.

"If your parents were still alive, they wouldn't want to see you doing this, Xiao-Xie. For your life to have meaning, you must first live well."

From that day on, Qin Ciyan forbade Xie Qingcheng from studying at He Jiwei's biochemical pharmacology lab.

He Jiwei was puzzled by this—he thought Xie Qingcheng was an extremely rare talent and that it was a waste not to properly cultivate his abilities. But in the end, in accordance with Qin Ciyan's

wishes, the young Xie Qingcheng thanked He Jiwei for looking after him and left his laboratory.

Qin Ciyan created a cover story to conceal the experiments conducted by Xie Qingcheng, saying that they had been done on a "theoretical individual." He misled everyone into thinking that the "First Emperor" was a simulated person and that the First Emperor's data was just the results of computational studies. From that point on, Qin Ciyan kept an even closer eye on Xie Qingcheng, protecting him as if he were the son who could never come back.

He could see how bewildered Xie Qingcheng was—after losing his direction once again, he seemed very lonely, his emotional state increasingly unstable.

And Qin Ciyan would soon be dispatched back to Yanzhou for work.

Before he left, he took Xie Qingcheng to an aquarium. Qin Ciyan had pondered his options for a very long time, but sea creatures were often the best at healing people's hearts.

"This is a nurse shark, that's—yes, the one swimming in the furthest corner—that's a lemon shark."

Like a loving father with his son, Qin Ciyan walked through the dark blue aquarium with Xie Qingcheng in tow, ice cream cones in both of their hands.

Perhaps he really was just a loving father.

As the waters glimmered unfathomably, as the interplay of light and shadow hazily unfolded, the one standing by his side became the son whom he would never get to see grow up.

Finally, they arrived at the jellyfish palace.

The walls in that section of the aquarium were all made of gleaming planes of transparent glass, with crystalline columns standing in the center of the hall.

Behind that glass, drifting gently up and down, were thousands upon thousands of jellyfish.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes widened slightly as he walked in.

He felt as if he'd entered a primordial world, where creatures from 650 million years ago swam leisurely around him, their translucent, gleaming bodies pulsating gently. They were like willow catkins dancing in the wind, like snowflakes falling through the sky, like the first gleam of morning sun in early summer or the last pool of flower petals in late spring.

The magnificence of every season brewed within these organisms made of water. Accompanied by the ethereal tinkling of the music box melody that played within the jellyfish palace, they drew people's hearts deep into the depths, to sink into the distant ice age, twenty thousand leagues under the sea.

Xie Qingcheng walked through the long, winding glass tunnel that glistened with rippling water, and for the first time since the onset of his sickness, he felt the return of a long-lost calm in his heart.

It was nothing like the calm he forced upon himself. This calm was genuine and true, comfortable and relaxed.

"So pretty," he murmured, watching as a massive jellyfish floated past like a cloud of gray smoke.

Qin Ciyan beamed at him. "Creatures like jellyfish don't have brains, hearts, spines, or eyes… They are 95 percent water. Their lives aren't very long either, only a few short months. Even the longest-lived deep-sea jellyfish only lives a few years. But look, their lives are so simple and carefree that they're an inherently beautiful sight. They make a lot of people feel extraordinarily calm just by looking at them."

"Do you feel that way too?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"Back when I was young, when I was studying in America, I'd go to the aquarium there once a month, for no other reason than to just find some peace amidst all that frustration. I'd sit down in the jellyfish section the moment I got there and stay the whole afternoon." Qin Ciyan's smile was tinged with nostalgia. "So many

years have gone by in a blink… The ticket taker at that aquarium even told me, if I couldn't find myself a wife in the future, I could come pick out a jellyfish free of charge to take home and marry. The aquarium would even officiate the wedding, ha ha ha ha."

Xie Qingcheng turned to look at him.

Surrounded by the soft glow of moon jellies, like pure moonlight submerged in the depths of the ocean, he looked at Qin Ciyan and finally smiled.

It was the first time since becoming ill that such a relaxed smile unfolded on his face.

"Thank you, Lao-Qin."

"It's nothing, little devil."

Qin Ciyan left, returning to Yanzhou.

But Xie Qingcheng slowly found a working method to control his emotions. That was what his father figure taught him, the precious gift he'd given him.

And so, just like Qin Ciyan had over two decades earlier, he often visited the jellyfish palace to watch these creatures from 650 million years ago. The young Qin Ciyan became the young Xie Qingcheng, the silhouettes of the two doctors overlapping within the world of countless drifting jellyfish.

Whenever Xie Qingcheng felt his sickness getting worse, his senses going numb, his heart growing abnormally stifled, he would watch those jellyfish videos—

They had no eyes.

They couldn't see the light.

They had no hearts.

They couldn't feel heartbreak.

They had no brains.

Emotions didn’t exist to them—they were creatures far more unfeeling than he.

But they were still carefree as they used their bodies, which were 95 percent water, as ink to paint pictures capable of soothing human hearts.

Qin Ciyan had said that the meaning of life was living well. These jellyfish seemed to be the best interpretation of living well.

Day after day, time flew by. In the end, through his own efforts, Xie Qingcheng became extremely calm, composed, and peaceful.

His status as patient zero of psychological Ebola remained unknown to anyone but the two of them.

“In certain aspects, you’ve already defeated this disease. As long as you continue like this without any more flare-ups, you’ll be able to live peacefully until the age of forty,” Qin Ciyan said. “Or possibly even longer.”

That “even longer” was because the Americans had developed a new, highly effective medicine in their life science labs.

Their research on RN-13 had been halted by the continental legal authorities, as the people launched mass protests against their inhumane use of homeless people as test subjects in their clinical trials. Due to the pressure, the research institution destroyed their entire supply of RN-13 and directed all their funding toward the treatment of patients who had been used as test subjects.

Extending the lifespan of RN-13 test subjects became their primary objective.

Fundamentally speaking, RN-13 borrowed metabolic cycles from the body’s future balance, shortening the patient’s lifespan each time it miraculously healed them. After years of work, however, they’d developed a sustained-release medication containing a compound that could significantly slow a person’s metabolism.

Ordinary people would die if they took too much of this medication, but RN-13 test subjects could endure it. In fact, it could greatly decrease the rate at which their cells replicated, thereby extending their lifespans.

And this time, the medicine's efficacy had been proven through repeated clinical trials.

"As long as you keep taking it, given your self-control, you'll be like any normal person—you could live into your seventies or eighties," Qin Ciyan told Xie Qingcheng. "You might even live longer than me."

The words "normal person" stirred something in Xie Qingcheng's heart. It had been a very long time since he last felt that those words were within his reach. Ever since he took RN-13, he'd believed that he would never be able to live a normal, complete life again.

"What are its side effects?" He suppressed the slight quaver in his voice.

"You really are no fool." Qin Ciyan sighed. "But the side effects aren't unacceptable… Your reaction time, the sharpness of your mind, and other such abilities that depend on cell activation will all decline. However, you are very intelligent to begin with. If you don't take this medication, you'll be able to make extraordinary contributions, but if you do take it…your abilities will become less outstanding over time. But Xiao-Xie, even if this treatment weakens your mind, you can still become an exceptional psychiatrist. But you can *only* be a doctor—you won't be able to keep extending your efforts to other disciplines as you did before. Becoming a prodigy in many different fields would be off the table.

"Why don't you take some time to think about it."

Xie Qingcheng had already been admitted to the psychiatry program at the medical school. He planned to receive his bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees after eight years of continuous study.

He'd originally intended to devote his time each semester not only to a full course load, but also to continuing his research in biochemical pharmacology. He had already received Qin Ciyan's approval.

His current state of mind was very stable. Even if he had trouble controlling himself every so often, he simply used his jellyfish videos to suppress those symptoms. The moment he saw those ancient floating life forms, he calmed down quickly, the edge taken off of his intense emotions—it was a reflex he had conditioned himself into.

He would absolutely never use self-harm to advance his research again. That was why Qin Ciyan had agreed to his request.

But with the appearance of a cure, Xie Qingcheng was once again pushed to a crossroads—

Should he return to the ranks of normal people, give up his research, and settle on becoming a doctor?

Or should he continue walking down this treacherous path, complete a mission that no ordinary person could achieve, and leave this world at the age of forty?

He had to make a choice.

But that was when it happened—

Something that cut Xie Qingcheng to his core.

Chapter 93:
He Was a Person Hidden from Sight

IN RECENT YEARS, there were three known domestic cases of psychological Ebola. Case #3 had been monitored and treated at a private hospital.

And it was during that time that Case #3 died suddenly.

He went mad before his death, completely losing his self-awareness and even accidentally killing his own father, who had constantly stayed by his bedside to look after him.

When he heard the news, Xie Qingcheng sat in a daze for a long time.

Aside from him, Case #3 was the patient who had resisted the illness for the longest. Xie Qingcheng had even followed the research team and supervised his treatment for a while.

Back then, Case #3 was still normal—so normal that Xie Qingcheng thought he would beat this.

But in the end, he still died.

Blood was splattered everywhere in the sickroom, like countless red spider lilies in full bloom.

The surveillance footage showed that during his flare-up, Case #3 had torn into his father with his teeth like an utterly deranged madman. Based on the blurry footage alone, if someone watching the video hadn't been told beforehand that this patient was a human being, they might have thought that he was a ferocious, flesh-eating, blood-sucking monster.

"He didn't recognize his father at all."

"His dad was shouting his name the whole time, but it was useless."

"It's so terrifying…"

Xie Qingcheng thought through the contents of that video over and over again. He remembered all the grisly details people had told him. Finally, he thought back to when Case #3 had still been clear-headed, and how he didn't seem like someone who would succumb to suffering.

Case #3's disease had already reached its terminal stage, so the newly developed drug from the United States couldn't alleviate his condition. But Xie Qingcheng still had a choice… He still had a chance.

As the day of Case #3 and his father's funeral drew to a close, Xie Qingcheng sought out Qin Ciyan and said, "Laoshi, I'm willing to take the new medicine."

It was time to get back on the right track.

He could still get everything back on the right track—that in itself was a kindness bestowed upon him by fate.

Once Xie Qingcheng began taking that highly effective drug, he could feel that his mind was no longer as agile as before. However, health and strength slowly returned to his body.

One day, after finishing a five-kilometer cross-country run with a sandbag strapped to his back, he finally realized that he was no longer patient zero.

He was Xie Qingcheng.

He was the Xie Qingcheng who could, as he had once imagined, enter the ranks of the police and don an officer's uniform.

But unfortunately, although his constitution had returned, he couldn't recover the years that had passed.

His first dream had already forever passed him by. In his present reality, he would finish his studies, graduate, and become a psychiatrist, and then he would serenely and peacefully live out his life.

At that time, he didn't want to get involved in anything too dramatic, nor did he have the mental stamina to support very many different undertakings.

Xie Qingcheng planned to put all of his remaining energy into eradicating mental illness. He remembered what hell was like. He didn't want anyone else to descend into its depths.

That was why he didn't immediately accept when He Jiwei asked him to serve as He Yu's personal physician. He didn't have that much energy to expend.

Of course saving a person was important, but there were many other problems he could delve into and surmount—for example, so many people suffered from depression, bipolar disorder, autism…on and on.

If he hadn't seen how Lü Zhishu treated her child, if he hadn't seen with his own eyes that He Yu suffered even more deeply than he once had, he wouldn't have stayed at all.

He Yu was something of an unexpected mishap in his life.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't tell anyone that he had also been subjected to RN-13, that he was the First Emperor of legend.

But in the end, he chose to stay by Case #4's side—to stand beside that lonely child.

On that day, with the fragrant summer hydrangeas in full bloom, when that fledgling dragon curled up helplessly and called out with such sorrow, hoping that any living person could understand his suffering and resonate with his frequency, Xie Qingcheng heard his lonely cries. But he couldn't respond—he could only look at him calmly and hold his hand out to that youth, just as Qin Ciyan had once done for him, and ask:

Doesn't it hurt?

Everything was supposed to unfold peacefully, just like that.

According to the contract he had signed with He Jiwei, he was going to stay with He Yu for ten years. He Yu's life was sorely lacking

love and care, so he led a far more desolate and miserable existence than any other psychological Ebola patient.

"None of you understand me," he'd said, unaware that there was one other patient who had almost completely conquered his disease and lived as a normal person.

Although Xie Qingcheng did his best to support him, there was so much he couldn't disclose. He used to worry that his encouragement wouldn't make much of an impression on He Yu. But fortunately, He Yu wasn't all that rebellious; when it came down to it, he was surprisingly obedient. He committed Xie Qingcheng's teachings firmly to memory, blindly imitating Xie Qingcheng's calm attitude as he followed in his mentor's footsteps.

Xie Qingcheng should have been able to lead him out of the deep quagmire of illness that way—if Qin Ciyan hadn't met with misfortune.

"Lao-Qin, sometimes you really are too reckless."

For the umpteenth time, Qin Ciyan had become the target of medical disturbances, reports, and complaints due to his kindness and his consideration for his patients.

Xie Qingcheng was standing next to the window in his office, watching the heavy rain come down.

Qin Ciyan was in his sixties now. After retiring from his position in Yanzhou, he had been rehired by the medical school in Huzhou. As for Xie Qingcheng, he had already graduated and become a doctor at Huzhou First Hospital.

As always, they never exhibited their familiar relationship in front of others. None of Qin Ciyan's disciples knew that Doctor Xie of the psychiatry department was technically their da-shixiong.[3] Xie Qingcheng stood hidden away in the dark, never to be known.

"Look at you, acting so cheeky. Haven't I dealt with this before? Who cares if they stage medical disturbances? When

patients are in a bad mood and don't understand what's going on, sometimes they get frustrated. But I'm a doctor, right? Doctors can't let patients lead them around by the nose, or allow them to dictate their own course of treatment, right? If I have a way to help a patient, no matter how little the patient understands, I'm still going to do what I know is right. That's my responsibility. I'm already past sixty; I have to follow my conscience."

Xie Qingcheng frowned and let out a sigh. "Lao-Qin, some things have changed. Society has gotten more complicated. It's not as simple as you think. Yes, you're an old doctor—and our country's foremost scholar." Looking at Qin Ciyan's expression, Xie Qingcheng could tell that he wanted to interrupt, so he pressed on. "But it's not a question of how prestigious your position is. Sure, it's no big deal if they complain or report you; that doesn't affect you. But nowadays, medical disturbances go beyond paperwork—remember that man last time? He almost hit you."

"Which man?"

"The one whose wife had a head injury from a falling object—the one where they didn't know who'd thrown it yet."

"Oh…" Qin Ciyan said. "Ah, him."

"If security hadn't just happened to pass by and apprehend him, who knows how bad things could've gotten." Xie Qingcheng reminded him gravely. "That bastard had a cleaver on him. Don't forget it."

Embarrassed, Qin Ciyan fell silent.

When he was younger, he had usually been the one lecturing Xie Qingcheng. But now that he was older, his mind had broadened, his heart had softened, and his temper was much milder than it used to be.

Nowadays, Xie Qingcheng was usually the one who admonished him.

Qin Ciyan listened to Xie Qingcheng's many words of earnest advice, all of which boiled down to telling him that he couldn't disregard the rules like before and risk his life to get things done.

After listening to this lengthy spiel, Qin Ciyan suddenly grinned. The old man's smile wasn't very pretty, but Xie Qingcheng wanted to see him smile like that until he was a hundred years old, brimming with vitality as it spread across his face.

"Xiao-Xie, do you know what I'm thinking?" the old man asked. "I'm thinking that if Zhouzhou were alive, he would lecture me about how to fit into your generation—just like you."

Xie Qingcheng stopped his preaching.

Qin Ciyan beamed. He stood in his white coat with his hands clasped behind his back and looked at Xie Qingcheng, dressed in his own white coat.

"Then, do you know what I'm thinking?" Xie Qingcheng retorted.

"What?"

"I'm thinking that if my dad were still alive, he would be about your age. And if I said these kinds of things to him, he would most likely have the same blithe attitude as you."

Qin Ciyan burst out laughing as he stepped forward to clap Xie Qingcheng on the shoulder.

"I hear you, I hear you. Don't worry so much, Xiao-Xie; I'm confident that people's hearts aren't as vicious as you think… Stop looking at me like that, will you? I'll be careful in the future. Surely that's enough?"

But Xie Qingcheng could tell that he hadn't really heard him at all.

Qin Ciyan hadn't heard him; Qin Ciyan was just humoring him.

Even after that conversation, Qin Ciyan insisted on putting his patients first, even if that meant violating the hospital's regulations.

It was because he was a doctor, he said, and to a doctor, dogmas, rules, and even reputation came second—he was a doctor because he wanted to save people. If complaints, reports, and medical disturbances scared him so much that he couldn't even do that, then what was the point of being a doctor at all?

A person with ideals could be hurt, tortured, or even killed, but their heart could never be defeated.

If the old man didn't want to change his ways, there was nothing Xie Qingcheng could do to convince him. The only thing he was grateful for was that after the Esteemed Master Qin's daughter moved abroad and got married, he stopped taking nearly as many overtime shifts, likely because he wanted to spend more time at home with his wife.

But Qin Ciyan had spent his whole life rushing about and wasn't accustomed to having time to himself, so when he was resting at home, he began to compile his writings.

Qin Ciyan had accumulated a huge amount of experience over the years. If he were to organize and transcribe everything, then edit and compile it, his creation would be a true magnum opus, a work that could help so many people trapped in the throes of illness.

But before Lao-Qin could finish his book, a shadow was cast over the skies of Huzhou.

Yi Beihai's crime snatched away the life of this old man, a man who had devoted the better part of his life to going above and beyond for his patients. If it hadn't been for Yi Beihai, he would have made it home to celebrate his birthday with his wife.

When it happened, he still had the gift Xie Qingcheng had left in his office that morning in his pocket. It was a silk handkerchief made by the top embroidery artist in Suzhou—like many of his generation, Qin Ciyan still carried a handkerchief on his person.

The handkerchief was custom-made, embroidered with many tiny moon jellyfish in pale silver thread. The artist's skill was so

exquisite that the jellies seemed to drift along the fabric when the sun shone onto the handkerchief.

Later, Xie Qingcheng saw that handkerchief among the victim's belongings documented by the police.

It was soaked in blood. The design was completely obscured.

That 650-million-year-old gentle benevolence withered in the hands of a thirty-something-year-old murderous thug, just like that.

That was when Xie Qingcheng became addicted to smoking. It was as though Qin Ciyan's cigarettes had fallen right into his hands. Every time he took a drag and smelled that familiar scent, it felt like the old man had never left.

On the day of Qin Ciyan's memorial service, many of the hospital staff attended the ceremony.

Xie Qingcheng had also put in a request, but the hospital rejected it. After all, he was neither Qin Ciyan's student, nor a comrade from his department who had battled alongside him. His department had already chosen a representative to attend the funeral. The death of a fellow was cause for mourning, of course, but the hospital still needed to operate as normal. Not everyone could take a leave of absence to send Esteemed Master Qin off on his final journey. Only the most important people in his life were afforded that privilege.

And Xie Qingcheng was nobody.

No one would ever know who had gifted Qin Ciyan the handkerchief that had been found among his effects.

No one would know who told the embroiderer to write: *For Laoshi.*

When Xie Qingcheng died on the hunt for the truth behind his parents' deaths, it was Qin Ciyan who gave him a new life. All those years ago, on a snowy day in Yanzhou, the path of a man who had forever lost his beloved son crossed that of a youth whose parents had left him behind.

What followed was two decades of companionship unknown to anyone else. As the years stretched on, the man became an elder, and the youth rushed toward forty. They were like master and disciple, like father and son, like a pair of brothers, like comrades in arms.

On a million-year timescale, perhaps friendships between two people disappeared in the blink of an eye—but they were never inconsequential. Because every sincere emotion, noble ideal, and unadulterated kindness was imbued with this world's most profound and lofty power.

A walking corpse like Yi Beihai would never understand that at any point in his mediocre life.

On the day his shifu was cremated, the "nobody" Xie Qingcheng stayed behind in the consultation room seeing patients who all complained of their own troubles, one after another.

At ten thirty, he pressed the button to temporarily halt the calling of new patient numbers.

He stood up and walked over to the window. That tiny square opening became the last bridge between his teacher and himself.

There were many times Qin Ciyan had found some excuse to stroll over to his department. He'd smile, say a few words to Xie Qingcheng, and smoke a cigarette at this window.

Xie Qingcheng used to get so annoyed with him. *"Can't you quit? Smoking like this at your age when you're a doctor of all things—it's ridiculous."*

Qin Ciyan would just laugh. *"You little brat, bossing your laoshi around again."*

Outside, the rain came down in torrents. It was exactly the same as that day when Qin Ciyan reached out to him as he sat on the steps in unspeakable exhaustion.

The sirens wailed as police cars cleared the way. Even from high up in the hospital building, he could hear the mournful cries of

the people saying their goodbyes to the eminent university fellow Professor Qin.

The mourners watched as the hearse made its slow, solemn way up the avenue, holding pure white chrysanthemums in their hands as words like "a selfless and benevolent doctor" and "the country's foremost scholar" poured out of their mouths in eulogy.

But as Xie Qingcheng stood by the little window and watched the hearse through the curtain of rain, he could only remember Qin Ciyan smiling as he said:

"Xiao-Xie, you're lecturing me again. If Zhouzhou were still alive, he'd be about your age. He'd probably give his old man an earful, just like you."

It had been over two decades since Zhouzhou left this world. Enough time had passed that the father who had buried his son before his time could finally talk about him to Xie Qingcheng. Qin Ciyan spoke calmly and gently in the brilliant light of the afternoon sun.

And now, as Xie Qingcheng witnessed his final departure, he lit a cigarette.

Then he placed it on the windowsill where Qin Ciyan had often stood, smoking as he cracked jokes with Xie Qingcheng.

The ash whispered as it fell.

As the rain poured down, the haze took the shape of the jellyfish of Brooklyn, drifting there from an earlier time—from when Qin Ciyan studied in America, when the esteemed scholar was still a young student—to bid farewell to this spotlessly pure elder.

"This is the last cigarette, Lao-Qin."

Xie Qingcheng stood in the smoke, murmuring softly as he closed his eyes.

At that moment, the smell of smoke made him feel very calm. It was as if Qin Ciyan had yet to pass away, as if those terrifying events had never occurred.

That old man was still standing, his back slightly stooped, by his side. Soon, he'd head back to his adjoining office, gently closing his door behind him when he left. Xie Qingcheng could almost hear that faint *click*.

But he knew it was nothing but his imagination.

His teacher, his father figure, the best doctor he'd ever met, the kind, loving mentor and parent he never expected to find again, was never coming back.

The motorcade outside slowly drove into the distance, firecrackers sounded solemnly, and the cigarette in the room burnt out.

Xie Qingcheng took a bouquet of lilies from the vase in his office and gently tossed the white flowers out the window to fall to the ground below. He knew that Qin Ciyan didn't like chrysanthemums, that the old fellow would have rather been sent off with fragrant lilies.

At that moment, Xie Qingcheng's tears finally flowed like rain.

It was as though he'd suddenly become his younger self again, nearly twenty years gone. On that day, as he bade farewell to his teacher, he revisited his youth for the very last time.

Chapter 94:
He Tasted the Bitterness of Separation

QIN CIYAN PASSED away just like that.

But things were far from over, and the cruelest was yet to come.

After Esteemed Master Qin's death, the police came to do a further investigation. When they were looking into who had made first contact with Yi Beihai's mother, they suddenly came to call on Xie Qingcheng.

"The first time Yi Beihai's mother came to Huzhou First Hospital to seek treatment, she stood downstairs, unsure of how to register for an appointment. Was it you who went to inquire about the purpose of her visit?"

Xie Qingcheng's eyes were as calm as stagnant water.

"Yes, it was me."

This was part of why Xie Qingcheng had urged Qin Ciyan not to break the rules to treat that patient.

When Yi Beihai's mother first arrived in Huzhou, alone and helpless, carrying a meager bag of produce on her back and reeking of sweat, she stood in the hospital lobby for a whole day.

Eventually, a doctor getting off work noticed her, and after inquiring about the purpose of her visit, passed her information along to his coworkers.

That doctor was none other than Xie Qingcheng.

That day, Xie Qingcheng had simply pitied her a bit and given her a hand. When he passed along her medical information, he didn't know the patient's circumstances in much detail, nor did he know that this woman had an idle, irrational son at home.

Later, when he found out, he urged Qin Ciyan on multiple occasions not to cross any lines when handling this case.

"She has different circumstances from the others. We can apply for reduced fees, we can do our best, but you can't assume that just because you're a respected, prestigious university fellow, no one can do anything to you. Don't try to take everything on yourself. Lao-Qin, listen to me…"

"She's already in such serious condition." Qin Ciyan pushed up his thick glasses as he looked at the X-rays before him, responding to Xie Qingcheng without even looking back. "This is a matter of life and death—saving lives comes first."

It hadn't even just been Xie Qingcheng. Other doctors had cautioned him too. But their perspectives were different from Xie Qingcheng's. Xie Qingcheng was worried about a malpractice suit or a medical disturbance.

The other doctors' concern was that, all said and done, Qin Ciyan was getting old. He'd toiled away for his entire life and developed quite a few health issues himself: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar, and even blood clots. They suggested that he stick to minor surgeries and guiding the students below him to avoid straining himself.

"I've seen the X-rays too, Lao-Qin," one of the directors of neurosurgery said with a sigh. "The surgery is too difficult. The slightest error and we won't even be able to resuscitate her. And since this patient is benefiting from the hospital's welfare fund, there's a lot of attention on this case. If you fail, your reputation will take a hit. It's not worth the risk."

Qin Ciyan's voice was gentle, but his attitude was extremely firm.

"Then what is my reputation even worth?" He chuckled, then said placidly, "Compared to a human life, my reputation as Qin Ciyan is worth very little. I'm risking my prestige, but she's risking her life, isn't she?"

With that, he insisted on continuing.

Everyone thought he was being excessively optimistic, a complete idealist. It was only when the police came to investigate that they discovered…

Qin Ciyan was no fool—he did have his misgivings, and he had taken protective measures. Before walking into Yi Beihai's mother's operating room, he had told the nurses' station, front desk, and infirmary on multiple occasions:

"If the patient's family comes looking for me, no matter what the issue is, send them straight upstairs to my office to talk to me. Do not let them seek out any of the other doctors on the team, and especially not Doctor Xie, who helped the patient establish the necessary connections." The old man had even added with a laugh, "Doctor Xie isn't a member of our department, and he also has a cold personality. If they do end up talking to him, first of all, it'll be completely useless, and second, it'll quickly turn into an argument. So remember—send them straight to me."

Xie Qingcheng stood woodenly in his office as he listened to the police officer's account. It felt like all the strength had been sucked out of his body.

For a long, long time, he couldn't hear another word, couldn't make out a single sound. It was like all the power that had kept him going for the past decade had crumpled and fallen apart.

He was like a corpse.

He was already dead.

Yi Beihai could have sought out him instead…because the one who first made contact with his mother wasn't Lao-Qin. But Lao-Qin had…

His entire body ice-cold, Xie Qingcheng thought—

He was just a mentally ill patient, a psychological Ebola sufferer. He should have died a long time ago. How could the life of

someone like him be more important than the life of a flawlessly altruistic doctor like Qin Ciyan?

Why protect him like that… Why look after him like that?

He was just a patient! Just an invalid! He would die a thousand times if he could just return to that day, if he could know all of this before Yi Beihai walked up to Qin Ciyan's office.

He would trade it all.

Xie Qingcheng smoked constantly during that period, and his tobacco addiction became extremely severe.

Li Ruoqiu tried to advise him, to no avail. She observed his listlessness with puzzlement; she couldn't understand why the death of another doctor would strike such a huge mental blow.

No one could understand…

The only person on earth who knew the whole truth had already been reduced to ashes in the crematorium's raging inferno.

After a long period of soul-crushing depression, Xie Qingcheng finally rose to his feet, like a marionette on strings. He gathered his courage and paid a visit to Qin Ciyan's home.

The graying Madam Qin opened the door.

In the past, to avoid arousing suspicion, Xie Qingcheng had only visited Qin Ciyan's home when his wife was out of the house. He wasn't sure whether the old woman would believe him or understand why he had come.

He was there to collect the Esteemed Master Qin's as-yet-incomplete manuscript.

He didn't know how to repay the staggering kindness that Qin Ciyan had bestowed upon him over the course of his life. After thinking it over, the only thing he could think to do was pour his efforts into helping Qin Ciyan finish the work that he had left undone, to fulfill the old man's greatest aspiration.

Little did Xie Qingcheng know that he would only get halfway through his explanation before the woman's swollen eyes flickered faintly with light.

"Ah, so it's you…"

Xie Qingcheng started in surprise. "You know of me?"

"Neither of you said anything, but I'm no fool. I could tell that there was someone like you out there. Please come in, child."

Madam Qin invited him into the house.

Xie Qingcheng felt another wave of heartrending pain. Whenever he'd come to this house with Qin Ciyan in the past, they always got caught up in lengthy discussions about scholarship. Qin Ciyan would always carry a piping hot cup of longjing tea from the kitchen and press it into his hand.

"Xiao-Xie, have some tea."

But now, although the house remained the same, the old man was only a black-and-white photograph smiling from the wall.

Standing before that photograph, Xie Qingcheng found himself beyond speech for a very long time.

"Have some tea."

The voice surprised him. Lifting his head abruptly, he met Madam Qin's kindly yet deeply sorrowful eyes.

"I always knew that there was a child like you," she began. "After Zhouzhou passed, every year on our son's birthday, Lao-Qin would shut himself inside and refuse to go anywhere or talk to anyone. But then one year, he suddenly stopped. On Zhouzhou's birthday that year, I'd expected him to stay home and lock himself up just like before. But first thing in the morning, I saw him standing happily on the porch by himself with a bouquet of perfume lilies that he'd picked. I walked over, so shocked that I didn't dare say a word or make a sound. I even wondered if I'd gotten the date wrong…but I knew that was impossible.

"When he saw that I was up, he turned to me and said with a smile, 'The flowers have bloomed again. Aren't they beautiful?'"

Xie Qingcheng listened in silence, his eyes growing wet.

"In that instant, I knew that something must have happened, but he couldn't tell me. Or perhaps…perhaps there was someone who had let him free himself from the boulder in his heart that had been stifling him for so long."

At this point, Mrs. Qin took out a handkerchief to lightly dab away her tears. She was a very graceful lady from a scholarly family. Even in inconsolable sorrow, her bearing remained gentle.

"To tell you the truth, Xiao-Xie…the moment you walked through the door and spoke, I knew that it had to be you. You haven't lied to me. Perhaps you've always been grateful to Lao-Qin for saving you. But I want you to know…"

The irresistible urge to bring someone lost in the darkness back to shore despite your own unspeakable agony—that was true kindness.

Madam Qin's voice caught in her throat as she spoke through her tears.

"He and I are truly grateful to you as well. Thank you for entering our lives.

"You don't know this, but…the day of Zhouzhou's accident, he'd wanted to talk to Lao-Qin. He was so small then; he always wanted his father's attention. But Lao-Qin was far too busy that day, and he couldn't tend to him at all. He ignored Zhouzhou and shut himself in his study to work on a manuscript, then the hospital summoned him for an emergency consultation, so he rushed out of the house… When he left, he noticed that Zhouzhou wasn't there, but he didn't take the time to check on him. By the time he finished saving the patient, he had already missed over ten calls to his office."

Despite the many years that had passed, despite her advanced age, the mother was still heartbroken. She clearly hadn't spoken of

this to anyone in a very long time, so when she told the story to Xie Qingcheng, it was like she was once again that woman from all those decades ago, freshly mourning her beloved son.

She covered her face with her hands and wept.

"He didn't know that when he left home for the hospital, his own child had already gotten into a car accident… He rushed back, but there was only enough time left for him to say a final farewell to his son. It was miraculous how that child clung to life by a single breath… I knew that Zhouzhou just wanted to wait for his dad to get off from work and come see him. He loved his dad, he idolized him—he'd sit by the door waiting for him to come home practically every day. So even at the very end, as always, he stubbornly waited for his dad to come back…

"When he saw Lao-Qin, he only had time to say, 'Dad, I don't want to die,' and then he was gone…taking Lao-Qin's heart away with him.

"Lao-Qin always blamed himself. He thought that if he'd been more patient and devoted more time to the child, he wouldn't have run out the door… Back then…the last words he said to his son were…"

The youthful Qin Ciyan said to the small child in a severe tone:

"Don't bother me. I'm very busy, and I have a ton of work to do. Be quiet."

"Daddy, I…"

"Out."

Qin Ciyan didn't know that from that point on, his child would be quiet forevermore.

That he would never come back.

Xie Qingcheng bade Madam Qin farewell and took away two suitcases stuffed with thick piles of his teacher's disorganized files.

Madam Qin walked him out of the small red brick Western-style house, then saw him off with a shallow bow.

That was the first and last time Xie Qingcheng spoke to his mentor’s wife.

Not long afterward, she became the target of harassment from journalists and cyberbullying from internet celebrities over the fact that she was nearly a decade younger than Qin Ciyan. Multiple rumors claiming that she had started out as his mistress began to circulate, and someone even leaked her phone number. Between grieving the loss of her beloved husband and enduring those pointless-yet-painful stabs again and again, the kindhearted, gentle woman fell ill. Soon after, on a drizzly day, she passed away, following in her husband’s footsteps and reuniting with her long-lost son.

Xie Qingcheng was left behind in the world of the living. It was like he’d lost his parents a second time, torn from his family once again.

Chapter 95:
I Sent You Back to Shore Instead

ORGANIZING ALL the writing Qin Ciyan had produced over the course of his lifetime was a time-consuming undertaking.

A doctor's schedule was usually very busy, and since Xie Qingcheng had started taking the RN-13 medication, he no longer had the bandwidth to multitask like he used to. After thinking it over, he finally spoke to Li Ruoqiu about his plans to leave the hospital and become a lecturer at the university.

By then, Li Ruoqiu's feelings for Xie Qingcheng had faded. It was also right around this time that she met the married man she ended up having an affair with. She didn't care all that much about Xie Qingcheng anymore and allowed him to do as he wished.

But Xie Qingcheng had always been a very responsible person. He had married Li Ruoqiu only after he'd made the decision to take the sustained-release medication and become a normal person. If he knew he was going to die at age forty, or if he'd been unable to control his symptoms, he wouldn't have gotten a delicate woman involved.

Even though he was fairly indifferent to relationships and emotions, he was still doing all that he could to live as an ordinary person—but what Li Ruoqiu wanted was passionate love. And that was something Xie Qingcheng couldn't give her.

At the time, Xie Qingcheng had thought that if he started working at the university, he could at least spend more time with his wife during the summer and winter breaks. Even if he didn't understand romance, he could at least accompany her to the movies or on walks—to him, that was another duty that he ought to fulfill.

He had already typed out his resignation letter and was prepared to hand it over at any time. But then something happened

at Huzhou First Hospital that made Xie Qingcheng put off his resignation.

"Why are we getting rid of these security measures?"

"Oh, these?" The worker, who was in the process of taking apart the scanner at the entrance, scratched his head. "I dunno, I think it's because of that journalist's story?"

"Shouldn't the journalists' stories be encouraging the hospital to *increase* security after what happened to Qin Ciyan?"

Noticing that Xie Qingcheng seemed eager to speak to them, one of the gossipier workers stepped closer and spoke with an air of mystery.

"That journalist had an idea—he thought that there was no point in treading the same ground as all the other reports. So he came up with a completely new perspective on the problem. Take a look at how much attention his special op-ed's gotten."

He passed his phone, filthy with machine grease, to Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng immediately recognized the homepage of a then-major website. The lead story was a hot piece of social commentary, with the author's photo beside the text showing a bespectacled man with a thick neck. The man looked kind at first glance, but a closer examination revealed a shadowy ruthlessness to his face.

Standing in the bustling hospital lobby, surrounded by people coming and going, Xie Qingcheng took a few minutes to carefully read through the entire op-ed.

There were times when the written word was much more terrifying than physical violence. When fighting in a narrow alley at close quarters, words could cut a person down as soundlessly as a blade of grass.

That journalist came at the issue from another point of view, writing about the added inconvenience and suffering experienced by patients seeking treatment after the hospital strengthened their security measures.

"Pregnant women, children, and the elderly alike must undergo security screening at the entrance of the hospital, and there's often a long, winding line at the main doors. At the sight of these patients, deep in the painful throes of illness yet forced to wait anxiously outside, exposed to the elements, I couldn't help but reflect on the situation. Of course, protecting the safety of our medical personnel is important, but have the convenient services promised by our country—in particular, convenient medical services—become nothing more than empty words? Aren't the hospitals overcompensating?"

The article's tone seemed moderate, but the arguments it tossed out were ones that fanned the flames of public opinion.

Xie Qingcheng was no idiot. All this was obvious to him after reading.

After Qin Ciyan was killed in a medical disturbance, Huzhou First Hospital had dramatically ramped up its security measures, and now people were lashing back against those new measures. Hospital administration had originally planned for those changes to be temporary, before gradually moving back to a more convenient check-in system. But who would've thought that a single special op-ed would make such big waves? The photograph of patients waiting outside the hospital entrance, holding umbrellas with worry written all over their faces, spread especially quickly over the internet.

The hospital administrators were worried they'd get in trouble with the higher-ups, so they temporarily removed the scanners by the entrance, hoping it would reduce the risk of a public outcry. Of course, they also had to answer to the doctors, so the number of security guards, now three or four times what it had been before the incident, remained the same.

"Everyone, please understand," the hospital administrators said, trying to console the doctors, "if we want to reduce conflict between doctors and patients, we must start with the root cause. These issues won't be resolved through any single security apparatus."

Thus, the situation devolved into nihilism.

Who on earth didn't realize that doctor-patient conflicts had to be solved by curing the underlying cause?

But what was the root cause of these conflicts? It was human nature.

Human nature wasn't something that doctors could cure. If human nature itself was diseased, that sickness operated at the level of society. It would require reporters, artists, and independent media creators with moral baselines and ideals to lead the charge in interrogating the consciences of the masses. They, in turn, would require an environment of understanding, one that accepted all opinions and schools of thought, to brew a medicinal concoction that could cure the heart. This was an extremely long process—it might take decades—and it would require many people to shed blood and tears, to make it their life's work, to toss endless pebbles at the behemoths who sought nothing but profit, to shoot their frail arrows at the stubborn monsters of ignorance, prejudice, malice, and hatred.

It was precisely that struggle between ignorance and enlightenment, understanding and intolerance, human thought and bestial instinct, that allowed human civilization to leave a trail of bloody footprints on the banks of the endless river of history.

The consequences of evil deeds would not sprout in just a few days, nor could rotten branches be pruned so easily.

"Changing the doctor-patient relationship from the ground up" was just an excuse by the institution's leadership to abandon their effort to protect their doctors. It was nothing but a nicely worded surrender to ignorance.

"I didn't say that this was your fault, Auntie. Please be patient and listen to me…"

"Director, I'm exhausted. I haven't even had a sip of water since I entered the examination room this morning."

"We should all learn from Professor Qin and dedicate our lives to our jobs."

To encourage kindness was an eternal virtue. But when taken to the extreme of encouraging sacrifice, it turned into horror.

Xie Qingcheng watched quietly from within the hospital.

All the doctors had become extremely tense, as if they were bound by an intangible rope that trapped them upon the holy altar of being "Angels in White," forcing them to place their loved ones, their children, their freedom, even their very lives behind their careers.

But that was unnecessary.

One couldn't berate someone for failing to remain perfectly selfless for all eternity. Rather, they should feel endless gratitude for each individual act of selflessness, while being fully aware that they had no obligation.

But the reality was, at that time, no one dared come into conflict with any patient or voice a single refusal.

The most pitiful were the young people, the disciples of Qin Ciyan who Xie Qingcheng should have called his shidi and shimei.[4]

They were truly trapped on a deserted island, as the moment anyone brought out the words "that's what Qin Ciyan did," all objections were rendered useless. They had no way off their island, so in the end, they just grew numb. They forgot that they were anything other than doctors—that they were also mothers, fathers, children, and spouses.

Xie Qingcheng watched as, under this pressure, his shimei was compelled to sign up for a six-month exchange program in a rural mountain area. He knew that her mother suffered from lung cancer,

and that this would be the last stretch of time she could spend with her while she was still alive.

He watched as his shidi, who was new to the profession, hid in a corner after a failed surgery, shaking with tears. The pressure made him interrogate himself again and again, blaming himself for his lack of mental strength, asking why he couldn't have performed his best.

He watched as they lost their agency, watched as they went from helpless to numb, then as they adjusted to seeing this as their new normal.

His heart ached with excruciating pain.

It hurt too much.

It shouldn't be like this, he thought.

Where was the understanding, the gratitude, or the tolerance? Were those virtues doomed to die under such duress?

Where was the light, the hope, or the kindness? Could those qualities only go hand in hand with sacrifice?

No.

It shouldn't be like this.

Everyone should get to live well; every life deserved respect. Sacrifice was noble, but it should not be the final standard of nobility, the greatest medal of merit.

Valuing dignity, valuing life, valuing every kindness offered to you by others, and saying "thank you," instead of "I want more…"—that was how it should be.

Outside the boundaries of that deserted island, Xie Qingcheng watched his shimei and shidi within, watched the comrades he'd never be acknowledged by, those who would never call him "shixiong."

Can't I set you free? he thought. *Before I go, can't I let you all go?*

That was why he later arranged and performed the absurd farce with that woman. Within that farce, he was the heart of the maelstrom, sinking unstoppably beneath the surging ocean.

He could never come back to the surface.

He recited the script that he'd rehearsed dozens of times, one line at a time.

He looked at her, yet he also seemed to look past her, at the neurosurgeon who had once rushed across this gray-painted floor countless times.

He saw that old doctor tell the nurse at the front desk, *"If the patient's family have any questions, they can come to me. There's no need to seek out Doctor Xie, who simply helped the patient establish the necessary connections."*

He saw that old doctor tell him, *"The pain of illness isn't scary, you just need to trust in your own heart. As long as you are alive, anything can be defeated."*

He saw that old doctor walk to him through the rain under his big umbrella, then reach out for him as he sat on the stairs. *"Doesn't it hurt?"* he asked.

He saw that old doctor ask him, when he decided to say a complete farewell to his past self, *"Xiao-Xie, what does 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water' mean? Why did you tattoo it over the scar on your wrist?"*

"Because I want to say goodbye to the person I used to be. That Xie Qingcheng is already dead, and in the future, I will die as well. All the fame and infamy I accumulate throughout my life will be like text on the water's surface—it will eventually disappear. I just want to live up to whatever life I do have; I want to do some things that are right."

The old doctor smiled as he patted him on the head.

"That's good to hear. Refusing to succumb no matter what hardships you encounter, living true to yourself—that is the point of

life. I'm very happy that you can think this way.

"Xiao-Xie, I didn't save you in vain."

At the very end, Xie Qingcheng saw the man he opened his eyes to when he woke up in that Yanzhou hospital room after the car crash.

That man's eyes looked so much like his father's.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes, then opened them again—

The person standing before him was the woman he was causing a scene with in front of the entire hospital, just as he'd requested.

He looked at her, but he wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the shadow of Qin Ciyan, at the places where Qin Ciyan had walked. He finally opened his mouth and said—

"The way I see it, the life of a doctor is far more important than the life of a lunatic."

Your life is far more important than mine.

Lao-Qin, do you understand?

Why did you make a choice like that? Why didn't you let me be the first person Yi Beihai found?

I'm nothing more than a patient, an invalid, a living corpse, an ordinary man, someone who spent the last dozen years of his ignoble existence desperately clinging to life.

Why did you value my life over yours?

He sank into the whirling maelstrom, deeper and deeper… deeper and deeper… The last ray of light disappeared from view. His struggle ended.

He was denounced, slandered, embroiled in scandal.

Thankfully, the hospital panicked, worrying that this would worsen the conflict between doctors and patients. However, it still wasn't enough… *That still wasn't the final step,* he thought.

In the end, as Xie Qingcheng stood at that lectern where he was meant to talk about his career path, he announced to everyone in clear and unambiguous terms—he was resigning.

He said he was afraid. He said he was scared, and that he was only an ordinary doctor. He didn't want to lose his life in the line of duty; he wanted to peacefully live out his days.

He knew that, upon saying those words, he'd become a target. The shidi and shimei he wanted to save would never know the truth. They would spurn him, curse at him, and he would ridicule them, deride them. He'd say about their teacher—his honored teacher, his father figure, the benevolent person whom he'd never meet again —"He can only blame himself."

Even a long, long time later, Xie Qingcheng had no idea what sort of heartlessness he'd tapped into to say those words so steadily and viciously, as if they were true.

He took off his medal and set it back on its velvet cushion. Then, he looked up and said, "This is my final decision."

Let me walk into the darkness—it's where I came from in the first place.

But the rest of you mustn't be so foolish in the future. You need to learn how to say no, learn how to protect yourselves. You need to know that death isn't the path to proving your righteousness —rather, it's living well.

Once, my teacher used his life to protect me. Now, it's time for me to use my reputation to protect you. I hope that from now on, you'll…

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes as he strode out of the conference room, a chaotic uproar in his wake.

I hope that from now on, you'll no longer have to exchange your blood and life for idealism, admiration, and recognition. I hope that from now on, you'll all be well.

In all likelihood, that was also what Qin Ciyan had wished for all his life.

In 2017, a few weeks after Qin Ciyan departed from the world, Xie Qingcheng took on the stigma of cowardice and left Huzhou First Hospital.

That same month, concerned that the doctors would react negatively to what had happened, and after careful deliberation and focus group research, the hospital administrators decided to make a public announcement about the necessity of the hospital's security measures, and restored the system to ensure the safety of their medical personnel. They also requested patients' understanding, promising to improve their equipment as quickly as possible to prevent long wait times while still protecting the doctors and nurses.

However, Xie Qingcheng would no longer benefit from these changes.

He returned to Moyu Alley alone, bringing with him the misunderstandings, the controversies, the disdain, and the suspicion. Wholly alone, he left the place that had granted him his second life.

When he was young, he'd once wanted to become a police officer. Later, his birth parents died, and in chasing after the truth, he could only turn that lost dream into a scar on his wrist.

After he grew up, he became a doctor. But then his honored teacher and father figure passed away, and to free the younger generation from the prison of virtue, he lost his home a second time.

He'd crawled out of a grave once. And in the end, he would return there.

After his resignation—after all the psychological suffering and pressure he'd endured—Xie Qingcheng's mental state became very unstable. He was accustomed to maintaining strict self-control, and with the help of his special medication, he could restrain himself perfectly and live like an ordinary person. But recent events had dealt too heavy a blow. It got so bad that, for a while, there was

simply no way Xie Qingcheng could go to the university and apply for a job.

He understood his illness very well and knew that he couldn't handle any more torment. No matter how calm he was, he would still break down. And if he broke down, he didn't know what the consequences would be—would he hurt his wife, his sister, his neighbors…?

He couldn't offer anything else of value at that time, so he poured all his energy into compiling Qin Ciyan's writings. Immersing himself in those familiar strokes and characters was the only thing that let him breathe and calm down.

As for certain people and certain matters, even though they shared the kinship of mutual suffering, he had no choice but to heartlessly forsake them.

"So I resigned from being your personal physician," Xie Qingcheng murmured softly as he lay in the ice-cold water.

In the face of death, he'd finally spoken aloud all the secrets that had been gathering dust for so many years.

"I chose to buckle down and finish what he had left undone, so I left your side. At the time, I was pretty much an invalid… Perhaps you couldn't tell. You may think that I feigned calm very well, that I was just like my usual self."

Xie Qingcheng paused, his life force seeming to freeze over in the bone-chilling water.

"But my heart had already collapsed. My core was already rotten… At the time, there was no way I could teach you anything, He Yu. I made my choice and abandoned you… That's the whole truth."

He Yu didn't say anything for a long, long time.

The only sound in the still, empty film studio was the echo of Celine Dion's melodious song.

The water level had been rising continuously as Xie Qingcheng told his story. It had reached the top of the walls by now, and their heads were already bumping against the ceiling boards.

Death was only a few minutes away.

Finally, He Yu spoke quietly.

"So…you originally planned on taking all of this to the grave?"

"I did."

"You never planned on saying anything."

"That's right."

"You… You saw how upset I was, you saw me trying all that time to find someone who could understand me, when you were that person all along—yet you didn't say anything, you didn't tell me anything…" The rims of He Yu's eyes were red. He stared at Xie Qingcheng as he floated in the water, pelting him with questions nonstop in a voice that had gone hoarse, though it was unclear whether from incredulity, hurt, heartache, or bewilderment. "If you had just told me a little bit of the truth, I would've understood, I would've let you go… Neither of us will ever be fully accepted by society, Xie Qingcheng! Why couldn't you tell me that you were too? Why couldn't you hold me? Why couldn't you let me hold *you*? You knew… You knew everything…but you didn't say a word…"

Tears spilled down his face, dripping into the water.

"I've been so cold… Xie Qingcheng, it's been so many years… Weren't you cold? Aren't you cold…"

As he looked at him, he thought of all the conversations he'd ever had with Xie Qingcheng.

His tears fell unceasingly.

He had never cried like this in front of anyone else. Even as death hovered over him, he could listen to a graceful song and smile calmly as he looked up to greet the reaper. But at that moment, he'd learned that he had surviving kin in the world.

It turned out that the person who could understand him completely, who could feel his pain, who could empathize with his suffering, had always been…right by his side.

Xie Qingcheng had once told him that he needed to rely on himself to walk out of the shadows in his heart. Xie Qingcheng had once asked him, *"Little devil, doesn't it hurt?"* Xie Qingcheng had once tried to rouse his reason when he was in the depths of despair, telling him that as long as he was alive, he could overcome any hardship.

"You need…to always trust in your sense of self. Every day you survive is another day you can't abandon the hope of conquering your illness."

Those words… He had always treated those words as the reassuring explanations a doctor gave to their patient. But as it turned out…

As it turned out, those words were steeped in Xie Qingcheng's blood and tears, dredged up from the bottom of his heart! They were the mournful calls of another psychological Ebola patient delivered from the depths of the ocean. They were the path Xie Qingcheng had once stumbled along, the love, the regret, and the separations he had experienced, the blood from his wounds, the tears in his eyes.

But Xie Qingcheng hadn't said anything. He *couldn't* say anything.

He just let him…stand there like a fool.

He had stood all alone on his rocky outcrop, sorrowful cries issuing from his throat, trapped on his solitary island in the endless sea and never once receiving a reply—he had thought that he was the last strange dragon alive. But as it turned out, that "human" on the sacrificial altar had the same blood flowing through his veins and was hiding the same terrifying wings.

Xie Qingcheng…didn't say anything. He never said a thing!

He Yu screwed his eyes shut, overwhelmed by the urge to hit and berate him. He interrogated him, his heart overflowing with resentment, hatred, and fury…with grief and anguish.

"Xie Qingcheng," he said, "I hate you to the bone. This hurts more than if you never told me the truth. Do you loathe me so much that you're only telling me these things at the very end? And the reason you weren't willing to tell me until now, it's because you've never seen me as a person, isn't it?"

He lambasted him, unspeakably furious. But as he finished his tirade, he pulled Xie Qingcheng into a tight embrace—in water so cold they couldn't help but shiver, in darkness so suffocating they could hardly breathe, in the hazy gloom, in this desolate place, in the face of death—on the verge of his demise, the wicked dragon hugged him tightly as he cried, swore, and howled in grief. Even as he trembled down to the tips of his claws, he seemed like he wanted to draw Xie Qingcheng's entire person into his flesh.

They were the two loneliest people in the world.

At death's door, one of them finally removed his mask, allowing the other to see the similarity in their faces. One of them finally took pity on the other, telling him, *"As it turns out, you aren't alone in the world."*

The water finally rose to cover their noses and mouths. Only the blink of an eye remained between life and death.

With bloodshot eyes, He Yu shot a penetrating look at Xie Qingcheng—a look that held hatred, resentment, forgiveness, obsession. So many sentiments surged into his eyes in an instant, hurriedly seizing their final moments of freedom while those eyes were still capable of expressing emotion.

Amidst the flourishing summer hydrangeas.

Shouldering those heavy chains, the fetters of his secrets, and the scourge of that forbidden drug, the scar-riddled azure dragon transformed into his human form and came to the fledgling dragon's side.

The azure dragon looked at that tiny child curled up on the steps as if he were looking through those years of desperate drifting and painful suffering to see his past self. He extended his human hand to the fledgling dragon, and his distant, mirrorlike eyes reflected the child's silhouette. He said, "Little devil, doesn't it hurt?"

He asked because he knew that kind of pain really did hurt. The pain of split flesh and bone was nothing compared to the pain of numb despair. Xie Qingcheng had experienced that kind of pain, strong enough to bring down a giant—knowing that he wouldn't live for long, feeling utterly useless, being forced to live out the rest of his life in this swamp which no pioneers had ever walked out of alive.

He knew all of this, but he couldn't say to He Yu, *"It hurts a lot."*

He could only ask.

He remembered the way that once, when he was covered in blood, that doctor had comforted him just like this. He could only copy him clumsily, and then pick up the shivering fledgling dragon while disguised as a human.

He knew that He Yu wanted a companion, that he wanted a bit of encouragement from his kin. It wasn't that he didn't have a shred of pity. But there was too much he had to do. And he treated himself with such ruthlessness, so what more could be expected of his treatment of He Yu? The only gentleness he possessed had turned into the elegant signature he left on He Jiwei's contract.

Using all the time he could spare, he accompanied and taught him in his capacity as a psychiatrist—that help was all he could give him, the very last energy Xie Qingcheng had left. It wasn't much, but he gave all of it to He Yu.

For the truth, he lost his dreams. For his little sister, he lost his health. To defeat his illness, he lost his reason to live. And to recover his reason to live, he lost his sense of peace and tranquility.

He lost his parents, lost his father figure, lost the new place of belonging that he had finally found. He lost his dreams of joining the ranks of the police, then lost his white doctor's coat. To protect his shidi and shimei who knew nothing of their connection, he even lost his teacher's desk as he was banished from the lectern that had been his final place of refuge.

Ever since that stormy night, he hadn't been able to hold on to anything. He would never again have peace.

To maintain the clarity of his mind, he had no choice but to sacrifice even the most fundamental human emotions—he constantly told He Yu to "calm down," but it was neither a demand nor an order. Rather, it was a mutilated azure dragon teaching a tiny fledgling dragon how to walk as far as possible down this long and thorny road. It was the incantation that had protected him as he slogged through distant mountains and faraway waters.

He hoped that He Yu would be able to understand—this was all he had, all that still remained.

He gave his companionship to Xie Xue, his courage to Chen Man, his filial piety to Auntie Li, his gratitude to the Esteemed Master Qin. He gave his protection to those doctors, his knowledge to his students.

All that was left was his disease-ridden body, a receptacle capable of containing all the remaining sins, confusions, secrets, agonies, and curses—he stored all of those inside his flesh and bones.

He kept his sickly body for himself.

As for the experiences of that sickly body and all of the suffering that he had endured over the course of his life, they were of no benefit to anyone—except for He Yu. And so, he had set those experiences aside for He Yu. After tearing his flesh to pieces and removing his bones, this was the very last thing he could give.

Granted, He Yu didn't really appreciate them. He always refused them, always believed that Xie Qingcheng's words were

wrong, that he didn't understand, that he couldn't possibly empathize. But he really couldn't say any more, couldn't bare himself any further.

He'd never planned on acknowledging their kinship, not until this very moment, when they were facing the arrival of death. Now that the azure dragon and the fledgling dragon were about to die together, he finally revealed his enormous wings and stretched out his thorny dragon tail. He shook the dust from his body as he broke out of the cocoon that was his human form, then let a mournful roar echo over the deserted island.

Turning back, he looked at the baby dragon staring at him in dazed awe, nudged him gently with a claw, and said, *"This is the whole truth."*

He Yu looked at him…

There was no doubt that He Yu resented him, and resented him deeply. There was no way that someone who had been lied to for so long could possibly let go so easily. But threaded through that resentment was some other emotion that he had never felt before.

This new emotion stemmed from the sight of the deep scars crisscrossing the azure dragon's body. Those scars were so severe and so deep that the little dragon could see blood, flesh, and bone; could look into the azure dragon's chest at his sickly, slowly beating heart.

An ordinary person would have died from such wounds; even if they survived them, they would most certainly beg for death. Every moment Xie Qingcheng remained alive was a testament to his courage, to the strength of his heart, for his entire existence was laden with torment, absent even the slightest hint of joy.

As it turned out, the only kin He Yu had was doing his utmost to survive.

The water rose to eye level.

They could no longer breathe uninterrupted, and had to rely on occasionally surfacing to try to capture a mouthful of the remaining air.

The roof of the film studio wasn't completely flat—there was a narrow platform, above which there was an angular incline. That was the last bit of space that the water would flood. Unfortunately, the narrow platform could only hold one person. Whoever climbed onto it would live a few minutes longer.

After the other person was completely submerged, perhaps those few extra minutes would give them time to be discovered. Perhaps the lucky survivor could be rescued…

Faced with that reality, He Yu fell silent.

Then he did something that Xie Qingcheng never would have expected.

He Yu was hot-blooded and young, and under such exhausting circumstances, he had far more strength left than Xie Qingcheng. So he used that strength, which brooked no resistance, to suddenly pick Xie Qingcheng up and set him on that narrow platform.

Physically, Xie Qingcheng had become so weak that he couldn't struggle free from his grasp. All it took was a brief tussle before he found himself being forcefully held in place by He Yu, who was still in the water. The youth tilted his head back, gazing at Xie Qingcheng through reddened almond eyes.

He Yu didn't speak any further; he didn't know what he ought to say. His heart felt like a knotted ball of hemp. He wasn't sure whether the emotions twisted within its depths were hatred, hurt, pity, regret, disappointment, or frustration.

He simply gazed up at Xie Qingcheng, subduing Xie Qingcheng, stopping Xie Qingcheng from leaving the ledge, keeping Xie Qingcheng from switching places with him.

The moment the water closed over the top of his head, He Yu looked up at Xie Qingcheng with wet eyes, his lips moving as he spoke. His voice was very faint, like a corpse, like a treasure swallowed by the sea…quietly sinking into the watery depths.

But Xie Qingcheng was certain that he heard him—that he heard the words he said.

Just as that youth had once braved the danger of an inferno to rescue his fellow psychiatric patients from being swallowed up by a sea of fire, he said, "Xie Qingcheng, if you survive…you absolutely mustn't remember me the way you remember Qin Ciyan.

"Because I hate you. You lied to me, you abandoned me… I hate you, so I don't want you to remember me… I'm dying first, so in the future, you'll be the loneliest person in this world. You won't have anyone you can call kin… So put on your mask, Xie Qingcheng, and return to the world of normal society.



"Forget all this.

"You're not that old. If you survive, you can start over from the beginning and gain…some of the things that you never managed to get before."

Jellyfish sinking into the vast ocean had no spines or hearts or eyes, as pure as clouds drifting through the sky. Looking at them from the outside, people regarded them as strange creatures, for how could life forms that were 95 percent water possibly have feelings?

But perhaps they did have feelings—over the course of their short lives, they loved this world very, very much. Perhaps it was precisely because of this deep, transcendent love that they'd managed to survive those endless 650 million years on earth…

He Yu gazed at Xie Qingcheng through a sheen of water, and then, bit by bit, was swallowed by the flood.

Chapter 96:
My Kin

WHEN HE WOKE UP again, He Yu found himself lying in a spotlessly clean room.

For the briefest moment, he thought he was dead. It was only when the beeping of the medical devices around him bled into his ears that he realized he was in a hospital.

What was going on…? Didn't he drown?

He shifted slightly, but there was an IV attached to his hand, preventing him from getting up. He could see the name of the hospital printed on the bedside table, though.

So, he'd been brought to the general hospital near the film studio.

Everything from before he passed out in the water poured into He Yu's head at once, rendering him momentarily dizzy, as if he had a mild concussion.

Xie Qingcheng was psychological Ebola's first victim, the patient who had taken the most complete course of the drug, the one whose condition was the most stable…

Xie Qingcheng had kept him in the dark and never said a word.

Xie Qingcheng had so many things he needed to do. Xie Qingcheng never wanted to choose him to begin with, and in the end he became the first person that Xie Qingcheng chose to give up.

But…

He had no right to criticize Xie Qingcheng's actions.

This was a man who would disregard his own tears of blood to extract every drop of value from his life. What could He Yu possibly demand from someone like that?

“You’re awake?” A deep, cold voice spoke up from beside him. “How do you feel?”

He Yu’s head whipped around. Staring as if he were seeing a ghost, he watched Xie Qingcheng lift the curtain and walk in.

Xie Qingcheng’s face was a bit pale, but his condition seemed much better than He Yu’s. At least, he wasn’t in a hospital gown, and he could walk around on his own.

After a brief moment of shock, He Yu coughed hoarsely. “You…”

Xie Qingcheng sat down next to him.

He Yu was fully awake now. Pushing himself to a sitting position, he surveyed his surroundings. There was no one else here—this was a VIP ward.

“If you want to see someone else, your mother, perhaps…”

“No.” He Yu grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the wrist to drag this person, who seemed like he was getting up, back to his side. “I don’t want them. I just want you.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t respond.

“Xie Qingcheng, the things you said to me at the film studio…”

“Surely you won’t force me to shut you up by killing you,” Xie Qingcheng said after a beat.

He Yu stared at him.

“Good. So guard your mouth. Do not breathe a word of this to anyone.” Xie Qingcheng hadn’t inhaled any water; he’d merely caught a slight cold. He was still very clearheaded. He looked down at He Yu. “That would be best for both of us.”

He Yu could tell that Xie Qingcheng regretted telling him everything.

In the end, they were both still alive. After their near-death experience, it was no surprise that Xie Qingcheng was reluctant to revisit their conversation.

Once you'd sobered up, you'd always regret the nonsense you spouted while drunk. Never mind confessions made in the critical moments before death.

Xie Qingcheng seemed very calm, his face completely absent of any ripple of emotion, as if he were determined to explain what had happened as succinctly and dispassionately as possible.

"Executive Lü realized you were missing and started searching for you. Someone told her that you went to the film studio, so she rushed there with the others." Xie Qingcheng gave him a simple summary of events. "They really did show up just in the nick of time. When they started trying to open the door, you had already lost consciousness. You didn't inhale that much water, but if they had taken any longer, they wouldn't have been able to save you, even if they drained your lungs."

Xie Qingcheng fell quiet for a moment before concluding: "You should get some rest."

He was accustomed to wearing a mask, but now that he'd removed it in He Yu's presence, he had no idea how to act face-to-face with him. He could only stiffly finish his explanation, then go back to being as calm and coolheaded as always.

Xie Qingcheng didn't want anything to change—in fact, he would much rather heartlessly slip his mask back on. But after Guo Xiang saw Yang Guo's face, what use was there in him redonning his mask?[5] That little rascal had already seen this dagege's face as plain as day.

He Yu sat on the sickbed, his fine hair in disarray.

Xie Qingcheng's evasiveness was no surprise, but He Yu hadn't expected him to process his emotions with such ruthless efficiency, as if he had excised a necrotic nerve or amputated some useless piece of flesh. He Yu had been stewing in his hurt and sadness, but now, his eyes immediately reddened in anger as he spat from between gritted teeth, "Xie Qingcheng, do you… Do you really have nothing to say to me?!"

Silence.

"We just barely escaped from the gates of hell, you told me secrets you've never told anyone else, and now I know that you and I are the same. So what about you? Are you really going to carry on like nothing's changed?"

Xie Qingcheng had anticipated this.

Since the moment they were rescued, he knew that he would face this kind of interrogation as soon as He Yu woke up. That was why he'd prepared his reply in advance.

But at the very last moment, He Yu's final words managed to move him. Xie Qingcheng was accustomed to a low degree of emotional reciprocity—and that was to say nothing of how He Yu had also said that he hated him, and that he wanted Xie Qingcheng to be the loneliest person in the world.

Xie Qingcheng wasn't good at navigating the turning points in relationships to begin with—he was a full-grown straight man, and despite having achieved academic distinction in the field of psychology, he was hopelessly slow when it came to the feelings of actual people.

He didn't know why He Yu would claim to hate him, and then turn around and cede his last chance of survival to him. But given that He Yu had spoken those words aloud, Xie Qingcheng's main takeaway was, naturally, that He Yu truly disliked him. And he wouldn't shower affection on someone who wasn't interested.

Besides, He Yu always prioritized protecting other mentally ill people, to the point of self-sacrifice. Xie Qingcheng had witnessed it before. That, he reasoned, had to be why He Yu had given him that final chance.

Xie Qingcheng looked at He Yu calmly for a while, then opened his mouth to lecture him in the same old logical tone that always seriously pissed He Yu off. After going round and round in circles, He Yu had finally managed to pry open a tiny crack in Xie Qingcheng's facade.

But in the end, they'd made it back from death's door.

And so Xie Qingcheng raised his defenses once again.

Everything returned to the starting point.

"What makes you think I should change?" Xie Qingcheng asked, with the same unflappable tone he'd use with a child to explain why the sun shone. "You didn't know who I was before, but I was always fully aware of who you were."

Silence.

"*You* might have to readjust, but there's no need for change on my side."

He Yu had no idea how to respond.

"The things that transpired in the studio—they only happened because we both thought that we were about to die. People do impulsive things when they're drunk too. But now that everything's back on track, it would be best not to mention those things again. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Thinking that he had addressed this issue quite well, Xie Qingcheng moved to stand up.

Of course, he didn't mention that the moment He Yu lost consciousness and began to sink, he'd jumped off that narrow ledge and back into the water.

He was used to death. But how could he behave like Rose when the Titanic struck that iceberg—lying helplessly beneath the chilly night sky in the middle of the sea, watching as the heart of the ocean disappeared into the water and all the vitality was frozen out of that fiery, passionate boy?

Rose was a delicate girl who was in love with Jack. But he was an adult man, with no such deep-rooted feelings for He Yu. There was nothing between them but a mess of inexplicable, sordid trysts.

How could he possibly allow He Yu to do as he wished?

When He Yu was still conscious, he had forcefully held the weaker Xie Qingcheng in place so he couldn't get down from the ledge. But when He Yu passed out, his arms spread wide as he sank downward, Xie Qingcheng had taken a deep breath and dived back into the water.

He pulled the youth out of the bone-chilling water and pushed him onto that narrow ledge, the only place where it was still possible to take in any oxygen…

Perhaps it was precisely because of the few minutes in which they switched places that both he and He Yu were able to avoid drowning.

But Xie Qingcheng didn't see any point in mentioning any of this. It would stir up too much unnecessary emotion, when this little devil was already in a terrible mood and clinging to him incessantly—saying more would only add to his troubles and make it even more difficult for him to set aside the conversation they'd had at the brink of death.

Thus, after mulling things over and making certain that he wouldn't accidentally divulge any extraneous details, Xie Qingcheng said—

"All right, you should get some sleep and—"

This time, he didn't get a chance to finish speaking. He Yu truly lost his temper.

His mood had been relatively steady when he first woke up—along with the resentment he felt toward Xie Qingcheng, he'd also felt a wealth of understanding and sadness. But Xie Qingcheng just had to go off on such a sanctimonious rant the moment he entered the room, without a shred of mercy.

It was no different from the way he used to behave when he oversaw He Yu's treatment and administered his shots at the He family home.

He Yu felt hurt and angry, his fury building slowly until he couldn't contain it anymore. He suddenly lunged forward to pull Xie Qingcheng toward him, his violent movement making the IV pole next to the bed clank loudly.

He yanked his Doctor Xie right onto the narrow twin-size hospital bed. The doctor's body nearly crushed his other hand, which was still hooked up to the IV drip.

Professor Xie's pupils contracted in surprise. "What're you doing? Are you insane?!" he hissed.

He Yu grabbed onto him firmly, making it impossible to break his grip.

He had ended up worse for wear than Xie Qingcheng—his face was still bloodless, his lips were chapped, and he was wearing a pitiful-looking hospital gown—but that couldn't hide the bloodthirsty viciousness that permeated his black eyes.

After all that, Xie Qingcheng was planning on acting as though nothing had happened. As He Yu turned this over in his mind, his eyes, which had still been tinged with the softness of sleep, turned menacing.

"Don't call me insane." He Yu's hand slid upward to close around the back of Xie Qingcheng's neck, silently preventing him from escaping with his wildly stubborn, unyielding strength. He pressed his fingers to Xie Qingcheng's lips, stroking them carefully. "You're insane too," he said, his voice throaty and pitched deep.

Silence.

"Completely insane."

Xie Qingcheng could make no response.

"Just like me."

His breath inched closer and closer to Xie Qingcheng as he spoke.

Xie Qingcheng had never met a patient whose savagery and strength were both so impervious to reason.

He Yu found Xie Qingcheng was struggling too hard; he couldn't subdue him with one arm, so he suddenly lifted his other hand, which was still punctured by a needle. Yanked askew, the IV needle instantly pierced a vein, the misdirected fluid causing his hand to rapidly swell up with a frightful bruise.

Of course, Xie Qingcheng saw it too—really, he thought, He Yu's illness was getting really fucking out of hand. But he couldn't afford to keep moving, as any further struggle on his part would likely make He Yu knock the entire saline stand onto the floor. He was forced to stay put, half-propped up on He Yu's sickbed, snarling through gritted teeth, "I tried talking sense to you, but you refuse to listen… Just what are you trying to do?!"

He Yu's eyes flickered.

Just what *was* he trying to do?

He didn't want Xie Qingcheng to leave. But letting Xie Qingcheng stay here, having to face his terrifyingly calm demeanor, would only make him more and more furious.

So, after staring at Xie Qingcheng for a while, he suddenly seized him by the hair and yanked him down, closer to himself.

Perhaps he was hoping to keep Xie Qingcheng from opening his mouth and angering him any further—or perhaps he had been possessed by the spirit of Jack come to life, seeking a bit of warmth in the freezing cold from Rose on her floating plank.

Or perhaps he was overcome by the impulse to feel the azure dragon's flesh and blood, which was so similar to his own.

Whatever the case, He Yu ignored Xie Qingcheng's resistance—as if suffering from a brain spasm, and with a chest full of hurt, sadness, and resentment—and impetuously kissed Xie Qingcheng on the lips.

Xie Qingcheng started in surprise.

"Don't move."

The kiss was soundless and impassioned, but because Xie Qingcheng was struggling the whole time, He Yu had to use the hand that was still hooked up to the IV to forcibly drag him into his arms and onto the narrow hospital bed. In the midst of their tussling, blood started flowing up the IV tube, but he paid it no mind, as if that blood wasn't his own.

He Yu pushed Xie Qingcheng into a sitting position on the bed as he held him, tilting his head up into the kiss. The passionate, searing heat of it was unprecedented, like He Yu was trying to use their locked lips to rouse his only kindred spirit on earth, the only one who could understand him.

He kissed Xie Qingcheng so deeply and ardently, but at the same time he resembled nothing so much as an evil dragon crying out mournfully from its rocky outcrop, hoping to hear even the quietest echo from some corner of this boundless world.

But Xie Qingcheng still coldly ignored him. Sure enough, unveiling his secrets hadn't changed Xie Qingcheng in the slightest.

He Yu thought he had found another dragon, but that dragon seemed to be carved from stone or ice—no matter how he prodded at him or rubbed against him, no matter how he called out to him or nudged him or scratched him with his claws, that other dragon simply closed his eyes to carry on silently meditating in his chilly, remote mountain cave.

He'd allow him to make a scene however he wished.

He Yu's chest swelled with resentment. The emptiness in his heart seemed to expand and expand, until it felt like it could never be filled. He didn't know what he was supposed to do anymore; their physical entanglement brought him only the saddest, most meager scrap of comfort.

He took Xie Qingcheng's lips between his own, sucking on them before licking deep inside to entwine with Xie Qingcheng's stubbornly unresponsive tongue. He used so much force and pressed

in so impetuously that their mouths filled with the taste of rust, but the blood could have belonged to either of them.

As he broke off the kiss briefly to take a breath, He Yu peered at Xie Qingcheng's face from up close—as they parted, their lips made a soft, sticky sound that made his heart beat faster, but they were still so close that they would touch again with the slightest movement, their suggestively heated breaths drifting out from between mouths that were wet and swollen from their kissing.

He Yu's throat bobbed, his black eyes growing even darker.

He had the subconscious urge to use the blood toxin on Xie Qingcheng again, but for some reason, the idea vanished the moment it appeared.

There was one thing Xie Qingcheng hadn't been wrong about. To Xie Qingcheng, his waterborne confession had been nothing more than speaking out loud some stories that had been gathering dust for years—walking from the darkness out into the light.

Aside from one more person learning the truth, nothing had changed for him.

But to He Yu, everything was different.

A Xie Qingcheng whom he had never known for all those years had been suddenly revealed to him.

So no matter how fiercely or viciously he berated him…

To say that nothing stirred in his heart…

It was a lie.

The thought of Xie Qingcheng standing there calmly in that endless, dark night, taking those secrets that could have cleared his name and burying them with his own hands…

It made him feel like Xie Qingcheng was a madman. Madder than he was.

And his suffering was even more unspeakably painful than He Yu's own.

He wanted to swim over so badly, to nudge him with his waterlogged wings, and then, ever so cautiously, embrace him.

But Xie Qingcheng didn't want him. Xie Qingcheng had rejected him yet again.

This made He Yu very unhappy. But even so, he didn't have the heart to rashly use the blood toxin to compel him again.

He Yu had always been kind to his own kin. In Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital, he'd even risked his own life, dashing into the flames to save the trapped patients. He was unwilling to use his ability to coerce someone who could truly empathize with his suffering.

In the end, he didn't give any commands.

After that first kiss, he stared into Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes as he panted, trying to calm his unbearably tumultuous emotions.

But the more he looked at him, the more chaotic the tangle of emotions in his heart became. In the end, he closed his eyes again, pulled Xie Qingcheng into his arms, and forcefully pressed his mouth to Xie Qingcheng's lips, already warm and wet from his prior ministrations. He kissed him so deeply, it was like he wanted them to melt together.

That way, he wouldn't be lonely anymore.

Neither of them…would be lonely anymore.

There was no one else in the VIP ward. Because there was no one to disturb them, because they had survived a calamity, because the man had coldly withdrawn, because the youth forcibly pressed on—this kiss became more and more uninhibited, the temperature within the ward seeming to rise with He Yu's every movement.

By the time He Yu's lips parted from Xie Qingcheng's again, his breath had grown urgent, the color of his eyes darkening even further. He pressed the tip of his tongue to the edge of his lip, and

there was an arrestingly defiant beauty to that flash of red against the white of his teeth.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu rubbed his hand against the red mole at the back of Xie Qingcheng's neck, and when he spoke, his voice was very low. "No matter what you say, whether you refuse to acknowledge the truth or whether you think there's no need for anything to change, I don't care. But I just want a little bit of warmth. I don't need you to talk sense into me; I don't need the experience that you paid for with your blood to light my way. I just want a bit of warmth from my kindred."

Silence.

"You want it too—I know you do. Can we not fight right now? You give me what's yours and I'll give you what's mine, okay?"

As Xie Qingcheng was simultaneously kissed and interrogated, the kissing left him a bit breathless. However, his mind was still very clear.

What the fuck are "yours" and "mine" in this scenario?

If he was supposed to let He Yu fuck him, then what was He Yu going to give him in return? What use could he possibly have for a young man's dick?

For a moment, he couldn't decide if this was hilarious or infuriating. But seeing the way He Yu's hand was swelling up—he had only just recovered, yet he insisted on yanking at Xie Qingcheng's clothes and refusing to let him leave—he couldn't help but pity the beast.

But it was truly absurd to continue like this. Xie Qingcheng swatted his hand away. "Let go of me first, and speak properly."

"No. You'll just leave if I let go."

"I'm not going anywhere, so let go. I can't talk to you like this."

"Then pinky promise."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

Their conversation had just gone from intensely hostile to unbearably juvenile. After a lengthy struggle, He Yu once again went to kiss Xie Qingcheng on the neck.

Xie Qingcheng's neck was very sensitive, and these kisses rained down so quickly and urgently that he could barely speak. His slender fingers clutched at He Yu's hospital gown, his entire body tensed like a drawn bowstring.

He Yu was completely absorbed in these wet kisses. Every so often, he would close his eyes to nuzzle into the hollow of Xie Qingcheng's throat with his nose, or swipe out his tongue to taste his skin, then bare his teeth and bite down, leaving behind a trail of suggestive scarlet marks.

By this point, the temperature inside the ward was no longer rising—rather, the heat had gotten so dense that it could no longer dissipate, melting the people within until their flesh and bones nearly dissolved into water.

With his emotions climbing to scorching heights, He Yu no longer felt like heeding any consequences—he was young and energetic, after all, and it wasn't like Xie Qingcheng had ever wanted him.

It was normal for young men who had just gotten their first taste of carnal desire to become extremely addicted for the first few months. Never mind doing it with their girlfriends once every two or three days—sometimes, they could even go two or three times a day. However, He Yu could only satisfy his cravings by looking at Xie Qingcheng's photos, and on the rare occasion he did manage to eat his fill, he had to go through an untold amount of hardship and suffer a great deal of pique.

Before today, when he had already been so thirsty he could die, he still had to hold himself back and affect a calm and untroubled facade.

But now that he had survived a calamity and learned that Xie Qingcheng was the person most like him in all the world, how could

he possibly hold back?

He longed for the warmth of kin and the vitality of the living, so even though he was still hooked up to the IV and wearing a hospital gown, as he kissed Xie Qingcheng again and again, he found himself overcome by the urge to press him down onto the bed.

Naturally, Xie Qingcheng thought he was nuts.

As they tangled messily with each other, suddenly—

Click.

The door handle moved.

Xie Qingcheng hadn't locked the door before he entered, so with a slight press of the handle, the door opened.

Xie Qingcheng shoved He Yu away at once, his breathing rushed and his messy fringe falling into his eyes. He Yu reacted even faster as he swiftly pulled the curtain closed, seamlessly concealing the area from sight.

Hidden behind the light blue curtains, both he and Xie Qingcheng calmed their breathing and straightened out their clothes.

The person stepped into the room.

At first, He Yu thought it was a nurse. But after a few seconds, he heard a voice that he reflexively loathed.

"He Yu, there's someone in your bed?"

Chapter 97:
No Longer the Same

THE PERSON WHO CAME IN was He Li.

It was a coincidence that He Li was the one who had stepped into the ward. He and his mother had gone out to buy some fruit, but she happened to get an urgent work call, so she'd had He Li go ahead of her and bring the fruit to the sickroom.

That was how they'd ended up in this situation.

He Li was young, but Lü Zhishu had always spoiled him terribly and never put any pressure on him, so he had already done all manner of shady things. With all the time he spent hanging around hedonistic rich brats in Yanzhou, he was nothing like his elder brother, who hadn't slept with anyone until he was nineteen. He Li was very attuned to these sorts of things.

Although he hadn't gotten a clear look at the person his brother had hidden from view, he was certain that before he came into the room, He Yu had been fooling around with someone.

Hilarious! Now *this* was a big fucking deal! He Li was thrilled.

Frankly speaking, being the brother of someone like He Yu was the opposite of a good time. Even if nobody said it aloud, people definitely compared the two of them in their heads. He Li didn't hold a candle to his model elder brother when it came to looks, ability, or character, so how could he possibly be okay with it?

Of course he couldn't.

But he never could have imagined that he would actually run into his brother engaging in sickroom play today!

Sweet! Serves you right, He Yu!

He started trying to guess which pretty little nurse had attracted his brother's attention—or perhaps it was a coldly beautiful

lady doctor who had made his brother lose control?

He Li felt like a fish about to leap straight through the Dragon's Gate.[6] Eyes gleaming, he stuck out his head to peer inside. This was too fucking awesome!

He wished he had a loudspeaker to tell the whole world over and over again—everyone, come quick and take a look at this, his brother was even more outrageous than he was, his brother was definitely up to no good, he was definitely fucking a pretty doctor right here in the hospital! That's right! There was no way he could be wrong!

Today was the day that He Yu's reputation would be ruined! Where was his loudspeaker? He was about to break into song like an emancipated serf!

Unfortunately, He Yu didn't give him the chance.

Straightening out his clothes, He Yu walked out from behind the curtain of his own accord.

He had pulled out the IV needle and was absentmindedly rubbing the dark bruise on the back of his hand as he emerged.

He looked up. "Yes. There's someone in my bed."

"Well, well, well. You always seem so dignified! Who would've thought that you—"

"How is this any of your business?"

He Li's smile vanished in an instant.

"Let me ask you instead—what are you doing, coming in here without knocking? Delivering condoms?"

He Li was struck dumb. He had never seen this side of his brother before.

His brother was always warm and kind, respectful and modest—you might even call him a doormat. No matter what anyone in their family said, He Yu pretty much never spoke a word of opposition.

In that moment, He Li seemed to have mindlessly stumbled into the most remote corner of a forbidden forest. Wholeheartedly believing that he would be able to steal the dragon's hidden treasure, he'd set out like a hero ready to receive everyone's newfound respect.

But before he even caught sight of the treasure, something appeared in a fissure of that cold, gloomy mountain cave: the eye of a great dragon with a thorny hide.

The massive dragon peered at him from beyond the fractured rock, its pupil like a mirror of colored glass, so huge that it reflected his whole body.

The instant the dragon's breath puffed out, all the blood in his body turned to ice.

He Li's entire heart went numb…

Th-this was his scholarly and courteous dage?

Smoothing out his clothes, He Yu stepped forward and grabbed He Li by his deathly pale face. Curling his fingers, he stroked his face, bit by bit.

"He Li, seeing as you've already barged in, out of what little brotherly affection I have for you, I'll give you a warning. You'd better not tell a soul about what happened here today. Of course, if you're brave enough, you can try me—see if you can afford the price."

"Wh-what price…" He Li's legs were shaking and his voice had gone shrill and distorted, but he still dredged up some courage. "I-I'm telling you, He Yu, if Mom finds out that you dared threaten me like this—"

"Go tell her then." He Yu raised an eyebrow as he cut him off. "Go on and tattle to her—go right ahead."

"You—! You can't… You wouldn't…"

"I can't?" He Yu asked with an easy smile, looking him in the eye.

"Do you know why, when you were five, your leg would always get caught in the wheel of your bike halfway through your ride? Do you know why, on your first day of school, you lost all your new textbooks, and no matter how you tried to explain yourself, no one would listen? The first time you messed around behind our parents' backs, you got a room at the Golden Ocean Club in Yanzhou, then turned around and told them you spent the night at a friend's house—did you really think that no one else knew about it?"

All the color drained from He Li's face.

"How did you—"

"I even have video footage. But it's too disgusting; I don't want to look at it a second time."

With a *thunk*, He Li fell back against the door, sweating so heavily that he looked like he'd been fished out of water.

His lips were trembling—his first glimpse of the ferocious beast behind He Yu's human mask had left him so stunned that he could barely speak.

"You…you…"

"So you'd better listen to me carefully, He Li."

He Yu's voice was very soft as he spoke directly into He Li's ear, yet his words felt so heavy that He Li could barely keep himself upright.

"If you dare breathe a word of this to anyone…" He Yu suddenly pressed in close, his voice laced with threat. "…you won't have even half a minute of peace for the rest of your life. Try me if you don't believe me."

With that, he released his brother. He Li slid to the ground, the colorful Red Delicious apples, tangerines, and grapes spilling out of the fruit basket and onto the floor…

He Yu looked at him disdainfully from above, his eyes bitingly cold.

"Now, scram."

After He Li left, He Yu pulled the curtain open again.

The youth met the man's gaze.

Xie Qingcheng was standing next to the hospital bed with his arms crossed, watching him grimly. From his expression, it was obvious that he had heard every single word of the brothers' conversation.

He Yu's mood had been spoiled. He stepped forward silently, staring at Xie Qingcheng's face. He lifted a hand to straighten his collar, which was already perfectly neat. His gaze moved back and forth over Xie Qingcheng's face, his eyelashes quivering like the tremulous light of the Milky Way spilling across the night sky.

"Xie Qingcheng."

Xie Qingcheng did not respond.

"Listen…if the two of us had died in the water, everything would have ended just like that. But now, we're both still alive. And no matter what you say, I know that you're different from everyone else."

He Yu was met with silence.

"It's impossible for things to stay the same as before," he went on. "I can't see you the same way, and you can't see me the same way. I hope that you can accept this fact."

To Xie Qingcheng, it seemed like He Yu had gone even more insane. Now that he'd learned the truth, it seemed he had laid down some of his hatred, but in its place he had picked up some new emotion that neither of them could fully understand yet.

Anyone could enter the ward at any time, so He Yu couldn't willfully pick up right where he'd left off, but still, he turned his face into the hollow of Xie Qingcheng's throat. "As for how the two of us are going to interact, I'll give us both some time to think it over. I'll contact you later, so wait for me, okay?"

It was only right for them to take some time to adjust—after all, eating too much could make a person choke, and all these secrets and feelings were much harder to digest.

Fortunately, in the days that followed, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng really didn't have many opportunities to meet alone.

Due to the deadly incident on set, filming for *The Trial* was forcibly shut down.

The film had a large budget, and its investors and producers were all the most powerful figures of their respective fields. To put it harshly, if the victim had been a minor cast member, these cold-blooded, apathetic businesspeople would have been fine with silently wiping away the gory stain so none of this blood would seep into the audience's field of view.

But instead the deceased was Hu Yi.

A man of his position and status had unexpectedly met his death in such a bizarre, cruel manner at this film studio.

Mr. and Mrs. Hu were both very influential, and Hu Yi was their only son. Overwhelmed with fury and grief, the couple rushed to the scene that very day, nearly upending the entire film crew. In the end, the Hu family matriarch roared at Huang Zhilong, tears streaming down her face and teeth bared in rage, "You'll pay for my son's life with your own! I'll make you pay!"

And apart from Hu Yi, an assistant writer and a production manager from the film crew were still missing. Even now that He Yu had woken up and began to cooperate with the investigation, the status and whereabouts of those two girls were still unknown.

When the officer responsible for taking Xie Qingcheng and He Yu's statements arrived, his face took on an extremely complicated expression. Were these two born under an unlucky star or something? Why did they keep getting embroiled in the strangest cases of the year?

But the officer was a consummate professional who wouldn't reveal any of his private thoughts; he kept his smart remarks to himself.

The investigation team meticulously went over everything that had happened that night, including the appearance of that last "worker" Xie Qingcheng had seen. A forensics expert created a composite sketch of the suspect based on his description. But since it had been late at night and Xie Qingcheng hadn't looked closely at the man's face, the finalized portrait was less than ideal.

The assistant writer and production manager's families kept wailing and making a fuss outside, throwing the scene into utter chaos. All the police department could do to console them was insist they would solve the case as quickly as possible.

And they did need to solve it as quickly as possible—as of now, the two girls were missing, not necessarily dead. If they were still alive, then the sooner they found a lead, the greater their chances of survival.

Everything proceeded at a tense, rapid pace.

But one question continued to hang over the entire film crew's heads—

Why was Hu Yi murdered?

Whom had he crossed?

And why had they chosen such a frightful way to murder him?

Doubtless these were the questions preying on Huang Zhilong's mind right now.

In the cast and crew's hotel, Huang Zhilong's face was as gray as steel. He sat on the sofa across from Lü Zhishu, who looked just as upset.

There was no one else in the room. Both these laoban had placed their phones on the tea table beside a monitoring device—the latest in cutting-edge counter-surveillance technology.

"Who did you offend?" Lü Zhishu asked.

"Who could I possibly have offended?" Huang Zhilong took a drag on his cigar. These tumultuous last few days had rendered his complexion a waxy yellow. "Who do *you* think I could have offended?"

"You have the face to talk to me like that?" Lü Zhishu grew agitated. "You *knew* that I had He Yu come here because I wanted you to keep an eye on him for me—for the organization—but look at you, you nearly got him killed! If I hadn't received that reminder from the Surveillance AI saying the signal from He Yu's phone had been cut off for over an hour and that I should investigate immediately, the next time I saw him, he would've been a corpse!"

Forced into an awkward corner by her probing remarks, Huang Zhilong said, "Since when did Executive Lü become such a caring mother to her son?"

"Me, care about him?" Lü Zhishu scoffed. "Do you need me to repeat what Executive Duan said?"

"Don't threaten me with Duan Wen." Huang Zhilong's eyes were bloodshot. "I'm telling you, Lü Zhishu, your position in the organization is even lower than mine. Don't think that you can speak to me this way just because Executive Duan is paying you more attention now you have the blood toxin—you ought to know your place!"

"Do you really think that you can hold your seniority over me after this mess? What position could you possibly still have?" Lü Zhishu let out a tremulous laugh, her plump cheeks quivering. "You can go ahead and keep your mouth shut, Huang Zhilong. Just wait till Executive Duan knocks on your door and tears you a new one!"

As if to confirm her words, the moment Lü Zhishu finished speaking, Huang Zhilong's phone began to ring from where it lay on the tea table between them.

The caller ID only showed a single name, glaringly bright: "Duan."

Chapter 98:
Red High Heels

LÜ ZHISHU AND HUANG ZHILONG locked eyes; both of them saw a wisp of fear in the other's gaze.

Since the Huzhou broadcasting tower incident, the higher-ups had been working on cutting all ties to the murder cases.

All the arrangements that Lu Yuzhu had made before her death had forced the police investigation across borders, and the foreign scapegoat was already surrounded, only waiting to be sacrificed to close the case.

But now this massive incident had occurred during the filming of *The Trial.* It was completely outside anyone's expectations.

Hu Yi had been murdered, and his parents would definitely investigate.

Huang Zhilong knew he had no way to avoid this call. He sucked in a deep breath, forcibly suppressing the trembling of his voice. "Executive Duan."

"Aiyo, Executive Huang." The voice emanating from the phone speaker was smooth as silk; the man's tone was as casual as if he was discussing the weather. "It's been so long since you've taken the initiative to call me, I couldn't help but give in to the temptation to call you myself."

"Executive Duan, I didn't mean…"

The man laughed. "I've been thinking about you. I wanted to ask after your well-being. Has Executive Huang been sleeping well lately?"

Huang Zhilong had been in a verbal spar with Lü Zhishu just moments ago, but now, pea-sized beads of sweat were rolling down his forehead.

"I…"

"I heard that your production's been put on hold. *Tsk*, as a producer with so much on your plate, you finally have a chance to rest. I bet you've been enjoying this rare vacation and sleeping till noon every day."

Huang Zhilong had no way to respond.

Executive Duan laughed, his tone changing abruptly. "But unfortunately, while Executive Huang has been sleeping well, I haven't been sleeping well at all. Do you know why?"

"E-Executive Duan, you must be joking," Huang Zhilong stuttered. "After an incident like that, I haven't been able to eat or sleep. I've been constantly racking my brain, trying to figure out a way to resolve the situation…"

Executive Duan snorted. "Oh? So you *do* know that there's something wrong. And here I thought you were sitting at the spa, vacationing on some island somewhere. You went so long without giving me a single call; I practically had to come find you myself."

"My…my apologies… I really have been stretched too thin…"

"There's no need to apologize." Executive Duan sounded just as leisurely as always, not a hint of emotion audible in his voice. "Executive Huang is a big boss now, so it's only natural that you keep certain business matters from me. I have no interest in asking about them, either. I just wonder what sort of deity Executive Huang offended so deeply that they'd kill such a prominent figure on your turf."

Executive Duan paused.

"I also heard that you nearly lost the blood toxin."

"Executive Duan…we've always been honest with each other. I haven't hidden any of my business from you." Oily sweat dripped from Huang Zhilong's nose. "I meticulously verify my accounts with you every year… You even have backup files on every worker in my employ. There's no reason for you to suspect me."

"I wouldn't call it 'suspecting' you," Executive Duan said slowly. "I just find it inexplicable. For some bizarre reason, he was dumped in a solvent vat like a film prop. Such a strange way to carry out a murder—I find it hard to believe they just wanted to disrupt a film project."

"Yes…yes…but I truly have no idea who I could have offended…" The cigar between Huang Zhilong's fingers burned down. "I really… I don't know why things have turned out like this either."

Executive Duan laughed. "You don't need to be so nervous."

Huang Zhilong mopped at his sweat.

"Actually, in terms of seniority, you've been in the organization since long before I took over. You're one of its founders," Executive Duan said placidly. "I don't use those I suspect, nor do I suspect those I use. If you say that's how it is, I won't question you."

Huang Zhilong let out a small breath of relief.

"But you must know that Mr. Hu is no easy opponent," Executive Duan continued. "If they find something in the course of this investigation, I'm sure you're aware of the consequences. There's no need for me to say more."

"Yes, yes…"

"There are currently no clues leading to the killer who dared to commit murder right under your nose, and neither of us know their ultimate objective. But it takes a careful man to steer a ship for ten thousand years. Don't you agree?"

"Right, right…"

"Excellent. Since you have a very clear idea of the things you need to act on quickly, as well as the things that you must never do again, I'll leave it at that. Don't give our opponent too much time. Whatever affairs you've been involved in, the traces must be wiped clean as soon as possible."

Huang Zhilong gave him another string of assents before finally hanging up the phone.

Perhaps it was just the sudden disappearance of the light source, but the moment the phone screen turned off, Huang Zhilong's waxy, pale face seemed especially gloomy and defeated.

Lü Zhishu leaned against the wall. "You'd better hope that everything you said today is the truth."

Huang Zhilong bared his teeth in a smile, his anxiously bulging eyeballs giving his perfectly normal face an unspeakably twisted quality. "Not a single word of what I said was false."

After Lü Zhishu left, Huang Zhilong sprawled out on the chair and covered his eyes with the crook of his arm.

In truth, the thought of murder was hardly cause for fear to people like them. After all, they were a group of vicious beasts in human form, licking blood from the tips of their fangs.

What frightened him was the fact that they knew absolutely nothing about their adversary.

The fact that they could pull off something like this meant that whoever this was, their methods were just as refined as those of their own organization. Furthermore, their choice of Hu Yi as their murder victim meant their standing must be very high—so high that Hu Yi's parents posed no concern to them even if something had gone awry.

When had he ever offended someone like *that*?

Huang Zhilong was drawing a blank. He began to question every single one of his secret projects. Had he slipped up somewhere? If there really was a problem with one of his projects, things would be much trickier.

And what were his opponent's next steps? Hu Yi was dead, but Huang Zhilong hadn't forgotten that the other party still had those two girls—they were workers under his employ and still missing to this day.

People with no background or status had never been anything more than grass underfoot to Huang Zhilong. It wouldn't have mattered to him if those two girls died; even if their parents showed up with protest banners to kneel in front of his offices, he had ways to suppress public outcry.

But now, with their insignificant lives bound to his, he had no choice but to agonize over their well-being. He had no idea what the other party was planning to pull using those two girls.

After deliberating at length, Huang Zhilong picked up his phone again and dialed a number. "Hello… Yes, Chief Zhou, how are you? I wanted to ask after the two missing girls—have you found any clues?"

At that very moment, at an unknown location in what appeared to be a basement, a girl slowly regained consciousness.

When she first opened her eyes, she thought she was still lying on the spring mattress in the film crew's hotel— that everything that had happened before was just a nightmare brought on by the exhaustion of the past few days.

But she quickly realized something was wrong.

The air was cold and damp, filled with the bitter scent of rotting wood.

Fear rapidly filled her eyes and she glanced around at her surroundings in terror. She wanted to scream, but found her mouth gagged by a strip of cloth, and could only let out a weak groan.

Like any animal that had fallen into a trap with a breath of life still left in its body, she began to struggle hysterically.

Craning her neck, she found herself locked in a cage just over a meter high with her hands tied behind her back.

"Mmph…mmmph!"

Swallowed up by fear, the girl began to recall everything that had happened before she passed out—

The man in the baseball hat.

The reflection of a cudgel rearing up behind her as she raised her phone to snap a photo.

The black hair billowing like seaweed inside the specimen tank as she took a closer look—

The realization that it was Hu-laoshi, whom she had been speaking to just hours before, immersed in the cloudy solution, his skin deathly white.

"Mmph! Mmmmmph!"

Tears started streaming down the girl's face. She was soaked from head to toe in sweat and urine, the consequence of pissing herself in fright…

Where was she?

What was this place?

Outside the cage, she was surrounded by hollow darkness.

Where was her friend? Where was Xiao-Yang?

She kicked her feet in despair, frantically twisting back and forth as she tried to loosen the ropes that bound her.

And then—

"Xiao-jiejie."

She shuddered violently.

She turned her head abruptly, but all she saw was a pile of straw lying in the corner of the cage. She grew even more distraught, thinking that her terror had made her lose her mind and start hearing things.

But the moment she turned away, she heard that voice again.

"Xiao-jiejie."

She whipped her head around once more.

The straw moved.

There was a child standing outside the cage, she realized, behind the pile of straw.

It was a very small boy who looked to be only five or six years old. But he was neatly dressed in clean clothes, and his hands and feet weren't tied. It didn't look like he was another prisoner—rather, he seemed more like a child who had snuck into the basement to play.

The young woman cried out, tears running down her face.

"Shh, Xiao-jiejie, don't shout."

The boy walked over quietly and craned his neck to look up at the entrance in the basement's ceiling. Then he approached the cage, stood up on his tiptoes, and slowly untied the strip of fabric covering the young woman's mouth.

The young woman gasped loudly, taking in huge gulps of air as her lips trembled and her teeth chattered audibly.

"Where… Where am I…and who are you…? Where's Xiao-Yang? Where's the girl who was with me? Have you seen her? What are you all trying to do…huh? What are you trying to do?!"

"Lower your voice." The boy was young, but he seemed quite precocious. He pressed a finger to his lips. "Don't let the aunties and uncles upstairs hear that you're awake."

The girl fell silent, perhaps because the boy didn't seem malicious, or possibly because she was too frightened to speak. She shook from head to toe.

"This is the basement of a big villa," the boy said quietly from beyond the cage. "I'm only a child, so I don't know who the grown-ups who've come here are, but I've seen them do bad things."

"D-do bad things?" the young woman asked tremulously. "… What…bad things?"

The boy shook his head wordlessly.

“Then…have you seen…the other girl who was captured and brought here with me?” the young woman pressed.

“I did.”

“Where is she?”

The little boy pointed at the ground.

“Downstairs?”

“In the pipes.”

The young woman stared in horror.

“She’s already dead,” the little boy explained. “I couldn’t save her in time. I didn’t have time to think of a way to save her. This kind of thing happens here a lot; the grown-ups told me not to mind it.” The little boy’s voice sounded abnormally rational.

It was entirely inappropriate given the circumstances, but there were times when the human mind acted of its own accord…

The young woman inexplicably recalled a photograph…

Taken at Auschwitz during World War II, it featured a German boy walking down the street past a massive pile of dead Jewish refugees on the side of the road. The boy had an incredibly indifferent, calm expression on his face.

The child’s heart must have become insensate and numb—he displayed no astonishment toward death, walking by as if it were the most normal thing in the world…

The boy standing before her seemed to be the same.

Fresh fear struck the young lady, who was already scared out of her wits. Only after shuddering for a good while did she manage to squeeze some words out of her throat. In a voice distorted by panic, she said, “Xiao-didi…can…can you please let me out? Please… I’m begging you… I’m an only child… My parents…my parents…”

She shook even more violently, her teeth knocking against each other.

“My parents won’t be able to handle it…! Please…please find a way…”

“Don’t be scared,” the boy said softly. “I came to find a way to save you. They’ve captured so many people that they’ll sometimes forget about them… I’ve secretly let a few of them go. They still don’t suspect me because I’m just a little kid.”

As he spoke, the boy took out a small key and focused his attention on opening the door to the cage.

“Jiejie, there’s a small corridor connected to this basement; just keep walking forward to escape. Oh, right, and take this—it’s a blueprint of the villa. I’ve marked the safest path to the exit for you.”

The young woman hastily accepted the document. She was so terrified that she had completely lost her ability to reason or any semblance of calm.

She didn’t realize how completely nonsensical her present situation was.

Her entire mind was filled only with the word “survival,” which crowded out every last bit of her rationality. She grabbed the blueprint in a panic and looked down at the little boy, her eyes filled with gratitude.

“Thank you… Thank you so much…”

The little boy smiled back with his hands clasped behind him, the picture of docility. “You’re welcome, jiejie. Go quickly now.”

The young woman staggered away, losing one of her shoes as she ran toward her escape. The boy remained standing next to the cage, watching her figure recede into the distance until she was finally swallowed up by the heavy darkness.

Some time later, the trapdoor in the basement’s ceiling creaked open.

A beam of warm yellow light spilled down, and a man who appeared to be a housekeeper stepped into the basement. He walked up to the boy.

However, he didn’t speak the way the boy did, as the housekeeper wasn’t his father—instead, he bowed very respectfully toward the child.

“We’ve finished setting up the game. The player has already walked into surveillance range as indicated on the blueprint.”

The boy beamed. “Let’s go upstairs and play, then.”

He followed the housekeeper back up as he spoke, leaving the gloomy basement behind.

The basement’s trap door was engraved with a picture of a cat toying with its prey. For cats, the thrill of the hunt didn’t stem from the death of the prey itself, but rather from their prey’s terror as it faced its imminent demise.

The boy walked into a brightly lit hall.

Here, the light was brilliant enough to throw his face and outfit into sharp relief—his face was very delicate, nearly breathtakingly so.

He was dressed very neatly, but there was something about his outfit that was extremely bizarre…his shoes.

On his tiny feet, he wore a pair of pint-sized, custom-made red high heels!

GAME START

It was a truly disturbing combination—a five-or six-year-old boy with a pair of women's high heels on his feet—entirely adult in style, yet shrunken down to a child's size.

High heels clacking, the little boy walked over to the tea table in the hall and turned to look at the large image being projected onto the wall.

The young woman he had just set free was already visible on the highly detailed projection. She had walked into the elaborate, labyrinthine system of paths, anxiety and fear written vividly across her face.

The boy watched for a while, utterly engrossed, before stepping forward and picking up a device that resembled a portable game console, eyes still fixed on the screen.

Smiling, he pressed a button with his soft little hand.

"Let the game begin."

Chapter 99:
Can I Come Over to Your Place for New Year's?

IT WAS THE LAST DAY before the cast and crew dispersed. Xie Qingcheng was gathering his things in his room.

Halfway through, a greeting card slipped out of a pile of miscellaneous items.

He picked up the card to see some well wishes written on it, and remembered that it had been given to him by the young assistant writer the day he joined the production.

The girl was around the same age as Xie Xue and very innocent and kindhearted. When Xie Qingcheng had joined the production, even though the broadcasting tower incident hung over him like a dark cloud, she hadn't treated him differently from anyone else.

But now her whereabouts were a mystery, and no one even knew if she was dead or alive.

There was also the other missing girl. Xie Qingcheng hadn't interacted with her much, but her sincerity was apparent from the way she treated people.

Xie Qingcheng sat down with the card in his hand and looked out at the drifting snow beyond his window.

Jiang Lanpei, Lu Yuzhu, these two innocent girls who'd gone missing… He couldn't be certain whether the same criminal organization was behind all of these cases, but either way, he had truly encountered too many deaths this year.

To overcome his mental illness, Xie Qingcheng had tamped down practically all of his emotional fluctuations, leaving him cold and stiff. He valued life, but he had given up the ability to grieve its

loss. Even the feeling of disappointment was too heavy for him to permit himself.

But now, even though Xie Qingcheng was reluctant to admit it—and perhaps because of the near-death experience and the secrets he'd finally shared after so many years guarding them alone—his emotional state seemed to have shifted slightly. He didn't feel quite the same as before.

It was as if his heart held an expanse of dense, dark ink; sharing the truth had been like pouring in a cup of water. The darkness had yet to dissipate, but it seemed somewhat diluted.

He could finally breathe again, at least a little.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He had done some soul-searching over the past few days, and he could confirm that his emotions had loosened up slightly. It made him feel vaguely regretful.

He Yu's words had been harsh, but everything he said was true—now that he had shared his secrets, it was impossible for them to simply go back to the way things used to be. In all likelihood, they would never be able to disentangle themselves from each other again.

Xie Qingcheng sighed. He was finding it difficult to calm down. He had pretty much finished packing by now, and it was already past ten o'clock at night, but unfortunately, he couldn't fall asleep.

And so, he opened the bottle of red wine that had been given to him when he joined the production. He had been planning to bring it home, but after thinking it over, he figured he might as well drink some of it now to ease his anxiety.

The wine was excellent, sweet and rich on the tongue. As he drained the glasses he poured out, he found himself getting rather tipsy.

Although Xie Qingcheng could hold his liquor, his body processed alcohol very poorly—drinking quickly sapped him of his

strength, and although his mind remained clear, he couldn't avoid the accompanying physical sluggishness.

Warmth began to dissolve into his veins. Clutching the wine glass in one hand, he lay back against the hotel's reclining chair in exhaustion. He felt calm, but within that calmness was a deep melancholy.

The more he drank, the warmer he felt. Casting his slightly reddened eyes downward and raising a hand to rub at his temple, he was just about to stand and go wash up when he heard a key card unlocking the door.

There were so many things he needed to take care of for the police investigation, and so he'd spent the past few days back at the hotel. And despite his soft, wine-soaked haze, he knew very well who had the authority to obtain his key card from the front desk and open his door.

Torn between impatience from the relentless nagging, resentment from telling the truth, and irritation at his inability to come up with an adequate solution despite days of consideration, Xie Qingcheng glared at the person who had entered his room, a cocktail of all those emotions simmering in his chest. But perhaps all the wine had left his gaze so soaked with liquor that it no longer held its usual sharp edge: He Yu didn't notice a hint of Xie Qingcheng's sour mood.

He had come to ask Xie Qingcheng what time he intended to depart the next day, and truly hadn't expected to find a mildly drunk Xie Qingcheng the moment he walked into the room.

Xie Qingcheng stilled for a moment, then stood up, his faintly red eyes still clear and bright. His body was straight as a ruler.

He watched He Yu in the entryway for a moment.

Then—

"Please get out," he said.

After a moment of shock, He Yu figured out why Xie Qingcheng was drinking alone in his room. He looked at him with a complicated expression, then closed the door behind him.

"Xie Qingcheng, you…"

"I'm asking you to please get out."

"Xie-ge…there's no need for you to be so polite with me."

Xie Qingcheng looked at him in silence. It wasn't politeness, it was cold distance—actually, ever since they escaped the jaws of death, his mind had been in turmoil.

He hadn't realized at first just how much he regretted telling He Yu those truths. It had taken him a few days to process, but once things settled down and he had time to think the matter through, his regret had only grown. But he was certain now that he needed He Yu to understand that while, yes, he had shared his history as the psychological Ebola patient "the First Emperor," he could only ever have revealed those secrets on the brink of death.

For the Xie Qingcheng who had returned to the land of the living, it was imperative that he draw clear boundaries between himself and He Yu. None of this would change his attitude toward He Yu.

He had to make sure that He Yu understood this.

"You've drunk so much. Were you upset about something tonight?" Unfortunately, the young man didn't seem to understand, and ignored his aloof attempt to turn his visitor out. He Yu walked up to him, his body shrouded in cold night air. He had a plastic bag in his hand. "Let's sit down and talk. I've brought you some hot cocoa tea."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless. He Yu really was a child. Who wanted to drink hot cocoa tea? Stuff like that made his throat feel like it was coated in sugar.

Xie Qingcheng walked over with a cold expression on his face, lifted a hand, and slammed it into the wall behind He Yu. His eyes

were faintly damp beneath his mussed hair.

"Get out."

But He Yu suddenly reached out and hugged him.

The heat was blasting inside, so Xie Qingcheng was only wearing a thin lounge shirt made of smooth, satiny silk. He could feel the young man's breath through the light material.

Xie Qingcheng sobered up at once. To avoid waking the people in the adjacent rooms, he kept his voice low. His breath was hot from the wine, but his tone was cold.

"Are you done?"

But this time, He Yu didn't actually do anything to him. To Xie Qingcheng's surprise, He Yu only pushed him against the entryway wall and held him, head buried in the crook of his neck as he breathed.

It was different from the way he'd vented his surging desire before.

It was even different from the scorching need he'd felt in the hospital ward after coming back from the brink of death.

This was the first time he had seen Xie Qingcheng since reflecting on everything he'd learned, and he held him like he was embracing another living being like himself.

This was the last person on earth who could truly empathize with him.

"The production crew will be disbanded tomorrow."

Silence.

"Don't worry, I've already thought it over. No matter what happens, I won't tell anyone else about the things you told me."

He Yu might've been young, but when he wanted to speak with Xie Qingcheng sincerely, he was more than up to the task. His bearing was perfectly steady.

He kept hugging the man in his arms as he spoke.

He found Xie Qingcheng's body very peculiar—it was clearly full of masculine strength, muscles wiry yet well-developed and not weak by any means. But as he touched him through his clothes, he couldn't help but feel that the fabric was too thick while Xie Qingcheng was too thin—so thin that he was like smoke or a disembodied spirit, and thus impossible to grasp. He Yu couldn't help reaching out to touch him, to stave off the panic in his heart.

It was a frailty that made it seem like he could disappear at any moment.

He hugged Xie Qingcheng, just like that, rocking back and forth in place a few times, dredging up a false impression of tenderness, like he was afraid of losing something—

He Yu closed his eyes. Before coming here, he had already spent a long time mulling things over. But at this moment, he once again thought of all those things from the past—the scar on Xie Qingcheng's wrist, the secrets in his heart—and everything that had happened between them. Finally, he thought about how after today, they would leave this place and return to Huzhou.

After that, Xie Qingcheng would definitely never willingly seek him out again.

He felt a strange twinge in his heart, as if something was tugging on it—it was an extremely uncomfortable feeling.

"I'll keep your secrets," he finally said softly into Xie Qingcheng's ear, his tone unexpectedly docile, like he was beseeching him. "However, let me say this up front—after you get back, don't spend any more time alone with Chen Man."

Xie Qingcheng pushed him. "Stop being mental."

"Mm." He Yu smiled—he really was being mental; he'd just spoken so imploringly, yet now his eyes darkened again as he grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the wrist, revealing a section of his pale gray tattoo with a stroke of his fingers.

Not again. Xie Qingcheng thought that perhaps he needed a teething stick—why else would he be so fond of gnawing on him?

Sure enough, He Yu bit down on Xie Qingcheng's tattoo, but this time, he didn't draw blood.

He said, "If you insist on spending time alone with him, then fine—just don't let me see the two of you together. You're my kin, so don't get too close to other people."

"After all the thinking you've done these past few days, *this* is the way you've decided to interact with me?"

"That's my last word," He Yu said.

Xie Qingcheng suddenly jerked free of He Yu's hand. Then, right before He Yu's eyes, he pulled out a disinfecting wipe, swiped it over his wrist, and tossed it in He Yu's face.

"Fuck off."

But He Yu hugged him even more insistently. Burying his face in the crook of Xie Qingcheng's neck, he nuzzled him gently with the tip of his nose.

Drunk on red wine, the man burned unusually hot. He Yu knew if he were to take what he wanted from Xie Qingcheng right now, the feeling would be unlike anything he'd ever experienced before.

But he didn't do it.

In his free time these past few days, he had indeed carefully examined his thoughts and come up with a brand new idea.

His feelings were different now, even compared to what he felt in the hospital room—he'd just barely escaped with his life back then, and the joy of surviving the disaster drove him to impatiently seek out warmth and softness from Xie Qingcheng's body.

His ardor had been completely impulsive, like a reflexive habit left over from his past behavior.

But it wasn't the same anymore.

Although the words he spoke were as cutting as ever, whenever he thought of how many years Xie Qingcheng had spent alone—whenever he thought of the tattoo on Xie Qingcheng's wrist and how it was actually a self-inflicted scar just like his own, precipitated by the depths of his misery and helplessness—he felt a soft ache in his cold, shadowy heart.

That feeling became a knot that bound him in place.

He still didn't like Xie Qingcheng, but there was no one like Xie Qingcheng.

The fact that he had never chosen He Yu was painful. But when He Yu regarded him as another psychological Ebola patient, he could understand what he'd been through.

He Yu didn't think that the new feeling he'd developed for Xie Qingcheng was necessarily pity. But at the very least, he didn't want to hurt this person anymore, and so he didn't overstep any boundaries—he just hugged Xie Qingcheng, for a long, long time, even though Xie Qingcheng still refused to hug him back.

This was the first time since they'd first slept together that they parted on peaceful terms.

He Yu's eyes were deeply overcast when he left, but in the end, he held himself back. "I've thought it over, Xie Qingcheng—from now on, I won't force you to do anything that you don't want to do. You can think of it as my way of saying thank you for telling me the truth. I won't torment you anymore, I won't make you do those things anymore, so you don't need to be scared."

Xie Qingcheng's body smelled of alcohol, but his eyes were as clear and chilly as thin ice. Still, there seemed to be a touch of rouge frozen beneath the ice, suffusing it with a soft blush.

"You think far too highly of yourself," Xie Qingcheng said mildly. "I've never been afraid of you—I just found those experiences disgusting."

He Yu was speechless.

"If you're really not planning on doing anything, why did you come to my room?"

After a moment of contemplation, it seemed that He Yu really couldn't remember why he'd come.

"Nothing really," he said. "I'm leaving now."

"Mm."

"Xie Qingcheng."

"Hm?"

"Before I go…can you hug me back? Just once?"

Xie Qingcheng closed those dark eyes that seemed to glimmer with stars. "I already told you," he said indifferently, "as far as I'm concerned, our relationship isn't going to change just because you know my secrets. That's still my stance."

Silence.

"Please leave."

The old He Yu would never have just left. But this time, he simply stared at Xie Qingcheng for a while. In the end, he didn't speak again, seeming as though he'd already said everything that he wanted to say.

In the past, he'd had plenty of ill intent that could've sparked to life and spurred him to entangle shamelessly with Xie Qingcheng. But after several days of contemplation, he felt like most of that ill intent had been yanked out of his chest.

He knew Xie Qingcheng had abandoned him, knew that he never factored into any of Xie Qingcheng's decisions—but now that he'd learned the whole truth, it was very difficult to feel that Xie Qingcheng had betrayed his expectations.

Betrayal was an act carried out by normal people. Trapped within this maelstrom, Xie Qingcheng had long since abandoned his identity as a normal person.

Xie Qingcheng didn't even want *himself* anymore.

Why in the world would that change for He Yu?

Even though He Yu was still hurt, he could understand. So when Xie Qingcheng once again told him to leave, he really did go.

The hot cocoa tea that He Yu brought over still sat on the table. Xie Qingcheng practically collapsed on the bed in exhaustion, lifting an arm to cover his eyes.

He could feel He Yu's residual heat lingering on his body; it was very warm, but Xie Qingcheng didn't want it. He had been in hell for far too long—he had never gotten over the deaths of his parents or Lao-Qin. Having lived for so long among the dead, he was no longer accustomed to how it felt to stand so close to the living.

It was better for him to remain alone…

Alone with his weariness and turbulent thoughts, Xie Qingcheng slept until the sun hung high in the sky the next morning.

When he returned to Huzhou, he was naturally in for another round of torment.

Zheng Jingfeng, Chen Man, Auntie Li, Xie Xue… Out of concern for him, all of them came to ask for a full account of what had happened. Although Xie Qingcheng didn't have much patience, he still explained everything to them one by one.

Of course, what they learned was only the tip of the iceberg. The only two people who knew the full story of what had happened at the film studio were He Yu and himself.

Meanwhile, true to his word, He Yu stopped forcing Xie Qingcheng to do those things with him.

Although the youth's desire was certainly abundant, and he couldn't hide the molten heat in his eyes, He Yu had always felt more protective and compassionate toward the mentally ill than the average person. He saw them as his kin, so naturally, he wouldn't add to their persecution.

At first, Xie Qingcheng had assumed that He Yu's words were just idle talk, but he soon discovered that He Yu really was acting

just as he said he would. In that respect, he truly was a gentleman of his word.

The end of the year arrived in the blink of an eye.

On a day not long before New Year's Eve, Xie Qingcheng received a message from He Yu.

"My parents are busy and need to go back to Yanzhou, though this time they asked me to go with them.

"But I don't want to go, so I told them no."

There was a long pause, as if He Yu was waiting for Xie Qingcheng's reply. But Xie Qingcheng didn't respond, so he finally sent the last message.

"I don't want to be by myself. Can I come over to your place for the holiday?"

Chapter 100:
Why Is She Allowed to Come Over to Your Place for New Year's?!

HE YU COULDN'T SAY why he wanted to go to Xie Qingcheng's place for the holiday.

Now, with the hatred between them wiped clean and their entanglement ended, whatever debts there had been between Xie Qingcheng and himself ought to be settled.

Before leaving the film production, he'd even made a solemn vow that, moving forward, he would stop forcing Xie Qingcheng to do anything that he didn't want to. In frank terms, that meant that he would no longer demand that Xie Qingcheng continue with their affair.

Previously, when the two of them were alone together, most of their interactions had consisted of physical communication, rather than verbal. Now that their physical relations had ended, Xie Qingcheng ought to have been much less attractive to He Yu.

And yet he only wanted to see him more.

Perhaps the secret only known to the two of them had tied them tightly together? He Yu didn't know.

He kept refreshing his phone, checking his messages every few minutes over the course of the day.

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond to his message.

After an entire day, he still hadn't responded to him.

Xie Qingcheng's rejection of his request was self-evident. He had no intention of spending the holiday with He Yu.

But He Yu didn't give up. At around nine o'clock in the evening, he finally couldn't resist giving Xie Qingcheng a call.

"Did you see my message?"

"He Yu? What message?" Unexpectedly, the voice on the other end was Xie Xue.

A year ago, He Yu never could have imagined a day when he'd feel so disappointed to hear Xie Xue's voice.

"Hand the phone to Professor Xie; there's something I need to discuss with him."

"Professor Xie is taking a shower," Xie Xue said, annoyed. "If there's something you need to say, you can tell your Xie-laoshi too."

"Shower…"

The image rose unbidden to He Yu's mind: Xie Qingcheng standing beneath the showerhead, with his broad shoulders and long legs, his narrow waist and slender frame, and that gorgeous spot of red cinnabar on the back of his neck.

A spark of warmth flickered to life in his heart.

"Hello?" Xie Xue prompted him when he didn't reply. "Hello? Why aren't you speaking?"

He Yu did his best to sound calm and indifferent. "I really do have something that I need to talk to him about. Give him the phone and get him on the line."

"In that case, wait a bit and call him back later."

"It's urgent."

Xie Xue was out of options. She pattered over to the bathroom in her slippers, opened the door a crack, and turned her head away as she reached her hand in. "Ge! You have an urgent call!"

Over the phone, He Yu heard the splashing sound of the showerhead and the low voice of a man speaking in response.

He imagined the scene, pictured the sight of the man dripping with glimmering water droplets as he reached out to accept the phone. He suddenly felt as though the steam from the shower was drifting through the phone line, warming his face.

There was a slight rustle of movement from the other end of the line. Then, Xie Qingcheng's voice said, "Hello?"

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu's throat tightened; he felt simultaneously overwhelmed by lust at the thought of the man showering and choked by his pointed disregard.

"There's something urgent you need to discuss with me?"

"Mm…"

"You're feeling unwell?"

He Yu sucked in a breath as he glanced down. "…I don't know if this counts as 'feeling unwell,' though I do feel rather uncomfortable."

Silence.

If Xie Qingcheng had been the type to browse the internet, he would have known that the appropriate response to He Yu's answer was "what a load of nonsense."

But he wasn't, so he asked, "Where do you feel uncomfortable?"

He Yu really wanted to have phone sex with him, but he remembered the promise he had just made. He could only say, "Just…my heart feels uncomfortable."

"Hm?"

"You never responded to my message."

The other end of the phone went silent for a good long while. Then, in a plainly disgruntled voice, Xie Qingcheng said, "That's what your urgent call is about?"

"Can I come to your house to spend New Year's with you?" He Yu asked in lieu of an answer.

"That's inappropriate."

"But…"

"New Year's should be celebrated with family. I'm not your relative. You should return to Yanzhou with your parents."

Silence.

"I'm hanging up."

Xie Qingcheng really did hang up at once. He Yu didn't even have time to make up a nonsense excuse to redeem himself before he was treated to the blaring of the busy tone.

Tossing aside his phone, He Yu sank into despondency once more.

In the Xie family home in Moyu Alley, Xie Qingcheng walked out of the bathroom, dressed in a bathrobe and toweling his dripping black hair. He had a grim expression in his eyes.

Xie Xue bit on the straw of her yogurt drink.

"Ge, why was he looking for you? What's the emergency?"

"Nothing. He was just looking for trouble."

"What a nutcase… Did he disrespect you, or talk back to you?"

"…No. Why so many questions?"

Xie Xue pursed her lips. "Because whenever you're with him, something awful happens. I still don't get how the two of you ended up trapped in that flooded studio… Why's he always clinging to you? It's not like you're his babysitter."

"How many times have I told you that girls should speak with restraint?" Xie Qingcheng asked with a cool face. "Also, it's almost ten. Wash up and go to bed."

Under the weight of her brother's oppressive glare, Xie Xue acquiesced, finished her yogurt drink with chagrin, and went to wash up.

New Year's Eve arrived in the blink of an eye.

On the last day of the year, Xie Qingcheng and Xie Xue finished cleaning the house together, then began putting up lanterns and

banners and setting the table with their neighbors. The residents of Moyu Alley would be eating dinner together at a long table this year. It was made up of a dozen or so smaller tables lined up end-to-end down the longtang, with each of the neighbors preparing their own specialty dishes. Only neighborhoods where the residents got along well would spend the holiday together like this.

Uncle Liu brought out his TV and propped it up at the highest spot at the end of the table to play the New Year's Gala, just like how they used to watch the women's volleyball championships back in the eighties.

Seeing this, a little kid dissolved into giggles, got his projector, and cast the image directly onto a screen.

"Uncle, we can watch like this now!"

Li Miaoqing walked out with a pipa in her arms—she had spent her youth working in a nightclub, and back then, all of the girls were required to learn a musical instrument. Sitting on a short stool, she plucked the strings with a twist of her fingers and played several Suzhou pingtan pieces with a smile. A little girl approached her to ask if she could play the theme song from a cartoon. In response, Li Miaoqing put on her reading glasses and began to search for the sheet music online…

"Doctor Xie, there isn't enough cabbage for the dumplings. Can you drive me to the market before it closes tonight?"

"We need more flour too."

Xie Qingcheng couldn't ignore the uncles and aunties' requests, so after he was finished with the task at hand, he grabbed his car keys and took one of the neighborhood aunties to the market to pick out her cabbage.

He never expected that on the drive back, he would run into someone at the entrance of Moyu Alley—

"My goodness, there's still someone eating beef vermicelli at the roadside stall on a day like this?" It wasn't Xie Qingcheng who

first noticed him, but rather, the auntie looking around from the passenger seat, staring intently out the window with her eyes wide open like a bullfrog.

There were a handful of cheap food stalls at the entrance of their longtang, most of which had already closed for the day. There was only a lone Huainan beef soup stall still braving the cold wind.

The boss lady of that establishment was a miser whose greatest passion in life was making money. She firmly believed that as long as she remained open tonight, even when CCTV began broadcasting "Tonight is Unforgettable," there would still be customers coming to patronize her beef noodle soup stall.[7]

How could she possibly close up shop on New Year's Eve?

And look, her faith was being rewarded—here was a customer, just as expected!

Xie Qingcheng stopped the car and looked outside, only to see He Yu sitting at a greasy little table on the side of the road, sipping slowly at some hot beef vermicelli soup.

Fucking unbelievable. He didn't even have a flatbread to go with his meal.

Sitting alone on the street corner, the perfectly well-behaved young man seemed utterly doleful as he slurped his noodles—what older auntie could look at him without feeling curious or distressed on his behalf?

The auntie sitting in Xie Qingcheng's passenger seat was no exception. "Doctor Xie, let's go ask this boy if he needs help."

"…There's no need. Look at how well-dressed he is."

"Aiya, just because he's well-dressed doesn't mean the child's heart is free of worries. Wasn't there something in the newspaper the other day about a fuerdai who committed suicide because his parents didn't give him enough love and attention? If society were just a bit more caring, there wouldn't be so many heartbreaking

incidents… If you don't want to bother, then I'll do it. I'll go and ask." The auntie made to open the door.

Rendered helpless by her impatient nagging, Xie Qingcheng sighed. "All right, all right, Auntie. Don't be so hasty. You get out of the car and warm up in the house first. I know him, so I'll go ask—I'll go ask him, all right?"

Satisfied, the auntie returned to the alley, clutching a bunch of cabbages and meat to her stout body.

But before stepping out of sight, something occurred to her and she called back to Xie Qingcheng, who was in the middle of locking his car.

"Since you know that boy, you might as well ask him to stay for dinner."

Xie Qingcheng was angry beyond words. He stalked over to the Huainan beef soup stall with a dark expression.

The money-grubbing boss lady asked, "And what would *you* like to eat today, handsome—"

"I'm just here to talk to this guy."

The boss lady was affronted, but it wasn't like she could strong-arm him into buying anything. She left with a huff of indignation.

Xie Qingcheng walked over to He Yu's little table, watching as he took tiny sips of clear soup broth with his softly curved lashes lowered.

"I'm surprised a young master like you hasn't choked to death from drinking beef soup on New Year's Eve."

Glancing up, He Yu feigned a shocked expression. "Ah, Doctor Xie."

Xie Qingcheng gave him a look.

"I spent a lot of time looking for a place to eat, but all the other restaurants are closed. Am I in your way?"

Xie Qingcheng had no desire to waste his breath on him.

He Yu had a housekeeper and a chef at home, and the He family had sizable investments in a number of high-end restaurants in the city. In what world did He Yu need to sit in the cold wind and slurp beef soup with meat sliced thinner than paper?

He was obviously doing this on purpose.

However, his despicable methods were highly effective. The delicious aroma of the New Year's Eve banquet had already begun to drift out of Moyu Alley. Every now and then, some children or older folk would come wandering out, and at a glance they could all see the lonely young man drinking his soup on the drafty streetcorner. He was much too eye-catching.

While they were drinking merrily at the long table in the alley, Young Master He was eating outside, exposed to the cold and wind. It was really quite an effective guilt-trip about the disparity between the haves and the have-nots—for while they were feasting to their hearts' content, this poor fellow was freezing to death by the roadside.

Of course Xie Qingcheng couldn't let He Yu silently ruin the festive mood of the entire neighborhood. He stood there for a while, then growled menacingly, "Get up. Pay your bill and follow me."

The neighborhood feast had already begun.

Surprisingly, the filthy-rich Young Master He was completely satisfied to find a place of refuge at this plentiful but humble feast. His bearing was self-effacing and gentle, like that of a modest gentleman, and he quickly became a well-liked guest at the long table. Xie Xue rolled her eyes and Xie Qingcheng ignored him, but everyone else piled food on his plate and poured wine into his cup.

"Ah, Xiao-He, why are you spending the holiday alone?"

"My parents are too busy with work…"

"What a poor child."

"Xiao-He, how old are you?"

"Almost twenty."

"Oh… Do you have a girlfriend? Let me tell you, I have a very beautiful niece. She's in her second year of university and studying acting in Yanzhou…" the auntie rambled on warmly.

Of course, she wasn't the only one who wanted to put forward the girls in their family to He Yu. Soon, he was surrounded by a circle of aunties and grannies.

"My daughter lives in France, but she'll be coming home very soon. She's a bit older than you, but she's young at heart and very pretty—let me show you a picture."

"My niece is half-Chinese and half-Japanese. Her eyes are bright and shiny, and she's charming as can be. These girls' pictures don't count for much—they can be photoshopped, after all—but I have a video here. Xiao-He, take a look and see if you're interested."

"Pssh, stinky old lady, your video could be edited too, okay?"

Half-joking and half-serious, the neighbors quickly started bickering.

He Yu smiled. "They're all great, but I just got my heart broken and haven't gotten over it yet…"

Hearing this, the women only doted on him even more.

"Aiyo, it's really hard to find such a devoted young man these days."

"What kind of girl could be so picky that she wouldn't like *you*?"

He Yu smiled again, lowering his lashes. "I suppose I'm just not good enough."

Xie Qingcheng listened from the side, his face drawn so taut that he didn't know what kind of expression he was wearing. He turned his gaze to the large screen and impassively ate some dumplings, watching a dance performance from the gala that

expanded in a profusion of colors like paints spilled from an artist's palette.

To be honest, just thinking about it made him annoyed.

It was true that He Yu had gotten his heart broken—Xie Qingcheng had personally witnessed it himself from beginning to end. He still didn't know the identity of the girl that He Yu had secretly been in love with, but if He Yu had liked her so much, something must have happened if he refused to speak of her afterward.

It would have been fine if he had merely avoided mentioning her, but He Yu had completely abandoned himself to despair and homosexuality.

Likewise, it would have been fine if he merely wanted to turn to homosexuality, but his partner had been Xie Qingcheng himself.

Xie Qingcheng sat there pondering indifferently for a while, feeling increasingly uncomfortable as time went on. Eventually he decided he might as well remove himself from the situation, so he went to the longtang's communal kitchen to help boil more dumplings.

Unfortunately, there were already plenty of aunties and uncles bustling about in the kitchen. They declared that he would only get in the way and quickly chased him back out again.

And so Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to sit back down in his seat and continue eating his New Year's dinner with an apathetic expression on his face.

Before he could pick up his chopsticks again, though, he noticed a small dough figurine sitting next to his plate.

At first, he thought that it was a toy that a child had put here and forgotten to take with them. Upon taking a closer look, however, he saw that the dough had been sculpted into a pair of tiny dragons with lively whiskers and claws. They were very cute and quite endearing.

"I saw them on the street when I was on my way here and bought a couple," He Yu said with a smile as he leaned over. "They're for you."

"…What do you mean? Is this a children's toy?" asked the straight man.

He Yu sighed, suppressing the urge to roll his eyes. "Xie Qingcheng, dough figurines are a traditional craft. You ought to learn how to appreciate art."

"Why a pair of dragons?"

He Yu's smile vanished. He sat up straight with his face seemingly blank, but upon closer examination, clear unhappiness had suddenly appeared on his features.

"Take a guess," he said stiffly.

"It's not the year of the dragon."

"It has nothing to do with what year it is."

"I wasn't born in the year of the dragon."

"It has nothing to do with the zodiac."

"I don't like dragons, either."

"…Who cares what you like?"

Xie Qingcheng found his sudden change in attitude baffling. He was like a little concubine having a sudden mood swing.

He ran out of patience. "I don't know, I give up."

He Yu's face fell. When he looked down, there was even a pout settling onto his cheeks, a clear indication that he was angry but unwilling to talk about it.

He snatched the little dough figurines from Xie Qingcheng, gripping them tightly in his hand. "If you lack the insight to appreciate them, then forget it. It's not like I *have* to give them to you. I can also keep them for myself."



"You like dragons?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I like—" He Yu's voice suddenly hitched.

What did he like?

He couldn't get the words out.

The boy fell into sullen silence once again, lowering his head to quietly pick at the little dough dragons' scales.

He Yu could see that Xie Qingcheng had no idea that he'd wanted to give him these figurines as New Year's presents because, in the depths of his heart, they were a pair of lonely dragons, fundamentally incompatible with normal people.

Just like a damn emotionally unavailable workaholic, Xie Qingcheng wasn't romantic at all. Meanwhile, He Yu had stood there in the cold and told the artisan again and again to sculpt the two dragons so that they'd look very realistic, to make one red like fire and the other silver like frost. He'd even had the artisan inscribe the pinyin abbreviations of his and Xie Qingcheng's names onto the scales…

He was a dumbfuck paying his New Year's respects to another equally dumb dumbfuck! What a truly unimaginable amount of dumbfuckery!

He scratched out those stupid abbreviations with no expression on his face. In the end, he threw the little dragons down onto the table before turning away to chat with the aunties and uncles, ignoring Xie Qingcheng completely as he flitted about like a social butterfly, courting the affections of the middle-aged and elderly crowd.

The dinner remained in full swing even as the clock ticked past nine and ten at night. Aside from the pair of mortal enemies that was He Yu and Xie Qingcheng, everybody else chatted away happily and with great enthusiasm as they covered the ground with melon seed husks and peanut shells.

But then, something happened that no one could have foreseen.

The area closest to the alley's entrance was the first to fall into disarray. Something happened there that put a sudden stop to all the warm laughter. However, those sitting further inside had yet to react and were still chatting away and cracking jokes.

It wasn't until the silence swept in like a tide that the people further in realized that something strange had transpired. Everyone turned their heads— "What's wrong?"

"What's going on…? Ah!" The person who spoke inhaled sharply as realization dawned. "My goodness…"

"How can this be…"

"Is that really her…?"

The unusual hubbub became more and more obvious until even Xie Qingcheng, who'd been somewhat distracted the entire time, ended up turning to glance over with absentminded eyes.

That one glance was all it took.

A buzzing noise droned through his head as all the blood drained from his face.

Someone had arrived—

Standing nervously at the entrance to the alley was a woman. She looked about thirty, and she was very pretty. She had some makeup on and was wearing a heavy, luxurious fur coat—the only thing that stood out starkly from the rest of her glamorous getup was the bruises on her face that even makeup couldn't disguise.

The woman was carrying a Hermès bag, yet she faced everyone's complicated gazes with an air of embarrassment.

Never mind the residents of Moyu Alley, even He Yu would never forget that face…

It was Xie Qingcheng's ex-wife, Li Ruoqiu.

Chapter 101:
Why Is She Allowed to Talk to You like This?!

LI RUOQIU HAD RUN away from home on New Year's Eve.

Back then, she had decided to get together with that married man, but they were discovered by his wife. The love between the man and his first wife had burned out long ago, so this matter became the last straw for their failing marriage.

After the man and his first wife got divorced, Li Ruoqiu became the man's legitimate wife, and for a while, their marriage was very loving and affectionate. The man was a sweet-talker and a romantic—he could make up for all the pleasant surprises that Xie Qingcheng never gave her.

She truly loved him very much in return—when money was particularly tight for him, she sold all of her valuable jewelry to support his risky foray into business.

Their little home became more and more prosperous, and their lives more and more joyous.

Until another, even younger girl appeared.

She didn't know when exactly her husband met that girl, but when she was at a beauty salon getting a facial, she accidentally ran into him bringing a pretty young student in to get her breasts done.

Li Ruoqiu tried her best to give him the benefit of the doubt—maybe it was for work? After all, he was running a modeling agency now, so perhaps…

Before she could even finish her thought, however, she saw from her secluded corner the man touching the girl's face with a grin as he said in a low voice, "I think you'll be even more perfect with a bigger chest." In that moment, all of her illusions shattered with a rumbling crash.

When Li Ruoqiu divorced Xie Qingcheng, she had said that love was reckless, that responsibility, ethics, and everything else could be sacrificed for its sake. Then she saw the bitter fruit born from a love without responsibility after its blossoms had withered and fallen away.

On New Year's Eve, the girl showed up to start a fight, with a child in her rounded belly.

Li Ruoqiu was infertile, so the sight hurt her deeply. She argued with that girl—and then the husband who had once adored her, who had once claimed that she was his one true love, viciously beat her to protect that girl and the vile spawn in her belly.

Unable to bear the pain and humiliation, she'd quickly gathered her things and left that house.

Sitting in the high-speed rail station, she didn't know where to go.

Her parents had already passed, and her old friends had all drifted away from her because of the arrogant attitude she'd developed after becoming a rich socialite.

She suddenly began to miss Xie Qingcheng very, very much.

There was no way she'd be able to buy a holiday season high-speed rail ticket this late, but she was currently in Hangshi, which wasn't all that far from Huzhou. She decided she might as well burn through some money, and called a taxi to Moyu Alley.

Seeing her in such a state, the taxi driver couldn't help but ask, "Miss, are you all right? Going out on New Year's Eve… Is your husband mistreating you? Should I take you to the police station?"

Li Ruoqiu stared blankly at her reflection in the car window.

Many years ago, as a twenty-something, she had once sat in a taxi and complained, "My husband's so unromantic—it's Valentine's Day, yet he didn't even buy me presents or get me flowers…"

The driver had smiled. "Miss, whether he gets you flowers isn't that important. Isn't it enough for him to treat you well?"

"But he didn't even get me flowers—how can that be considered treating me well?"

The driver had looked at the numerous shopping bags in all shapes and sizes lying in her lap, shaken his head, and said no more.

Only now did Li Ruoqiu understand the meaning hidden behind the driver's words that day.

Xie Qingcheng never remembered anniversaries or holidays—he was too busy, and he didn't like wasting time on such saccharine things. But he always left his payroll card with her and gave her a clear view of their finances. Whatever she wanted to buy, however she wanted to spend his money, he never uttered a word of refusal.

She could have used the money that he gave her to buy many, many bouquets of flowers.

"Miss?"

In the end, as if transported from a different lifetime, Li Ruoqiu sat in the taxi, covered her face, and broke down into silent, bitter sobs.

"Before…before…my husband was such a good man, he was so kindhearted and responsible," she cried. "He treated others well and treated me even better…but I…I…"

With great difficulty, the driver eventually managed to calm her down. Then Li Ruoqiu looked at the dark bruise on her face, wiped her tears, and did her best to hide the injury with makeup.

She knew that by going back, she would be attracting odd stares, gossip, and even looks of scorn.

She had planned on walking discreetly up to Xie Qingcheng's house and knocking on his door to ask if she could stay for the night. She hadn't anticipated that Moyu Alley would be holding a banquet.

Now her miserable appearance also became his embarrassment.

Just like that, the jubilant bustle of the last day of the year was overtaken by an endless, awkward silence.

Xie Qingcheng and Li Ruoqiu sat down by themselves inside the house. Since they were talking, it would be impolite for anyone else to enter.

After a very long silence, it was Xie Qingcheng who spoke first.

"Have some hot water." He stood up and poured some water, then passed it to her.

While the water was quite warm, the cup wasn't her old one anymore. In a daze, holding the disposable paper cup reserved for guests, she dissolved into tears once again.

Xie Qingcheng had ceded her the sofa, while he sat on a stiff chair a very respectful distance away from her. "What happened?"

Li Ruoqiu shook her head as she wiped repeatedly at her tears. After a long pause, she finally managed to say, "Xie-ge, I'm sorry. I didn't know that there was going to be a celebration like this today. I didn't want to make things awkward for you…"

"…It's fine," Xie Qingcheng said.

He was the kind of person who held deeply entrenched ideas about gender roles. He believed that women were vulnerable, that they shouldn't do this or that, and had a lot of very old-fashioned ideas.

Because of his chauvinism, he rarely held anything against women.

Meanwhile, Li Ruoqiu had always been a very idealistic woman—she liked to watch idol dramas and daydream, and she easily let herself get carried away by emotions, consequences be damned. Aside from that, however, her intentions were usually good, and she could even be very tenderhearted and kind in some other respects—otherwise, Xie Qingcheng would never have married her in the first place.

But she had always loved romance and liked to fantasize about irrelevant details. Xie Qingcheng never lived up to her expectations, and she could never stop herself from arguing with him.

That was why Xie Qingcheng had gotten into the habit of never contradicting her. Regardless of whether she was being reasonable, he would just let her throw tantrums as she pleased. He wouldn't argue easily with a woman, and especially not with his wife.

Perhaps it was precisely the way he held himself back that fed into an insatiable desire in some deep corner of Li Ruoqiu's heart. She subconsciously felt that no matter what she did, Xie Qingcheng would always understand her, that he would never fight with her.

But, of course, there was no way Xie Qingcheng would let her have her cake and eat it too.

After the disintegration of their marriage and the filing of their divorce papers, they hadn't been in contact at all. Not until this very moment, when she suddenly appeared with a bruise on her face and tears in her eyes.

She told Xie Qingcheng the whole story.

Xie Qingcheng looked at her. After a long silence, he asked, "What's your plan moving forward?"

"I…I don't know… I have nowhere else to go, and it's New Year's, but I feel horrible…"

"…I understand."

Li Ruoqiu started crying again. "How could he do such a thing?"

Silence descended. Xie Qingcheng took out a cigarette. He was about to flick his lighter on, but he gave her a long look and instead of pressing down, he set the cigarette aside.

"You're always living in your fantasies, Li Ruoqiu." Xie Qingcheng spoke calmly and sensibly, just as he had countless times before whenever she encountered difficulties. "But reality might not

be able to live up to your imagination—it might even contradict it completely.

"After everything that's happened, you should think about what you want to do from here on out, and whether you're willing to keep living like this. If you are, then you should go back and have a proper talk with him. If you're not, you have to preserve evidence that you can use to protect yourself and find a reliable divorce lawyer."

"Wh-what do you think I should do…?"

"I can't help you with this decision." Xie Qingcheng looked at her calmly, neither casting stones down the well nor treating her with any additional warmth. "Li Ruoqiu, you should know that there's nothing between us anymore."

A shudder ran through Li Ruoqiu's body. After a long moment of silence, she raised her head and slowly looked around at the place that had once been her home.

For a hazy moment, she could almost see her own silhouette from the first time she'd walked into this house as a new wife. The young woman hugged her new husband next to the window, standing up on her tiptoes to kiss him and beaming at his mild expression as she said, "I love you so much. I want to be with you forever."

But now, everything had changed.

The traces she'd left on this room had all been erased—there was only a faint mark on the wall where their wedding photo used to hang.

It was with the man before her that she had grown into her womanhood. In the beginning she'd thought everything about him was wonderful, but by the end, she thought everything about him was terrible.

She'd always felt that Xie Qingcheng had never given her enough, but she'd never wondered whether she was the one who

wanted too much.

As Li Ruoqiu looked around, she thought of everything she'd been through in this house, and of her tumultuous marriage now. She wondered, if she hadn't cheated, would she still be folding dumplings and making eight-treasure rice with Xie Qingcheng like she used to? Would Xie Xue still call her saozi, and…and…

The sound of children playing and laughing trickled in from outside. Seized by some unknown emotion, Li Ruoqiu suddenly spoke to Xie Qingcheng in a deeply sorrowful voice.

"Xie-ge."

"What is it?"

"…If only we could have had a child together."

Silence.

"Then maybe things wouldn't have…"

She didn't finish, probably because it would be too unbecoming. Unearthing a handkerchief, she dabbed at her tears.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

At first, it had seemed like a test from the heavens. In the end, it became a punishment.

She and Xie Qingcheng didn't have a child when they were together, so her heart had been more easily swayed. She'd had an affair with another man and felt that she could start her life over. She had rejoiced at obtaining her freedom in that way.

But later, because she couldn't have children, she was ousted by a younger girl for that same laughable reason and became a victim of adultery herself. Full of grief, she lost her marriage.

Perhaps this was what people meant when they said that fate was a fickle mistress.

Xie Qingcheng shook his head; he didn't know what to say either. He glanced down at his wristwatch. "It's getting late. I'll have Xie Xue take you to a hotel and get you a room so you can rest."

"I…"

"You should go."

He stood up, ready to see his guest out.

Li Ruoqiu's eyes were filled with hurt. At last, she looked at the untouched cigarettes on the table. "You should smoke less."

"…Mm."

"It's not good for you."

Xie Qingcheng nodded, but he did not speak.

He opened the door, planning on bringing her to Auntie Li's house to find Xie Xue. However, he hadn't anticipated that the door would nearly collide with a young man the moment he pushed it open.

Xie Qingcheng stared.

He Yu was leaning against the wall outside the door.

The boy stood calmly with his hands in his pockets, his face absent of discernible expression; it was impossible to say how long he'd been listening. He met Xie Qingcheng's gaze as the door swung open, and Xie Qingcheng's eyes darkened.

"What are you doing here?"

He Yu looked him up and down; the hostility in his eyes was clear, along with a repressed bestial instinct.

But before he had the chance to say anything, Li Ruoqiu walked out, her tears wiped dry and her leather bag packed up. Thus, the woman came face to face with this nineteen-year-old student.

The moment He Yu shifted his gaze to her, it became very placid. He gazed at her calmly.

Chapter 102:
I'm the Only One Who Knows You Best

LI RUOQIU DIDN'T RECOGNIZE the young man at first—after all, He Yu had changed a great deal from the middle schooler she had known in the past. It was a while before she abruptly caught on.

"Ah—it's you?"

A bit of awkwardness appeared on her face.

But He Yu didn't seem to feel awkward at all. He smiled. "Auntie Li, it's me. Hello."

This little brat's tongue was far too sharp. At Li Ruoqiu's age, he should be calling her "Jie" at most. But he insisted on calling her "Auntie," like he was reminding her of something on purpose.

"Y-you've grown so much," Li Ruoqiu marveled. "Last time we met, you were still a little kid…"

He Yu continued smiling faintly without saying anything.

"How many years has it been since we last saw each other?" Li Ruoqiu wondered.

"It's been a long time," He Yu agreed.

Li Ruoqiu and the boy studied each other for a while. She was very attuned to emotional nuances, so she noticed right away that there was something off about the way he looked at her. That sort of feeling…how to describe it? It felt somehow familiar…

As she thought about it, she realized—it reminded her of the looks she'd gotten from that young girl who had shown up at her home to start a fight.

The realization made her freeze abruptly in place. She didn't know why this schoolboy would look at her like this.

"You… Aren't you ringing in the new year with your parents tonight?" she asked tentatively.

He Yu's answer was very simple. "No. I'm spending it with Xie-ge."

"But…" Li Ruoqiu wanted to ask something else, but Xie Qingcheng interrupted her.

"Come with me."

Li Ruoqiu had no choice but to give up. Xie Qingcheng glared at He Yu in warning for a few seconds, then walked off to find Xie Xue.

Xie Xue despised Li Ruoqiu, but just like Xie Qingcheng, she wasn't the type to kick someone when they were down. Knowing that Li Ruoqiu had been severely beaten by her scumbag of a husband till her mouth was all swollen and one of her teeth had come loose, she agreed to take Li Ruoqiu to a nearby hotel and look after her for a few days.

After making all the necessary arrangements, Xie Qingcheng sat down by himself in his house to smoke.

No one came in to disturb him again. Auntie Li was a very tactful person, and He Yu had been called away by the other aunties and uncles to chat.

Swept up in a warm and welcoming clamor, the crowd outside did their best to pretend they hadn't seen a thing—to leave him a bit of peace. As the night deepened, snow began to drift from the skies again, the windows gradually fogging up and leaving only the red paper cuttings pasted to the glass in clear definition.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes were as hazy as the mist. He stubbed out his last cigarette with slender fingers before rising to wash up in the bathroom.

It was stifling inside the room. He had smoked too much, and also drunk some wine. Plus, he was truly in a terrible mental state. It took a long time for him to drift off to sleep.

When CCTV began to play “Tonight is Unforgettable,” the door opened once again.

In his bleary state, Xie Qingcheng thought that Xie Xue had returned. Only when that person walked past the curtain and arrived at his bedside did he realize it was actually He Yu.

Lying on the bed, Xie Qingcheng didn’t feel like talking. He just opened his peach-blossom eyes a sliver to look up at him with an indifferent, vacant gaze.

He hadn’t lost his temper in front of Li Ruoqiu, but he really did feel extremely humiliated. Extremely embarrassed.

Perhaps Li Ruoqiu hadn’t realized it, because she was the one who had betrayed him, but when she came crying to him in full view of so many people, Xie Qingcheng felt like he had been stripped naked and his old scars torn open for everyone to see.

Including He Yu.

He felt like quite the failure, incapable of even holding on to his own wife. Any man would be deeply hurt by such a major rejection, but it had been so many years since that injury that he’d thought it wouldn’t bleed anymore.

But her arrival had made the wound fester from within once again.

It hurt.

The man and the boy looked at each other silently in the dark.

After a long time, Xie Qingcheng said in a hoarse voice, “You should head back. The show’s over.”

He Yu said, “Xie Qingcheng, you absolutely could have told her to scram.”

“She’s my ex-wife.”

“She’s *just* your ex-wife.”

Annoyed, Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He was already feeling a bit dazed, the excess nicotine and alcohol causing his brain

to turn extra slowly.

"Stop sticking your nose in my business," he said. "You should go."

After the film studio incident, He Yu really had planned to go back to treating Xie Qingcheng with a basic degree of respect.

But things had changed again tonight. It was like the moment he saw Li Ruoqiu appear, any thoughts of "reconciliation," "understanding," or "goodwill toward his kin" had fucking vanished into thin air.

He narrowed his eyes, a pit of magma like boiling asphalt roiling in his heart. "Xie Qingcheng, I'm asking you, why did you speak to her so politely just now? You aren't actually planning on forgiving her and making up, are you? There's no bar too low; anyone can just love you and leave you, you—"

"When the fuck was I planning to make up with her?" Enraged, Xie Qingcheng shot up to a sitting position. In the murky dark of night, with a head of disheveled hair, he glared at He Yu through humiliated eyes. "When was I planning on forgiving her? But she's a woman! And she used to be my wife! How do you want me to treat her? Do you want me to chase her out onto the street in the middle of winter on New Year's Eve? I'm a man, okay? I can't fucking hold things against a woman like that! I can't do it!"

"This has nothing to do with whether you're a man or not. There's a right and wrong to everything, and it's already damn near saintly of you not to strip the tendons and drink the blood of someone who betrayed you. And she even had an affair—"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear it anymore. With that, he knew that He Yu had heard everything when he was standing by the door.

For all these years, he had always been reluctant to talk about why he had divorced Li Ruoqiu. He'd only ever said that their affections had faded. After all, no man would willingly admit that his own wife had fallen in love with someone else—it wasn't an issue of right and wrong, but one of sheer humiliation.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes were so red, they looked like they were about to drip blood. Furious, he ground out, "Are you enjoying yourself, learning about these things?"

Silence.

"Shut your mouth, He Yu. What do you know? I've thought about it, and I wasn't that bad, was I? *Was I?* I treated her well enough back then. She could do whatever she wanted—I supported her in everything she did. Are you really going to tell me that it's *my* fault she had an affair?!"

He Yu's expression turned ugly as well. "That's not what I meant."

But Xie Qingcheng couldn't remain so calm anymore. The effects of the nicotine and wine, the psychological stress, and He Yu's interrogation made him lose control and let his irritation take over.

Now that He Yu knew he was also a psychological Ebola patient—albeit one who suppressed his symptoms very well—seeing him lose control like this over Li Ruoqiu upset He Yu even more.

He felt that resentment and discomfort in his heart flourish even further, his eyes burning slightly red. "But Xie Qingcheng, you really shouldn't allow such a bitch to affect you to this extent."

"Don't say things like that in front of me. You don't know her circumstances, and when all is said and done, she's still my ex-wife. Do you understand?"

He Yu stared at him. "You saying that clearly means you still care about her."

"Like hell I care about her!" Xie Qingcheng began to tremble with rage. He recognized that he couldn't keep blowing up like this, but the extreme humiliation made it impossible for him to stop arguing with He Yu.

It was true that he never argued with Li Ruoqiu.

But right now it was He Yu standing in front of him, and he *did* want to yell at him, he *did* want to vent. He wanted to pick up the lampstand beside him and throw it at He Yu to make him get out.

Perhaps in that moment, he was an injured azure dragon. Curled up in his cave as he licked his wounds, he didn't want any of his kin to encroach upon his territory.

Because they were both men—who knew if He Yu would pierce his neck with his fangs and take his life?

He wanted to do it, so he did.

With an alarmingly loud *thunk*, the lamp smashed down.

He Yu was caught off guard, and the sharp edge of the lampstand caught the side of his forehead, slashing through the flesh like a knife. Warm blood immediately began to trickle from his wound.

The young man was quiet for a long time. Then he raised a hand to lightly touch his wound. In the dark, he swept up a bit of blood and smeared it between the pads of his fingers, staring silently at his fingertips.

"Get out," Xie Qingcheng said. "Get the hell out."

The young man looked at the blood staining his palm and, after a long time, quietly began to laugh. When he looked up again, a strange red gleam rippled through his eyes.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He sighed. "Why won't you let me treat you a little better? It's only been a few days, and you're already acting like this with me."

He walked up to Xie Qingcheng's bed, step by step, then looked down at him from above.

He Yu felt like he was also about to have a flare-up. His heart was unspeakably irritated, suffocated, and hurt—but mixed together, all of these feelings also made him feel aggressive and bloodthirsty, yet somehow numb.

"Is this how you want to interact with me in the future, Xie Qingcheng?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"That woman is nothing but a disgraceful, cheating traitor. She isn't worth your pity, even if she were torn into a thousand pieces. But I'm your kin. How could you hurt me like this for her sake?"

"It's not for her—"

At that moment, it was practically impossible for these two maniacs to communicate. It was like they were each venting their emotions on their own separate channels, two torrents unable to ever make contact.

He Yu showed no excessive excitement, but he was actually even less rational than Xie Qingcheng right now. Xie Qingcheng knew when to stop and where the boundaries of venting his feelings lay. He knew to control himself and suppress his emotions as soon as he reached his limits.

But He Yu wasn't the same.

As a fledgling dragon, He Yu didn't really know how to regulate himself. Though he appeared to have better self-control, the light in his eyes was far murkier.

He suddenly raised his bloody hand and reached for the loose hair lying over Xie Qingcheng's forehead, using his thumb to smooth it up and out of his face.

"But what use is there in being so good to her?" he said in a low voice, like he was speaking to himself. "You're just a spare tire to her, a recycling station. She doesn't respect you, Xie Qingcheng. She doesn't love you."

"As if I need *you* to fucking tell me that!" Xie Qingcheng flew into a rage. This time, he got off the bed to chase the boy out. "He Yu, you are just a child. You don't understand anything at all! You're right, she *didn't* respect me! I wasn't good enough, okay? It serves

me right to be divorced, serves me right to be seen as a joke by all of you, serves me right—”

He didn’t get to finish his words.

Because He Yu caught him by the arms and twisted them behind his back. Then he leaned forward, making them both crash onto the bed. Xie Qingcheng’s eyes shot wide open as the student fiercely kissed his tobacco-scented lips to the sound of the clock outside striking midnight.

“That’s right, Xie Qingcheng. It really does serve you right,” He Yu said, his voice low as he emerged from their messy, viciously passionate kiss to pant for breath. “Serves you right for provoking me.”

“Let go… You fucking… Let go of me!” Xie Qingcheng hissed quietly into the space between them. “What are you doing *now*?! Didn’t you fucking say you wouldn’t do this to me again?!”

He Yu had one large hand around his neck and the other on his back. When he heard Xie Qingcheng say this, he drew back slightly, his gaze lingering on the man’s face.

He was still lying on top of Xie Qingcheng, his lips barely half an inch from his mouth, close enough to feel every rise and fall of his chest.

“You said you wouldn’t do this again,” Xie Qingcheng said at last, quietly, as he panted for breath.

The soundproofing in this old apartment wasn’t great, and there were people everywhere outside. Their argument had gotten so ugly; it would have been more than enough to invite the sidelong gazes and searching eyes of the curious. Xie Qingcheng had already lost enough face today; he didn’t want to lose any more.

“He Yu, I hope that you’ll keep your word.”

He Yu looked at him silently, his eyelashes dipping as he shifted his gaze from Xie Qingcheng’s eyes to his lips. “I did say that. Don’t worry, I won’t go back on my promise.”

His inscrutable gaze lingered on Xie Qingcheng's lips a moment longer, then moved back to his eyes.

When He Yu had been staring at those lips, his gaze had been full of desire, but now that he was looking into Xie Qingcheng's eyes again, it darkened.

"But—" He slowly brushed his fingertips over Xie Qingcheng's forehead. Eyes closed, he nuzzled gently against the hair at Xie Qingcheng's temples with the tip of his nose. When he abruptly opened his eyes again, they burned with a scorching yet ice-cold flame. "Some things can be different. Would you like to give them a try?"

Before Xie Qingcheng could figure out what he meant—*what* could be different—He Yu suddenly pulled the belt of his bathrobe free.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes reddened in fury. "You insist on behaving like this again? You're going to go back on your word just like that? You're capable of respecting all mentally ill people, but I'm the one fucking exception?!"

He Yu didn't make a sound as he pushed Xie Qingcheng down with brutal strength and shoved the belt between Xie Qingcheng's teeth, muffling his words beyond comprehension.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear it any longer. He didn't want to resort to violence, but it seemed that violence was his only option. He picked up a nearby cup of water and began by throwing its contents in the young man's face. Then, when the water not only failed to chase He Yu away but made him cling even tighter, Xie Qingcheng furiously smashed the empty cup directly into his head.

With a *thunk*, He Yu's already-bloodied forehead began to bleed anew; the blood was no longer slowly seeping out, but streaming down. Fresh red blood coursed a searing line down his face and past his pitch-dark brows, flooding one of his open, unwavering eyes.

Blood filled the rim of his eye…then rolled abruptly down, like a bloody tear silently dripping from the eye of a demon.

Perhaps He Yu's gaze was too frightening, or perhaps it was the sight of bloody tears dripping down the young man's damp face that made Xie Qingcheng realize that things had gone too far off the rails—he couldn't actually kill a man on New Year's Eve. His hand, veins bulging, began to tremble imperceptibly until it was taken by He Yu's in a firm grip. The young man sank his fingers between Xie Qingcheng's own, entangling their hands as he removed the cup from Xie Qingcheng's tightly clenched grip…

With He Yu's bloodied fingers pressed against Xie Qingcheng's palm, capturing his hand in that lustful grasp, it was impossible to hold on to his weapon. The cup fell and rolled off the edge of the bed, shattering on the floor.

At the sound of porcelain breaking, Xie Qingcheng immediately squeezed his eyes shut, his expression pained like he had been tormented to the point of madness by everything that had happened today…

"Xie Qingcheng…"

He Yu slowly lifted his hand. His gaze seemed crazed yet calm, hurt yet furious. He touched Xie Qingcheng's ice-cold face.

"I said…some things can be different."

Then he lowered his head—

And did something he had never done before.

Xie Qingcheng had already despaired of him, but he never expected that after tearing open his clothes, He Yu would lower his head, lean down, and actually…

He actually…took Xie Qingcheng's length into his mouth.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes shot open, and he made a muffled noise around his gag. His mind went blank—he couldn't believe what was happening.

He Yu was giving him head.

He Yu's desire was as passionate as it was impatient. He was also slightly sadistic in bed by nature, so every other time he'd pounced on Xie Qingcheng, he'd only ever been concerned with getting himself inside and was always a bit rough. He rarely spent much energy taking care of Xie Qingcheng in front—not that he could have, even if he wanted to. Xie Qingcheng was quite frigid, and he didn't have the patience to melt that statue of ice.

But now, He Yu was taking him into his mouth.

He Yu's blowjob skills weren't very good. In fact, he was quite amateurish, but that was to be expected; he had never done this before, nor had he ever expected to end up doing it.

However, when he heard Xie Qingcheng say that being divorced, being laughed at, being abandoned, all served him right, he found himself overwhelmed by irritation. Faintly, he even felt a bit of pain.

He didn't know how to soothe his own pain, and he didn't know how to stop Xie Qingcheng from torturing himself like this. It seemed that no matter what he said, he ended up poking at Xie Qingcheng's sore spots. His control over his own emotions was poor enough that he wasn't sure if he'd be able to say more than a few words to him without starting another argument.

And so, he decided to do *this*.

To prevent Xie Qingcheng from blathering at him during this process and provoking him even further, he decided to gag the man with the belt of his bathrobe—at the moment, Xie Qingcheng couldn't speak a single word. His pupils contracted to pinpricks as everything that was happening on the bed turned his nicotine-and alcohol-muddied thoughts into an even greater mess.

He'd never imagined something like this happening.

Frankly, in all his years, Xie Qingcheng had never had anyone go down on him before.

He was a very traditional and inflexible sort of man. Back when he was with Li Ruoqiu, he'd never asked her to do anything for his pleasure. He believed that, as the weaker sex, women ought to be respected and protected. Although he clearly understood the rationale for oral sex from a medical perspective, he could not accept it. He felt that it was a burden on the woman, and that in demanding it, he would be humiliating his wife. He'd never even entertained the thought.

But now, as He Yu sucked, licked, and swallowed his dick down without the slightest hesitation, a terrifying thrill sparked to life.

It wasn't purely sexual—not so much physical pleasure as psychological stimulation.

It stemmed from a basic male instinct, the desire to conquer. Xie Qingcheng had never felt such a sensation before and, sinking his hands into He Yu's dark hair, tried to push him away with faintly trembling fingers.

He Yu ignored him, sucking him in deeper instead.

Unable to bear it, Xie Qingcheng tugged at his hair, his chest heaving as his eyes burned red—

He had never been enthusiastic about sex to begin with, and after Li Ruoqiu's betrayal, it just felt humiliating. He became disgusted by love and even more disgusted by desire, so he grew increasingly disinterested in sex.

Later on, after engaging in homosexual intercourse with He Yu, he suffered from such severe PTSD that at first just thinking about it made him want to throw up. It was only through his superhuman willpower that he was able to eventually excise this feeling of weakness from himself. As a virile young man, He Yu was insatiable. Thus, over time, Xie Qingcheng was tormented into apathy.

Until now.

He Yu was actually holding him in his mouth, trying to please him. The boy's mouth was warm and wet as he carefully kept his

teeth away from the man's dick and caressed the shaft with his tongue.

He Yu sucked fervently, like he was dying of thirst. It really was strange—of course he loathed homosexuality, but now he felt it was no big deal to suck Xie Qingcheng off. In fact, he even enjoyed it.

No man could put up that much resistance against being sexually serviced by someone, especially when that service was carried out with roiling passion, not just mechanical lovemaking done out of obligation.

Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth and bore it, Adam's apple bobbing sensually up and down, before finally allowing his control to slip slightly. He let a low gasp escape between breaths.

His immediate thought was that he shouldn't be this way.

Aside from the time when he drank Plum Fragrance 59, he'd never felt much pleasure from this sort of thing with He Yu; he had always been overcome by humiliation and disgust. As a man, he couldn't bear being pushed down beneath another.

But now, he felt a long-lost tingling heat slowly awaken within his body in response to the boy's enthusiastic ministrations.

His heart beat faster and faster, even as he recognized in the depths of his semilucid consciousness that all of this was wrong… that it shouldn't be happening.

His fingers sank into He Yu's black hair, clutching at the dark strands as he tried once again to push him away. But the boy's head remained stubbornly buried deep between his thighs. He didn't find it dirty or humiliating to lick and toy with him; he even lapped at him more attentively when he felt Xie Qingcheng gasping for breath despite trying to push him away. He Yu raised his almond eyes, gazing at him wetly as he continued to suck on him.

After a while, He Yu slowly lifted his mouth from Xie Qingcheng's cock, then pressed a light kiss to its pretty, trembling head. His lips and the older man's shaft both glistened with residual

wetness. He Yu and Xie Qingcheng looked at each other silently in the dark of the night, their breaths labored.

Under his ministrations, Xie Qingcheng had already grown hard.

While Xie Qingcheng never had much of a sex drive and was still very unused to being with a man, his issues were simply a dislike for the act itself coupled with a low sex drive. He wasn't totally without desire, nor was he impotent. Xie Qingcheng still had a body made of flesh and blood—it was impossible for him to feel nothing with He Yu using his mouth to pleasure him like this.

This was the first time he had shown desire in front of He Yu.

"Ge, I told you." He Yu's voice was low, a bit hoarse from sucking Xie Qingcheng's cock down his throat, but he'd clearly been encouraged by the reaction. "Some things can be different."

As he spoke, he took Xie Qingcheng's hardness in his hand and stroked it wetly, up and down. Then, with his eyes still on Xie Qingcheng, he turned slightly and kissed that trembling length again. He closed his eyes, his lashes soft as he nuzzled it gently with the tip of his nose. He was truly enjoying himself.

"Ge, it serves you right for provoking me, just as it serves that woman right not to have you. You shouldn't have paid her any attention. Your house is so small; if you're going to take someone in, it should be me… Only I can enter your den."

The young man kissed his cock as he murmured these words to him. He Yu's mental state was honestly a bit pathological as he raved like a lunatic, but despite the crazed ranting, his almond eyes seemed to flicker with weakness and bewilderment.

He'd kissed him and caressed him, and prostrated himself to kiss and suck at Xie Qingcheng's dick. Now, he straightened back up to remove the strip of cloth gagging Xie Qingcheng and kiss his lips.

"Mm…"

He Yu let out a deep sigh as their lips and tongues tangled. He licked his way in, thrusting his tongue inside until everything was amorous and wet, biting at Xie Qingcheng's lips and pressing against the back of his neck with one hand to angle his head, again and again, kissing him, toying with him, wanting him.

After he'd heard Li Ruoqiu and Xie Qingcheng's conversation, He Yu wanted Xie Qingcheng more than ever before.

He especially wanted to fuck Xie Qingcheng on this bed where he had made Li Ruoqiu into a woman. He wanted Xie Qingcheng to feel desire because of him, wanted him to get hard, wanted him to come. He wanted Xie Qingcheng to want him desperately, to tremble as he climaxed beneath him on this bed.

The appearance of his saozi had churned all these irascible emotions in He Yu's heart to the surface. He felt extremely uncomfortable and extremely forlorn, like he was about to be driven mad by these feelings. And so he was compelled to pleasure Xie Qingcheng with his mouth without a second thought.

There was nothing else he could do. He wasn't a woman, so he didn't know how he could win. His only choice was to clumsily yet enthusiastically suck Xie Qingcheng off. He hoped that the flames burning in his chest could spread to Xie Qingcheng's body tonight and sear away every trace that Li Ruoqiu had left on his skin.

Between each kiss, He Yu pressed his forehead to Xie Qingcheng's, and spoke quietly. "That woman said that everything would be different if she could've had a child with you. But she doesn't deserve it. She doesn't deserve it, Xie Qingcheng. She doesn't understand you. I'm the one in this world who understands you the most… I'm the one who can feel you the most…"

That sense of desolation intensified, slowly pooling into an ocean inside his heart.

"It makes me so angry when you talk to her. How can she be so shameless as to say that she wants your child?"

"…That's not what she meant," Xie Qingcheng interjected.

"You're still standing up for her!"

This lunatic became extremely long-winded whenever he veered into madness. He looked like he wished he could strangle Xie Qingcheng, but he also seemed like he wanted Xie Qingcheng to praise and coddle him. As he talked and talked, the intensity of the madness in his eyes burned stronger and stronger, yet his voice only grew softer and lighter.

"Ge, you're not allowed to stand up for her… She doesn't treat you as well as I do. Did she ever do this for you?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"But I can do this for you. I can give you head." As he spoke, he kissed Xie Qingcheng's lips again and again. Their kisses weren't deep, just one light touch after another.

"She made you so apathetic to sex, but I can cure you. Really, I'm not lying to you this time. You shouldn't be so frigid. Don't be so apathetic with me. Don't treat me like you treat her."

It was like he was teetering on the brink of madness, or threatening him, or maybe pleading with him.

Perhaps in that moment, even He Yu himself didn't know what sort of emotions were driving him. Too many feelings had pooled together, filling his heart up like a swamp, eating away at him from the inside. Entrapped, he searched madly for a way out, and when he looked into Xie Qingcheng's eyes just inches away from his own, he thought that perhaps this was the light that could lead him out of this desolate swamp.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and turned his head away. The pressure of He Yu's emotions was too much to take.

He Yu had been kissing Xie Qingcheng on the bed this entire time, and when he saw him turn away, He Yu became anxious, angry, and hurt. He stared silently at Xie Qingcheng's resolute, icy-cold, emotionless face for a long time. Then, as if in retaliation or

perhaps as an appeal, he leaned down to take Xie Qingcheng into his mouth once again.

Xie Qingcheng grabbed He Yu by the hair, stopping him in his tracks.

"Stop it." His voice was very low, with no discernible emotion.

He Yu's eyes reddened, half-crazed and half-hurt. "I've said it before—I'm your only kin."

"…He Yu, have a bit of self-respect, okay?"

"Then…" He Yu's voice trembled slightly. "Then can *you* give me some respect?"

Xie Qingcheng felt a stab of pain at these words.

His mind had already been stirred into absolute chaos by all the nicotine and alcohol, so this pain only served to push him even further into utter disarray. Xie Qingcheng shifted his glassy eyes to He Yu and stared at him quietly in the darkness.

"Why are you doing this? What are you getting out of this? Yes, I'm your kin, but our only point of similarity is that we have the same disease. What else do we have in common? I know that you're lonely, He Yu, but you…"

He couldn't continue… He Yu had reached up and covered his mouth.

He shoved Xie Qingcheng down, arching his back to press Xie Qingcheng into the bed as he looked at him with an exceptionally vicious gaze.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He Yu was going to go mad again, going to violently tear him apart again and shred his stomach and intestines with his dragon's claws.

But then, without warning…

A teardrop fell onto Xie Qingcheng's face.

Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes in surprise to see that, hovering above him, the young man had begun to cry. Tears dripped

down without a sound to land warmly upon his cheeks.

The boy he had smashed over the head with a lampstand and a cup, the one he'd cursed out and rejected, had blood dripping from his forehead and tears coursing down his face.

"He Yu, you…"

He Yu had stopped talking. Perhaps because he hated too bitterly, or perhaps because he had begged too insistently, as Xie Qingcheng looked up at him now, that young, always-composed face seemed a little wretched.

He pinned Xie Qingcheng down abruptly, his expression turning wooden even though his eyes were still as red as before and his tears had yet to dry. He looked down at Xie Qingcheng from above, just like that.

And then he leaned down.

Heedless of whether Xie Qingcheng refused him, whether he accused him of having no sense of dignity or of not understanding him, He Yu stubbornly, clumsily sucked him into his mouth once again.

This time, He Yu deep-throated him, swallowing his entire cock down to the base until it pressed at the entrance to his throat. It was uncomfortable for He Yu, but extremely pleasurable for the one on the receiving end.

Xie Qingcheng's body arched violently. Overwhelmed, he clawed at the bedsheets beneath him, his knuckles going white as he panted lowly. Ears ringing, his vision whited out in bursts. He couldn't bear it—he struggled, pushing at He Yu, trying to escape this utterly unfamiliar and utterly terrifying pleasure.

"He Yu, stop it…that's enough…"

But the young man just kept sucking at him, slick wet sounds emerging from his mouth.

"…He Yu!"

He Yu ignored him as he diligently sucked him until he was even harder. When he lifted his head again, there were still tears clinging to the ends of his eyelashes, but he looked at Xie Qingcheng with what seemed like irritation.

In the ensuing silence, Xie Qingcheng turned his gaze away, again.

Refusing him, yet again.

He Yu gritted his teeth. He wouldn't accept this. He was going to keep dragging things out tonight until one of them gave in.

"Are you sure you don't want this?" he asked quietly.

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond.

He lowered his face again.

Xie Qingcheng pushed him.

He tried again—and got pushed away again.

He pressed closer again.

Only to be pushed away yet again.

And…

In the end, it turned into an extremely childish shoving match. The back-and-forth went on and on, compounding Xie Qingcheng's turmoil in the process.

Xie Qingcheng pushed him away, again and again, so He Yu stubbornly advanced, again and again. It was just like the way, in their lives, He Yu kept running toward this man, who pushed him away despite his own loneliness, again and again.

Again and again…

Again and again.

Knocking on the door of his heart.

Xie Qingcheng looked at this boy, this hatefully, pitifully, perhaps even laughably stubborn boy, and then finally—

Maybe it was because of the cigarettes and the wine. Maybe he was really just irritated. Maybe his thoughts had become tangled up in a massive knot, or maybe he was in too much pain.

Maybe it was because his desire burned too hot; maybe the person before him in the present was too persistent, or maybe the person from the past had hurt him too much.

Or maybe it was none of these things. Maybe there was no reason at all, merely that when their two pairs of eyes once again connected silently in the dark of night, they plucked a fragile string in his heart that had been worn too thin over the course of the evening.

This time, as Xie Qingcheng ruthlessly shoved He Yu away once again, he slapped the boy across the face. Then, panting roughly, he met He Yu's eyes.

The two of them looked at each other quietly.

And then, perhaps because of all those "maybes…"

After delivering the slap, Xie Qingcheng paused for a moment, then suddenly grabbed He Yu by the hair and dragged the relentless beast over, hauling him to his own frosty eye level.

He Yu's eyes widened in shock.

"Xie Qingcheng, you—"

Xie Qingcheng stared at him.

"Are you going to insist on acting like this?"

Silence.

"You insist on being like this?"

He Yu was at a loss for words.

"Very well, He Yu. Very well…" Xie Qingcheng's eyes had gone red with fury and hurt. "Today, I'll fucking let you have your way…!"

It was practically a self-destructive acquiescence, a self-despairing release of pent-up emotion.

Xie Qingcheng met the entirety of He Yu's unvarnished desire by shoving the youth down—He Yu had yet to come back to his senses—and pinning him to the bed, his eyes fierce, bewildered, and tumultuous.

In shock and alarm, He Yu said, "Xie Qingcheng…"

Xie Qingcheng straddled him and propped himself upright, loose wisps of hair falling over his forehead as he bent down. He stared at He Yu for a moment with his piercing, fiercely combative, unyieldingly masculine eyes, before finally abandoning himself to despair and grabbing He Yu by the jaw, leaning down to kiss him viciously.

He Yu mentally blue-screened for more than ten seconds before he suddenly realized what had just happened.

Xie Qingcheng had shoved him down onto the bed—for the first time, Xie Qingcheng had taken the initiative to respond!

Even though this reciprocity had been entirely born of the other man's agitation and self-destruction, He Yu was still affected intensely.

The moment he had his wits about him again, he began to kiss Xie Qingcheng frantically, his hands roving all over the man's body.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu murmured his name between panting breaths as he kissed and caressed him, like a fledgling dragon calling out to its kin. "Xie Qingcheng…"

"Shut up," Xie Qingcheng snapped.

One man releasing his sexual urges was entirely different from two men doing so together—now that there was reciprocation, the scalding waves they stirred up reached new heights, as the air heated to an almost terrifying temperature.

Xie Qingcheng sat astride He Yu with the young man's arms locked tight around his body, caressing him—even the slightest reactions from Xie Qingcheng overwhelmed him with excitement.

And that was to say nothing of how overpowering Xie Qingcheng was once he took the initiative. He was extremely domineering, his kisses as deep as the look in his eyes, as deep as an abyss of male hormones—it felt like he was about to switch places with He Yu and fuck him instead.

This overbearing initiative was deeply exciting to He Yu; no matter how many times Xie Qingcheng was fucked and no matter what he suffered, if he wanted to be, he would always be the toughest, most iron-willed man. He Yu reciprocated enthusiastically, looping his arms around the back of Xie Qingcheng's neck as he deepened their passionate kiss.

As for Xie Qingcheng, he seemed extremely agitated; the way he was approaching this intimacy could practically be described as self-harm.

Maybe he really had been hurt. The way Li Ruoqiu had spoken to him had seemed like a form of acknowledgment, but her words had actually been a sharp knife, inadvertently piercing his heart.

What was he? A spare tire? A harbor to which she could return to shelter from the wind when she was no longer wanted?

He kissed He Yu passionately. For the first time, he felt that being intimate with He Yu could stem the bleeding of his heart. When he was with He Yu, he felt like he would be truly needed—not replaceable, not something He Yu could do without.

In the face of Xie Qingcheng's nearly overbearing response, He Yu panted uncontrollably and ardently thrust his tongue into Xie Qingcheng's mouth.

They quickly tore each other's clothes into disarray, He Yu's eager hands wandering up and down Xie Qingcheng's body as he caressed him.

The soundproofing in the apartment was very poor, so he kept his voice low as he called out to him again: "Xie-ge."

No response.

"Xie-ge."

The words were quiet, but the eyes gazing at him were very deep. Xie Qingcheng paused.

He suddenly remembered that someone else had once called him Xie-ge on this very bed. Someone else who'd lain underneath him, who'd also watched him with such deep emotion in her eyes.

Her arms had once encircled his neck the way He Yu's arms did just now, to pull him down and kiss him.

At the recollection, Xie Qingcheng felt disgust and self-loathing course through him.

He paused abruptly, like he had suddenly sobered up. He looked at He Yu, thinking that he really had gone mad, that this was too absurd…

He woke up…and pulled away.

Ashen-faced, Xie Qingcheng said in a despondent tone, "I'm sorry, I can't…"

He Yu seemed to understand what he was thinking, but his reaction was to yank Xie Qingcheng down again and press another searing kiss to his lips with strength and desire that a woman could never have.

With this kiss, though Xie Qingcheng was still on top and He Yu was beneath him, the younger man seemed to have regained the initiative. He Yu tightly gripped the back of his head, as if afraid he'd run away or regret it. He kissed and embraced Xie Qingcheng ardently, like whether he was cast from ice or refined in fire, he would crush him into his chest; like whether he was arsenic or heroin, he would inject him into his own bloodstream.

At this moment, his nearly sick obsession became the drug that could best tempt Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu tilted Xie Qingcheng's head back as he peppered him with kisses. He pressed their foreheads together to nuzzle, and said again and again into his ear, "Xie Qingcheng, I want you. I want you.

I want you so damn much, Xie Qingcheng. I want you so much I could die."

His eyes were red, and anyone who saw those eyes would understand there was not a trace of falsehood in any word he spoke. He ceaselessly expressed his desire for this divorced man, this man who had been abandoned by his ex-wife. Like he didn't care at all. Like he loved both his excellence and his imperfections, and admired both his strength and his disarray.

"Ge, do it with me, okay?" He Yu said. "Xie Qingcheng, don't think about her anymore. Do it with me, I'm better than her in every way—I understand you more than she does, I'm closer to you, I won't abandon you like she did. I… I…"

By now he was spouting all sorts of nonsense to tempt Xie Qingcheng into sleeping with him. Finally, he even said, "I'm younger than she is, so I can make you feel *really* good. I can go multiple rounds in a single night. She said she couldn't have a child with you, but maybe I can get you pregnant with my child instead…"

He was so eager to sell himself that he ended up saying the most ridiculous things.

Logically speaking, Xie Qingcheng ought to have beaten him up as soon as he heard such crazy words, but in that moment, when he looked at this babbling schoolboy thirteen years his junior, his heart felt like a complete mess.

His instincts told him that they absolutely shouldn't be like this, that this was wrong. But at the same time, it felt like He Yu's hand had staunched the bleeding of his heart. He Yu had pressed forcefully down on his wound, and his palms were completely soaked with his blood.

In that moment, he didn't quarrel with He Yu as he usually would. Instead, after a long silence, he slowly pushed He Yu down onto the bed, stared at him for a good while, then said in a voice laced with threat, "Why aren't *you* the one getting pregnant?"

He Yu blinked in silence. He'd forgotten that Xie Qingcheng was a real man's man, so if he really were to take the initiative, he wouldn't want to be on the bottom.

However, He Yu also suspected that Xie Qingcheng didn't actually want to be the one on top in a homosexual relationship. When all was said and done, it was still very difficult for a straight man like Xie Qingcheng to get in bed with another man.

He Yu pulled Xie Qingcheng a bit lower from where he was currently straddling him, so that their chests were touching and their hearts were nearly beating in unison. As their hearts trembled together, he stroked Xie Qingcheng's hair and whispered softly to him, "I'm better at making money than you are, Ge, so if you get pregnant, I can support you."

Xie Qingcheng cursed at him in a low hiss. "Pregnant my ass."

He Yu waited for him to finish swearing before tilting his head up again and kissing him deeply, half like a punishment, half overwhelmed with desire. Eagerly, frantically, he pulled down the zipper of his own jeans.

This time was different from all their previous encounters—even though they had yet to fuck, Xie Qingcheng taking the initiative had made He Yu terrifyingly hard. Xie Qingcheng's condition was also entirely unprecedented—He Yu had gone down on him, and tonight, his heart wasn't so opposed to being with someone of the same sex. Where he was usually rather unresponsive, tonight he was already burning, already hard.

The two of them strained against each other on the creaky old bed as they kissed, panting deeply and urgently as they both refused to concede.

He Yu pressed his tongue into Xie Qingcheng's mouth, drawing him into a heated kiss as he gathered both their cocks in one hand and began stroking them together.

This terrifying stimulation made the rims of Xie Qingcheng's eyes sting as tiny shivers ran up and down his spine. He closed his

eyes, lashes trembling slightly.

Although the two of them had been pressed intimately together for a while now, they had restrained their voices the whole time, not daring to let the neighbors or the people outside overhear any hint of what they were doing. But now, as Xie Qingcheng sat astride He Yu's body, the youth's forehead pressed to his own, waves of pleasure surged up one after another, threatening to drown them. In the end, they both stopped moving to watch as He Yu's hand jerked quickly along the two shafts pressed flush against each other.

As Xie Qingcheng watched, he found himself thinking once again that this was much too absurd. He tried to turn his head away, but He Yu noticed his slight movement and immediately gripped his nape with his other hand. Then He Yu nudged his own face forward, letting out a low, sensuous gasp as he kissed him on the lips, infatuated.

"Ge, look at us. Look at what we're doing together."

Xie Qingcheng had never genuinely enjoyed sex before; this torment was almost more than he could bear. Under He Yu's passionate ministrations, Xie Qingcheng's breathing grew more and more urgent, but he still remained highly restrained. He Yu stroking them off together like this was truly too embarrassing for him.

"Enough," he said in a low voice. It was almost a command, as lofty and imposing as ever. "Stop—don't keep doing this…"

But how could He Yu possibly listen to him?

He Yu was neither Li Ruoqiu nor Chen Man—he rarely took Xie Qingcheng's orders seriously. When he heard Xie Qingcheng's command, he only kissed him even deeper before stroking their blisteringly hot lengths with even greater fervor.

Xie Qingcheng grabbed He Yu by the hair as he straddled him, his back slightly arched, the veins in the backs of his hands standing out. Knitting his slanted, pitch-black brows, he said in a low voice, "Stop it… He Yu… Stop…"

"Ge, come for me. I want to see you come."

"Let go… Let *go* of me…!"

He Yu only looped a hand around the back of Xie Qingcheng's neck, pinning him in place above himself. As their burning-hot bodies pressed close, they both let out a soft gasp.

Then He Yu drew Xie Qingcheng into another wet kiss, sucking on his slightly cool lips and tongue. Xie Qingcheng's lips were usually so cold, it was always difficult to warm them up, but right now, He Yu didn't seem to care at all. Instead, he kissed Xie Qingcheng with a bone-deep infatuation, as though trying to steal all the breath from his lungs.

Xie Qingcheng had never been subject to such fervent, frantic need in bed before.

As a certain critical horizon loomed closer, finding that he couldn't struggle free, Xie Qingcheng reflexively tried to turn away so that he wasn't facing He Yu. However, realizing that this would show too much weakness, he abruptly lifted a hand and pressed it over He Yu's eyes to keep the young man from seeing his expression. He Yu's almond eyes were completely covered by his hand, blocking the entire scene from view.

But this didn't actually affect anything—although he couldn't see Xie Qingcheng's face when he climaxed, he could all-too-clearly feel Xie Qingcheng's body shaking faintly as he leaned over him, and that beautifully stiff length twitching in his palm as gush after gush of come spilled thickly into his hand and onto their stomachs…

In that moment, He Yu felt a joy—an almost unearthly pleasure—he had never known before. He kissed Xie Qingcheng and clung to him like he was losing his mind. "Ge… Xie-ge…" He Yu murmured. "Did you know this is the first time you've ever come with me…? Did you know…?"

"…Shut the fuck up!" Xie Qingcheng snapped back as if offended, panting quietly.

He Yu smiled and reached up, closing his fingers around Xie Qingcheng's wrist and pulling away the hand that was blocking his view. For a moment, his eyes seemed to glimmer like fallen stars.

Looking at Xie Qingcheng's wrecked expression post-orgasm, he tried his best to suppress his smile, but failed. His grin only grew wider as he grasped Xie Qingcheng's arm and peppered the tattoo with kisses.

"I already told you—I'm the World's Most Handsome And Experienced Lover…"

Xie Qingcheng jerked his hand out of He Yu's grip before dealing him a slap across the face, albeit not quite hard enough to really hurt him. "Have some shame."

"How am I going to have a kid with you if I have too much shame?" He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't muster a response.

"Ge, I made you feel good, but what about me?" He Yu stopped smiling, staring at him with both elation and madness in his eyes as he reached down to stroke his own dangerously hard dick, even deliberately rubbing it against Xie Qingcheng's stomach.

"Xie-ge, will you give me pleasure? I wanna fuck you; I wanna be inside you so bad. I wanna fill you with my cock and give you my baby."

The brat's brain had really gotten messed up; it was quite apparent that Li Ruoqiu's parting words had been too much for He Yu to handle.

Xie Qingcheng was still recovering from his orgasm. "You don't have the ability," he said with an air of indifference.

He should have said that *he* didn't have the ability, or the right parts, but Xie Qingcheng's pride as a man was too great—he didn't like saying he was incapable of anything, even if the ability in question was determined by the fundamental biology of the sexes.

He Yu stopped as soon as he heard this. He drew Xie Qingcheng into his arms, kissing him on his lips, his earlobes, his neck…before saying, "In that case, could you please let me find out whether I have that ability or not?"

With that, he swept Xie Qingcheng into yet another wet, heated embrace. The two of them rolled around on the old-fashioned bed, the friction from their bodies tugging half of the sheets onto the floor. They clung to each other so ardently that it seemed they no longer cared about anything else, like their sole wish was to fling all their worldly concerns to the back of their minds as they melted together in desire.

He Yu felt like a century had passed before he finally managed to pin Xie Qingcheng beneath him again. The two men panted for breath, already drenched in sweat—Xie Qingcheng looked like a precious treasure that had been plunged into water, his smooth brow gleaming softly in the darkness. He Yu lifted a hand to push Xie Qingcheng's wet bangs out of his face, touching his forehead softly and brushing against his eyelashes. For the first time, he felt as though Xie Qingcheng's eyes were so deep that they could suck him in.

He asked, "Ge, can I fuck you?"

Xie Qingcheng ignored him.

He asked again, and Xie Qingcheng still ignored him.

He Yu continued to pester him, kissing him again and again, amorously thrusting his hips against him, his lustful intent patently obvious.

"Can you let me fuck you…? Xie Qingcheng, can you please let me fuck you…?"

Xie Qingcheng had finally been nagged to his limit—the way He Yu kept talking, it was like he didn't know the meaning of shame or humiliation. In the end, he responded by roughly seizing He Yu's hair and pinning him down. Pressing his hand against the back of He Yu's head, he kissed him heavily, like he was letting off steam…

What followed was only to be expected.

Ultimately, He Yu gained the upper hand in their tussling. At long last, he took his erect, leaking cock and brought it to the older man's entrance, rubbing back and forth for a moment before pressing in bit by bit.

Through it all, Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth and restrained himself, refusing to make a single sound. His head was a bit of a mess. He didn't know how things had ended up this way, how he'd once again found himself being recklessly speared open on this young man's cock, but he didn't have the opportunity to think too much about it. He gasped as He Yu entered him, pressing in deeply until he was fully seated, the slap of his balls against Xie Qingcheng's ass making the older man furrow his brows and let out a muffled grunt.

"It feels so good…" He Yu said, his voice hoarse. Then, pressing in deep, he gently rocked back and forth a couple of times. "Ge, you feel so good. It's been a long time since I've felt so good."

"Shut up…"

"But it's true. I missed you so much I wanted to die. You're so hot inside… I missed you so much I almost lost my mind."

Xie Qingcheng remained silent. The boy's words and eyes were both so sincere that he found himself incapable of cursing at him for the time being.

He Yu hugged him as he ground gently against him. Then, like a parched man finally getting a sip of warm water, he began to thrust with uncontrollable urgency.

Xie Qingcheng's entire body tensed, unable to accept it. It hurt a lot—He Yu was too big, and he was fucking him too deeply and relentlessly. The boy was impetuous to his core; no matter how many times they'd slept together, he was still as eager as the first time.

Xie Qingcheng held his breathing steady, refusing to pant, even as he paled and clutched at the half-fallen bedsheet. He Yu spread Xie Qingcheng's legs and wrapped them mortifyingly around his waist, pinning Xie Qingcheng down as he pounded away rhythmically. Forcing Xie Qingcheng's tight hole to devour his shaft, he completely took possession of this man on his nuptial bed.

The sound of skin slapping against skin and the wet noises of sex echoed throughout the room. The old-fashioned wooden bed creaked dully under the force of their passionate lovemaking, bearing both their weights as it gave shelter to this unconventional love under the cover of darkness.

The apartment was so small that Xie Xue's childhood bed was only separated from them by a curtain. At this moment, the curtain had been pulled completely closed, as though an oblivious young Xie Xue was still sleeping there.

As he was being fucked, amidst all the pleasure and stimulation, Xie Qingcheng suddenly became overwhelmed by a sense of disgrace. The humiliation he felt today was even deeper than what he'd felt on his first night with He Yu at that club. He had never been all that interested in the act, but he and Li Ruoqiu did have sex after they were married. Their sex life conformed to society's expectations for a husband and wife, and they'd done everything on this very bed.

But now, he was being pressed into that same bed by a nineteen-year-old boy, forced to take it like a woman. The abrupt reversal of position was so jarring that he couldn't help but tremble.

As he realized this, he suddenly couldn't take it anymore. He tried to back out and break free, saying, "He Yu… Forget it… Stop, I don't like this—not here, don't…"

How could Xie Qingcheng tell him to stop *now*? He Yu was about to die of frustration, about to lose his mind. His movements stilled for a moment as he pulled away slightly and looked down at the man lying beneath him.

He panted lowly and asked, almost uncomprehending, "Why should I stop? Don't you feel good? I've fucked you hard again, so why do you want me to stop?"

His hips started moving again as he spoke, the thrusts shallow but quick, so difficult to bear that Xie Qingcheng's entire body tensed up.

He Yu leaned down to stare into Xie Qingcheng's face beneath his messy bangs, then followed Xie Qingcheng's shattered gaze—only to see the old mark on the wall where Xie Qingcheng and Li Ruoqiu's wedding photos had once been displayed.

Suddenly, He Yu understood. In the end, Xie Qingcheng still couldn't accept being fiercely fucked by a college-aged boy on the bed in which he had once been a husband.

An overwhelming ache suddenly rose in He Yu's overstimulated heart. With this dull pain throbbing through him, he lifted his hand to cover Xie Qingcheng's eyes and leaned down to kiss and nuzzle against his lips and nose even as his hips continued to thrust unerringly.

"Don't think so much. The past is the past. And now, Xie-ge, you are mine. Did you forget? You still have to birth me a child."

Xie Qingcheng wanted to pick up the mug and smash it over his head again. "Birth…your motherfucking…*ah*!" He Yu's response was to snap his hips forward so sharply that Xie Qingcheng's waist nearly crumpled. The sudden thrust caught him off guard, making him cry out, peach-blossom eyes opening wide, loath to believe that this young man could reach so deep inside him.

"You've said it. You can't take it back." He Yu stroked a hand over Xie Qingcheng's firm abdomen as he thrust into him, fucking him so deep and so hard that he almost believed that Xie Qingcheng's stomach really would swell with pregnancy from his onslaught. "You have to bear my child, Ge. I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to knock you up."

If Xie Qingcheng wasn't being fucked so ruthlessly, he would've cursed him out for his absurdity—what was this lunatic going on about now… But he couldn't speak—he was being fucked with such excessive, almost retaliatory force that he was incapable of stringing together a complete sentence.

He Yu ruthlessly drove his hips forward like he was punishing this man, like he was coercing him, like he wanted to stopper off every single one of his regrets. Spreading Xie Qingcheng's legs wide, he spent a long time fiercely and passionately thrusting into him. Then he took a deep breath and picked Xie Qingcheng up, without breaking the connection between their bodies. He knelt on the bed, bucking his hips upward without pause and bouncing the man in his arms, fucking him hard, sending waves of both pain and pleasure through Xie Qingcheng as he jerked him up and down. Xie Qingcheng's prostate was situated especially deep inside him, and it was the perfect position and angle to stimulate that spot fast and hard.

"Is it here?"

Silence.

"It's here, isn't it?"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear it anymore; overwhelmed, he furrowed his brow, dampness gathering beneath his long eyelashes.

He Yu was fucking him so deeply. He even reached down to stroke the place where they were connected. "So wet… Ge, you get wet whenever I fuck you here… Does it feel *that* good?"

As he asked these humiliating questions, he kept pounding into him, fierce and rapid as a pile driver. With their bodily fluids easing the way, each push and pull grew more fervent, the wet sounds from Xie Qingcheng's hole accompanying each slap of skin on skin.

Though Xie Qingcheng was an intensely tough, unyielding man, when all was said and done, he was still made of flesh and blood. Under such a relentless onslaught of stimulation, he still trembled with wave after wave of near-terrifying pleasure.

He clamped his hands down on the headboard, his knuckles white and his brows knitted, and bit down hard on his lip, refusing to let out a single wayward sound.

But He Yu could feel how that little hole kept twitching and clenching under his assault. He let out a delighted gasp, then suddenly pulled his slick cock out. He grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the hair and forced him into a kneeling position before once again pressing the head of his cock against that lewd, spasming hole. He rubbed it wetly against the entrance for a while, but did not push in.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes had gone glassy, and his hole was still clenching pitifully. He Yu's every thrust had hit his sensitive prostate, making his inner walls shudder again and again with this terrifying new pleasure. Yet at that moment, He Yu had chosen to pull out in a sudden spur of wickedness, leaving only the slick, hard head of his cock inside. His rubbing and teasing felt like Xie Qingcheng was trying to scratch an itch through a boot, maddening in its inadequacy.

He Yu leaned down to kiss the red mole at Xie Qingcheng's nape, rubbing his waist with large hands before landing another slap on his ass. It wasn't particularly hard, but it sent a jolt all the way through Xie Qingcheng. He dropped his head and arched his lovely shoulder blades, his entire body tensed. Pressing his forehead against the disheveled sheets, he refused to make a sound.

"Ge, do you want me to put it in?" He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond.

"You keep clenching here, and you're so hard… You feel really good right now, don't you?"

Xie Qingcheng snapped, "If you won't…fucking…do it…then get out…!"

But his voice trembled with every syllable, so although his words were quite imposing, unfortunately He Yu wasn't threatened at all.

He Yu kept teasing him, pressing his cock against Xie Qingcheng's clenching hole—pushing in slightly and then pulling back out, thrusting shallowly before easing out again.

Xie Qingcheng's mind was increasingly muddled. He had never experienced such an obscene maneuver, and it was about to drive him entirely mad. The unresolved stimulation, that sense of soaring into the clouds only to be dragged back before he could reach the peak, grew steadily stronger in the face of this advanced technique that He Yu had learned from who-knew-where. He gradually began to tremble all over as He Yu fucked him like this, his firm, undeniably masculine body shuddering beneath a college student so many years his junior.

"Ge, ask me for it," He Yu said. "Tell me you like it. Ask me, and I'll put it in."

Xie Qingcheng glared at him in stony-faced silence.

"You're unbelievably wet here, you know? You take it better than a woman." He Yu pressed the large head of his cock into Xie Qingcheng again. As it squeezed into the little hole slicked up with their bodily fluids, it even made a lewd squelching noise. "Ge, praise me. If you praise me, I'll make you feel so good."

It was the first time Xie Qingcheng had felt such powerful stimulation to his prostate, but even so, how could he possibly praise He Yu? He clenched his teeth and bit his lip until he drew blood. Even though the light in his eyes was already distinctly scattered, he still refused to do as He Yu wanted.

He Yu continued to murmur dirty things into his ear, his words growing increasingly obscene and absurd. Gradually, the boy's relentless assault crushed Xie Qingcheng's patience and tolerance into a misshapen mess.

And then—before He Yu realized it—Xie Qingcheng's fury boiled over.

Rather than praising He Yu, he began to struggle as if He Yu was torturing him instead. Flipping them over on the lasciviously

disheveled sheets, he first landed a heavy slap across He Yu's face before cursing him out in an extremely hoarse voice. "You really fucking want to make this a competition, huh? You fucking want to see who has better endurance, huh?"

That wasn't actually what He Yu had meant. He wasn't like Xie Qingcheng—fundamentally speaking, as the top, he already had the upper hand, so he didn't feel such a strong urge to claim further victories in bed. But he had well and truly set Xie Qingcheng off this time.

While He Yu was still regaining his senses, Xie Qingcheng pinned him beneath his body once again. Then, before He Yu could react, Xie Qingcheng slapped a hand over his mouth, straddled his hips, lined himself up with He Yu's cock in an almost retaliatory manner, and pushed himself down.

He Yu's body arched, so overcome by pleasure he nearly came on the spot. Perhaps that was precisely what Xie Qingcheng was trying to achieve.



He Yu's breathing was muffled under Xie Qingcheng's palm. Xie Qingcheng's body was trembling as well—as he sat down on He Yu's cock of his own accord, his waist softened and shuddered until he nearly collapsed into He Yu's arms. However, he managed to catch himself, his gaze cold and fierce, his bloodstained lips fluttering around his words: "You little brat, if you can't bear it, then you should just say so—or you can beg me if you'd like."

He Yu was about to be tempted beyond endurance as Xie Qingcheng rode him—such a stoic, strong man was riding him like *this*, biting his lip as he moved up and down in tiny increments.

Xie Qingcheng gazed down at He Yu with pitch-dark eyes as he used He Yu's own tactics against him. Although Xie Qingcheng also found it extremely hard to bear, he furrowed his brows and continued with his shallow movements, stimulating He Yu but not allowing him any opportunity to satisfy his thirst.

"X-Xie-ge, you…"

This time, it was He Yu who couldn't handle it. His length was buried in the man's slick warmth, that tiny hole sucking him in rhythmically as it swallowed up the hot hardness of his desire, but the thrusts were very weak. Like trying to quench his thirst with poison, the pleasure only served to worsen his plight.

Watching He Yu's delirious expression, Xie Qingcheng finally recovered some sense of initiative.

His fingers sank into He Yu's black hair and smoothed back the messy strands that had fallen over the boy's face. Then he stared into his spellbound eyes and said, "Still trying to act tough? Do you plan to keep using such despicable tricks?"

He Yu took a ragged breath, his black eyes dazed as he stared at Xie Qingcheng. Then, he yanked the man down and pressed a forceful kiss to his thin lips. He pried his teeth open and licked his way in, curling their tongues together sensually. Clutching at Xie Qingcheng's waist, he kissed him wildly, wet noises coming from their mouths as he spread Xie Qingcheng's legs even wider until Xie

Qingcheng was kneeling over his body. Then he stared into Xie Qingcheng's eyes, his Adam's apple bobbing with intense yearning.

"You forced my hand, Xie Qingcheng. You forced me into treating you like this."

As he spoke, he reached a hand up to pin Xie Qingcheng's wrists behind his back, making Xie Qingcheng lose his balance and fall inexorably into his embrace. Then, with his other hand gripping his half-exposed cock, he adjusted their positions before pulling out the length that Xie Qingcheng had just voluntarily shoved into himself and rubbing light circles against his unspeakably sticky hole.

And then—

He Yu lined himself up and plunged back in, slamming right into Xie Qingcheng's sensitive spot.

"…Ahh!"

This time, the stimulation was too much—caught off guard, Xie Qingcheng cried out loud, his eyes flying open. He Yu pinned Xie Qingcheng inescapably in place, the older man's legs spread wide as he knelt on the bed with his body draped over He Yu's. He Yu began to thrust wildly up against that spot, fast and hard, over and over again.

The bed shook harder than ever as He Yu put all of his power into his hips, his every thrust making Xie Qingcheng's body tremble from the force.

He Yu fucked him frantically, vengefully, using his astonishing strength to pound into Xie Qingcheng as he watched the man above him shake and quiver from both pleasure and pain.

It was only through his inhuman willpower that Xie Qingcheng managed to bite his lip once more. The intense pleasure was accompanied by an excruciating sense of shameful taboo; when his awareness came back to him, despite the urgency of his breathing, the strenuous heaving of his chest, and the tears that had been

fucked out of him, he still kept his mouth resolutely shut, unwilling to let any more filthy, uncontrolled sounds escape.

"Let's switch positions," the youth said hoarsely, landing a slap on the tight curve of the older man's ass. "I want to fuck you from behind."

He wasn't initiating a discussion—he was merely giving Xie Qingcheng a heads-up. He lifted him up without breaking their connection and carried him off the bed, but he wanted him so much that he couldn't help but thrust into him as he held him. He ended up fucking him harshly in his arms like that for several long minutes before he could bear to finally pull his scaldingly hot cock out from that slick entrance with a soft, lewd sound.

By this point, Xie Qingcheng's whole body was starting to tingle from being fucked; under that unbearably unfamiliar, unbearably intense stimulation, it was impossible for his usually sharp peach-blossom eyes to focus at all. He Yu set Xie Qingcheng down at the edge of the bed and rearranged his limbs to put him on his hands and knees before moving to stand beside the bed. Then, with one hand gripping his hot, hard length, he slowly but firmly guided himself back inside.

"Ah…"

He pressed in so abruptly that for a moment, Xie Qingcheng dissociated, beset by the feeling that his entire body was about to be speared open by this schoolboy.

"Ge…is it deep? Does it feel good?"

He Yu paused for a few seconds after he was fully seated, fervently kissing Xie Qingcheng's back, his neck, his shoulder blades… And then, he started to fuck him frantically once more.

"Fucking hell, you're such a tease. I wish I could just fuck you to death like this. You're just asking to be fucked, Xie Qingcheng. You're just asking for it."

"You motherfucking…animal! Ahh!"

He Yu responded by slamming into Xie Qingcheng's prostate with an insane amount of force, punching an involuntary gasp out of him even as he swore at him.

"Ge, you're so disobedient," He Yu said. "You don't know how to behave at all…"

Xie Qingcheng refused to pay him any further attention. He bit his lower lip and silently endured the intense thrill of pleasure from below.

They'd been fucking nonstop like this for more than half an hour before He Yu felt his lower abdomen gradually tightening. He felt wave after wave of electric tingling, going from hazy to distinct as his breathing grew more urgent and his eyes darkened.

He wrapped his arms around Xie Qingcheng from behind, kissing that gorgeous spot of cinnabar at his nape once more as he panted softly, "Xie Qingcheng, can you feel it?"

He didn't stop moving his lower body for a single moment, the foreboding sensation of his throbbing cock so clear to Xie Qingcheng that it made his scalp go numb. How could he possibly not feel it?

Yet He Yu insisted on pressing up against his ear, passionately kissing and sucking there as he thrust vigorously into him from behind. "I'm gonna come," he said in a rough and throaty voice. "Ge, it feels so good. I'm gonna come."

Xie Qingcheng had been fucked nearly to the point of breaking down. It wasn't until the boy panted those words several times into his ear that he suddenly realized something, his mind clearing slightly.

He Yu was extremely aroused already from hugging and kissing and fucking him all this time, and from constantly nuzzling against him. His breathing grew heavier and heavier as he panted out, "I'm gonna fill you up with my come…"

Xie Qingcheng's face went white. "Pull out…now! Motherfucker… Y-you aren't wearing a condom… Ahh…" The pitch of

his final words crept up slightly out of fear.

Other than that time in the changing room, He Yu had started wearing a condom almost every time—mostly because they often did it at school. Each time He Yu finished fucking him in an empty classroom, Xie Qingcheng had to endure the discomfort and teach class afterward. If He Yu had insisted on going without under such circumstances, Xie Qingcheng would have definitely killed him. There were even a few times when He Yu realized that he'd forgotten to bring condoms on his way to see Xie Qingcheng and had to make an immediate detour to the campus supermarket to buy some, because there was no way Xie Qingcheng would allow him to creampie him in a classroom.

This was very much like when they had sex at school, and Xie Qingcheng would reject him because he didn't have condoms.

He Yu paused, then said in a mocking tone, "Do you have condoms in your house?"

Xie Qingcheng blinked.

"If you do, I'll pull out and put one on right now." He paused. "Or should I go and ask your neighbors to borrow a box of condoms, right in front of your ex-wife?"

"…Fuck off!"

He Yu was close to coming, so he slowed down his movements and teased Xie Qingcheng to draw out that maddening pleasure. He deliberately made every press into him lingering and deep, talking nonsense to him all the while.

"Ge, look, why are you behaving like you're actually my wife… I'm about to fill you with my come, yet you *still* want me to put on a condom… Mmh…"

Xie Qingcheng was speechless with indignation.

"Next time." The young man seemed almost amused. "Next time, wifey. If you let me come inside you this time, next time I'll

prepare the condoms and the birth control pills. I'll make sure everything's prepared for you before I fuck you properly, all right?"

"Pills my ass… If you keep blathering stupid shit like this, I'm going to…"

But before Xie Qingcheng could finish speaking, He Yu leaned forward to kiss him on the lips. Holding him around the waist, he started thrusting into him with renewed ferocity. Xie Qingcheng bit down on his lip immediately, his face flushing red as he forced all his sounds back into his throat.

This time, He Yu's pounding grew more and more ferocious and urgent. Oversensitive from being fucked so long, Xie Qingcheng could sense the intense throbbing of the young man's cock inside him so clearly that he could practically feel each one of the fiercely protruding veins—he fully understood what this portended.

He couldn't stand it anymore. He tried to struggle away, but He Yu caught him by the waist and pulled him back. Like a male animal pinning down a female as they mated, he seized Xie Qingcheng tightly, his panting breaths unspeakably harsh and deep.

Xie Qingcheng knew that He Yu was about to come. The length buried inside him pulsed and twitched like it was trying to throb in synchrony with his heart, but his heart could hardly stand such youthful, powerful shuddering. A hint of sexual weakness was finally forced out of Xie Qingcheng's rigidly austere and unrelentingly masculine body. His eyes red and wet, furious yet helpless, he stammered, "Let go of me… Don't you… Don't…ah…!"

But the more he spoke, the more aroused the boy became. He slammed against Xie Qingcheng's sensitive prostate even as he himself was about to come, his motions so fervent and frantic that Xie Qingcheng was once again brought to the brink of orgasm, truly fucked into delirium. In the end, tormented by his fear of He Yu coming inside him, torn between insensate pleasure and psychological collapse, he cried out.

"Ah… Ahhh… He Yu…slow down… Slow… Aahhh… Stop, stop that, pull out, can…can you just pull out before you come… You… Ahh!"

"Xie-ge." He Yu's eyes reddened at the sound of Xie Qingcheng calling out to him. Moved and infatuated, he flipped Xie Qingcheng over so that they were facing each other and hugged him tightly. Then he kissed his sweat-soaked face, his trembling lips, his slender neck, his beautiful Adam's apple, even as his hips pounded into him with even greater intensity. "I can't hold back any more. You're sucking me in too tight, I don't want to pull out, it feels too good. It'll feel good for you when I come inside too, Ge… Let me fuck you… Let me come inside you…"

"No… Don't… Ah… Don't come, don't come inside…"

Xie Qingcheng truly broke down. Suddenly, in the wake of He Yu's fierce thrusts, as the boy panted roughly against his neck, thick ropes of come forcefully spurted out.

"Ahh…!"

Completely overwhelmed, Xie Qingcheng cried out loud. He Yu released right against that sensitive place, each gush drawing full-body shudders and delirious moans from Xie Qingcheng.

"He Yu… Ah… Ahhh…"

The sound of his voice was too lovely to withstand—practically obsessed, He Yu looked at the man lying beneath him, begging him with his legs spread wide open, crying out in pleasure and telling him to pull out even as he had no choice but to endure He Yu filling him with every last drop of his come.

"…Don't come inside… I can't take it… You… Ahh…"

At the sound of his moans, an unprecedented sense of satisfaction unfurled in He Yu's heart. Overcome with pleasure and love, he continued to drive into the older man without pause as he kept ejaculating in fierce spurts, forcing violent shivers and miserable cries out of Xie Qingcheng's body.

"You can't take it? But you're trembling from pleasure… Did you know that you're leaking? You're sucking me in so tight that you're shaking… Ge, if you could repair your body as the First Emperor, then maybe your body was also trained to be more sensitive? You're too good at taking me…"

Xie Qingcheng's eyes reddened. "Y-you fucking…!"

But He Yu wouldn't shut up. "Xie Qingcheng, I love fucking you so much. Tell me, since your body's been transformed…maybe you really could get knocked up… If you can, then why don't you be my wife for real—I'll fuck you every day, and you'll have my babies… Ge, you're so beautiful. You're so, so beautiful."

Xie Qingcheng practically felt like He Yu was swearing at him, like he was using this onslaught of words to curse him out.

But He Yu was utterly sincere as he gazed at him, held him, fucked him, and said the most searing words from his heart. "Ge… I want to fuck you all my life… I want to fuck you for the rest of my life… I'm going to fuck you for the rest of my life…"

Faced with the fiery love written all over the boy's face, still being thrust into seemingly without end, as that vigorous release painted his insides and the pleasure emanating from his prostate spiraled up and up and up…Xie Qingcheng tumbled shamefully over the edge in He Yu's wake.

He didn't want to climax like this, but his body couldn't stand being toyed with so intensely. And so finally, on this bed, He Yu's relentless fucking—the endless thrusts and release against that sensitive spot—made Xie Qingcheng come with his legs splayed wide open.

His come splashed onto their stomachs, which thrilled He Yu even more—even the calm that usually followed his orgasm was completely overwhelmed by love and yearning. He didn't intend to succumb to weariness at all as his desire slowly stirred back to life inside Xie Qingcheng—he didn't even pull out, instead using the

slickness from his release to slide smoothly in and out of him once again.

"Ah…" Xie Qingcheng had truly reached his limit, unable to hide the note of pleading in his usually calm, solemn voice. "He Yu, don't keep going… Stop, He Yu… Please stop… Aahhh… Stop… Stop it… Don't… Ah!"

"I don't want to stop. I want to fuck you for the rest of my life. Ge, I want to keep your legs spread so that I can always fuck you. I want you. I only want you… It feels so good… Xie-ge, you make me feel so good…"

That night, He Yu went completely insane. They did it on the bed, on the chair, in the shower, before He Yu finally pressed Xie Qingcheng back onto the despoiled bed and roughly speared him through. He covered Xie Qingcheng's mouth with his hand, preventing him from making any noise while his lower body moved with fervent passion.

Xie Qingcheng didn't have any condoms at home, so He Yu came inside him every time until his insides were a dripping mess. The passion of his endless thrusting made the come inside Xie Qingcheng start to foam, but he was still forced to let the younger man creampie him again and again, so overstimulated that his toes curled and trembled where they were pressed against He Yu's waist.

Toward the end, He Yu still felt like it wasn't enough; he just *had* to get competitive. Panting, he asked with the relentlessness of a madman, "Ge, have you ever done it like this with Li Ruoqiu? Have you ever fucked her this hard? Did you ever make love to her so many times in a single night?"

At first Xie Qingcheng refused to reply, but later, after he'd been fucked too madly and too viciously…it seemed that if he remained silent, He Yu was going to try to pound him to death. In the end, he broke down and snarled, "Ah… Motherfucker… How could I… I'm not as outrageous as you… Ngh… Not so fucking hard…! Ah…!"

He Yu huffed a breath and slowed a little, pressing into him with shallow, lingering thrusts as he gave Xie Qingcheng time to gather his wits. He dipped his head to kiss him. “I’m not outrageous. It’s because you fill me with an insatiable hunger.”

Xie Qingcheng felt like his heart had suddenly been scalded.

He Yu, the little beast, could be incredibly crude and vulgar, but he was a man of learning: He could also be very erudite.

He read poems; he wrote stories. He could say “I want to fuck you to death” without veiling his meaning if he felt like it, but he could also eloquently intone, “It’s because you fill me with an insatiable hunger.”

That was simply who He Yu was, simply the He Yu who was giving the entirety of himself to Xie Qingcheng; giving him his desire and his body, his past and his future—giving Xie Qingcheng everything.

Xie Qingcheng had never felt this kind of searing weight before.

After a whole night’s worth of trysts, the bedsheets were covered in substantial wet patches. It was true that Xie Qingcheng had never had such intense sex with Li Ruoqiu in all their years of marriage. To be honest, he’d never imagined that such intense sex was even possible.

Xie Qingcheng endured such extreme stimulation and unrestrained indulgence that he ended up being fucked into a breakdown. He sobbed pathetically, but still kept glaring viciously at He Yu.

“Don’t you dare fucking come inside me again… You… Ah…!”

But how could He Yu possibly listen? The filthy masculine desire in He Yu’s bones craved nothing more than to make Xie Qingcheng his sex slave, to cuff his wrists and shackle his ankles, to come inside him again and again, to take that strong, pristine, put-together, godfatherly man and defile him from head to toe.

"He Yu, you…"

"I've come so much for you today—could the First Emperor get pregnant for me in return…?"

The sweat-drenched youth lay on top of him, having come over and over again with inhuman strength into his unbearably sticky body. Each release gushed against Xie Qingcheng's prostate, drawing out a faint shudder from his fucked-open body and rousing a shiver from his unfocused eyes.

"Can you get pregnant for me…?"

Xie Qingcheng refused to say anything, but after he endured yet another load of come, reflexive tears finally welled up in his vacant eyes, streaming silently down the tails of his peach-blossom eyes and into the pillows.

He Yu's warm lips kissed away those tear tracks. The boy murmured as he nuzzled into the crook of the man's neck, lifting a hand to stroke over Xie Qingcheng's abdomen.

"One more time. I want to fill you up with my seed… I want to make you feel even better… Ge, I really can't be without you…"

As he spoke, the length still buried inside Xie Qingcheng reared its head once more and he resumed his lustful thrusting into Xie Qingcheng's slick, hot body.

Xie Qingcheng was caught off guard. He hadn't thought He Yu could harden so quickly again. His hole still hadn't recovered from the intense prostate orgasm, so the stimulation made it spasm and tremble. While he was still ensnared in the afterglow of his climax, the boy's cock was already frantically fucking his insides into clenching again. His brows knitted and his fingers dug into the bedsheet beneath him; he unexpectedly let out a hoarse, fragile moan.

"Ah…"

He Yu leaned down and kissed him, pressing his lips to Xie Qingcheng's furrowed brow as he fumbled for the hand that was

clutching at the bedsheet, loosening his fingers one by one and lacing their sweaty hands together.

The place where they were connected was completely drenched, each shallow thrust accompanied by a lewd squelch. Xie Qingcheng's hole was filled with a sticky mess of come. Some of it dripped filthily out as He Yu moved within him, only to be forcefully pushed back inside… He Yu didn't want a single drop to leak out. His motions became increasingly frantic as he fucked the man in his arms, consumed by the flames of passion.

"Moan for me, Ge. I want to hear you moan, so moan out loud."

Xie Qingcheng shook his head, refusing to make a sound, but his quivering lashes were already wet.

"Ge… I really can't take it anymore…" Seeing him like this, He Yu couldn't hold back the sadistic sexual instincts etched into his bones. He slammed into Xie Qingcheng fiercely and insistently, his movements brutal and urgent. "You're filled up with my come… You're so wet, your little hole feels so good, squeezing me so tight… You know, you were made to be fucked by a man—with your body, you ought to be cuffed to a bed for men to fuck day and night…"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear listening to such unhinged words. "Stop talking," he said hoarsely. "Stop fucking talking. Ahh…! He Yu, slow…slow down… Ah…"

He Yu started fucking Xie Qingcheng the moment he opened his mouth, forcing his voice several notes higher until it resembled a mournful cry.

"Don't… He Yu… Not like this, it's too deep…"

"Ge, you called for me. You said my name…"

Xie Qingcheng's eyes were unfocused, fucked into a muddled haze. He bit back urgent gasps between his teeth, unwilling to let them spill out, but there was no way he could suppress the sounds of his sharp, wrecked breaths. They leaked out of his throat one

after another to the accompaniment of the creaky groans of the swaying bed, the filthy wet noises from where the two of them were joined, and the slapping of He Yu's balls against his body.

"Does it feel good? Ge? Am I fucking you well?"

He grabbed Xie Qingcheng's face and forced him to meet his gaze. Through eyes hazy with torment, the older man saw the searing infatuation in the expression of the youth resting on top of him—

Xie Qingcheng started in surprise.

That expression was far too enraptured.

It looked almost exactly like the overly obsessed, preposterous kind of love that Xie Qingcheng had never believed in…

Perhaps because that kind of love was too unfamiliar to Xie Qingcheng, he lost his composure in a moment of panic, crying out involuntarily as He Yu pounded emphatically into that sensitive spot. "Ah… Hahhh…"

He Yu adored the sound of his moans. Even though Xie Qingcheng rarely let them out, even if they were hard to hear clearly, they were enough to drive He Yu to derangement. Eyes darkening, he bucked his hips forward again and again, nearly madly, as if he wanted to fuck Xie Qingcheng to death amidst the bedsheets, the sharp movements making Xie Qingcheng tremble and cry out over and over.

"Ah… He Yu… Slow…slow down…"

"Ge, it looks like your stomach is bulging because of me… I said I was going to fuck you for an entire day… I'm going to fuck you until you can't take in any more, until my come drips out of you whenever you move… I really want to get you pregnant… Ge… I'll come inside you every single time…against your most sensitive place… I want to make you feel good… I want you to feel good too… I want you to come again and again because of me…"

"He Yu, you… Ah… Ahh…!"

The room was a complete mess—the mattress itself had been shifted out of place by their intense lovemaking, as if it couldn't withstand such an overpowering tidal wave of love.

Throughout this onslaught, Xie Qingcheng felt an emotion in his heart that he could not bear, a feeling of which others had spoken but that he had never seen… It was a youthful, terrifying eros that burned down everything in its path.

Dragged into the depths of this erotic love, he could no longer escape: it was as if He Yu wanted to pull apart their blood and bones amidst this feverish emotion and melt them back together into one whole.

In the end, He Yu fucked him into unconsciousness. But before Xie Qingcheng passed out, he saw He Yu's eyes. They were intensely eager and slightly manic.

As though even if the two of them were burnt to ash, their embers would continue to intertwine.

Chapter 103:
Xie Qingcheng, You Have to Take Responsibility for Me

THE NIGHT PASSED.

When He Yu woke up, it was already bright out. He blinked and saw Xie Qingcheng smoking next to the window, already dressed. The window was cracked open, and smoke drifted from between his fingertips as the morning sunlight spilled in.

Xie Qingcheng's condition was quite poor; last night had left him rather worse for wear. Then again, no one could endure He Yu's torment for an entire night and not end up worse for wear. Even though he was wearing a shirt and blazer, a faint smattering of hickeys was visible around the collar. His lips, too, were covered in obvious bite marks.

Xie Qingcheng seemed extremely irritable. The ashtray was already piled high with a mountain of ashes. He Yu didn't know when he'd woken up—Xie Qingcheng was a much lighter sleeper than he was.

Xie Qingcheng turned around when he heard rustling from the bed. "…You're awake?"

"…Mm."

On a morning like this, any number of relatively gentle exchanges could have taken place between them.

Such as, *Are you all right?*

Or, *Do you want some breakfast?*

Even if neither of the above sufficed, they could at least say, *You should get dressed, it's cold out.*

But in the end, after spending some time silently looking at this boy he'd hooked up with far too many times, Xie Qingcheng chose the most coolheaded and ruthless thing to say:

"Since you're awake, you should go."

He Yu was dumbstruck.

After getting so thoroughly intimate with him last night, He Yu was genuinely shocked to hear such cold words from Xie Qingcheng today.

He paused for a long while before finally saying, "Last night…"

"It's true that you didn't force me into anything last night," said Xie Qingcheng. "I lost my head and couldn't control myself." It seemed as if he had spent a long time thinking about how he would face He Yu when he woke. His answer was quick and ruthless to the point of being nearly robotic. "I'm not blaming you. You can leave."

He Yu sat up, looking like a little dragon that had tried its best to please its master only to end up callously abandoned.

His hair was still sleep-mussed and sticking up in tufts. There was even a bit of dried blood on his forehead, and a cut on his lip where Xie Qingcheng had bitten him the night before.

Xie Qingcheng glanced at him for only a moment before looking away. The light from beyond the window seemed to drain him of even the slightest hint of human vitality.

It wouldn't be a stretch to call the events of the previous night "insane"—it was like they'd spent New Year's Eve possessed. The things they'd done had been unimaginable to them both. When they remembered the details now, it was all bewildering.

It was as though they'd fallen into a fantastic illusion that night. Like two people within a dream, neither of them seemed fully real.

Perhaps it had exhausted too much of his passion—that crazed, unexpected tryst seemed like it had sapped the last of the vigor from Xie Qingcheng's body.

It was obvious that Xie Qingcheng regretted it deeply.

He Yu gazed at him silently. He'd worked so hard all night; it would be a lie to say that this dragon pup didn't feel hurt at being abandoned so abruptly. Still, his self-respect didn't allow him to show it.

In the end, voice soft but expression equally flat, He Yu said, "You don't need to send me off in such a hurry. Even a rent boy delivered to your door wouldn't deserve such treatment."

"What's a rent boy?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"A male prostitute."

"…But you're not a male prostitute," replied Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu looked at him stiffly but didn't utter a word.

Xie Qingcheng sighed, putting down the phone he'd been glancing at intermittently as he smoked, and walked to the bedside. He Yu saw what he'd been looking at in his periphery—jellyfish videos.

He used to find it funny; he didn't know why Xie Qingcheng kept watching those things. Only now did he realize that the videos functioned as a type of mood stabilizer for Xie Qingcheng, like a reflex developed over time. Those creatures that lived on gently without brains or hearts had been Xie Qingcheng's only balm throughout his painful past.

He knew that the reason Xie Qingcheng had been standing there smoking incessantly and watching those videos was because he felt so uncomfortable—because his mental state was a complete wreck.

Even if Xie Qingcheng had slept with him voluntarily, even if Xie Qingcheng had done it because he'd been irritated—and then enticed—by him, He Yu knew that Xie Qingcheng had regretted it afterward. And it wasn't the usual type of regret.

Just as he expected, the first words out of Xie Qingcheng's mouth when he approached him were, "He Yu, we shouldn't

continue like this.”

He Yu said nothing, just sat there in silence.

His back still bore the marks where Xie Qingcheng had clawed at him in desperation the night before. Yet now, the same man who’d clawed at him like that had actually just said “We shouldn’t continue like this”? He Yu was utterly incensed and hurt.

He lifted his head to stare Xie Qingcheng in the eye, a silent interrogation.

In response, Xie Qingcheng remained quiet for a while before turning to take a first aid kit from a drawer. Gauze, iodine, and cotton swabs in hand, he dabbed carefully at the wound on He Yu’s forehead, cleaning and dressing it in silence. “You shouldn’t go out with blood on your face on New Year’s.”

He Yu didn’t make a sound as Xie Qingcheng lightly cleaned the area around the wound with an iodine-soaked cotton swab. He just let Xie Qingcheng give him this little bit of aftercare.

Xie Qingcheng wound a length of pure-white gauze around He Yu’s head. His fingers paused over the row of adhesive bandages before finally selecting a kids’ cartoon dinosaur band-aid and applying it to He Yu’s forehead.

“Okay, you can go.”

Silence.

“Xie Xue will probably be back soon.”

More silence.

“It’s really not right for us to do this. Yesterday, I acted on impulse.”

Even more silence.

“He Yu.”



Sitting on the bed with his chin lifted and a few strands of hair spilling over the gauze, He Yu finally spoke. “Xie Qingcheng, I’m so thirsty. And tired. I want some water.”

Xie Qingcheng sighed. After all, he was the one who’d taken the initiative to express his desires. He still felt the need to offer something in exchange for what he’d received, even if he’d ultimately gotten the shorter end of the stick. After all, he was a grown man. It was a mindset he couldn’t shake.

He went to pour He Yu some water.

Seeing that Xie Qingcheng was actually willing to get him water, He Yu’s mood seemed to improve somewhat. As Xie Qingcheng busied himself in front of the tea table, He Yu craned his neck and peered around, raising his hand to touch his forehead and the cartoon band-aid from time to time.

But as soon as he saw the cup of water that Xie Qingcheng brought over, his face fell again. His expression became even gloomier than before.

“Here. Drink.” Xie Qingcheng held out the disposable cup.

He Yu stared at the paper cup, the same kind that Li Ruoqiu had used. He pursed his lips tightly and turned his face away, refusing to take a sip.

Xie Qingcheng had no idea where he’d gone wrong this time, but this concubine seemed displeased. “Drink,” he said, frowning.

He Yu glared at him before suddenly lifting a hand to smack the cup to the ground, spilling water all over the floor.

“What are you doing?!” Xie Qingcheng exclaimed.

“What do you think I’m doing?!” He Yu kept glaring at him.

“How am I supposed to know what’s the matter with you?”

“Why can’t you understand me?”

Xie Qingcheng was completely dumbfounded. He had no idea what he had done to provoke such a crazy outburst. Even Li Ruoqiu

had said "Thank you, Gege," when he gave her water, but He Yu had the nerve to overturn the cup he passed him, after he'd fucked him all night long!

"I'm telling you, He Yu, if you're done making a scene, you should go home. Just act as if nothing happened last night. I've already told you several times that it was a momentary lapse of judgment…"

"With the kind of momentary lapse of judgment you had last night, if I were a woman, I would've gotten pregnant!"

He Yu's righteous indignation just gave Xie Qingcheng a splitting headache. Surely, given the things they'd done yesterday, *He Yu* wouldn't have ended up the pregnant one. Did he have no sense of shame?

On second thought, though, He Yu saying "I would've gotten pregnant" was a vast improvement over the things he kept saying in bed last night, like "I want you to have my baby" and "Ge, I want to knock you up." It was also far easier for Xie Qingcheng to accept than if he'd said "*You* would've gotten pregnant."

Gritting his teeth, Xie Qingcheng said, "But you're not a woman. And if you *were* a woman, I wouldn't have lost control with you like that."

"Why not? Are you gay?"

Xie Qingcheng's face turned ashen. "I'm not."

"Why, then?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to keep bickering with him. He glanced at the clock on the wall.

"I can't explain it to you, but take my word for it—I just wouldn't. Let's stop talking about this. It's getting late and you should leave. Don't let Xie Xue run into you on her way back."

"Xie Qingcheng, as a man, don't you need to take some responsibility?"

"Like hell I need to take responsibility for you!" Xie Qingcheng shouted, losing his temper. "Listen to me, He Yu, there shouldn't be anything between us. Everything should be simple and clean. Think of last night as the end of this—there's not going to be a next time. Now, you need to get up. Get—"

His sentence was interrupted when He Yu suddenly reached out and hugged him around the waist.

"I don't want to. I don't want to go. I'll be all alone at home. I want to stay here. When Li Ruoqiu had nowhere to go, you took her in, so why can't you do the same for me…?"

He pressed his forehead to Xie Qingcheng's waist, rubbing softly against his body. His eyes were filled with a stubborn madness, along with a hint of turbulence and bewilderment. As He Yu continued rubbing against Xie Qingcheng, it felt like a vessel within his heart was filled to the point of overflowing with an unfamiliar emotion, one he couldn't name.

His chest felt painfully swollen, and to quell that ache, his heart needed medicine. Instinctively, he sensed that he could obtain that very medicine from Xie Qingcheng's body, that Xie Qingcheng's essence could slowly soothe his anguish. He knew that would save his heart from being mangled by a formless knife.

He closed his eyes and held Xie Qingcheng for a long while before he suddenly realized that the man in his arms was trembling slightly. Touching him again, he was surprised to find his body temperature rather high.

He Yu jerked his head up from where it was pressed against Xie Qingcheng's waist.

"Ge, do you have a fever? Why do you feel so hot…?"

"…I'm fine." Xie Qingcheng grabbed him by the wrist and tried to pull his hand away.

But He Yu refused to let go. He stared at Xie Qingcheng for a while—

"Are you sure that drug is still working on you? You're always getting sick! It seems like every few days, you…"

"No ordinary person would be able to bear what you did to me last night," Xie Qingcheng said. "Let go of me."

He Yu's frown only deepened. "And your eyesight's getting worse too…"

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to hear things like this from him. Even medical professionals could try to conceal their illnesses and avoid treatment—facing a difficult diagnosis was difficult for anyone. He Yu's interrogation had poked Xie Qingcheng right in his sore spot. Using significantly more strength than before, Xie Qingcheng abruptly shoved him away.

"He Yu, that drug can prolong my lifespan, but it can't keep me in peak physical condition forever. I'll always take care of myself—as long as you don't provoke me, that is."

He Yu wordlessly shifted his gaze from Xie Qingcheng's face to the ashtray on the windowsill. It was overflowing with a massive pile of ash.

He stared at Xie Qingcheng, not knowing where this burst of intense anger had come from. "Is this what you call 'taking care of yourself'?"

"If you hadn't aggravated me, I wouldn't have smoked so much today."

He Yu didn't respond.

"You should leave."

Silence.

"I want to have some time to myself."

Those faint stirrings in He Yu's heart seemed to suddenly grow into a huge, ferocious beast with sharp claws that forcefully tore at his organs.

"No way. I'm taking you to the hospital," He Yu stubbornly insisted.

"I don't want to go to the fucking hospital!"

Not again! How many times a year did he need to go to the hospital? And all because he had been fucked by a boy until his body couldn't take it anymore!

"You're sick," He Yu insisted. "You have to go to the hospital." But He Yu felt a twinge of uncertainty—he was a rich young master, after all. "…Is the hospital open on New Year's Day?"

Xie Qingcheng looked at him—he clearly wanted to take action, yet was at a complete loss for what to do. Xie Qingcheng suddenly felt very tired. When all was said and done, He Yu was still a kid.

Xie Qingcheng heaved a low sigh. "How about this, He Yu. Just go home. I'll treat myself here." Meeting He Yu's eyes, he lied, "Besides, the hospital isn't even open today."

"If that's the case, I'll contact my personal physician for you—"

"You want to shout about us from the rooftops too?"

He Yu stopped in his tracks.

Xie Qingcheng took his phone, turned it off, and handed it back to him. "Please, if you genuinely consider me your kin, don't do this. Let me save some face."

He wasn't arguing anymore, but that only made him seem even more distant, as if he might fade away before He Yu's eyes in the very next moment. Even his soul seemed faint.

To his astonishment, He Yu found that he was starting to panic.

"Go home. Please," Xie Qingcheng said.

"But I—" He Yu paled. "You shouldn't…"

"What shouldn't I do? I'm an adult. I'm thirteen years older than you—don't you think I know how to look after myself? I don't need you to teach me anything."

He Yu looked at Xie Qingcheng's pallid, weak, indifferent, formidable, distant face—for a fleeting moment, the monster in his chest seemed to gnaw at him so hard he could hardly breathe.

What was wrong with him?

What was this…

"As for what happened yesterday, just let it go."

"Why… Xie Qingcheng… Why? Why can't we continue like this?"

"We just can't."

"But why…"

Xie Qingcheng stilled for a beat. "Because I don't love you, and you don't love me either, He Yu. So it would be a mistake. Didn't you say that a man should take responsibility? Then let me tell you—taking responsibility means that in the future, we should only do these kinds of things with the person we love. Otherwise, we're just tormenting each other."

Suddenly, everything went still. The word "love" rang through He Yu's ears.

The great beast in his chest swallowed his heart. His heartbeat came to an abrupt stop. His ears emptied of sound, unable to hear a thing. The final drop of blood drained from his face.

He jerked his head up, staring unwaveringly into Xie Qingcheng's eyes. He was on the verge of understanding something as he touched upon some sort of truth—

Love…

"I don't love you, and you don't love me either."

"In the future, we should only do these kinds of things with the person we love."

"Otherwise, we're just tormenting each other…"

Distant mountains appeared to shudder and the whole earth seemed to shake as He Yu's heart, swallowed by that monstrous beast, set off a staggering earthquake. With his shattered, sickly heart as the epicenter, great tremors tore through his entire body until even his fingertips sought escape from the calamity.

Love?

Roused from its slumber, the deity in his heart had solemnly called the name of that terrible beast. That name was like a binding hoop that instantly pulled tight around its huge, vicious body.

Love.

Again and again, the name spiraled through the landscape of his heart, filled with beacon fires and smoke signals. It circled around the ears of that strange beast, which narrowed its eyes in pleasure as it emitted a deep and inexorable rumble of agreement.

Yes, it said. *That's my name. That's the kind of emotion I am.*

Do you understand now…? As your world is falling apart…you have finally called me by the right name. Have you found the key to taming me?

The great beast slowly spit out his still-frozen heart.

A few seconds later—

Ba-dum.

That blood-soaked heart began to beat again.

Again and again, faster and faster, more urgently and more anxiously, frantically, madly, transforming into the drumbeat that made his eyes tremble until they reddened…

He Yu's face paled to an unsightly degree.

As Xie Qingcheng scolded him, his own routines and instinctive behaviors, the motivations he'd never interrogated, suddenly crystallized before him.

All the things he had done… Full of deep ardor, like a supple thread winding ceaselessly around his heart, impossible to forsake.

Could it be… Could it be because he loved him?

Did he—

Did he…*love* Xie Qingcheng?!

Chapter 104:
Its Name Was Love

HE YU WAS A VERY SMART person. But there were times when he was extremely obstinate and stuck in his ways.

For example, he had once been positive that he was a straight man. He'd been so convinced of that answer to the question of his sexuality that he dismissed Xie Qingcheng as nothing more than a minor misstep along the way.

It was only now that he was coming to realize that perhaps Xie Qingcheng had been the right answer all along. He Yu was the one who had been mistaken.

This astonishing revelation had He Yu frozen in shock where he sat on the bed.

Xie Qingcheng threw his clothes at him.

"Get up already."

Vacant-eyed and completely spaced out, He Yu obediently dressed himself.

Once he'd slipped back into his clothes, he got up from the bed and stared blankly at Xie Qingcheng for so long that the older man started feeling uncomfortable. Finally, He Yu murmured, "Xie-ge… Can… Can I stay for a little bit longer…?"

Oblivious to the fact that He Yu's heart had just been flipped upside down, Xie Qingcheng took the boy's sincerely flustered entreaty as yet more stubbornness. "No," he replied.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

Xie Qingcheng had absolutely no desire to acknowledge or even think about the ludicrous things they'd done the previous night. He was determined to shoo him out, and persisted in doing so until his face began to pale and his lips turned ashen.

"If you really want me to rest up properly, He Yu, then you'll leave. You'll just be torturing me if you stay here. You should go."

"But…" He Yu had no idea what he wanted to say either. In the midst of his panic, he tried to grab Xie Qingcheng by the hand, as if that would somehow make it easier for him to think this through.

However, the moment he touched Xie Qingcheng's burning-hot fingers, Xie Qingcheng reflexively pulled them away.

He Yu blinked, taken by surprise.

Xie Qingcheng was struggling to endure his physical discomfort and fever. When he looked at He Yu, his peach-blossom eyes were tinged with sickly redness.

He marched He Yu to the door and pushed him outside. "We can't do these kinds of things together anymore. Go home and calm down."

"But Xie Qingcheng, I want to…"

"Let me calm down too."

Xie Qingcheng was about to close the door when Auntie Li just so happened to walk by.

"Ah, Xiao-Xie, you and your friend are up so early on New Year's Day!"

Xie Qingcheng instinctively tugged at his collar, but the love bites on his neck were still quite obvious, with several faint red spots peeking out.

When he saw Li Miaoqing approach, He Yu yanked off his crooked camel-colored scarf and looped it around Xie Qingcheng's neck, wrapping the skin above his collar in soft cashmere.

Xie Qingcheng didn't understand what was going on, but just as he was about to struggle free, He Yu grabbed the scarf and pulled him closer. "Don't take it off. I'm covering your hickies for you."

Only then did Xie Qingcheng realize how far up the marks extended. Caught between annoyance and exasperation, he had no

choice but to leave He Yu's scarf around his neck and stop moving.

Li Miaoqing stopped in front of them, her eyes sleepy. "Aiya, did you two get into a fight last night? We all heard some smashing noises."

"…We didn't," Xie Qingcheng said.

"Auntie Li, we were watching a movie," He Yu explained. "A war film."

"Oh…" Li Miaoqing didn't think any more of it. She yawned.

"You're up early today," said Xie Qingcheng.

"Yeah, I don't know what happened last night, but I kept dreaming your house was getting renovated. There were all these banging and thumping sounds. They were so realistic…so I woke up early."

Neither He Yu nor Xie Qingcheng knew what to say to that.

"Since you're awake, why don't you both come over to my place for breakfast?" she asked, oblivious to the reason behind their silence.

"We'll pass," Xie Qingcheng said. He felt extremely uncomfortable—he'd only had time for a brief shower this morning, and there were certain things that he hadn't managed to clean out completely. Also, his fever was still sending flashes of heat through his body. He just wanted to make He Yu leave so that he could wash up properly, take some medicine, and take a nap while Xie Xue was still out with Li Ruoqiu.

"He has some urgent matters to take care of," he said to Auntie Li. "He needs to go home."

"Aiya, Xiao-He's leaving already?" Auntie Li exclaimed.

He Yu didn't want to leave, but…

"That's right," Xie Qingcheng insisted. Seeing that He Yu was still rooted to the spot, stiff and dazed with no intention of leaving, he gritted out, "I'm giving him a ride."

With that, he grabbed his car keys and pulled He Yu out of Moyu Alley. After stuffing He Yu into his car, he sat down in the driver's seat.

He Yu had somewhat regained his wits by now. He looked at Xie Qingcheng with faintly red eyes.

"Xie-ge, you don't feel well. Why don't I drive…"

"Stop babbling."

Xie Qingcheng fastened his seatbelt, started the engine, and silently drove He Yu to a nearby automated parking lot. It was difficult to find parking in the old city district, so He Yu usually parked here if he needed to stay for a while.

"Get out," Xie Qingcheng said.

Before, He Yu definitely wouldn't have taken Xie Qingcheng's feelings into account—he would have stayed when he wanted to stay and left when he wanted to leave. His own emotions had always been the most important. But now he felt apprehensive. His head buzzed with static.

At last, under Xie Qingcheng's weary yet unyielding gaze, he got out of the car.

"Hold on," Xie Qingcheng said.

He Yu's eyes brightened, as though lit by a beacon of hope.

"Here's your scarf."

The light in He Yu's eyes went out again.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he even managed to get a word out, Xie Qingcheng had tossed the scarf at him and closed the window. Then he slammed on the gas, enduring the discomfort of his stomach, his waist—his entire body—and turned the car around to go home, leaving He Yu standing there by himself in a daze.

He Yu stayed there for a long time before he managed to find his car and get in. It was a gorgeous, extremely comfortable

Lamborghini, but sitting inside didn't feel as real as sitting in Xie Qingcheng's passenger seat.

He had absolutely no desire to go home. He didn't want to go back to that tomb… Instead he began driving in dazed circles around and around the old city district.

He kept on thinking about the things that had happened, both the night before and in the past, thinking about the terrible beast in his chest whose name he'd just learned, thinking about the emotion that even he struggled to digest immediately, that…"love."

His heart was a complete mess.

There weren't very many people on the road on New Year's Day. He Yu kept driving until day turned to night. He finally pulled over on a deserted side street and turned on the stereo. With "My Heart Will Go On" playing in the background, he lay back in his seat with his eyes open. As he thought about everything that had happened, the past engulfed his heart like a rising tide.

Did he really care for Xie Qingcheng? Since when? Did he *love* him?

Where did that love even come from?

Did he love him for his body? Was it an attraction born of kinship? Or had it happened before that—had he unwittingly fallen in love with the whole of Xie Qingcheng's being?

Exhausted, perplexed, and agitated, He Yu tried to carefully mull over everything that had happened.

He thought of Xie Qingcheng last night, pinning him onto the bed as he took the initiative to kiss him. He thought of Xie Qingcheng in the flooded studio, floating on his back and telling him the whole truth as the music played on. He thought of Xie Qingcheng beneath that flowering tree, acting in a movie scene for his only chance to put on the police uniform he could never wear for real. He thought of Xie Qingcheng in the cave on Neverland, lighting

a cigarette as he said indifferently that he could no longer remember what his dream had been.

He Yu thought of the obstinate look in Xie Qingcheng's eyes at the club, still holding on, still staring at him so stubbornly even after the drugged wine had taken effect. "He Yu, come back with me," he'd said. "I'll tell you everything you want to know."

But on that day…on the night he and Xie Qingcheng first established their debt of love and hatred, the night Xie Qingcheng had tried desperately to bring him back…he'd poured a glass of red wine all over Xie Qingcheng's snow-white lapels just to debase him.

He Yu remembered how he had set down the glass and, from across the wide, dimly lit table, used a pinkie promise to trick him, stroking his face with a small smile.

And then he'd said, "You deceived me so thoroughly. Did you think I'd still believe you?"

Yes, Xie Qingcheng had deceived him and abandoned him. But he hadn't known that back then, when Xie Qingcheng's health was already so ruined he couldn't bear the weight of his own emotions… he'd still given his final beacon of light to He Yu.

He Yu remembered how Xie Qingcheng had always told him to be calm, to subdue his own inner demons, to rely on himself to walk out of the shadows in his heart.

That was the only gift—the *final* gift—that Xie Qingcheng could give to his kin, as psychological Ebola's patient zero.

It was he who told He Yu that the mentally ill shouldn't be treated any differently. It was he who told He Yu to find the bridge that would connect him once more to society. It was he who told He Yu, *"Little devil, you must be strong."*

Because of Xie Qingcheng's words, He Yu strove to become someone who could fit in with normal people. He'd even wanted to share this principle with other patients in the depths of suffering.

It was all because Xie Qingcheng had told him that the lives of the mentally ill were no different from those of ordinary people.

The He family ran a mental health facility as a very minor part of their larger corporation. He Jiwei had never bothered with it; he allowed He Yu to run it as a learning experience. He Yu had turned part of the facility into a charity to maximize its impact on all the patients with psychological issues who came to seek help.

It was all because Xie Qingcheng had once said that cages were for criminals, not for patients who had already suffered so much pain.

After Xie Qingcheng left, he'd tottered on the verge of collapse, but then he'd staggered to his feet, striving to reintegrate into normal society. He even stopped self-harming for a long time, working hard to control his emotions. He abandoned the box cutter he'd once pressed to his wrist to the passage of time.

It was all because Xie Qingcheng had once asked him, *"Little devil, doesn't it hurt…?"*

Doesn't it…

Hurt…?

Was it back then that the seed of admiration had been planted?

Did he love more than just Xie Qingcheng's body? Had he fallen in love with the man's soul as well?



What was his soul like…? He'd been shown many times over the years, but never fully taken it in.

He Yu's breathing was ragged. The words he'd tattooed onto his wrist to imitate Xie Qingcheng had become a black ribbon, guiding him inexorably forward… He followed the ribbon onward.

The ribbon fluttered, the fog dissipated, and what lay before him was Xie Qingcheng's silhouette. In that moment, He Yu saw him with incomparable clarity.

Here lies one whose name was writ in water…

The youth finally tried to empathize with the older man, and in the end, he found Xie Qingcheng's silhouette in his own heart… The person he saw was someone who had given him faith, given him support, given him all his blood-soaked experience as one who had triumphed over psychological Ebola.

He saw that person suppress his own pain and say calmly, ruthlessly, and decisively, "How could the life of a mentally ill person be more important than the life of a doctor?"

Was that truly a moment of betrayal?

No. It wasn't.

He Yu knew now that it was truly the most bone-piercing despair, the deepest remorse.

He finally understood that the Xie Qingcheng he had hated so deeply in the club had actually been asking Qin Ciyan—"*Laoshi, how could my life be more important than yours?"*

He could almost hear Xie Qingcheng say—

"I'm just a patient. I'm just a reassembled corpse dredged up from a pool of blood.

"You're the nation's foremost scholar and a brilliant doctor. You have a wife and a daughter. You still have manuscripts to finish and dreams to realize.

"Why did you tell those people that if something happened, they should come to you first? Why did you shield me behind you?"

Suddenly, He Yu understood everything. He could see everything…

From a third-person perspective, he watched the old man gaze at Xie Qingcheng, wordlessly beaming in silent acceptance, just as he did whenever Xie Qingcheng expressed doubt or confusion.

He Yu remembered Xie Qingcheng telling him, that night in the flooded studio, that the old man's heart had grown softer and his temper had become milder as he aged.

If Yi Beihai's knife hadn't pierced his flesh, he would have lived out his days in peace with his wife, and when Xie Qingcheng went to call on him, he could have brought a bouquet of lilies to tuck into the wicker basket in his study.

But in the end, Xie Qingcheng didn't even have the right to leave a bouquet of flowers on the old man's grave… Xie Qingcheng would be chased away by his shidi and shimei for merely gazing at his tombstone from afar.

But He Yu knew that he never regretted it.

That was Xie Qingcheng's soul.

When he robotically spat out those cutting words, he had been pushing himself into the abyss.

He loathed the so-called disadvantaged people who exploited doctors and wanted them to die for the sake of their patients, and he worried that his naive, impetuous, overly kind shidi and shimei didn't know how to protect themselves.

Or rather, that they wouldn't dare to say, "Aren't doctors worthy of protection? Aren't doctors' lives also lives? Aren't doctors people too? We have families, we have wives and children, we're daughters and mothers. Please don't praise us while forcing us to spill our own blood to be deserving of that praise."

He believed things shouldn't be that way. Therefore, he sacrificed his own reputation and laid his own career to rest.

That was Xie Qingcheng's soul.

In the same way Qin Ciyan had protected him, he paid the price to protect the weary, overwhelmed, dedicated idealists in white coats behind him.

All along, He Yu had thought that Xie Qingcheng loathed mentally ill patients, that he feared them. But the person he loathed was really himself.

He Yu had always respected the mentally ill and sought to protect those who were tormented in both body and mind, but he had no idea that Xie Qingcheng was also one of them—that he was the one most like him.

That was Xie Qingcheng's soul.

Did he love him…

Did he love him…

That kind of person, that kind of heart, that kind of soul…

The great beast in his chest that now had a name was frantically circling his heart.

As though seeing through the eyes of that strange creature, he looked down and spotted the man standing in the hospital, facing a crowd of scowling faces and pointing fingers. He saw that man meet the eyes of Qin Ciyan's distant, translucent soul, surrounded by ancient, floating jellyfish that had swum from Brooklyn all those years ago to the present day.

Then Qin Ciyan turned around. Putting his hands in the pockets of his long white coat, he slowly walked away. His figure's aged stoop straightened into the easy confidence he had held in the prime of his life, before finally returning to the sprightly appearance of his youth—a young student studying abroad in America, carrying a thick pile of books under his arm and smiling as he gazed up at a sky that

was brimming with jellyfish. Finally, he turned his head to grin brightly at Xie Qingcheng, who couldn't catch up to him.

"Xiao-Xie, I don't need a reason to save you, because I know that you'll do the things I want to do. As long as you're alive, I'll live on through you. You are my confidant, my son, my disciple, my comrade in arms—you are the hope I'm leaving behind. I've gotten old, and the old will always pass on—it's only right that aged leaves fall to protect new shoots. My own mentors also sacrificed their time and energy to help me come into my own."

The Brooklyn sunset illuminated the young man's figure. Clad in a European-style suit, he beamed and waved at Xie Qingcheng, before fading into the brilliant golden light.

He Yu looked on as Xie Qingcheng came to a standstill. His footfalls halted as he stopped chasing after him.

Doctor Xie watched Doctor Qin disappear bit by bit, like he was gazing upon the ice-cold bodies of his parents on that rainy night. The sunlight was like an arrow, a rainstorm, a firework, like the brilliance this man had cast over the course of his life, illuminating his face in that moment. His expression abruptly crumbled and shattered as he stood frozen in place for an age.

He Yu knew that Xie Qingcheng couldn't go to Brooklyn. He had to go back. He had to turn back.

And so, lifting his hand, Doctor Xie silently and ruthlessly put on a mask labeled "traitor," "coward," and "deserter," and turned around. He faced the others once more with his sorrowful, unyielding, determined eyes gazing out from behind the mask.

He walked back, heading away from Qin Ciyan and into an endless night. Allowing raging flames to singe his body and sharp blades to pierce his heart, he took one step after another with unparalleled resolve.

He Yu watched… Through the eyes of that strange beast, he finally saw everything so clearly. Xie Qingcheng's every step seemed to batter against his heart.

This was the real Xie Qingcheng, the Xie Qingcheng that He Yu knew.

It was love. He loved him.

He loved this person's body and heart. He loved this person's scars and lacerated flesh. He loved his sickly, worn-down body.

He loved him.

He loved him…

That terrible beast let him see everything so clearly—everything about himself, everything about Xie Qingcheng—

Thus, as the long night ended, before daybreak arrived…the youth finally faced the frail, graceful light of dawn and hoarsely mumbled a belated realization.

"Xie Qingcheng… Doesn't it…hurt…?"

Xie Qingcheng, doesn't it hurt…?

All these years, haven't you been in pain? Haven't you…been lonely…?

Chapter 105:
The Words I Couldn’t Say

AFTER XIE QINGCHENG chased He Yu away, he took another shower.

This time, what went on in the shower was a humiliating affair. Xie Qingcheng felt so terrible that he could barely keep himself upright. After struggling through washing himself, he took some fever-reducing medicine, fully intending to shut himself in his house and rest.

But his bed was an utter mess. He couldn’t sleep in it like this.

Xie Qingcheng could only steel himself and change the sheets; he could barely even look at the stains on the old ones. Even now, he wasn’t sure what kind of psychedelics he could have taken last night that led him to do such outrageous things with He Yu.

He wasn’t prone to embarrassment. Rather, he just found it extremely ridiculous, especially when he looked at the filthy bedsheets—he’d never thought two men could leave them in such a state. He must have been possessed.

Coughing softly, Xie Qingcheng stripped the sheets and tossed them into the washing machine. Then, after making the bed with fresh linens, he buried his aching body under the blankets. He continued to cough.

Xie Qingcheng tossed and turned, but the fever was unbearable, and he was in so much discomfort that he couldn’t fall asleep.

His condition was beyond terrible. Thankfully, Xie Xue had left with Li Ruoqiu and had yet to return. He didn’t have to put up a facade for anyone; he could finally take off his mask, revealing a face made weak and dazed by the torment of sickness.

It was a long time before the medicine finally took effect and reduced his fever. Perhaps it was because the room still smelled like He Yu, but right before Xie Qingcheng hazily fell asleep, he seemed to see He Yu's eyes from last night—

Those eyes were filled with ardor and brimming with naked hunger, like he needed him, couldn't be apart from him…then they were overcome with dazed passion…

A stifling sensation choked Xie Qingcheng's heart. Immersed in this feeling, he felt his awareness slowly slip away…

The medicine he'd taken had a sedative effect, so Xie Qingcheng ended up sleeping all the way through to the morning of the next day.

Sensing that his fever had receded somewhat, he got out of bed, washed up, and dressed before reheating and eating some random leftover dumplings from the fridge.

After bustling about like this for a while, Xie Qingcheng sat down and began to read. For Xie Qingcheng, reading was like watching jellyfish—they were both ways to divert his attention, to try to escape the disquiet in his heart.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

Xie Qingcheng, who had finally, with great difficulty, managed to immerse himself in the world of books, resurfaced from his thoughts.

"Who is it?"

A youth's voice came quietly through the door.

"It's me."

He Yu had the nerve to come back here again.

The pen that Xie Qingcheng had been using to annotate stilled, its sharp tip stabbing through the page.

He heard the youth say from outside, "Can you open the door?" A long pause. "I want to talk to you."

"Stay where you are," said Xie Qingcheng.

"Ge… Why did you lock the door?"

"Because there are people like you who try to disturb me during work hours."

The person beyond the door paused. "Xie Qingcheng…can't you open the door…? Please open the door… I don't… I don't feel well…in my heart."

Things would have been fine if he hadn't said that, but the moment he did, Xie Qingcheng suddenly recalled the time He Yu went crazy on him, panting into his ear as he told him, "I feel so hot, I'm burning up. It's like I've got heatstroke. Xie Qingcheng, I want you to cool me down."

Xie Qingcheng's voice chilled another eight degrees. "Stay there."

He Yu fell silent.

After a while, Xie Qingcheng heard a shrill screech from the door, like nails on a chalkboard. He Yu was scratching on the door like a cat, trying to piss him off.

"Are you a child?" asked Xie Qingcheng.

"I *really* don't feel well. I *really* want to see you. Has your fever gone down? I want to spend time with you… I want to talk with you."

Xie Qingcheng couldn't be bothered to pay him any attention, so he switched on the speakers sitting on the table and turned his background music all the way up, drowning out the awful sound of He Yu dragging his nails along the door.

He continued reading like that for a while, and gradually, the sounds from outside stopped.

Xie Qingcheng turned off the speakers and finished writing the section he was working on. When he reached the last page, he rose and went over to the counter to pour himself a cup of coffee. Then,

checking the time, he surmised that He Yu must have left. Thinking that he ought to go out and pick up some more medicine, he put away his books and went to open the door—only for a hand to suddenly shove it open.

Xie Qingcheng was no pushover—with quick reflexes and ferocious strength, he slammed the door shut with a thud. But He Yu was much crazier than him. Never mind his fingers, he didn't even blink as the heavy security door swung closed over where he was clutching at the doorframe.

There was a loud bang, and a red mark appeared where the door smashed into He Yu's hand and broke the skin. Blood spurted from the wound a moment later.

He Yu didn't feel much pain from this. He looked through the crack in the door that he'd forced open, staring fixedly at Xie Qingcheng with his almond eyes.

Then he slowly pressed the door open bit by bit, as if he were prying apart Xie Qingcheng's shell.

He stepped inside, grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the collar with that bloodied hand, and locked his arms around him, pinning him against the wardrobe so forcefully that the boards shuddered and moaned. The impact tipped over an ugly, unused vase sitting on top of the wardrobe; it fell, smashing directly into He Yu's shoulder.

He Yu endured it without batting an eye, even as more blood started trickling from his shoulder. They bumped against the light switch as they tussled, turning off the incandescent bulb and plunging the room into murky darkness.

Xie Qingcheng stared at those wolfish eyes, mere inches away in the dark, and said in a low voice, "You've lost your fucking mind. Didn't I tell you not to come back here?"

He Yu's voice was very husky and soft. Accompanied by the sound of his breathing, it seemed to lodge itself into Xie Qingcheng's chest the moment it left He Yu's throat.

"My heart's a mess." A second later, he repeated himself. "Xie Qingcheng, my heart's a mess. There's something I really want to talk to you about."

"But *I* have nothing to say to you."

His words stabbed sharply into He Yu's heart. He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng's face—they were both panting slightly from exertion, their breaths mixing together.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

"Get out."

Instead of getting out, He Yu pressed their foreheads together, feeling Xie Qingcheng's temperature for a while.

"You don't have a fever anymore… Did you take medicine?"

Xie Qingcheng pushed him.

Refusing to let go, He Yu murmured, "Xie-ge, I'm sorry. I thought about it for a long time—I thought about it all night yesterday. I really can't help it anymore—I want to tell you that I…"

"I'm not interested. Please get out."

That made He Yu feel even more helpless. After a moment of quiet, he finally seemed to give up seeking Xie Qingcheng's acceptance. He searched the older man's face with his eyes, his dark pupils gradually focusing as they passed repeatedly over those thin lips. Then, his throat bobbed.

He didn't know what was wrong with him—perhaps the beast in his heart named "love" had bewitched him. Even though he knew that he shouldn't, he felt so terrible that he dissociated for a moment and lowered his head—

Xie Qingcheng abruptly turned his face away.

But this position made the youth's searing lips press against his neck, where the skin was thin, fragile, and very sensitive to heat. After the way he'd been provoked on New Year's Eve, his reaction to He Yu's touch was obvious, especially with He Yu's lips pressed to a

sensitive spot on his neck. He couldn't bear it, his fingers curling tight on the wardrobe as a silent shudder ran through him.

He Yu looked up, watching him with pitch-black eyes.

"Ge…don't chase me away. Can you let me stay for a little bit longer?"

Silence.

"I thought about a lot of things yesterday."

Xie Qingcheng still said nothing.

"I-I actually want to tell you—" He Yu suddenly grabbed Xie Qingcheng's wrist like he couldn't contain his emotions, as if he thought Xie Qingcheng's touch could give him some encouragement.

As He Yu restrained him, a powerful, instinctive aggression stirred within Xie Qingcheng. He snapped, "Just what do you want to do, He Yu?"

He Yu had been wanting to say, *I love you, Xie Qingcheng. I realized that I really love you.*

But in that moment, as he looked into Xie Qingcheng's eyes, filled with guarded reticence and not a trace of warmth, he didn't receive Xie Qingcheng's encouragement, only his dismissal and mistrust.

He suddenly couldn't get the words out.

"I…"

As if he had a fishbone lodged in his throat, he could only keep a tight grip on Xie Qingcheng's wrist, refusing to let go.

After standing there frozen for a while, he suddenly thought of a way to indirectly express his feelings. He gritted out a few shaky, forlorn words.

"I… Xie-ge… Do…do you still remember those pictures? Those…pictures from the club?"

Xie Qingcheng blinked in surprise—after all that dawdling, *this* was what He Yu wanted to talk to him about? He couldn't help it; he flew into a rage.

"The plan you came up with after thinking all night was to threaten me with those pictures? Didn't I already say you can do whatever you want with those? Even if you send them to the anti-pornography office, I don't give a flying fuck! How do you still have the nerve to—"

"I deleted them."

The second half of Xie Qingcheng's rant petered out. He narrowed his eyes, at a loss for how to respond.

"Xie Qingcheng." He Yu controlled the tremor in his voice. "I deleted those pictures. They've been completely destroyed. They're gone."

Two pairs of eyes met as they faced off in the narrow space. As he gripped Xie Qingcheng's hand tightly, in that moment, an inexplicable fear gripped He Yu's heart.

He was afraid that Xie Qingcheng would shoo him out and then close the door in his face, never to open it again.

He could only say, over and over again, "I deleted them."

No matter how he tried, he still couldn't say "I'm sorry" or "I love you." Instead, "I deleted them" was like a piece of driftwood keeping his fragile self-regard afloat over the abyss, while also keeping Xie Qingcheng's gaze lingering upon him.

But after a long beat of silence, Xie Qingcheng raised his other hand and forcibly pried He Yu's fingers, one by one, from around his slender wrist.

"Is that so?" Xie Qingcheng said softly, his gaze falling on He Yu's youthful face from mere inches away. "Do you want me to get down on my knees and weep in gratitude?"

When he'd pulled off his last finger, Xie Qingcheng flung He Yu's hand to the side. With a grim expression on his face, he

retreated to beside the wardrobe, rubbing the red marks on his wrist.

Ever since he took RN-13 to repair his body, his skin scarred and reddened easily, and He Yu had grabbed him hard enough to leave a mark. The area around his tattoo had developed a blush, a heartrendingly lovely sight.

"Nothing like that will ever happen again," He Yu added.

"And what does that have to do with me?"

He Yu opened his mouth—his heart felt stifled, but his throat was too tight, and he actually didn't know what he should say. In the end, he could only take all of his emotions and pour them into that name.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

But Xie Qingcheng said, "You should go."

"Xie Qingcheng," He Yu said in a low voice.

The more he saw of him in this state, the less courage he had to say that sentence—"Xie Qingcheng, I love you."

He had less and less courage because he knew what Xie Qingcheng's reaction would be. He had already gotten a glimpse of it.

"Just what do you want to hear, He Yu?" Xie Qingcheng looked at him. "You've already caused such a huge scene—what more do you want? Fine, thank you *so* much for being *so* compassionate as to finally delete those shameful pictures after you used them for so many revolting things. Please accept my gratitude on behalf of my entire family. I thank you sincerely from the very bottom of my heart. Now can you leave?"

He Yu didn't leave. There was a bitter taste at the back of his throat, but just as he was about to open his mouth to explain, footsteps sounded from a distance—

Xie Qingcheng reacted more quickly than He Yu, turning at once to lift the blinds with a couple of fingers. When he caught sight of the person approaching, his expression immediately turned very ugly.

"It's Xie Xue!"

He Yu's expression also became quite colorful as he was suddenly yanked out of his lustful stupor, his newfound sobriety tinged with bewilderment.

The sound of footsteps drew closer and closer—they could hear the *click* of a pair of high heels.

He Yu snapped out of it immediately—instead of fussing over himself, he rushed to button the collar of Xie Qingcheng's shirt that he'd just pulled into disarray.

It was only then that he discovered that the buttons on Xie Qingcheng's shirt were very difficult to close. Before he had time to button the top two, Xie Xue's silhouette had already passed by the window and reached the door.

"Ge, why is your door open? I just sent Li Ruoqiu to the train station… Why do you have the blinds drawn with the lights off?"

She opened the door and walked in.

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng quickly pulled away from each other.

Neither of them wanted her to find out about any of this, so even though their faces were ashen, their hair was a mess, two of Xie Qingcheng's buttons remained undone, and He Yu was still bleeding, they straightened up in perfect unison and pretended that nothing had happened.

As soon as Xie Xue turned on the light and saw the sorry state of things, she froze in shock.

"Dage? He Yu?" She blinked in confusion. "You guys…" Her gaze swept over the mess, flitting between the two disheveled-looking men. "What…are you guys doing?"

In this embarrassing silence, He Yu reacted before Xie Qingcheng. "*Ahem*, since I stayed here for two days, I wanted to help clean up, but I wasn't careful enough and got hurt. Your ge, he…was taking care of it for me. I had to take my shirt off, so he shut the blinds."

"…You need to turn on the light if you close the blinds," Xie Xue said, her gaze passing over He Yu's bleeding shoulder and hand to land on the broken vase on the ground, her eyes instantly flying wide open. "I-isn't this the hand-sculpted vase I won a prize for in sixth grade?! Oh god! What happened?! Who broke it?!"

"It's because I'm not good at doing chores," He Yu said. "I didn't see it and I knocked it over… I'm sorry."

"Ah! You're not supposed to sweep on the first or second day of the new year![8] You ignorant, out-of-touch young master! How do you not know this?!" Xie Xue was full of righteous fury—that was her favorite vase! He Yu had only stayed in her house for a little while, and he broke it! He *broke* it!

"I'll get you another one…"

"How can you get another one? How can you possibly manage that? Can you get sixth-grade me to make a new one?! I'm so mad! I'm so freaking mad!"

Xie Xue swore at length, but luckily, she was only upset about her vase—if she'd found out that her brother had been fucked by her student, she probably would've grabbed the cleaver from the kitchen, chopped He Yu into mincemeat, and made dumplings out of him.

It was truly a fortune amidst misfortunes that even if she had a hundred times the brainpower, Xie Xue would have never surmised that during the two days she stayed in the hotel with Li Ruoqiu, her family patriarch dage had had multiple rounds of improper relations with He Yu in this very apartment.

Xie Xue hadn't finished berating him. "He Yu! You son of a bitch! Just what are you trying to do! You cursed him out so

viciously before, yet now you're depending on his care—you're inexplicable…"

She kept venting as if she had the lung capacity of an entire choir put together, unleashing a lengthy torrent of curses at He Yu. He let her go on as she pleased and didn't try to talk back, but toward the end of her haranguing, even Xie Qingcheng could hardly bear to keep listening.

"Forget it, Xie Xue, that's enough," he finally cut in. "He's about to leave." He shot He Yu a look.

"But he—" Xie Xue began.

Xie Qingcheng put a hand on Xie Xue's shoulder and shook his head.

Xie Xue finally shut her mouth, even though it looked like she still wanted to take out all her anger at Li Ruoqiu on He Yu.

What was with all these people who thought they could right their wrongs after the fact?! Could a broken pot be restored to its original state?!

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to hear any more of these arguments. He closed the last two buttons on his collar in a seemingly absentminded fashion and said to He Yu, "If there's nothing else, you should go home."

He Yu didn't move.

"Xie Qingcheng, I…"

Xie Qingcheng looked at him coldly, his gaze full of warning.

"Leave."

After that order, there was no way He Yu could stay, much less confess his feelings. No matter what a mess his heart was, he had to process it on his own.

He bit his lower lip in silence. He was well aware that to Xie Qingcheng, the fact that he loved him was a burden, not worth saying out loud.

Xie Qingcheng wouldn’t accept him. He didn’t even want to see him again.

Chapter 106:
I Watched Your Silhouette

HE YU LEFT. After that, he didn't show himself in front of Xie Qingcheng again for a long time, but he took many car trips to watch him from afar.

He rested his chin on the steering wheel, his almond eyes staring straight ahead to watch Xie Qingcheng walking out of snowy Moyu Alley at daybreak and returning home at twilight, his figure tall and broad, yet growing thinner by the day.

He didn't bother him again. Xie Qingcheng had expressed his views very clearly—he didn't have the patience for He Yu's pestering.

Before He Yu realized that he loved him, he hadn't cared too much about Xie Qingcheng's feelings. When he reached his epiphany, he'd wanted to confess on a moment's impulse, but he was met with Xie Qingcheng's cold rejection before the words left his mouth. He Yu's heart had tangled into a hopeless knot, and there was no way he could manage to say "I like you" out loud.

He understood very clearly that if he ran over to Xie Qingcheng and said, "Sorry, Ge, I realized that I have feelings for you, so can we start over from the beginning?" Xie Qingcheng would definitely slap him in the face, then tell He Yu to get the fuck out of his sight.

And at this point, he no longer had the ability to coerce Xie Qingcheng anymore. The fangs on his face were now made out of frosting, and the claws on his body had become feeble and powerless. He Yu felt alarmed at this version of himself; he didn't think he should possess such a weak emotion.

He shouldn't be weak, nor should he like Xie Qingcheng. And that was to say nothing of the promise he'd made.

He'd given his word to this person who'd already endured too much—to stop nagging him, to stop forcing him, to stop hooking up

with him. To end their relationship.

This was the only way he could take care of things—things would be better for them both this way.

One day, Xie Qingcheng took a detour on his way home from getting groceries to order a cake from a nearby shop. The cake shop was very close to where He Yu had parked, so He Yu didn't get a chance to leave.

He heard Xie Qingcheng speaking to the shop employee, his voice floating faintly over—

"Yes, I'd like a 'Happy Fiftieth Birthday' sign… Could I have a look at the different types of cakes…?"

It was probably for a neighborhood auntie or uncle's birthday, He Yu figured. He watched Xie Qingcheng flip attentively through the booklet the employee handed over, feeling faintly envious of the person who would be receiving this cake.

He even decided over the brief course of these few minutes that after Xie Qingcheng left, he would go into the shop and ask the worker to sell him the exact same cake. And then he'd bring it home and eat it by himself. Being a little lonely was no big deal.

But before this highly dignified plan had time to flourish, Xie Qingcheng finished ordering and suddenly turned around. With a sidelong glance of his peach-blossom eyes, he looked right at He Yu's car—and the person inside it.

They stared at each other through the windshield.

In truth, He Yu was being very low-key. He hadn't been driving any of his family's luxury cars; he'd purchased a commonplace BMW SUV for this very purpose. It had a tall chassis, giving him a great vantage point, and it didn't attract attention.

But then he'd gone and bumped straight into Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu didn't even know how he was supposed to face him right now—he couldn't say that he liked him, and he'd agreed not to bother him.

With no way of expressing his current mood to Xie Qingcheng, he had to just sit there as the other man strode over with a grim expression and rapped his knuckles against the window.

He Yu kept one hand on the steering wheel, his head pillowed on his arm, as he used his other hand to lower the window.

He had almost driven himself mad, but he still smiled and pretended nothing was wrong. “Whatcha doing?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing? What are *you* doing here?”

He Yu lowered his lashes and thought for a while, but he couldn’t come up with an excuse. In the end, he ignored the question. “You bought so many things—why don’t I help you carry them home?”

Xie Qingcheng pressed his hand against the door of He Yu’s car to prevent him from coming out. On the other side of the open window, he said very coldly, “Didn’t you say that you wouldn’t bother me again?”

He Yu discovered that he didn’t even have the right to explain himself anymore.

“Liking” someone when they accepted your feelings could indeed be called “liking” them. When they didn’t accept them, it was just “harboring a secret crush.” And when they would never, ever accept them, the word for that was either “behaving despicably” or “harassing.”

He Yu had a very strong sense of self-regard. Now that he’d come back to his senses, he had no plans to let Xie Qingcheng know about his feelings just to watch him express his shock, loathing, contempt, and disdain. That would hurt too much. The pain would drive him mad, and the madness would make him lose control. In the end, both of them would be hurt, and both of their lives and their illnesses would suffer for it.

Therefore, He Yu only flashed him one of his usual sneers, one that was even somewhat haughtily distant. “You’ve misunderstood, I was only just passing by.”

“Then you can go home now.”

He Yu wanted to say, “How’d you get even thinner lately? Is there something you’ve been keeping to yourself and dealing with on your own?” But then he remembered that he couldn’t like Xie Qingcheng.

Therefore, he took the love that he’d just discovered and wrapped it up in the ugliest paper he could find, so that it was just as sinister and unsightly as before—so that no one would discover it.

“This road isn’t your house,” he said. “The police haven’t given me a ticket and told me to leave. You should be a bit more reasonable.”

“You’re an eyesore.”

He Yu felt like he’d been stabbed in the heart, but he expressionlessly wiped off the blood. There was a secret coppery taste in his throat, but the corners of his mouth curved into a careless, roguish smile. “Xie Qingcheng, the last time you slept with me, you didn’t think I was an eyesore. You kissed me and rode me, you even…”

Xie Qingcheng shoved He Yu’s head back inside the car from where he’d propped it against the window, using so much force it actually hurt He Yu.

“You’re not allowed to mention that night to me again,” he snapped.

He Yu skirted around the topic to obscure the shift in his attitude, but he still made sure that Xie Qingcheng wouldn’t feel too uncomfortable.

“Oh, all right then. I won’t say any more.”

Before he drove away, he looked at the bags in Xie Qingcheng’s hands. One of them was printed with the name of a nearby

pharmacy.

He Yu already had his foot on the brake and a hand on the wheel, but in the end, he couldn't help asking. "Xie Qingcheng, are you sick?"

Xie Qingcheng followed his gaze to the plastic bag from the pharmacy.

"I'm not." He furrowed his brow as he spoke, and his lips moved slightly, almost as if he wanted to tell He Yu something else. But in the end, he didn't continue.

"If there's anything you need help with, just let me know," He Yu replied. "A single day as husband and wife is worth a hundred days of kindness, after all."

"Husband and wife my ass. Scram."

He Yu smiled and drove away just as he was told.

After he turned around and drove far enough that Xie Qingcheng couldn't see his face anymore, that shallow feigned smile fell away like snow.

He gripped the steering wheel and slowly made his way into the distance, his knuckles turning white, unable to hold back the pain in his heart any longer as it spread like cracks through china…

When he got home, He Yu couldn't keep his mask on a moment longer. He rummaged through a pile of pills. Disregarding Anthony's advice, he swallowed them all. At least they could quell the violent turbulence of his emotions.

Then he lay down on the bed and spent a long time collecting himself. Out of habit, he tried to pull up the pictures he'd taken at the club to comfort himself, but as soon as he opened the album, he realized that he'd already destroyed them. They were gone.

All that was left was a picture of Xie Qingcheng's side profile that he'd found on the internet. It was a beautiful photo. The glow from the streetlight wreathed Xie Qingcheng's face in a brilliant halo of gold.

He Yu looked at his handsome profile again and again. Finally, he couldn't help bringing his phone to his lips and softly kissing the image of Xie Qingcheng's face. Only the man in the picture wouldn't treat him so coldly.

In the midst of this self-consolation, He Yu began to feel something like grief. He needed to let it out, he wanted to talk to someone—people always wanted to let others know about their unrequited love, as love was something that couldn't stay hidden. Even a lunatic was no different.

It was too bad that He Yu didn't have any friends he could sincerely confide in. He ended up just logging on to his Weibo side account to confess his secrets, spilling his innermost thoughts into a virtual tree hollow.

He used this account to record his everyday thoughts and moods, and he had already made plenty of posts at irregular intervals. However, he had never written much before—most of his posts were just photos that had some special meaning to him, along with simple captions.

For example, there was one of the first rays of morning light. He'd written, *"The dawn is endlessly wonderful."*

As another example, he'd posted a jellyfish video and written, *"My heart will go on."*

The most recent one was a nightscape photograph taken near Moyu Alley. The caption for that one was: *"The moon is so beautiful tonight."*

The longer He Yu swiped through his posts, the worse he felt, so he went to a forum for discussing relationships to look for some content that could make him feel better.

But the content he found was all like this:

> Calling out a shameless scumbag dude who just wanted to get into my pants.

Too bad Xie Qingcheng doesn't even want *to get into my pants,* He Yu thought.

> I still miss him a year after we broke up, what should I do?

You're just lucky that you got to be together. Saying that you broke up is just showing off that you had him once.

> My wife goes three rounds a night, is that too much?

He Yu went ahead and replied: *"You're worthless."*

He Yu read these posts thoughtfully, but in the end, he felt that none of these people's experiences were valuable as references. Therefore, he decided to compose his own post—after all, there was no harm in listening to other people's advice sometimes.

So He Yu wrote:

"Dear tree hollow: There's this man I like. He's thirteen years older than me, but he looks very young, and I don't care about the age gap, I don't even care about the fact that he's a divorcee with a chauvinistic personality. Even though we've never acknowledged any romantic relationship between us and we don't even count as friends with benefits, we've slept together many times. Eventually I discovered that I have feelings for him, but he thinks I should stay as far away from him as possible. The last time we had sex, he was the one who took the initiative, and I know he enjoyed it, but after we finished, he immediately wanted me to disappear. I get upset whenever I see him now, but I still have to pretend like I don't care. I'm so tired… I don't know how I can make myself feel better."

This forum was very active, so the replies rolled in quickly.

> Sis, you've met a scumbag, you'd better run.

> He enjoys it while you're doing it, and after it's finished he tells you to disappear. What a prime specimen of a scumbag! A garbage man deserves to be with a trashy woman, what else can I say other than respect yourself, best wishes, and lock it down. I wish you two weirdos a lifetime of happiness together, just don't die on my doorstep.

> Darling, it's seriously not worth it. You should cut your losses; when you're dealing with a man this utterly worthless, it's always going to be us women who are patient in the beginning and get hurt in the end. I was once as rash and persistent as you are, but I ended up wasting the best years of my youth—ah, I can't bear to look back on the past. Meimei, listen to your jie's advice—there are plenty of men in the world, and you're still young. You need to learn how to love yourself. Think of your parents—they wouldn't want you to ruin your life in the hands of a man who's on his second marriage. You're still young, aren't you? Are you really willing to be his young mistress? What's more, this man seems very unreasonable. Even if you become his concubine, he's not going to dote on you. Women must love themselves! Remember this!!

> Sister, you can't be with this man, he's gaslighting you. I'm guessing he's the type who tells you 'just the tip.' His behavior clearly shows that he's a dickwad who doesn't see women as people. Two words: dump him.

> I can tell you for sure that if you got pregnant, he wouldn't even give you the money for an abortion.

> Thirteen years apart? How old are you? He can't be very young anymore. Can he satisfy you? He's a divorced chauvinist after all… Does he have kids? Are you willing to be his little mistress, his kids' little stepmother? You'd better think it over carefully, silly girl!

> How come even this kind of man can get a girlfriend but I can't, I'm crying boohoo.

> We're strong independent women, sister, men are just our playthings, don't take it too seriously.

He Yu stared at his phone in disbelief.

Did he really sound *that* much like a troubled teenage girl? And Xie Qingcheng wasn't a scumbag, okay?!

He Yu blocked each and every one of these people.

Finally, after giving it a bit of thought, he wrote below his own post, "I'm blocking everyone who calls him a scumbag, take care."

Several seconds later—

> Girl, you're hopeless, there's no saving you from this gaslighting asshole.

He Yu's jaw dropped. *Forget it! Time to sleep!*

A few days later, the new semester began.

It was the second semester of He Yu's first year, and just as before, Xie Xue was one of his teachers. He figured that if he couldn't see Xie Qingcheng, then seeing Xie Xue would be good too. At the very least, Xie Xue's eyes looked like her brother's, so looking at them could make him a bit happier—they would certainly make him happier than the replies he received on that forum.

But when he walked into the classroom on the first day of the new semester, the person He Yu saw behind the lectern wasn't Xie Xue, but rather a pudgy old professor in a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

"Due to health reasons, Xie Xue-laoshi is temporarily unable to teach her classes. I will lead this class for the time being. My surname is Zhang…"

Sitting in the last row of the classroom, He Yu suddenly remembered that when he ran into Xie Qingcheng at the entrance of Moyu Alley, Xie Qingcheng had been carrying a plastic bag from the pharmacy. At the time, he'd looked like he wanted to say something, but then he stopped himself.

He Yu suddenly understood…

After class, He Yu called Xie Xue, but no one answered. He called Xie Qingcheng instead—Xie Qingcheng hung up the first time, but he must have been annoyed enough to actually pick up the second time.

"What is it." His voice was very cold.

He Yu didn’t beat around the bush. “Ge, is Xie Xue sick?”

No reply.

“She didn’t come to class today.”

Xie Qingcheng seemed to know that he wouldn’t be able to hide it from him. There was a long stretch of silence on the other end of the call.

Finally, Xie Qingcheng heaved a sigh. “Fine—when you get a chance, stop by Moyu Alley sometime. I’ll tell you in person.”

He Yu technically had two elective classes that night, but he decided to skip them. He drove over to Moyu Alley as soon as his regular classes ended.

As soon as he walked in, He Yu saw Xie Qingcheng sitting inside, smoking a cigarette. He was alone in the house.

“Where’s Xie Xue?”

“In the hospital.”

“Why so suddenly?” He Yu asked, startled. “What happened? Which hospital?”

“A private hospital established by Qin Ciyan and a friend of his. I feel more at ease with her there.” Xie Qingcheng’s fingers curled as he lit a cigarette. “Sit down.”

Seeing as Xie Qingcheng still didn’t want to have anything to do with him, he must have had a good reason for calling him over here.

As expected, Xie Qingcheng didn’t intend to make small talk with He Yu. After a pause, he cut to the chase. “Xie Xue shows signs of having taken RN-13.”

He Yu started in surprise—that was the last thing he expected to hear. But he also immediately understood why Xie Qingcheng would want to tell him about this: Other than He Yu, there was nobody else Xie Qingcheng could talk to about that forbidden drug.

As a victim of RN-13, He Yu felt his expression twist. He didn't have any romantic feelings toward Xie Xue anymore, and their relationship was even at a deadlock of sorts, but she was ultimately still a friend who had given him a great deal of comfort in his most difficult times.

"How is she doing now?" he asked gravely. "Is it serious?"

"She's all right. Her condition is still under control."

He Yu let out a small sigh of relief, but the frown didn't leave his face. "Have you found out what happened?"

"I have some idea."

Xie Qingcheng had already finished his cigarette. He coughed softly, and then reached for another one. But before his fingers touched the box, He Yu took it away.

"No," said He Yu. "Don't smoke. I hate secondhand smoke."

Xie Qingcheng didn't have the energy to bicker with him over this. He grabbed a handful of his own hair and closed his eyes.

"According to the lab results, she came in contact with the drug last fall," he said after a moment. "I asked her about it in the hospital, and she confirmed that she had started to experience some physical symptoms back then—she couldn't sleep, and she had nosebleeds…"

He Yu's heart stuttered. He remembered seeing Xie Xue get a nosebleed at school before. They'd even had a conversation about it. He'd suggested that Xie Xue get it checked at a hospital, or tell Xie Qingcheng about it, but Xie Xue thought it wasn't a big deal and that Xie Qingcheng was too busy to be disturbed.

"She never told you?" He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng lowered his lashes, wearily bringing a hand to his brow. "No. I only found out a few weeks ago. When I came home one day, I found her unconscious on the floor. There were some bloody tissues nearby, and bloodstains around her nose and mouth. I immediately brought her to Huzhou First Hospital, and your

cousin did her examination, but nothing came up on the regular blood tests."

"Then what happened?"

"Afterward, I recalled some of the side effects from the first time I took RN-13—I also had nosebleeds and delirium." At this point, Xie Qingcheng glanced up at He Yu. "You're different—your illness was inherited, so you don't know about these early symptoms. But I took Xie Xue to the hospital run by Qin Ciyan's friend for a special examination. These are the lab results."

Xie Qingcheng took a sheet of paper from a drawer and pushed it over to He Yu. On that snow-white paper was written Xie Xue's name—positive for RN-13.

He Yu was silent for a long time. "So who dosed her with it?" he asked at last.

"It was a very small dose." Xie Qingcheng didn't immediately tell him who it was, choosing to tell He Yu about Xie Xue's condition first. His voice sounded as if it were floating slowly up through water, cool and heavy. "With current advancements, it should be possible to prevent permanent damage to her health from a dose of that size. I've put her on a course of medication since I found out, but…" Xie Qingcheng leaned back against the sofa and closed his eyes. "Our special medicine was developed from the chemical structure given by that American research lab, the one Qin Ciyan connected with in the beginning. The medication you and I take is the same type. It's effective on both of our bodies."

He Yu could see where this was going. "Does it not work on Xie Xue?"

"No," Xie Qingcheng said. "It can ease the symptoms, but it doesn't show obvious curative properties."

"That's because…"

"She took a new version of the drug."

There was a long silence.

"Someone's developing a new version of RN-13?" He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng nodded his head in abject weariness.

"But RN-13 research has to be done underground; it's illegal. Even if someone were conducting secret experiments, Xie Xue's just a teacher—how would she chance upon something like this?"

Xie Qingcheng fiddled with his lighter.

"There was a chance. Think back to last autumn—do you remember what happened to her?"

Chapter 107:
I Helped You Investigate

THE MOST CRITICAL thing that had happened to Xie Xue last year was that she was nearly dismembered by Jiang Lanpei.

"Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital," replied He Yu.

"Correct. I've been constantly wondering when she could've possibly come into contact with a drug like RN-13 that would cause psychological Ebola. It was a tiny dose no less, possibly a one-off occurrence. Plus, she took a new, modified version of the drug. In the end, I thought of something Jiang Lanpei said back then. I don't know if you still remember it."

That woman's crazed silhouette seemed to float before He Yu's eyes. A woman in a red dress, holding a bloody scalpel, with Liang Jicheng's mutilated corpse at her feet and Xie Xue's unconscious and unresponsive body in her arms.

Unconscious and unresponsive…

Unconscious…

A spark flashed through his mind. With Xie Qingcheng's reminder and his watchful gaze, He Yu remembered.

"She said—she made Xie Xue drink medicine!"

In that moment, the dead woman's voice seemed to reverberate through this room, echoing between them. Xie Qingcheng and He Yu both saw her words circling like vultures in each other's eyes, casting the shadow of memory on their bodies.

The woman leered as she said, "…So I lied to her and got her to follow me into the office, then drugged her with a sedative in her drink when she wasn't paying attention… Of course I knew which one was the sedative! The most laughable thing about you normal people is that you look down on lunatics. I know that special

sedative all too well. Whenever I was disobedient, that Liang bastard would force a whole cup of it down my throat…"

It was terrifying.

At the time, they'd assumed it was a regular sedative, especially since Xie Xue's later blood tests didn't reveal any issues. But no one had ever thought that it might be a special drug—that it might be a new kind of psychiatric medicine that had appeared in a place like that, where Liang Jicheng tested it on Jiang Lanpei. And in the end, Jiang Lanpei used it on Xie Xue.

It wasn't RN-13, but it had to be based on RN-13. Regular tests wouldn't be able to discern its presence at all. Because of this, they'd missed their best chance to investigate.

"Xie Xue's condition is fine for the moment, but it's hard to say what'll happen in the future. If we want to treat her illness, we have to determine the chemical structure of that new drug or obtain a sample of it," Xie Qingcheng said. "There's no other way."

"You're telling me this because you want me to help you find that sample, right—or learn its chemical structure?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't reply. He fiddled with the lighter. Actually, the only reason he'd told He Yu was because He Yu had asked. But he also knew that with He Yu's help, he could achieve many things that would be impossible under normal circumstances.

However, asking things of He Yu made him extremely uncomfortable, as it now cast a shadow in his heart—after the first time he'd asked He Yu for help, at the broadcasting tower, their relationship had devolved to an unsalvageable state, never to be neatly defined again.

Now that he'd so painstakingly put an end to their relationship, Xie Qingcheng couldn't foresee the consequences of playing the wild card that was He Yu.

After giving it some thought, he finally looked at him. "If you're unwilling—"

"Do you really take me for such a callous person?" He Yu said without any visible expression on his face.

Xie Qingcheng paused.

"That's not what I meant." He thought it over. "I'm sorry. I just don't want to owe you anything."

He Yu felt painfully stifled, and his expression gradually darkened. Unsure of whether he should resent himself or the other man, he finally gritted out through his teeth, "Xie Qingcheng. Why do you insist on keeping such a clear account of the debts between us?"

Xie Qingcheng replied calmly and rationally with the truth.

"Because we don't have a relationship."

It was as if He Yu had taken a blow to the head. His vision went dark. The terrible beast in his heart was already howling. This was so absurd it was laughable; after all that they'd been through, even today, Xie Qingcheng could still say something as cutting as he had when He Yu was fourteen.

"Our relationship is merely one of employment," he'd said back then. *"After that relationship ends, there'll be nothing between us."*

Now, this man who'd slept with him so many times was saying once more, *"All of our rotten debts can be written off."*

Now, there was no relationship at all.

In his silence, He Yu's eyes gradually turned a little red. That redness was stained with hateful blood and dyed with the poison of love, filled with silent fury and dissatisfaction—all of which he slowly brought back under control.

"I hope you remember, Xie Qingcheng, that the two of us are kin," he said softly, his expression flat. "If it has to do with RN-13, it doesn't just involve you—it involves me as well. I would want to do something about this even if you didn't ask me to."

With that, he abruptly rose to his feet.

Despite all the time that had passed, he still wanted to be alone with Xie Qingcheng, day and night. But when he saw Xie Qingcheng in person and smelled the alluring aroma of tobacco and the crisp scent of disinfectant on him, when he saw those fine-boned hands fiddling with the lighter from only inches away, He Yu kept thinking about how easily he could've held him, kissed him, clung to him, and even slept with him in the past.

Now he could only listen as Xie Qingcheng spoke every word so coldly and resolutely, stabbing into his heart. The beast in his heart that had just been bestowed a name was in so much pain that it was bleeding as it howled in his chest, but all He Yu could do was tell it, "Hush. You'd better shut up."

Before, Xie Qingcheng had been the medicine that could calm him down. Now, he'd become a poison that shattered his mind. If he let Xie Qingcheng keep tormenting him like this, he couldn't be sure that he wouldn't suddenly lose control and do something to hurt him.

He paused for a moment, expression icy. "I'm leaving," he told Xie Qingcheng, without any warmth.

"Wait a minute," said Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu turned around, still expressionless, but there was some faint anticipation in his heart.

"My cigarettes," Xie Qingcheng demanded.

He Yu froze for a few seconds, then his black brows shot straight up in a mask of fury. Right in Xie Qingcheng's face, he took out the pack of smokes he'd just confiscated and smashed it into a pancake. Then he took a step past Xie Qingcheng and tossed it neatly into the garbage can.

"Go ahead and smoke, you damn chimney, all you do is smoke! Let's see what you can smoke now!"

Xie Qingcheng blinked.

As soon as he got home, He Yu took a bunch of pills to suppress his emotions and avoid thinking about what Xie Qingcheng had said to him. Once he'd calmed down a little, he opened his laptop to review what they knew about Xie Xue's situation.

At the beginning, he'd thought that investigating this matter might not be too difficult, but after sorting through a few timelines on scratch paper, he realized that Xie Qingcheng had really gotten stuck in a very challenging predicament. Almost all of the trails had gone cold.

For starters, Xie Xue had been drugged at Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital. Jiang Lanpei had said she'd been given a special medicine, one that Liang Jicheng specifically used to numb her mind.

The relevant information that could be gleaned from this was obvious.

First, the ordinary patients of Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital probably wouldn't have come into contact with this medicine. Second, Liang Jicheng had likely administered the drug directly.

But Liang Jicheng was dead, and Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital had been reduced to scorched rubble. There were no more opportunities to find a witness or material evidence.

He Yu also searched for details about Cheng Kang Hospital, but the results were just as he expected. Liang Jicheng's wife, his son, and all of his high-ranking accomplices in Cheng Kang had either perished in Jiang Lanpei's inferno or died by assassination or freak accident shortly thereafter. There was not a single living witness.

Considering the circumstances, the only option was to use Liang Jicheng's connections to try to find the mastermind behind the scenes.

He Yu asked around in business circles, while Xie Qingcheng went to Chen Man and Zheng Jingfeng for help. However, before they realized it, a month had flown by and they still didn't have any results.

It was clear that their opponents didn't interact directly with Liang Jicheng, and had likely even been adamant about keeping their circles separate. There wasn't a single branch of Liang Jicheng's network that raised red flags.

Until one day, He Yu caught wind of someone—a man named Sha Hong.

Sha Hong was a fifty-year-old labor camp inmate, currently held in Huzhou First Prison. He'd been Liang Jicheng's driver twenty years ago before getting sacked for improper conduct. After he left his job, Sha Hong got involved with a criminal organization, and was later sentenced to life in prison for smuggling drugs.

He Yu was very excited when he found this person. The hidden mastermind was undoubtedly an extremely careful person; they'd killed off every single high-ranking person with ties to Liang Jicheng. But from the broadcasting tower incident, it was clear that the mastermind had one extremely obvious trait: arrogance.

Those kinds of arrogant eyes could usually only see targets that were high in rank and status. People like drivers, nannies, and janitors? To such eyes, they might not have even registered as people.

He Yu was different. He had the type of personality that would notice a single speck of dust. Despite being born into status, because of his illness, he'd thoroughly experienced the pain of rejection from society. He'd always believed that all people were equal. He saw this grain of sand that the hidden mastermind failed to notice.

In addition, he understood very well what a driver's role entailed. Over the course of chauffeuring their boss around day by day, a driver would likely hear all kinds of things and see all kinds of people. Those things and people might not be important on their face, but if you tugged at that unimportant thread, you were very likely to unravel some important clues.

He Yu pulled some strings to arrange a prison visit that very same day.

Inside Huzhou First Prison, He Yu met with Sha Hong. The man's hair had already gone white, but the devious glint in his eyes was still there. He Yu spent a few minutes assessing him, and concluded that this was a person with wildness in his bones. Prison life might have restrained his body, but it hadn't captured his heart.

When He Yu walked into the specially appointed visitation room, Sha Hong looked up at him, clearly not taking him very seriously.

This was to be expected, as the pretense He Yu used for the visit was a "screenwriting interview."

In this day and age, there were many chronically jobless artists who developed a stack of pretentious airs and diva habits before ever managing the patience to produce a single work. They'd demand a "deep dive" or "comprehensive interview" at the drop of the hat, pretentiously calling it "sacrificing myself for art" as they hassled and hurt others incessantly in a pompous, self-serving show. As if interviewing a prisoner or asking the corrections officer to let them experience a couple days in prison was some kind of colossal sacrifice.

Sha Hong had clearly taken He Yu to be that kind of person.

He Yu sat down across from him and drew out a smoke, passing it to him with the permission of the corrections officer. Then he took one himself, fiddling with the cigarette in slender fingers as he lit it with practiced movements and took an elegant drag.

"How'd a little boy learn how to smoke like a grown-up?" Sha Hong bared his teeth in a twisted smile. He clearly looked down on He Yu; it was obvious he didn't want to cooperate for this ridiculous interview.

Until He Yu lazily flicked the cigarette. His gaze flickered from the ashes to Sha Hong's face. "I didn't come to interview you about

your life in prison. I came to ask you about some things from your time as a driver."

The inmates watched the news every night at seven o'clock, so Sha Hong wasn't ignorant of what had happened with Cheng Kang.

He could tell that the person in front of him was hiding something. "Interview" was probably just an excuse that he'd used to avoid suspicion from the jailers.

Sha Hong picked up the cigarette He Yu had just passed him, borrowed the lighter, and took a long drag. For the first time, he assessed He Yu's face with full interest, though his expression remained unmoved.

Each of them saw secrets in the other's eyes.

In the end, Sha Hong smiled. "What's there to ask about that?"

"I'm curious," He Yu said. "I want to film a program about the minds of criminals, but I don't want to feature people who turned to crime from the beginning. You went in this direction later in life, so you have a more storied past, and you're someone who's witnessed great events and notable people. I'm very interested in those influential figures you've encountered…from the smugglers of Myanmar, to the drug lords of Yanzhou, to the legendary croupiers of Macau's casinos—and the very first person you worked for, Director Liang."

When he mentioned Director Liang—and only Director Liang—He Yu unhurriedly rapped his knuckles against the corner of the table. Sha Hong saw this movement, but the corrections officer didn't notice anything amiss.

Sha Hong was still for a moment before sneering like a sly mongrel. "Oh, I get your drift."

He Yu was very pleased with Sha Hong's intelligence. Not everyone would be able to pick up on a code like this. But Sha Hong had spent many years smuggling and dealing drugs, relying on his

quick wits to evade capture, and thus was more perceptive than the average person.

"What's in it for me?" Sha Hong grinned, his tone heavy with implication. "It's not like I'm running a news training camp over here, kid. If you want me to give you some source material, you'll have to offer me something in return."

He Yu took another drag on his cigarette. Then he casually tossed away the cigarette butt, but not into the nearby ashtray—it landed outside instead.

"Aiya," He Yu replied mildly. "Look at what I've done. How did this *get out* here?"

He looked up and stared into Sha Hong's eyes. Judging by the sudden brightness in them, He Yu knew that this man had definitely understood what he meant.

The man's breathing quickened. It was only the corrections officer's presence that kept him from fully expressing himself. The muscles in his face tensed. But after a moment, he forced a smile and scoffed.

"You're pretty impressive—it's a giant ashtray, so how'd you manage to toss the cigarette outside?"

He Yu carefully wiped the ash from his fingertips and blandly remarked, "Mm." Then he smiled. "Enough about cigarettes, why don't we get back to the topic? Mr. Sha, would you be willing to do me a favor and give me some content and inspiration?"

Chapter 108:
Why Is She Looking For You Again?

SHA HONG WAS a very clever person: He wouldn't tell He Yu everything he knew all at once.

It was very difficult for a felon serving a life sentence to trust that He Yu could get him out of prison. He wanted He Yu to show him some proof first.

He Yu had anticipated this. Sha Hong wasn't some vapid idiot, so there was no reason he'd share his leads so easily. But He Yu wasn't a pushover either. Just as Sha Hong couldn't trust him, He Yu couldn't be sure that Sha Hong wasn't extorting him either; perhaps he was just messing with him and didn't have any useful information at all.

"I can show you that I'm being sincere," He Yu said with a smile, "but perhaps Mr. Sha should also give me some reliable material first, yes?"

Sha Hong bit down on his cigarette and smoked for a while. By the time the cigarette was almost finished, their allotted meeting time was nearly over as well. When the corrections officer came to take him back, Sha Hong finally stood and said to He Yu, "I think the Jiang Lanpei in the picture isn't the real Jiang Lanpei."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Sha?"

Sha Hong smiled mysteriously. "Young man, I've seen you on the news, I know you've met Jiang Lanpei in person. If you've seen her up close, think back on it—isn't her whole face a bit stiff?"

He abruptly stopped speaking and shot He Yu a meaningful look. After putting on the heavy handcuffs and fetters under the corrections officer's supervision, he disappeared into the depths of the corridor.

Sha Hong had been behind bars at the time, but he had accurately described Jiang Lanpei's face, at least from He Yu's interaction with her.

He Yu was an extremely meticulous person in some respects. At the time, he had indeed noticed that there were some problems with Jiang Lanpei's facial muscles—it seemed like her range of expression was limited.

He hadn't been able to observe or investigate much in the midst of that perilous situation, but upon hearing Sha Hong's words, He Yu was sure that he wasn't lying. This man really did have information that was worth the risk to dig up.

Thus, one week later, Sha Hong's labor-intensive prison factory job moving scrap metal came to an end, and he was transferred to a new post sewing buttons onto bedsheets for the export market.

A few days after that, he was relieved from the button-sewing job and allowed to serve food in the cafeteria.

Now this was a felon's dream job—not only was it leisurely and untaxing, but it also gave him the opportunity to take the biggest pieces of fish and meat every day. The other inmates scrambled to suck up to Sha Hong in hopes that he would serve them the best options at the counter.

The days passed like that for a while, until the prison's medical examinations drew near.

A few weeks before the day of the exams, one of Sha Hong's fellow inmates furtively passed him a slip of paper sealed with wax. A row of simple words was written on it.

"If you trust me, I'll ask you some specific things this weekend. If you give me the information I request, your medical results will meet the criteria for compassionate release."

The signature was very simple: just the character "He."

With that, Sha Hong accepted He Yu's second "interview."

They scheduled their meeting for seven o'clock in the evening. On the day before, Sha Hong sat down at a small table in the prison and wrote a very succinct outline of the things he planned to tell He Yu about tomorrow.

He knew this meeting would be very important for him. He needed to give He Yu some valuable information to make sure he was satisfied. But he also didn't plan to give a complete account of the most important matters all at once, so that He Yu wouldn't be able to renege on his promise to grant him medical release after he finished using him.

Sha Hong scrawled some words on the paper, repeatedly cutting out information until he was finally satisfied. Tucking the paper near his chest, he climbed into bed with the sound of the lights-out whistle and went to sleep.

Perhaps it was because the end of his imprisonment was right before his eyes, or because he had spent so long thinking about the events of the past right before sleeping, but that night, as he lay on the hard plank bed that he'd slept in for more than a decade, Sha Hong had a dream.

"Ha ha ha ha, after we take care of this business, both of us brothers will have made it."

In the dream, Liang Jicheng looked the same as he did twenty or so years ago. He and Liang Zhongkang walked out of a luxurious restaurant on the Bund arm-in-arm, both brothers only half-awake in a drunken stupor.

"Those other guys sure are big shots—fuck, once the contract was signed, they transferred all that foreign currency straight into our Swiss account without even blinking. Ge, I've never seen so much money in my life. Don't even mention helping them hide people or equipment, even if it were—"

Before finishing the sentence, Liang Jicheng shut his mouth smugly; his drowsy gaze had landed on Sha Hong.

The younger Liang-laoban hiccupped tipsily, caught his elder brother's eye, and grinned—they clearly both understood that they shouldn't speak too much of these under-the-table dealings in front of their driver.

"Executive Liang, Junior Executive Liang, please let me help you into the car."

Liang Jicheng disdainfully waved his hand away. "What are you doing! Watch it! Do you have any idea what I'm wearing? Gu… Gucci, n-ninety thousand a pop! I haven't even cut the tag off yet—if you get it dirty, are you gonna pay for it?"

A ninety-thousand-yuan Gucci wool overcoat was still ordinary ready-to-wear and not haute couture, but it was extremely luxurious for the Liang brothers back then. Their private psychiatric hospital wasn't profitable at the time; more than once, it had almost gone bankrupt.

But Liang Zhongkang guffawed, clapping his brother on the shoulder. "What's the big deal? In the future, we'll be protected under the shade of a big tree—each of their celebrities' evening gowns is worth over a fucking million. What's ninety thousand when we're working for them?"

"You're right, Ge, I drank too much—from now on, ninety thousand's not even enough to clean my teeth. Hey, careful, what're you doing?!" The tipsy man accidentally tripped over himself as Sha Hong helped him into the car, but in his confusion he'd blamed it on Sha Hong. He raised his hand and slapped Sha Hong across the face.

"Watch where you're going! *This* is what you call service? You can't even support your master properly! See if I don't just fire you!"

"What are you hitting him for? He's from the countryside and he reeks of salted fish. You'll have to get an alcohol wipe from the car and disinfect yourself now that you've touched him." The elder brother's words cut even deeper than the younger one's. Liang Zhongkang let out a wild laugh, looking over at Sha Hong in an

immensely self-satisfied manner. “There’s a fucking social order of the rich and the poor. Some people can command thousands, millions with a wave of their hand, while other people… Hah.”

Sha Hong was so incensed that he released the hand he was using to support the brothers. “All people should be considered equal. Do you think you can slander my character just because you’re my boss?”

“Equal? This is Huzhou—do you know what Huzhou was like a hundred years ago? On this side of the river, it was a prospering city of riches, while on the other side, people were starving and dying. If you and I were here a century ago, you’d be a rickshaw driver, and if I wanted to beat you to death, I’d go ahead and do it. Don’t talk to me about equality!”

Sha Hong was about to argue back when Liang Zhongkang took out a fat wallet from inside his jacket. Pulling out a pile of one-hundred-yuan notes, he slapped the bills against Sha Hong’s stiff face. “Stop being so idealistic, young man. You want to talk about equality with us? Let me show you what equality is—I heard your mother’s ill and that you’re desperate for money. I hit you, so here’s a thousand. I’ve got plenty of money now, you want it? Huh? Do you want it!”

Those stinking, sordid, incomparably seductive bills landed harshly against his tense cheek. The thin notes seemed to weigh a ton—heavy enough to break his bones, to smash his face into a gory mess.

Sha Hong remembered that when the wind blew on the Bund back then, those flimsy hundred-yuan notes fluttered through the sky, causing a frenzied scramble among the late-night crowd returning home.

He’d stood in the cold wind, but he couldn’t recall whether he himself chased after that scattered money, kneeling and sobbing. It was very strange—his memory was usually excellent.

But he just couldn’t remember.

Perhaps even the memory was ashamed of itself. When a person couldn't help falling to the level of a beast, the human brain was too embarrassed to acknowledge such absurd events.

Sha Hong only remembered the faces of the two Liang clan brothers, despicably self-satisfied, full of brash, vicious laughter.

"Ha ha ha… Ha ha ha ha…"

And the sound of that laughter, spinning up like a deranged maelstrom in his memories.

He very clearly remembered the date and address, as well as the brothers' anxious, unsettled expressions before they drove to the arranged meeting spot, and the handful of names that they'd said softly in the car.

Sha Hong had been a driver, but he was also a human being—he had silently remembered those names. Those names were very likely to satisfy He Yu.

On Sunday morning, He Yu got up very early and drove to Moyu Alley.

He was going to see Sha Hong today, and after giving it some thought, he'd decided to tell Xie Qingcheng about it.

But before he even got out of the car, he saw Li Ruoqiu walk out of the alley with Xie Qingcheng at her side.

Since that awkward run-in on New Year's Eve, Li Ruoqiu hadn't appeared for a while. He couldn't imagine why she had come back here today.

He Yu found this woman truly bizarre—she and Xie Qingcheng were divorced, so why was she still clinging to him? How did she have the guts to use the man *he* liked as her rebound?

"You should go back. You don't need to send me off—I'll call a cab."

"I've already called one for you."

"Then…" Reaching into her luxury handbag, Li Ruoqiu took out a rather thick envelope that clearly held a considerable sum of money and handed it to Xie Qingcheng. "Then you should take this. Xiao-Xue was always so good to me, and now that she's suddenly fallen ill, I can't do much else to help, so you should…"

"You should keep this money."

"…N-no matter what, she's still my little sister-in-law…" Li Ruoqiu replied.

"Not anymore."

"Xie-ge…"

"You should go home. I'm very thankful that you care about her. But we can't take this money."

The woman looked up in a daze, stared at him for a while, and then said, "Ge, please don't take it the wrong way. That's not what I meant. It's just that… It's just that I've been through some things, and there's a lot more that I understand now. I know I spent a lot of your money before, a-and I don't know how to repay you for all that you did for me, so I—"

Xie Qingcheng cut her off.

"Back then, you were my wife. There were also many things that you considered on my behalf." His eyes were very calm, like two distant pools. "It was my duty."

Li Ruoqiu stared at him, looking as if she were about to cry again.

"…Xie-ge, I-I've decided to divorce him," she blurted out to him out of nowhere.

She searched for any hint of a reaction on Xie Qingcheng's face, only to be thoroughly disappointed. Vines of sobs twined over Li Ruoqiu's voice.

"…You know that I'm the type of person who can't bear being unloved. When I divorced you, it was because you always seemed so

cold and icy, and I wanted some warmth when we were alone together. The way you reciprocated was so mechanical too, without much desire… Did you know how resentful I felt back then?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't answer.

"It was like your whole life was on a schedule—you planned everything out so precisely. I tried so hard to dig out something gentle, something passionate from your heart, but I couldn't. You took care of me and protected me—you gave me a home, but it never seemed like you treated me as your wife. You didn't like it when I cooked for you or did your laundry, you didn't want me to do too much for you—but I think that love should be reciprocal. The more you acted that way, the more uneasy I was. I felt like I'd always owe you if we continued on like that."

Xie Qingcheng sighed. "I've already said that you made many sacrifices and concessions for my choices as well, and—back then, you were my wife. Those were all my duties."

"But back then, you were my husband too. Why couldn't you let me take care of you too?"

Xie Qingcheng was rendered speechless.

Li Ruoqiu gazed at him through reddened eyes. "Ge, you let others receive your care and guidance, but you never accept any of their good intentions. When we were married, you almost drove me crazy. I never imagined that someone's *goodness* could become the boulder that crushes another person's heart.

"I want love so badly—I want someone to love me back equally, and to let me take care of him and protect him in return. I'm willing to do anything for it, no matter if it's right or wrong. When… when I found someone like that, I thought I'd found true love, but how could I have known…"

She chuckled bitterly, lowered her head, and dabbed at her tears.

"Right now, I feel so lost, Xie-ge. Maybe I idealized love too much…or maybe a love without responsibility is just an affair that leaves an impression, regardless of the marriage certificate. Nothing more."

Xie Qingcheng still remained silent.

Li Ruoqiu finished wiping her tears and looked up at him. "Can you accept this money? Even if you have to see it as a last act of comfort for me? Or even…forgiveness?"

"…I'm sorry." In the end, Xie Qingcheng still refused. "I can't."

As if she'd expected that outcome, Li Ruoqiu only smiled softly. But as she smiled through her tears, it was clear that she was still crying.

The cab Xie Qingcheng had called for her arrived. Just as before, he opened the door for her out of habit, his manner very paternalistic and considerate.

His peach-blossom eyes met her tearful ones. "Please get in. Thank you for coming here to ask after her condition. I…"

He didn't finish what remained of his sentence, because Li Ruoqiu couldn't hold back the complicated emotions in her heart or suppress her sorrow any longer.

In the crisp chill of the morning wind, she suddenly reached out and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Her shoulders shook, her tears finally falling like rain.

"Xie-ge… I'm sorry… Sorry… Could you hold me? Just one last time. I'm so, so sorry… I… I…"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't get angry with a woman, especially one crying so brokenly. Although Li Ruoqiu had cheated on him, she'd also done something he was extremely grateful for. That was something he would always remember, now and forever.

Xie Qingcheng didn't know what to do, seeing her in this state. He could only say, "Li Ruoqiu, calm down. This is very inappropriate.

The car is here. You should get in."

But Li Ruoqiu refused to let go. She had suffered too many grievances—in that moment, as she clung to him, she wished from the bottom of her heart that none of it had happened, that she was still his wife, that she could embrace her husband without reservations, to her heart's content.

She had no idea that nearby, He Yu was gripping his steering wheel, gazing at them through the windshield.

And as she wrapped her arms around Xie Qingcheng's waist, clinging to him as she cried out her troubles…

Every detail of the scene…was reflected in that youth's dark pupils.

Chapter 109:
I Let You Tempt Me

IN THAT MOMENT, He Yu felt simply murderous.

He glowered at that woman, watching her embrace Xie Qingcheng, the man he couldn't even touch. He felt bewildered and wronged.

She'd hurt Xie Qingcheng too, so why was *she* allowed to hold him and cling to him, whereas he could only watch him from afar, to be reprimanded and cursed out as soon as he drew closer?

But He Yu could answer this question for himself.

It was because he was a man.

Because he was also a psychological Ebola patient.

Because he'd given Xie Qingcheng his word that he wouldn't force him or hurt him anymore.

Because he was the only one who knew of Xie Qingcheng's secrets; he knew of all the suffering that Xie Qingcheng had gone through.

So he couldn't.

But all the same, when he saw Li Ruoqiu throw her arms around Xie Qingcheng, hatred overwhelmed him with such force that he wanted to snap the steering wheel in half—in that instant, his rationality eroded. He longed to get out of the car and shove Li Ruoqiu away, and then frantically kiss Xie Qingcheng right in front of her. He wanted to unheedingly drag Xie Qingcheng back into Moyu Alley, to undress him halfway and start fucking him right there.

He didn't even care if Li Ruoqiu saw—he even wanted her to see.

As though going mad, he wanted this woman who saw Xie Qingcheng as her rebound to know that Xie Qingcheng wasn't a man no one else wanted.

He's not your Xie-ge anymore—he's my *Xie-ge.*

I've kissed him and fucked him on your nuptial bed. I let him know the taste of pleasure as he panted hard beneath me, so turned on that he convulsed and trembled and cried out. I know that he never experienced that kind of ecstasy when he was with you. He got on top of me and moved his hips, he bent down and kissed me fiercely, but you *never had that—you—don't have anything at all—*

He Yu's thoughts roiled like thunder. He ignored the fact that he had tempted Xie Qingcheng that night, and even further ignored Xie Qingcheng's self-destructive despair and heartbreak. He turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the reason Xie Qingcheng had gone to bed with him in a fit of madness on New Year's Eve.

He only wanted to provoke Li Ruoqiu. He only wanted to show this clueless woman—*the man you didn't want is the man I love.*

You're not allowed to touch him.

I love him so much, but I don't even touch him.

Just who do you think you are?

Who do you think you are to hug him, to cling to him?

Who do you think you are—someone he won't curse out?

The more He Yu thought about this, the more furious and aggrieved he became, his emotions muddying his reason. By the time he came back to his senses, he had already gotten out of the car and walked over to the two of them.

As soon as Xie Qingcheng saw him, his expression shifted.

This feeling of being treated and appraised differently made He Yu feel even worse. He glared at Xie Qingcheng in silent reproach.

Xie Qingcheng looked away.

Li Ruoqiu hadn't expected this boy to suddenly come out of the car at the street corner and appear before them as if he'd dropped from the sky. The shock pulled her out of her grief. Realizing that something wasn't right, she let go of Xie Qingcheng. She quickly composed herself and turned to He Yu with a forced smile.

"Wh-what a coincidence."

"What a coincidence indeed," He Yu said softly.

For some reason, Li Ruoqiu shivered. As they stood there at the longtang entrance, the atmosphere between them was bizarre.

The driver couldn't take it anymore. He stuck his head out of the car. "Hey! What are you guys doing? Are you gonna leave or not?"

Li Ruoqiu said, "No…"

Xie Qingcheng replied, "Yes."

He signaled for Li Ruoqiu to get in.

Although the woman was very hesitant, in the end, she couldn't get out a single word of opposition in the face of Xie Qingcheng's insistence, just like always. He steered her into the car in a manner that brooked no resistance, and all she dared to do was roll down the window and give him a halting goodbye.

"Xie-ge, you, you should look after yourself. If there's anything you ever need help with, I can…"

He Yu had already walked over, looking down at her with his expressionless face. Even though he was clearly still a youth, his aura was even more overbearing than Xie Qingcheng's.

Li Ruoqiu trailed off, unable to finish her sentence. The window rolled back up as the taxi started, cutting off the young man's gloomy gaze from the woman's bewildered eyes.

As soon as Li Ruoqiu was gone, He Yu pulled Xie Qingcheng into an empty alleyway nearby.

There were many small lanes like this in Huzhou's old city district. Many western-style houses had been built in this area when it was occupied by the British a century ago, and the houses were packed close together in a way that created a number of narrow alleys only wide enough for two or three people to pass through.

He Yu immediately threw Xie Qingcheng against the patchy wall, pinning him there.

His mindset wasn't normal—his domineering nature was bone-deep and the jealousy had gone to his head, so he lost control of his strength. When he slammed Xie Qingcheng's back against the wall, Xie Qingcheng knitted his brows and let out a low groan, caught off guard by the pain.

That sound was throaty and alluring, yet also tinged with fragility. He Yu couldn't help but remember those times at the club, in the dressing room, and on New Year's Eve, when he'd tormented Xie Qingcheng to the point that he could no longer hold back those hoarse cries.

He Yu's heart blazed with warmth.

He pulled Xie Qingcheng close, reaching out to rub the painful point of impact. "Xie Qingcheng," he murmured gently to him, "it's okay… Let me rub it for you… I'll make the pain go away…"

"Let go of me…!" Xie Qingcheng drew his sword-straight brows together, gritting his teeth as he grabbed He Yu's hand. "Let go. You —!"

Xie Qingcheng stopped in the middle of his sentence.

Because as He Yu held him, their hips pressed together. He Yu dipped his head down, lashes quivering as they rose. He buried his nose under Xie Qingcheng's chin to inhale deeply.

Xie Qingcheng had been too busy for meticulous self-care these past few days. There was a pale shadow of stubble that was only evident at such close proximity, and He Yu could even smell the distinctive scent in the hollow of the man's neck.

It was a scent unique to this man's body, a blend of bracing tobacco and icy disinfectant, with base notes of a grown man's musk.

It was like Pandora's box had bewitched He Yu. He looked up and silently met Xie Qingcheng's eyes again. He moved as if hypnotized; he couldn't help but press closer to this irresistibly alluring man.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

He Yu braced his arm against the wall next to him, his face inching forward as his eyes flitted between Xie Qingcheng's nose and his lips. Finally, he closed the distance between them until their jaws brushed lightly against each other, the tips of their noses practically touching.

He looked at him so intently, like Xie Qingcheng's lips exerted a magnetic force.

In that moment, the flames of envy and fury consumed He Yu, making it impossible for him to control his desire to kiss him, to mindlessly entangle with him right here.

Until Xie Qingcheng reached up to slowly press a slightly cool fingertip to He Yu's warm lips.

"Remember what you promised, He Yu."

Tall, well-built Xie Qingcheng came back to his senses as he watched the other man; his voice shook almost imperceptibly out of fear that He Yu would start going at it with him in this neighborhood alley. However, he still strove to maintain his usual calm.

"Let go of me," he said in a low voice. "Don't do something that makes me look down on you."

He Yu fell silent, like he'd been roused from a trance…as though the dream had ended. His eyes were still agitated, but Xie Qingcheng's words had undoubtedly pricked him.

He straightened up, the fog dissipating, his pupils refocusing.

After standing there frozen for several long seconds, he slowly pulled away from Xie Qingcheng.

Every single inch of him wanted to kiss him, to frantically and ardently possess him; he wanted to melt into surging waters, to plunge into squalid dirt, to go up in scorching flames with him, here in this narrow alley.

He longed for him so deeply that he wanted to tear him to shreds.

But He Yu stopped cold.

Medusa's gaze had cast a demonic spell over him.

As the demon dragon's scarlet eyes stared at his frail yet formidable kin, he finally stopped himself from clawing at his inverted scale.[9]

"You misunderstand…" He Yu said softly, trying to cover his embarrassment. "I wasn't planning to kiss you. I just wanted to smell whatever the debauched scent on your body is that's so irresistible to others. Could the First Emperor's special ability from psychological Ebola be seduction?"

"The First Emperor is unique among psychological Ebola patients—I don't have a special ability." Xie Qingcheng pulled himself together and continued with a grim expression. "Besides, Li Ruoqiu only came to see what was going on because she contacted Xie Xue, but Xie Xue never replied. Get your mind out of the gutter—stop speaking nonsense and dragging a girl's innocent name through the mud."

"What innocent girl? She's already been married, so how's she still a girl? I'm telling you, Xie Qingcheng—that woman came here to get back together with you. The way she hugged and teased you and the look in her eyes when she watched you weren't the least bit innocent."

"…Then what kind of look would you call innocent?"

He Yu gave it some thought. "The way I look at you," he said.

Xie Qingcheng actually stared into his eyes for a while.

As two pairs of eyes met, that strange beast in the depths of He Yu's heart started howling in dissatisfaction, wanting to sink its teeth into Xie Qingcheng and drag him beneath a canopy of crimson gauze. It urged him to turn Xie Qingcheng into bleached bones in its cave, never to vanish or leave. To gnaw away at him until he was stripped clean of flesh.

Xie Qingcheng pushed He Yu's head away.

"Don't stand so close to me."

"…Why didn't you talk to her like that when she hugged you?" He Yu asked morosely.

"Because she's a woman."

"Haven't you heard of gender equality? Why do you need to discriminate against men?"

Discriminate my ass. "She's my ex-wife."

"I'm your ex-hookup."

Xie Qingcheng didn't deign to reply.

"Xie Qingcheng, you aren't taking any responsibility. You're treating me like this just because I can't get pregnant, because I'm a man, because we don't have a marriage certificate."

Xie Qingcheng was frowning. He Yu's words were utterly unhinged, totally illogical—what was all this talk about pregnancy, certificates, and responsibility…? He Yu had distorted things to the point that Xie Qingcheng even had the vague misconception that *he* was the one who had seduced and dumped He Yu.

But hadn't He Yu been the one who initiated the physical relationship between them?

And the conversation had swung back to the topic of their previous argument—if someone had gotten pregnant at any point from the things they'd done in bed, would that person have been *He Yu*?

What kind of underhanded sophistry was this?

"Say something." He Yu looked at him, leaning back against the wall. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

"…I have nothing to say to you."

Xie Qingcheng was a full-grown man in his thirties, after all—was he really going to pull a long face and debate the specifics of who got the worse end of the deal with He Yu?

As a straitlaced chronic chauvinist, he couldn't do it. If He Yu thought he was the one who was shameless, irresponsible, and unreasonable, then so be it. At any rate, "acted like scum toward a nineteen-year-old boy" sounded more respectable than "got fucked by a nineteen-year-old boy," so it was obviously a bit easier for Xie Qingcheng to accept.

Xie Qingcheng actually turned around and began walking away, just like a scumbag who'd knocked up a co-ed.

But halfway out of the alley, "college girl" He Yu grabbed his wrist, fingers closing around his tattoo.

Frankly, it had been quite a while since the two of them last touched. When He Yu's palm met Xie Qingcheng's wrist, a shiver ran through them both. However, while Xie Qingcheng tensed up from head to toe with the desire to throw off He Yu's hand, He Yu felt an electric tingle rush down his spine and a wish to pull Xie Qingcheng into his arms.

Xie Qingcheng turned around impassively.

"Let go."

He Yu gritted his teeth, summoning all his willpower to hold back the impulse to scoop Xie Qingcheng up and pin him against the alley wall, to kiss his lashes, his lips, the mole at the nape of his neck. He calmed himself down with effort, even managing to squeeze out a very unsightly smile.

"…Do you… Do you really think I want you that bad? Xie Qingcheng, with my position and status, you know that I can get

anyone I want, right? Men and women are all chasing after me. Why would I need you? Why would I only be with you? I'm just toying with you. It's a joke, don't take it so seriously."

Xie Qingcheng yanked his wrist out of He Yu's grip and fixed the cuff of his sleeve. He looked up at him. "Very good. I really admire your self-confidence. But I don't think your joke is very funny."

With that, he made to leave again.

He Yu didn't touch him again this time. He could still feel the warmth Xie Qingcheng had left behind on his palm, and the delicate smoothness of the skin on his wrist. He savored these sensations in his hand, feeding them to the injured, bleeding beast in his heart.

He didn't want Xie Qingcheng to leave just like that, so he had to stop making a scene.

He leaned back against the wall, suppressing the flames in his heart. "Don't leave yet," he said. "There's actually some important business that I wanted to talk to you about today."

Xie Qingcheng stopped in his tracks.

He turned back to look at He Yu's face, his figure illuminated by a narrow beam of light coming through the gap between the tall buildings. It threw the brightness and shadow on Xie Qingcheng's figure into sharp relief, but as he gazed at He Yu with the light at his back, He Yu couldn't make out his expression.

"I really do have some actual business to discuss," He Yu added, wiping the devil-may-care expression off of his face. "I found someone who might be able to give us a lead to follow tonight. Do you want to come with me to see him?"

Inside Huzhou First Prison…

Sha Hong was preparing dinner in the cafeteria. A corrections officer had arranged his "interview" with He Yu for after the meal.

When Sha Hong had been a drug dealer, his higher-ups would always carefully appraise the quality of their wares, sorting them by grade from A+ all the way down. As a result, Sha Hong had acquired a similar habit, and had already clearly sorted and graded the intelligence he was about to "hawk" to He Yu. Although he'd spent recent years stuck in prison, he'd managed to keep track of what was happening on the outside through watching TV, talking to newly arrived inmates, and listening to the corrections officers' conversations.

There were several particularly important people on his list of names.

Those people were the same as many capitalists—in public, they spouted mouthfuls of grand ideals, but in private, they were filthier than the sewage under a manhole cover. The Liang brothers were dead, but those other people were still thriving in society as "celebrities," "high fliers," and "model citizens."

Sha Hong scoffed as he chopped vegetables.

The people who'd slapped bills against his face on the Bund might have forgotten about his existence long ago—what did a driver matter to them? They couldn't even remember his name; perhaps they felt it was beneath them to remember it.

But even a nobody could play a part in toppling the most formidable establishment. Sooner or later, retribution would come.

He glanced up at the clock—it was almost time. He didn't have a moment to waste.

He put the chopped vegetables and meat into a pan and began stir-frying. Surrounded by the aroma of simple cooking, eyes that had just flashed with hate gradually grew wet—cooking reminded him of his mother.

Liang Jicheng had humiliated him, then dismissed him. The reason he gave for his dismissal was especially revolting—he said Sha Hong was a light-fingered crook who had stolen his employer's money.

Between Executive Liang and a random driver, whose word carried more weight? Who would everyone believe?

His reputation was hopelessly tarnished, and he couldn't find suitable work anywhere. His mother was gravely ill and needed money for treatment, but he didn't even have enough to make ends meet—how could he possibly afford the sky-high price of medicine?

He'd applied for jobs everywhere, only to be rejected over and over again. Finally, a friend of his who claimed he could make a fortune with a little bit of risk found him and suggested they sell "cough syrup" together…

He wanted to save his mother, but he was slowly led astray by how easily this money flowed in. It changed him as a person, and in the end, the vast net of justice descended, catching him in its clutches. A few months later, in prison, he learned of his mother's death. In that moment, he fell to his knees and bawled his heart out to the corrections officer, but the officer told him there was no way they could let him out to send his mother off on her final journey.

To this day, he'd never gone to that public cemetery to retrieve his mother's ashes from the storage warehouse.

As Sha Hong cooked, he recalled how when he was little, his mother ran an illegal street food cart all by herself, dodging the local law enforcement and serving food right under their noses. One bowl of congee or rice noodles at a time, through bitter toil, she scraped together enough spare change to raise him. He'd gotten through his childhood nourished by humble yet warm dishes that smelled just like this.

He reached up to wipe away his tears.

Amid the rising tendrils of steam, he murmured softly, "Mom, I'm coming to bring you home."

"22104, hurry up and get ready, your visitation time is almost here," an officer by the kitchen door called out to him. Sha Hong assented and started stir-frying faster.

The liquid in the pan was almost cooked off—seasoning with dark soy sauce was the last step.

Sparks flew around the iron wok. As Sha Hong unscrewed the cap to pour the soy sauce, he paused in confusion: Why was this soy sauce clear? And why did it smell like alcohol?

That ended up being his final thought.

A thunderous *boom* rang out.

The alarms began to wail.

"H-help! Fire—save us!"

"Put out the fire! Everything's on fire!"

The flames leapt up instantaneously as a massive explosion roared to life in the kitchen, ear-splitting sirens piercing the furious inferno. Sha Hong didn't even get a chance to scream before he was sucked into the towering flames, swallowed up in the blink of an eye…

Chapter 110:
I Wanted to Kiss You So Badly

XIE QINGCHENG and He Yu sat in the car in silence.

Before they arrived at the prison, their hearts had been full of hope. They'd never expected things to turn out this way.

"Sha Hong was only targeted recently," He Yu told Xie Qingcheng with a somber expression, his hands folded on the steering wheel. "Nothing like this ever happened when I came to see him before. Someone's following me."

Xie Qingcheng leaned back in the passenger seat, watching the nighttime scenery outside. It seemed like the darkness would never lift.

"I knew there was a good chance that they'd follow me, so I was very careful; I even said I was visiting Sha Hong for a screenwriting interview. I kept urging the prison guards to move my second visit time forward, but…"

"It's no use," Xie Qingcheng said. "They just needed one glance at Sha Hong's past to realize he'd slipped past their net. You stood out too much during the broadcasting tower incident, so they'd definitely be watching closely. I think you should've told me about this earlier."

"I didn't want to pull you into this from the beginning," He Yu snapped in irritation.

Reaching for a cigarette, Xie Qingcheng's hand stopped in midair. For some reason, he looked at He Yu.

He Yu knew that his tongue had slipped. He coughed. "I thought you'd drag me down," he said with a grave expression. "And can you stop smoking?"

Xie Qingcheng peered into the box, saw that there was only one cigarette left, and decided to let it go. He put the box back into his pocket, rubbed his forehead with his hand, and let out a weary sigh instead of retorting.

"How's Xie Xue doing these days?" He Yu asked.

"Her fever comes and goes, but it never disappears for long." Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and leaned his head back, sighing. "There aren't any serious problems right now, but it'll be troublesome if it continues this way." He was silent for a moment, stealing a glance at He Yu behind his long, downcast eyelashes. "…I didn't think you still cared about Xie Xue so much. I didn't think you'd want to interact with her after you argued."

Truth be told, He Yu didn't intend to interact much with Xie Xue anymore. But in the end, she was still an old friend—and even more importantly, she was Xie Qingcheng's younger sister. Even if this had nothing to do with RN-13, he wouldn't just leave it alone.

So after a silence, he said, "Of course I care about her. I've known her for years."

Xie Qingcheng glanced at him. There was a hint of surprise in his eyes.

But He Yu didn't notice. To lighten up the suddenly gloomy mood, he swiped at the dashboard screen to put on some music. To his surprise, the first song was the same one he'd been playing on repeat recently: "My Heart Will Go On."

"Every night in my dreams, I see you, I feel you…"

This song instantly transported both of them back into the bone-chilling, deadly flooded film studio, and the atmosphere suddenly turned strange and uncomfortable.

As he listened to the song, He Yu's thoughts gradually shifted away from the anxiety-riddled matter of Sha Hong.

Xie Qingcheng let the music fill the silence for a long moment. Then he spoke.

"Don't blame yourself too much for what happened with Sha Hong. Sometimes things are just out of our control. As for Xie Xue, it seems like she's still very important to you. Thank you for being so committed to helping her."

He Yu said nothing.

Xie Qingcheng's tone warmed up somewhat as he tried to console him. "She's in a very reliable hospital, so you don't need to worry about her for now."

He Yu listened to his words of consolation in silence, but in his heart, he felt miserable. Why couldn't Xie Qingcheng understand his heart?

Why couldn't Xie Qingcheng understand that everything he had done, his reluctance to let her go…it didn't really have anything to do with Xie Xue. It was all because of her brother…

My heart will go on, my heart will go on.

His thoughts were in chaos; he suddenly yearned to turn to Xie Qingcheng and kiss him, to tell him everything. But he couldn't. Just like Jack, just like the *Heart of the Ocean*, his heart was doomed to sink.

As those impulses reared up within him again, he kicked the inside of the car and swore under his breath.

Frankly, what He Yu really wanted was to pin Xie Qingcheng down on the passenger's seat, pull off his clothes, and start fervently fucking him right there in the car. But in the end, he just irritably grabbed a handful of his own bangs and turned his ashen face away.

In the interest of airing out his gloominess, he decided to open the window. The early spring weather was still fickle, alternating between hot and cold, and the evening air that rushed in was very chilly.

Oblivious to the crazy mood the song had put him into, Xie Qingcheng reached over to close the window, which only irritated He Yu more.

"What're you doing?"

"Closing the window."

"But I *just* opened it."

"Aren't you cold?"

He Yu was so affronted and overheated he could die, and the culprit was the man hovering over him right now, trying to shut the window.

He had no choice but to lean as far back as possible so that Xie Qingcheng wouldn't touch his chest. Xie Qingcheng was clearly trying to avoid him, but the space in the car was limited. The distance between them had practically vanished.

He Yu glared at this man, his bloodthirsty desires and brutal urges rushing up over and over. He silently balled his hands into fists, his nails digging into his palms so hard that they almost drew blood.

If he didn't do so, he knew he might have a sudden change of heart, discarding his calmness and ripping away his disguise to pin Xie Qingcheng down roughly. After all, the man was already leaning over the driver's seat—how could it be wrong to simply press him down a little?

When he finally couldn't hold back any longer, he shoved Xie Qingcheng away, leveling a fierce, disdainful glare at him. "If you're cold, can't you put on another layer? I'm only twenty, and *I* think it's too hot!"

Xie Qingcheng didn't know what was wrong with him—why did he suddenly lose his temper when everything had just been fine?

But too much had happened tonight. He didn't have the energy to bicker with him—and he just didn't want to. The man simply gazed tranquilly at the boy for a while, then, eventually, he spoke.

"…Forget it. If there's nothing else, I'm getting out of the car."

"Where do you think you're going!"

"Calling a cab to go home."

This made He Yu so furious that he actually started to cry.

"Go…go ahead! Go ahead and call a cab! *So* sorry for wasting your time today, shall I reimburse you for the fare?" He actually reached into the storage compartment as he spoke, handing him a pile of five-and ten-yuan notes—it was probably toll change that his driver had left behind.

He stuffed the bills into Xie Qingcheng's hands. "Go," he raged, "get out of my car right now."

"Can you just calm down?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I can't!"

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to fight with him, so he put the money back into the compartment and tried to get out of the car. But even as he was yelling at Xie Qingcheng to leave, He Yu had locked the passenger side door.

Xie Qingcheng really had to hand it to him. He whipped around. "Just *what* are you trying to do?"

He Yu opened his mouth, chest heaving—he was obviously very worked up, but he didn't know how he was supposed to vent his emotions. Now that he'd vowed not to bother Xie Qingcheng anymore, he had no more excuses to defy him. When Xie Qingcheng asked him what he was really thinking, the first thing that came to mind was that he wanted to kiss him.

But he wasn't allowed to.

The black dragon howled forlornly. He didn't know how to deal with a treasure that was so precious to him, but which burned him so painfully.

Finally, He Yu flung open his door and got out of the car. He glared at Xie Qingcheng fiercely and obstinately through the window, eyes red, as if he wanted to show him just how tough he was.

In the end, with all the "toughness" he could muster, he exclaimed, "I've had enough of you! Just the sight of you pisses me off. Take the car—I'll call a cab for myself! Surely you can't have a problem with that?"

Xie Qingcheng blinked.

By the time he came back to his senses, He Yu had already turned to go.

In the process of leaving, the brat actually picked up a rock from the ground and turned around to throw it, perhaps as a way to let off some steam—but he only ended up chipping off a small fortune's worth of paint from his six-million-yuan car.

Of course, Xie Qingcheng wasn't going to take He Yu's six-million-yuan car home. If he scratched or nicked it and couldn't afford to pay for the damages, that would be as good as letting He Yu screw him over.

He stepped out of the car too.

When he saw Xie Qingcheng step out of the car and into the frigid night wind, He Yu was incensed. "What are you getting out of the car for!" he roared.

"I already said I'll take a cab home."

He Yu stood rooted to the spot, gnashing his teeth and stewing until his eyes turned red. In the end, he angrily rushed over to Xie Qingcheng and threw his coat over his head.

"Fine! *Fine!* Take this! Hurry up and leave! I can't stand the sight of you!"

What in the world did this unreasonable young man even want, Xie Qingcheng had to wonder. One moment, he was speaking in a perfectly civil manner; the next, he'd grabbed a rock and thrown it at him, then he was leaving his own car for him.

One moment, he was trying to take advantage of his weakness; the next, he was lending him his coat.

"Aren't you afraid that I'll sell your coat?"

"Then—th-then sell it!" He Yu had intended to say this in a very lofty manner, but a chilly gust of the early spring wind blew, making him shudder and stammer as it drained the color from his lips.

Shivering, He Yu said in exasperation, "S-sell it! It's not like you h-haven't sold my things before…"

Xie Qingcheng looked at the young man trembling in front of him. Even though he thought the boy was being completely unreasonable, he also found him rather funny… He even pitied him a little.

Surely this person was insane.

Well…he really *was* insane.

Xie Qingcheng took the coat, which still radiated He Yu's warmth, and threw it back onto the boy.

"Put it on properly. Don't get sick and then come calling me."

"If I called you, would you pick up?"

Xie Qingcheng ignored him—he felt like this might never end if he responded. There were too many worries weighing on his mind right now for him to waste so much time bickering over a coat with He Yu.

Once he'd given back the coat, he turned on his heel and left.

"Xie Qingcheng!" He Yu called after him. "I asked you a question! This time, are you gonna pick up when I call you?! Xie Qingcheng!"

Xie Qingcheng turned a deaf ear to the dragon's roars. The frigid night had already frozen him half to death, and he was just about to wave down an empty taxi he spotted in the distance when he heard footsteps behind him.

He turned around, only to run straight into He Yu's face.

Then, He Yu grabbed him around the torso and hauled him back into the car.

"…Motherfucker! Let go of me!" Xie Qingcheng ordered.

This time, He Yu was the one who was too angry to listen.

Xie Qingcheng's strength and skill had originally been enough to deal with He Yu, but his physical condition had deteriorated and he was no longer a match for a young man at the peak of fitness.

He Yu forcibly stuffed him back into the car, slammed the door shut, and got into the driver's seat with a grim expression.

Xie Qingcheng was so mad his head was beginning to ache. Sha Hong's sudden death was anxiety-inducing enough, and now He Yu's shenanigans were making the vein in his temple throb even harder.

As for He Yu, Xie Qingcheng's indifference had driven him to anguish. With his emotions running wild and his ears buzzing blankly, he slammed on the gas and zoomed forward.

He actually didn't even know where he wanted to take Xie Qingcheng. Acting on instinct, he parked the car in front of a budget hotel and dragged Xie Qingcheng inside with a stony expression.

The receptionist inside was dozing off. "…Huh? Hey! Hey! What are you doing!"

He Yu tossed his ID and wallet in front of the employee and said harshly, "Get me a room."

Xie Qingcheng jerked out of He Yu's grip. "Are you out of your mind?!"

He Yu didn't reply, only shooting him a bloodshot glance before turning his terrifying gaze on the receptionist. "A room with a double bed."

The receptionist had seen impatient gay guys before, but never like this. As he looked at the unsightly expression on the man standing next to this handsome youngster, he wondered—could this be sexual assault? Did he need to call the police?

"Any day now!"

The receptionist stammered, “Y-your ID please, and we’ll need to see the other gentleman’s ID as well…”

“No need to register his name,” He Yu replied. “I’m staying alone. He’s a guest.”

The receptionist said nothing.

But the look in Young Master He’s eyes was too vicious, and the receptionist wasn’t a particularly courageous man, so ultimately, he checked He Yu in and handed him the key card.

He Yu hauled Xie Qingcheng toward the room.

The door opened with a beep. He Yu pushed Xie Qingcheng into the dark room without turning on the lights, locking the door by feel with a crisp click.

Now, the two of them were alone.

In the dim entryway, He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng’s face up close.

He had never stayed in such a cheap, dirty little hotel before. He didn’t even know why he’d stopped at such a lousy place as he sped down the road.

He didn’t even know what he was planning to do after he dragged Xie Qingcheng in here.

To a normal person’s thinking, what *else* was there to do after getting a room? Might as well do what he needed to do.

In the depths of his heart, this was what He Yu yearned for.

He especially yearned for the version of Xie Qingcheng from New Year’s Eve to come back, along with all the violence and passion he’d never shown before. He’d been at Xie Qingcheng’s mercy, yet Xie Qingcheng had fully belonged to him.

How could he have known it would end up being his last meal?

He Yu held Xie Qingcheng around his waist, staring at him with scarlet eyes as he pressed him against the coat rack in the hallway, the jut of his throat bobbing.

Their moods that night were both reminiscent of New Year's Eve. Sha Hong's death had made their emotions turbulent.

Last time, Xie Qingcheng's heart had been a mess, so He Yu had managed to tempt him for the very first time. Perhaps because of these similarities, He Yu had a faint hope that Xie Qingcheng might rely on him again while he was feeling down.

But Xie Qingcheng didn't.

He Yu's anguish was unbearable, festering and swelling as they fought, until finally, he'd mindlessly hauled Xie Qingcheng to the cheapest hotel in the area and got a room.

It was just too bad that getting a room was much easier than actually taking care of business. As He Yu stared into Xie Qingcheng's coldly lucid eyes, he remembered the way Xie Qingcheng had looked the morning after, sitting by the window and calmly smoking a cigarette on New Year's Day.

Back then, Xie Qingcheng must have been truly distraught, both pained and unnerved by what they'd done.

He Yu's pathological mindset still contained one thread of rationality that pulled his body back under control like a marionette string, keeping him from acting on impulse and roughly overpowering Xie Qingcheng.

He'd already gotten the room—it was too hard to stomach the thought of not doing anything at all. However, if he actually did do anything, he would be bullying his only kin and injuring him in both body and spirit.

He Yu stood there, waging war against himself, until finally he headbutted the wall next to Xie Qingcheng in anger, despondently mashing his forehead against the boards with his eyes closed.

Xie Qingcheng was silent.

In this position, He Yu's body pressed down on his own, the youth's hand gripping his wrist around that delicate tattoo.

To an outsider, their silhouettes would've looked like they were overlapping in the entryway, as if they were sharing a sorrowful, intimate kiss.

But Xie Qingcheng knew that He Yu hadn't kissed him.

He Yu was simply pressing his head against the wall next to him, very close to the crook of his neck. He could distinctly feel He Yu's heated breaths brushing over his skin.

After a long while, He Yu suddenly straightened up.

Fury, indignation, and desire reddened his eyes until they were suffused with a rosy glow.

"Forget it," He Yu rasped. "We won't do anything. I'm not doing anything. I'm leaving. You'd better not stop me."

Xie Qingcheng was thoroughly baffled. "No one's stopping you."

He Yu looked like Xie Qingcheng had kicked him. His face turned ashen with fury, and he even stuttered slightly. "Well. G-goodbye then."

Since Xie Qingcheng's emotional CPU was the Windows 98 Clueless Straight Guy Edition, he didn't get He Yu's meaning at all.

He Yu turned and walked away.

If he lingered any longer, he feared he might really end up hurting his kin. His kin's attitude might have been ice-cold, but his every movement fanned the flames in He Yu's heart.

He wanted so badly to fall into another blissful dream with him. So he had no choice but to leave.

Xie Qingcheng was right—humans were different from animals, because humans could control themselves.

Once He Yu left him in the room by himself, Xie Qingcheng found that the boy's actions had muddled his usually clear mind. He couldn't make heads or tails of any part of this farce.

His tall figure was still leaning against the wall, his peach-blossom eyes bewildered, lacking their usual sharpness. After a moment, he took a pack of smokes out of his pocket, biting down on the filter and lighting the last cigarette with practiced movements.

As he exhaled a breath of smoke, he suddenly realized that he was still wearing He Yu's coat.

He didn't like wearing other people's clothes, and he didn't want He Yu to be frozen stiff in the cold winter night, either. Thus, as soon as he came back to his senses, he ran out after him.

He Yu was checking out at the front desk.

The receptionist was looking at He Yu with an undisguised subtlety in his gaze. How long had it been? Not even fifteen minutes in total, and after subtracting the time it took to undress, wash up, and dress again…not even three minutes remained, little brother.

This youngster's aura was pretty intimidating, both handsome and spirited, but he'd only lasted three minutes in the end.

So when he saw Xie Qingcheng sweep in with a frozen-over look on his face, the receptionist wasn't surprised at all—who could've possibly gotten any pleasure out of that?

"Your coat," said Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu signed the forms and turned away without paying any mind.

Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to walk over and drape the coat over the boy's shoulders.

Upon seeing this thoroughly paternal gesture, the budget hotel receptionist had the same thought as the Skynight Club receptionist—astonished, the young man behind the counter looked at He Yu, and then at Xie Qingcheng, thinking that his previous assumption had been wrong. The one who'd only lasted three minutes probably wasn't the younger guy, but rather the handsome man who was chasing after him.

Now the story in the young receptionist's head changed completely—this older uncle was probably the pretty college boy's sugar daddy, and because he hadn't managed to make the experience enjoyable enough, the boy left in a fit, like a peeved concubine. Now the handsome uncle was trailing behind his concubine, draping a coat over his shoulders.

He Yu turned to glare at Xie Qingcheng. Probably because he was really furious, his tone was positively noxious. "Uncle, how long are you planning to drag things out with me because of a coat?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't even care that it was the first time He Yu had called him "Uncle." He took a silent drag of his cigarette. Then, probably because he saw no point in speaking with this cantankerous concubine, he walked to the front desk and said, "I'll pay the bill."

The receptionist shot a look of deep reproval at this man—he hadn't just strung a university student along, he even made him foot the bill.

"That young man already paid it."

Thoroughly irritated, Xie Qingcheng turned around to face He Yu. Speaking around the cigarette between his teeth, his words were impassive yet somewhat garbled. "Open your Alipay. I'll transfer you the money."

Xie Qingcheng had provoked He Yu to his limit.

He cursed under his breath, unable to bear it any longer—he suddenly grabbed Xie Qingcheng and pulled him outside, his movements just as rough as when they arrived. The two of them had spent the whole day bickering back and forth, from the alleyway to the car, from the car to the budget hotel—then all they did was fight in the hotel, only to end up back in the car again.

Only a couple of lunatics could've pulled this off.

He Yu brusquely shoved Xie Qingcheng into the spacious back seat of the Cullinan and climbed on top of him with bloodshot eyes.

Gripping Xie Qingcheng's wrist with one hand, he reached up with the other to brush through a few strands of loose hair on Xie Qingcheng's temple, caressing his broad forehead and elegant brows.

Between the intensity of his ardor and the desperation with which he was suppressing it, his hand trembled slightly.

Beneath the car's dim ambient lighting, their eyes met at close range. He Yu's gaze was slack and infatuated, seemingly bewitched as he stared into the depths of Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes. The Cullinan's soundproofing was so good that they couldn't hear anything at all from outside—all that echoed in their ears were the sounds of their breaths and heartbeats.

He Yu stroked Xie Qingcheng's brow and forehead again and again, as though cupping handfuls of sweet spring water for the beast in his heart that was dying of thirst, but it was far from enough…so far from enough.

The closer He Yu drew to him, the hotter he felt—he was his agar, his opium poppy; he was both his poison and his antidote.

Looking down at the man underneath him, he couldn't help but remember the passion this man had unleashed upon him on New Year's Eve. Even if that kind of passion was more like a type of self-destruction…

In this kind of atmosphere, Xie Qingcheng found for the first time that he couldn't meet He Yu's eyes. He turned his face away.

The very next second, He Yu grabbed his face, forcing him to turn and look at him again. Although Xie Qingcheng's gaze was cold, he discovered a trace of turbulence amid that coldness.

That turbulence made He Yu's heart swell and shudder in excitement. With hot blood coursing through his body, he silently gazed into Xie Qingcheng's eyes for a few seconds, his breathing gradually becoming labored and urgent. Then he suddenly buried his hands in Xie Qingcheng's dark hair, cradling his head. With lowered lashes, he leaned down to kiss him—

Chapter 111:
We Found a Clue

"EVERY NIGHT in my dreams, I see you, I feel you. That is how I know you—"

In the moment before their lips met, He Yu's phone rang.

Celine Dion's crisp voice yanked He Yu out of the haze of desire. The moment the music shattered that bewitchingly suggestive atmosphere, his mind raced back to everything that had happened before.

He suddenly sat up, his chest heaving as though it had been scalded, and tore his gaze away from Xie Qingcheng's handsome face.

"*Ahem*… I need to take this call."

Xie Qingcheng also sat up in a state of disarray.

Behind his messy bangs, his eyes and brows were frosty. He Yu wasn't the only one who'd been brought to his senses by the ringtone—after seeing the way He Yu had just looked at him, Xie Qingcheng could barely pull himself back together.

Xie Qingcheng's heart hadn't necessarily softened—rather, he felt like there was something wrong with He Yu. When the boy fixed his gaze upon him, there was something strange in his expression.

He'd felt that if he said another word in that moment, He Yu might cease to live right then and there.

No—he was probably overthinking it.

The look in He Yu's eyes was like a baby bird's, like Xie Qingcheng was the only person in the world he could depend on. A very long time ago, Xie Xue had looked at Xie Qingcheng like this—she was the only person he'd ever seen with that expression.

But He Yu wasn't like Xie Xue. He could get anything he wanted—how could there be anyone that a kid with his abilities couldn't live without?

How had Xie Qingcheng almost misunderstood…? He'd nearly been bewitched by this guy again… Fucking hell.

Deeply vexed, Xie Qingcheng reached for a cigarette, but after rummaging fruitlessly at length he finally remembered that he'd just smoked the last one.

"Mm-hm… Okay, got it."

He Yu was still on the phone, murmuring in agreement from time to time.

Xie Qingcheng decided that he needed to get out of the car—tonight had just been too fucking absurd for him. Thank goodness for that phone call, because if he and He Yu ended up having sex in this car today, he'd never be able to live it down. Besides, behaving like that would be completely irresponsible toward both He Yu and himself.

He undid his seatbelt, preparing to leave.

But He Yu suddenly held him back. He was still solemnly listening to the person on the phone, brow furrowed, and he shook his head to indicate that Xie Qingcheng shouldn't move.

Although He Yu's voice was still a bit hoarse with desire, his tone was very serious and calm. An outsider would've never guessed that he'd been planning to undress his former psychiatrist, shove him into the backseat of his car to kiss him ardently, and fuck this man who was old enough to be his uncle—a textbook example of a beast in human clothing.

"Sure, no problem. I'll be right there."

After hanging up, He Yu turned to Xie Qingcheng. "Come to Baoshan Nursing Home with me—there's someone who wants to see us."

"Who?" asked Xie Qingcheng.

“I don’t know if you still remember him,” He Yu said. “Zhuang Zhiqiang, the old man you met on your matchmaking date with that Bai girl.”

Baoshan Nursing Home was owned by the He family, but He Jiwei had ceded all control to He Yu, letting He Yu manage the business on his own. After the fire at Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital, He Yu had arranged for the homeless, mentally ill Zhuang Zhiqiang to be transferred to this nursing home for his care.

Since then, so much time had passed in the blink of an eye. The facility’s head nurse had just called to tell He Yu that Zhuang Zhiqiang’s condition had taken a turn for the worse over the past couple of days.

But as the old man neared the end of his life, he’d had a flash of terminal lucidity; his mind had suddenly become very clear. He remembered how he’d been rescued and brought to the nursing home, and he said that he wanted to meet with the young people responsible.

When He Yu and Xie Qingcheng made it to Baoshan Nursing Home, Zhuang Zhiqiang was lying back in an elevated hospital bed with his eyes partially closed, seeming to be half-asleep.

“Sir,” the nurse called softly, “our President He and Doctor Xie are here.”

The old man slowly surfaced from his shallow sleep, his gaze focusing on the two people before him.

“Ah, it’s you guys.” Zhuang Zhiqiang’s chest was huffing and puffing like an old radiator, sending out the last bit of his human vitality. “It’s you guys…”

He tried to sit up in his bed, but He Yu stopped him.

“Sir, you don’t have to get up.”

The old man’s lips trembled, and every breath he took was laborious. There seemed to be many things he wanted to say to

them, but before he could get a single word out, his eyes filled with hot tears that began to roll down his face.

"Have… Have I inconvenienced you two?"

"Not at all," He Yu said. "We happened to be out taking care of some things; we hadn't gone to sleep yet."

Zhuang Zhiqiang seemed to feel slightly relieved. He wiped away his tears and then gripped He Yu's hand tightly. "…Ah… I know the end is near. I asked you both to come because I… I wanted to say thank you.

"I came to Huzhou many times while I was drifting around for all those years. I don't think I've ever done anything to be ashamed of, but for some reason, times got so hard as I grew old… My heart hurt so badly…" At this point, the old man had to take a deep breath. He paused to dab away his tears. "It was so painful. If I hadn't met you kindhearted people, I probably… I probably wouldn't even have a place to rest in the end. I probably would've died on the side of the road, or under a pavilion… No one would've found my body for days."

As he spoke, Zhuang Zhiqiang became more and more dejected and agitated. He looked like he wanted to climb out of his bed and prostrate himself before the people who'd finally taken him in. He Yu reached out to hold him back and helped him lie down again, just as Xie Qingcheng did the same thing.

Zhuang Zhiqiang's mind was much clearer than before; his death must be close. His whole life had been full of hardship until the very end, when he received this elusive kindness. His honest character compelled him to thank them personally, as though this was the only way he could peacefully depart from the world.

Xie Qingcheng and He Yu sat with him for quite a while. "What…what about that girl?" he asked, when he'd calmed down.

He was referring to Xie Xue.

At that moment, Xie Xue lay in another private hospital being treated to slow the progression of a rare illness.

"She's busy with work and not in Huzhou right now," said Xie Qingcheng. "If there's anything you want to say to her, you can tell me—I'll pass it on."

"Ah… I don't dare trouble you." Zhuang Zhiqiang coughed, slowly shaking his head. "I really don't dare trouble you any more."

His cloudy eyes looked up at the ceiling. "I just wanted to ask you…please thank her for me, the next time you see her…thank that girl for me… Wh-what's her name?"

"Her name is Xie Xue."

"Ah, Xie Xue…" It was as though a ray of light shone through the old man's hazy eyes, his fading irises glimmering with scattered brilliance. "Oh… So as it turns out, her name is Xue too… This is really…really…"

Hearing this, He Yu's heart quivered.

"Sir, when we met you, you said you have a daughter, and that you came to Huzhou to look for her," He Yu began. "But the people from Homeless Services told us that they couldn't find a daughter from your hometown when they looked into it. We thought you might have been imagining things…"

"What? I wasn't imagining things!" The old man grew agitated again. "How, *how* could she be a figment of my imagination? Her name was Zhao Xue, but of course you wouldn't be able to find her… because…because she's not my daughter by blood… She's my adopted daughter!"

Zhuang Zhiqiang lay back on the bed. Then, he told them some things from his past they hadn't known about.

The place where Zhuang Zhiqiang had lived was very poor, both economically and spiritually. Because its location was so remote and the soil was ill-suited to farming, it became a breeding ground for all sorts of preposterous things. It was home to many ignorant

practices, like families selling their sons and daughters, child brides becoming young mothers, and even ghost marriages.

Zhuang Zhiqiang's mother had been a victim of these traditions—she was sold to Zhuang Zhiqiang's father when she was fourteen and endured physical abuse at the hands of that useless man.

When the now-elderly Mr. Zhuang was a child, he saw his bruised and battered mother wiping her tears away every day—those memories had a lasting impact on his young heart.

After Zhuang Zhiqiang's parents passed away, he kept to himself and didn't interact much with the idle, crude men in his village. The others all saw him as an eccentric. He never married—but to the villagers, marriage amounted to selling off their daughters to provide for their sons. They demanded unreasonably large betrothal gifts before holding an absurd, hideous ceremony to deliver the poor girl into the bed of a man she might not even like. Throughout this process, she was supposed to weep her heart out and endure the guests' unctuous and irresponsible harassment.

Zhuang Zhiqiang didn't have much money, and he wasn't willing to treat a girl like that. In this uncivilized village, he was still able to live with a clear conscience, spending his whole life as a bachelor.

But Zhuang Zhiqiang did have someone who was dear to him: a pretty, clever young girl from the neighboring village named Zhao Xue.

One day, when Zhuang Zhiqiang was returning home after finishing his work in the fields, he heard whimpering from a pile of grass behind his house. At first, he thought that a weasel was making a racket back there, so he headed over with a club in hand, only to discover that it was a girl.

That was how he first met Zhao Xue.

Probably because of Zhuang Zhiqiang's righteous air, once the girl had recovered from her hesitation and fright, she timidly followed Zhuang Zhiqiang into his home. After anxiously gulping

down some hot water covered in an oily film, she fell to her knees and began to bawl.

She said, "Uncle, please save me, save me—I don't want to get married."

Even though Zhuang Zhiqiang was used to the vulgar traditions of this desolate place, he was still shocked by how young Zhao Xue was—she was scarcely an adolescent. Even in this village, it was rare to marry off such a young girl.

When Zhuang Zhiqiang carefully inquired about her circumstances and learned the whole story, he was so livid that his scalp went numb.

Zhao Xue was from the Zhao Family Village a few kilometers away. She was the only daughter in her family, with three half brothers born to her mother and stepfather.

Her stepfather was a beast of a man who harbored illicit designs on her. Although her mother was frail, she still tried to protect Zhao Xue when her stepfather drunkenly attempted to sexually assault the girl. For this, her stepfather beat her mother severely, and her mother passed away not long afterward.

Domestic violence against women was so commonplace in this wretched village that no one even raised an eyebrow. As long as she hadn't been beaten to death on the spot, it was very difficult to prove that her abominable husband was the murderer.

After her mother was buried, Zhao Xue was forced to stop going to school so that she could stay home and cook for her stepfather and three older brothers.

Because of his wife's death, her stepfather didn't dare assault her at first. However, shortly thereafter, a wealthy family offered a very generous betrothal gift to "buy" Zhao Xue, and her stepfather gladly agreed to the request.

The sum they offered was so large that it would take him several years to squander away. So of course he didn't care that the

son of that wealthy family had vitiligo and was mentally ill. What did that have to do with him? *He* wasn't the one being married off.

The news gave Zhao Xue such a horrible fright that she ran away from home that very night. She left the Zhao Family Village, scrambled over a hill, and escaped to the neighboring Zhuang Family Village…

After Zhuang Zhiqiang finished listening to her story, he smoked his pipe in silence for a long while. As he looked at the girl kneeling before him, he made up his mind.

He said to Zhao Xue, "Miss, how about this—if you feel safe here, you can stay with me for a night. Tomorrow, I'll bring you into town; there's a new Hope Elementary School there. They take boarding students; we can try to explain your situation to the principal, and if you're accepted, you don't have to go back. You can stay in the county seat, and you don't need to ever return to that awful place. Are you willing to trust me?"

Zhao Xue was simultaneously very unlucky and very lucky.

It was unlucky that she'd been born into such an awful family, but it was lucky that she met Zhuang Zhiqiang.

The principal of Hope Elementary School was a very kind woman. She didn't just take in this new student; she also protected her unfalteringly for many years afterward.

For most of the year, Zhao Xue lived at school with the principal. During vacations, she would make the car ride back to the Zhuang Family Village to help Zhuang Zhiqiang with farming and other chores.

Zhao Xue saw Lao-Zhuang as her father, and when she called him her old man, Zhuang Zhiqiang would smile from ear to ear. But not many people met Zhao Xue, and even fewer knew that Zhuang Zhiqiang treated her like his own daughter. After all, Zhao Xue was a runaway from the neighboring village, and Zhuang Zhiqiang didn't want her life to be disrupted again.

The days passed like that as Zhao Xue advanced from elementary school to middle school, and then to high school…

Zhao Xue made good on the kindness that Zhuang Zhiqiang and the principal had shown to her—with exceptional marks, she was accepted into a newly built high school in the county seat.

This school was also a charitable project, but its infrastructure and resources were considerably better than most of the schools built through Project Hope. The school even had a variety of arts training programs to provide more opportunities for children from the mountains to move into the prospering city.

"Later, she told me that she was selected as an arts candidate," Zhuang Zhiqiang recalled. "I didn't know what an arts candidate was, so she explained it to me. She wanted to be a model or celebrity on TV one day…so she needed to take specialized classes in Huzhou…"

When the old man reached this point in his story, he sorrowfully dabbed at his eyes with a tissue.

"I was very happy at the time," he said in a choked-up voice. "Huzhou was a big city, I thought, and not many people got the chance to establish themselves there. But my daughter could… My daughter was amazing…"

Zhuang Zhiqiang paused before suddenly breaking down into loud sobs. "But I never saw her again… After she came here, it was like she vanished. I asked the school, but they didn't know anything. I went to the address they gave me, but there was nothing there; she had already moved… I couldn't find her… I couldn't find her…"

The old man couldn't stop weeping. "I'm not crazy… I really do have a daughter… I haven't seen her in so many years… I miss her… Even on my deathbed, I still can't bear to let her go. Where did she go…? Does she remember this old man…?"

Tears fell one after another onto the blankets.

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng stayed quietly by his side, lending their company to this elder who was weeping like a child.

Perhaps because the sight was too pitiful, He Yu spoke up even though he knew the chances were slim.

"Uncle, let me try to help—do you have any information about Zhao Xue's last whereabouts? For example, do you know who invited her to come to Huzhou?"

"I asked the school, but they said it was too long ago and they didn't have the records anymore…"

"After Zhao Xue came to Huzhou, did she contact you?"

"Only at first…" Zhuang Zhiqiang recalled. "At first, she would call me in good spirits, but at the time, she only told me that Huzhou was very beautiful and that she saw many things she'd only seen on TV before—she didn't talk about much else…because Secretary Wang had her sign a, what's it called…an NDA…"

He Yu's heart skipped a beat.

Even though there were countless people in the world with the surname Wang, in the context of arts training programs, mysterious disappearances, and criminal activities, he immediately thought of one person.

He asked Zhuang Zhiqiang, "Did Zhao Xue ever tell you the full name of that Secretary Wang?"

"She—she did, but I didn't pay particular attention to it at the time; I can't remember anymore. I think it was Wang… Wang something… Kang…"

It was like a sudden clap of thunder sounded.

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng turned to one another, each seeing his own unsightly expression in the other man's eyes—

Wang Jiankang.

The first victim in the Huzhou broadcasting tower murders.

Zhao Xue's disappearance was related to them! Neither of them could have expected it, but this was a clue for their investigation of the Cheng Kang and broadcasting tower cases!

Chapter 112:
I Held You

A FEW DAYS LATER, Zhuang Zhiqiang passed away.

The old man didn't get a chance to reunite with his long-lost daughter before he left the world, but at the very least, he received a little bit of comfort and company.

After He Yu and Xie Qingcheng settled Zhuang Zhiqiang's affairs, they prepared to set off for his hometown, the Zhuang Family Village of Qingli County.

They'd both known of Zhuang Zhiqiang's birthplace, but they hadn't researched it in any detail. Now, upon taking a closer look, they were somewhat surprised to discover that Zhuang Zhiqiang was from Qingli County.

"Lu Yuzhu used to be the county secretary there," Xie Qingcheng remarked.

"Do you think that's a coincidence?"

Xie Qingcheng shook his head.

"I don't think it's so simple either," said He Yu. "Let's take things one step at a time, but we need to move faster. We can't let this go the same way it did with Sha Hong—we can't let our enemies destroy the evidence first."

He Yu didn't need to say any more. They both quickly requested time off, and they boarded a flight to their destination that very night.

After the plane landed two hours later, they hired a car and set out toward the Zhuang Family Village of Qingli County.

The sky was glimmering with the first rays of dawn by the time they reached the village. They found a local guest house to stay in,

and although He Yu did his best to mentally prepare himself, entering the room still proved to be a horrible shock.

He'd never seen such a shabby hotel before. The room smelled like mildew. The carpet hadn't been installed evenly. The tiles on the floor were cheap, the vanity was blooming with mold, and the mirror was covered in splotchy marks. Not even the sheets were clean—they were littered with suspicious-looking light brown stains.

He Yu turned to leave on the spot, suitcase in tow.

"…What are you doing?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I can't deal with this."

"Just bear with it for one night."

"I don't want to."

"Then where are you going to stay?"

"I'd rather sleep in a pile of hay outside than stay in this kind of place."

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to deal with him—he was so delicate, like a spoiled, prissy young lady. On second thought, though, He Yu *had* only followed him to this backwater to track down the clues that would lead them to the drug Xie Xue had taken.

He might as well let it go, he decided.

"Okay, enough fussing," Xie-ge cajoled the prissy young lady. "I'll think of another way."

In the end, Xie Qingcheng found a rural farmhouse that seemed relatively clean and gave the family a thousand yuan to let them stay for two nights. When the family saw their handsome looks and urbane mannerisms—and, of course, their money—they were delighted to accommodate their requests. The room they prepared wasn't very large and only had one bed, but at least it was clean and tidy. The lady proprietor made sure to lay out two fluffed cotton mattresses from the closet for them, and then very politely brought them two cups of tea.

He Yu stood in the room, still feeling rather ill at ease.

"Sit down and drink some tea," Xie Qingcheng said.

He Yu walked over and peered at the tea—the water wasn't clear, and it gave off an earthy smell even after it had been steeped. He walked away again, like an aristocratic kitten who'd rather die of thirst than drink it.

Luckily, Xie Qingcheng had two cartons of Shuhua milk in his suitcase. He handed them to He Yu.

He Yu took them, glaring at him. "Is this all you're giving me?"

Xie Qingcheng's patience had run out.

"I brought them just for you. If you don't want them, give them back to me."

He Yu rolled his eyes. He reluctantly pulled the straw off of the carton and took tiny sips of the processed milk that he disdained for not being pure enough.

After they'd settled in and eased some of their weariness from traveling, they set out again to investigate Zhao Xue.

They first went to the high school where Zhao Xue had studied, but the building was abandoned, the grounds overgrown with weeds. The school's main iron gate was closed, held in place by a thick, corroded chain that looked like the molted skin left behind by a snake.

"Humanity High School? It's been closed for years now." The shopkeeper at the small convenience store nearby cracked peanut shells as he answered their questions about the school. "The financial backer withdrew their funding—there was a big fuss at the time. A lot of the students had nowhere else to study. It's really quite a loss."

"Do you know who the principal was, and where they are now?" He Yu asked.

"The principal? The first principal was a woman, but she left after just a few years. The principal after her was from the city, but after the school closed, he left too. He didn't talk much with the people in the village while he was here—he was an educated man, you know, a bit stuck up. We couldn't really understand him. But you guys can go to the Yi Family Village up the road and ask around—there's an integrated nine-year elementary and middle school there that used to have a partnership with Humanity High School. They might know more there."

When he heard the words "Yi Family Village," a vague sense of anticipation and unease rose in Xie Qingcheng's heart.

Following the shopkeeper's directions, the two of them walked a kilometer to another small village in Qingli County. Underneath the towering tree at the village entrance, a handful of wizened old men were playing cards. The sounds of mahjong tiles being shuffled and dice being thrown in a cup drifted out of a two-story building with clay roof tiles nearby—it was obviously an underground gambling house.

Next to this gambling house, there was a stone tablet with three large words carved into it:

Yi Family Village.

It was obvious at a glance that this village had a gambling problem. He Yu coldly appraised the group of old men, who were still betting so intently despite the fact that they might as well already be half-buried in the sandy loess soil. He turned back to Xie Qingcheng and said disdainfully, "This place is too…"

But when he caught sight of Xie Qingcheng's face, He Yu stopped speaking.

Xie Qingcheng had suddenly gone extremely pale.

He Yu wasn't stupid. After a few seconds of dumbfounded silence, he put the pieces together—the Yi Family Village, the surname Yi, a remote backwater, a gambling addiction, the little

casino at the village entrance… One name suddenly surfaced from his thoughts.

"Yi Beihai."

This was where Qin Ciyan's murderer had lived!

Xie Qingcheng had seen pictures of the Yi Family Village in the papers before. After Qin Ciyan's death, quite a few journalists had rushed here to photograph Yi Beihai's old home. The cobwebby front door had been sealed, but the mud-brick house itself still hadn't been torn down. Still, the building appeared entirely decrepit.

Xie Qingcheng walked over to that old house, staring at every single brick and tile. The rims of his eyes slowly reddened; it was hard to say if it was out of hatred or heartbreak.

He was about to lose himself in the scene when somebody suddenly grabbed his wrist. It was He Yu.

"You—" Xie Qingcheng snapped.

"What an ugly hovel. Let's go. Don't look at it anymore. It'd be bad luck to look at it too much."

He Yu covered Xie Qingcheng's eyes with his other hand as he spoke, forcibly turning his face away from the house. He kept talking in a tone that brooked no resistance.

"Quick, come with me to the school."

He Yu's attitude somehow seemed both comforting and completely unreasonable.

Xie Qingcheng really couldn't pin down his behavior—He Yu had been acting so strangely lately, always speaking to him so harshly, as if Xie Qingcheng owed him five million yuan.

But he hadn't done any of those shameful things to him again.

"Let's go," He Yu repeated.

Xie Qingcheng stilled for a moment, pulling his wrist out of He Yu's grasp. He hated being told what to do by anyone, especially when the person in question was a boy so many years his junior, but

he knew that He Yu was right. He straightened out his cuff and took a moment to calm himself down.

"It's fine," he said. "I can walk on my own."

He willed himself to look away from Yi Beihai's old home. Sliding his hands into the pockets of his coat with a solemn expression, he strode past He Yu.

He Yu watched his silhouette…

Although Xie Qingcheng's expression had been unsightly when he turned away, his figure was as upright, tall, and resolute as ever, as if nothing other than death itself would be able to break him.

Xie Qingcheng…

Silently reciting his name to himself, He Yu caught up to him.

Soon, the two of them arrived at the Hope School of the Yi Family Village.

When Zhao Xue had been a student at this school, it was still called the Hope Elementary School of the Yi Family Village. Later, it merged with another school to become an integrated elementary and middle school, teaching students from first through ninth grades, which was when it had acquired its current name.

As soon as Xie Qingcheng caught sight of the principal, he knew they had no cause for optimism.

The principal was very young, probably not even thirty years old, and obviously couldn't be the same person who had helped Zhao Xue back then. After a very simple conversation with her, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng's hearts plummeted even further—the former principal had passed away many years ago, and the turnover rate for other teachers was very high.

Most teachers who came to teach in rural areas didn't remain for very long—only a handful had stayed on for more than five or six years, and of those, none had ever met the person who had overseen Humanity High School.

"Is there any way to access the old files?" He Yu asked.

"There used to be an archival library in the village, but there was a fire a few years ago. Humanity High School's materials were all in there, so there's nothing left now."

An archival library that caught fire…

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng were more certain than ever that this matter was closely linked to the Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital and Huzhou Broadcasting Tower cases. The methods used in these three cases were too similar; it could hardly be called coincidence.

But the problem was extremely obvious: their opponents hadn't left them any trails to follow.

The people who were familiar with these cases were impossible to track down, like sand washed away by the pounding waves. After an entire day of searching, Xie Qingcheng and He Yu came up essentially empty-handed.

At nightfall, they returned to the farmhouse.

The family had prepared some food for them. After eating a bit, Xie Qingcheng went back to their room to rest. Just from looking at his weary profile, He Yu could tell that there was a lot weighing on his heart.

He thought for a while, and then turned to the woman they were staying with. "Auntie, are there any nice restaurants around here?"

"There's one place that's pretty good, but it's a little far—it takes more than half an hour to walk there." The lady seemed a bit worried. "Was dinner not to your taste?"

"Ah, that's not it at all. I enjoyed it very much." He Yu smiled. "It's just that my friend isn't feeling well—I didn't want to bother you, so I thought I'd go out and get some more food for him."

She understood now. "Is that gentleman your older brother?" she asked.

"…You could say that, yeah."

"You're so good to him—look at you two, full of brotherly affection."

He Yu smiled without saying a word.

The lady was very warmhearted, and her husband happened to be making a trip to the fields and said he could take He Yu along. He Yu gladly agreed.

As it turned out, the man drove a tractor.

He Yu couldn't be too picky in a backwater like this—at any rate, riding a tractor was still better than walking half an hour by himself on these unlit roads at night. Thus, He Yu became a tractor-riding CEO who took a long, arduous journey to get takeout for his Doctor Xie.

Fortunately, the restaurant's food was excellent. Although the place was on the small side, it was mercifully clean and neat. He Yu ordered a few stir-fried dishes to go, and then, remembering that Xie Qingcheng had been coughing a lot lately, he asked the owner to prepare some soothing stewed pear syrup with rock sugar. Then he rode back on the tractor.

When he got back to the room, Xie Qingcheng was already asleep. Since there was only one actual bed in the room and Xie Qingcheng obviously didn't want to sleep with He Yu, he had made up a bed for himself on the floor.

The sound of He Yu coming home woke him from his light slumber.

"Where did you go?"

He Yu walked over to the table and brought the takeout containers one by one out of the plastic bag, instantly filling the room with the aroma of food.

"I didn't really like the food at dinner, so I got some things from a restaurant nearby. Want any?"

"No…" Xie Qingcheng replied.

The hand in which He Yu was holding his chopsticks momentarily stilled. He said somewhat gloomily, "I ordered too much, so if you don't eat any, I'll have to throw it out."

"Could you not waste so much food?"

"Then get up and eat with me."

Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to throw on a jacket, pull himself up, and sit down at the table, coughing all the while.

But when he saw the dishes on the table, he frowned slightly, his gaze rising to land on He Yu's face.

"What's wrong? Is it not to your taste?"

"No."

Not to his taste? It was perfectly suited to his taste—*too* perfectly. Peppercorn chicken, mapo tofu, tomato beef brisket soup, sauteed sweet potato leaves…

They were just some small homestyle dishes, but they were all things Xie Qingcheng liked to eat.

More importantly, they weren't things He Yu particularly liked.

He Yu was incredibly particular—his sea urchins had to be Sardinian, his oysters had to be Irish, and he wouldn't even eat Australian beef—it had to be Japanese. He didn't eat spicy or numbing foods, and he wasn't fond of vegetables either.

But this was He Yu he was talking about, here. Surely he would never go out of his way to buy extra food for Xie Qingcheng.

He dismissed the idea completely until He Yu took a jar of stewed pear with rock sugar out of a paper bag and pushed it in front of Xie Qingcheng with a wooden expression.

Xie Qingcheng stared.

"What are you looking at?" He Yu said. "I don't want you to keep me up all night with your coughing."

Xie Qingcheng was a straightforward person; he didn't like to beat around the bush. Since He Yu had indeed gotten this specifically for him, he glanced at him and said sincerely, "Thank you."

He Yu wasn't so straightforward. He turned his head away. "Take your time eating. I'm going to wash up."

The mere sight of the farmhouse's extremely crude washroom gave He Yu the heebie-jeebies. He steeled himself through a quick shower, then immediately dressed again and went back to the room. Xie Qingcheng had already cleaned everything up and was standing by the window, feebly drinking the stewed pear as he looked at the overcast landscape outside.

For a moment, as He Yu walked toward him, he wanted so badly to wrap his arms around his slender waist from behind and kiss the cinnabar mole at his nape, to let his lips trail down the bluish veins of his neck. He wanted to cast his eyes down to drop kisses along the stark line of his jaw, then finally kiss him on his thin lips.

He wanted to kiss him, he wanted to have him, ten thousand times over.

But he knew that he shouldn't.

He loved Xie Qingcheng, but he didn't want to lose control over himself, and he really didn't want his love to hurt Xie Qingcheng any more. Xie Qingcheng's emotional burdens were already grave enough, and He Yu feared that if he carelessly poured any more into Xie Qingcheng's body, he would collapse beneath the weight and fall apart completely.

As if he felt He Yu's gaze, Xie Qingcheng looked back at him, coughing softly. He emanated an inexplicable blend of strength and fragility.

"It's getting late," he said. "You should sleep. We'll continue investigating tomorrow."

He Yu was about to agree when he caught sight of Xie Qingcheng's other hand where it was resting against the window frame. His face suddenly fell. He was stunned speechless.

Unbelievable! Xie Qingcheng was *still* smoking!

Not only that—he was smoking *while* drinking the stewed pear!

Young people might go out clubbing while drinking goji berry tea, but this menopausal old man refused to be outdone—he could drink a cough remedy at the exact same time he devoted his energy to the nation's tobacco industry.

Thoroughly shocked and infuriated, He Yu strode over to the window and snatched the cigarette right out of Xie Qingcheng's hand.

"What are you *smoking*?"

"…Marlboro."

"Not the brand! I meant—are you *seriously smoking*?!"

He Yu stubbed out the cigarette on the wall with a hiss and tossed it out the window, fed up with Xie Qingcheng beyond belief.

"You *reek* of tobacco. You're not allowed to smoke anymore."

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to make a scene with him, so he pushed He Yu away. "Fine, I won't smoke anymore. I'm going to sleep."

"What are you sleeping on the floor for?" He Yu demanded. "It's a double bed."

Did he really need to ask why Xie Qingcheng was sleeping on the floor? Young people these days were way too casual.

Although he had slept with He Yu so many times, none of those trysts meant much of anything to him—none except for the last time. That one night with He Yu had brought him a pleasure he'd never known before—real, genuine pleasure. He had never experienced anything like that before, whether with Li Ruoqiu or by himself.

When he thought of what he'd done with He Yu that night, and especially how he'd taken the initiative himself, it seemed too absurd—and too dangerous.

It felt like He Yu had bewitched him. How else could things have gotten to that point?

When he woke up the next morning and smoked an after-sex cigarette, watching the boy sleeping soundly in the crook of his neck, alarm bells went off in his heart. He knew that he could not, under any circumstances, let something like that happen between him and He Yu ever again.

The best method of prevention would be to reduce unnecessary contact.

Xie Qingcheng looked at He Yu calmly and solemnly. "It's not suitable for us to sleep in the same bed. As for the reason why, you should be clever enough to figure it out. You're younger, so I'll let you have the bed. It's time for me to rest. Thanks for dinner."

Xie Qingcheng was about to go lie down, but the youngster was faster than him and took the bedding on the floor first.

"I'm not about to fight over the bed with an uncle," He Yu said grimly. "As the chairman of the student government, it's my duty to respect the old and cherish the young. Please take the bed—you're getting on in years, and I wouldn't want you to injure your back."

Faced with He Yu's stubbornness, Xie Qingcheng didn't feel like wasting any more time. There was so much weighing on his mind already. He really didn't have the energy to bicker with He Yu.

He took another blanket from the bed and gave it to He Yu. Then he sighed, shrugged off his jacket, and lay down on the spaciously empty double bed.

"Go to sleep. I'm turning off the light."

"Okay."

However, in the quiet of the night, neither of them slept.

This was a given for He Yu—like most young people, he usually went to bed late and didn't get much sleep to begin with. As for Xie Qingcheng, he had too many things to do and too many thoughts in his mind, so he tossed and turned in the darkness, sighing softly to himself, unable to sleep soundly.

Although Xie Xue's illness didn't present any major issues for now, there was a chance that her condition could worsen at any time while the new drug remained unknown. He couldn't stop worrying about her.

And there was the matter of Yi Beihai, too… This was Yi Beihai's hometown, and Lu Yuzhu's hometown too. These unremarkable characters who had stirred up such perilous waves were all born in this remote Qingli County—could it really be a coincidence?

Then he thought of Qin Ciyan again. Xie Qingcheng's heart ached deeply and uncontrollably.

He closed his eyes, but it was impossible to fall asleep.

Halfway through the night, rain started falling outside the window, sheeting down in torrents. The gusting wind brought a damp chill into the room.

The blanket was too thin, so Xie Qingcheng's coughing grew worse and worse, until he couldn't stop. In a daze, he heard an indistinct movement from behind him. Before he could react, he felt a familiar warmth—

He Yu had climbed into bed and hugged him from behind.

Chapter 113:
Who Was It That I Saw?

XIE QINGCHENG STIFFENED for a moment. In the darkness, he silently opened his eyes.

He didn't want to sleep with He Yu, of course, but given the condition he was in, he didn't have it in him to struggle against him, either.

When he felt Xie Qingcheng suddenly tense up, He Yu knew that he wasn't asleep.

"Ge," he said quietly into his ear, "let me squeeze in with you. I'm cold."

"…Didn't I already say that you should take the bed?" Xie Qingcheng tried to sit up.

"Don't get up—I'm freezing to death. Come on, Xie Qingcheng… I'm only going to hug you. I won't do anything else."

Xie Qingcheng could tell that he really wasn't making any advances. The young man's body felt like a scalding hot stove pressed to his back. Although "freezing to death" seemed like a complete lie, Xie Qingcheng ultimately didn't want to continue the conversation.

Fine—He Yu could do whatever he wanted.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes again. Surrounded by the young man's warmth as he curled up next to him, he tried to make himself relax.

He Yu was only twenty, after all, and brimming with vigor. With his back pressed against the boy's chest, Xie Qingcheng could feel his heartbeat and his body heat. Gradually, he stopped shivering from the cold, and drowsiness slowly overtook him.

His body relaxed, but unfortunately his heart couldn't. As soon as dreams overtook Xie Qingcheng, he saw Yi Beihai brandishing a cleaver, his head thrown back in maniacal laughter.

He saw Qin Ciyan's body falling from the window like a marionette with its strings cut, falling…falling…

The scene suddenly shifted into one of countless moon jellyfish drifting in the rays of the setting sun, floating past cafés and markets on the streets of Brooklyn. The man who was like a father to him walked out of one of the shops, carrying his dinner in a brown paper bag, and smiled.

"Ah, Xiao-Xie…"

His smile gradually blurred in the lovely sunset, the golden light turning into scarlet blood that gushed from broken bodies, only to be washed away by the rain.

Zhou Muying and Xie Ping lay in the wreckage of the crash, a police cordon drawn around them in the downpour as the truck that had driven into them of its own accord was consumed by a roaring inferno…

The flames licked the heavens like the tongues of demons. In Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital, Jiang Lanpei sang softly, "Drop, drop, drop the hanky, set it lightly behind your friend's back, no one let him know…"

He rushed in, but it was too late. Xie Xue's dismembered corpse lay on the floor…

He started coughing violently.

"Xie Qingcheng! Xie Qingcheng! Wake up! *Wake up!*"

Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes flew open wide, pupils drawn into dots. He was drenched in cold sweat, panting, as He Yu's face appeared in his unfocused gaze.

He Yu was leaning over him, one hand propped next to his pillow as he patted his face with his other hand. He said anxiously, "Wake up, you're having a bad dream."

Even though Xie Qingcheng had opened his eyes, the nightmare kept going. His mind was still trapped in the chaos of his dreams.

As he saw He Yu's face so close to his own, those handsome features overlapped with his memories of He Yu from that night in the club. In that moment, it was like he was still lying on that black leather sofa, and He Yu was about to pour that scarlet liquor onto his chest.

Jerking upright, Xie Qingcheng harshly shoved He Yu away.

"Don't touch me… You…" he rasped out between coughs. "Stay away from me." His illness and his dream had left his body weak, but the look in his eyes was severe. He resisted instinctively.

He Yu wasn't an easygoing person to begin with, and he couldn't pretend it didn't bother him to have his good intentions so roundly rejected by Xie Qingcheng.

But then he saw the way Xie Qingcheng's hands were pale and trembling, that even his fingertips were shaking as he buried his face in his palms—

He Yu fell silent at once. He knew that he must've played a part in that nightmare.

The boy's expression grew grave as he realized—every time he touched him now, Xie Qingcheng would subconsciously remember the things they had done before. And for Xie Qingcheng, they were all undoubtedly memories he didn't wish to relive.

No matter how good He Yu's intentions were, how deep his desires ran, or how badly he wanted to just hug Xie Qingcheng and comfort him, Xie Qingcheng would never need any of that from him.

It seemed like his presence could only worsen Xie Qingcheng's condition.

He Yu stared in silence at Xie Qingcheng for a long moment, his gaze at once heated, fierce, and helpless, until he finally managed to force down his desire to draw close to him. With a grim

expression, he slowly got off the bed, pushed open the door, and walked out of the room.

Xie Qingcheng sat alone on the bed, still surrounded by the warmth of two people cuddled together. As that warmth gradually faded, he leaned back against the headboard, the curve of his neck a delicate arc. Then, he slowly closed his eyes.

He didn't want to care what He Yu was doing. Whether the brat was hurt or pissed off, it didn't matter to him.

Once, he had wanted to give He Yu the last drop of hot blood in his body, but on that night in the club, He Yu had personally scattered the handful of warmth that Xie Qingcheng offered him. Even though they'd made it through a life-or-death situation together afterward, in the depths of his heart, Xie Qingcheng could no longer accept He Yu the way he once had.

He would never be able to accept him…

As Xie Qingcheng calmed down, he was taken aback by the sudden sound of the door creaking open again so soon.

He was even more surprised to see He Yu walking in with a cup of freshly boiled water, steam spiraling from its surface.

He Yu passed the water to him, his gaze lowered.

"Drink this," he said without looking at Xie Qingcheng. "When I used to have bad dreams when I was home alone, I always drank a cup of hot water. It'll make you feel much better."

He was right.

In the chilly night, surrounded by lingering nightmares, it was very difficult to resist the temptation of a cup of hot water.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and took the cup at last, still murmuring his thanks. Then he took two white tablets from a pill case by the bed and washed them down with the water.

"Are those the pills you take for your psychological Ebola?"

“Mm-hm.” After swallowing the pills, Xie Qingcheng took a few more sips of water. He gradually relaxed, some color returning to his lips. He noticed that He Yu wanted to take a closer look at the pill case, but he reached out to stop him. “They’re different from yours. They won’t work on you.”

“Are you sure these pills are really effective?” He Yu asked. “Your health still seems pretty bad to me.”

Xie Qingcheng looked up at him. “Who’s the doctor here, you or me?”

“…Right, you’re the doctor. All right.” He Yu put the pill case down and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

“It’s so annoying how you keep startling awake and shivering from the cold—I’m done waiting on you,” He Yu said carelessly. “I’m going outside to look at the stars.” With that halfhearted excuse, he left.

But of course he wasn’t going to look at the stars—his heart simultaneously ached and burned.

The way Xie Qingcheng had looked when he startled awake made him want to hold him and comfort him. The way Xie Qingcheng looked when he slept, knitting his brows in his sleep and trembling slightly, made him want nothing more than to indulge his innate inclination for aggression in bed and start passionately fucking him.

Every time He Yu suppressed his emotions and diverted his intense love and desire away from their target, it was inevitably a blow to his mental state. This internal conflict was wearing him down, especially since he still had to maintain his calm, unflappable facade in front of Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu walked out to the path between the fields and pressed an ice-cold pocket knife to his wrist—long ago, he’d left behind a self-inflicted scar there. He would hurt himself if he didn’t hurt

others—his illness was impossible to placate without an offering of blood and anguish.

He didn't want to hurt Xie Qingcheng anymore—his strange dragon kin had already suffered too many wounds. In the end, the only person left for him to hurt was himself.

Blood trickled out, but he was soon numb to the pain.

At last, He Yu threw the blade to the ground, burying his twitching hands in his pitch-dark hair. He doubled over where he stood, holding his head in his arms as his heart screamed silently—his anguish overwhelmed him. He couldn't escape.

Sometimes, he even wondered—if he hadn't done that to Xie Qingcheng in the club, would everything have turned out differently? Could things have taken a turn for the better?

Whoosh…

As the night wind echoed off the loess hills and whispered through the parched leaves of the Russian olives, He Yu tried his best to calm his heart.

Suddenly, he heard the rustling of footsteps in the distance.

He Yu lifted his scarlet eyes, unconsciously looking toward the source of the sound. It was a person dressed in red, their features obscured behind a muffler. This person seemed to have the figure of a slim woman, but it definitely wasn't the woman from the farmhouse.

The woman furtively approached the house where they were staying, pausing hesitantly next to the window and standing on her tiptoes several times to peer inside.

He Yu froze in astonishment, because the window she was looking into was the one to his and Xie Qingcheng's room.

He Yu pulled himself together and straightened up.

It seemed like almost anything could happen here in Qingli County—Yi Beihai, Lu Yuzhu, and Zhuang Zhiqiang's long-lost

daughter Zhao Xue were all from this strange place. It was as though an invisible black net stretched over the county, ensnaring all sorts of murder cases, missing persons, and criminal forces.

He and Xie Qingcheng were outsiders who'd come here to dig up long-buried clues. They were bound to be discovered.

Truthfully, He Yu wouldn't have been surprised if someone had received orders to kill them. Since the moment they arrived in Qingli County, he'd been on high alert, never letting his guard down even when he slept.

He wasn't afraid of killing or drawing blood—if his opponent showed an inkling of aggression, they'd be knocking into the muzzle of his metaphorical loaded gun.

His heart was filled with waves of sickness that needed to be drained out.

If these criminals wanted to attack them, giving him the excuse of legitimate self-defense, he wouldn't hesitate to tear open their chests and carve out their hearts.

He Yu stared unblinkingly at the woman in the red dress; she had yet to sense his presence. Holding his breath in rapt attention, he slowly drew closer—

The woman's skulking silhouette was reflected in his scarlet eyes. Just as the mantis stalked the cicada, unaware of the oriole lurking behind it, she had no idea that He Yu was watching her every move. Suddenly—

The woman swiftly reached behind her back as if about to pull something out.

The unblinkingly executed murders from Cheng Kang hospital, the broadcasting tower, and the production of *The Trial* flashed through He Yu's mind.

Was it a gun?!

He rushed from the shadows faster than she moved out in the open. By the time her hand reached the rigid object at her back, a

sharp knife was already pressed between her shoulder blades.

He Yu's icy voice spoke from behind her. "Don't move."

A shiver ran through the woman's slender body.

The tip of He Yu's knife slowly slid down her spine until it reached the arm hidden below her windbreaker.

"Put it down."

The woman said nothing.

He Yu repeated himself, this time colder and more threatening. "Put. It. Down."

"…Looks like I don't have a choice, do I?" said the woman.

"No, you don't."

For a moment, there was silence. Then the woman seemed to decide that, under these circumstances, listening to He Yu was her only option.

Something heavy slid to the ground with a muffled thud. It was too dark outside for He Yu to clearly see what it was, but he was in no rush to find out right away.

"Good. Now, put your hands in the air and turn around," he ordered. "I said, turn around."

The woman had no choice but to give in to He Yu's demands. She slowly turned to face him. In the darkness, He Yu saw a pair of extremely familiar eyes—he had definitely gazed into those eyes before, somewhere else.

"Take off your scarf. Hurry up."

A dog barked a few times somewhere in the distance, the bizarre soundtrack to their confrontation in this mountain village.

The woman stared intently at He Yu with those familiar eyes. Then, she slowly reached up, lifted her muffler, and—

Suddenly, she drew her hand back and locked him in place with astonishing force. With a strength that was shocking for a woman of

her build, she shoved He Yu away, breaking free of his grasp. She then leveled a roundhouse kick at him, forcing him to duck away. The woman seized her chance to run, and He Yu swore to himself, grabbing a corner of her hooded coat.

"Let go!" the woman snarled.

He Yu didn't loosen his grip. Her coat ripped as the two of them yanked it back and forth, the force pulling it down to expose her face.

Thousands of suspicions had already filled He Yu's heart. But no matter how calm or fearless he might be facing any kind of murderer, when the murky light fell onto that woman's face, he still froze in shock.

Chapter 114:
I'd Seen Her Before

"LU YUZHU?!"

It really was her: the woman he'd thought had died in the explosion at the archives!

How could this be?

He and Xie Qingcheng had been there themselves, when the entire library had been leveled by an assortment of buried explosives. How could Lu Yuzhu's flesh-and-blood body have made it out of there unscathed?

While he stared blankly, the woman seized her chance to flee. As she sprinted away at top speed, the sleeves of her red dress fluttered in the desolate landscape, making her look like a spirit risen from the grave. She swiftly tore through the brambly undergrowth and disappeared from sight.

He Yu was about to give chase when he suddenly caught sight of the object she'd dropped. It wasn't a handgun—in fact, it wasn't a weapon at all.

It was a thick brown paper bag.

After standing there dumbfounded for a long while, He Yu carefully picked up the hefty bag. On his way back to the house, he ran into Xie Qingcheng with his coat thrown over his shoulders.

"What happened?" Xie Qingcheng asked. "I heard something outside."

He Yu didn't know how he was supposed to explain. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he never would have believed that Lu Yuzhu was still alive, much less that she had somehow followed them to Qingli County and peered into a farmhouse window to watch them in the middle of the night.

Xie Qingcheng frowned at him. He Yu was still holding the brown paper bag.

"I'll tell you inside."

Back in the guest room…

Xie Qingcheng was equally shocked once he heard the whole story. "Are you sure you didn't confuse her with someone else?" he asked, coughing softly.

"I'm sure. That was definitely Lu Yuzhu's face. Though…"

"Though what?"

"Though when I fought her in the archives, we traded a few blows, and I didn't think she was that strong. Her reaction times weren't so fast either," He Yu said. "You didn't see the way she ran off in the end—she just vanished, like a ghost."

Xie Qingcheng remained silent.

"It wasn't just my imagination," He Yu said.

Xie Qingcheng took a sip of warm water, his features blurring slightly in the steam. "Do you still remember what Lu Yuzhu told us back in the archives?" he asked eventually.

"What?"

"She said she had a daughter."

He Yu blinked in surprise. Realization struck. "And this is Qingli County," he blurted out, "so that means—"

"That person might have been the daughter who never acknowledged her mother again."

"That would make sense," said He Yu. "Her speed and strength were nothing like her mother's. If she grew up doing farm work and running around in Qingli County, she'd be in much better shape than Lu Yuzhu."

"Let's inquire more closely tomorrow," Xie Qingcheng said. "We didn't find any clues at Humanity High School, but Lu Yuzhu's ex-husband and daughter are certainly worthy targets for investigation."

He Yu nodded.

They both glanced at the brown paper bag again.

"When she reached behind her back, I thought she was going for a gun," said He Yu. "But in the end, she only took out this bag."

"If it were a gun, you should've been running away. What were you doing, trying to disarm her?"

"…What's it to you?"

Xie Qingcheng glared at him.

He Yu took Xie Qingcheng's half-finished cup of water and swallowed a few sips as a pretense. "At any rate," he said, "this brown paper bag is what she left behind after all that sneaking around. Let's see what's inside."

The two of them cautiously opened the bag. Under the guest room's dim light, they huddled together to get a clearer look at the contents that fell out.

What they saw rendered them both speechless. That thick bundle of paper was…

The personnel records of Humanity High School.

"How…can this be?" He Yu mumbled.

Xie Qingcheng was just as surprised—how could he have anticipated a mysterious woman sneaking over here to drop off a bagful of the very records they'd been seeking in vain this entire time?

This situation just kept getting stranger.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu ventured. "Do you think these files are real?"

"Let's take a look at them first."

The moonlight outside the window was like frost as Xie Qingcheng and He Yu began shuffling through that thick sheaf of aged documents. Somewhere in the middle, their eyes paused on one page in particular.

"Zhao Xue," said He Yu.

Xie Qingcheng had spotted her name too.

The records of Zhuang Zhiqiang's foster daughter Zhao Xue were right here…

Zhao Xue actually looked a bit like Xie Xue—they both had a sweet, charming air about them. The report contained all sorts of details, from her family's address to the awards she received at school. In the space for "future whereabouts" near the bottom of the form, whoever filled it out had simply written "arts student in Huzhou." But the document didn't specify which arts institution she had enrolled in for further training.

Xie Qingcheng and He Yu quickly rifled through the reports and found over ten more that said "arts student in Huzhou" just like Zhao Xue's. All of them were very pretty female students. But these students had something else in common too—their parents and close relatives were almost all listed as "deceased."

"If these files are real, this means that the girls they picked to study in Huzhou were either no longer in contact with their families, like Zhao Xue, or they were already orphans. And all of them were very beautiful…" He Yu summed things up as he read. "If that was really Lu Yuzhu's daughter outside just now, why would she give these to us?" He paused, thinking. "And why would she even have these old records…?"

For the time being, neither of them had promising theories on the mysterious woman's motives.

They quickly finished looking through the files.

The faculty records were at the very end. He Yu and Xie Qingcheng found some documents there about the person who'd

been principal of Humanity High School at the time of its founding.

Although the files on the school's administration were very concise and not as detailed as the student records, they at least included basic information like names, places of birth, and photographs. One would usually imagine that someone harming schoolgirls would be a vulgar-looking man. However, contrary to their expectations, the picture before them showed a woman.

She had lovely features and a haughty bearing, with high cheekbones and thin lips. Even though the photograph was barely two inches tall, her strong, independent personality still shone through.

Xie Qingcheng peered at her, his brow furrowed.

"Don't you think…" He Yu began.

Xie Qingcheng looked up and met his eyes. "She looks a bit familiar."

"I think so too," said He Yu. "I feel like I've seen her before. But I can't think of where."

The principal's name was Jin Xiuhe. This record from over twenty years ago listed her age as twenty-eight, and her place of residence as Huzhou.

"Hold on." Seeing her name reminded He Yu of something. "I think I know who she is." He took out his phone as he spoke, typed in a few keywords, and pressed enter.

An assortment of text and photos appeared in the search results. He Yu took a few seconds to quickly glance through them before handing the phone to Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng saw that "Jin Xiuhe" actually had an encyclopedia entry.

Jin Xiuhe, female, former chairwoman of the Huzhou Women's League, chosen as one of the city's Top Ten Businesswomen in 1994…

All of this was unimportant.

The important part was the line about her marital status—in the entry for her husband's name, three shocking characters were written:

Huang Zhilong.

He Yu remembered everything now.

"Jin Xiuhe was Huang Zhilong's wife!"

If Humanity High School had such nefarious plots lurking behind it, then all those female arts students lured to Huzhou were likely linked to her as well… He turned it over in his mind.

Studying the performing arts…

Huang Zhilong's wife…

Arts students…

He Yu realized something. "If this is all true, could those old cases of missing students be related to Huang Zhilong's entertainment company?"

The longer he followed this train of thought, the clearer his ideas became. The appearance of these documents seemed to link together all the fragmented pieces of evidence they'd collected so far. It was as though a vast ocean had opened up before his eyes, with the truth soaring out of the water like a great mythical dragon.

He Yu suddenly looked up at Xie Qingcheng. "I have a guess."

"Go on."

"These are the clues we currently have in our hands." He Yu listed them out for Xie Qingcheng one by one. "First, before Humanity High School was shut down, Wang Jiankang came here to recruit students. He told them at the time that they would move to Huzhou to study the performing arts and prepare for their exams. He promised that they might become celebrities on TV and make a name for themselves as entertainers someday. Zhuang Zhiqiang's foster daughter Zhao Xue was one of these girls."

He Yu pointed to Zhao Xue's file.

"This record indicates that her last known position was as an 'arts student in Huzhou,' but we don't know where in Huzhou she went. Zhuang Zhiqiang was in contact with her when she first arrived, but Zhao Xue stopped all communication not long after that, and he never saw her again before he died. So we can assume Zhao Xue legitimately went missing."

He took a pen from the nightstand and marked Zhao Xue's file as "missing."

"I don't think she's the only missing person either. From these files, it's clear that all the 'arts students in Huzhou' had either very few family connections or were orphans without any relatives."

He Yu laid out each of the records in front of Xie Qingcheng as if revealing a hand of cards.

"We can go to the village committee tomorrow and ask around, but I think I know what we'll hear. These girls went to Huzhou full of hope to start on the road toward stardom, but they never came back. I assume that these overlooked women are either missing or deceased."

He Yu wrote down "Wang Jiankang." Then he made another internet search to check something.

"Second…the information on Baidu indicates that Wang Jiankang started working at Huzhou University fifteen years ago, as the person in charge of international academic exchanges. But after what happened at Cheng Kang, Wang Jiankang was killed. At the same time, Lu Yuzhu blew up the school's archival library, destroying everything inside."

"Do you suspect that the arts training institution that those girls went to was the Huzhou University School of Communications?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"Close," said He Yu. "From what I know about Huzhou University, they've never set up prep courses for the college

entrance examination in recent memory. But although there aren't official courses, there are plenty of unofficial ones. For example, there are some private prep centers that advertise with slogans like 'classes taught by Huzhou University professors,' and some of the really bold ones rent out Huzhou University's premises to recruit students. To outsiders, these agencies might look like they're legitimately affiliated with the university, but they're not actually related at all.

"I'm more inclined to believe that Wang Jiankang recruited students into one of these private prep centers with Huzhou University's name tacked onto it," He Yu continued. "That just leaves one problem—where did those students ultimately end up?"

He pushed the last case file in front of Xie Qingcheng and softly tapped his knuckles on the paper.

"Jin Xiuhe. She was Humanity High School's principal, and the fact that Wang Jiankang came to this school to recruit students can't be a coincidence. It's very possible that he and the school's administrators had a mutually beneficial arrangement. Humanity High School would've been like a long-term pipeline. You know teachers are often very familiar with their students, especially at a boarding school, so they had plenty of time to determine which students would be the best targets—which of them could disappear or die without anyone who'd search for the truth.

"Jin Xiuhe must have tacitly allowed or even abetted Wang Jiankang's wrongdoing, which means that she must have benefited from everything Wang Jiankang was doing. It's very likely that they were working together for mutual gain."

By this point, even He Yu couldn't help but sneer in disgust.

He could imagine girls like Zhao Xue, living through countless hardships and studying hard for a decade, yearning for a day in the future when they could transform into phoenixes and fly away from their dead-end lives. They slung shabby backpacks sewn out of old

clothing over their shoulders, carrying their precious dreams with them as they walked to school…

But they didn't know that this "charitable school" was different from the "Hope Elementary School" they had attended before. What awaited them was the yawning maw of a demon that would swallow up their flesh and bones.

"I think these missing people may ultimately be connected to Huang Zhilong's film company. And Huang Zhilong's company might be connected to Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital too.

"Do you remember at Cheng Kang Hospital, Jiang Lanpei said that the Liang brothers were perverts and had assaulted her?" He Yu asked. "I think we can come up with a theory—when Wang Jiankang took up his position at Huzhou University, he met Jin Xiuhe through his new job. The two of them worked together to choose the best targets among these students. Then, using the pretense of arts training, they decisively brought them under their control. These students became research subjects for a drug similar to RN-13. That kind of research…"

At this point, He Yu glanced at Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng's handsome features looked resolute beneath the lamplight. It was difficult to imagine that this man had once endured the torturous pain of having his body broken and bloodied so badly that he had no choice but to take an illegal drug to stay alive.

"That kind of research couldn't be endured by just anyone," He Yu said softly. He paused for a moment, then continued speaking with his eyes lowered. "They couldn't handle it, so they lost their minds. The women who went mad were sent to Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital, and they became the patients that the Liang brothers—Wang Jiankang and Jin Xiuhe's collaborators—took advantage of with their authority and money. In that hospital, those women were like prisoners condemned to an endless life sentence until their abusers squeezed out everything they could from them.

"I would guess that all the patients sent to Cheng Kang had their names changed. After enough time passed, it would be very challenging to investigate. Perhaps the clues were in Huzhou University's library, and that was why they needed to destroy it right after the Cheng Kang case."

Xie Qingcheng let He Yu finish. He carefully considered everything he'd said, before finally asking a single question.

"If Huang Zhilong is really connected to all this, then who orchestrated Hu Yi's death?"

"It might have been Huang Zhilong himself," He Yu answered.

"That's unlikely. *The Trial* had a colossal budget, but after Hu Yi died in that specimen tank, filming was halted on the entire production—that was a huge loss for Huang Zhilong. I don't think it was him."

"There's another possibility, then," said He Yu. "As a longtime criminal, at some point Huang Zhilong provoked someone who wanted revenge. But either way, I think we have some clues to follow now, about the RN-13 that Xie Xue took. If we direct our search toward Huang Zhilong's film company, we may find an answer."

"What about Jin Xiuhe?"

He Yu shook his head. "You don't understand our circles. No matter what she did back then or whether we find any evidence, Jin Xiuhe can no longer be convicted."

Xie Qingcheng raised his eyebrows, his expression turning combative. He couldn't stand it when people used their influence and power to subvert the law. "Really? How powerful is her backer?"

He Yu smiled wanly. "Extremely powerful."

"Who is it?"

"King Yanluo,"[10] He Yu replied. "Jin Xiuhe is dead. The only person we can investigate now is Huang Zhilong himself. But before we begin, we need to confirm something—"

He lifted the yellowing records again.

"We need to go to Lu Yuzhu's ex-husband's home tomorrow and figure out whether the girl from tonight is really Lu Yuzhu's daughter. If she is…I want to know how these files ended up in her hands."

Chapter 115:
We Went to a Massage Parlor

BY THE TIME they were ready to go back to sleep, it was very late at night.

After they'd analyzed all this data together, Xie Qingcheng was looking at He Yu with less distrust than before.

"You should rest soon," he said, then coughed softly a few times.

"Still cold?" He Yu asked.

"I'm fine," Xie Qingcheng answered. "I'll be better after drinking a bit of hot water and resting for a night." He pulled his jacket around him and walked over to the table. The unfinished cup of water there was still warm. Xie Qingcheng leaned against the table, sifting through the files once more as he slowly finished the water.

After enduring this harrowing ordeal, Xie Qingcheng seemed even wearier than before. He Yu didn't know if Xie Qingcheng had smoked too much, or if his health was simply poor, but ever since they'd met again, his physical condition had been noticeably deteriorating.

An air of sickness had settled over Xie Qingcheng's tall, striking figure, as if he was draped in a sheet of snow-white gauze. Beneath his unyielding aura of masculinity was a beauty as cool and fleeting as morning mist.

He Yu stood there for a while, watching the man who always seemed to slip through his fingers like pale tendrils of fog. Gradually, his mind began to wander.

Xie Qingcheng turned around and noticed him staring.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing…" He Yu responded. "I'm going to go wash my face. You should get some sleep."

He left the room with a strip of torn fabric in his hand. He wrapped it around his wrist to make sure Xie Qingcheng wouldn't see his self-inflicted wound while he was asleep. Only then did he go back inside.

By the time he returned, Xie Qingcheng had already fallen asleep on the bed. He Yu watched him calmly for a long while, with a look in his eyes that seemed both gentle and dangerous.

He knew that his thoughts toward Xie Qingcheng were even more extreme than anything that crossed the minds of Wang Jiankang's criminals.

Wang Jiankang and his cohorts committed murder and ran prostitution rings, but they were too unsophisticated—a crime committed solely for money, power, and fame was nothing more than an eyesore, as ugly and stupid as a dog rolling around in the mud.

Maybe he was mentally unsound, but he had no interest in the kinds of things they did. Because of the aberrant psychology etched into his bones, what he really wanted to do was to carve Xie Qingcheng into a work of art that belonged fully to him.

He would have to blind him in both eyes so he couldn't walk ahead without him.

If Xie Qingcheng didn't listen, he would pluck out his scales and peel away his tendons one by one, then press his bloody body to his chest, holding him close. With the coursing of hot blood and the regeneration of new skin, he would make his body meld seamlessly with his own.

That way, he could have him.

He could share every breath and every heartbeat with his only true companion.

He Yu stood by the wall for a while, savoring the bloodthirstiness in his heart, before sighing and walking over to the bed.

This time, Xie Qingcheng had left half of the bed for him. But He Yu didn't dare sleep in it anymore. Lowering his lashes, he slowly undressed. Then he lay down on the floor again and closed his eyes.

As soon as He Yu's eyes closed, Xie Qingcheng's opened. In the darkness, he looked sidelong at He Yu's face.

What was he doing?

Before, Xie Qingcheng hadn't wanted to sleep with him, yet He Yu insisted on squeezing in.

Now, he didn't care where He Yu slept—now that he knew he wouldn't do anything rash, Xie Qingcheng had even left him space on the bed so that the kid wouldn't catch a cold.

But he didn't want to sleep there anymore. It was truly baffling.

After a while, as if he could feel his gaze, He Yu's eyes flew open again.

Xie Qingcheng said nothing. Neither did He Yu.

The person on the bed, propped up against the pillows, met the gaze of the person on the floor.

He Yu's voice was audibly throaty, like the sound of a temple bell suppressing an evil beast. "What are you looking at?"

Xie Qingcheng was a man who valued directness, so since He Yu asked, he didn't beat around the bush. "Why are you sleeping on the floor again?"

"The bed is too hard and you're too skinny—sleeping up there holding you is really uncomfortable. And you smell like smoke."

Xie Qingcheng didn't reply.

"I can't stand you," He Yu said.

"That's for the best. Please carry on not being able to stand me." Xie Qingcheng turned off the light. "Sleep."

In the black of night, the room returned to darkness.

He Yu pulled the blanket over his face and whispered in a voice too quiet for the other man to overhear, "Xie Qingcheng, you moron. I was lying."

Even though he was sleeping right near him, He Yu took out his phone under the covers and silently opened Xie Qingcheng's WeChat profile. He typed some words he would never send into the chat box.

Xie-ge, goodnight.

Then he closed the page, opened that photograph of Xie Qingcheng in profile, and kissed it softly. This was the only way he could let out a tiny fraction of the emotions surging within him. Otherwise, he knew that the sickness he'd barely managed to suppress through self-harm would return with a vengeance.

He Yu didn't care whether he did beastly things—he knew he was already a beast in Xie Qingcheng's eyes.

But he cared about whether Xie Qingcheng could endure it.

Even though Xie Qingcheng was the bravest, strongest, and most resilient man he'd ever met, He Yu knew that no one's endurance was truly limitless. Xie Qingcheng had already been through so much, and he didn't want his desire to become the last straw that broke his back.

The night passed just like that.

Early the next morning, Xie Qingcheng and He Yu asked the family they were staying with where Lu Yuzhu's former husband lived.

"His house should be in the town center, I think." The lady didn't seem too sure, though. She turned to ask her husband. "It's there, right?"

"That's right," he replied. "I think it's on North Street—I'm not too familiar with the area so I'm not positive, but it should be around there. Are you heading there?" he added warmly. "I'll give you guys a ride."

Naturally, the ride was his extremely hip tractor.

He grinned at He Yu. "Hey kid, you and my tractor are fated! You rode it to get dinner for your gege last night, and now you're riding it again the very next day, ha ha ha!"

These villagers spoke straight from the heart, and He Yu was too late to stop him—he put a hand to his forehead helplessly.

Xie Qingcheng heard everything. His brow furrowed slightly as he looked at the boy next to him. So it was true. He'd known from a glance that He Yu must have ordered most of the dishes last night with him in mind, but this irrefutable confirmation made a subtle feeling stir in his chest.

Xie Qingcheng had taken care of Xie Xue, Li Ruoqiu, and Chen Man like that. But he'd never received the same kind of care in return—he was extremely unaccustomed to it. The feeling was actually somewhat uncomfortable for him. He didn't understand what He Yu was trying to do.

After all, what tied them together anymore? They were sufferers of the same rare disease, and they used to sleep together. That was all that was left of their relationship—they'd cast off everything else.

"I was taking a walk and bought that stuff along the way," He Yu said. "Do you have to stare at me like that? It's terrifying."

"…Get on the tractor."

Although they were more than two decades into the twenty-first century, fragments of the past could still be seen everywhere on the roads of Qingli County's seat. The red lacquer characters above the door of the grocery store looked like they were straight out of the eighties. A handwritten price sheet hung in the window of the

hair salon. At the entrance of the school, the owner of the convenience store was selling fried skewers and rice cakes. He wore a navy factory uniform and lazily picked his teeth. Above the store's door hung a bunch of cheap plastic toys, pop rocks, potato chips, and multicolored hard candies.

As a Gen Z-er, He Yu had some vague knowledge of these colorful objects from the nineties, eighties, and even the seventies, but he'd rarely encountered them in real life. Xie Qingcheng was different, though—as he walked through Qingli County's streets, a hint of nostalgia peeked through in his eyes.

When he caught sight of a Weixin Foods near the primary school's gate, the kind of store that had long gone extinct in Huzhou, his footsteps abruptly slowed, as if he'd tripped over an invisible rope.

Following his gaze to the store, He Yu was taken aback.

"Two yuan for a cup of boba?"

"That's what the price used to be," Xie Qingcheng replied.

"…How long ago was that?"

"Let me think." Xie Qingcheng thought for a while, walking toward Weixin Foods with his hands in his pockets. "Before you were born."

He Yu had nothing to say to that.

They walked into the store, which was filled with the aroma of recycled cooking oil and non-dairy creamer. The smell made He Yu's forehead scrunch up just as it made Xie Qingcheng's forehead relax.

"Laoban, two milk teas please. I was also hoping you could give me some directions."

"Just ask if you want to ask," He Yu said in a low voice. "What are you getting milk tea for? At two yuan a cup, is it even drinkable?"

"For two yuan a cup, it's not going to kill you," Xie Qingcheng said.

The proprietor was very enthusiastic and handed them a greasy post-it with Lu Yuzhu's ex-husband's address written on it. Soon the milk tea was ready.

Xie Qingcheng tried a sip, and discovered with satisfaction that this milk tea tasted just like it had all those years ago.

Once, he'd been a kid who walked home every day in his school uniform. Xie Ping and Zhou Muying were very busy with work, so when he was in elementary school, they gave him five yuan a day to buy some snacks after school to tide him over until dinner. Otherwise, by the time the two police officers came home, Xie Qingcheng would've practically starved to death.

Boba and the like had first appeared near the entrance of Xie Qingcheng's school when he was in fifth or sixth grade.

Boba drinks were very trendy at the time, and two yuan a cup wasn't cheap for an elementary school student back then—after all, it was only one yuan for four fried tenderloin skewers. But everyone rushed over to get a cup while it was still new, and the line stretched to more than a dozen meters long when the place first opened.

Xie Qingcheng loved going to the milk tea shop back then. The shop owner also sold all sorts of fried skewers, roast sausages, and meatball soups, and there was an area for students to sit and do their homework. Xie Qingcheng would order a milk tea and some snacks and quietly finish his schoolwork there. Eventually, his parents learned to check the milk tea shop by the school when they got off from work, because Xie Qingcheng would often still be doing homework at a table inside—they would stop by and pick him up on their way home.

Later, Huzhou went through some dramatic changes, and little shops like that gradually disappeared, as if they were scraps of paper littering the street.

To Xie Qingcheng, that two-yuan cup of boba wasn't simply about the flavor—it also evoked the sound of Xie Ping's bicycle bell ringing outside the shop door all year round…

"Officer Xie, picking up your son?" the shopkeeper would greet him.

The man would smile and nod as he walked in, touching his head to Xie Qingcheng's. *"Time to go. You sure love drinking this milk tea every day. Let's go home for dinner."*

A loud spluttering sound interrupted Xie Qingcheng's reminiscence.

He turned toward the source of the sound to find He Yu having a violent coughing fit. Despite his best efforts, his face had turned slightly green. The young master put down his milk tea, looking as if he were a moment away from being sent to the crematorium.

"What's wrong…?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

It would be awkward for He Yu to say anything in front of the shopkeeper, so he pulled Xie Qingcheng toward the exit.

As soon as they stepped outside, he blurted out, "Can you really drink this stuff?"

"I grew up drinking it."

A long silence.

"Y-you…"

"Forget it," Xie Qingcheng said. "There's a generational gap between us. You wouldn't understand."

Forced to choose between "understanding Xie Qingcheng" and "not drinking white arsenic," He Yu still decisively opted for the latter. He threw out the milk tea, having determined very scientifically that drinking this stuff wouldn't open the floodgates to understanding Xie Qingcheng anyway. Li Ruoqiu was around the same age as him, so she must have had this stuff before too, but did *she* understand Xie Qingcheng?


2.00

Nope.

Clearly, drinking poison was unnecessary.

On the other hand, Xie Qingcheng was very satisfied with his drink. As the two of them walked toward the address the shopkeeper gave them, he sipped on his boba without smoking a single cigarette the whole way there. Just as Xie Qingcheng finished his last tapioca pearl, they stopped in front of a dual-purpose shopfront.

The two men glanced at the shop sign and checked the address again, looking back and forth several times to make sure they hadn't come to the wrong place.

Thick red curtains were pulled shut inside the shop. The words "massage," "hair salon," and "foot spa" were written on the grimy glass door, but there was no price list in sight. The shop's name was at the top: "Awen Hair Salon."

It was very obvious what type of "business" this salon was engaged in.

They hadn't anticipated that Lu Yuzhu's ex-husband would live somewhere like this. Xie Qingcheng hesitated briefly before stepping forward and knocking on the door.

Over ten minutes later, as they were beginning to doubt whether there was anyone inside, the salon's curtains parted slightly, and the glass door slid open a crack.

A young woman who looked to be only eighteen or nineteen stood behind the curtains. She warily looked them up and down, then seemed to reach some sort of conclusion and began to close the door again without a word.

Xie Qingcheng wedged the door open.

"Please wait a moment."

The young woman stared at him dully.

"Could you please tell us if Yi Qiang is here?"

They'd learned that Yi Qiang was the name of Lu Yuzhu's ex-husband.

When she heard the name, the woman paused with the door half-closed. "Are you the police?"

He Yu was speechless—the actual police obviously wouldn't admit who they were if she asked them like that.

"No," he replied anyway. "We're just looking for Yi Qiang."

"My dad's been away for months now. He's not home."

He Yu stared blankly—her dad? Could this girl be Lu Yuzhu and Yi Qiang's daughter?

But she didn't resemble Lu Yuzhu at all, and she looked quite frail, too. If He Yu had encountered her last night, there was no way he would have let her escape—nor would he have mistaken her for Lu Yuzhu.

"Are you Yi Awen?" he asked.

"She's my older sister," the girl replied blankly. "My name is Lulu."

So this was Yi Qiang's daughter with his second wife.

Lulu relaxed a little when she saw that the two men weren't looking for trouble, but she still stared warily at their faces. "Is there something you need from my dad?" she asked.

"It's not a big deal—no worries if he's not here. Oh yeah, one more thing," He Yu added, feigning carelessness, "Could we talk to your sister?"

Lulu shrank back until her face was shrouded by the curtains, only peeking out at them through a narrow crack.

"She isn't here. Neither is my dad. You should leave."

"We're not the police," Xie Qingcheng said. "We don't mean any harm. Could you…"

Lulu had already shut the door.

Xie Qingcheng wanted to knock again, but He Yu pulled him back and shook his head.

"Let's go for now. Asking that way won't get us anywhere," he said as they left Awen Hair Salon. "Put yourself in their shoes—the people who live in places like that always need to have their guard up."

"Then what do *you* think we should do?"

"Let's try again tonight," He Yu replied.

After dinner, it became clear to Xie Qingcheng exactly what He Yu intended to do.

He Yu went to the family they were staying with and asked them for some old clothes that locals might wear. Once he'd haphazardly thrown together an outfit, he cut off some of his hair and meticulously glued it onto his face to create a beard. Finally, facing the mirror, he dusted some cheap bronzer from the town pharmacy onto his face.

The communications school offered makeup courses as electives—who would've thought they'd come in handy now?

When He Yu walked out of the bathroom, he gave Xie Qingcheng a fright. What happened to the poised, elegant university student who was here just a second ago? The man in front of him was clearly a weathered, unkempt villager.

He Yu grinned. "How do I look?"

"…Completely unrecognizable."

"Excellent. I can do your makeup too."

Xie Qingcheng narrowed his eyes. "What are you planning?"

"A nighttime trip to the hair salon, of course."

"Surely you're not thinking of…"

"When Lulu was talking, I looked through the crack in the door—there were a bunch of girls inside. I couldn't see exactly how many, but there were at least four or five. Since that place is running

an illegal business, of course we're not going to get anywhere just barging in and asking for information." He Yu grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the hand and pulled him toward the bathroom. "We need to pretend we're customers. Come here, let me help you with your makeup. I've already come up with our cover story—someone from the neighboring village recommended the place to us. We're looking for some fun but we're also afraid of being discovered, so we don't want to do anything in our own village, so we came out here to patronize their services."

He Yu could certainly come up with some outlandish plans, Xie Qingcheng thought. But on second thought, although this idea was truly appalling, they didn't have any other options right now.

He Yu began to do Xie Qingcheng's makeup. He liked to listen to music when he needed to concentrate, so the playlist he'd picked for the occasion floated out from his phone.

The music played and played, eventually arriving at a song that was very familiar to He Yu. He listened for a while before realizing—this was the theme song from *Andhadhun.*[11]

He Yu's makeup brush suddenly paused as an idea occurred to him.

"Xie Qingcheng."

Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes. "Hmm?"

"Would you mind wearing a pair of contacts? I have some in my suitcase that might be useful. I've got an idea that might help those girls let down their guard."

Chapter 116:
And Found a Body

JUST AFTER EIGHT O'CLOCK that evening, two customers appeared at Awen Hair Salon.

They were unfamiliar, but based on their clothes and general appearance, they were likely villagers from the area. One of them was leaning on a white cane, gazing ahead vacantly with listless gray eyes.

They knocked on the hair salon's glass door.

Unlike the endless wait during the day, Awen Hair Salon's doors opened right away at night. As before, the person who greeted them was Lulu. She looked them up and down, and then asked, "Two for a shampoo?"

He Yu had never come to this kind of place before, but being as clever as he was, he replied cautiously, "For a massage."

"Oh…please have a seat."

Lulu led He Yu to a cheap hairdressing stool. He Yu cast a sweeping glance over the floor. There wasn't a single strand of hair in sight…

Out of the corner of his eye, he began to examine this salon. The premises were separated into an inner and outer half. There was a staircase as well, with more rooms partitioned off upstairs. Currently, they were sitting in the outer area, which looked like any ordinary hair salon. However, the scissors were rusty—they were clearly just props.

A row of slouching women sat on a nearby sofa. None of them was especially pretty, but their outfits were extremely provocative and revealing. They looked up from their phones from time to time to glance at the two men.

“Does this gentleman want a massage too?” Lulu sized up Xie Qingcheng, her gaze lingering on the gray contacts covering his irises.

“Yes, it’s his first time,” He Yu said. “Make sure not to scare him. What are your prices for ‘neck and shoulders’ and the ‘complete package’?”

He had looked up these code words on the internet just moments ago. Although he didn’t feel entirely confident, his face was a mask of calmness.

Lulu was quiet for a moment. In the silence, He Yu started to worry.

But finally, Lulu smiled. “Eighty for neck and shoulders, two hundred for the complete package. Which lady would you like to be your masseuse?”

He Yu truly had a wild streak—after thinking for a bit, he flashed a convincingly vulgar grin at Lulu. “How about we all go together?”

“That’ll be fifty more per person,” Lulu replied.

“Ooh, that’s a lot,” He Yu lamented. “Jiejie, that doesn’t make any sense. Aren’t I saving you a room?”

“It’s too extreme,” Lulu said. “Most places wouldn’t let you. Just ask one of them if you don’t believe me.”

He Yu made a show of scrounging for every cent. “Can we get twenty off? We’re new customers, so humor us—we’ll come back again.”

“Ten.”

“Deal.”

Xie Qingcheng hadn’t expected He Yu, the little brat, to be so good at acting. Of course, he wasn’t slacking off either—since he was wearing contacts that made him look like a blind man, just like

in *Andhadhun*, he made sure to walk very cautiously, first tapping on the ground with his cane before slowly stepping forward.

He Yu picked two of the frailest-looking girls. One of them walked over and took Xie Qingcheng's arm. "Ge, be careful—the stairs are narrow. I can show you the way."

The four of them walked up the stairs together.

The small rooms upstairs were partitioned with wooden boards that were barely thicker than sheets of paper. Naturally, the soundproofing was abysmal.

At this hour, there weren't many entertainment options in the area. Although stress relief starting at eighty yuan certainly wasn't cheap to the villagers, it was a thrilling and effective outlet for many single men. There were several customers already up here, judging by the amorous sounds echoing plainly down the hallway.

Although the two women who led them upstairs were both very young, it seemed like they were already numb to this kind of work. They showed no trace of shyness or embarrassment.

They walked into one of the rooms and bolted the door. Inside were two beds and two armchairs upholstered in synthetic red velvet.

"Please take off your clothes," said one of the girls.

He Yu smiled.

"Aiyo, this is my friend's first time at this kind of place. Slow down a little, okay? Don't scare him. Why don't you massage his shoulders first?"

The girls met all kinds of people in this line of work; they were used to first-timers who felt rather ill at ease, so they weren't caught off guard. In the service industry, the customer always came first.

The two girls had them sit down in the crimson armchairs. The chairs faced a full-length mirror, which gave them a view of the entire room.

The girls started to massage their customers.

The people who came here weren't actually looking for massages, so the girls didn't have a particularly expert technique. Some small talk and lingering touches were enough to gradually melt away the customers' awkwardness.

"Dage, where are you from?" they'd say to set the stage. Then, they'd toss out a hint with, "Dage, just let me know if you want to feel good." Every profession had its workflow, and theirs was no exception.

Throughout this process, Xie Qingcheng hadn't said much. With his long lashes lowered over his cloudy gray eyes, he rested his cheek on his hand and listened to the conversation with a mild expression.

He Yu was sharp as a tack—after only a couple of days, he had already picked up some of the local dialect. He quickly won the two girls over with his lighthearted banter. As the girls continued the massage, they unknowingly began to let information slip.

Both of them had been students at Humanity High School, albeit only briefly. But when He Yu asked them why they dropped out, one of the girls didn't answer, while the other was silent for a moment.

"My family wanted me to get married," she said, smiling wanly, "so I left school."

"So you…"

"My husband likes to gamble—lots of the men here do. They place huge bets at the underground casinos and they'll lose two hundred thousand or more in a single night—more than the whole family's savings put together." The woman gently pinched He Yu's shoulders. "So my husband's making me go out and earn some money."

It was a shocking story, but He Yu was well-read and well-versed in the ways of the world. He knew that in these sorts of

places, especially in remote villages, such deplorable things happened from time to time. The husband would loaf around and make his wife earn a living through disreputable means. Sometimes, the husband himself would even be her pimp—in those cases, the man naturally took all her earnings too. Women were merely tools, with flesh, blood, and bones that could nourish their families.

Still, meeting one of these victims in real life, his heart was shaken.

One of the women paused for a moment with her eyes downcast.

"Dage…"

No matter the age of their client, they would always call them "Dage."

"Later, could you be gentle with me when we're together?" Probably because He Yu seemed so friendly, she couldn't help letting some weakness show through. "I'm three months pregnant, so…"

He Yu's astonishment grew. "And you're still working at a place like this?"

"Otherwise there would be no money. We're out of money at home, and I still have to pay off his debts." Her tone was mild, but tears were already beginning to gather in her eyes.

He Yu was dumbstruck.

At that moment, he suddenly thought of Lu Yuzhu.

Back in the day, Lu Yuzhu had also resorted to the world's oldest profession. As time passed, she gradually grew numb. And while she was in such desperate straits, the mastermind behind the scenes had asked her, "Why are you working at a place like this?"

In truth, those words weren't all that gentle or caring. Perhaps that man didn't even think before he spoke, just like He Yu right now.

But Lu Yuzhu had been treated like an animal for too long. That sentence had reminded her of the fact that she was still a human being.

"…Forget it then," He Yu began, "why don't we just…"

These words seemed to startle the woman. Without waiting for him to finish speaking, she suddenly fell to her knees.

Everyone in the room—other than Xie Qingcheng—jumped at her movement. Xie Qingcheng remembered he was supposed to be blind, so he kept sitting there woodenly, not moving a muscle.

The woman tugged on He Yu's sleeve. "Dage, could you please not switch me out? J-just pretend I didn't say anything. You can do whatever you like. I just came back to work a few days ago, but I'm not very pretty, so hardly anyone's picked me. If you send for someone else, the madam will be so disappointed with me, I-I…"

By the end, she was choking back silent sobs.

"…No, I meant, let's forget it for today," He Yu clarified. "You can just massage my shoulders and chat with me—that's enough."

She stared at him blankly. "Huh…?"

"I just wanted to relax with my friend anyway. You know how hard it is for penniless single guys like us to find women who are willing to talk to us. So it's fine if we don't do anything this time. Life's hard for everyone. We're friends now, so you can just discreetly give us a discount next time, whenever it's more convenient."

The rims of her eyes reddening, the woman was both moved and uneasy. "B-but how could I live this down? How…how about I use my hand…"

"It's okay, let's just chat some more," He Yu replied. "Ge, don't you agree?"

Leaning back in the red velvet armchair, Xie Qingcheng hummed impassively in assent.

He Yu pointed at Xie Qingcheng and smiled. “See, this dage didn’t really want it to begin with—I dragged him along with me to check this place out.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t reply.

With that, the intangible distance between them and the girls shrank a little bit. When He Yu followed up with other questions, their answers were more detailed than before. After a few more back-and-forths, they had a solid understanding of the circumstances in the county, and at this salon in particular.

The Yi, Zhuang, and Duan Family Villages were the three largest villages under the jurisdiction of Qingli County. The villagers tended to be greedy yet indolent, and their customs were despicable, especially those of the Yi Family Village. The county’s governance was extremely corrupt, and the villages’ schools and roads were still those that Lu Yuzhu raised funds to build back when she was the county party secretary.

The men of these families would not only refuse to work, they’d often beat their wives at home too. The women could either choose to endure it silently, risk a dangerous escape, or, like these two girls, sell their bodies for a bit of money to support their families.

In the county seat, there were several other parlors like Awen Hair Salon, and their organizational structures were very unbalanced. For example, the owner of Awen Hair Salon was Lu Yuzhu’s former husband, Yi Qiang.

When Lu Yuzhu was framed and sent to prison, Yi Qiang found a new flame before his divorce proceedings with Lu Yuzhu were finalized. He even moved in with this younger lady.

After Lu Yuzhu was released, her own daughter didn’t even recognize her anymore, and that younger woman became Yi Qiang’s rightful wife, looking down on this “convict” with the lofty attitude of the lady of the house. Heartbroken, Lu Yuzhu left Qingli County, and never returned home in all the years that followed.

After a few years, Yi Qiang and his new wife had a daughter together—this was Lulu. But as the saying went, a leopard couldn't change its spots—Yi Qiang wasn't a diligent worker, and Lu Yuzhu had been the one in charge in their marriage. It was only because she was strict with him that he hadn't dared to slack off.

His new wife couldn't hold a candle to Lu Yuzhu's strength of character.

Gradually, the shortcomings that Lu Yuzhu had suppressed for Yi Qiang stirred to life once again. He loafed around and got addicted to gambling, hitting and swearing at his wife and daughters when he lost, and spending the money on prostitutes when he won.

The family's savings were rapidly depleted.

His young wife was a very fragile, selfish person who couldn't handle living like this. One night, before her husband came home, she abandoned her daughter Lulu and Lu Yuzhu's daughter Awen to board a train to the big city. She wanted to live well, but she had no work skills, and it would be hard to fool around with guys with two kids in tow. She decided to make a clean break with her past and pretend to be an unmarried rural migrant worker. With her looks, she was confident that she could reel in a nice, reliable man in the city.

She ran away, leaving the furious father on his own.

Angry and resentful, Yi Qiang drowned his sorrows in alcohol all day long and beat and cursed his daughters. The older daughter he'd had with Lu Yuzhu was already grown up and wanted to leave this miserable existence behind—and so, just like her stepmother, she bought a train ticket and went to the nearest city to look for a job.

Perhaps it was because of her limited education, or perhaps she wasn't accustomed to the transient lifestyle, but after a while, she came back.

After her return, Awen's personality had changed drastically. She went to her father and said to him, "Do you want to make

money without doing any work? I have an idea, but I need your help. If you sell the family property, we can purchase a mixed-use commercial and residential building—I already found a place. If you do as I say, the money will start rolling in."

Thus, Awen Hair Salon was opened.

Yi Qiang was the big boss and took the majority of the earnings. Awen and her sister Lulu were in charge of finding girls to work in the parlor.

As his earnings multiplied, Yi Qiang bought a car and the trendiest new phone. He spent this tarnished money with a clear conscience, speeding between the city and the village to patronize increasingly expensive nightclubs and extravagant underground casinos.

He gradually started to treat his daughters better too. Before, he'd always say that it was better to have sons than daughters, but now that he knew his daughters could earn money and support him too, he'd grin when they were mentioned and called them his treasures. Of course, he knew that the girls who toiled in his parlor were also the daughters and even the wives of other men.

But so what? Their labor could be traded in for chips on the gambling table or a beautiful woman in his arms, so he accepted it without question.

As Yi Qiang spent less time in Qingli County, he grew more distant from his old friends in the village as well. When he draped himself in name brands and put on a luxury watch, he instantly felt his social status skyrocketing—such a tiny village couldn't contain a golden phoenix like him. He spent all his time loitering in the city, flirting with women and practically forgetting who he was.

As long as his daughters remembered to send him money on time, all was well.

Hearing the whole story made He Yu feel sick to his stomach. Coming from an unhappy family himself, he loathed parents who treated their children like dogs.

“So Yi Qiang usually lives outside the village these days?” he asked.

“That’s right. He hasn’t been back in a long time.”

“What about Awen?”

“Wen-jie comes around the salon every day, though she usually stops by quite late. Gege, do you want to meet her?”

Of course He Yu wanted to meet Yi Awen—he needed to see her in person to find out if she was the mysterious woman from last night. If so, he wanted to know why she sneakily gave them those files, and where she’d gotten them from.

However, now he’d listened to the girls’ story, he was pretty sure Yi Awen wasn’t the kind of person who’d give him the straightforward truth just because he asked. And there was that suspicious gap in her timeline—that first time she ran away to the city.

Before then, it sounded like she was a relatively helpless girl who didn’t have the nerve to stand up to her father. But after she returned, she could order Yi Qiang around and even convince him to sell the family property and start this kind of business—just what exactly had she experienced outside the village in those years?

He Yu wanted to hear more about Yi Awen, but unfortunately, the girls didn’t know any more.

He glanced at Xie Qingcheng. Although it was impossible to read his gaze through his cloudy gray contacts, He Yu knew him so well that from his smallest movements, even his posture and aura, he could tell what he was thinking. Right now, he could sense that Xie Qingcheng’s thoughts were the same as his own.

Xie Qingcheng had mostly kept quiet and listened throughout the entire conversation. But a few minutes later, just as He Yu expected, he spoke up.

“I’d like to use the restroom. Where is it?”

Unsurprisingly, this dingy little hair salon didn't have a private bathroom in each room. One of the girls carefully relayed the directions to Xie Qingcheng, but she still felt a bit uneasy. "Dage, how about I take you there?"

He Yu stood up and smiled. "He, uh… He'd probably feel a bit embarrassed. I'll go with him instead."

The girl had never encountered such reserved customers before. Chuckling, she opened the door for them, pointing out the way once more before letting the men walk out.

After making sure the two girls hadn't followed them, Xie Qingcheng spoke quietly to He Yu.

"Even if we meet Yi Awen, she might not tell us the truth. So let's take this chance to see if we can find any clues in these rooms. Humanity High School's files must be very important to the person behind the scenes. If those records are real, and the mysterious woman from yesterday was really Yi Awen, then she must have some connection to that person. We don't have much time, so let's split up and investigate. You take the left side, I'll take the right."

He Yu looked into his hazy gray eyes. "Even with those contacts in, how are you still so sharp?"

Xie Qingcheng touched his eyelids, frowning slightly. "Am I not convincing?"

He Yu broke into a smile. "No, you're very convincing. I just mean that your vibe hasn't changed at all. You still act like a damn cop."

Xie Qingcheng didn't reply; he didn't have time to humor He Yu's nonsense. "Hurry up and go," he said.

They walked off in opposite directions.

Almost the entire second floor of Awen Hair Salon was partitioned off into those same small rooms. Xie Qingcheng didn't find anything noteworthy as he walked through, but on reaching the end of the hallway, he discovered another narrow staircase.

This building had an attic.

When he climbed the stairs, he discovered a small attic room, containing only a desk, a few bookshelves, and some messy piles of miscellaneous items.

Xie Qingcheng felt that there was something disconcerting about this place, although at first it was hard to put his finger on why. A putrid odor intermittently wafted through the air. Having been trained as a doctor, he immediately identified it as the smell of something rotting.

As Xie Qingcheng carefully looked around the room, he realized what was odd—

The rotten smell was strong, but there wasn't any food in the room. Other than paper, he only saw metal and wood. None of these objects could cause that kind of stench.

So where was the smell coming from?

Xie Qingcheng slowly backed up to the doorway. He looked the room over from this vantage point for a while, and eventually noticed something else bizarre about it…

The walls.

Although the wall furthest from the door was mostly covered by a bookshelf, upon closer examination, he could tell that it was a slightly different color than the other two walls. The pale pink paint looked fresh.

Xie Qingcheng walked over to the wall and pushed the bookshelf to the side. Like a curtain slowly opening in a dark theater, the shelf's movement revealed a large, peeling wet patch on the newly painted wall, as if some strange kind of moss was growing there. After he moved the entire shelf aside and stepped back to the doorway to look at the wall again, a shock jolted through his body.

That patch of dampness…was shaped like a blurry human silhouette.

All sorts of horrifying ideas sprang into his mind. Xie Qingcheng glanced at his wristwatch—almost ten minutes had passed since he left the private room, but if he didn't look for evidence now, he would almost definitely never get another chance. Thus, he quickly decided to step forward and knock on the wall near that indistinct human-shaped outline. He discovered an area toward the bottom of the silhouette that sounded hollow.

Xie Qingcheng used a box cutter from the desk to scrape off the pink paint on that hollow section bit by bit, finding a layer of newly installed wooden boards underneath. Without much effort, he pried off a small section and tilted his phone flashlight upward—

A particularly horrible stench assaulted his senses, and he saw a pair of tan, leather men's shoes. Above the shoes was a length of ankle in a state of severe decomposition…

There was a body in the wall.

At that moment, a distant, chilly voice spoke from outside the door.

"What are you looking at?"

Chapter 117:
Ge, You're So Good at Driving

"WHAT ARE YOU looking at?"

But the person outside the door was talking to He Yu, not Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu had finished examining his side of the floor uneventfully. Upon reaching the end of the long hallway, he also saw the staircase leading to the attic. He was about to climb it when a hand landed on his shoulder.

He immediately turned around to see a woman who bore some resemblance to Lu Yuzhu…but she definitely wasn't the mysterious person from last night. He Yu froze in surprise, an unpleasant conjecture occurring to him. "You're…Yi Awen?"

"That's me," the woman replied, looking him up and down suspiciously. "Did you need something from me?"

"I…" Even though her answer had dashed his hopes, he still quickly pulled himself together and responded smoothly, "Not really, it's just that this place is called Awen Salon, y'know, and it's clear that you're the boss."

Yi Awen didn't indulge him. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for my friend—he went to the bathroom a while ago. I'm worried he got lost."

The two of them weren't far from the attic. He Yu raised his voice on purpose so that Xie Qingcheng could hear him from upstairs.

"The bathroom is downstairs, not upstairs," said Yi Awen.

"Oh," He Yu responded. "Then I'll check downstairs. It's my first time here—I didn't know."

Yi Awen still hadn't let her guard down. "Where are you from?"

"The neighboring Zhuang Family Village—I came to see my relatives." He Yu feigned nonchalance, leering crassly at Yi Awen as he spoke. "Jie, the girls in this place of yours are really great, very talented. Not like the ones back home—they charge a hundred or more, but they have a bad attitude! They won't even talk to you."

Yi Awen gave him a mechanical, bland smile, but there was some hidden contempt in her gaze as she looked at He Yu.

"I'm glad you're having a good time."

In the middle of their conversation, the attic door suddenly swung open with a creak.

Yi Awen jumped, her eyes flashing with an ominous light as she looked toward the top of the stairs—

The first thing that appeared in her field of view was a well-worn white cane.

The cane tentatively tapped on the steps, taking its time to cautiously and deftly explore the contours, before at last a foot stepped down very carefully to land on the wooden stair.

Then, the cane inched down again…

The stairwell was very dim, and it wasn't until he felt his way to the bottom of the staircase that the man's face emerged from the shadows and Yi Awen got a good look at him. Other than his tall, upright physique, he looked like any ordinary farmer from this area. The man was blind, his open ash-gray eyes entirely vacant.

All the muscles in Yi Awen's body had been tensed, but when she realized that this man couldn't see, she relaxed slightly. However, she still stared at him unblinkingly, watching him draw closer step by step.

The man had a waxy yellow complexion and average looks, but his voice was extremely pleasant, like a lake on a still day, smooth as glass. "I heard people down here… Is the bathroom downstairs? I'm sorry, I went the wrong way…"

Before Yi Awen had the chance to reply, He Yu leapt forward and took Xie Qingcheng's arm.

"This is my friend," he explained to Yi Awen. "Remember how I told you I was looking for someone? I was looking for him." He turned to Xie Qingcheng. "Ge, why didn't you come back and ask me if you couldn't find the bathroom? What are you trying to prove on your own out here? Come on, I'll take you downstairs."

Xie Qingcheng threw off his hand without missing a beat. Even while playing this kind of role, he somehow managed to preserve his everyday coldness, putting on a stubborn elder brother act. "No need, I've got it."

"Oh, you've got it? Save that for the girls back in the room, all right? Don't get all stubborn with me. Careful—after me."

"Stop pulling on me," Xie Qingcheng said coldly, half-feigning and half-serious.

"Sorry for the trouble, Wen-jie." He Yu turned back to apologize to Yi Awen as he and Xie Qingcheng moved together down the stairs. "We'll stop bothering you."

Watching the stubborn man use his cane to feel down the hallway, Yi Awen couldn't see anything amiss. She felt a slight relief. She'd returned just in time, she thought—if the man who could see had gone upstairs, he might've found something she needed to keep hidden.

She nodded perfunctorily at the two men before immediately turning around and heading up the stairs to make sure everything was all right.

As soon as she turned away, Xie Qingcheng's lips moved slightly as he spoke in a voice so soft only He Yu could hear it.

"We need to get out of here. She killed someone."

He Yu's grip on Xie Qingcheng's arm tightened.

Yi Awen entered the attic.

The room still looked just as it had before. That blind man must have just walked in and fumbled around before realizing he'd come to the wrong place and going back downstairs.

She let out the breath she was holding, but just as she was about to leave again, she remembered something that made all the blood in her body run cold. Her pulse instantly skyrocketed as a manic voice seemed to scream in her head: *Stop him—stop them!*

Something was wrong—very wrong.

Yi Awen's pupils contracted as realization dawned on her—that blind man had been wearing something that a person who lost their sight would never use…

A watch.

He was wearing a watch!

She'd noticed it as soon as he came down the stairs, but at first, she'd only felt a vague sense of unease without realizing what it meant.

Why would a person who couldn't see wear a watch? Who would it be for?

Yi Awen ran over and wildly shoved the bookshelf to the side.

Then, she saw it.

There, in the section of wall that she had patched up over Yi Qiang's body, there was a hole. Through that opening, her father's decomposing leg was clearly visible…

Blood surging through her veins, Yi Awen was overcome by shock and fury as she whipped around, flung open the door, and rushed down the stairs.

Her motorcycle was parked outside, unlocked as usual—when she stopped by the salon at this hour, it was only for a quick check-in, after all.

Xie Qingcheng swung his leg over the motorcycle. "Get on," he said to He Yu.

"…You know how to drive a motorcycle?" asked He Yu.

"I've even driven a police motorcycle before."

Yi Awen sprinted downstairs, her face incandescent with fury as she appeared in the doorway. Her younger sister seemed utterly bemused.

"Jiejie, why are you…" she asked nervously, ashen-faced.

Yi Awen didn't answer her. Like a falcon reaching for its prey, she lunged forward.

At almost precisely the same moment, He Yu got behind Xie Qingcheng on the motorcycle. "Hold on tight," said Xie Qingcheng, in a low voice.

Before He Yu had time to react, his Xie-ge twisted the throttle and sent the motorcycle plunging into the darkness with a roar.

It wasn't until he'd gotten onto a motorcycle behind Xie Qingcheng that He Yu realized just how unrestrained he was being—and just how excellent his driving was, too. He whizzed down the unpaved mountain paths like they were pancake-flat roads, but the combination of the adrenaline and the breakneck speed made the steeper sections feel as weightless as freefall.

The red needle on the dash veered frantically to the right, the chilly springtime wind whipping loudly through their clothes.

After the initial tension wore off, He Yu realized he still had his arms tight around Xie Qingcheng's waist.

He Yu was a lunatic. Even at a critically dangerous moment, his mind remained unaffected by the death-defying speed. His head was perfectly clear as he thought: This was the first time since the club… no, since he and Xie Qingcheng first parted ways, that Xie Qingcheng had asked He Yu to hold him.

It didn't matter that they were fleeing for their lives.

"Hold on to me a bit tighter."

"Huh?"

"Hold me tighter."

He Yu was practically bowled over by this display of sentiment—but a second later, the motorcycle suddenly soared into the air, its immense momentum propelling it over an abandoned roadblock—and nearly throwing He Yu off the back.

He Yu cried out, "Be careful—"

But before the last syllable left his mouth, the motorcycle had already flown a hundred meters ahead.

He Yu was shocked speechless.

On a motorcycle, Xie Qingcheng was just as good as a trained police officer. He Yu even began to suspect that he must've used these skills to pick up girls long ago—how else would he have gotten so good?

He Yu was a fast and steady driver, but only behind the wheels of sports cars and luxury cars. Motorcycles were too athletic and unrefined—He Yu wasn't familiar with them and had never driven one before.

In the blink of an eye, they had already reached the barren mountains outside the village.



These mountains on the border of Qingli County were truly desolate—they were nothing like the little hills that were common in the southern part of the country, from which the city lights could still be seen. Each of these peaks was like a wild beast hibernating in the darkness. When the night wind blew, the forest's susurrations sounded like their guttural sighs.

Xie Qingcheng shot a cool glance behind them. Now that he wasn't pretending to be blind, it was impossible for those gray contacts to completely conceal the daggerlike sharpness of his gaze.

He spotted the light of another motorcycle on the mountain path behind them.

Yi Awen was a local who knew all the shortcuts, after all. Having already found another bike, she was currently in hot pursuit, doggedly tailing them like a madwoman.

The two motorcycles sped across more than a dozen kilometers as if they were participating in a cross-country race. Even the heavens sought to join in on the fun—a bolt of lightning suddenly split open the overcast skies, immediately followed by a roll of thunder. And with that, the rain of the year's first spring thunderstorm began to pour down.

The raindrops pitter-pattered noisily, washing the makeup off their faces and the dust off the mountain roads.

The path quickly became very muddy, and as they rode deeper into the wilderness, it became more and more difficult to navigate. Looking up, they could see only the majestic sky and endless barrens, bereft of any sign of human habitation.

But to Yi Awen, who had lived here all her life, this place was very familiar.

Now, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng could clearly hear the roar of her motorcycle's engine—she must have taken one of the steep cut-off routes to make up some of the ground between them.

He Yu couldn't help but ask Xie Qingcheng, "Do you know these roads? Where are we going?"

"The police station in town."

He Yu's heart plummeted. He wasn't reassured in the slightest. "Is it this way?"

"Yes," Xie Qingcheng replied. "I checked a couple days ago."

He actually knew where they were!

Yi Awen must've figured out Xie Qingcheng's intentions. She kicked into a higher gear, urging the motorcycle forward at top speed. When He Yu snuck a backward glance, her figure was completely enshrouded by the motorcycle's headlight, making it look like there was a raging fireball pelting after them.

As she drew closer and closer, she reached down to grab something tucked at the small of her back.

She was still a little ways off, and He Yu couldn't clearly make out the object in the pouring rain and glaring light, but something tugged at a nerve in his head—in the basement of the university archives, the woman who resembled Yi Awen had done the same thing, reaching for something kept at the small of her back…

He Yu suddenly put two and two together. "Xie Qingcheng," he cried out, "be careful! She has a gun!"

At nearly the same moment, they heard the bang of a gun going off. As the sound echoed between the mountains and valleys, Yi Awen lifted the smoking pistol. Just like her mother, she had fired a bullet at He Yu and Xie Qingcheng.

As soon as she shot it, Xie Qingcheng realized that Yi Awen's gun was likely a crude homemade weapon. The noise it made was loud and harsh, and its range was far worse than a properly manufactured firearm's would be.

That type of gun usually couldn't hold many bullets at a time—it would need to be reloaded after every three rounds or so. With this deduced, Xie Qingcheng arched his back like a cheetah and

accelerated along a serpentine pathway that would give them the best chance of evading the gunfire. With that kind of weapon, even a specialized police officer wouldn't necessarily be able to hit their target—luck was always a major factor.

Yi Awen evidently realized this too, as she stopped trying to aim in the downpour. Lu Yuzhu hadn't raised her herself, but nature worked in mysterious ways—her genes had given her some of her mother's personality. When faced with a critical situation, both mother and daughter had the exact same reaction—

They started shooting indiscriminately.

Bangbangbang!

Bangbangbang!

As if the gunfire in the archives was ringing out in unison.

As if everything were hurtling down the same old tracks.

The silence that followed was the same, too.

The Lu family's mother and daughter were both extremely lucky in some respects. The chaotic barrage of bullets managed to strike those two extremely unlucky men.

A screeching pop rang out—Yi Awen had pierced the wheel of Xie Qingcheng's motorcycle.

The tire exploded, and the force of it and the resulting drag countered their massive momentum like one terrible dragon fighting another in the deep sea, emitting ear-splitting roars as they clashed fiercely. The motorcycle spun fully out of control, throwing its riders into the air. The bike itself surged ahead, splattering rain and mud everywhere, until it careened over the lip of the road and tumbled down, down, down…

Boom!

The gas tank must have been damaged in the fall, because about half a minute later, despite the wind and rain, the flames of an

explosion suddenly lit up the slope. Black smoke billowed upward, as if trying to strangle the downpour with its scorched vapors.

Xie Qingcheng had been hurled next to a boulder by the path. The fall had bruised his internal organs, and he coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Fiercely wiping blood away, he looked up with utmost calm to discover that He Yu had been thrown even further than him—the centrifugal force had tossed He Yu nearly over the edge of a precipitously sheer cliff. A single crooked pine tree in front of him was the only thing preventing him from tumbling down.

He Yu struggled to grab onto that tree, trying to pull himself up onto safer ground as the sound of footsteps splashing in the mud drew closer. Finally, a pair of black leather women's shoes stopped in front of him.

He Yu looked up. Against a backdrop of sheeting rain, he met Yi Awen's terrifyingly cold eyes.

A second later, Yi Awen lifted her foot and ferociously stomped on the hand He Yu was using to grip that tree.

Chapter 118:
Xie Qingcheng, Why Did You Have to Treat Me like That?

YI AWEN'S STOMP was heavy and ruthless, and her boots had a small heel. He Yu heard a brittle cracking noise from his own finger—the sound of the bone breaking. Blood gushed out of the gash she'd caused.

Luckily, He Yu had been used to minor injuries since he was little, and this sort of ordeal wasn't a big deal for him. He persisted in clinging to the pine tree's roots, gritting his teeth as he started to climb.

Yi Awen narrowed her eyes as she caught sight of He Yu's real face through the torrential rain. "You think you're so brave, little brat, coming to my place in disguise… What are you trying to do?"

This woman is hopeless, He Yu thought—she really expected him to honestly explain himself while she was trying to kick him off a cliff? Her EQ was even lower than her mother's! But because he didn't want to be stepped on again, He Yu answered.

"I came to investigate some matters involving your mom!"

"No, fuck *your* mom!" Yi Awen cried. "You're literally facing death, and you still have the nerve to make stupid jokes?"

"…Who's making jokes? I said I came to investigate matters involving your mom! Your actual mother!"

Yi Awen blinked in confusion. "My mom?"

Then, like a moth struggling free of its cocoon, eager to cast off its past, her expression became even more forbidding. "No, I don't have a mom."

"I'm talking about Lu Yuzhu!"

"…I don't care who you're talking about, she's not my mom… She's not my mom!" The hottest flames of hell could leap from the eyes of a person in the throes of fury. Yi Awen dragged He Yu into her personal hell, gritting out each word with deliberate emphasis. "Forget it, I don't care what you came here to do. You saw something you weren't supposed to, so both of you are going to die!"

As she spoke, she raised her gun again.

As expected, it was a crude homemade firearm.

She lifted the weapon and shook out the used casing, swapping in a new makeshift cartridge. With a click, Yi Awen loaded the gun, bending down to press the pitch-black muzzle to He Yu's forehead.

"Sorry, little brother, it's time for me to send you to hell. I just want to live a good life—I can't have you messing that up."

Crooking her finger, she pulled the trigger.

Bang!

Just as the flint sparked, Yi Awen was ferociously shoved to the ground, splattering mud everywhere. Her arm was knocked aside at the last instant before she shot He Yu dead at point-blank range.

Xie Qingcheng grappled with her on the muddy ground—he had crawled over despite his injuries.

Although Xie Qingcheng's physical condition had declined in recent months, his wrestling technique was still formidable. Bending his long legs, he pinned Yi Awen down in a mud puddle just as lightning split the sky. The view of the sprawling wilderness of the loess hills bracketed by the endless heavens and earth was more stunning than any cityscape. The bolt of lightning seemed to rend the fabric of the cosmos, like a sword being plunged into an abyss.

When that flash of electricity lit Xie Qingcheng's face, Yi Awen met his eyes—and just like her mother seeing him in the archives, her heart shuddered uncontrollably. Even blunted by the gray

contacts obscuring his eyes, once he stopped holding back, this man's aura was so imposing that it shook her to the core.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The deep sound rolled over the clouds, seeming to increase the pressure on her trembling heart.

As the early spring storm raged, the wheel of fortune seemed to stop on the same space as before. Xie Qingcheng held Yi Awen's hand down just like he'd once held down Lu Yuzhu's, when she, too, had been gripping a gun.

The girl's hand shook as she struggled, but once she got over her initial shock, she suddenly remembered what she needed to do —her silhouette overlapped with her mother's. She tried to lift the hand that Xie Qingcheng was pinning down.

But Xie Qingcheng was too strong, and she couldn't throw him off. She desperately glanced in He Yu's direction, but when she caught sight of his predicament, her pupils suddenly contracted. Then she threw her head back and began to laugh.

"Ha ha… Ha ha ha ha…!"

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond.

Yi Awen leered. "You'd better let go of me right away, otherwise you'll regret it!"

Sensing that something was wrong, Xie Qingcheng jerked his head to the side.

It was He Yu.

The pine tree that He Yu grabbed onto hadn't been sturdy to begin with, but Yi Awen had fired a shot into its hollow trunk, and cracks were spreading through the wood like a sheet of ice splintering. Even someone who was actually half-blind would be able to tell that the tree was about to break.

He Yu was clutching that swaying, teetering tree, staring at them both in silence.

Xie Qingcheng had to make a choice.

If he went to pull He Yu up right now, Yi Awen would use this opportunity to open fire on them again—she would definitely shoot Xie Qingcheng.

But if Xie Qingcheng continued to wrestle for the gun with Yi Awen, He Yu might not be able to hold on for much longer. He would fall into the chasm below with that broken hunk of wood.

He didn't even need to think about it.

Whenever Xie Qingcheng needed to choose between himself and other people, he would always—always and forever—choose to place the lives of others before his own.

And that was to say nothing of how, in that instant, his ears seemed to ring with the crack of the gunshot from the library basement, and the sound of He Yu's voice calling his name.

Back then, He Yu had still been his little devil…

His little devil had put his arms around him, shielding him from Lu Yuzhu's bullet.

The warm blood from his memory seemed to mix with the pouring rain of the present, flowing back into his heart.

Xie Qingcheng threw one last look at Yi Awen, who was cackling maniacally in the mud. Then, he straightened up and released his grip on her—

He Yu hadn't made a sound because he didn't want the other two to notice the danger he was in. But when he saw this, he finally yelled, "Xie Qingcheng! Are you insane?! What are you worrying about me for?! I can't stand you, and you can't stand me either! Forget about me—get her gun away from her first!"

But Xie Qingcheng knew there wasn't enough time. With a crack, the pine tree split even further.

He Yu was hanging on to life by a thread, but he wasn't looking at the tree trunk—instead, his reddened eyes were locked on Xie Qingcheng, stubbornly turning in his direction as if welcoming the wind and the rain, the imminent danger, and even death itself.

He Yu felt like something had violently bored into his heart.

He could see that Xie Qingcheng's face didn't contain even a trace of love for him, yet he still rushed over to him—because of the goodness etched onto his bones and the sense of duty seared into his blood.

He Yu knew he wasn't special. No matter who it was in He Yu's position today, Xie Qingcheng would've made the exact same choice.

But it wasn't until that very moment that He Yu truly understood…in *his* heart, Xie Qingcheng would always be uniquely precious.

This strange, special dragon insisted on protecting the lives of others even when he was caught in the undertow…yet back then… after the case at the broadcasting tower…He Yu had really believed the video…

He had actually believed that this person, the one who had unwaveringly encouraged him to walk out of the darkness on his own two feet, would mean those words that devalued human life.

How had he believed it…just like that…?

He Yu closed his eyes.

For some reason, the rain streaming down his face was hot…

Bang!

The sound of a gunshot made He Yu's eyes abruptly fly open again.

It was Yi Awen.

Yi Awen had fired again.

Xie Qingcheng was no idiot—he wanted to save He Yu's life without sacrificing his own, so he used every maneuver he knew to avoid the girl's gunfire.

The first bullet flew into the air.

The second bullet narrowly missed him…

But then, the gunshots stopped.

Yi Awen didn't fire a third time…because she realized that she didn't need to rush to shoot right now.

Didn't Xie Qingcheng want to save He Yu? Then he would have no choice but to stop for a moment to reach for the boy and pull him up. At that point, she could get up close and shoot them both dead. So she saved the last bullet in her cartridge.

Standing in the downpour, she watched them with the chilling gaze of a ghost.

As a ruthless schemer himself, He Yu deduced in a split second what sort of tricks Yi Awen had up her sleeve. His face went white—even when Yi Awen had stomped on his hand with her high-heeled boot, his expression hadn't twisted so badly.

"Xie Qingcheng!" he bellowed with all the force he could muster. "Don't fucking come over here! Do you want us to die together?"

He Yu practically never cursed—the only exception was in bed.

But now the curses tumbled out, flames flying from his eyes even as the rain streamed down his face. He couldn't let Xie Qingcheng get any closer to him.

But Xie Qingcheng was still walking toward him.

Xie Qingcheng's steps weren't heavy, but each one seemed to set off an earthquake in He Yu's heart. When He Yu saw his face as he drew closer, he knew that Xie Qingcheng already understood what would happen the moment he bent down to help him up.

But he still continued so resolutely.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu said, his voice quavering.

Finally, Xie Qingcheng stopped in front of He Yu. As rain pelted down, the man leaned forward and tightly grabbed onto He Yu's ice-cold hand—as decisively as He Yu had once taken a bullet for him.

As determinedly as He Yu had once pushed him onto the ledge of that flooded studio.

"I'm pulling you up," Xie Qingcheng said.

At the very same moment, Yi Awen slowly raised her gun to point it at the man's back—her expression turned deeply sinister, seeming to contain both joy and ridicule, not to mention bewilderment, pain, and even envy… All of these emotions rested on her hand, making it tremble slightly.

Bang!

The third gunshot finally echoed amid the mountains.

Blood spurted everywhere…

Jagged bolts of March lightning relentlessly tore apart the boundless night, as if bringing dawn's light to the endless darkness before its time.

"Ngh!"

He Yu's eyes flew wide open as blood dripped onto his face, one drop after another.

Xie Qingcheng stifled a groan of pain, the color draining from his face in an instant. He had known all along what Yi Awen was planning to do, so he leaned slightly to the side as he helped He Yu up, fixing her in his peripheral vision. The moment she pulled the trigger, he swerved forcefully in the opposite direction. However, there was only so much he could do without letting go of He Yu—he could duck so that the bullet would miss his vital organs, but at this distance, it was impossible to dodge completely.

Yi Awen's third shot hit Xie Qingcheng in his left arm, just below his shoulder. It was almost exactly where He Yu had been injured before.

Destiny seemed to have looped back onto itself, braiding their fates together, ordaining that their debts be repaid.

He Yu's mind was utterly blank, and he couldn't seem to hear anything either. He just stared at him dumbly…stared at his blood, his face, all that he had done…

Xie Qingcheng… Xie Qingcheng…

His Doctor Xie.

He still hadn't left.

He still…wanted to save him…!

He Yu's heart trembled as his pupils contracted to pinpricks. He saw the grievously wounded man in front of him furrow his brow, overcoming the pain by sheer force of will. He saw this man, left arm soaked in blood, still refusing to give up. Then, enduring the agony and gritting his teeth, he used his last reserves of strength to haul He Yu over the edge.

The exertion tore Xie Qingcheng's gunshot wound and exacerbated the internal injuries he'd sustained from crashing into the rocks. He couldn't stop himself from coughing heavily, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth.

He had reached his limit—as soon as he finished pulling He Yu up, his body crumpled and lurched forward.

He Yu caught him in the pouring rain.

"Xie Qingcheng," he murmured. "Xie Qingcheng…!"

His palms were covered in blood…the blood from the scrapes and the fall, and the blood that poured out of Xie Qingcheng's arm.



He Yu didn’t fear blood—on the contrary, he thirsted for it. But in that moment, he panicked. It was as if the blood had seeped into his reddened eyes and soaked into his strangled throat.

“Xie Qingcheng!”

In the torrential downpour, before he lost consciousness, Xie Qingcheng said one last thing to him.

“He Yu, I’ve…paid you back…for that bullet.”

He Yu’s heart swelled with grief. He wished more than anything that he could’ve tumbled off this cliff to his death. He held him so tightly in his arms, wanting to say something, yet unable to speak.

After all, he’d seen the look in Xie Qingcheng’s eyes as they were illuminated by a momentary flash of lightning. He looked like he’d been relieved of a burden.

Like he could finally write off all of his debts, having repaid them in full.

Finally, faced with that expression, the youth’s heart was torn into a million pieces, and then—

Completely hollowed out.

As the thunder boomed and the mountains flashed with brilliance, He Yu slowly looked up, still embracing Xie Qingcheng’s limp, bleeding form. With feverishly scarlet eyes and a daggerlike gaze, he stared straight at Yi Awen.

Chapter 119:
I Wanted to Kill Her

IF AN EVIL DEMON lost the shackles granted to him by a god, what would he do?

He Yu's shackles were Xie Qingcheng—he was the demon dragon's kin who could tie him down and restrain his fits of madness.

But Xie Qingcheng had fallen.

Grievously wounded and covered in blood, he had fallen into He Yu's arms, just like that.

His blood turned into the flickering firelight that led the demon dragon astray. The shackles that had held He Yu suddenly broke open, shattering into dust.

He Yu's pupils were already blood red.

He couldn't remember exactly how he put Xie Qingcheng down. He only remembered that Xie Qingcheng was very heavy; nestled in his arms, Xie Qingcheng's solid warmth radiated into He Yu's wounded chest. But by the time he laid him down against the rocks, that bit of anesthetic warmth was already gone.

It was gone…

Gone!

He stalked coldly toward Yi Awen. Before, Yi Awen had resembled a vengeful spirit, but next to He Yu now, she looked more like a sheep who had grown up listening to heavenly flute song.

Without a doubt, He Yu wanted her dead.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" Yi Awen sputtered. "You—"

As if a dragon's wings, fangs, and spiked tail suddenly sprouted from his body, he threw himself at her without another word—before

she managed to raise her gun again, he had her pinned against the rocks with a terrifying ferocity.

Tendons bulging from the hand he'd grabbed her with, he pelted her with a flurry of furious punches and kicks. His pupils contracted to pinpricks of black ink, reflecting Yi Awen's battered visage as he tormented her into unbearable agony.

She shrieked and swore, frantically trying to break free. But it was like he couldn't hear a thing.

He'd lost his mind.

Xie Qingcheng's blood had refined him, body and soul, into a malevolent spirit. At that moment, all that the demon dragon could hear was the last sentence his kin had spoken to him.

Seemingly relieved, the azure dragon had said to him, *"He Yu, I've paid you back for that bullet."*

But really, no matter what Xie Qingcheng might have said, in the depths of his mind, he still remembered what He Yu had done for him…

That was why Xie Qingcheng hadn't left the club back then. It was why, after all the absurdities that followed, he'd never actually murdered He Yu. When He Yu pestered him over and over amid their endless trysts, he chose to stop fighting and sacrifice his own body, numbly dealing with He Yu instead of resorting to extreme measures to end their pathological relationship.

Xie Qingcheng detested all aspects of He Yu's behavior, but perhaps, in his subconscious mind, he'd always felt that he owed him something.

Xie Qingcheng was already extremely unwilling to owe anyone anything at all. But because this matter was tied to his mortality, it pressed down on Xie Qingcheng's soul with a stifling weight.

Maybe he'd been looking for a chance to pay him back for the life he owed him all along. Only then would Xie Qingcheng be able to peacefully and completely break things off with him.

Was that why…

Surely that was why.

He Yu's eyes didn't fall on Yi Awen anymore—he couldn't see her. This criminal could cry or curse or scream at the top of her lungs, but no matter what she did, he couldn't hear her.

Blood flew into the air as the rain sheeted down.

In the middle of their savage fight, he seized her gun and snatched away the knife she used to lunge at him. With a flip of the blade, the deadly weapon fell into his hands. Gripping the handle, he unblinkingly drove the blade into her palm.

"Aaaaah—!"

The villain let out a shriek that seemed to emanate from hell itself.

Blood had splashed onto He Yu's face. Although his bloodstained features were devoid of expression, he looked more like a vengeful spirit than she did.

"This cut," he said menacingly, "is for when you stepped on my hand."

Click. Gripping Yi Awen with one hand, he used the other to open the gun's magazine and dump out all of the bullets.

This murderer must've had a guilty conscience to carry something like this on her.

Now, the knife and the gun were both his. He needed to pick one to end the life of this woman who'd hurt Xie Qingcheng—

He would kill her…

Kill her!

He didn't pick the gun. After taking it apart, he tossed it into the mud. That object had hurt Xie Qingcheng—he didn't want to touch it again.

More importantly, it would be too easy to kill her kindly with a gun. He wanted to torture her to death.

He noticed with disinterest that her struggling had gone from fierce to feeble, from hopeful to despairing. She was like a moth fluttering its wings in his hands.

The moth had wanted to fly into his flame and put out his light, so he caught it. After giving it a taste of agonizing pain, he was going to end its life, judgment for its crimes. It didn't matter if the moth's fluids splashed everywhere, covering his hands in filth.

He pressed that blood-splattered knife against Yi Awen's neck.

"This cut," he said softly, "is me sending you down to hell."

His eyes were even redder and sharper than the bloody blade.

"It's over," he growled.

Cold light flashed.

The blade pressed in…

But then—

At that moment, a hoarse, whisper-soft sound broke through his barriers, soaring straight to his eardrums.

"He Yu."

He Yu stilled.

For a moment, there was a lull in the monsoon of chaos ripping through his head.

"He Yu!"

The demon dragon's shackles began to materialize again. Those shattered fragments transformed into brilliant chains coalescing in midair to hold back the youth who was about to jump into hell.

The sound of his name woke He Yu's senses.

He whipped around.

At some point, Xie Qingcheng had regained consciousness. He was leaning against the wall of rock, covered in blood and coughing softly as he pressed a hand to his wounded left arm.

"He Yu…" Xie Qingcheng panted hoarsely. "Don't kill her… She can't fight back anymore… You'll be going too far if you keep on fighting. Don't be a murderer. Don't be like her."

He Yu didn't reply.

"Come here… Listen to me… Leave it to the law to punish people for their crimes…"

Xie Qingcheng knitted his brows and coughed violently before lifting his head, his chest heaving with each labored breath.

"You're already covered in blood."

He Yu still didn't respond.

"He Yu, put down the knife. Come over here. Call the police. Let them take her away. Don't…" As Xie Qingcheng's wound twinged with pain again, he furrowed his brow. "Don't take any more into your own hands."

Yi Awen was lying in a pool of blood, but when she heard those words, her eyes were more terrified than when she was facing her own death.

"D-don't call the police! I'd rather you kill me right now! Don't call the police!"

She was utterly frantic.

It was clear that her abilities ultimately fell far short of her mother's. Lu Yuzhu had managed to force them into desperate straits, but Yi Awen failed.

Like the crude gun she'd stolen, she could go off at any second—but in the end, she was just a petty village criminal.

Although she hadn't said anything out loud, Xie Qingcheng was certain that Yi Awen wasn't part of that organization—she had nothing to do with the RN-13 criminal cases they were looking into.

"He Yu…quick," Xie Qingcheng rasped. "Come over here."

He Yu didn't move.

Xie Qingcheng wanted to continue, but even though he was awake now, he'd still banged his ribcage and the back of his head in the fall. Trying to speak at length made him cough so violently that the world flashed dark before his eyes and he spat out mouthfuls of blood.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu muttered, slowly coming back to his senses. Xie Qingcheng's orders couldn't make He Yu obey, but his weakness could.

The wicked dragon finally withdrew its bloody fangs from the human's neck.

He Yu was covered in blood, but he still staggered to his feet and stumbled toward Xie Qingcheng, step after step.

The knife slipped out of his hand, clattering to the ground.

"Xie Qingcheng…!"

The enormous dragon folded his wings and landed next to Xie Qingcheng. As if waking from a dream, he anxiously helped him sit up and pulled him into a hug. "Are you okay…? Are you okay?!"

Xie Qingcheng indicated that he was fine with a nod and croaked, "Go call the police."

"Don't call the police… You can't call the police!" the woman cried. "Kill me—just kill me yourselves! Don't call the police…"

Xie Qingcheng said, "Yi Awen, you killed someone…!"

She didn't reply.

His eyes were severe over his bloodstained cheeks as he continued.

"That person in the wall behind the bookshelf in the attic—that's your father, isn't it?"

The light in Yi Awen's eyes warped. Paired with the blood all over her face, her appearance had grown even more terrifying.

"He was asking for it…" she muttered, then began to shout. "You wouldn't understand! He was *asking for it*!"

A clap of thunder boomed.

As it reverberated through the wide-open valley, it sounded like a decrepit old train rumbling to life.

The sound of that thunder sent her back to five years ago.

On the platform of Qingli County's railway station…

The bell screeched, and the train's engine roared.

Carrying two tattered red, white, and blue plastic tote bags, Yi Awen ran toward the late-night train from her village without a backward glance. Her eyes held all of her unhappiness and disdain for the past, but also her overflowing excitement and anticipation for the future.

Yi Awen, who'd dropped out of high school, was following in her stepmother's footsteps.

She was running away from this village, a recycling station for humanity's trash.

She was going to the city, to a prospering world of wonders.

Yi Awen was a very diligent woman. Young, hardworking, and attractive, she wasn't worried about finding work in any city. Nor was she worried about finding a man.

She got a job as a salesgirl in a mall selling sheets and duvets. With a salary of two thousand yuan per month plus commission, she could often take home a bit more than three thousand without trying too hard. Many city folk would find this salary paltry, but to a working girl like Yi Awen who'd just escaped her village, it was enough. The mall provided her housing and meals, so Yi Awen could put that three thousand toward fulfilling her own dreams.

There was an American-style café in the city center, the likes of which Yi Awen had only seen on TV before. The thirty-something-yuan cup of coffee was a little bitter, but as she sipped it from within the crowd of young people typing on their laptops, she could imagine herself as the female lead of an urban drama. Thirty yuan wasn't an overly extravagant price tag for a destitute girl to buy her dream.

On the top floor of a skyscraper, there was a conveyor belt sushi restaurant that was a little more than two hundred yuan per meal. People who made more money than Yi Awen would look down on that kind of place—they preferred to eat at quiet, elegant vegetarian restaurants tucked away in a longtang, places where they could enjoy a pure, natural prix fixe meal of green seasonal vegetables for over a thousand yuan. But to young people like Yi Awen who'd just struck out on their own, this kind of sushi restaurant gave them a chance to look down from the top of the building at the bright lights of the busy city, bewitching them into putting down roots and sacrificing their youthful bodies to this vaunted land, encouraging them to continue climbing up and walking forward.

There were also the brightly lit budget hotels.

For less than three hundred a night, you could have a room that held love within its walls. Of course, Yi Awen envied the lovely, smiling women flitting in and out of luxury hotels in their Jimmy Choos, on the arms of "successful men," draped in heavy furs, with delicate shoulders peeking out above slender waists. When she walked past the entrances of those hotels, she thought even the air wafting out of them was unfathomably fragrant.

Although she lived in budget hotels and hostels, she felt content.

It wasn't that she didn't long for a life of luxury, but when she saw those incomparably beautiful women with chubby, homely men, she felt that she was better off. After all…

Her man was both accomplished *and* handsome.

Soon after Yi Awen arrived in the city, she found herself a boyfriend—a handsome university student. The first time she went to a hair salon, she was too embarrassed to say she couldn't shell out a few thousand yuan for the membership card the hairdresser tirelessly tried to upsell her. The customer in the next chair came to her rescue—he told her sincerely, "You don't need to get a perm, your straight hair already looks very nice."

That day, they exchanged WeChat contacts and eventually got together.

He was a native of the city, an accounting student in university. His mother was in middle management at a state-owned company, and his father was a police officer.

Many girls wouldn't find his background particularly impressive, and they certainly wouldn't feel any sort of insecurity or fear. But Yi Awen was different—after their first kiss, as she gazed at his bright, handsome face while wearing his wool coat, an unbearable shame welled up.

She thought of her parents, her birthplace, of everything she'd lived through, and burst into humiliated tears.

Confused and startled, he asked her what was wrong. Was his kissing technique really that bad?

She wiped away her tears and pulled herself together as well as she could. "That's not it," she said. "That's not it—this is my first relationship. I'm so happy."

In the end, she still hid her background from him. She didn't dare tell him that she had run away from the poorest, most gambling-addicted village in Qingli County, with a compulsive gambler for a father and a little sister from another mother. One of her mothers fled to the ends of the earth with no intention of returning; the other was a criminal who'd been jailed for accepting bribes.

"Lu Yuzhu's daughter! The criminal's daughter! Yi Awen, your real mother is behind bars! Your stepmother is a slutty mistress!"

Even the other villagers looked down on her and insulted her. How could she have the courage to explain her life story to her boyfriend?

Thus, she deceived him.

In front of him, she molded herself into a part-time university student at the school next to X University. To make the lie more believable, she even made a trip to the campus and asked a graduate for a set of course materials. When they went on dates, she'd often put a few books in her bag to make it look like she'd just gotten out of class.

He never suspected anything—student relationships were often very simple and clean, and so he never investigated her past.

But students wouldn't remain students forever.

Her boyfriend graduated. On the day he got his diploma, he took her to that top-floor conveyor belt sushi restaurant in a neighborhood that wasn't inexpensive for a student and solemnly asked her, "Are you willing to come home with me and meet my family?"

She was startled and delighted—and also alarmed.

At that moment, she felt like a swollen balloon that was about to float into the sky. But she also worried that she might burst or explode—with a *pop*, everyone would find out that she was hollow, with nothing inside. Then it would all be over.

If she had come clean to her boyfriend at that point, the situation might have not devolved past the point of no return. But Yi Awen was too self-effacing and timid. She loved him—she loved him so much that she was too afraid of losing him and didn't dare say a thing.

In the end, she used four months of savings to buy a presentable-looking outfit at the mall—after all, she'd told her

boyfriend that she came from a literary family and her parents were both newspaper reporters. Although they wouldn't be particularly rich, they would at least be well-off.

She planned to keep spinning her lies.

She endeavored to dress herself up in front of his parents, like a dishonest shopkeeper wrapping a worm-eaten apple in colorful paper, trying to hide it in the fruit basket to dupe inattentive customers.

On the day she met his parents, she wore a pure white midi dress with a casual blazer and a pair of Spanish lambskin shoes, with a spirited ponytail and light, elegant makeup. She even bought a set of imported toiletries specifically because she wanted to leave a good impression on her boyfriend's mother.

His parents brought them to a nearby Western-style restaurant.

This restaurant was a truly respectable establishment. Before this, the fanciest place she'd ever been was a middling chain steakhouse.

As she faced the complicated etiquette of the dinner table in a state of flustered bewilderment, she looked up to see her boyfriend's mother staring at her pensively. Yi Awen's heart skipped a beat as a vague sense of foreboding set in.

She knew that this worldly woman had spotted the holes in the apple.

After that meal, her boyfriend didn't contact her for some time.

It was almost like she already knew how this was going to go. Although her heart was filled with pain, she resisted reaching out to him, as if they'd come to a mutual understanding.

Until one day, when she came down with a fever—lying on the rickety steel cot in the room she shared with her roommates, she started crying as she thought about him. In the end, she couldn't resist sending him a message.

"Dear, will you listen if I explain?" she wrote.

Her boyfriend didn’t reply.

She pressed her phone to her heart, but before she passed out from irresistible drowsiness, she didn’t receive a single message from him. Unsurprisingly, the next morning, there were still no new messages.

Sometimes breakups were calm like this, without any ugly drama, as if saving face for both parties.

But she still cried, wailing loudly as she lay on her dorm room bed. She felt as though the mask she wore so diligently had been shattered in that instant, revealing the face that still belonged to the girl from that destitute village—the daughter of an inveterate gambler and a criminal.

Later on, she ran into him on the street.

Even though hardly any time had passed, he was already with a new girl. That girl wore a scarf that probably cost more than a year of Yi Awen’s savings, revealing a mouth full of neat, snowy-white teeth when she smiled. The easy elegance and grace that Yi Awen could never manage to feign were written all over her face.

They didn’t see her, but she overheard a bit of their conversation when she walked by as they faced the display window with their backs to her.

She heard him say, “I know I lost my temper with the bank teller just now, but don’t think I’m prejudiced against people from the countryside. I got deceived before—I told you what happened with my ex-girlfriend. My dad got someone from the station to investigate her; turns out she was lying to me about everything. She was a worker from some village—her dad racked up over two hundred thousand in debt and her mother was a labor camp prisoner. Just thinking about her still disgusts me. I don’t know how someone could be so malicious…”

That day, she fell apart completely.

Was she really malicious?

She knew that what she'd done was undoubtedly wrong, but she'd never sought to obtain anything from him other than love.

When they were together, she'd actually paid more than he did—both because she was older than him and already making money on her own, and because she truly and sincerely loved him.

Because she loved him so deeply, so apprehensively and insecurely, she got confused—once she told a single lie, she had no choice but to tell bigger and bigger lies to pad out the story.

Making that kind of choice was an instinct that had been drilled into her—every time she candidly told others about her real circumstances, they either gave her empty words of comfort or unabashedly looked down on her. She'd gotten enough of those stares growing up, to the point that she utterly loathed her mother and father.

Why couldn't others judge her solely on who she was?

Why did they always need to include her family, her parents, the deeds in her drawers, the balance in her accounts?

Yi Awen couldn't understand.

All those years, her family had never shown her a single bit of normal guidance or concern.

She saw how her father was wretched, beastly, and idle. She couldn't remember her birth mother, but others always told her that she was corrupt, ruthless, and cruel…

She was their child, so her birth must have been an act of retribution.

She didn't deserve a bright future.

Chapter 120:
I Spared Her Life, but Not Her Heart

AFTER THAT, Yi Awen had a few more brief relationships, but she didn't want to pretend anymore.

An honorable person would be forthright, and she wanted to try being honorable.

But the results were dismal.

No one would want to buy an apple full of worm holes, no matter how sincerely or cheaply it was sold. Every time one of those men learned about her family, he came up with all sorts of far-fetched excuses to leave her.

Yi Awen was initially sad and indignant, but by the end, she only felt numb and jaded.

One night, sitting at a bar at four in the morning, she watched drunken woman after drunken woman being picked up by men who no doubt intended to take advantage of them. Suddenly, she realized that this city was no different from her village.

Both places were equally filthy, operating under the same set of unspoken rules—if you had money and power, no one would dare bully or cheat you; if you were poor and powerless, you'd spend your whole life letting other people call the shots and order you around.

Around that time, she received a letter from her younger sister.

This sister from another mother was the only person in the world who could really understand her. She was even smaller and weaker than Yi Awen, so she endured even greater hardships.

Her sister wrote that she missed her and that she wished she would come home. She said their father wanted to marry her off to a disabled widower from the neighboring village.

When she finished reading, Yi Awen was furious.

That cripple was already fifty, and how old was her sister? Of course she knew exactly what the man they called their father was plotting.

The cripple was sick, ugly, and old, but he ran a little gambling house their father frequented. Their father had lost all his money there, and now he wanted to use his daughter as a bargaining chip on the betting table.

Yi Awen couldn't allow that to happen.

She packed up her belongings and left her disappointment and trauma behind in the city. Bringing her frozen heart and the knowledge and experience she had accumulated, she returned to Qingli County.

She went to her father, Yi Qiang, and asked him without preamble if he wanted money.

Then—

Then, yet another poppy flower nourished by darkness bloomed in the barren dirt of the Yi Family Village.

Awen Hair Salon opened.

Once a victim, Yi Awen now became a perpetrator. She blamed her misfortunes on her impoverished family background and being born to an idle father and criminal mother.

She couldn't change her past, but she figured that if she sold her soul, she could change her present.

Everything should have gone according to plan…if Yi Qiang's ego and greed hadn't continued to swell, if his younger daughter hadn't grown more beautiful day by day.

Yi Qiang met a gang boss in one of the city's casinos. Because of the gangster's powerful connections, people naturally fawned over him. He'd experienced enough of the city's carnal delights, and in

the interest of trying something new, he would sometimes check out what the countryside had to offer.

Thus, Yi Qiang brought the gangster to his hair salon in the village.

Yi Awen happened to be away that day, so only Lulu was watching the place. The gangster looked around but found no one to his liking. He was about to throw a fit when he caught sight of Yi Lulu's stunning beauty.

That night, as her father stood by and said nothing for fear of causing offense, that man forced himself on Yi Lulu.

She didn't dare tell Yi Awen what had happened, but eventually, she could no longer hide the fact that she'd gotten pregnant.

Shaking with fury, Yi Awen brought the girl—still so young—to the hospital in town. Before being wheeled into the operating room, her sister pulled on Yi Awen's sleeve and asked dazedly, "Jie, if we had a mom, would our lives be a little bit easier…?"

In that moment, Yi Awen's heart clenched so tightly that even her anger couldn't make its way through.

After she got home, she retrieved the surveillance footage from that day she hadn't been around and watched the entire thing. Her hands and feet were clammy.

Originally, she'd wanted to find an excuse to pardon the man she called her father. But then she saw with her own eyes how that man fawned over the gangster so deferentially, then stood indifferently outside the room as if pretending he couldn't hear the young woman's cries, and finally accepted the gangster's thick bundle of bills, even putting his palms together and smiling as he bowed in thanks.

She watched it all woodenly.

Even after the display went dark at the end of the recording, she still didn't move a muscle.

A long while later, she saw her own reflection on the dark screen.

She saw a face that belonged to a demon.

"I killed him," Yi Awen finally told He Yu and Xie Qingcheng. "If I didn't cut away our family's rotten roots, it would be impossible for me and my sister to start anew. I didn't have a choice… I didn't have a choice at all.

"What do you guys know…? You don't have to worry about putting food on the table and clothes on your backs. You think you're so clever, coming here to uncover the truth. I've seen plenty of people like you—you'll go back and write up a bunch of eye-catching articles about the so-called truth, turning other people's flesh and blood into the rotten fertilizer that nourishes your livelihood."

What had started out as an irresponsible report from a new journalist who thought they were serving justice had ultimately transformed into a tangled, complicated, demonic web. Yi Awen assumed that Xie Qingcheng and He Yu must be trying to dig up some dirt on the village for a news report, just like that journalist from back then.

As she spoke, she threw her head back and began to laugh.

"You people… You don't know anything, you don't understand anything! To you, all of our suffering is just fodder for your teatime conversations!"

Xie Qingcheng didn't bother explaining anything to her—they'd only crossed paths with Yi Awen accidentally while investigating an RN-13 case. Twenty years after Lu Yuzhu's family was shattered, they were witnessing the conclusion of her husband and daughter's story.

At that moment, a police siren howled in the distance. Yi Awen bit her lip, all color draining from her face.

"You guys called the police?!"

Xie Qingcheng and He Yu hadn't gotten a chance to call the police. They didn't know who was responsible, either. They watched the police car zip along the steep roads.

Yi Awen subconsciously took a step back. As if somehow decreed by fate, she and her mother both loathed the police. In her mother's case, it was because she had been framed, whereas for Yi Awen, it was because of the way her ardent love had been extinguished—her ex-boyfriend's father had been a policeman who exposed her family background and secrets.

She felt like she'd been stripped naked and examined under surgical lights. That feeling of shame still persisted to that day.

"Jie! Jiejie! Are you okay?" The police car sped to a nearby mountain path, and Yi Lulu rushed out of the car…

Ironically, Yi Awen's sister had been the one to call the police.

The girl didn't know that Yi Awen had killed her father, or that she'd sealed his body in the wall to keep people from finding it. In her eyes, her sister was still a good person, kind yet helpless. If she saw Yi Awen get into an argument with someone, she'd always assume it was the other person's fault—that they were bullying her and her sister.

Yi Awen dazedly took in the scene—she could have never anticipated that it would end like this.

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to continue speaking to her, nor did he know what he was supposed to say to this wretched, loathsome, yet pitiable woman.

But He Yu was different.

He Yu was no saint—he hadn't committed murder because Xie Qingcheng hadn't let him, but his chest was still filled with hatred and spite. After the police came over, he suddenly called out to Yi Awen.

"Hold on. I haven't finished talking to you yet."

Yi Awen didn't reply.

He Yu walked slowly toward her like a stalking predator revealing his deadly fangs. Looking down at this woman who had injured his kin, he spoke in clipped tones, his voice laced with malice.

"Miss Yi, do you think you're innocent and helpless? Do you think your actions were forced by circumstances outside your control?"

To everyone else, He Yu's words sounded righteous and moving, but when Yi Awen's gaze met his, she saw only an unmasked devil in his eyes. Clutching at her bleeding hand, Yi Awen turned away in panic.

He was getting his revenge.

Using his own methods, this beast in human clothing would get his revenge.

"What difference is there now between you and those people who once humiliated you?" He Yu asked coldly. "You didn't want your sister to endure those indignities, but what did you do in the name of rewriting your destiny and obtaining money and power? When you rounded up those girls to sell their bodies in your parlor, did you ever consider their feelings?"

In front of her younger sister—in front of the only person she still cared about—he tore off her disguise.

Terrified, Yi Awen shook her head. He Yu could manipulate her emotions as precisely as a butcher handling a fish.

"Stop… Stop talking," she beseeched He Yu as she watched the bewilderment on Yi Lulu's face turn into shock.

But He Yu didn't listen.

She had forced him to hear Xie Qingcheng say those heart-wrenching words, "I paid you back," so he was going to make her experience the same kind of anguish. He knew that this would be even crueler than killing her outright.

"Because your family circumstances were unfortunate," he continued ruthlessly, "because you couldn't stand people calling you the daughter of a criminal and an inveterate gambler, you make those other girls do that kind of work."

"They work willingly! Willingly! I don't force them!"

"But have you ever thought about whether their daughters and fathers are willing? If they have children in the future, will people in this village point at those kids, just like they pointed at you? Will their boyfriends' parents look down on them? Have you thought about that, Yi Awen? You've only ever thought about yourself!

"You never bothered to look into your mother's whereabouts these past few years, have you?"

She didn't reply.

"If only you had the guts to stop avoiding her and recognize her as your mother—if only you took a closer look at the articles about her, you would've known that your mother, Lu Yuzhu, was pardoned many years ago! The original trial was based on false evidence, and the prosecutor personally paid her a visit in Huzhou to apologize and exonerate her."

Upon hearing this, Yi Awen shuddered and looked up, staring at him in disbelief as if she'd seen a ghost.

"You had no idea. I'm not surprised at all," He Yu said deliberately. "Because you're too selfish—you only ever wondered why she was a corrupt official, because in your eyes, she was an official before she was your mother. You never tried to understand her, you never tried to find out about the time she came home only for you and your father to break her heart—because you didn't recognize her at all, and your father had already found a new woman. Only then did she leave you forever!

"It's not difficult to look into these things, so why don't you know about them? It's because you didn't want to look into them in the first place. The minute you found out she was a corrupt official and a criminal, you were ashamed of her—you wished she'd never

walked this earth. So you never bothered to try to understand even the tiniest bit of your mother's past."

Yi Awen remained silent.

"If you'd looked into it, you would've learned that back when your mother was in charge, she was the one who planned out the only passable road in your entire damn village. You would've learned that when she was the county secretary, she was the one who constructed the Hope Elementary School in the county seat for all the children in this area who wanted to study. If you'd looked into it, you would've known about the humiliation, pain, torment, and false charges that your mother endured. You would've known that she finally had her name cleared. If you looked into it…"

He Yu paused briefly.

Revenge was the original motivation behind his words. He'd wanted to unmask Yi Awen in front of everyone, including her dear little sister—he'd wanted her to experience that look of disappointment in the eyes of someone she loved.

But as he spoke, the figure of that woman from the broadcasting tower seemed to float up in his eyes, throwing her head back in wild laughter and then sobbing into her hands.

In truth, if it hadn't been for their opposing positions, He Yu might have sympathized with Lu Yuzhu back then. Up until the day of the broadcasting tower case, when Lu Yuzhu resolved to die for the organization, her heart still ached for the daughter she would never see again.

When Xie Qingcheng had asked her whether she could still see those eyes watching her from the sky, even though Lu Yuzhu had never met Zhou Muying, his words still roused a sort of universal maternal feeling, making her hesitate.

He Yu didn't necessarily hate Lu Yuzhu.

When He Yu reached this point, his words contained a sincere note of inquiry.

"If you looked into it, Yi Awen—if only you'd seen her as your mother, if you'd trusted her and asked for the truth about her past, she would've been your pride instead of your shame, the mother you'd go to any lengths to save. Then everything would be different now—both of you could've had time to set things right. But did you know that because of your family's neglect, your mother's burdens weren't limited to her own wrongs? Do you know what she had to do in the end?

"In order to survive, she ended up working at a 'salon' very much like yours. Perhaps that salon's boss also had troubles outside their control, just like you—but while you exploited those girls for your own gain, your mother toiled just as 'willingly' as the girls who worked for you. You could've changed everything—if only you'd made the slightest effort to understand her, if only you weren't ashamed to have a criminal for a mother, you could've gone to her side as soon as you learned about those injustices.

"Perhaps you could've even brought your sister with you.

"Your mother wouldn't have joined a terrorist organization, you wouldn't have fallen this far, and your sister wouldn't have anything to worry about. Even your father—"

He Yu stopped for a moment before finally speaking the truth out loud, as Yi Lulu and the police all gaped in horror.

"Your father wouldn't have been murdered—you wouldn't have killed him and cruelly sealed him in the wall of your salon's attic."

Yi Awen had been trying to pull herself to her feet, but at that moment, she crumpled to the ground again.

"You once had a key that could've changed the lives of everyone in your family, if only you'd been willing to make a genuine and open-minded effort to understand your own mother. But you tossed it away without even looking at it."

Thunder boomed from the heavens, a deep, muffled rumble.

Its sound was like the final drumroll at the close of an epic concerto. Tonight, the ending of the piece that had begun at the broadcasting tower was finally performed.

Silence descended, seemingly endless.

At last, the police stepped forward and slapped handcuffs onto Yi Awen's wrists. As she walked past her sister with her head lowered, Yi Lulu watched her at a loss, her eyes swimming with tears of panic.

"Jie… I-I didn't mean to… I didn't know… Why did you…" She didn't know what she was supposed to say. Her words tumbled out senselessly.

Yi Awen kept her head lowered, not daring to look at her.

In the end, she, too, became her family's shame. She was terrified of seeing that look of intense disappointment in Yi Lulu's eyes as she brushed past.

It wasn't until she was helped into the car that Yi Lulu suddenly snapped out of her trance. She threw off the police officer who had been supporting her and staggered toward her sister—

"Jie! Jiejie!"

"What are you doing?!" the officer cried.

"Stop her—"

But the captain shook his head, stopping his subordinates in their tracks.

Yi Lulu threw herself at Yi Awen's back, sobbing and hugging her tightly.

"A-jie, it's okay, it's okay. Don't be scared, I don't blame you, I don't blame you—I know you love me, I know you wanted the best for me… You've always been my only family in the world, and that's never going to change. A-jie, no matter what you've done, you'll always be my A-jie!"

Yi Awen's heart throbbed violently. She suddenly turned her head back to look at that young girl.

Her eyes filled with tears.

In that moment, she suddenly understood how her long-lost mother must have felt when she left the Yi Family Village all those years ago.

Back then, had Lu Yuzhu wished for someone to give her those words of love and support?

It didn't matter if she was the celebrated Secretary Lu or the unjustly imprisoned criminal—the whole time, she was her daughter's mother and her husband's wife. Perhaps this was how she felt when she came home.

Back then, she had wanted so little.

Perhaps she just wanted her husband to call her his wife.

Perhaps she just wanted her daughter to call her "Mama."

But neither of them gave her that comfort, so she left and never returned in all the long years that followed.

Yi Awen's throat choked with sobs. She thought she should say something to her sister, but in the end, she said nothing at all. She hurriedly turned around, following the police officers as if fleeing. She left…

He Yu watched as her silhouette disappeared behind the closed door of the police car.

Then he turned back to say something to Xie Qingcheng, but he found that he was leaning back against the rocks, pressing his hand to his profusely bleeding arm.

The breath of relief He Yu had barely let out now hitched in his throat again. He cried—

"Xie Qingcheng!"

No reply.

“Xie Qingcheng! Are you okay? You—”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t answer. Enduring the violent fall and the gunshot wound had sapped his strength. His face bloodlessly pale, he slowly slid down the rock with his head bowed and his eyes closed.

Meatbun's Mini Theatre:
Magical Pet Shop 2

AFTER THE PUPPYDRAGON from the magical pet shop went home with Xie-ge, he discovered that Xie-ge also lived with a little girl—this was Xie-ge's younger sister, Xie Xue.

"Wah! What a strange little creature!" Xie Xue poked the puppydragon's tail. "Are you a puppy or a dragon?"

He Yu curled up his tail. "I'm a dragon!"

Xie Xue immediately searched on the internet: *How are you supposed to raise a dragon? What does a fledgling dragon eat?*

There were all sorts of answers online: You should feed it cookies.

Powdered goat's milk is the best option.

Little dragons under the age of five shouldn't eat anything too salty. Anything all-natural should be fine, dragons are very tough.

Xie Xue noted down every single point.

When Xie-ge went to work, Xie Xue carried a bunch of food over to He Yu's little den.

"Powdered milk?"

The little dragon didn't respond.

"Powdered goat's milk?"

The little dragon was silent.

"Puppy milk replacement?"

He Yu reached out a little paw and knocked the milk replacement to the ground.

Xie Xue was very dejected. The puppydragon wouldn't eat anything. Would it starve to death…? The internet didn't say

anything about this—could she have missed something? She carefully looked at the results again.

The nth reply: "Dragons are magical creatures, lustful by nature. Young dragons don't need to be given food unless they are curious about certain flavors. But when dragons reach adolescence, they must have sex with someone they love to meet their needs for growth… If you really have taken in a dragon, I recommend that you sell it right away. No matter how adorable young dragons may be, they are all extremely dangerous when grown."

Xie Xue was shocked! As soon as Xie Qingcheng came home, she immediately showed this message to her brother.

"Gege, maybe we should just let it go…"

Xie Qingcheng frowned slightly. As he was thinking it over, a warm, fuzzy paw suddenly wrapped around his leg.

He looked down to see the puppydragon gazing at him, droopy-eared and chagrined, very innocent and pitiable.

"…Lots of people will spout nonsense on the internet." Xie Qingcheng gave the phone back to Xie Xue without taking the matter to heart. "No need to pay attention to this."

"But…"

Xie Qingcheng caught sight of the milk replacement in the corner. He opened a can and held it out to He Yu, getting a bit of milk on his fingertips. He asked He Yu tentatively, "Will you drink this?"

The puppydragon walked over and obediently rubbed his head against Xie Qingcheng. He took the milk, hugging it against his chest, and then gave Xie Qingcheng's fingertip a tiny lick. It was a tingly sensation, just like a little puppy.

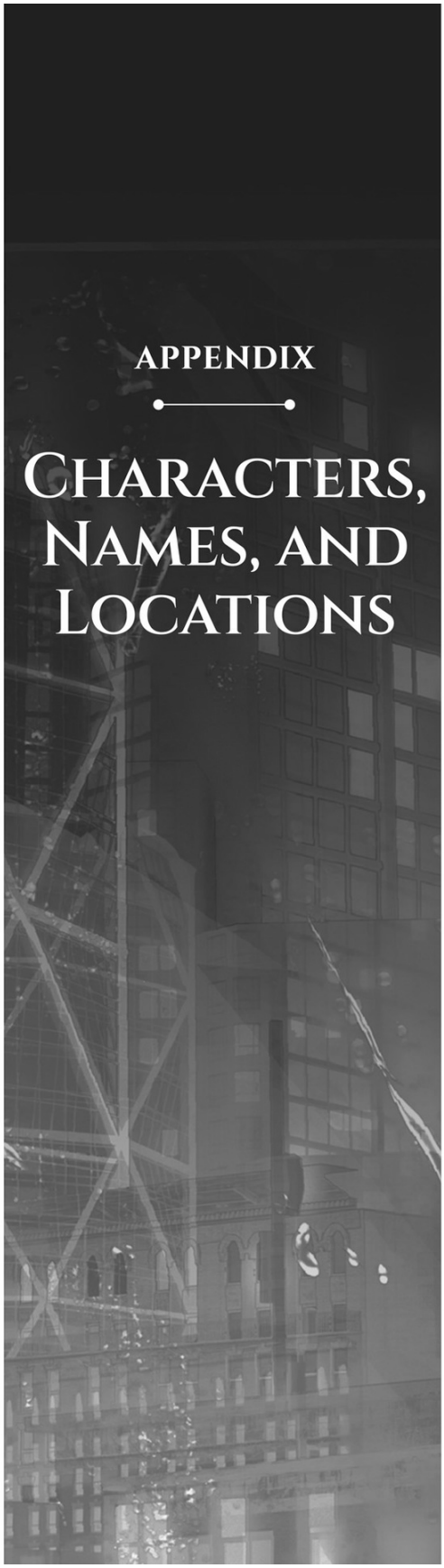
See—who said he couldn't raise this creature?

Xie Qingcheng lifted his hand and patted the puppydragon's head.

Many years later, when a transformed He Yu tore off Xie Qingcheng's clothes and pinned him to the bed, giving him no chance of escape, Xie Qingcheng suddenly remembered the post Xie Xue had shown him.

Fucking hell, why hadn't he believed it back then?

The ancients hadn't been lying—indeed it was true that dragons were lustful by nature.



APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

HE YU: 贺予: A nineteen-year-old university student with a rare mental illness.

XIE QINGCHENG 谢清呈: He Yu's former doctor, who currently works as a medical school professor.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

XIE XUE 谢雪: Xie Qingcheng's younger sister, and a lecturer at He Yu's university.

WEI DONGHENG 卫冬恒: A senior drama student at Huzhou University.

CHEN YAN 陈衍: A police officer and family friend of Xie Qingcheng. Nicknamed "Chen Man."

QIN CIYAN 秦慈岩: Xie Qingcheng's former colleague, who was killed by the angry son of a patient.

LI RUOQIU 李若秋: Xie Qingcheng's ex-wife.

LÜ ZHISHU 吕芝书: He Yu's mother, a wealthy businesswoman.

HE JIWEI 贺继威: He Yu's father, a wealthy businessman who is often away from home.

HU YI 胡毅: A screenwriter and producer of *The Trial*.

HUANG ZHILONG 黄志龙: A powerful entertainment executive.

ZHENG JINGFENG 郑敬风: A veteran criminal investigator and former colleague of Xie Qingcheng's parents.

DUAN WEN 段老板: A mysterious figure working in the shadows.

NAME GUIDE

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

DI/DIDI: A word meaning "younger brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "older brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

LAO-: A prefix meaning "old." Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

LAOSHI: A word meaning "teacher" that can be used to refer to any educator, often in deference. Can also be attached to someone's name as a suffix.

LAOBAN: A word meaning "boss" that can be used to refer to one's superior or the proprietor of a business. Can also be attached to someone's name as a suffix.

SAOZI/-SAO: A word meaning "elder brother's wife." It can be used to address the wife (or informally, girlfriend) of an unrelated male peer.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

XUEZHANG: Older male classmate.

XUEDI: Younger male classmate.

XUEJIE: Older female classmate.

XUEMEI: Younger female classmate.



APPENDIX

GLOSSARY

GLOSSARY

BAIDU: A Chinese tech company that provides a variety of online services. Its search engine, Baidu Search, and its online encyclopedia, Baidu Baike, are comparable in popularity to Google and Wikipedia in other countries.

EYES: Descriptions like "almond eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like that of an almond, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

FACE: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

JADE: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word "jade" can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

UNIVERSITIES AND CLASS STRUCTURE: In Chinese universities, students are assigned to a class of students in their major. Each

class takes their major courses together for the duration of their university career.

WECHAT: A Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app ubiquitous in modern Chinese society. People use its text, call, and voice message functions for both personal and business communications. Many vendors in China prefer its mobile payment capabilities to cash.

WEIBO: A popular Chinese microblogging social media platform similar to Twitter.

XUEBA: 学霸, literally "academic tyrant," is a slang term for high-achieving students. Usually complimentary.

感谢阅读， 回忆长伴。

"Thank you for reading,
may these memories
stay with you forever."

肉包不吃肉

- Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat

Footnotes

Chapter 90: His Secret

[1] The characters in Qin Ciyan's given name are 慈 (cí, "compassion") and 岩 (yán, "stone").

Chapter 91: His Dream Recast

[2] Shennong, the god of agriculture, tasted hundreds of medicinal herbs to determine their uses. In some stories his experimentation is said to have eventually killed him.

Chapter 93: He Was a Person Hidden from Sight

[3] A term for the most senior male fellow disciple of your mentor.

Chapter 95: I Sent You Back to Shore Instead

[4] Junior disciples of the same mentor. “Shidi” is used for one’s “younger brothers” and “shimei” for one’s “younger sisters.”

Chapter 96: My Kin

[5] Characters from Jin Yong's epic wuxia novel The Legend of the Condor Heroes. Guo Xiang fell in lifelong, unrequited love with Yang Guo the moment he took off his mask and revealed his face.

Chapter 97: No Longer the Same

[6] The Li in He Li's name, 鲤, means "carp." The idiom "carp leaps through the Dragon's Gate" (鲤跃龙门) is used to describe someone getting a big break, and refers to the legend that a carp who leaps over a certain waterfall can become a dragon.

Chapter 100: Why Is She Allowed to Come Over to Your Place for New Year's?!

[7] "Tonight is Unforgettable" is traditionally the final song performed during the CCTV New Year's Gala.

Chapter 105: The Words I Couldn't Say

[8] According to superstition, cleaning at the beginning of the new year will sweep away all the good luck.

Chapter 109: I Let You Tempt Me

[9] In Chinese mythology, dragons possess an inverted scale on their throats. The scale must not be touched, or else the dragon will kill the offender. The inverted scale is also used as a metaphor for a sore spot or weakness that can provoke strong negative reactions.

Chapter 114: I'd Seen Her Before

[10] The ruler of hell.

Chapter 115: We Went to a Massage Parlor

[11] Andhadhun is a 2018 black comedy about a pianist who pretends to be blind and witnesses a murder he shouldn't have been able to see.

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

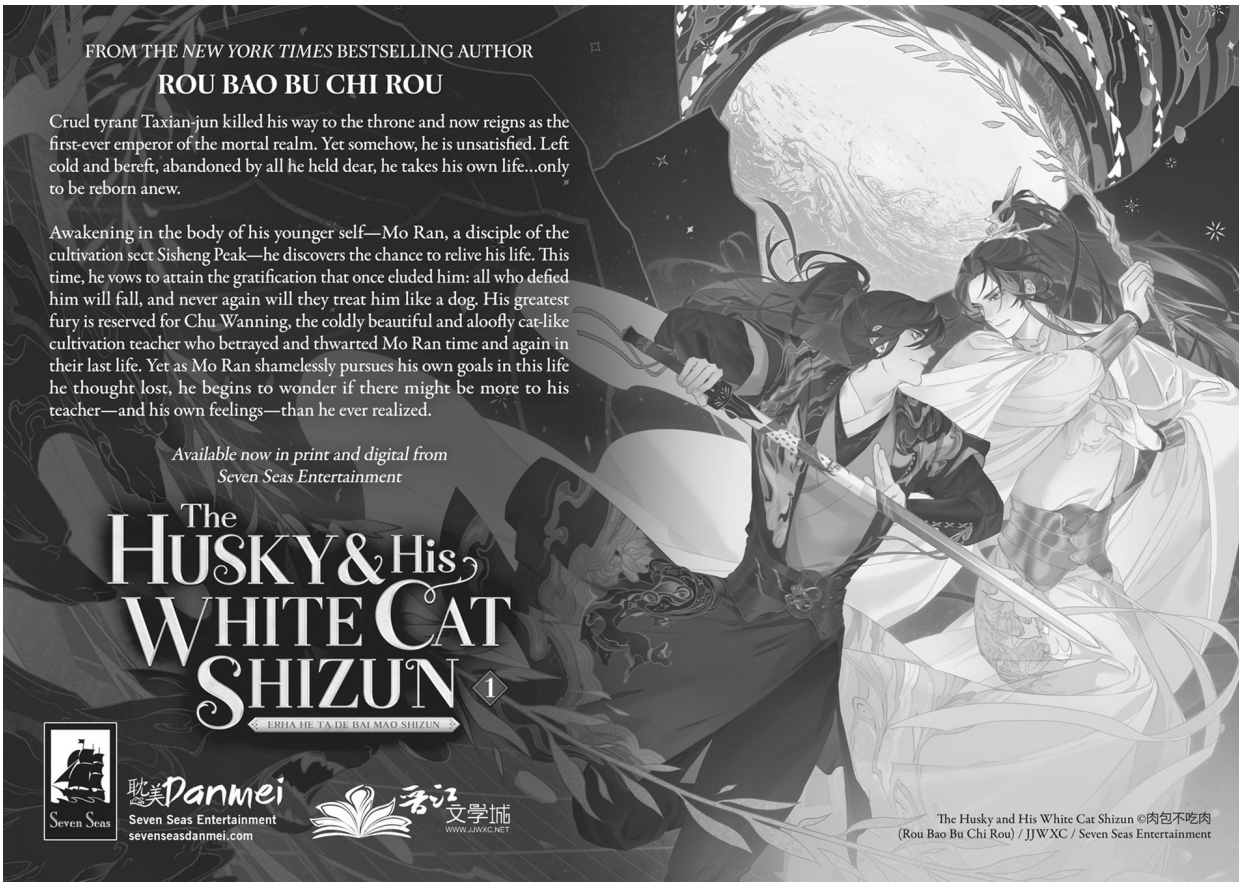
Cruel tyrant Taxian-jun killed his way to the throne and now reigns as the first-ever emperor of the mortal realm. Yet somehow, he is unsatisfied. Left cold and bereft, abandoned by all he held dear, he takes his own life...only to be reborn anew.

Awakening in the body of his younger self—Mo Ran, a disciple of the cultivation sect Sisheng Peak—he discovers the chance to relive his life. This time, he vows to attain the gratification that once eluded him: all who defied him will fall, and never again will they treat him like a dog. His greatest fury is reserved for Chu Wanning, the coldly beautiful and aloofly cat-like cultivation teacher who betrayed and thwarted Mo Ran time and again in their last life. Yet as Mo Ran shamelessly pursues his own goals in this life he thought lost, he begins to wonder if there might be more to his teacher—and his own feelings—than he ever realized.

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THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN

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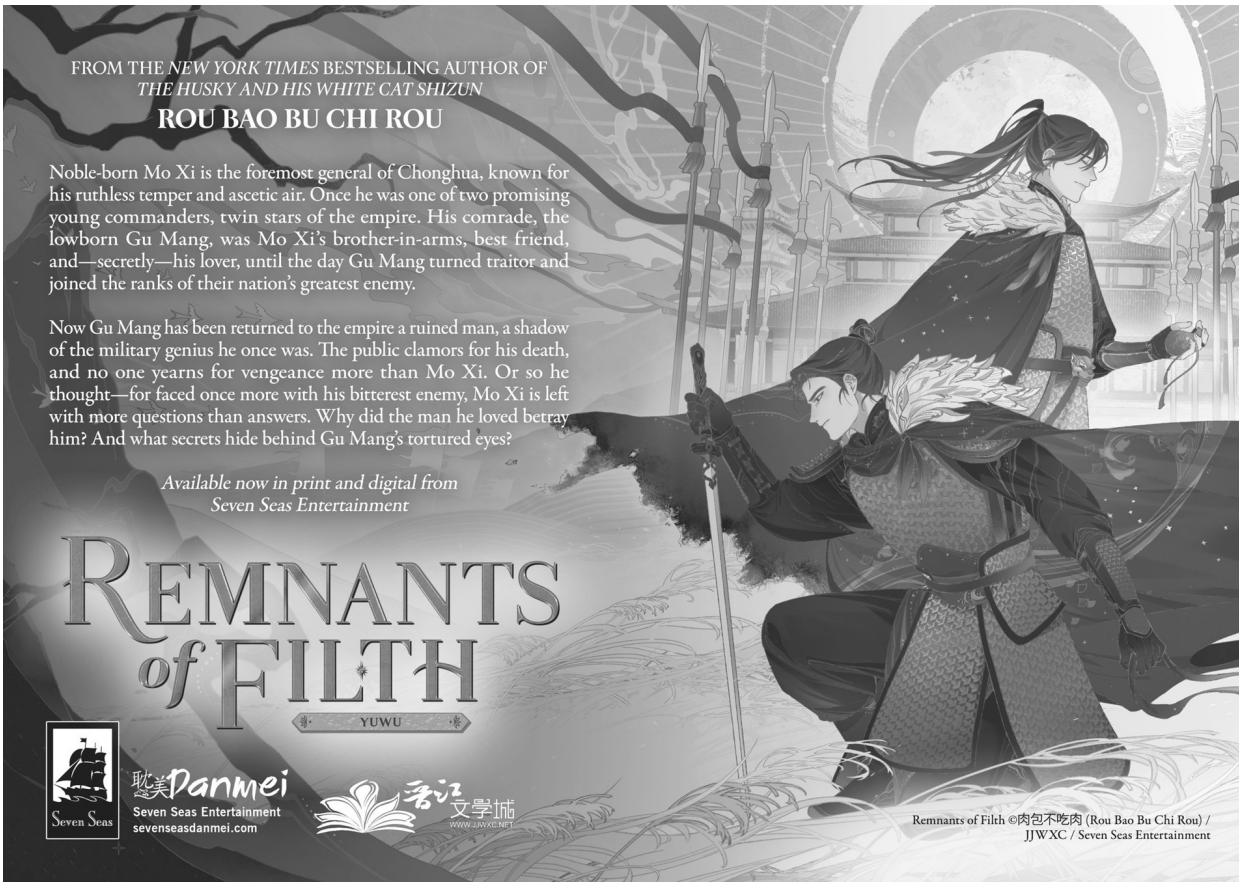
Noble-born Mo Xi is the foremost general of Chonghua, known for his ruthless temper and ascetic air. Once he was one of two promising young commanders, twin stars of the empire. His comrade, the lowborn Gu Mang, was Mo Xi's brother-in-arms, best friend, and—secretly—his lover, until the day Gu Mang turned traitor and joined the ranks of their nation's greatest enemy.

Now Gu Mang has been returned to the empire a ruined man, a shadow of the military genius he once was. The public clamors for his death, and no one yearns for vengeance more than Mo Xi. Or so he thought—for faced once more with his bitterest enemy, Mo Xi is left with more questions than answers. Why did the man he loved betray him? And what secrets hide behind Gu Mang's tortured eyes?

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REMNANTS of FILTH

YUWU



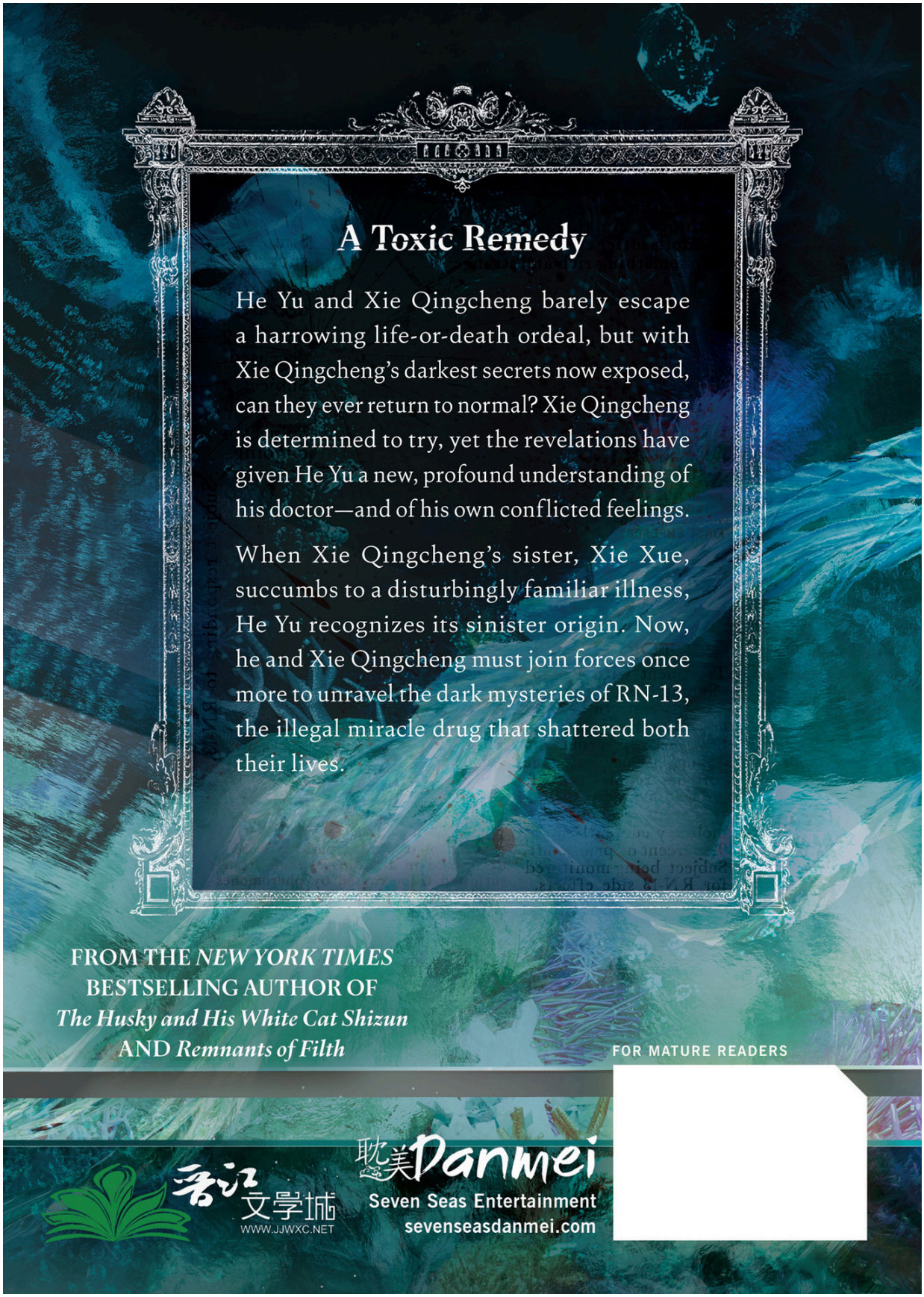
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A Toxic Remedy
He Yu and Xie Qingcheng barely escape a harrowing life-or-death ordeal, but with Xie Qingcheng's darkest secrets now exposed, can they ever return to normal? Xie Qingcheng is determined to try, yet the revelations have given He Yu a new, profound understanding of his doctor—and of his own conflicted feelings.
When Xie Qingcheng's sister, Xie Xue, succumbs to a disturbingly familiar illness, He Yu recognizes its sinister origin. Now, he and Xie Qingcheng must join forces once more to unravel the dark mysteries of RN-13, the illegal miracle drug that shattered both their lives.
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