
FROM NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
CASE FILE
COMPENDIUM
Bing An Ben
5

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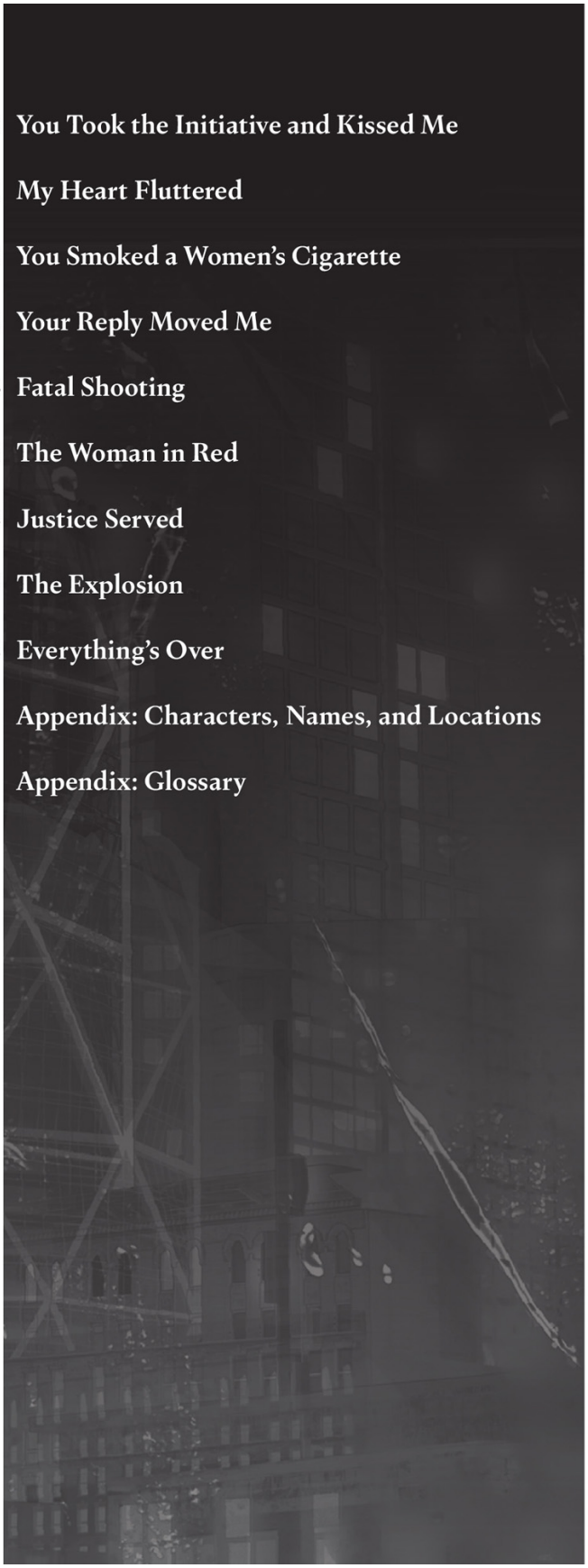
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Chapter 121:
You Called Me Little Devil Again

HE YU SAT next to Xie Qingcheng's hospital bed with his head lowered, silently peeling an apple.

Even though Yi Awen hadn't been the mysterious woman with the bag he saw that night, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng had learned a great deal about Qingli County, in addition to witnessing the finale of a family drama.

Yi Awen had been taken away, and the police had found Yi Qiang's severely decomposed body in the salon attic. Currently, Yi Lulu was at the police station receiving psychological counseling and undergoing questioning.

It was now the next day, and at the Qingli County's community health center, He Yu had remained watchful at Xie Qingcheng's side the whole time.

He Yu actually didn't know how to peel an apple—the result of his handiwork was a scraggly mess, with half the flesh ending up in the garbage can along with the skin. Still, he finished peeling and cutting the fruit and handed it to Xie Qingcheng. By now, he no longer bore any resemblance to that terrifying would-be murderer in the mountains.

Although Xie Qingcheng was awake, he didn't have much energy to eat, nor was he willing to have someone else feed him.

"I cut it into small pieces for you," He Yu tentatively began.

Xie Qingcheng had one hand hooked up to an IV and the other hand covered in bandages. Even if the apple had been cut into pieces, he'd have had a hard time eating it.

Nevertheless, with a soft cough, he said, "I'll eat it myself."

He Yu was about to reply when the doctor entered the room.

Xie Qingcheng's luck wasn't even E rank—it was an F. When the motorcycle flew into the air and tossed them against the cliff, he injured his head and torso. He still had a mild concussion and was coughing up blood, to say nothing of the gunshot wound to his arm. He was far unluckier than He Yu.

"Your muscles and bones have been damaged," the doctor explained to them after reviewing the compilation of medical case studies. "Even after treatment, this arm will never be as strong as before. And your health, well—"

"I know," Xie Qingcheng said, interrupting the doctor. "You don't need to continue."

The doctor glanced at him with a complicated look in his eyes.

"I used to be a doctor myself," Xie Qingcheng explained.

The doctor was silent for a moment. "Then, please. Look after yourself."

"I will, thank you."

He Yu hadn't thought their conversation would end so abruptly, and there was no way *he* was going to let the doctor go just like that. He'd never had any problem logically delivering words of condemnation, incisive and cold. Now, though, when he heard the doctor tell Xie Qingcheng about his arm, he jumped to his feet, his thoughts a jumble as words spilled out of his mouth.

"What do you *mean*?! What do you mean his arm will never be the same as before? I've been shot around there and *I'm* fine now, so why can't he get better? Is it an issue with the quality of care here or—"

"He Yu." Xie Qingcheng's voice dripped with reprobation.

He Yu fell quiet. He gritted his teeth, forcibly restraining his increasingly irritable mood, but the rims of his eyes reddened and his chest heaved.

"The diagnosis will be the same in the city," the doctor replied evenly. "Even if you were injured in the same general area, the

specific location will result in different outcomes. Plus, to be honest, he's much older than you, so his ability to recover can't compare to yours. I understand your feelings, but please calm down."

Rather than answer, He Yu seethed in silence.

"If there's nothing else, I'll be taking my leave," the doctor said. "If you need help with anything, feel free to press the call button at any time."

Once the doctor left, neither of them spoke. After a long pause, He Yu selected another apple and sat down. He began to peel the fruit, but his movements were irregular and frantic, helpless and despondent. In the end, he flung the apple into the garbage can so hard that it thudded heavily against the bottom and knocked the can onto its side.

Xie Qingcheng looked up at him with a sidelong glance. "What are you trying to prove?"

He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng, his eyes brimming with both anguish and fury. It was a while before he spoke again. When he did, he ignored Xie Qingcheng's question. "Well, what are you going to do now?"

"It's just one arm, and it's not like it's going to be entirely useless." Xie Qingcheng seemed wholly indifferent. "Finding out the truth as quickly as possible is more important. And—*please* pick up my garbage can."

"Just one arm?" He Yu repeated Xie Qingcheng's words back to him, his voice taking on an odd tone. He couldn't care less about the stupid garbage can. The man in the hospital bed didn't reply. He Yu tried to hold himself back, but he failed in the end. "Xie Qingcheng, you always told me to value myself, but what about you?" he cried out, jumping to his feet. "Can you manage the same for yourself?!"

"Then, what's your advice?" Although Xie Qingcheng was quite unwell, his severe aura loomed imposingly as he stared up at He Yu.

"*I* would never fucking dare!" He Yu was so incensed that he started swearing.

"You're a student; don't use that kind of language in front of me. Besides, your situation isn't the same as mine."

"Yeah? And how's that?"

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes and didn't respond immediately. It seemed as if he wanted to give a perfunctory answer and let the topic go.

He Yu wouldn't let him. "Xie Qingcheng, answer me! How exactly are you and I different?!"

No response.

"We're both human, aren't we?"

Silence.

"We're both psychological Ebola patients, aren't we?"

More silence.

"Don't give me any of that 'I'm mentally ill, my life is worthless' spiel, because…because when you devalue yourself, you're also devaluing me!" He Yu became more and more worked up as he spoke. He stared at Xie Qingcheng with bloodshot eyes for a long time before he went on. "Xie Qingcheng, I'm begging you, please take yourself seriously. Back there in the mountains, you know, if that bullet landed in your heart instead of your arm—you would've died just like that, right in front of me. I really…"

I really would've lost it. Murder, slaughter, dismemberment, arson—you name it, I could've done it.

"I hope you won't blame yourself for this," Xie Qingcheng said solemnly. "You came with me, so I needed to protect you."

He Yu blinked.

"Besides, if someone's in mortal danger right in front of me, I could never stand by and do nothing."

"But you were about to trade in your life for mine!"

"Yes, and? I'm your elder, so it would be my duty to save you. Enough about this. After all, I *didn't* die."

With every word Xie Qingcheng said to him, He Yu felt a handful of salt pouring onto his heart. He could tell there was something about Xie Qingcheng's personality that was even more terrifying than his own—it was as though Xie Qingcheng treated his own life as an object that he could trade in or destroy for the sake of a goal, as long as he found the exchange acceptable.

"You're completely disregarding your own life," He Yu said hoarsely.

In the end, he just annoyed Xie Qingcheng.

"I am *not*," Xie Qingcheng said as he stared up at He Yu. "I knew exactly what I was doing. I'm thirteen years older than you, and I'm the first psychological Ebola patient who can control his emotional symptoms and conquer the disease. Who are *you* to tell me I'm disregarding myself? So, my arm's injured and won't ever be as strong as before? It is what it is. I told you long ago that we can't change the things that have already happened, so we need to learn how to accept them."

He spoke very calmly, almost mechanically. "I've just already accepted the facts, that's all. I hope you'll stop making careless assumptions about my feelings, He Yu. You're still too young. Besides, the two of us may have the same illness, but we don't walk the same path. You can't truly understand me."

When he heard that last sentence, He Yu's face turned ashen and he grew quiet. It was a long while before he sorrowfully spoke up again.

"Xie Qingcheng, could you please not say that? You and I… we're both unique. Ever since I learned the truth, I've been trying my best to get closer to you. I want to understand what you feel, how you *think*, but you've kept on insisting that I'm too young, I'm not calm enough. You even—you wanted to use that bullet in your

shoulder to pay me back. Xie Qingcheng, how much do you not want me? How much do you want to settle the score between us?"

He started to choke up as he continued. "You, *you* said you didn't want to owe me anything, so you insisted on this step, and now you're telling me I can't understand you? 'We don't walk the same path'? You just want to dismiss all my hard work. Isn't that right?"

Xie Qingcheng hadn't anticipated this aggrieved reaction, and he paused in surprise. "That's not what I meant. Why are you making such a big fuss out of this?"

Unexpectedly, those words provoked He Yu past his limit. Overtaken by his emotions, He Yu found it impossible to accept Xie Qingcheng's words.

"Look, you've paid me back completely, so you can talk to me like this! Even if I'm actually worried about you, you'll just say I'm making a fuss." He Yu glared at Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng was already dizzy to begin with because of his mild concussion. As He Yu grew more heated, his headache only worsened. "Why don't you sit down? We can have a proper conversation."

"I *won't* sit down! No matter what I do, you think I'm childish, that we don't walk the same path, and that I can't understand you. What use is sitting down?!"

"Then you can leave." Xie Qingcheng felt like his head was about to split open.

He Yu's eyes sharpened in anger. "I just *knew* you were gonna chase me out again! You don't owe me anything anymore, so I've gotta leave if you want me to leave. I don't have the right to stay, do I?"

He Yu was so inscrutable, Xie Qingcheng thought, that even the most difficult woman he'd ever met couldn't measure up. "What exactly do you want?"

Infuriated and hurt, He Yu glared at him for a long time before lowering his head and bracing a hand on the hospital bed. After another moment, he looked down with tearful eyes and kissed Xie Qingcheng's bandaged shoulder.

"I don't know…" He Yu's voice had softened, tinged with a throaty hoarseness. "I didn't want you to pay me back."

Xie Qingcheng remained silent.

"But, but now…you've already paid me back for everything," He Yu said. "I just don't know what to do. Xie Qingcheng, I don't know what to *do* anymore."

He Yu kissed Xie Qingcheng's shoulder again, then his neck and his lips, gripping his bed sheets in his hand as tears rolled down his cheeks. Utter misery washed over him.

"Xie Qingcheng, why do you have to treat me this way? Why can't you be a little bit nicer to me? Why are you unwilling to owe me anything at all?" He Yu continued to kiss him, unable to keep himself from reaching out to pull Xie Qingcheng into a tight embrace. "Why can't you see me as someone who's not like everybody else?"

Uneasiness overtook Xie Qingcheng as He Yu hugged and kissed him. He didn't know what He Yu wanted from him. After all, they'd only ever hooked up because of an unexpected turn of events, and now that that arrangement had ended, they were merely two unlucky sufferers of the same disease. He felt that He Yu's reliance on him was excessive—his demonstrations of physical intimacy were like a runaway train that couldn't be stopped.

"Xie Qingcheng, couldn't you acknowledge me?" He Yu asked it despondently between the presses of his lips. "Could you…give me a hug? Just like how I hug you."

Nothing.

"Please?"

He Yu kept on waiting, and waiting, but—of course, after all that, he didn't get a hug from Xie Qingcheng. As he stalled, he buried his youthful face in the crook of the older man's neck. His eyes slowly closed with disappointment.

It was okay. It was fine. He'd known it would turn out this way, hadn't he? Xie Qingcheng had already paid back all his debts. Why would he still indulge him? He had no reason to baby him with a hug. Yes, that was fine. He Yu was already used to it. Actually, he'd never had any hope in the first place. As long as Xie Qingcheng didn't throw him off, that was enough.

For a long time, all that could be heard in the quiet hospital room was the faint beeping of the instruments and the sound of their breathing as He Yu stubbornly clung to Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng didn't understand why He Yu was asking him for a hug right now, but he sensed that his emotional state was very fragile. He didn't want to upset him any further. So he didn't push him away.

"Why don't you let go of me now?" Xie Qingcheng eventually asked.

"I don't wanna."

Xie Qingcheng paused. "It's too hot. Let go of me."

"No. Let me hug you for a little longer."

He Yu really didn't let go. Apparently he was willing to persist in giving a one-sided hug for quite a while. He even hugged him more tightly than before, as if this could make up for the effort that the other man wasn't putting into the embrace.

"Xie Qingcheng, you don't owe me anymore," he muttered. "But don't I owe you? What am I supposed to do? Tell me, what should I do?"

Xie Qingcheng could feel He Yu's vigorous heartbeat pressed against his chest. That fervent, almost obstinate, beseeching rhythm pushed him into a sense of vague disorientation. That disarrayed

feeling caused him even greater unease, so he tried to push He Yu away with his uninjured arm.

"He Yu, there's nothing to be done," Xie Qingcheng said. "The two of us have turned over a new leaf. As long as you don't disrupt my personal life or pull me into more nonsense, I don't want to hold onto those things from the past anymore. Let go of me, okay? You're so heavy and so hot. You're like a…"

You're like a large dog. An extremely annoying large dog.

"You think I'm *heavy*," He Yu whined.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't muster a reply. Fucking hell. Okay, what if he stopped talking?

Although the idea occurred to him, Xie Qingcheng couldn't hold his tongue, for He Yu really had managed to muddle his thoughts.

"He Yu, I still don't understand what you want from me. I'm not planning to settle our old scores, so what is there for you to be unsatisfied with? I took a bullet for you because, regardless of what other people might think, *I* don't want to owe anything to anyone. There's nothing more to it. It's not like I want to break off contact with you or cut you out of my life. Right now, you're so—you're a boy, but you're being all clingy like a girl. Just what do you want?"

Actually, if it were a girl in He Yu's place, Xie Qingcheng would understand right away that He Yu's feelings toward him were romantic. It was too bad He Yu was a boy.

Not only that, but he was a boy as different from Xie Qingcheng as fire was from water. He Yu pestered him, tormented him, even humiliated him—Xie Qingcheng would never imagine *love* when considering He Yu's feelings. Boys He Yu's age were curious about sex, so he assumed their physical involvement couldn't be taken seriously. Because of that, Xie Qingcheng wanted to know He Yu's *real* goal.

Faced with this question, He Yu had no way of giving Xie Qingcheng an honest answer. He knew what Xie Qingcheng's response would be. Knowing that, he could only take the words "Xie Qingcheng, I love you" and lodge them in his chest and throat where they would never be spoken, choking on them until his eyes filled with passion and shame.

"You're the only person in the world I can really talk to, so I don't want you to die," he said at last. Those dismal words were the best he could do. "Xie Qingcheng, could you—please, promise me that in the future, you'll never hurt yourself for another person? That you won't sacrifice yourself for anyone else again? Because…your life is *also* a life. Qin Ciyan traded his life for yours. Think about it. Just think about it, okay?"

Xie Qingcheng had been listening indifferently, but when he heard these words, a slight shiver ran through him.

He Yu felt it too. "Xie Qingcheng," he said, "you shouldn't waste the life he gave you."

All the muscles in Xie Qingcheng's back tensed up, and it was some time before he was able to relax. He didn't try to refute He Yu's words again.

Finally, He Yu let go of him. He sat up, staring into Xie Qingcheng's eyes. "I'm taking this as your promise." When Xie Qingcheng didn't reply, He Yu continued. "From now on, you can't do this to yourself. Xie Qingcheng, you're the First Emperor, as well as Qin Ciyan's disciple. I trust that there are many things you still need to do on this earth. Your hands and limbs, your vital organs, and your life itself are things you shouldn't regard so lightly. I won't let you sacrifice yourself for anyone."

Even though He Yu knew that the blood toxin was useless against Xie Qingcheng's will, he still bit his own lip and leaned down to exchange a blood-soaked kiss with Xie Qingcheng. "You need to be good and listen," he whispered against his lips. "That's my order."

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. After that coppery kiss came to an end, he reached up and patted He Yu on the cheek.

"Little devil, you really are delusional," he said with a sigh.

Although it was a simple sentence, it made He Yu's heart thunder in his chest. He straightened up and turned his face away so that Xie Qingcheng wouldn't see the look in his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"Nothing, really."

It's just that you haven't called me "little devil" in a long, long time.

Chapter 122:
Our Relationship, Perceived

AFTER XIE QINGCHENG went to sleep, He Yu walked out of the community health center and called his father.

"Dad."

"What is it?" For some reason, He Jiwei's voice sounded rather tired.

"Could you recommend a wound care specialist to me?" He Yu asked.

"You got hurt again?"

"No." He Yu didn't want to tell him too much. "It's just… The wound I got at the broadcasting tower still bothers me sometimes, so I think it hasn't completely healed yet. It's not a big deal or anything, but do you know who the most reputable doctor in the field is?" A pause. "All right, send me the number. I'll call them later."

He Jiwei was in his villa in Yanzhou. When he got off the phone with He Yu, he contacted a private American physician he knew quite well, then sent the doctor's number to He Yu.

"Did something happen?" Lü Zhishu, He Yu's mother, asked.

"It's He Yu," He Jiwei replied mildly without looking at her. "The injury on his shoulder relapsed, so he wants to find a doctor to check it out."

Lü Zhishu couldn't quite believe it. "Why doesn't he ask Anthony? He's his doctor, after all."

"Anthony is just his psychiatrist. It makes sense that he wouldn't ask him."

But Lü Zhishu disagreed. Given how independent He Yu was, she thought, he wouldn't ask his parents for help unless it was

something very important.

"Where is He Yu these days, anyway?" she asked in an absent-minded manner. "Who's he with?"

"I don't know."

Lü Zhishu pressed her lips together in dismay at her husband's answer.

He Yu's brother He Li, who was seated nearby, was displeased to hear his mother express such concern for He Yu.

"Mom, Dad, have you ever wondered if my brother's been dating someone behind your backs?" Even though He Yu had threatened him with a jab to his temple, He Li still blurted out this cryptic remark.

Of course, as a woman, Lü Zhishu had considered the possibility. She was sensitive to these things.

Back at the film set, something had seemed off to her about He Yu. He always seemed distracted, looking at his phone dozens of times over the course of a single meal. She'd also heard from Huang Zhilong that He Yu had inexplicably asked to change his room. She'd asked Huang Zhilong to look into the room situation, only to learn that there'd been no women staying next door, nor had there been any girls who visited He Yu's room. She'd relaxed at that news, but…

Now, when she heard He Li say such a thing, her heart began to pound with nerves once again. Executive Duan seemed quite lenient with He Yu for the time being; he hadn't asked her to watch over him every second. But if it turned out He Yu was in a relationship without her knowing and reporting it to the higher-ups as soon as possible, Executive Duan probably wouldn't be pleased with her.

However, she didn't dare bother Executive Duan without a shred of evidence. She had to verify whether there was any truth to this conjecture. Immediately, she went to work.

First, she hired an investigator to determine He Yu's recent whereabouts. This information came easily enough: The records indicated that He Yu had gone to Qingli County, and that he was with Xie Qingcheng.

Upon seeing the results, Lü Zhishu blinked in surprise. Qingli County? Wasn't that where Lu Yuzhu was from—*and* where Huang Zhilong had used the pretext of education to gather suitable human test subjects for the organization?

Yes, Qingli County was one of the "bases" that the organization had kept shrouded in darkness. There was no way Executive Duan could be oblivious to the fact that He Yu and Xie Qingcheng had gone there…but he didn't really seem to mind. It seemed he was confident that He Yu wouldn't be able to scrape any clues out of the bricks and mortar of that county seat.

Why would He Yu and Xie Qingcheng even set out for Qingli County so suddenly, though? Could it be they had already discovered what was wrong with that place?

Just as Lü Zhishu's imagination was beginning to take off, the investigator sent another reply.

"Executive Lü, before Young Master He went to Qingli County, it looks like he went to Meiyu Private Hospital to visit a girl named Xie Xue."

A lightbulb flipped on in Lü Zhishu's head. Xie Xue?

Lü Zhishu was an important person with a great deal on her mind; her memory wasn't perfect. She had to mull over the name for a while, but eventually the outline of a girl's face surfaced in her mind.

In Lü Zhishu's eyes, Doctor Xie's younger sister was an unremarkable girl. Because she was so poor, she had to rely on her sunny disposition to avoid giving people the impression she was disadvantaged. Lü Zhishu disliked silly girls like her, naïve romantics who appeared to live in perfect harmony with the rest of the world.

Xie Xue's pure and carefree smile reminded Lü Zhishu of painful things in her own past.

The few times she'd met Xie Xue, she'd been indifferent toward her. Lü Zhishu had even warned He Yu, back when he'd been in middle school, to keep his distance from the girl because they would never belong to the same social class.

How had He Yu reacted at the time? The way Lü Zhishu remembered it, He Yu had been very opposed to her suggestion. He hadn't hidden his warm feelings toward Xie Xue in front of his mother at all.

So, was it *her*, then?

For further confirmation, Lü Zhishu asked the investigator to obtain He Yu's recent transaction history.

It could take days on end to comb through the lengthy transaction history of a fuerdai. However, Lü Zhishu had instructed the investigator to limit the search to certain items, keeping it highly targeted. A few hours later, she received a reply.

Last year, He Yu had spent ¥1.68 million at the Skynight Club. The receipt included condoms and lube. He'd also purchased condoms on numerous occasions at Huzhou University's convenience store. Clearly, he had a regular partner who was more than just a one-night stand.

Lü Zhishu sat down, gripping her phone, ashen-faced. Huzhou University? That girl taught at Huzhou University. It seemed like it *was* her.

At first, she thought about calling the Skynight Club and asking for their surveillance footage, but too much time had gone by—a nightclub wouldn't have preserved CCTV footage from nearly a year ago, so investigating Skynight would be pointless. In that case, what about investigating Huzhou University?

After muttering to herself at length, Lü Zhishu sent a message to a member of the organization with connections at Huzhou

University, asking them to obtain surveillance records from the days when He Yu purchased condoms. Although the videos were quickly sent over, they showed that He Yu hadn't had much contact with Xie Xue outside of class on those days, and that he'd only met with Xie Qingcheng alone a few times.

How strange. What did he use the condoms for, then?

Lü Zhishu wanted to have someone follow him, but as soon as this idea occurred to her, she quickly dismissed it. He Yu was very observant; there was a good chance he would realize he was being tailed, and the situation would be unsalvageable. For the time being, Lü Zhishu didn't dare take such a risk.

Instead, she asked the investigator to edit together the relevant footage with as few blind spots as possible. Although this would be quite a task, she could afford to wait. Besides, if He Yu kept on seeing that greedy, penniless wench, she'd definitely get her hands on some unassailable evidence sooner or later; there was no rush. With these thoughts in mind, she settled down to wait for the investigation's results.

After a few days, the treatment for Xie Qingcheng's wound was more or less finished, and He Yu's hand was even less of an issue. It had only been dislocated—Yi Awen hadn't broken any bones—so it'd healed swiftly. With that taken care of, the two of them returned to Huzhou together.

Once they arrived, Xie Qingcheng planned to go straight to Zheng Jingfeng and report the results of their investigation to him. There was clearly a mole within the criminal investigation unit, and Zheng Jingfeng was the only person Xie Qingcheng could trust completely right now. For his part, He Yu was worried and wanted to go with him. Xie Qingcheng thought this was unnecessary.

"He and my parents trusted each other with their lives," he said. "If we can't have confidence in him, then the entire police force will be as good as useless to us."

He Yu glowered for a long moment. “Who cares if he’s a good cop or a bad cop?”

“Why do you insist on coming with me, then?”

He Yu’s expression darkened further. “Because of your arm.”

“What’s wrong with my arm?” Xie Qingcheng asked.

“Can you even drive with your shoulder in this condition?”

“I’ll take the metro.”

“Are you kidding? The metro’s so crowded, with everyone jostling for position—do you want to lose your arm completely?”

Xie Qingcheng fell quiet for a moment. Although he knew that He Yu was concerned for him, this kind of worrying was just bizarre. When he thought about it, He Yu had been acting oddly for a while now. He wouldn’t have been as confused about Chen Man or Xie Xue doing these things for him, but this was He Yu. He wasn’t a kind person, not really. His warmth was only skin-deep, and he treated everybody with cool indifference, so he would never express this kind of concern for someone for no apparent reason. Xie Qingcheng had no idea what his motives could be.

“The metro won’t be crowded at this hour, little master,” he said. “Where’s your common sense?”

He Yu paused for a moment, taken aback. “Really? How wonderful. In that case, I’ll take the metro back with you.”

Xie Qingcheng hadn’t expected this answer.

“Let’s go,” He Yu insisted.

Xie Qingcheng couldn’t be bothered to nag him anymore. Even though he found He Yu’s behavior incomprehensible, Xie Qingcheng had too many things to worry about, so he let it go. He Yu could do as he pleased.

Although it was possible to get a taxi straight from Huzhou Station, it was more convenient to take Line 5 of the metro to Captain Zheng’s police station. On the other hand, it was impossible

to get to He Yu's house by the metro. Any visitor would need to flag down a cab from the closest station.

"You don't mind going out of your way?" Xie Qingcheng asked He Yu as he swiped into the station.

He Yu didn't answer, because he was still stuck at the turnstile. "Hey, how do you get in? My QR code didn't work."

"You need to use the metro QR code."

"Where's the metro QR code?" He Yu was really something else. He almost never took the subway. In fact, his last trip had been back when he was about ten years old, back before transit apps had been developed.

Seeing his struggles, a middle-aged lady nearby couldn't help but take pity on him. "Young man, let me teach you how to use your phone." The fiftysomething auntie wearing reading glasses took He Yu's hand, teaching this twentysomething boy (one of the top five hackers in the world) how to use his phone. "All righty, first open up your digital wallet—Yes, that's right, clever boy! Next, tap on this one, the metro transit card, and enter your personal information…"

Xie Qingcheng had already passed through the barrier and couldn't return to help. He stood there on the other side, watching this absurd scenario play out.

At long last, the auntie successfully taught the hacker how to ride the subway. He thanked her modestly before swiping into the station.

Xie Qingcheng was practically speechless. "Did you have fun?"

"It was indescribably fascinating."

"You sure are stubborn, little devil."

He Yu's mood lifted again at Xie Qingcheng calling him "little devil," but he turned away, schooling his face to hide it.

After entering the station, the two of them discovered that there was a problem.

"Xie Qingcheng, you said it wouldn't be crowded."

Xie Qingcheng certainly hadn't expected that there would be so many people riding the metro at this hour. He couldn't know that it was a total coincidence—a nearby comic convention had just ended, so droves of young men and women were now pouring into the station.

Many of the girls were wearing revealing cosplay outfits. Xie Qingcheng wanted to tell them, on behalf of their parents, to wear a jacket. The paternalistic straight man cancer inside him insisted that it was simply *disgraceful* for young girls to dress like this.

"What are they wearing?" he muttered, frowning.

"It's cosplay," He Yu said.

"What?" Xie Qingcheng's frown deepened.

He Yu paused as a mischievous idea popped into his head. "They're dressing up as fictional characters," he said, feigning indifference. "It's quite interesting. If you want to learn more, I can prepare a police uniform and handcuffs for you next time. Come over to my place and I'll teach you how to play."

Xie Qingcheng had a bad feeling about this. "No, thank you."

He Yu imagined Xie Qingcheng in a light blue uniform and a pair of handcuffs, a look of grim endurance on his face. "What a loss," he murmured.

Xie Qingcheng blinked. What loss? But he was distracted from the question by their train pulling into the station, so the two of them boarded along with a bunch of girls in costume.

Although Xie Qingcheng thought these girls in short sleeves and short skirts were totally unacceptable, many of the other men on the metro found them a lovely sight to behold. Consequently, the proportion of guys looking at their phones on this train was considerably lower than usual. How could beauties in games rival beauties in real life?

He Yu didn’t look at his phone either, but he wasn’t watching the pretty girls.

As soon as he boarded, he’d begun to feel uncomfortable. The passengers were packed in like sardines in a can, with hardly any room to breathe. Xie Qingcheng, with his aloof personality, would never scramble for a spot on public transit. Forget about seats—they didn’t even manage to get a good place to stand.

After Xie Qingcheng made room for a greasy man leaning his whole body against the handrail, he had no choice but to reach up through the crowd and grab onto the highest handhold with his injured arm. Watching this unfold, He Yu couldn’t bear the burning in his heart any longer. He didn’t care if Xie Qingcheng would chew him out; he squeezed his way over to him and grabbed the handle on Xie Qingcheng’s other side, sandwiching him between his arms and preventing other passengers from bumping into him. The stand he’d taken was protective, but not overtly so—Xie Qingcheng didn’t take notice, and the two of them stood like this in relative harmony.

As the train headed downtown, more and more people got on, and the car became increasingly crowded. In these cramped surroundings, He Yu gradually realized there was an upside to taking the metro. How would he ever get the chance to be so close to Xie Qingcheng anywhere else? This was unique. Xie Qingcheng’s back was pressed to his chest, no distance between them, yet he didn’t even mind. Rather, he was resting with his eyes closed, just passing the time on the long journey.

After a while, Xie Qingcheng even began to doze off with his forehead propped against his own arm, revealing a small sliver of the tattoo on his wrist. Just like that, he fell asleep.

“That guy is *so* handsome…”

Suddenly, He Yu overheard two girls whispering next to him.

“Right? He’s so manly.”

“I noticed him as soon as he got on. He seems like a real gentleman too. Didn’t crowd anyone at all.”

"What should I do? I really wanna go and ask for his WeChat…"

"Go for it! You got this!"

There was a lot of hesitation between the two of them, but after a while one girl mustered the courage to come over to Xie Qingcheng's side. She was a pretty girl dressed in a school uniform, probably even younger than He Yu. Just as she was about to poke the drowsing Xie Qingcheng with a pale and delicate finger, He Yu's arm suddenly blocked her way.

"Eh…?"

He Yu smiled at her, typed a few words on his phone, and showed it to her. The girl peered at the screen in bewilderment and then looked up, astonished.

The words on the screen were: *"Sorry, he's my boyfriend."*

The girl drifted back to her friends, shaken. Once she was there, her friend started assailing her with questions. *She* didn't seem to believe He Yu and started grumbling to the one who made a move.


Sorry, but he's my boyfriend.

"No way! Look how much younger he is. They look like an uncle and his nephew. What do you mean, 'boyfriend'? He must've been teasing you. You can go ask him again if you don't believe me."

No need for that, He Yu thought.

He shot a sidelong glance at the two girls, then looked down at Xie Qingcheng, taking a whiff of the cool scent of disinfectant that wafted from his collar. His chest burned hotter and hotter. At that moment, the train pulled into a station. Passengers packed in even more tightly. He Yu saw that the girls wanted to come over again, so, using the crowd's jostling around them as a pretext, he leaned down and—as if by accident—kissed the red mole on Xie Qingcheng's neck.

This kiss was immeasurably thrilling and enticing.

He looked up, flashing a dangerous smile at the two dumbstruck schoolgirls. As if to ask, *Do you believe me now?*

Embarrassed, the girls darted through the crowd into another train car.

Of course, He Yu wasn't oblivious to Xie Qingcheng's allure. He was tall and handsome, with a masculine aura and a steady and reliable bearing. Even though very few people wanted to *marry* a divorcé, there were plenty of girls who were interested in *dating* a man like him. He Yu knew all that, that women would find Xie Qingcheng attractive even if he stood there doing nothing, but when he faced the reality of the situation, he couldn't help the jealousy and possessiveness that bloomed in his heart.

Was she blind, coming over here to ask for Xie Qingcheng's WeChat? Couldn't that girl and her friend see the kind of relationship they had?

Forget kissing Xie Qingcheng's neck—if only Xie Qingcheng agreed, he could've held him, kissed him, even defiled him in this very train car. He wanted everyone to know that this man was his: more beautiful than *any* woman when he fucked him, with his

slender waist and shapely legs, and those throaty, choked-back moans.

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, that fervent desire provoked He Yu's anxiety once more, faintly presaging a flare-up of his illness. But with a great effort, He Yu suppressed these fantasies, just as he'd hurt himself whenever he'd longed for blood in the past. Outside the confines of He Yu's fevered mind, all he'd done was kiss Xie Qingcheng before he could realize it, then turn his inflamed gaze away.

When they reached the station before the police bureau, Xie Qingcheng woke up. He glanced at the flashing transit display. "It's almost my stop."

He Yu made a sound of agreement.

Xie Qingcheng shifted, turning around to look at him. They were so close to each other that He Yu thought he could kiss him on the lips with the slightest dip of his head. He had to exert a Herculean effort to withstand the temptation.

But those thin lips infuriated him further a second later. "Do you know how to leave the station on your own?"

"I'm a *hacker*," replied He Yu.

"A hacker who doesn't know how to enter a subway station."

Was he *flirting*? He Yu imagined tearing open his throat and kissing his searing blood. He wanted that.

Instead, he glared at him with crimson eyes, whispering in a tone so soft only the two of them could hear. "Xie Qingcheng, that's enough. If you keep talking, I'll strip you and do you right here."

He Yu had seemed so obedient recently that Xie Qingcheng couldn't remember the exact pain of fangs tearing into his flesh. Taking He Yu's deranged threats as a joke, he reached up to pat him on the cheek. "Wake up, little devil. Your stop is coming up soon too." The train soon came to a halt. "Bye now."

"Mm," He Yu said. He wanted to follow but couldn't; he could only gaze with dark yet pitiful eyes, a hurricane of viciousness and affection in his chest, as he watched that retreating back—until the doors closed once again and the train slowly lurched forward. He lost sight of him.

He Yu put his hand on the railing that Xie Qingcheng had just been holding, where some of his warmth still lingered. For a moment, He Yu really felt that his love was far too pathetic.

Xie Qingcheng. Xie Qingcheng, how do I love you so much? How can I just love you more and more?

"Aiya!"

Just as He Yu was absorbed in his lovelorn melancholy, he heard a flurry of shocked exclamations from a few students nearby. He glanced in their direction to discover that they were staring tongue-tied at a news program on the metro's TV screens. He Yu wanted to distract himself from the torment of his illness, so he looked at the screen that had drawn these passengers' stares. As soon as he heard what they were saying, he went still.

It was a breaking news story from Huzhou. A woman had been found dead in her home under tragic circumstances. It looked like she'd been murdered.

And this woman, He Yu realized, was someone he knew.

Chapter 123:
I Went Back to the Skynight Club

THE MURDER VICTIM turned out to be the second female lead of *The Trial*.

"The victim lived in Wanhe Residences, a luxury low-density community. The first person to discover the body was the community's property manager.

"The property manager said, 'As professionals, safety is our community's top priority. Our villas have highly comprehensive security coverage, and our staff members often take note of the residents' daily routines to ensure the safety of older residents who are living alone. Last night, the head of the security team overseeing Ms. Yang's area reported that the lights in her house had been on at all hours for several days. He was worried that something had happened to her.

"'However, because Ms. Yang was young, our staff thought it might be a misunderstanding and didn't want to disturb her. As such, we first tried contacting her today using the number listed on her resident forms. When we received no reply, we investigated in person. The groundskeeper and the captain of the security team came with me to her house. No one answered when we rang the doorbell. The groundskeeper looked through the window and saw that the house was a complete mess, with paint splashed on the walls. We realized that something was wrong and called emergency services. Then, we retrieved the master key and began an urgent rescue operation for our potentially endangered resident. Tragically, upon reaching the second floor, we discovered Ms. Yang's corpse.'"

This lurid piece of news diffused through the stale air of the subway like a dose of stimulant. Gradually, almost everyone's attention was drawn to the metro TV.

"The deceased is Ms. Yang, a twenty-eight-year-old female." The coverage cut to the anchor's face. "The property manager found her body in the bathtub on the second floor of her residence. There were signs of a violent struggle, but no clues as to the murderer's identity have been found. The surveillance cameras did not capture footage of anyone entering Ms. Yang's home. The case remains under investigation."

He Yu wasn't too familiar with the actress, Ms. Yang, but they *had* crossed paths several times on the set of *The Trial*. He hadn't come away with a bad impression of her, and certainly never thought that something like *this* would happen to her.

Another incident involving *The Trial*'s cast and crew… Just how many people in the production had met with misfortune so far? Hu Yi had died in a specimen tank. Those two missing girls had yet to be found, dead or alive. Now, there was this second female lead.

Filming wrapped a long time ago, so why was she killed now? Was it a coincidence, or something deeper?

He Yu recalled the backgrounds of the actors involved in the production. The male and female leads were both big names and had their own respective companies. There hadn't been anything particularly notable about the other cast members. As for the second female lead, in terms of both experience and acting skill, she'd actually been inferior to the third female lead, yet she'd won the more prominent role. Why?

At the time, He Yu had been wholly uninterested in these types of actor rankings and ignored most of it, but he now recalled that someone in the production had commented on it before.

He Yu's thoughts twinged with something, so he took out his phone and looked up the actress's basic information. A moment later, his eyes locked onto the words "Agent: Zhilong Culture and Media."

This was Huang Zhilong's company![1]

Upon further investigation, he found she was the only actor in *The Trial*'s entire cast under Huang Zhilong's management. This homicide case also seemed to be inextricably linked to Huang Zhilong!

He Yu began reaching out to people related to this case the moment he got off the metro.

Through his connections, he found several contacts he could ask about the specifics of the case. In a short amount of time, he learned some facts that the police hadn't made public.

The forensic investigator had determined that Ms. Yang had likely been dead for ten days. By the time the property manager found her corpse in the bathtub, it was already severely bloated, in a state of advanced decomposition.

Actually, the first person to see the body had been the groundskeeper, not the property manager who was interviewed. However, the groundskeeper had experienced a nervous breakdown from the shock, and couldn't be interviewed because he was still undergoing psychological treatment. The property manager was no fool; when he heard the shrieks of the groundskeeper and the head of security after they entered the bathroom, he realized that the scene must've been horrific, so he ran outside the villa to wait for the police.

In hindsight he'd made an apt decision, saving himself from the sight of the horribly decomposed corpse at the scene of the crime. The climate-controlled bathroom maintained a temperature and humidity level highly conducive to microbial growth. The actress's lovely face had been completely destroyed, and the stench was unbearable.

The friend who relayed this information to He Yu also divulged an additional detail: "The murderer must be a real psycho! There was a digital video camera at the scene that must have been set up over the bathtub at first. What were they thinking, putting a camera

over a bathtub with a dead body in it? Did they want to film a time-lapse of the decomposition or what?"

"Did you see the footage?" He Yu asked.

"Didn't I say the camera was over the bathtub 'at first'?"

"Okay, so what happened?"

"It fell into the tub and got stuck to the corpse. The forensics team can't even open it anymore. They're working on it."

This was all that He Yu's friend knew about the case. The guy was a self-serving, lazy city bureau investigator with whom He Yu had gone out drinking before. His parents had gotten him the position, as he was a total parasitic layabout.

However, even he noted, "That camera is really important. There's evidence of a struggle at the crime scene, but the murderer didn't leave behind a speck of DNA. Weird, right? If the video can be restored, they'll probably be able to make some real progress on the case."

"All right, thanks," said He Yu. "Hey, man, one more thing."

"Hm?"

"In the future, you shouldn't give outsiders so many details about a case."

"O-oh," his friend replied.

He Yu was already certain that this wasn't going to be a straightforward case. It sounded likely that the video camera—an important piece of evidence—would be completely destroyed. Before that happened, he needed to tell a police officer he could trust. Unfortunately, other than the hapless officer he'd talked to just now, he didn't have many connections with the police. He gave it some thought, but he couldn't think of a single suitable person.

So, half an hour later, Zheng Jingfeng, who was still chatting with Xie Qingcheng, received a call from his receptionist.

"Captain Zheng, someone's here to see you."

By this point, Zheng Jingfeng had more or less wrapped up his conversation with Xie Qingcheng. Lao-Zheng had been furious to learn that Xie Qingcheng had been personally investigating those heinous events, but he was helpless to do anything about it. After they'd argued, he'd still felt obligated to listen to what Xie Qingcheng told him about the clues he had uncovered.

And so, when he answered the phone, he was in a huff. "Who is it?" he asked the receptionist irritably.

"It's the guy who was involved in the broadcasting tower case."

Zheng Jingfeng glanced at Xie Qingcheng. "That guy's drinking tea in my office right now!"

"The other guy. The younger one. His name is He Yu."

The telephone was loud and the office was quiet, so Xie Qingcheng overheard this too.

Zheng Jingfeng blinked in surprise. "What's he doing here?"

Xie Qingcheng tapped his cigarette against the ashtray. "If you let him in, you'll get your answer."

Zheng Jingfeng's temper flared again and he turned to glare at him. "Is this my office or yours? You think you're real tough, huh?"

Upon entering the room, He Yu first met Xie Qingcheng's eyes from across the table. Xie Qingcheng sat on the other side with a cigarette in his hand, his bearing thoroughly condescending.

"Xie-ge. Captain Zheng." He Yu greeted them in turn.

His expression shifting as swiftly as that of a Sichuan opera face-changing performer, Zheng Jingfeng politely ceded his chair to He Yu. "Come sit down, young man."

He Yu walked into the office and started coughing in lieu of replying.

"Oh, did you catch a cold?" asked Zheng Jingfeng.

"No, I'm just not accustomed to the smell of smoke," He Yu replied courteously.

Zheng Jingfeng couldn't be happier to hear this. He immediately pointed at Xie Qingcheng. "Look at yourself. What are you smoking in front of a student for? Put that out."

Xie Qingcheng blinked without moving.

"Put it *out*!"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't be bothered to waste his breath with them. He shot He Yu an admonishing glance to warn him against getting carried away and then stubbed out the cigarette with a press of his slender fingers. Because of his recent poor health and injured arm, his overbearing presence was marked by listlessness as he leaned indolently back in his chair.

"Whatever you have to say, just say it. There are no outsiders here," Xie Qingcheng said, his unyielding air tinged with arrogance.

He Yu sat down and began selectively relaying what he had learned to Zheng Jingfeng.

Their investigation in Qingli County had led them to suspect that Huang Zhilong had abducted those young village women, and that he was also connected to the deaths of Xie Qingcheng's parents. However, this wasn't an issue that could be proven with only a handful of cases; such an accusation required ample evidence. Without that evidence, they couldn't formally interrogate Huang Zhilong.



Furthermore, an actress from his company had now been killed, leaving behind a video camera that wouldn't turn on anymore. If Mr. Huang were really involved in this situation, he would try to destroy or steal the evidence before the camera was repaired.

Captain Zheng listened to this account, then sat in silence for a while, lost in thought.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll do all I can to keep an eye on this."

"Thank you for your time," He Yu said. "I don't know if this production has been cursed or what. Hu Yi's murderer still hasn't been found, neither have those two missing girls, and now the second female lead has been killed in her home. Terrible things just keep happening, one after another."

This line of conversation frustrated Zheng Jingfeng. The investigator who'd been in charge of the homicide case from *The Trial* had been confident that they could find some clues about the murderer within a week, but in the end, they hadn't managed to uncover anything at all. Hu Yi's parents had raised a huge fuss and called him a useless idiot to his face. There were also the parents of the two missing girls, who'd started out full of hope only to descend into despair over the course of their endless wait.

For a righteous police officer like Zheng Jingfeng, these kinds of situations were more depressing than any other. Waiting for a verdict to be handed down. Waiting for the culprit to be caught. Waiting for news about the missing. Sometimes, waiting could be even crueler than death.

"These waters run too deep," Zheng Jingfeng said with a sigh.

"What are the chances that those two girls will be found alive?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

Zheng Jingfeng shook his head without a word. Missing persons cases were the direst. After the optimal period for rescue and investigation had passed, they would often drag on for three or

four decades before being resolved—but more often than not, the victims were already long dead, or had been trafficked to the countryside and become unrecognizable after bearing seven or eight children.

Since the police had never followed up with him about the case from the film studio, Xie Qingcheng more or less understood the situation already. As someone who had waited nineteen years for the truth, he was all too familiar with the implications when the police didn't reach out of their own accord.

Xie Qingcheng wouldn't have even asked any more questions. At thirteen, he'd called and run to the police bureau repeatedly, asking for updates on his parents' car crash. However, he had only been turned away and apologized to, his concerns ultimately glossed over time and again. Back then, he already understood that pestering the police was pointless—if the case had really been blown open, they would've picked up the telephone and told him. Otherwise, even if he went to the bureau five hundred times a day, he still wouldn't receive the news he wanted to hear.

Still, he asked about the girls now, all because He Yu had seen "Lu Yuzhu" in Qingli County. If even Lu Yuzhu was still alive, then anything was possible in this case. There was hope for *everything*.

Zheng Jingfeng understood what he meant. "I think you must've mistaken one woman for another that night in Qingli County. That couldn't have been Lu Yuzhu."

"I saw her with my own two eyes," said He Yu. "Unless she has a sister, or some other relative who looks just like her, but I don't think even a relative could look so similar. Maybe Lu Yuzhu escaped from the explosion—"

"That's impossible," Zheng Jingfeng insisted. "We investigated the scene of the crime." He paused before continuing, "We found Lu Yuzhu's remains. She can't possibly still be alive, because we found her skull."

Both He Yu and Xie Qingcheng fell silent. The two of them didn't have anything else to say, and so after sitting in the office for a little while longer, they bade farewell to Zheng Jingfeng and prepared to leave the station.

Just before they departed, Zheng Jingfeng called out to them. "Xiao-Xie, don't do anything so risky next time."

Xie Qingcheng gave a perfunctory agreement.

Infuriated, Zheng Jingfeng turned to He Yu instead. "Young man, don't go along with his nonsense next time."

He Yu gave his own perfunctory agreement.

Zheng Jingfeng was so incensed that he nearly smashed his cup. "Just when exactly did the two of you get so close?!"

Close? Xie Qingcheng shot back, "Lao-Zheng, would you like me to refer you to a better optometrist?"

As they made their way away from the bureau, a thought occurred to He Yu.

"Xie-ge," he said.

"What is it?"

"Would you like me to refer *you* to a better orthopedic surgeon?"

Xie Qingcheng's mind was still on the case. "What, are you mocking me?" he asked, without giving He Yu's words much thought.

"No one's mocking you. I really did find an American orthopedic surgeon for you," said He Yu. "To treat your shoulder…"

Xie Qingcheng finally realized that He Yu wasn't joking. He stopped in his tracks, frowning slightly.

"Really," He Yu insisted. "I already got the doctor's contact information. If you have time, we can go together."

Xie Qingcheng looked into this young man's earnest eyes, thinking and thinking.

"*Why* are you treating me like this?" he asked. Lately He Yu had been showing concern for him one moment and then bickering with him the next, and he couldn't comprehend it. It was truly baffling.

He Yu didn't answer his question. "Will you go?" he asked instead.

"There's no need. I understand my own health."

Slowly, disappointment and anxiety surfaced in He Yu's eyes. "Xie Qingcheng, why are you so ready to give up without even trying? You weren't this kind of person before. You would persevere with even the tiniest bit of hope. But now—"

"Those American personal physicians all have very high fees. Long-term treatment for bone and nerve injuries are both time-consuming and expensive, and the final outcome won't be very effective anyway, so there isn't much point."

"But I have money," He Yu said hurriedly. "I can pay for your treatment."

A chill descended over Xie Qingcheng's eyes. "And why, if I may ask, would I spend your money?"

He Yu's voice lodged in his throat. He had forgotten that Xie Qingcheng was a chauvinist with a great deal of self-regard. He would never let He Yu treat him this way, providing for him like a mistress.

"That's…not what I meant," He Yu said. "Whatever you're thinking, that's not what I meant." He paused, and then added, "Sorry."

With that response, the severe look in Xie Qingcheng's eyes thawed at last. "He Yu, what *exactly* do you want? If there's something you want to say, just say it to me. Grown men don't need to beat around the bush."

"I…" He Yu's lips only moved slightly before he bit them closed again.

He wanted to say, *Actually, Xie Qingcheng, what I* want *is to fuck you. I want* you*—but would you give yourself to me? No, you refuse to give yourself to me, but you're* still *asking me. You don't know anything, yet you torment me anyway.*

"I don't want anything," He Yu said, his voice tinged with despair. "It's just… You're another psychological Ebola patient who's endured the same suffering as me—isn't that enough?"

Xie Qingcheng's expression had returned to its usual impassivity; now his features froze taut once more. "As a patient who's overcome the demons of his disease, I don't think I need your sympathy. You, on the other hand…" He paused, stepping forward and pulling his hand from his pocket to feel He Yu's forehead. "*Your* temperature's quite high, He Yu. Your mental state has been unstable lately, but you don't know how to regulate or control yourself. If you have a flare-up, it'll be much more serious than my arm."

Xie Qingcheng watched him with his peach-blossom eyes, just like he'd watched the boy standing at his door all those years ago. When He Yu didn't answer, Xie Qingcheng concluded, "Instead of worrying about me, you would do better to worry about yourself."

He Yu looked back at him in a daze, his heart pounding. He'd found himself caught off guard when Xie Qingcheng reached out to touch his forehead, just like the time he'd gotten that tattoo in middle school and Doctor Xie had gently touched his feverish temple with his laptop.

After what had happened in Qingli County, Xie Qingcheng's attitude toward him had warmed. It made him feel as though they could go back to how they used to be. At that moment, after Xie Qingcheng touched his head and spoke those words of apparent concern, He Yu found he couldn't hold back anymore.

"Xie Qingcheng," he blurted out hoarsely.

"What is it?"

"If you still care about how I'm doing…then, could you…"

"Hm?"

"Could you come back and be my psychiatrist?" He Yu couldn't stop the question from spilling out as an irrepressible fervor rushed into his chest.

Xie Qingcheng was taken aback. Nonetheless, *this* time, he didn't immediately reject him. Frowning, he scanned the boy in front of him with an appraising eye.

This was the second time He Yu had asked Xie Qingcheng to return to his side. The first time, he had forcibly kissed him in a bar, and then asked him in a manner more akin to coercion.

That time, he'd taken Xie Qingcheng's silence as agreement, so he'd tidied up his room with a heart brimming with hope, only to receive Xie Qingcheng's bone-chilling rejection. It had been so destabilizing that he'd accidentally fallen out of a window in a daze—and as he'd convalesced in bed during the days that followed, he hadn't received a single message from Xie Qingcheng.

Even now, Xie Qingcheng still had no idea that after that rejection, He Yu had lost control of his emotions, fallen into a stupor, and tumbled from the second floor of the villa.

Now, He Yu was asking him for the second time. On the spur of the moment, as if he couldn't help it, he impulsively asked him this question: *Are you willing to come back?*

Actually, He Yu himself began to regret it the moment the words left his lips. He knew that Xie Qingcheng would refuse.

There was a long silence.

"I don't know why you're so attached to the idea of my coming back, but given the things that have transpired between us, I think it would be entirely inappropriate for me to resume that post. Furthermore, I have many things on my plate. I don't think it's possible for me to take responsibility for a patient as his personal

physician. Therefore, He Yu, *I can't*." Xie Qingcheng reiterated, "I cannot agree to your request."

He Yu felt slightly breathless, as though he were back on that windowsill again, the glaring sunset stinging his eyes with a streak of scarlet as he swayed and fell. Past the age of fourteen, he'd never been able to open that tightly sealed door ever again. This time was no exception either.

"Go home and rest," said Xie Qingcheng. "All these days you've spent with me, you haven't been able to get a good night's sleep."

He Yu gritted his teeth. For a moment, his eyes turned monstrous, like he was about to take the man before him and lock him in a cage or shackle him to a bed.

But, then, he looked away.

"You…you don't need to take it so seriously. There's nothing that I'm particularly attached to, and it's not like you're *that* great a doctor or anything. I can go on without you. I just thought I'd ask, that's all." He Yu paused. When he continued, his voice was cold and clipped. "If you really can't, then forget it."

With a grim expression, he picked up the pieces of his shattered ego and haughtily yet briskly turned to leave.

Xie Qingcheng stood rooted to the spot with his brow slightly furrowed, pensively watching his retreating figure.

As soon as He Yu got home, he swallowed a large handful of the pills Anthony had given him to control his emotions. It was like Xie Qingcheng had driven him to the brink of madness. Only now did he realize just how terrifying his love for Xie Qingcheng could be, as addicting as the most potent drug on earth.

"Why do you have to like *him*?" Facing the mirror, he saw his silhouette reflected in pupils that appeared shrouded by a bloody haze. "Why can't you let him fucking *go*?!"

Clearly, he'd been able to get over Xie Xue, so why couldn't he do the same for Xie Qingcheng? His attachment to the other man was even deeper than he'd realized.

In this lonely place, He Yu subjected himself to brutal torment—relying on medicine, self-destruction, and pain. Unbeknownst to all, he suppressed his terrible impulse to steal Xie Qingcheng away and handcuff him to his own bed.

He *couldn't*—he could never unleash the suffering from his illness onto Xie Qingcheng's body.

Panting harshly, He Yu looked at his bloody reflection in his room's mirror. With a deep breath, he slowly wrapped a strip of gauze around his bleeding wrist, then turned on the faucet and rinsed away the garish bloodstains.

The breakdown was looming closer and closer; he'd nearly reached his limit. His anguish and desire swelled fiercely, the pressure threatening to rip his body to shreds. He couldn't… He *really* couldn't handle it anymore. How was he supposed to carry on like this?

Since he was doomed to never be with Xie Qingcheng, then he needed to settle things and shift his feelings away from him, as quickly as possible!

He Yu took a deep breath and washed his face, wiping away all the streaks of crimson that had splashed onto his cheeks during his bloodthirsty venting session. Afterward, he patted his face dry and cleaned his wounds one by one.

After changing into clean clothes, he stared at his reflection in the shattered mirror. A madman stared back with stormy scarlet eyes. His mind chewed through his thoughts, until he finally turned and left the room, slamming the door shut behind him, to drive toward his destination: the Skynight Club.

Chapter 124:
We Met at the Club Again

AT THAT VERY moment, Xie Qingcheng was visiting a patient in the VIP ward of Meiyu Private Hospital.

Xie Xue was still unconscious. Although her condition wasn't severe at present, a course of treatment similar to dialysis was required to control the initial effects of RN-13. The treatment was painful and compromised the patient's immune system, so Xie Xue spent much of her time in the hospital asleep.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear to wake her, so he settled for arranging a bouquet of her favorite yellow roses on the bedside table and straightening out her blankets.

As if sensing his presence as she dreamt, the girl burrowed deeper into her blankets and murmured softly, "Gege…"

Xie Qingcheng's hand froze. After a moment, he reached over to gently stroke her hair. "It's okay. Gege will find medicine for you as soon as possible."

Xie Xue turned her face into his hand, nuzzling it like a kitten before sinking into peaceful slumber. Xie Qingcheng sat with her in the hospital room like that for a while before preparing to leave again. Time was of the essence in his investigation into Huang Zhilong's entertainment company.

Years ago, Wang Jiankang had sent those orphaned village girls to Huzhou, and each and every one of them had studied at the school run by Huang Zhilong's wife. And the actress who had recently died under extremely strange circumstances had been part of the entertainment company belonging to Huang Zhilong himself. Standing by the window in the hallway, Xie Qingcheng turned on his phone and skimmed through some netizens' opinions regarding the actress's death.

Given Huang Zhilong's status and position, a mishap like this shouldn't have blown up into such a huge scandal. However, it seemed as though Huang Zhilong's luck had been running out recently. First, there was Hu Yi, who had died on the set of *The Trial*, and then the assistant writer and production manager who had gone missing and were yet to be found. Hu Yi's parents were powerful individuals who knew exactly how to kick up a fuss, and they'd adored their son. There was no way they would let Huang Zhilong off the hook.

While the case remained unsolved, the Hu parents pestered Huang Zhilong from every angle—in the virtual world and the real one. Relationships in the entertainment industry were rarely genuine, often built only on mutual benefit, and people who'd once flattered Huang Zhilong by calling him "Executive Huang" at every turn now went out of their way to avoid him. Huang Zhilong was in dire straits, and his company's stocks had tumbled to their price limits several times.

In the midst of all this, a well-known actress under his management had died under bizarre circumstances. If it hadn't been for what he'd learned in Qingli County, Xie Qingcheng would've suspected that Huang Zhilong was a victim, not a perpetrator.

Xie Qingcheng found that people all over social media were lambasting Huang Zhilong and his company, circulating sensational rumors. He scrolled through them for a while, until one of the allegations caught his eye.

This little write-up couldn't quite be called an allegation. Rather, some grieving fans of the actress had compiled a list of artists that Zhilong Entertainment had screwed over. Xie Qingcheng knew very little about the issue at hand, and reading the post gave him quite a shock. It seemed like this company was a remarkably shady operation in an already shady industry. According to the fans, Huang Zhilong's business was uniquely dictatorial. The actors under his management needed to be obedient and suppress any desire to speak their minds; in other words, they had to say whatever the

company wanted them to say. They didn't even control their own social media accounts, as their managers supervised and composed all of their posts.

Zhilong Entertainment didn't treat their actors as people. The company required "absolute compliance," meaning that the actors weren't allowed to object to unfair terms in their contracts, not even the most egregious issues. Otherwise, the company would deem the actor "disobedient," and use underhanded loopholes to decrease their exposure, even going so far as to find outlandish excuses to take their music, shows, and films off the air.

Without control of their own accounts, the actors couldn't even publicize such injustices. If they created a side account to speak up, no one would believe them, and in the event that they were discovered by the company, they would have to pay an obscenely high contract-breaking penalty, as per the exploitative terms they had signed.

Ten years ago, there'd been a passionate actor who couldn't take the company's grotesque treatment anymore and had jumped from a building to his death. Before he'd died, he'd recorded a video detailing his misfortunes to expose Zhilong Entertainment's shady practices. However, the actor wasn't well-known, and Huang Zhilong had managed to immediately suppress public discourse by paying his connections to purge the video from the internet, thus preventing the situation from spinning out of control. Nevertheless, the video was still passed around privately on a smaller scale, and most of the fans of the actors under Huang Zhilong's management were aware of this incident.

But what good was having such *awareness*? Money formed such thick armor that even someone's death couldn't pierce through it; what could these fans' indignant denunciations achieve?

It wasn't until now, after Hu Yi's death, that money faced off with money and power contended with power, and negative information about Zhilong Entertainment had begun to proliferate at last.

Hu Yi's parents were just as well-connected as he was, so it was impossible for Huang Zhilong to wipe everything from the Internet or prevent it from showing up in Weibo hot searches. As a consequence, Zhilong Entertainment had become a topic of heated debate.

"You could form a full regiment with all the people Huang Zhilong's killed."

"Psh! More like a whole army. Everyone on the list is definitely dead, but what about the ones that are still missing?"

"If you look up a bunch of the old artists who used to be under Huang Zhilong's management, the last news of them you'll find is that they were transferred to one of his overseas companies, but they were never heard from again once they left the country. No one even knows if they're dead or alive."

"It's so weird! Why were these actors willing to leave their home behind and go overseas just because they were told to? It's not like any of them made it big after going abroad, either."

"It's like they were bewitched or something—makes me wonder if that company also deals with drugs…"

As Xie Qingcheng read on, the furrow in his brow grew deeper.

Absolute compliance. Unwavering obedience. Like they were bewitched. Never heard from again after leaving the country.

He had a vague feeling that if he continued investigating these questions, he would definitely find the answer he sought.

Ding.

Just then, the elevator doors opened.

As he was about to step in, Xie Qingcheng met the eyes of the person walking out of the elevator. It was the private hospital's director, an elderly man who was getting on in years. This doctor was an old friend of Qin Ciyan's who was also well-acquainted with Xie Qingcheng.

When he saw him, the director nodded at him. "Ah, Professor Xie."

"Director."

"It's so late. Are you here to see your sister?"

"Mmhm."

"Aiya, as long as she's here, you don't need to worry about a thing." The director paused briefly. "But you, on the other hand…" The director peered at him through his thick glasses and sighed. "You know the state of your health. I don't need to remind you. You must remember to…"

But before the old man could elaborate, Xie Qingcheng's phone rang. Xie Qingcheng glanced at the screen.

"Director, something's come up. I need to take this call. Let's chat some other time," he said, and walked into the elevator.

Meiyu Hospital was the same private hospital where Qin Ciyan had treated him with RN-13 after his car accident. The director wasn't necessarily privy to all the details of Xie Qingcheng's medical history, but he knew the gist of it. As Qin Ciyan's old friend, he knew where the bounds of propriety lay, what could and could not be said.

As he watched Xie Qingcheng's departing figure, he heaved a sigh and shook his head. Then, a profound anxiety in his eyes, he walked away with unsteady steps.

"What? He Yu went to the Skynight Club *again*?"

The call was from Zheng Jingfeng. Just hearing the name of this establishment gave Xie Qingcheng a headache.

"That's right," Zheng Jingfeng replied. "He was spotted by the same traffic cop as last time too. I thought I'd give you a call since you seem to really care about him, and you know as well as I do that there's nothing good about that place."

This conversation gave Xie Qingcheng a sense of déjà vu. Fuck, hadn't he heard something just like this a year ago? Back then, he'd known why He Yu wanted to abandon himself to despair and go to a place like that to fool around. Now, he had no idea why He Yu would do this. Who had provoked him this time?

Anger was already flaring in Xie Qingcheng's chest, but there was more. "He was driving another new sports car and speeding down the road like a rocket," Lao-Zheng went on. "After he got out of the car, he told the officer to take it away. Does that motherfucker think a civil police officer is going to be his long-term designated driver? Has he lost his mind? He seemed perfectly fine in my office. Any idea what happened to him?"

"How the fuck would I know?" Xie Qingcheng swore furiously. "Just the sight of the brat pisses me off!"

Seething with rage, he hung up the phone. After he gave the matter some thought, though, his paternal instincts won out: He couldn't stand by and do nothing. This time, he didn't owe He Yu anything, so he didn't believe that He Yu would do anything beastly to him—nor would he tolerate it if he did.

With this in mind, Xie Qingcheng got into his car, buckled his seatbelt, and typed the words "Skynight Club" into the GPS. Then, he sped off into the distance.

It was already dark out, and the entrance of the Skynight Club was swarming with fancy cars and charming beauties.

Much like a year ago, He Yu was sitting in a luxurious private room, reclining on the black, full grain leather sofa and slowly smoking a cigarette. A massive champagne tower stood before him, and the crowd of hostesses surrounding him were doing their best to win his favor.

"Young Master He, let me fill your glass."

"It's been so long since you've been here, I missed you!"

The club's hostesses were lovely and charming, but when they failed to raise his spirits in the slightest, they couldn't help panicking slightly. Young Master He had spent a few hundred thousand on alcohol upon arriving, but if they couldn't coax him to smile and make him feel at home, not only would their commission be deducted, they'd also receive a stern talking-to from the manager. Thus, after observing He Yu's body language, the anxious lead hostess indicated to the others that they should try to placate him somehow.

Regrettably, no matter what they did, He Yu's expression remained indifferent. He drank when they toasted him, and even seemed willing to flirt with them. However, his face would fall after every brief exchange, his refined smile morphing into a gloomy sneer. No one knew what exactly he wanted.

There were two types of people who came to the Skynight Club—thrill seekers and show-offs. Desire was always written all over the faces of the former, whereas vanity overflowed from the eyes of the latter. Neither seemed to be the case for He Yu.

After giving it some thought, the lead hostess gathered her courage and stepped forward to recommend a few more servers to him.

With a wine glass in one hand and his face propped up in the other, He Yu had gotten a bit tipsy. His almond eyes were unfocused as he stared at the scene of debauchery before him, his gaze fixed on a man who wasn't there.

After spacing out for a while, he started to feel ridiculous. Shaking his head, he looked away. "Sure, bring them in," he eventually said to the lead hostess.

This time, both men and women were present among the servers who entered the room.

The lead hostess wouldn't dare bring out the male hosts for every guest—she needed to observe and consider the situation. Only upon encountering someone like He Yu, who didn't chat or smile

despite the hostesses' best efforts, would she invite the hosts in as a last-ditch effort to lighten up the mood.

He Yu looked up and was about to berate the lead hostess for her lack of judgment when he caught sight of someone. A man, very tall and very handsome, with a pair of beautiful peach-blossom eyes.

After a long moment of silence, He Yu casually poured a glass of wine and, gripping it with two fingers, pushed it in front of the host.

"Want a drink?"

The host with the peach-blossom eyes was a quick-witted man. After draining the glass in a single gulp, he said to He Yu, "It doesn't matter how much I drink, but Young Master He, you shouldn't drink too much. It's not good for your health."

He Yu broke into a smile. "Everyone here is telling me to drink more, but you're different." A pause. "Why don't you stay?"

Not everyone was like Xie Qingcheng, urging him against drinking because he had his best interests at heart. This was just another way of playing hard to get, and of course, He Yu understood this. Still, he let him stay, and gazed into those eyes over the scarlet wine.

The host with peach-blossom eyes was immensely flattered to receive a patron's attention. In truth, his type wasn't favored among the Skynight Club's clientele. Few of the patrons were women, and among the men who preferred the company of hosts over hostesses, most of them liked boys who were delicate and slender. Meeting He Yu today was surely a sign that the gods were smiling upon him—this was a golden opportunity!

Hence, after getting over his initial reservation, the host gradually grew more daring and ambitious. He figured if he served He Yu well, he would be able to reap some personal benefits later.

He Yu watched impassively as he preened and posed, without feeling too repelled—until the host tried to entice He Yu by

deliberately spilling his drink on his shirt. The wine stain quickly soaked into his once snow-white shirt.

"Aiya. How embarrassing," said the host, undoing several buttons to reveal his sculpted chest and leaning down to grab a tissue to wipe up the spill.

Looking at the splash of wine on his white shirt seemed to remind He Yu of something. His eyes dimmed. Unfortunately, the host was too clueless to notice. Instead of using the tissues right next to him, he reached for the box in front of He Yu. In the process, he accidentally-on-purpose brushed against He Yu's leg…

He Yu's face twisted in an instant. Before the smile had fully faded from his lips, his eyes had already darkened.

A second later, there was the crash of shattering glass, followed by the screams of men and women alike. He Yu's face was utterly devoid of expression as he slapped the host across the face, his initial interest having turned to disgust.

"Get the hell out!"

His outburst shocked everyone in the room. The man with the peach-blossom eyes cowered as he knelt on the floor with trembling legs, not daring to look up.

"Young Master He, I'm so sorry, I didn't do it on purpose," the man said fearfully.

"Sincerest apologies, He-laoban, this server is new, he hasn't been trained properly. I know you're a generous man. Please don't take this to heart." The lead hostess bowed to him over and over, proposing all sorts of ways to make it up to him.

He Yu couldn't hear any of it. His eyes scarlet with fury, he stared at the other man, stared at the open collar of his shirt and the vivid red wine staining the front of that shirt. He felt the bloodthirstiness that he'd suppressed with such difficulty by swallowing pills roar back to life like a wildfire.

He truly wanted to kill, to burn it all down, to end his troubles once and for all.

His mental illness gnawed away at his soul, leaving behind nothing but an empty shell. Phantom images flashed before his eyes —

He saw Xie Qingcheng panting for breath after he came to the Skynight Club to look for him. He Yu had knocked him to the ground with a kick to the chest, shattering wine glasses all over the floor and dyeing his lapels crimson. Xie Qingcheng had already been in such a wretched state, yet he'd still said to him, "A human heart can be very strong, He Yu. You shouldn't be believing in me—what you should always believe in is your own heart."

He saw himself pinning Xie Qingcheng against that bar counter, kissing him on the lips in front of all the onlookers who had gathered around to watch the spectacle. He had murmured into his ear, half threatening and half beseeching him to return to his side. He'd thought that Xie Qingcheng had agreed, so he'd cheerfully gone on stage and played a song on the guitar. Xie Qingcheng had sat in the crowd, yet he hadn't spared him a single glance.

He saw a twenty-something-year-old Xie Qingcheng after his resignation, walking out the gate of the He family villa with his suitcase in hand, not turning back even once. His figure receded into the distance before finally vanishing from sight. Stumbling into the empty guest room, so tidy it was like no one ever lived there, He Yu had seen the book that Xie Qingcheng had left for him.

The handwriting in the book exuded tenacity and strength. The man had written:

Little devil, there will come a day when you walk out from the shadows in your heart on your own. I hope I can trust in that.

From Xie Qingcheng

From Xie Qingcheng… From Xie Qingcheng…

Only later did He Yu learn that what Xie Qingcheng had given him wasn't an illustrated volume of *Rare Diseases of the World*, but rather the armor and sword, forged in his own blood and tears, that could conquer psychological Ebola. Leaving behind this bloodstained treasure for that tiny fledgling dragon, he'd walked on alone, bound by duty to never look back.

From Xie Qingcheng… From Xie Qingcheng.

He gave him all that was left of his blood, transformed into an everlasting rose. He left it in the guest room, hoping that the young child would catch a whiff of the rich fragrance that was life itself.

From Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu closed his eyes. He didn't want to be haunted by these phantoms of the past anymore. The endless mirages would drive him mad; would drive him to his death. He would lose control, fly into a rage and smash the place to smithereens, hurt all these people, spill their blood until they shuddered with helpless fear—just to *get away* from everything.

Suddenly, as he reached that precipice, the door to the private room opened. A gust of wind rushed in from outside. That gust seemed to provoke the demonic fire in his heart, its flames leaping and shuddering, making his pupils flicker and blur.

In the midst of the chaos he'd caused, He Yu looked up at the person standing in the doorway.

Grief erupted in his heart. Just like a year ago, Xie Qingcheng was standing there. Like he had before he gave up on him, before he completely lost hope. The only man who'd ever cared about him, had still cared about him back then, standing there. As simple as that.

Xie Qingcheng was dressed neatly in a casual shirt and dress pants, his eyes anxious and angry, his handsome features slightly

pale. Because he'd rushed all the way there, his breaths darted quick through his parted lips, and a few flyaway hairs fell over his temples.

"He Yu!" he said sharply.

He Yu froze. Was this a hallucination? It had to be.

"I…I must be really sick…" He Yu, too deep in the throes of a flare-up to know any better, chuckled softly. "Why am I seeing you again?"

He thought he must've become so obsessed that he was seeing things, so he dragged his gaze away from the specter in the doorway. With a sigh, he pressed his palm to his scalding forehead. "Xie Qingcheng, why is it that no matter where I run…you still won't let go of me?"

A second later, someone grabbed He Yu's wrist so hard there was an audible slap of skin on skin.

He Yu whipped his head up and froze. Despite the blood red that suffused He Yu's pupils, Xie Qingcheng's reflected silhouette was crystal clear.

"Come back with me," Xie Qingcheng said, without asking him what was going on.

This wasn't a hallucination—*he* wasn't a hallucination!

He Yu's pupils contracted minutely, an inscrutable glimmer of repressed emotion flickering within.

Xie Qingcheng calmed his ragged breathing and said to him, just as he had a year ago, on that day before he gave up on him, like He Yu had yearned for all along: "He Yu, take a look at yourself right now! The state that you're in!"

It was really him! Even He Yu's heart trembled at the thought.

From Xie Qingcheng… From Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng had given him so much that, after he fell in love with him, everything that he'd received and relied on had transformed into an inescapable net ensnaring his heart. In an

instant, he finally understood why it hadn’t been too difficult for him to set aside his feelings for Xie Xue, but never his bewitching desire for Xie Qingcheng.

What Xie Xue had given him was companionship. But Xie Qingcheng had given him everything—all of his courage and hope to continue living. He was the only light and warmth He Yu ever had. After falling in love with the sun, he’d also fallen in love with every inch of its brilliance. Only after that star itself burned out would the flames of his love finally turn to ash.

Finally, He Yu understood. Since the age of seven, both his life and his beliefs had been inextricably linked to Xie Qingcheng. Once his faith and reliance had irreversibly transformed into love, there was no hope for him. For the rest of his life, he would never be able to love anyone else so passionately.

Chapter 125:
Loving You Hurts So Bad

HE YU WAS REALLY quite drunk. Once he saw Xie Qingcheng, as soon as Xie Qingcheng had reached out and touched He Yu, demonstrating he had really come here looking for him, He Yu couldn't say anything at all. His fearsome mask, his fiercer fangs, vanished completely. He was just a little fledgling dragon who had ventured out from his mountain cave and gotten lost.

Half supporting and half carrying him, Xie Qingcheng dragged He Yu to the lobby of the Skynight Club without a hitch. When he arrived downstairs to pay the bill, it just so happened that the receptionist was the same girl who had seen them last time.

"Hello, s—"

The rest of the receptionist's words lodged in her throat. She stared at the scene before her in shock. *What?!* Young Master He *still* hadn't broken up with the son of a bitch who'd fucked him all night long to the tune of ¥1.68 million, then beat him up?! This was absolutely wild! Did he think he could do whatever he wanted just because he had a handsome face?!

Xie Qingcheng didn't know what she was thinking behind her wide-eyed scowl, nor did he have any time to waste on her. He could tell that He Yu's condition was terrible; the boy's body burned like a stove against his side.

He Yu's wrists were also wrapped in gauze. Even if others were none the wiser, how could Xie Qingcheng not see what'd happened? He needed to take He Yu home right away.

"The bill, please," Xie Qingcheng said.

The receptionist came back to her senses and suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. "Hello, sir. The bill from the private room tonight comes out to ¥490,000."

Xie Qingcheng stared, rather speechless. Did the rotten excesses of capitalism require a minimum of a hundred thousand yuan for any bill?

Luckily, He Yu was only somewhat dazed and not completely unconscious; he still had enough awareness to pay. Hearing this, he jerked into motion and fumbled for his credit card in his coat.

"I'll pay." He Yu fished out his card before going back to leaning limply against Xie Qingcheng. "I can pay, I've got lots of money now. Did you know I don't need to ask them for pocket money anymore? I can give you whatever you want. I made loads and loads of money. I can give you even more than my dad, Xie Qingcheng. Don't look down on me."

The receptionist was even more shocked than Xie Qingcheng: What kind of stepdad fantasy *was* this? Was she hearing things right? This man was *also* Old Executive He's sugar baby?! What exactly was this, then? The son inheriting the father's lot?

With a buzz, the printer produced the receipt.

The receptionist had received professional training, so she wouldn't say anything no matter how shocked she was, unless—no, never mind. She had no choice but to hold herself back.

Suppressing her turbulent emotions, she handed the receipt to He Yu. "Young Master He, if I could get your signature here, please."

He Yu took the slip, haphazardly scribbled a few indecipherable strokes, and handed it back to her.

The young lady glanced at it. "Um, Young Master He, I'm afraid we can't use this signature. I'll print out a new copy. Please sign it again."

"Why can't you use it?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

Restraining her disdain, the receptionist passed the slip back to the handsome sugar baby living off of his benefactors. Xie Qingcheng glanced over it. For a speechless moment, it was difficult to process his feelings.

In his daze, He Yu had signed: "From Xie Qingcheng."

Xie Qingcheng drove He Yu back to the He family villa.

It was challenging for He Yu to suppress his thirst for blood during these flare-ups. Xie Qingcheng knew all too well how painful this internal conflict was. Thus, throughout the course of their journey, he had no choice but to divert some of his attention to He Yu's condition.

At first, He Yu only leaned back in the passenger seat, his face pale and his eyes closed, his bitten lips smudged rose-red. By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, He Yu had reached the limits of his endurance. His eyes snapped open and he unbuckled his seatbelt.

Xie Qingcheng immediately parked the car at the side of the road and stopped him.

"What's wrong?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I feel awful," He Yu rasped. "So awful…" Just saying these words was a struggle.

"He Yu, hold on a little longer."

As He Yu had been recklessly overmedicating, his resistance to the drugs he needed had grown increasingly severe. Xie Qingcheng *knew* he must have taken his pills before going to the Skynight Club, but the drugs had already worn off even though He Yu was in the midst of a flare-up.

Under such circumstances, patients usually only had three choices: first, hurt themselves; second, hurt others; third, self-destructively take an even higher dosage of medication to get through the rest of the flare-up. However, this last action would increase the patient's resistance to the medication further in the future.

Xie Qingcheng had been reminding He Yu to avoid overmedicating and becoming dependent on drugs for a long time

now, but there had been many things that prevented He Yu from turning Xie Qingcheng's guidance into a reality.

A fine sheen of sweat already covered He Yu's forehead and his body radiated heat like a stove. Even his vision had gone blurry, as though his searing anxiety had burned his sight.

He'd endured for a while, but he couldn't bear it anymore. He started groping around in the car, looking for anything sharp he could use to cut himself to ribbons. If only there were blood, he'd feel a little bit better.

"Where's the knife?" he said hoarsely, as if he was asking himself as well as Xie Qingcheng. "Where's the knife?"

Xie Qingcheng held him down. "There's no knife. Put your seatbelt back on. We're almost home."

"*No*, I don't want to go home. I want a knife," He Yu muttered. "I want a knife! Give me a knife! I can't take it anymore…"

The more Xie Qingcheng saw him in this state, the more worried he became.

Xie Qingcheng had treated psychological Ebola's Case #3 and witnessed how Case #3's symptoms had worsened. In theory, if the course of the disease wasn't controlled by medication, each flare-up would be more difficult to control than the last. Thus, the best course of action was for the patient to maintain utmost calm and reduce the number of relapses.

Xie Qingcheng had always spoken quite caustically to He Yu whenever they'd been together. This was partly due to his natural personality, but it was also a strategy to raise He Yu's threshold for dealing with mood fluctuations.

After all these years, it was true that He Yu's ability to tolerate ridicule had increased significantly. However, Xie Qingcheng had no way of building up He Yu's resistance to other difficulties, which continued to subject him to emotional torment.

"He Yu, hold on a little longer. Hey, can you hear me?"

He Yu stared at him for a few seconds before jerking his head away. “I want a knife.”

But, of course, there was no knife in the car.

He Yu mindlessly rummaged around the car anyway, but he couldn’t find anything he could use to self-harm. He wanted to escape, but Xie Qingcheng had locked the doors.

The rims of He Yu’s eyes grew redder and redder, as if they might soon drip blood. “Why’s there no knife, Xie Qingcheng? I need a knife. I can’t take it anymore!” He started to tear at the bandages on his wrists, the forceful movements gradually turning frantic.

The bandages fell away. A chill shivered through Xie Qingcheng as the sight rendered him speechless.

Latticework covered He Yu’s arms, new slashes overlapping with old scars. There were *so* many wounds! Some of the cuts had yet to heal, so He Yu’s movements tore them open a second time. Blood ran in streaks from his injuries.

Just how many flare-ups had he endured?

“You—” Xie Qingcheng seized his wrist, staring at his deathly pale face. “He Yu, how long has this been going on?”

He stroked the wounds on He Yu’s wrist. Slash after slash, cut after cut, crisscrossing each other, almost too much to behold. To think that He Yu’s self-harming was so severe. Despite being by his side, he’d had no idea.

Voice trembling slightly, Xie Qingcheng asked, “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

He Yu blinked, taken aback.

“You haven’t told anyone about your current condition?”

Dazed and dejected, He Yu wondered, how *could* he say anything?

He was sick because he wanted something he could never have. He’d realized that he loved Xie Qingcheng, but he also knew

that he couldn't go near Xie Qingcheng. Xie Qingcheng didn't like him at all—was *disgusted* by him. He had no desire to forsake his self-respect by telling anyone else about his feelings. Why, so that they could mock him for going mad?

He would rather just go mad on his own.

Each time Xie Qingcheng subjected him to cool rejection and ruthless indifference, it aggravated his emotions. What had once been his medicine had become his poison. He fell ill again and again, swallowed pill after pill, but when he couldn't control himself, the only thing he could offer to quell the gaping hole in his heart was his own blood.

Who could he tell? Even now, facing Xie Qingcheng in person, it was impossible for him to say anything.

Rallying his feeble sense of self, he managed to rasp out, "*None of your business*. It's none of your business, Xie Qingcheng."

He was on the brink of agony. He really couldn't take it anymore. He yearned to drink blood, to vent his emotions; more than anything, he wanted to tear Xie Qingcheng apart and subsume his flesh into his body, bit by bit. An overwhelming thirst in his heart whispered that, if he did that, his body would no longer ache, and his heart would no longer be empty.

He wanted blood. He wanted love. He wanted…Xie Qingcheng.

His hands shook uncontrollably with the force of swallowing his own desire. Gripping the edge of the car window, his knuckles bulged as if they were the last battlements holding down the border.

Bang!

In the end, unable to hold back the viciousness that rushed within him, he slammed his hand into the window. Xie Qingcheng had a run-of-the-mill car without impact-resistant windows, so He Yu's blow instantly cracked the glass into a spiderweb of shards.

He Yu was drenched in sweat. He leveled a vengeful glare at Xie Qingcheng, his eyes nearly devoid of awareness.

Hateful, yet full of anguish, he snarled at him, "Why do you have to torture me like this? Why won't you give me a knife or medicine! I seriously want to kill you! You and then myself. I feel *terrible*, Xie Qingcheng, so terrible I'd rather be dead! I can't take it anymore!"

He tore at the scabs on his arms. The wounds had never healed properly to begin with, but now they became even more of a gory mess. The exposed flesh was frighteningly raw.

"I can't take it anymore!" he howled furiously, even as tears started streaming from his eyes.

A psychiatric hospital would definitely use bodily restraints on He Yu at this point; his pathological urge to self-harm was too strong. But there were no restraints here. Xie Qingcheng could only pin He Yu down and try to prevent him from escalating things even further.

"He Yu, you need to hold on! It's almost over. You've already held on for so long with your medication, just resist for a little bit longer. This flare-up is passing."

"You're lying to me," He Yu spat out, his thoughts growing more and more muddled. "You're lying to me! I can't get better and I can't take it anymore! Nothing you've said to me is true… Everyone is lying to me! You're all *lying to me*!"

He Yu's condition was so poor that all Xie Qingcheng could do was soothe him again and again. His only hope was that He Yu's symptoms would subside on their own. Until then, he needed to keep He Yu firmly under control to prevent him from hurting others or continuing to hurt himself.

It was impossible to keep driving, but luckily they had reached the outskirts of the city. There weren't many cars out here. They weren't in anyone's way.

Xie Qingcheng kept forcefully pressing him down, using his training as a doctor to soothe him. However, this process was excruciatingly slow and He Yu was too strong, no longer the boy that

Xie Qingcheng could boss around as he pleased. Worse, Xie Qingcheng's injured shoulder gradually began to give out.

Suddenly—too suddenly—with an explosive burst of strength, He Yu broke free from Xie Qingcheng's hold and shoved him down onto the driver's seat. He glared down at him with blood-red eyes. He'd finally lost any semblance of control. Xie Qingcheng's reflection disappeared completely from his eyes, as though his pupils were entirely shrouded, filled with primordial chaos.

He Yu reached out and ruthlessly grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the neck.

"*Liars*. You're all liars…! You all hate me, you're all scared of me, and I'm going to *kill* you all. Every last one of you!"

"He Yu!"

The Xie Qingcheng of the past would've never let He Yu move close enough to gain the upper hand; he could've guaranteed his own safety. He'd never anticipated that his arm would become incapable of exerting any force at all. He struggled valiantly in He Yu's hands, but he couldn't throw off his grip. Gradually, his face flushed red as he lost his breath.

As he was forced into this critical life-or-death juncture, a surge of ferocious strength burst out of Xie Qingcheng. Using his remaining good arm and his wrestling skill, he broke free from He Yu's grasp, fiercely pinned him in place, and then reflexively slapped him squarely across the face.

The sound of flesh striking flesh rang out like a snapped branch. That instinctive gesture of self-defense struck He Yu so heavily and precisely that his ears began to ring and the world swam before his eyes. Bracing himself, he frowned, not saying a word.

Xie Qingcheng was finally able to breathe again. His chest heaved violently as he gasped for air. Fingerprint marks were already visible on his neck, evidence that He Yu had nearly strangled him to death in the throes of his attack—they would take some time to fade.

Xie Qingcheng took a moment to collect himself, recovering his energy. When he saw that He Yu was still sitting frozen in menacing silence, Xie Qingcheng's first reaction was to pin him down again.

No matter how pitiable He Yu's current condition was, allowing him free rein would be irresponsible. Panting for breath, Xie Qingcheng lifted his uninjured arm and firmly held He Yu in place once again, trying to keep him under control.

It was then that He Yu raised his head and looked straight at him. Xie Qingcheng abruptly stilled.

Perhaps because of the slap, the bloody haze in He Yu's eyes had dissipated somewhat, and he seemed to have sobered up enough to recognize the person in front of him. He looked rather feeble again, just like he had at the Skynight Club, but at least he wasn't so aggressive anymore. In fact, he looked more like an ordinary person in the pit of despair.

"He Yu, you…"

"Xie…Qingcheng." He Yu slowly came back to his senses. In a tiny, trembling voice, like the whimper of a little dragon on the brink of death, he said, "Xie Qingcheng."

He raised his hands. Xie Qingcheng instinctively tried to stop him, but this time, He Yu's hands didn't do anything to hurt him. He Yu only took those trembling hands—the hands that signaled his imminent breakdown—and wrapped them around Xie Qingcheng's waist. He hugged him tightly. So, so tightly.

With utmost exhaustion, sorrow, and what could even be called helplessness, he hugged him.

"I'm awake. I'm awake… D-did I," he said shakily, "Did I lose it completely just now?"

The car's cabin was cramped, so even though Xie Qingcheng had leaned over to pin He Yu down while they tussled, he hadn't stood to his full height. Now, as he hugged Xie Qingcheng, He Yu's head pressed into Xie Qingcheng's chest, right against his heart.

His head cleared as he listened to that heart beat again and again, though a mounting sense of terror filled him. Had he nearly killed Xie Qingcheng? Had he nearly prevented himself from ever hearing his heartbeat ever again?

He held him for a long time. A long, long time.

Eventually, Xie Qingcheng heard him mumble, "Ge, could you give me a knife? I don't want to hurt you, but I really can't take it anymore. I can't. Could you let me handle this myself? Let me handle this myself…"

Dismay washed over Xie Qingcheng. How had He Yu come to be like this?

When he'd left the He family, he'd confirmed that He Yu was capable of controlling his emotions. In the four years they were apart, He Yu had never been involved in any mishaps. Somehow, though, after he came back, everything had become more and more chaotic, and He Yu had tumbled into the abyss of reckless abandon. Had he done something wrong since he came back? Or had he been mistaken to leave in the first place?

Xie Qingcheng didn't know. He had no way of knowing how He Yu's heart had changed, or why his moods had become so erratic. He Yu had once been relatively honest with him, but now, the walls he'd put up around his heart seemed to be higher for Xie Qingcheng than for anyone else.

Just what exactly had happened to him?

"Xie Qingcheng…"

Upon hearing He Yu sorrowfully call out to him again, Xie Qingcheng returned to his senses. He knew that He Yu was slowly pushing through his meltdown.

Clearing his throat softly, Xie Qingcheng chose to act like the live-in doctor he'd once been and comfort this boy whose very soul seemed to have shattered to pieces.

"It's okay." He patted He Yu on the back. "It's okay. Don't worry, I'm okay. Soon enough, you'll be okay too. Don't use knives to deal with your problems, He Yu. The most painful part is over. You can get through this. It's okay now…"

He kept on patting He Yu on the back, consoling the helpless boy in his arms. As a doctor, as the First Emperor, and, right now, even as Xie Qingcheng, this was his duty.

"He Yu, don't give up."

There's still hope. As long as we keep on living, as long as we never succumb, there's still hope for you and me. For us.

Chapter 126:
But I Still Love You

THEY SPENT THE NIGHT in the car. Slowly but surely, He Yu's fever receded and his emotions stabilized. However, Xie Qingcheng couldn't risk continuing to drive before his condition settled down. There was a section of road under construction up ahead, and if anything unexpected happened with He Yu, the situation would become even harder to deal with.

Xie Qingcheng kept watch over him, until He Yu's temperature and emotional state had almost returned to normal.

There was no doubt that this flare-up had been severe. Not only had He Yu's long-term abuse of his medication been laid bare, but for a period of time he'd completely lost control. Now that his outburst was over, he was overcome by exhaustion and gradually fell into a deep, hazy sleep as he recovered.

Xie Qingcheng waited until He Yu was sound asleep before he buckled his seatbelt and started the car. By this point, a faint white light, like the pale underbelly of a fish, was beginning to peek over the horizon. The darkest hour was over. Nevertheless, he planned to send He Yu back to the villa. With the severity of his current condition, Xie Qingcheng needed to find out what exactly He Yu was hiding.

Xie Qingcheng felt himself struck by the unexpected irony of this thought. Before, it had always been He Yu who was curious about what Xie Qingcheng was hiding. Now, Xie Qingcheng was the one trying to figure out what unknown changes had befallen He Yu.

Xie Qingcheng took off his coat and tossed it over the sleeping youth. Then, swiftly and steadily, he drove to the front entrance of He Yu's home.

When he rang the bell, the housekeeper came to the door. Although the housekeeper had already seen that it was Xie Qingcheng through the doorbell camera, he was still taken aback when he opened the door and they came face-to-face. That was to say nothing of the fact that Xie Qingcheng was supporting a half-conscious He Yu.

"D-Doctor Xie…"

"Is Executive He home?"

"Both Executive He and Executive Lü have been busy recently. Neither of them are in Huzhou…"

Xie Qingcheng sighed. That was more or less what he'd expected.

"Could you please help me bring him inside first?" Xie Qingcheng asked. "He's too heavy."

Xie Qingcheng and the housekeeper helped He Yu into his bed. He Yu had never liked it when others entered his room, so the housekeeper didn't dare linger and rapidly retreated with a bow.

After He Yu was settled, Xie Qingcheng straightened up and peered around the room. It had been a very long time since he'd last been here.

The room's furnishings hadn't changed much in five years. However, the whole room seemed colder and more desolate. Xie Qingcheng thought it resembled a five-star hotel suite more than a bedroom that someone lived in. It was comfortable, but it didn't seem to hold a single touch of personal color. It was as though whoever lived in this room had no love for it and was ready to leave at any moment.

Precisely because the furnishings were so spare, a few things stood out vividly. Xie Qingcheng caught sight of the volume of *Rare Diseases of the World* on He Yu's desk. He'd left this book as a memento for He Yu when he departed five years ago. He wanted to remind him of the ossification disease he'd described to him once

and encourage He Yu to walk out from the shadows of his illness on his own.

"Little devil, you're not alone." These were the words of comfort that he couldn't say out loud back then. They were ultimately transformed into the solemn handwriting on the title page: *For He Yu.*

Xie Qingcheng walked over to the desk and opened the book, which was clearly well-worn. He saw his inscription from five years ago, the fountain pen ink faded from the passage of time. He stared at it through lowered lashes for a long while.

Whoosh.

Perhaps, as usual, He Yu had forgotten to close the window and draw the curtains. The morning breeze rushed into the room, sending the pages of the book aflutter.

As though decreed by fate, a thin sheet of paper that had been stuffed into the book drifted down like a flower petal and landed on the desk. At that exact moment, a ray of morning sun pierced through the clouds to illuminate the piece of paper.

Xie Qingcheng stilled in surprise.

It was a medical report. He picked up the report to slide it back into the book, but as he did so, he happened to glance at it, revealing something he never expected to see.

He had assumed that this was one of He Yu's own reports—perhaps to commemorate an improvement in his psychological Ebola, for instance—but it was actually an ordinary blood-work report. The name of the report's subject was printed on top: *Xie Qingcheng.*

There was nothing more absurd than seeing one's own lab results in someone else's home.

Xie Qingcheng stared blankly at this thin piece of paper for a while before picking it up to take a closer look. He wasn't mistaken; it really was his own blood-work report. Why would He Yu have *this*?

Xie Qingcheng looked at the date on the report again with a frown, searching his memory. As something occurred to him, his expression gradually turned unsightly.

It seemed to be from the first time they'd had sex, when he'd gotten a fever, and Chen Man had sent him to the hospital. He remembered now. Chen Man had said he lost the blood-work report, so Xie Qingcheng needed to get more blood drawn.

After giving it some thought, Xie Qingcheng understood what had probably happened. He Yu must've also gone to the hospital that day, but he hadn't shown his face the whole time. Still, that didn't explain why he had taken this report.

Gritting his teeth, Xie Qingcheng examined the report again. Some writing faintly showed through the back of the page, so he flipped it over. The once-spotless page was filled with lines and lines of the words, *Xie Qingcheng, I'm sorry.*

He'd used pens of various colors, and the handwriting was sometimes neat, sometimes messy. It didn't look like everything had been written in one sitting; it seemed like He Yu had jotted down these sentences at different points in time.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. Forget it. Back in the flooded studio, he'd already said that he wouldn't pursue the past any longer, so what was the point of wasting his emotional energy on this?

He crumpled the report into a ball and tossed it into the garbage can. No need for He Yu to see it and feel guilty again, then sit here copying out *I'm sorry* day after day. He reached over and closed the window as well, to stop the wind from blowing in.

Just then, he heard He Yu call out to him in a small voice. "Xie Qingcheng."

He blinked, caught off guard.

Again: "Xie Qingcheng…"

Xie Qingcheng walked over to the bed, only to discover that the youth wasn't actually awake—he was just muttering in his sleep. Xie Qingcheng stood next to him and watched him for a while.

"What are you calling to me for? *I'm* not your dad." Despite these words, Xie Qingcheng couldn't watch a patient in distress and just leave them be.

Xie Qingcheng stayed with He Yu until he confirmed that the boy was sound asleep. Only then did he get up and go downstairs to look for the housekeeper. He wanted to ask about He Yu's recent medication usage.

"The young master's mood is unstable, so he's always downing pills by the handful," said the housekeeper. "We're very worried about him."

"When did this start?" asked Xie Qingcheng.

"It's been quite a while. Many months now."

"And none of you tried talking to him?"

The housekeeper sighed. "What could we say? We know that taking medicine like this can't be good for his health, but at least he's getting by one day at a time. It's not like before, when the young master's flare-up made him so miserable that he fell out of a window…"

Xie Qingcheng stared in astonishment. "He fell out of a *window*?"

"Th-that's right," the housekeeper stammered. "You didn't know?"

"When did this happen?"

"It was the winter holiday, before the young master went to film *The Trial*. He was acting strangely around then. First, he was ecstatic, chatting and laughing with us. He went to that room that's been deserted for ages and cleaned it on his own six or seven times. We asked him if a guest was coming to stay and he said yes, but no one ever did."

The housekeeper's lips kept moving as he blathered on about some unimportant matters, but Xie Qingcheng's face had already paled. He didn't listen to anything that followed.

Of course, he knew who He Yu had tidied up that room for. He also knew full well who that guest who never showed up was. As his thoughts churned, he remembered the handful of messages he'd received from He Yu back then. He Yu even sent him multiple texts in a row.

"Doctor Xie, I'm sick," he said. *"Xie Qingcheng, I'm sick."*

But Xie Qingcheng had been so disgusted with him, he'd thought that He Yu was just crying wolf again, and hadn't considered that the contents of those messages might have been true.

Now that he'd uncovered the truth, Xie Qingcheng couldn't put his feelings into words.

If He Yu had threatened him—if he'd said, "If you don't come back to be my doctor, I'm going to ruin myself just to show you," Xie Qingcheng would've been exasperated and assumed he was trying to use his principles to blackmail him. He Yu hadn't done so, nor had he tried to morally pressure him later. Instead, it seemed like he sincerely hoped that Xie Qingcheng wouldn't find out more about his troubles.

He Yu had held out for a long time. Up until yesterday, when he couldn't manage it any longer.

Xie Qingcheng thanked the housekeeper and went back to He Yu's bedroom. His heart was in disarray. He couldn't easily forgive He Yu for what he'd done, but human emotions weren't as simple as black or white, love or hate. Once he realized how long He Yu had been enduring the anguish of his disease by himself—the anguish that had been born from Xie Qingcheng's rejection, no less—Xie Qingcheng's feelings jumbled inside him like a puzzle with the pieces tossed every which way.

As a doctor, it was his instinct to prevent a patient from hurting themselves. As psychological Ebola's patient zero, it was his instinct to prevent He Yu from doing harm to himself. He couldn't deny that He Yu's current behavior dismayed him. He couldn't understand why He Yu had done such things. Was it really just because the two of them were so-called "kin"?

Reaching for a cigarette in his fretful state was second nature, but when he glanced at the vulnerable young man in his bed, Xie Qingcheng felt that it wouldn't be appropriate to subject a patient to secondhand smoke. He bit his lip and put the pack of cigarettes back in his pocket.

Around one in the afternoon, He Yu finally woke from his stupor. Lying in bed, he pressed a hand to his forehead. He spent quite a while gathering his wits before he remembered what had happened the day before.

That violent scuffle in the car. Xie Qingcheng repeatedly trying to pin him down, before He Yu eventually got his hands around Xie Qingcheng's neck. His illness had gotten the better of him, and he had nearly choked Xie Qingcheng to death.

Cold sweat drenched He Yu as he fully came back to himself.

"Xie Qingcheng!" he shouted in a panic.

"I'm here."

He Yu hadn't expected to receive an answer. He whipped around to discover that Xie Qingcheng hadn't left. He was sitting by the window, reading. When he heard that He Yu had woken up, he closed his book and looked his way.

"Xie Qingcheng, you…"

"Lie down. There's no need to sit up."

He Yu wasn't so obedient. As he pulled himself up into a sitting position, he saw his arms were wrapped in fresh gauze. This meticulous bandaging was Xie Qingcheng's handiwork. He Yu looked down in silence. What happened last night was real.

It was the first time he'd completely lost all rationality in the throes of his illness. He nearly ended Xie Qingcheng's life with his own two hands, almost killed the man who stayed by his side.

He slowly raised his shaking hands to stare at his palms. The late-stage symptoms of psychological Ebola were nightmarish, weren't they? Upon waking, he might discover the corpse of the person he loved the most lying next to him.

He couldn't stop thinking about it. All his life, He Yu had been virtually fearless, but in that instant, he felt terror in the pit of his stomach.

Xie Qingcheng walked over to him. "He Yu, you—"

"Stay away from me!" He Yu snapped. A turbulent light flickered in his eyes. A moment later, he forced himself to calm down, but he really didn't want Xie Qingcheng to come near him.

"Stay away from me…" He Yu buried his face in his hands, mumbling softly.

Xie Qingcheng gazed at him for a moment before he spoke again. "He Yu, calm down. I'm not going to do anything to you." He hesitated. "I just wanted to discuss something with you."

"What…do you want to discuss?"

"Your illness."

He Yu no longer wanted Xie Qingcheng to treat him. After what had happened yesterday, he wished more than anything that Xie Qingcheng would vanish right before his eyes.

"Don't worry about it," He Yu insisted. "My illness isn't serious, it's just that this recent flare-up was pretty intense, I—"

Xie Qingcheng cut him off. "I heard that your condition made you lose control and fall out of a window."

Silence.

"You don't need to hide it from me anymore. I know everything."

After another long beat, He Yu rasped, "What, did the housekeeper tell you?"

"Yes. If I hadn't brought you home today, I would've never found out about it."

For He Yu, this discovery had come too late. Once, he thought it would be great if Xie Qingcheng could see just a bit of the sincerity in his heart. If he saw that, might he not treat He Yu just a bit better? But now, he was petrified.

Last night's chaotic scene in the car played out like a movie before his eyes once more. Who wouldn't be afraid of blindly killing their beloved with their own hands?

Thus, in that long stretch of silence, He Yu made his decision. He would do everything in his power to keep his distance from Xie Qingcheng.

"Now you know, but so what?" he murmured, a disingenuous chill in his voice. "Xie Qingcheng, didn't you wonder about me?" As He Yu spoke, a shadow of self-mockery spread across his face. "You didn't want to even look at me back then. I messaged you, but you never replied. Why bring it up again? It's already been so long. It means nothing now."

"I thought you weren't telling the truth."

"It doesn't matter." He Yu's messy hair drooped over his forehead. "I'm used to it. To you, I'm just a liar."

Xie Qingcheng paused. "I'm sorry. I misunderstood you."

He Yu's face remained impassive, but his heart skipped a beat. Xie Qingcheng had said to him, *I'm sorry.* He'd hardly ever heard Xie Qingcheng say those two words to him. If they could've come just a little earlier, perhaps he wouldn't have lost it so badly.

"He Yu, you can't go on like this. Your mental state is already difficult to calm with medication, and abusing it will only raise your tolerance. I've never met your current attending physician, but he

ought to have warned you about this as well. I hope you'll take his words to heart."

He Yu endured the throbbing ache inside himself and lay silent for a while.

"See, Doctor Xie, you know that I have a new attending physician now," He Yu began. "Yes, you *should* understand that these things have nothing to do with you anymore. Once, I…really wished that you'd come back. I groveled and pleaded with you, said I was hurting over and over, but you said—" He Yu cut himself off with a derisive chuckle, his eyes red, his voice a bit hoarse. "You thought I was lying to you. What's the point of nagging me now? Because you find me pathetic? You really don't need to do this. I have a doctor who's just as skilled as you are."

"I don't doubt that doctor's skills, but few people have studied psychological Ebola more deeply than I have," said Xie Qingcheng. "He Yu, do you understand how serious your condition is? It would be one thing if I hadn't seen anything, but now that I have, do you really think I can just ignore it entirely?"

He Yu stilled for a moment, his silhouette stark on the white wall behind him. "Based on what I know about you, I think that there's nothing you wouldn't do."

Xie Qingcheng didn't answer.

"Xie Qingcheng, you said it yourself: You're a man of many responsibilities, and I'm nothing but a tiny disaster to you. After Qin Ciyan's accident, I was the first burden you abandoned."

"Could you not put words into my mouth?" In his frustration, Xie Qingcheng's fingers itched for a cigarette. "I never said you were a burden."

"But that's *exactly* what you did! Your *actions* proved that you saw me as a burden."

Xie Qingcheng resisted the urge to smoke, but he couldn't help clicking the lighter on and off in his hands. Finally, he threw down

the lighter with a clatter and looked up at He Yu.

"You really want to debate me on this? Then, I'll be honest with you, so you better listen up. Since your eighth birthday, when I entered your home and agreed to become your doctor, I've never seen you as a burden. No doctor would see a patient as a burden. In those days, although you weren't a burden, you *were* just an interesting patient to me. I didn't feel a deeper emotional connection than that.

"After Lao-Qin's accident, you *were* one of the first things I gave up, but I told you very clearly that, given the circumstances, I had no choice. Letting you go didn't bring me any relief. I didn't feel like I'd unloaded some burdensome weight."

When Xie Qingcheng said this, he seemed to be recalling those bygone days and the pain of being stuck between a rock and a hard place. His eyes darkened.

"If you still don't understand why I gave you up back then, even after what I told you in the water—that choosing to leave didn't bring me any happiness—if you still think that I jumped for joy and sighed in relief when I let go, then…" Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. "Perhaps telling you the truth was all for nothing. There's just no way for me to relieve your suffering. I'm sorry."

He Yu's heart throbbed like a bruise. He knew he'd misspoken in his efforts to push Xie Qingcheng away. Xie Qingcheng was a staunch and resolute man, but his weak spot was his compassion for his patients. What He Yu had said undoubtedly stung like a knife to his heart, like salt on his wounds. How could he talk like he was oblivious to Xie Qingcheng's deep care for his patients?

He *wasn't* oblivious. Ever since Xie Qingcheng had explained it to him, he knew that Xie Qingcheng regretted leaving him. Otherwise, He Yu wouldn't have changed his opinion of Xie Qingcheng after they had been trapped in the water together.

Unfortunately, if he didn't harm Xie Qingcheng with his words, he might end up causing him physical harm instead.

Just go, he thought. *Just go, Xie Qingcheng. Hurry up and leave.*

He Yu felt his grip on the reins slipping once again. He feared that he wouldn't be able to stop himself. As fast as possible, he wanted to stop talking and chase Xie Qingcheng away, so he continued pushing this blade into Xie Qingcheng's heart, along with his own.

"Even if I wasn't a burden on you before, that's what I became in the end," He Yu said. "Ever since what happened at the club, you're disgusted and repulsed by me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have ignored me completely when I asked you for help."

Xie Qingcheng didn't reply.

"Go home, Xie Qingcheng. Don't worry—we're both victims of RN-13, so I'll help you investigate. Even if you don't care about me at all, I'll hold up my end of the bargain."

Xie Qingcheng stared at him.

"Go home," He Yu repeated. "I want to go back to sleep."

Xie Qingcheng looked up, but he didn't leave. Instead, he took a few more steps forward, until he was at He Yu's bedside.

In the end, when Xie Qingcheng spoke, his voice was steadfast and sincere, the clarity of his emotions bringing a calming force to his words. "I'm not going to deny that I was repulsed by you before. I remember exactly what you did in the Skynight Club. However—" He changed the topic. "He Yu, I haven't forgotten the archives, or the choice you made in the flooded studio. And I can't forget that you're the last surviving psychological Ebola patient in the country. You're going through the same suffering I once did, so there's no way I can pretend I haven't seen anything. I haven't forgotten that you were once my patient, that I didn't cure you, and that I couldn't be by your side."

The agony in He Yu's heart reached its zenith. One after another, Xie Qingcheng had laid out the reasons he cared for him,

yet none of them were personal. To He Yu, this was even more hurtful than if he had said he didn't care about him at all.

He Yu really couldn't control himself anymore. He felt the lunacy that he had never fully suppressed overtake him again, and the flames of his desire for Xie Qingcheng—so fierce that he wanted to burn to ash with him—ignited once more.

He tore his face away, his hands trembling, his eyes strained.

These omens presaged a second flare-up in his precarious condition. He wanted to conceal it, but he had reached his limits. Still, he forced out through clenched teeth, "Just go… *Go!*"

Every detail of his abnormal behavior was reflected in Xie Qingcheng's eyes.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't possibly leave him here like this. "He Yu, if there's something on your mind, why can't you say it?" he asked, staring at him. "You know how severe your condition is, so why are you still repressing yourself like this?!"

"Nothing's on my mind! Stop pushing me, all right?!"

He Yu was spinning out of control. He didn't realize it himself, but Xie Qingcheng could tell—could see He Yu's eyes taking on the color of blood.

"Xie Qingcheng, you don't understand me at all, not in the least. Just pretend you don't see it whenever I get sick in the future, got it? I don't want to see you! It would only piss me off if I did! Go home! Hurry up and go home! *Get the hell out!*"

"When I ignore you, you jump off a building. When I don't, you find me annoying." Xie Qingcheng glared at him. "I just want to know the fucking reason, so what are you being so stubborn for?!"

"No reason," He Yu responded, his face paling. "There's no reason at all."

It couldn't be any more obvious that this was a refusal to cooperate. Xie Qingcheng didn't speak for a very long time. Despite

his unflappable temperament, anger sparked like a live wire in his chest.

"He Yu, this is a matter that concerns me. Your fall, your fit, your nervous breakdown—all of these concern me. I want to know why, because you're not the only person affected by this."

He Yu could feel that beast in his heart slam against the door, sending tremors through his chest and making his ears ring. Xie Qingcheng was pushing him to the edge. He couldn't come up with any more excuses to gloss things over. He only wanted to make Xie Qingcheng leave.

On the verge of breaking down, he told Xie Qingcheng once again, "I don't want to tell you! You should leave. Please, I'm *begging* you, stop asking me. Won't you let me off this once, Xie Qingcheng? Can't you please…let me go…"

You should go.

Stop tempting me to shed this painted skin of mine, to meet your eyes in my worst, truest form.

You should go.

Stop asking for an answer when you'll only curse and yell at me once you receive it, when you'll only take me for a lunatic.

You should go…

Please leave…

With his feelings tangled up into this excruciating knot, He Yu's condition only worsened.

Xie Qingcheng watched his trembling fingers, his disheveled hair, and his wild eyes. A needle seemed to pierce his heart, digging into the part of it that belonged to He Yu. The needle stabbed into him, filling him with remorse, stifling his breath, making him bleed.

Showing him his cruelty and his failure.

In that misery, in that silence—

Closing his eyes, at last, Xie Qingcheng said, "Okay."

He drew a breath. "If you really don't want to tell me, I won't ask. I won't force you or push you any further. But, He Yu, after I walk out this door today…I don't think we should see each other anymore, okay?"

He Yu suddenly froze.

When Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes, they were swollen. "I don't blame you, nor do I hate you. But whether it's as a doctor or as a person, I feel like I've made a complete mess of our relationship. It's my fault that we've ended up this way. As I'm thirteen years your senior, I'm unquestionably the elder and leader in this relationship. I should've been more responsible with you. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to guide you onto the path I hoped you could walk."

Xie Qingcheng paused, then gathered himself. "I once said that I'd spent seven years on you, but seeing you end up like this made me feel like I fed that time to a dog. When I said that, I *was* disappointed, but that disappointment wasn't only directed at you. Moreover, it was directed at myself. He Yu, I really feel like I failed you completely."

He Yu had no answer to that.

"We're both psychological Ebola patients," Xie Qingcheng continued. "Qin Ciyan saved me, but I couldn't save you. I still don't know where I went wrong. Perhaps I shouldn't have seen you again after you came back, or I misjudged your condition and shouldn't have let you leave on your own. Maybe I never made the right diagnosis in the first place. I might have made a mistake in agreeing to your parents' requests. I could have stayed to take care of you."

At this point, both of them lapsed into a long silence, as if they were both remembering those bygone days.

"I want to know where I went wrong," Xie Qingcheng said. "I think you know, but you don't want to tell me. Even though your illness is so severe, you don't want to confide in me about your pain.

Because of me, a patient now finds it impossible to tell me the truth, and my existence—my *presence* worsens your condition.

"He Yu, I was once a doctor. Your doctor. And I've made a complete mess of it all. I couldn't be your lifesaving medicine, like Qin Ciyan. In the end, I became your wounds instead."

Xie Qingcheng kept his head down without looking at He Yu, as if he were already tired of confronting him. His inky lashes were lowered, his expression cool and calm, as he voiced these thoughts he'd never expressed to He Yu before.

"I'm an utter failure. I'm sorry that I was your doctor, rather than someone like Lao-Qin. I never managed to step into his shoes. I can't change anything, nor have I saved you."

He stopped briefly to glance at He Yu, but it was as though he looked past He Yu's face to see that fledgling dragon he'd met twelve years ago.

"When I first met you, you were only a child. Now that I think about it, I prevented you from meeting a suitable protector. I wasn't a proper adult at all." Xie Qingcheng's voice was low and tired, colored with unmistakable regret. "Little devil, I'm so sorry for all these years."

The hush in the aftermath of his words hung over them for a long time.

It was time for this to come to an end. Since there was no way to resolve the issues between them, continuing on like this would only lead to one mistake after another. It had to end.

After Xie Qingcheng finished saying all that he wanted to, he rose, closing his downcast eyes. Finally, he was about to do what He Yu wanted him to do—leave.

The sharp sound and feeling of someone grabbing his wrist stopped him in his tracks.

He Yu had wrapped his quivering fingers around Xie Qingcheng's wrist. Then, a warm droplet landed on the back of Xie

Qingcheng's hand. He was stunned. He turned, his gaze landing on He Yu.

His head was down, his bangs hanging over his eyes—Xie Qingcheng couldn't see his expression clearly. But he knew that He Yu was crying.

Before Xie Qingcheng could come back to his senses, He Yu tugged him back into his seat. Suddenly, He Yu reached up to cradle the back of Xie Qingcheng's head, pressing close as tears streamed from his eyes. A second later, he kissed Xie Qingcheng's slightly cool lips.

Even He Yu's lips were trembling as he cried, unable to suppress his sobs no matter how much he wanted to. Xie Qingcheng's heartfelt words had pierced a hole through his heart. This tiny fracture was enough to shatter the mighty walls of the fortress He Yu had built around his heart. It collapsed. He Yu embraced Xie Qingcheng and kissed him, caressing his hair, and then pressed his forehead to his.

This man—who had done everything he could and now found himself facing a dead end—had finally confessed what he was feeling. He admitted, *I'm sorry, little devil. I really feel like I failed you.*

"Xie Qingcheng, you shouldn't… Don't feel that way about yourself!" He Yu's voice was choked with emotion as he tried to stop it from shaking. He didn't want Xie Qingcheng to discover that his heart was so broken.

Pressing his forehead to Xie Qingcheng's and closing his eyes, he said softly, "You shouldn't feel like you're a failure, Doctor Xie. You didn't do anything wrong. *Nothing*. You don't need to tell me sorry. *I* kept you in the dark, I didn't tell you anything, not because you're a failure of a doctor, but because…because…"

He Yu's voice broke as tears rolled down his face. After a long pause, he squeezed the truth out of his heart, one shaky syllable at a time, as though each one weighed him down—

"Because I love you! Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu's shoulders shook, his tears dripping like rain. "I love you. It's because I've fallen for you, I've fucking *fallen in love with you*, do you get it? Do you?!"

It was agony. In order to console the man before him, he dug out these words that he knew would never be reciprocated from the ruins of his heart, holding them out to him unadorned. He knew that he would surely be met with rejection, revulsion, even ridicule, but he still offered up these words, along with the fervent blood and tears of his youth, hoping to impart a bit of warmth to this man's ice-cold lips and hands.

He Yu hugged him, sobs lodging in his throat. "Because I *like* you, Xie Qingcheng. It's all true. I want to be with you, kiss you, hold you, have you—I want to do things to you that you can't accept… I'm so selfish, aren't I? But I can't help it. No matter how hard I try, I can't stop. I can't stop thinking about you. It's impossible! Xie Qingcheng. Doctor Xie. Don't say that I'm sick. Don't think that I'm a liar—I really love you. I'm trying my hardest not to, that's why I'm so moody and crazy and out of control whenever I see you. Don't blame yourself. You've never done anything wrong, not ever. I'm the one who's wrong. *I'm* no good, just miserably wretched, a moth drawn to a flame…"

His voice weakened, his arms tight around Xie Qingcheng, who was frozen in astonishment.

Tears still leaked from his tired eyes. "I know, I *know* you don't like me. It's humiliating and futile. I know it isn't right, but I love you anyway. I tried to quit, but I couldn't. Even now, I still can't. Go on, laugh at me! Xie Qingcheng, just go ahead. Laugh.

"I've really lost my mind. I fucking knew how this would turn out, but I insisted on following this stupid path to the end. I'm a total wreck, but I want to hold you. I…I've got nothing good going for me, but I still dare to love you. I can't help it. There's no cure. I'm covered in dirt and grime, but I still love the snow in the sky. It's my fault, not yours… I'm sorry… I'm so inferior, but I love you…

Loving you hurts so bad. Xie Qingcheng, it *hurts*. I know I can't have you, that I have to let go, but I still love you, each and every day."

He Yu's voice strained with the sincerity of each word. He hugged Xie Qingcheng through his tears. In his hands, he held out his infinitely blemished love, humble yet proud, apprehensive yet resolute, for Xie Qingcheng to see. The unembellished love that belonged to a young man like him—this deeply diseased heart that could only be He Yu's.



"Xie Qingcheng, what should I do?" he choked out. "Save me! Please, *save me*! I can't change or walk away. I-it's impossible. Xie Qingcheng, I'm sorry… I-I really…really…really, really…"

He was stuttering terribly; all his usual eloquence and his cleverness had fallen away. With tearful eyes, he offered his heart and cut open his soul to give his only treasure to his Xie-ge, his Doctor Xie, his Xie Qingcheng.

"Ge…I really love you so much," he concluded, forlorn.

He Yu knew that holding Xie Qingcheng was like holding snow, that kissing him was like kissing frost, that loving him was like drinking poison wine; all of it was destined to end in unrequited heartbreak.

And yet, come hell or high water, he was going to keep on loving him.

Xie Qingcheng, it really hurts to love you. I know this pain; I know it all too well. It doesn't matter. With all that I am, all of my heart, never stopping for a single moment…I insist on loving you.

Chapter 127:
Ge, Be Reasonable

XIE QINGCHENG NEVER could have imagined such a shocking answer to his questions. It was like he'd been struck by lightning: His ears rang, and it felt as if a crack had split open in his chest. Raging tides poured into his heart until he couldn't get a single word out of his mouth.

He Yu held him so tightly, like he was his eyes, his organs, his ribs; his life.

In his shock, the usual calm that Xie Qingcheng relied on left him. His mind was completely blank, and he couldn't even begin to think of what he was supposed to do.

Truth be told, Xie Qingcheng had been the recipient of many love confessions over the course of his life. Since he was young, he'd never lacked pursuers—men and women alike. However, most of those people only liked him for his face. They thought he was handsome and manly and wanted to have some fun. A confession of love like this, so ardent that the other party was driven to tears, was actually something he'd only ever received from Li Ruoqiu.

The main reason Xie Qingcheng had married Li Ruoqiu was because her dogged pursuit had worn down his resistance. Once he had his illness under control, he knew that he wouldn't die young and could live like a normal person. Going out with her was a part of that, so he eventually agreed to try. In actuality, Xie Qingcheng was reluctant to deny others' sincere feelings.

When he saw how sincere Li Ruoqiu was in her pursuit of him, he was incapable of admonishing her. In the end, he didn't have the heart to hurt her, and he agreed to date her. He conceded time and again to her pleas until, eventually, they reached the point of marriage. Though he couldn't see the young man who was holding

him and confessing to him the same way he'd seen Li Ruoqiu, he still found himself incapable of mocking him.

But still, he was alarmed, so much so that he froze to the spot. He had no idea what he should do.

Time passed. When he came back to his senses, he managed to speak with some difficulty: "He Yu, you… Let go of me first."

He Yu only clung harder.

"Let go of me, and we'll talk, okay?"

Damn it, he hated that the way he said it sounded like there was room for discussion! And his voice was touched with nerves, making it obvious he had no idea what to do.

In all his previous conversations with He Yu, if he wasn't cursing, then he was peppering He Yu with imperious commands or disdainful jabs, like "You have so little stamina, you could go three rounds in fifteen minutes." It was easy when he knew that He Yu was only messing with him.

Now, He Yu was telling him that it was *real*: that he was talking about real love. A chauvinistic man like Xie Qingcheng couldn't help feeling a strange, yet strong sense of responsibility for others, so for once, his words had taken on a hint of caution as he spoke to He Yu.

He Yu pressed his chin against the dip of Xie Qingcheng's shoulder, tears dripping from his long eyelashes. "No, Xie Qingcheng, just go ahead and laugh at me already."

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond.

"You must want to laugh at me. Go on."

"…I can't bring myself to do so. Please let go of me."

He Yu tried to hold it in, but he couldn't help the genuine hurt bleeding into his voice. "You—you're even saying 'please' to me now?"

Xie Qingcheng was at a complete loss. He Yu was like an exquisite million-dollar glass statue that would shatter from a single careless word. He'd never be able to pay back the cost if it broke, so he didn't dare touch it without thought.

He picked through his words, then offered the ones he'd chosen like tribute to the glittering statue. "Fine. How about: Let go of me, now?"

When He Yu wordlessly released him, Xie Qingcheng stared at him for a while, feeling awkward. He couldn't have expected things to turn out like this.

"He Yu…you… You're not joking, are you?"

"Do I *look* like I'm joking to you?"

Xie Qingcheng pressed a hand to his forehead, like he was struggling to digest this information. He didn't ridicule or curse at him, didn't say anything disrespectful, but he really felt like he was about to break down.

He Yu loved him. How the hell did things turn out like this?

Xie Qingcheng had never considered the possibility that He Yu might love him, not when He Yu had kissed him, held him, or even slept with him.

They'd both been straight! Their sexual relationship had only developed out of retaliation—even when He Yu's desire for revenge had faded, Xie Qingcheng had assumed that he was just a lust-addled virgin who couldn't control himself after getting his first taste of sex.

They'd both lost their heads and spent a passionate night together on New Year's Eve, but that had only alarmed Xie Qingcheng with the intensity of his own physical reaction. He grew concerned that his continued entanglement with such a fervent young man would cause him to lose control over important aspects of his life—that he would tumble down with him.

Of course, he knew that He Yu was deep in *lust*, but he never took that to be real love. Lust and love were not the same. One sought after the body, while the other demanded the heart.

He Yu was still in his first year of university. What sorts of games wouldn't kids his age play? When infatuation took hold, they would pluck the stars down from the sky for you, but when the flames of ardor flickered out and regret set in, they'd run off once again to seek a new so-called soulmate. Their passion grew as quickly as it faded; to them, romance was little more than an exciting new game, to be dropped the moment they gained a full score.

Back in the day, hadn't Li Ruoqiu been just the same?

There was no point in discussing matters of love with someone so young. The light in their eyes and the words from their mouths didn't merit more than a moment's consideration; none of it was earnest.

As for the way He Yu always wanted to kiss and embrace him, as if he was starved for touch, he'd assumed that He Yu had become addicted to the game. Eventually, Xie Qingcheng grew tired of resisting. The more he resisted, the more He Yu liked it, so in the end, his struggles were completely useless. As long as He Yu didn't come inside him, Xie Qingcheng allowed him to do as he pleased.

Who knew? He'd assumed that He Yu would soon get sick of him if he refused to respond. To Xie Qingcheng's surprise, that hadn't happened.

In fact, not only had He Yu never gotten sick of him, here he was, crying from heartbreak and speaking with such sincerity. He'd done so much and suppressed his feelings for so long, and now—under Xie Qingcheng's interrogation, no less—he had given this astonishing answer.

He said he loved him.

Dammit.

How the fuck am I supposed to deal with this?

He was filled with turmoil. Everything about this was wrong, but he had no idea how to respond to He Yu's earnestness. Even someone as calm as Xie Qingcheng would panic when faced with something like this. His face remained placid, but inside, he was scrambling to keep up.

Suddenly, from the riot of his tumultuous thoughts, Doctor Xie pulled a perfectly logical answer from the depths.

Right, he thought, clinging to this final lifeline. *That must be what happened.*

Sighing in relief, Xie Qingcheng turned a solemn gaze on He Yu. Just as he had when this kid was his patient, he adopted the posture of a model psychotherapist. "Uhh, He Yu, I think that you're actually…confused about your emotions. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He Yu stared.

"Look," Xie Qingcheng continued, "I'm over a decade older than you. Your dad is forty-one this year, and I'm not much younger than your dad. How could you be in love with me?"

"You're thirteen years older than me, yes, but you're also eight years younger than my dad," He Yu said. "Why is it that you're 'not much' younger when it comes to him?"

"Eight and thirteen aren't the same."

"How are they not the same?"

"Well…one of them is less than ten."

"But eight is only five less than thirteen."

Xie Qingcheng's head hurt. How had this conversation turned so childish?

He didn't want to keep solving first-grade math problems with He Yu, so he switched tack. "He Yu, there's no way you're in love with me, okay? You have to take responsibility for yourself; don't

misinterpret your own thoughts. Think about this carefully: Would you fall in love with a woman thirteen years older than you? Of course not. So it's even more unlikely you'd fall in love with a man who was the same. This age difference is entirely abnormal. Even if I'm not the same generation as your dad, I'm still old enough to be your uncle. Do you think that's normal?"

He Yu shook his head, but before Xie Qingcheng could let out a sigh of relief, it turned into a nod. "If it's you, it's normal."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

"I would love you if you were a woman. I'd love you even if you were my *dad*, much less an uncle."

Xie Qingcheng found He Yu's sweet talk utterly absurd. That was just what young people were like, thinking they were spouting honey when it was really a fountain of bullshit. And after hearing He Yu's treatise on love, he thought the boy was even more unreasonable than Li Ruoqiu.

This only cemented his conviction that He Yu was confused about his emotions and acting on impulse. Once his madness got to his head, his rationality vanished, and crazy words spilled out in a confusing stream of consciousness. He had to tamp down his anger and try to explain how one plus one equals two to this youngster who couldn't figure out his feelings.

"Listen to me, He Yu. First of all, that example you gave just now is called incest. Even though I'm neither your uncle nor your father, your hypothesis is inherently flawed. You shouldn't have these kinds of thoughts."

He Yu peered at him through his messy fringe like he was earnestly listening to and mocking Xie Qingcheng at the same time. He could practically hear the little brat saying, "See? I was right. You really don't believe me."

Xie Qingcheng ignored his infuriating gaze. He Yu had confessed his feelings to him so seriously; he would respond to him in kind.

Thus, Professor Xie continued explaining how one plus one equals two. "Second of all, do you know what love is?"

With his eyelashes still damp with tears, He Yu looked up at him and said reflexively, "It's the way I love you."

For a speechless moment, Xie Qingcheng didn't dare meet his gaze. When He Yu spoke, the light in his eyes was so scorching that it might burn him.

Xie Qingcheng kept his eyes downcast for a while before he sighed. "*Kids*. Listen. Love is responsibility, restraint, and family. He Yu, none of those things are possible between us."

He Yu was feeling much better now that he'd expressed his emotions, and the despondency that preceded a flare-up had also vanished. As a result, he could calmly listen to Xie Qingcheng's speech.

"Mm. I agree with the first half of what you said," he said.

Xie Qingcheng was surprised to hear this. "You do?"

"I do. I *also* think love is responsibility, restraint, and family," said He Yu. "But Xie Qingcheng, you're missing something."

"What am I missing?"

He Yu had a direct response ready on his tongue, but a flash of inspiration had him changing tack. "What did I say before I agreed with you?"

After thinking for a while, a frown on his face, Xie Qingcheng remembered. He mechanically repeated He Yu's words back to him. "I love you?"

He Yu immediately broke into a teary smile. Though bittersweet, it was still a smile—some joy amid the pain. He pressed his forehead to Xie Qingcheng's.

"Mm. Me too," He Yu said.

Xie Qingcheng blinked in confusion.

"I love you too," He Yu repeated.

Xie Qingcheng realized he'd been tricked.

He Yu wasn't Li Ruoqiu. He wouldn't obediently listen to Xie Qingcheng's lectures point by point. Not only would he talk back, he would even set traps for him.

Xie Qingcheng's temper flared again. He pulled away from He Yu. "I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you. What're you playing at?"

"I'm *also* being serious." He Yu dabbed at his tears. His turbulent heart having calmed, he said solemnly, "I'm not playing at anything. What you said about responsibility, restraint, marriage—I second all of that. But what about 'I like you'? What about 'I love you'? Where does that fit in?"

"You—!" Xie Qingcheng exclaimed.

"You always tell me I'm too young, that I'm only nineteen, but have you forgotten that I'm almost twenty?" He Yu asked. "Why is it that you won't take me seriously because I'm young, anyway? You say I don't understand anything, that everything I think is wrong, like I can't even tell whether my own feelings are love or not. I'm not an idiot! I understand very well.

"The most important part of love is 'I love you.' Without those words, it's nothing at all. You need to have love before you can talk about responsibility. What are you doing otherwise, giving charity?" He Yu didn't mince his words. "That was your relationship with Li Ruoqiu. You didn't love her at all, and that's where you were in the wrong. You felt guilty, so you played along and stayed with someone you didn't love, hurting you both in the end. You turned your own marriage into an act of service. Who are you to tell me I don't understand love?"

These words stabbed into Xie Qingcheng's heart like daggers. At last, with an ugly expression, he choked out, "You little brat, what do you know?"

He Yu's almond eyes gazed at him straight-on. "I'm an adult too, Xie Qingcheng."

Silence.

"Haven't you noticed?"

More silence.

"You used to always make fun of me, saying that in ancient times, I wouldn't even have come of age yet, that I was just a little kid. Very well. Now, even if we were in ancient times, I would be old enough to marry and have kids with you. The new year's passed—I'm twenty."

"…Only according to the old system. By modern reckoning, you're still nineteen."[2]

He Yu glared at him. "I feel like even when I'm thirty, you'll still think I'm a little kid."

"I'm not talking to you about age anymore," Xie Qingcheng said. "I need you to understand that what you feel for me can't possibly be love."

"You're not *me*. How would you know that what I feel for you can't be real love?" After all, could a person truly see through the eyes of another?

As their conversation went in circles, it turned into a debate. He Yu was a million times more difficult to handle than Li Ruoqiu. Xie Qingcheng hadn't planned on bringing up the issue of gender, but now, he had no choice but to use it as an explanation.

"He Yu, you've imprinted on me like a baby bird. I'm well aware that I'm the first person you've ever slept with."

He Yu fell silent.

"You told me that you've slept with tons of people, but I know that was a lie. You don't behave at all like someone with a lot of sexual experience."

Unable to maintain his expression of indifference, He Yu turned his face to the side.

Some semblance of control had finally returned to Xie Qingcheng. His back straightened as he continued his lecture. "Under these circumstances, you may have developed some incorrect ideas about me. That's understandable—it's human nature. But physical desire isn't love—it's merely a physiological reaction. Although it's not entirely appropriate, I can give you an example: There are some people who will become attracted to the characters in certain types of films; they might even become attached to the performances of specific actors, but is this love? Of course not. It's just a type of sexual desire. Your feelings toward me are similar."

"Xie Qingcheng. I don't see you as Hatano Yui."

"See, your instinctive response is to name a female actress," said Xie Qingcheng. "Your sexual orientation is normal; you like women. I still remember you told me in Hangshi that you failed to pursue a girl from your school."

It was He Yu's turn to get a headache. "Back then, I misunderstood my feelings—"

Before he finished speaking, he knew he had made a mistake.

Indeed, Xie Qingcheng didn't miss a beat. "Then, how can you be sure that you haven't misunderstood your feelings now?"

He Yu had no way to respond.

"You're only nineteen."

"I'm twenty…"

Ignoring He Yu's protest, Xie Qingcheng rose to his feet. He stuck one hand in his pocket and poked He Yu in the forehead with the other.

"You're still very young, so don't waste your time on the wrong person, and don't misconstrue your emotions anymore. You need to recognize that what you feel for me is only a habitual physical desire, and perhaps a desire to make up for the fatherly love you lack. As for two men being together, I think…it's inherently wrong."

"Oh yeah? Then, the wrongs you and I have committed together should condemn us both to death, eighteen times over," He Yu said.

"So let's avoid a nineteenth time," Xie Qingcheng replied.

He Yu gazed at him silently with deeply hurt eyes. Xie Qingcheng hadn't laughed at him or mocked him. Instead, he spoke to him seriously, explaining why He Yu should turn back and correct the error of his ways. Nevertheless, it had left He Yu feeling deflated.

That didn't mean he gave up, though. "With you, I'd be willing to be condemned to death any number of times," He Yu insisted. "If reincarnation exists, I'd gladly die with you a thousand times—a million times! As long as in one of those lives, you'll believe that I really do love you."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless. These words were no longer in the realm of honeyed idiocy. How had this child strayed so far?

What a goddamn disaster, the uncle thought. *Just how the hell am I supposed to treat him now?*

Chapter 128:
I’m Gonna Pursue You

XIE QINGCHENG had seen countless patients, but he’d never encountered such a tricky manifestation of symptoms: The patient insisted his chief complaint was that he’d fallen in love with his former psychiatrist, to the extent that he wouldn’t give up even if he had to die a thousand deaths.

It was truly beyond comprehension. Doctor Xie had no clue what to say.

He Yu, on the other hand, had said his piece. Now that he’d expressed his deep love and innermost emotions, he wiped his tears again and pulled himself together.

“So, Xie Qingcheng, now that you know the truth, you won’t blame yourself anymore, right?” he asked.

No, Xie Qingcheng blamed himself even more than before.

“There’s no need to worry. The only reason I told you is so that you’ll see it’s not your fault. It’s just because I love you with all my heart. I love you very much. It’s not a mix-up or a misunderstanding. For this love, I would give up anything and everything I have. But—”

He Yu’s eyes darkened. “I also know that my presence causes problems for you. I could even hurt you myself. As long as you can stop blaming yourself, I won’t bother you anymore.”

“What are you saying?!” Xie Qingcheng came back to his senses—the brat was going to seal off his heart again? His sword-straight brows drew together as he snapped, “You’re going to make me watch you torture yourself even more? After you told me all this, you think I’m going to just let you do that?”

He Yu blinked. His eyes darted up. “So…so, what you mean is…”

“Could I trouble you to stop bottling up your emotions in the future? No matter what you want to say to me, even if I’m homophobic, I’m not going to laugh at you,” said Xie Qingcheng. “Besides, I still think that you’ve gotten your feelings muddled. With me around, you’ll be able to grow out of it over time.”

When He Yu said nothing in response, Xie Qingcheng continued, “In the future, you should do what you have to do and put your mental state first. This is the safest way; it will minimize the chance of you hurting others. Just look at yourself now. Hasn’t your mood improved a good deal now that you’ve said everything aloud?”

He Yu pondered Xie Qingcheng’s words and realized that it was true. Now that he’d voiced the intense feelings suppressed in his heart, his emotions had calmed down, which meant he was no longer in danger of hurting Xie Qingcheng.

He stilled, looking down at his newly steady hands, and muttered, “It really has, hasn’t it?”

“You should live according to your true feelings,” Xie Qingcheng said. “Don’t worry. I’ll deal with your temper and mood swings. Since you’ve spoken to me honestly, I can guide you in the right direction.”

He Yu started in surprise.

“What’s wrong? Is there something else you want to say?” asked Xie Qingcheng.

As He Yu listened to Xie Qingcheng, he felt as though a beam of light had shone down from the heavens with a realization—one that Xie Qingcheng probably didn’t want him to make.

So, Xie Qingcheng wanted him to stop hiding his feelings? That meant that one way for him to protect Xie Qingcheng was to stay by his side. If He Yu repressed his feelings, it would invariably lead to harm like it had last night.

He wouldn't ask for much at all—as long as Xie Qingcheng knew about his love and let him be good to him, He Yu would be so very obedient and tame.

"I understand now!" He Yu said, his voice full of excitement.

"Let's hear it, then."

"As long as it's not too hard for you, I'll try my best to make you truly understand my feelings, and prove that I really do love you."

Wait, *this* was what he understood? Xie Qingcheng didn't know what to say.

"So, Xie Qingcheng," He Yu continued, "if…if you don't mind, will you let me pursue you?"

This little lunatic! What was he thinking?!

He Yu's train of thought became clearer as he spoke. To him, this had to be the best option. As long as Xie Qingcheng was by his side, He Yu could stay calm and protect him.

He Yu took Xie Qingcheng's lack of response as a tacit agreement, and his heart burned with warmth. "Ge, just let me pursue you, okay? If you ever find me a bother, you can tell me to stop anytime. Okay?"

Silence.

"See, I'm completely shameless, terribly sick, and in too deep. *You're* the one who forced me to speak my mind, and since you're such a responsible person, you ought to take responsibility for me, right? Give me a chance to pursue you, okay?"

What the hell is this? Xie Qingcheng marveled to himself, in lieu of responding.

He Yu always seemed to mistake Xie Qingcheng's silences for agreement. His eyes brightened again and his cheeks flushed faintly red.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't believe this brat had done such crazy things in bed but could declare he was going to pursue him like an innocent middle schooler. The excitement practically bubbled out of He Yu, yet he was also a touch shy when he grabbed Xie Qingcheng's hand.

Xie Qingcheng didn't dare throw him off just then.

"Xie Qingcheng, bear with me," He Yu said quietly, his head lowered, as he tugged at Xie Qingcheng's hand. "There's a generational gap between us, so when I walk to your side, I might bump into you and say things that you don't get. If you really can't stand it, curse at me like you used to. Just—please, don't tell me to get lost."

Finally, Xie Qingcheng couldn't hold back his voice. "Why?"

Had he actually hurt He Yu's heart every time he told him to scram? But no matter what he said, it wasn't like He Yu ever actually left.

He didn't expect He Yu to respond earnestly.

"Because you've taken off my mask with your own hands, so I've stopped pretending," He Yu said. "I can't act calm anymore. I need you to take responsibility for me. Now that I've dropped the act, if you tell me to leave, I might follow my worst instincts."

For some reason, when he said this, Xie Qingcheng suddenly thought of a TV series he'd watched many years ago called *Palace of Desire*—specifically the scene in which Princess Taiping took off Xue Shao's mask. When his true face was revealed, both of their gazes shone with brilliance.

"I'll get lost, and find myself back in your bed," He Yu said.

Xie Qingcheng felt a headache coming on.

"Really!" He Yu insisted.

Really what? It was *really* a bunch of nonsense. "Let go of my hand," snapped Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu did as he was told, but not before grasping Xie Qingcheng's fingers, gazing deeply into his eyes, and dropping a soft kiss on his fair knuckles. "Ge, thank you for allowing me to pursue you."

After a beat, Xie Qingcheng thought belatedly, *Wait, hold on a second*. When did he say he was allowing it?!

The evening of the day after He Yu had confessed to him, Xie Qingcheng lay in bed in Moyu Alley, about to light a cigarette. After a moment, though, he returned it to its pack.

An entire damn day had passed, yet He Yu's words were still echoing in his head.

Goddammit! He couldn't understand the nonsense young people spouted. Li Ruoqiu was only slightly younger than him, but communicating with her had been far from effortless either. Now that he'd been exposed to He Yu's way of expressing his love, he felt that the generational gap was even more extreme, deeper than the Mariana Trench.

Xie Qingcheng flipped over on the bed, rubbing his knuckles and sighing heavily. His head felt like it was about to split open. What exactly did He Yu even like about him? His old age? His poor health?

He was aware of his own looks and the appeal they held for people, but the idea that He Yu was interested in him for that reason was genuinely preposterous. Their relationship could hardly be described as "friendly," and so many of the things that had transpired between them were too mortifying to think about. Just how hardcore were He Yu's tastes that he'd fall for a doctor old enough to be his uncle who'd chewed him out since he was a child?

As it crossed his mind, the thought made Xie Qingcheng even more uncomfortable—He Yu had claimed that, even if Xie Qingcheng were his blood relative, he would still love him.

How fucking absurd.

He had no idea how to deal with this mess, but there was no way what He Yu felt for him was real. The kid had gotten sex and dependence mixed up with love. Just for the sake of argument, even if He Yu was so messed up in the head that he truly had fallen in love with him, Xie Qingcheng could never return his feelings. Whether in terms of sentiment or logic, he couldn't give He Yu what he wanted.

He could only hope that He Yu would come to understand himself better on his own. As he thought about this, Xie Qingcheng began to wonder about the girl who'd been He Yu's first failed crush. Why was he able to move on just like that, without fixating on her afterward?

If only He Yu still liked that girl, everything would be so much easier…

With so much on his mind, Xie Qingcheng fell into an uneasy slumber.

The next morning, he woke up to find two unread messages on his phone.

Ah, World's Most Handsome and Experienced Lover: *"Xie Qingcheng, will you have dinner with me tomorrow?"*

This message had been sent a little after eleven the night before. He Yu was keeping his word about pursuing him—but he might have thought he was being too hasty, because he sent a second message at two in the morning, as if trying to cover for himself.

Ah, World's Most Handsome and Experienced Lover: *"I want to discuss the case with you."*

The case?

After a moment of consideration, Xie Qingcheng replied, *"Okay."*

He tapped on He Yu's profile. Scrunching his brow, he went to change He Yu's "Ah, World's Most Handsome and Experienced Lover" display name. He Yu had chosen this name for himself, and while Xie Qingcheng hadn't cared enough to change it before, it bugged him all of a sudden. After some thought, he changed the display name to:

"Little Devil."

Just as he finished, his phone vibrated.

Little Devil: *"Then I'll come pick you up at 5 pm."*

"So early?"

"I want to see you sooner."

How awkward. Xie Qingcheng didn't know how to reply. But if he left He Yu on read, he would prove his words—his claims that once He Yu told Xie Qingcheng the truth, he'd hate and avoid him—were correct. Xie Qingcheng didn't want He Yu to think that.

With that in mind, Professor Xie flipped through his sticker library and selected a very polite smiling sticker. Comforting while retaining a sense of distance, this was one of the must-have stickers for middle-aged men on social media.

After sending it, Xie Qingcheng felt quite satisfied. He got out of bed to wash up before heading over to Meiyu Hospital.

"Gege!"

Xie Xue was in high spirits today. When Xie Qingcheng arrived, she was propped up against a fluffed-up pillow reading a book. As soon as she saw him, she immediately put down the book, a brilliant smile spreading across her face.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked.

"Much better! When can I check out of the hospital?"

"Wait a little longer."

Xie Xue's face fell. "I've already waited so long, Gege, I'm really fine. Even my nosebleeds have pretty much stopped lately. I need to go back and teach my classes."

"Wait a little longer," Xie Qingcheng repeated, patting her on the shoulder.

She pouted and lay back down on the bed. "But I'm sooo bored…"

Xie Qingcheng pulled a chair over and sat down beside her. He peeled an apple for her and cut it into bite-size pieces that he passed to her on a disposable plate from her bedside cabinet.

"You're always whining about how you don't want to go to work, but when you actually have to rest, you can't sit still at all," Xie Qingcheng said. "You sure are something else."

"Gege, cut me an orange too."

Xie Qingcheng gave her a look. Nevertheless, he reached into the fruit basket for an orange, removed the peel and pith, and placed the cut slices onto the plate. Then he figured he might as well add some grapes, sweet preserved plums, and walnuts. Finally, he turned around to grab a carton of yogurt to make her a proper fruit parfait.

Satisfied with his creation, Xie Xue murmured, "With a brother like you, of course I'm going to be useless around the house—he even said that I—"

Realizing her tongue had slipped, she immediately shut her mouth. Fortunately, Xie Qingcheng seemed to have something on his mind and hadn't been listening carefully. She let out a tiny sigh of relief as he occupied himself with clearing the table.

"In the future, you need to learn how to do these things yourself. You can't depend on me to look after you your whole life," he said as he wiped the paring knife clean.

"No way," Xie Xue said. "Even when I'm seventy, I'll be relying on Gege to make me a fruit parfait—but don't add walnuts! I won't

be able to chew them."

Xie Qingcheng's eyes flickered as he went still. He glanced away before he spoke again. "Wonderful. And what will *you* do for me in the future?"

"I'll tell you jokes and watch your grandkids."

Xie Qingcheng had no words.

"And I can go plaza dancing with my saozi! Gege, you're so handsome. You'll definitely find an amazing saozi who's perfect for you."

For some reason, He Yu popped into Xie Qingcheng's mind. The image threw him off-kilter—he coughed awkwardly and got to his feet.

"Eat your food and ring the bell for the nurse to clean up when you're done. I have some things to take care of, so I'll be going now," he said. As he reached the door, though, he remembered something else. He turned back to Xie Xue. "One more thing—that ring on your hand."

Xie Xue jumped in fright, nearly choking on a piece of apple.

"Stop wearing it," Xie Qingcheng said. "People will think you're married if you wear a ring on your ring finger."

Xie Xue guiltily shoved her hand under the blankets. "B-but it looks nice there."

"*Behave*." Lecture complete, Xie Qingcheng left.

Xie Xue exhaled and pulled her hand out into the sunlight again once he was gone. Thank goodness Xie Qingcheng was so out of touch, otherwise he would've noticed that she was actually wearing a Tiffany couples' ring.

Before he left, Wei Dongheng had given it to her, along with a promise—he hoped that when he returned, he could give her a real engagement ring in its place.

Cell phones were essentially prohibited in the army, so it'd been a while since she last heard from him. Xie Xue sighed as she fiddled with the ring, worry surfacing in her heart. Wei Dongheng was supposed to return during summer break. They'd discussed telling Xie Qingcheng about their relationship after he came back… However, she still worried that Xie Qingcheng wouldn't accept them.

As far as other people were concerned, Wei Dongheng was a troublemaker. She was the only one who knew better. Although he had a foul mouth, he was good at heart. He could even be a bit silly in a way she found very endearing. By contrast, her brother was rigid and old-fashioned. If he found out that she was dating Wei Dongheng of all people, he would probably…

She didn't dare finish the thought. Hunching over, she continued with her reading.

After Xie Qingcheng finished taking care of things at the hospital, he went home and tidied up a bit. At four thirty, someone knocked on the door.

When Xie Qingcheng opened the door, he found He Yu standing outside. Now he'd unloaded the burdens on his heart, He Yu's mood seemed much improved. Now that he wasn't repressing his emotions anymore, his beautiful almond eyes shone clear and bright. As tall and handsome as ever, He Yu was wearing a cream-colored shirt and loose-fitting dress pants, a hint of rakishness in his elegant demeanor. It was fifteen degrees Celsius, but he was dressed as though it were twenty-five.

Xie Qingcheng surveyed him imperiously. "Aren't you cold?"

People about to go on a date never feared the cold. This was nothing—even fifteen below freezing couldn't stop women from baring their cleavage or men from showing their muscles.

"I'm not cold." He Yu smiled.

Xie Qingcheng decided to let him do as he pleased. “Why are you here so early? I thought you said five o’clock.”

“I wanted to see you sooner.”

Xie Qingcheng stared.

Even He Yu himself could barely stand saying these words in person. “Aiya, how nauseating,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “It’s the truth, though.”

Xie Qingcheng couldn’t be bothered to argue with He Yu about whether or not his love was real. The youngster would have to figure it out himself—or maybe a day would come when Xie Qingcheng could enlighten him. Otherwise, any amount of arguing was only a waste of time.

“Wait here, I’m going to change.” He shut the door with He Yu still outside.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t put much effort into his wardrobe—year in and year out, he wore the same dependable sets of shirts, dress pants, and overcoats—so he wasn’t actually changing; he was merely finding an excuse to go take a pill. His health was poor and he hadn’t been looking after himself lately, which had left him even worse for wear. He was constantly coughing and experiencing dizzy spells.

Given his condition, he should have gone to Meiyu Hospital for treatment, but he’d been too busy. He had to just knuckle through it, relying on medication to alleviate his symptoms. However, he didn’t want He Yu to see the medication and interrogate him about it. Lying was easier.

When the door opened again, He Yu saw that Xie Qingcheng was still dressed in the casual shirt from before with a black wool overcoat on top.

“You only put on a coat, so why did you need to close the door?”

Lighting a cigarette, Xie Qingcheng said, "And pray tell, what would you have done?"

The cigarette lit up, but He Yu snatched it before Xie Qingcheng could take a drag.

"Give it back."

"You can smoke if you want, but I'll kiss you if you do. Your choice."

"Choice my ass." Xie Qingcheng shoved He Yu's head away and grabbed his cigarette back from He Yu's fingertips. "Where's your car?"

"Smoking is forbidden in my car."

"Fine, I'll get a cab. Send me the address."

"…Ge, could you just *not* smoke?" He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

"Please? Pretty please?"

Xie Qingcheng was at a loss. He was susceptible to coaxing, not coercion. As soon as He Yu used this pitiable tone with him, he looked at the little beast in front of him and—for once—thought, *I guess it's not very appropriate for me to make him breathe secondhand smoke. After all, he's only nineteen.*

After fidgeting for a moment, Xie Qingcheng swore under his breath and stubbed out the cigarette before tossing it into the trash. "You're a real hassle."

With that, He Yu pulled him to the car.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Xie Qingcheng realized the extent of He Yu's decadence. He thought they were just going somewhere to eat, but He Yu had actually dragged him out to one of the terrace restaurants on the Bund where a single meal cost more than a working-class monthly salary. People didn't come here to conduct business; all the guests were couples, and no shortage of them were sugar daddies with their mistresses.

Xie Qingcheng stopped in his tracks a short distance away from the entrance. He Yu was neither his wife nor his mistress. It was completely inappropriate for two grown men to have a discussion in a place like this.

"What's wrong? You don't like it?" He Yu asked.

"Did you *think* I would like it?"

"Well, this was the only place that came to mind for our discussion."

"Cancel the reservation." Xie Qingcheng took out his phone and opened his maps app, ready to look up directions. "I'll find a place. My treat."

He was intending to just find some random restaurant, but after he'd typed in half the address, he glanced up at the unreasonable young man in front of him, and an idea occurred to him. He deleted the name of the Western restaurant he'd tapped in already and entered a new address.

Chapter 129:
I’m Seriously Pursuing You Now

XIE QINGCHENG HAD a mean streak too. The place he chose for them was a stuffy, old-fashioned tea house.

This was a vegetarian restaurant that played Buddhist chants as background music, and all the diners were middle-aged men and women who looked like they’d walked straight out of an eight o’clock news program about traditional Chinese medicine. Everyone as far as the eye could see appeared unconcerned with worldly desires—any frivolous pleasures had been cast aside entirely. The sight was enough to turn any young man impotent.

Xie Qingcheng’s intent was obvious: He wanted He Yu to realize just how large the age gap between them really was. Young people liked hot pot, Western cuisine, and Japanese food, right? In that case, he wouldn’t allow He Yu to touch a single morsel of meat today.

You say you’re in love with an uncle? Very well then, you can come and keep that uncle company while he partakes in health-conscious activities for the middle-aged. Experience the generational gap for yourself before you say such things again.

“Hello sir, table for two? Please take a look at our menu. If you need anything, just press this button to ring the bell.”

Xie Qingcheng thanked the server and handed He Yu the menu. “Order whatever you like.”

As soon as He Yu stepped into the restaurant, he realized he was probably the youngest diner there. Not that he minded much. He accepted the ascetic menu and started perusing it.“Why are people your age so sexually repressed?” He Yu asked, breaking into a smile.

Xie Qingcheng blinked at him. What did eating vegetarian food have to do with sexual repression?

As if reading Xie Qingcheng's mind, He Yu pointed at the menu and said, "See—vegetarian mala tripe, mushroom Couple's Delight, and vegetarian chicken and goose…"

"What about them?" Xie Qingcheng asked stonily.

"Your hearts are full of carnal desires, yet you insist on eating vegetarian food." He Yu grinned. "You uncles are good at feigning propriety and abstinence, but if you're really immune to earthly temptations, why do you want vegetarian Couple's Delight? Cabbage and tofu should be more than enough."

Xie Qingcheng thought He Yu was spouting nonsense at first, but after he considered it for a moment… He had a point. He'd brought He Yu here to show him just how boring and dull middle-aged people were, never expecting that He Yu would end up lecturing him about the nature of desire. Unable to refute him, Xie Qingcheng couldn't hide his annoyance.

"Are you ordering or not?" he demanded tersely.

"Okay, okay, I'll order." Somehow, He Yu still managed to order a table full of decadent dishes off of this vegetarian menu.

"Moonlit lotus pond stir-fry, sweet-and-sour stuffed lotus root…" As he finished listing out menu items to the server, he pursed his lips and looked up to stare at Xie Qingcheng before adding, "and the *vegetarian* mala Couple's Delight."

He Yu somehow managed to make the perfectly dignified name of this dish sound like a cat call. Xie Qingcheng turned away with a gloomy expression.

That done, the server left with the menu. Once they were alone, He Yu sat there with his hands folded, rubbing his knuckles and grinning as he looked at Xie Qingcheng. His gaze made the hair on the back of Xie Qingcheng's neck stand up.

"What is it?" Xie Qingcheng asked, turning his eyes back to He Yu.

"Ge, this is the first time you've formally invited me to dinner." When he didn't answer, He Yu continued, watching him with those fathomless, attentive eyes, "This restaurant's style is just like you. I'm enjoying it a lot."

How exactly is it just like me? Xie Qingcheng wondered.

Of course, He Yu wasn't trying to insult him. He was only thinking that people's personalities were reflected in their tastes, and Xie Qingcheng's aura really *was* similar to that of this vegetarian restaurant—thoroughly mild and unwilling to indulge an animal appetite.

But was he truly devoid of all desires? No, he wasn't.

He Yu knew the passionate flames and flowing waters that could be teased out of the body of this older man, and he cherished the memory of that feeling. It'd been too long since he'd last gotten a taste of it.

These dishes were vegetarian, yet their names oozed carnality. This was just like Xie Qingcheng and He Yu's current relationship: clean on the surface, yet their entanglement had muddied the waters into a state of unspeakable filth. He Yu's heart in particular was already burning beyond reason.

As they waited for their food, He Yu looked Xie Qingcheng up and down, contemplating his present attitude. He concluded Xie Qingcheng was completely unbothered by his confession and the suggestive atmosphere lingering between them. That was almost a relief, yet He Yu felt faintly dejected…

If Xie Qingcheng didn't find his antics troubling, then it meant that he could lay his worries about hurting Xie Qingcheng to rest and continue flirting. On the other hand, it could mean that he didn't matter at all to Xie Qingcheng. It was possible that no matter how many times the two of them went to bed together, or how plainly

and vulnerably he spoke, Xie Qingcheng would only ever treat him as a little devil.

He Yu spent some time caught between solace and bitterness before Xie Qingcheng broke the awkward silence. "So, about the case. What did you want to discuss with me?"

The main purpose of their meeting today *was* to discuss the case, after all. He Yu collected himself and took out his phone—he couldn't afford to be casual about this.

"I found some personal information that Huang Zhilong deleted from the internet," he said.

"Deleted personal information?"

He Yu hummed in the affirmative. "We would expect someone of Huang Zhilong's stature to have his background information—perhaps in the form of a Baidu wiki entry—available online. After some careful searching, I found that there's a period of time where the details are very sparse—it's as though it was deliberately simplified. That period was over two decades ago."

Now that he wasn't flirting anymore, his expression became serious as well. The two of them got down to business and began to discuss the circumstances of the case.

"Back in 1998, the Internet wasn't that widespread and it was normal for online information to be incomplete, so it's easy for Huang Zhilong to hide what he was doing at that time. Most people wouldn't notice. But I hacked into the central archival databases and discovered that Huang Zhilong was once a visiting professor at Huzhou University in the 1990s. His subject of expertise was none other than screenwriting and directing."

Xie Qingcheng was an extremely calm person, but even he was shocked by this news. "Huzhou University?"

"To be more precise, the Huzhou School of Media and Communications. The communications school and Huzhou University

hadn’t merged yet. He was the directing expert hosted by the communications school.”

This information seemed to tie together some of the previous fragments they’d uncovered. Wang Jiankang and Huang Zhilong’s wife had once worked together to trick young people from remote villages to travel to Huzhou under the guise of “arts training programs.” Furthermore, twenty-something years ago, Huang Zhilong himself had taught at the communications school. This was clearly suspicious. Could Huang Zhilong have hatched the idea to turn these students into his victims over twenty years ago? Had Wang Jiankang merely been his chosen “heir”?

After all, once the boss had made it big, he could wash his hands and delegate the dirty work to others.

“I noticed something else that’s worth considering, too,” said He Yu.

“What’s that?”

“Look at this.”

Xie Qingcheng glanced down at He Yu’s phone. It was a photo of Huang Zhilong’s wife, Jin Xiuhe. Specifically, it was an ID photo: The woman looked very young, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. It would be more accurate to call her a girl.

She was more beautiful than the mature woman in the picture on her Baidu entry, but apart from her beauty, there also seemed to be something terrifying hidden within this image. For some inexplicable reason, the ID photo disturbed Xie Qingcheng deeply. He frowned.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?” He Yu asked.

“Very uncomfortable.”

“Yeah,” He Yu said, after a long silence, “but, actually, when I asked a few other people, they all liked it. They said she’s very pretty. There was nothing about it that made them uncomfortable.”

Xie Qingcheng started. “We’re the only ones unsettled by this photo?”

“Yup. I don’t know if it’s a psychological effect because we know some of the underlying truth, or if there’s some other reason we’re the only ones who feel this way. If it’s the latter, then I think it might be because of this.” He Yu pointed at the photo.

Xie Qingcheng’s gaze followed his finger. “Her clothes?”

“Her uniform.”

“This only proves she was a student when the photo was taken.”

“It can prove one other thing.”

“Which is…?”

“The uniform she’s wearing is very similar to our current one. After the two schools merged, Huzhou University stuck with the communications school’s uniform design because the style was unique and appealing. Even now, Huzhou University’s uniforms resemble the uniforms from back then. You wouldn’t be familiar with it because you’re not from Huzhou University, but just from the neckline in the photo, I can tell that Jin Xiuhe was a Huzhou Communications student.”

Xie Qingcheng’s eyes went wide.

“This information was deleted too. I’m not too surprised; maybe Huang Zhilong thought a teacher-student relationship would cause a scandal. According to what I found, his wife studied at the communications school for only a few months before she went abroad to fluff up her resume, then married Huang Zhilong.”

“So, you mean that the first people to target the students were probably Huang Zhilong and his wife?” Xie Qingcheng asked. “And then, after Huang Zhilong stepped behind the curtain, his wife used Wang Jiankang to continue trafficking people and organs?”

“That’s what it seems like. Unfortunately, the woman in this photo is already dead, so we can only go after Huang Zhilong to

confirm the truth."

The new information He Yu uncovered was worthy of serious consideration. They sat in silence for some time.

After an extended interval, Xie Qingcheng asked, "Did you find anything else?"

He thought that the answer would be no—after all, it was already impressive that He Yu had made two discoveries in such a short amount of time—but to his surprise, He Yu switched off his phone display and said, "I did."

"Go on then. I'm listening."

He Yu held his gaze for a while. "Oh, it's nothing urgent. Plus, I only noticed this just now. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Xie Qingcheng knitted his brows. Why was He Yu being so coy all of a sudden? "Of course I want to hear it."

"Oh?" He Yu paused for a moment and then grinned. "In that case, the last thing is… Ge, I noticed that your attitude toward me is much nicer than before."

Great, the moment we stop discussing the case, this guy goes right back to overstepping boundaries, Xie Qingcheng thought listlessly.

Seeing Xie Qingcheng's expression, He Yu said, "*You're* the one who wanted me to say it."

"…If you prefer a lousy attitude, that's fine too."

"I don't." There was an irrepressible cheekiness to his smile, but the way his long lashes lowered made him seem very obedient. "This is perfect."

In due time, their dishes arrived, one after another.

As he ate, He Yu asked Xie Qingcheng, "Ge, is this how you dealt with the others?"

"What?"

"When you didn't know how to respond or couldn't return other people's affections—did you talk sense into them like this, urging them to leave even more gently than usual? Or is it only me you treat like this?"

There was a brief pause as Xie Qingcheng recalled that, in the past, he'd rejected Li Ruoqiu in much the same way. He would always express himself clearly, but if the other person refused to take no for an answer, he couldn't reject them in a hurtful way. In fact, their love could turn into a source of guilt that sapped him of his strength and made him incapable of giving a ruthless rejection.

Xie Qingcheng sighed. Instead of answering He Yu's question directly, he said, "I hope you'll realize the truth about your feelings for me sooner rather than later, He Yu. You only view me as a replacement—a replacement for the fatherly love and affection that you want. You're looking at me as if I were your dad."

"No one's looking at you like He Jiwei." He Yu gazed at him with his chin in his hand. "He's not nearly as nice to look at as you." When Xie Qingcheng stayed silent, he continued, "I'm looking at you as the person I love. You can't trick me."

Xie Qingcheng was about to mutter "fucking hell" under his breath, but as the memory of He Yu's heartbroken expression resurfaced, he suppressed the impulse.

"Let's just eat."

After they finished their meal, Xie Qingcheng remembered something. "One more thing: This is for you." He took an electronic wristband from his coat pocket and pushed it toward He Yu.

He Yu's almond eyes grew round. "You're…you're giving me a gift?"

"It really can't be considered a gift," Xie Qingcheng replied. "This is a monitoring wristband. Qin Ciyan had these custom-made back in the day. It can monitor the emotional state of psychological Ebola patients and send out an alert. I think you need one right now."

He Yu carefully examined the band before fitting it around his wrist. The black, minimalist design made it look just like an ordinary fitness tracker.

"Yours is a new model, based on the latest research, and it can even control your emotions to an extent. Ideally, you should be wearing it at all times, unless you're in the shower," Xie Qingcheng said.

"It's not waterproof?"

"It is."

"Then I'll wear it in the shower too." He paused while Xie Qingcheng stared. "Because you gave it to me."

Xie Qingcheng pressed a hand to his forehead. "He Yu, can you please be a little more rational and think about what I said again? You don't love me. Furthermore, it's impossible for *me* to love you."

"Xie Qingcheng, can you please be a little more rational and think about what I said to you again? I *know* you don't love me, but I love you."

Silence.

"If it bothers you that much, then I'll never show myself to you again. All you have to do is nod."

How could Xie Qingcheng possibly do that? His feelings for Xie Qingcheng were the reason He Yu's condition was so poor. There was no way Xie Qingcheng could do nothing in the face of that.

"Forget it," Xie Qingcheng said. "I'm hardly bothered by your childish behavior. But you must understand—no matter what you do, I'll never develop feelings for you. Your actions are a complete waste of time and energy."

"No. Time I spend on you is never wasted. Thank you for allowing me to keep you company."

"Who said anything about *allowing* you?" Xie Qingcheng's head felt on the verge of exploding.

"You just said that you don't mind."

"I said that I'm hardly *bothered*."

"In that case, let me keep you company. Xie-ge, I'm telling you, I'm young, strong, fun, capable—I guarantee that I can provide you with a user experience like no other! You don't need to feel pressure to commit, either. Since you're sure you won't fall in love with me, why not test me out? It wouldn't hurt to just give me a try —"

Xie Qingcheng stood up. "Waiter, check please."

On the way back, He Yu remained glued to Xie Qingcheng's side. He jabbered away nonstop, like a chatterbox dragonet wagging his tail as he trailed after a full-grown dragon.

"Xie-ge, I'm telling you…"

"Xie-ge, slow down."

"Xie… *Achoo!*"

In the ensuing silence, Xie Qingcheng turned around to see He Yu, dressed to the nines like a peacock fanning its tailfeathers, succumbing at last to the chilly night wind. He sneezed three times in a row before shivering uncontrollably. Xie Qingcheng wanted to pretend he hadn't seen anything, but his virtuous instincts kicked in as he thought about how He Yu was recovering from a major flare-up and would need to take more medication if he caught a cold. It wouldn't do for him to live like this, becoming a walking medicine cabinet at such a young age…

Xie Qingcheng shrugged off his coat and tossed it over He Yu's shoulders with a grim expression on his face.

"Are you done strutting around yet?" he asked coldly. "Caught a chill? Serves you right. Now, button up and don't come bothering me saying you're sick later."

He Yu stared in stunned silence. He never could have imagined that he would be treated so well after confessing to Xie Qingcheng. Yes, this was entirely the consequence of a veiled "it's not you, it's me" type of rejection, just Xie Qingcheng trying to assuage his guilty conscience, but it was still infinitely better than the lonely anguish of bottling up his feelings.

Joy mellowing his anguish, He Yu opened up Xie Qingcheng's coat. The black wool was suffused with Xie Qingcheng's unmistakable scent—the smell of disinfectant and a faint note of tobacco. He Yu felt his heart melt as he inhaled it.

Suddenly, he walked over to Xie Qingcheng and threw the heavy coat over both of their heads.

Xie Qingcheng was taken aback as his surroundings plunged into pitch darkness. He had no idea what He Yu intended to do. In the darkness, the young man's hand cupped the back of his head, lightly pressing their foreheads together beneath the shroud of the coat.

"Xie Qingcheng."

People walked past all around them, but they were half hidden by the wool coat; no matter how curiously the passersby peered at them, they couldn't see a thing.

In the darkness, He Yu observed Xie Qingcheng's handsome face up close, smelling the light and crisp yet calming and masculine scent on his neck. As he stared, Xie Qingcheng's pale lips seemed to emanate a magnetic force, pulling him in closer and closer.

Finally, he tilted his face to the side. On the street flashing with neon lights, beneath the cover of the coat, he closed his eyes and kissed Xie Qingcheng on the lips.

"Please don't think I'm childish. *You're* pretty childish too. From now on, don't use vegetarian restaurants to scare me. You'll find it's no use at all. Never mind becoming vegetarian—even if you shave your head and become a monk, I'll still come to the temple gates

every day to pay my respects. I seriously want to pursue you. I love you.”

Chapter 130:
The Mysterious Tape

FROM THAT DAY ON, He Yu became even more brazen in his pursuit of Xie Qingcheng.

His zoomer antics left Xie Qingcheng speechless. To tell the truth, in his thirty-three years, he had never dealt with a courtship like this. He Yu had the energy of a kindergartener.

After their leave of absence came to an end, the two of them returned to Huzhou University and Huzhou Medical School to study and teach, respectively. Every chance he could grab, He Yu went to the medical school to sit in on Xie Qingcheng's classes.

Before, Xie Qingcheng had to rack his brains to figure out how to get He Yu to make him a PowerPoint presentation. Now, without Xie Qingcheng's prompting, He Yu would study the reference materials, prepare the lesson himself, and then follow Xie Qingcheng with a computer in his hands to help him edit it.

"Professor Xie, did you hire a teaching assistant?" One of the other teachers in his office couldn't contain his envy. "This kid is so useful."

"If you want him, you can have him," said Xie Qingcheng.

"Well, it's not like he's following *me* around," the teacher said sullenly.

Eventually, rumors began to spread among Xie Qingcheng's classes as well. Everyone surmised that the handsome guy from Huzhou University must've fallen for a girl in Xie Qingcheng's classes. They speculated that the girl must be a drop-dead gorgeous, peerless beauty, to have worked up a hottie from the neighboring school into such a lust-addled state. All Professor Xie's female students took this to heart and began to pay special attention to their appearances in addition to their studies.

Now that these med school girls had started dolling themselves up, they shone like freshly dusted pearls. The boys were astonished—they never realized there had been so many beauties right by their side all along! Since these young men had an eye for beauty, they started making friendly overtures to the girls they liked at every turn.

Soon nearly all the girls in Xie Qingcheng's classes had started seeing someone.

As for Young Master He, who was more successful than any matchmaker, he had to witness pair after pair of lovers couple up while he remained a single man himself. Pitiful. He couldn't help but stare at Big Shot Professor Xie's profile, so focused on teaching his lessons, and heave a sigh.

The more closely he pursued Xie Qingcheng, the more colorless he found Xie Qingcheng's life really was. In his day-to-day life, if he wasn't teaching his classes, he was preparing for his classes, and if he wasn't organizing materials, he was doing research. There were, however, also occasions when he was nowhere to be found, as if he'd vanished into thin air.

He Yu found these instances rather strange; he had no idea where Xie Qingcheng went, and Xie Qingcheng never bothered to give much of an explanation. He just said he was busy and had meetings to attend off campus.

Xie Qingcheng always looked completely worn out when he came back, so He Yu figured he must've been working on some very important projects. It wasn't his place to inquire; all he could do was find a way to share the burden.

Knock knock knock.

During the lunch break one day, He Yu peered into the room through the office door that had been left ajar. "Professor Xie, may I come in?"

Xie Qingcheng ignored him, so He Yu let himself in. There was no one else in the office, and Xie Qingcheng was organizing files on

his computer, with his glasses on.

He Yu pulled a desk over next to him and began to set out an assortment of take-out containers on it. Xie Qingcheng still didn't pay him any mind. Minding him was no use, after all—it wasn't like he would *listen*. Since the curtain covering the window of He Yu's so-called "love" had been drawn aside, he often did things like this. Xie Qingcheng decided to save himself the trouble of wasting words on him and treated He Yu's behavior as nothing more than filial piety.

As He Yu arranged the dishes, he scrutinized Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu had actually looked for Xie Qingcheng the night before, but he hadn't been at the medical school or in Moyu Alley. He Yu didn't know where he went after that, but he eventually responded to He Yu's messages in the middle of the night, saying he'd been at the hospital with Xie Xue. Looking at Xie Qingcheng now, his face seemed haggard—why would seeing Xie Xue leave him in a state like this?

Noticing He Yu staring at him, Xie Qingcheng reached up to straighten out his sleeves. "What?"

"You look so tired," He Yu said. "Was Xie Xue's condition bad yesterday?"

"You're reading too much into it. She's doing well." Xie Qingcheng shifted his gaze back to the computer to type something. "All we're missing is the special medication."

"Maybe I'll go see her sometime too, then."

"Meiyu has been very strict with security lately. It's not a good time for you to visit." Xie Qingcheng clacked away at the keyboard. "If there's anything you want to say to her, I can relay the message."

He Yu thought about it a bit, but he couldn't think of anything to say to Xie Xue. He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. You should eat first."

He Yu didn't know how to cook, but he did have money. He'd gotten a high-end restaurant nearby to open up their kitchen just to

make this lunch. The dishes resembled ordinary home cooking, but they were made with meticulous technique. The center stem of each verdant, dewy bok choy had been removed; the cured pork belly was from free-range black pigs that foraged on acorns, smoked over the highest quality cedarwood; even the simple mala pot was seasoned with special peppercorns from Sichuan's Hanyuan county that had been picked fresh that day; and the sauce for the mapo tofu was topped with caviar.

It was like the emperor delivering lychees across the country just to win a smile from Noble Consort Yang. Unfortunately, Xie Qingcheng didn't seem to have much of an appetite.

They hadn't made a breakthrough in their investigation of Huang Zhilong yet, and the formula of the medicine Xie Xue had been force-fed in Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital remained unknown. With all this hanging over him, trying to eat even the most delectable dishes was like chewing wax to Xie Qingcheng. After a few bites of meat, he covered his mouth, as if vaguely nauseated. His face turned deathly pale, and he put down his chopsticks.

"What's wrong?"

"I feel…a bit under the weather. I'll be fine with some rest."

Seeing how distracted Xie Qingcheng was just eating a meal, He Yu made an offer. "Why don't I come to your dorm tonight to help you prepare your lessons?"

"I don't have time tonight. I'm meeting a friend to discuss some things related to the case. Also, He Yu. Could you refrain from focusing *all* of your attention on me?" After his trip to Meiyu, not only did Xie Qingcheng seem physically unwell, but his spirits were also rather low. "I may not be too affected, but if you continue like this, you'll be treating yourself irresponsibly."

He Yu refused to answer that.

"Doesn't your school have club activities and organizations? You should check them out. Boys your age should be meeting bright, active girls."

He Yu's expression darkened.

Draping his coat over his shoulders, Xie Qingcheng picked up his laptop, gave him one last glance, and walked out.

Xie Qingcheng was meeting Chen Man tonight.

Chen Man didn't tell Xie Qingcheng where they were meeting ahead of time; he only sent him the address in the afternoon the day of. When Xie Qingcheng saw his message, he couldn't believe it. It was the exact same restaurant on the Bund that He Yu had picked.

Did all young people like this kind of thing?

"Let's go somewhere else." Xie Qingcheng replied to his message with a location. *"Here. My treat."*

History often repeated itself, to shocking effect. The hostess of this vegetarian restaurant for middle-aged patrons watched in astonishment as this tall, handsome man brought a young, pretty boy not once but *twice* in a row to their establishment. Not even the same pretty boy this time! The urge to gossip was completely unbearable. What a scumbag! A total playboy!

Naturally, Xie Qingcheng hadn't put any thought into this decision. He just disliked the coyly suggestive atmosphere of that restaurant on the Bund and couldn't be bothered to look for a new place.

"Sir, would you like the same private room as last time?" the hostess asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"Very well, sir. This way please. Mind your step on the stairs."

The two of them sat down in the room. It had been a while since they last met, but a great weight appeared to be resting heavily on Chen Man. Xie Qingcheng thought he seemed even worse

off than himself. Dark circles curved under the young police officer's eyes and stubble dotted his jaw.

"What's happened?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"Ge," Chen Man began hesitantly. "See, I…I heard from Uncle Zheng that you've been investigating Huang Zhilong's company lately…"

Xie Qingcheng started in surprise, and then his temper flared. "That Lao-Zheng—"

"Please, don't blame him," said Chen Man. "I couldn't find you around recently, so I took the initiative to ask him myself. The main reason I wanted to meet with you today is because there's something related to Huang Zhilong that I ought to tell you about."

At these words, Xie Qingcheng paused. "What is it?"

Chen Man seemed to have no idea where to start. Finally, he said, "Recently, I was sent a mysterious videotape… Uhh, I'll just show it to you."

The private room's soundproofing wasn't particularly good, so Chen Man handed Xie Qingcheng a set of earbuds, then pressed play on his phone.

The camera was pointed at a TV, one of those old-fashioned, bottom-heavy models. At the beginning, Chen Man's reflection was visible on the switched-off TV screen, holding up his cell phone to record. Next, the old TV flashed on, static flickering as an image gradually appeared.

The recording showed a girl sitting in front of the camera. Although the video wasn't very clear, Xie Qingcheng recognized her pointed chin, lovely peach-blossom eyes, and distinctive upturned nose: This was definitely Zhuang Zhiqiang's missing adopted daughter, Zhao Xue!

Xie Qingcheng tensed from head to toe. He wanted to know where Chen Man had gotten this tape, but he held himself back and watched with bated breath.

In the video, Zhao Xue's face was unusually pale, and she was so thin she was almost unrecognizable. Her lips were devoid of color and her eyes were filled with panic, anxiety, and fear. She seemed like she was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

She adjusted the camera several times. After a few seconds, she began to speak.

"This is my tenth video recording." Her voice sounded like a string that was about to snap at any moment—sharp, her words tumbling out in a rush, as though she were pressed for time.

"I don't know what month or day it is, or how long I've been locked up in here. The only thing I can use to keep a record is this video camera. I've hidden it under a floorboard in this basement. If the police find it one day, I hope that it can be used as evidence to punish these evil monsters in a court of law."

She swallowed. This seemed rehearsed, as if she made this statement at the beginning of each recording. With that out of the way, she began to relay more details.

"Right now, I'm in the basement of Zhilong Films. This is an illegal life sciences laboratory, where many men and women who've 'gone missing' are locked up. We're being used as subjects for inhumane biochemical experiments.

"In my previous videos, I listed the names of all the people I know here. I hope that their families will one day know what happened to them." Zhao Xue started choking up as she spoke. "I-I also hope my old man can see this video and learn what happened to me… I-I don't know whether I'll ever see him again…"

She lowered her head and wiped at her tearful eyes, calming her anguish before continuing.

"I can't pass this camera around for everyone to record. I'm afraid someone might sell us out to save their own skin. I stole it when the guards weren't looking, and if it's discovered, all of this evidence will be destroyed. I have to protect it so I can keep a proper record while I'm still alive.

"But the battery's running low now. I can't charge it. I don't know how long it'll keep working. Until then, I have to leave behind as much evidence as possible. Today, I discovered something new that I need to make a note of."

Her words drew Xie Qingcheng's full attention. He leaned forward slightly, waiting for Zhao Xue to say what she'd discovered. But the image on the TV flickered abruptly, and there was a very unnatural transition.

Xie Qingcheng glanced up at Chen Man.

"A section was deleted," Chen Man explained. "I don't know what she said. Ge, finish listening first. You need to hear the rest."

After the unnatural cut in the video, Zhao Xue continued speaking with her head bowed: "That's why so many people are locked up here, most of them young women."

Xie Qingcheng understood at once. Whoever had provided the tape didn't want whatever she said before "that's why" to get out, so they cut it.

Zhao Xue went on, "A jiejie who was locked up with me was taken away three days ago for experiments, and they only brought her back yesterday morning. She was still alive, without any visible injuries, but…"

Conflicting emotions warred on her face, a mixture of fear and hate. She looked like a melting wax figure. "Later on, I discovered that…she was *torn up*, down there. I was terrified when I thought about what must have happened to her, just disgusted. But then… once I could think again, I realized that something wasn't right.

"I've been locked up with this jiejie for a long time, and I know her fierce personality. There's no way she wouldn't put up a fight against such inhumane abuse! There should be wounds all over her body. After she woke up, I tried to talk to her, to find out more about what happened. It was like she couldn't hear me. She just stared, her eyes blank—no reaction at all, as if the woman behind them was no longer there.

"The next day, out of the blue, she got a massive nosebleed and started twitching all over, yelling that she wanted to drink blood. And then…she collapsed on the floor. *Dead*."

Zhao Xue's lips started trembling. "When they came to take her body away, I heard them saying something about how Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital reported that the 'obedience potion' is very effective, but its side effects are unpredictable. Some people have extremely adverse reactions, so its formulation still needs to be fine-tuned."

Abruptly, Zhao Xue stopped and whipped around, glancing from side to side. Her sunken cheeks looked even more appalling when she was afraid, like she was a skeleton wrapped in a layer of human skin.

"I think someone's coming," she whispered to the camera. "I can't say any more. This might be my last recording. I don't know. They said they need to find someone else to go to Cheng Kang Hospital… Cheng Kang needs more people… They pick us by our numbers. Jiejie was number twenty-three, and I'm twenty-four. If this really is my last recording, then…"

An intense hatred surged over her fearful face, nearly piercing through the screen. "If anyone's watching this, you have to avenge me. Don't let Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital get away with this. They're working with Huang Zhilong! Avenge us! We'll be watching from heaven."

A few seconds later, the display abruptly went dark. The tape had ended.

Xie Qingcheng slowly removed the headphones, his fingertips ice-cold.

Looking at Chen Man, he first asked the question he'd wanted to ask this whole time. "Chen Man, where did you get this tape?"

Chen Man's face was even paler than when he showed Xie Qingcheng the recording. But he'd known Xie Qingcheng would ask

him this question, so after some hesitation, he reached into his bag and took out a pouch containing a memory card.

There was a line of words written on the pouch: *"Preserved Evidence, Zhao Xue's video."* These words were handwritten. Below them, there was a piece of paper with another line of printed words attached with tape: *"The old TV at your family home can play this card."*

Chen Man saw the same astonishment he'd felt when he first saw this envelope on Xie Qingcheng's face.

"Ge, you recognize this handwriting, right?" he asked softly.

How could Xie Qingcheng *not* recognize it? The writing was unmistakably in the hand of Chen Man's elder brother, Officer Chen Lisheng!

Chen Man's face was ashen, his eyes bloodshot. He hadn't the courage to verify the truth, but even so, he couldn't help but cling to his last thread of hope.

"Xie-ge, this writing is my brother's, and whoever it was who mailed this to me knew I have an old TV that can read this memory card at home. D-do you think, somehow, that the person who sent this video…could be…my brother?" Chen Man's quavering voice hitched around the edges. "Could my brother still be alive, investigating everything from the shadows?"

Chapter 131:
Love Rivals, Get Out of My Way

XIE QINGCHENG DIDN'T answer Chen Man. He had personally attended Chen Lisheng's funeral, after he had sacrificed his life. There had been a visitation, and he'd confirmed with his own eyes that the deceased was indeed Chen Lisheng.

Taking a thousand steps backward, even if Chen Lisheng really were still alive, why hadn't he sent this recording to Chen Man any sooner?

Gradually, Chen Man collected himself amid the silence, reining in his emotions. "Ge, I'm sorry. I lost control of myself. I really hoped that he…that he was still alive…"

Xie Qingcheng poured him a cup of hot tea and watched him take a sip. "Don't worry, Chen Man, you don't need to explain," he said. "I understand."

"I just can't help but wonder, what if there's a one in a million chance he could actually turn up alive? You know Captain Zheng has a mysterious informant. Ever since I received this recording, I've been wondering, could that informant be my brother? I…"

Chen Man clutched the teacup, his head abruptly dropping between his shoulders as tears began to roll from his eyes.

"I know it's not realistic," he said. "Still, I tried to investigate the tracking information for the package. I ran a fingerprint and forensic analysis, but the person who sent it didn't leave a single useful trace. Their countersurveillance techniques were really professional. That just made me think, my brother was a talented policeman too! He could totally have pulled it off." Chen Man paused. "But…"

"But deep down in your heart, you knew it couldn't be him," Xie Qingcheng finished for him.

A gloom came over Chen Man's face. "Then, do you think, the handwriting…"

"Handwriting can be imitated. It's also possible that your brother wrote this note many years ago, but the recording ended up in someone else's hands." Xie Qingcheng waited, but Chen Man had no answer to that. "Chen Man, your brother is already gone. *That* is the truth."

Chen Man closed his eyes.

That's right.

He visited Chen Lisheng's grave several times every year, not only on the winter solstice and the Qingming festival, but also whenever he had something weighing on his mind. When he went to the cemetery, he'd spend some time sitting in front of his tombstone, speaking to Chen Lisheng.

Even though he and his elder brother didn't share a mother, they had a strong relationship that Chen Man couldn't let go of. Even though he'd watched his brother's body be interred, Chen Man couldn't help but hope Chen Lisheng was the mysterious informant.

"Think about it, Chen Man. Even if your brother was the informant, he wouldn't have waited this long to send the recording to you."

Chen Man lowered his head. He wasn't an idiot. If Chen Lisheng had been in possession of this critical recording years ago, he would've turned it in to the police so they could make backup copies and use it as evidence to support an investigation into Huang Zhilong. He wouldn't have kept it to himself.

Even if Chen Lisheng had stopped trusting the police and didn't want to hand over this important evidence to the department as a whole, he would've found *one* police officer he trusted to give it to at some point in the last decade. There was no reason for him to wait until his younger brother grew up just to send it to him.

In the end, while Chen Lisheng being the mysterious informant was an exciting theory, once he cooled down and thought it through, he knew it had absolutely no legs to stand on.

So who else could have sent this recording? Who knew the Chen household so well, down to the fact that they owned an old television that could play this kind of memory card?

"Did you tell anyone else about this?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

Chen Man shook his head. "No."

"Good, don't say anything for now. Huang Zhilong has a large and complicated web of connections. I'm unsure who the highest-ranked corrupt officer is." He took a breath. "And it's unclear whose side the person who sent this tape is on. After Zhao Xue said she'd made a new discovery, a part was clearly cut out. Did she say something that interfered with the sender's interests? If that's why it was edited, it's difficult to say what their motive was in sending you this recording."

Chen Man went silent. This detail hadn't escaped him, either. It was just the memory of his brother and the desire to see him again that had clouded his judgment.

Xie Qingcheng could read Chen Man's thoughts on his face. "In any case, one grainy self-recording isn't enough evidence to shut down the headquarters of Huang Zhilong's company for an investigation," he said. "If we act too fast, we'll only make them raise their guard. I'm sure you know that."

"So what do we do now?" asked Chen Man.

For a moment, Xie Qingcheng considered telling Zheng Jingfeng everything…but Zheng Jingfeng was busy working on the case of the murdered actress. He was hard to pin down, and his phone was always either busy or off.

They talked it over and decided that it was best to wait. To be precise, waiting was the only thing they could do.

Xie Qingcheng had no room to talk about good life choices considering his condition, but he was more worried about Chen Man, so he smothered him with words of advice before he allowed him to leave. "If anything comes up, just talk to me. Don't do anything rash. Although this recording is worth looking into, there are still too many open questions. You must be cautious; don't jump into anything without thinking. Wait until Lao-Zheng has a bit more time, and we can set up a meeting with him and update him on the situation."

Chen Man didn't say anything.

"Did you get all of that?" Xie Qingcheng pressed him, worried.

Chen Man finally gave a half-hearted hum of assent.

The meal concluded, though neither of them had really tasted their food. Chen Man's eyes were still red when Xie Qingcheng walked him out of the restaurant. He only got himself under control as they were about to separate.

"Ge, I was too emotional today. I hope I didn't give you the impression that I'm useless…"

"You're only in your early twenties. Don't ask too much of yourself," Xie Qingcheng said. "How did you get here today? Did you drive?"

"Yeah, I can drive you back. I'm parked in the lot a bit further down. You'll get ticketed if you park—"

Before Chen Man could finish, they were interrupted by the conspicuous blaring of a car horn. They both looked up to see a flashy Lamborghini parked in front of the vegetarian restaurant. The window rolled down to reveal He Yu's impassive face.

He didn't spare Chen Man a single glance as he drove forward, one hand on the steering wheel, until the passenger-side door was aligned with where Xie Qingcheng was standing.

"Get in." He spread a stack of parking tickets between his fingers like playing cards. "I've been waiting for you forever; I got

ticketed four times already.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t need to wonder what he was doing here—He Yu must have tracked his phone again.

No matter what a muddled state Chen Man was in, he was still shocked when he saw that He Yu had come to pick up Xie Qingcheng. He looked back and forth between them. Hadn’t they had a fight?

“Take that junker of yours and scram,” said Xie Qingcheng.

“If you’re not riding in my car, are you riding in his?” He Yu asked.

“Are my legs broken? Am I broke? As if I can’t take a fucking taxi?” Xie Qingcheng snapped.

He Yu sprawled against the windowsill, still not letting it go. “You’re on the way for me. We can save energy and reduce emissions.”

Xie Qingcheng had never seen anyone else talk about reducing emissions while driving a sports car. He was done with He Yu’s antics—he started ignoring him. He said his goodbyes to Chen Man and patted him on the shoulder. “Relax. If anything happens, you can come to me.”

Then, Xie Qingcheng actually hailed a taxi right in front of the two young men and slid into it just like that.

Once he was gone, the cheerful expression that had formed on He Yu’s face while he was talking to Xie Qingcheng slipped, and his gaze finally swiveled to Chen Man. Now, he looked apt to skewer Chen Man straight through.

“What did you talk about with Xie Qingcheng? Why did he say you could come to him if anything happens?”

Chen Man might have been mild-mannered, but this baseless interrogation ticked him off, especially when he was already in a terrible mood. “I’m sorry, this is a private matter between the two of us.”

He Yu narrowed his eyes and scoffed. “A private matter? Fine. Then, I’ll ask you something that isn’t private. How’s the food at this restaurant?”

Chen Man looked at him in surprise. The question had clearly caught him off guard. Why was He Yu asking about the restaurant all of a sudden? Chen Man was a straightforward person and didn’t have a well-honed radar in the realm of intimate relationships, but He Yu’s gaze was just too naked in its intent. Chen Man began to sense that something was off.

He couldn’t be certain that his hunch was correct, but he raised his guard and his voice took on a chill. “Mm, it’s pretty good.”

“You don’t find vegetarian food too bland?”

“I like light and subtle food like this.”

He Yu narrowed his eyes and chuckled. “Young Master Chen has unique tastes.”

“Since you’ve asked me so many things, can I ask *you* something?” Chen Man said.

“Go ahead.”

“Why are you here?”

“Is this private property? Am I not allowed to enter?”

“I don’t think this is a coincidence. You came here specifically to pick up Xie-ge. Why?”

He Yu lowered his lashes. His demeanor was impeccably elegant, but he made no attempt to hide the aggression in his voice. “I apologize, but this is a private matter between the two of us. If you think it’s strange, you can ask him about it.”

Chen Man’s face went dark. The more he studied He Yu, the more certain he was that something was off about that reaction. But He Yu was a strange, wicked flower—someone as pure as Chen Man could never understand the twists and turns of his emotions.

"He Yu," Chen Man said, a burning anxiety suddenly gripping him, "what exactly happened between you and Xie-ge?"

Sitting in the car, He Yu chuckled, as if Chen Man had asked a funny question. "Officer Chen, you really want to know?"

"Yes."

He Yu nodded, still smiling, and pulled out a box of cigarettes. It was a brand that Xie Qingcheng had been smoking recently. He Yu didn't like to smoke, but whenever he wanted to breathe in Xie Qingcheng's scent, he would take one out and smell it. He flicked his lighter open with a click and lit the cigarette, biting the end between his teeth and taking a puff. Then he leaned out the window and beckoned to Chen Man.

Chen Man walked over and leaned in, thinking He Yu was actually going to answer his question. There was a stiff expression on his face as he prepared to listen.

He Yu breathed out his lungful of smoke until a hazy cloud swirled all around him. Lowering his eyes to hide the emotions swirling within them, he said, "I hate him. I'm just playing with him."

Chen Man had nothing to say to that.

"Hey, the sweet and sour lotus root here was pretty good. I liked that dish. Did you like it too?"

With that last meaningful remark, He Yu shifted his car into gear and took off with a press of the gas pedal.

He Yu was certainly jealous that Xie Qingcheng had seen Chen Man in private, and at a restaurant he had taken He Yu to before at that. When Chen Man had asked what'd happened between them, He Yu had nearly tossed him a box of condoms from the glove box so he could figure it out at his own pace. He realized that would have come with consequences, though.

Listening to that song from the *Titanic* soundtrack on loop, holding a Xie Qingcheng-flavored cigarette between his teeth, He Yu just barely convinced himself not to turn right back around and

scream at Chen Man, *Xie Qingcheng is mine, motherfucker! We've already slept together, so you better know your place and stop chasing after him!*

Instead, he sped all the way to the Huzhou Medical School faculty dormitory.

A taxi couldn't outpace a sports car: When He Yu let himself into the familiar building, Xie Qingcheng still hadn't gotten back. He waited by the door for a while before footsteps sounded from the stairwell and the motion sensor light turned on.

He Yu turned and watched as Xie Qingcheng approached.

Xie Qingcheng didn't expect to find He Yu at his home waiting for him, and his surprise was tinged with annoyance. He had processed a lot of information today, and he was at the end of his patience. The recording Chen Man showed him had occupied almost the entirety of his mental CPU, and He Yu's appearance was like an annoying pop-up window showing up when his whole system was in the process of crashing. Xie Qingcheng was quite irritated with him right now.

"What nonsense are you up to now?" Xie Qingcheng rubbed the center of his forehead. "I'm really exhausted today. Do you have to be so stubborn?" A pause. "Did you not go to any club activities tonight?"

If only he hadn't mentioned those damn club activities! He Yu was even angrier now, frozen to the spot, his eyes locked on Xie Qingcheng. All the confidence and arrogance he had displayed to Chen Man fell away bit by bit, like pieces of armor, until they were gone entirely.

"You know I like you," He Yu said after a long silence. "Why do you keep saying such hurtful things?"

"How is this hurtful? I just want you to meet more girls and slowly correct your mistaken—"

"Liking you is a mistake?"

Xie Qingcheng went quiet.

He Yu said, slowly and with deliberate emphasis, "Xie Qingcheng, all I did was fall for someone. Why is that a mistake in your eyes? Why do you have to scold me like this?"

The soundproofing wasn't great out in the corridor, so Xie Qingcheng sighed and unlocked his door. He didn't want any awkward encounters if someone were to overhear them.

Inside, his dorm was very clean. Unlike Xie Xue's dorm, it was a minimalistic residence, verging on bare. The table held only some books and medicine, and there wasn't a single piece of decoration to be seen.

Xie Qingcheng looked over his shoulder. "Let's talk inside."

He Yu stubbornly stood in the doorway, refusing to comply.

"Are you coming inside or not? I'm going to shut the door."

He Yu glared at him. "Just shut it. It's not as if you've never shut a door in my face before."

He was getting more and more absurd. Meanwhile, Xie Qingcheng could hear the faint sounds of his neighbor cleaning their home. Afraid another instructor would come outside in the evening and happen upon this ridiculous scene, he forcibly tugged He Yu in by the arm.

"Okay, just sit down," he ordered.

He Yu didn't have an obedient bone in his body. He refused to sit.

"What's going on with you?" Xie Qingcheng said. "You were perfectly fine earlier. If something's wrong, can't you just say it? You're harder to figure out than any girl. What exactly do you want?"

He Yu stood like a statue for a while, before he said coldly, "Why didn't you just tell me you were meeting up with Chen Man? And why did you take Chen Man to the restaurant where we had our first date?"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I just invited you out to eat. It wasn't a date."

"It was a date to me. You took him there, and you didn't even tell me. I've warned you that he likes you, but you refuse to listen. You don't trust me. You don't trust a word I say about him."

Xie Qingcheng listened to his increasingly impassioned speech—He Yu clearly felt he was in the right, which was absolutely absurd. Xie Qingcheng had met with Chen Man to discuss serious business. How had He Yu twisted it into something like a married man going out to have an affair?

"He Yu, Chen Man is a kid I've known for over twenty years," Xie Qingcheng began, his voice somber. "I've known him even longer than I've known you. I don't know what he did to confuse you, but from my understanding of him, he isn't that kind of person. I don't believe there are that many brats who like to romance their uncles, but even if there are, I don't think I'd be so unlucky as to run into not one, but two. What a double helping of fortune!"

Seeing He Yu open his mouth to speak, Xie Qingcheng cut him off before he could begin. "And besides, we are *not* in a romantic relationship. To be precise, there's no relationship between us at all. I've told you three hundred times—I don't like you that way and I never will, so I don't need to tell you who I meet in private, who I share meals with, or where I sleep. I hope you won't use tracking software to find me again. I'll let it go this time, but this is your last warning."

Concubine He always spoke with a loud voice, but after Xie Qingcheng brought up the tracking software, his face paled and his voice softened with the knowledge that he was in the wrong.

"I-I was just looking for you because…because…" His voice went so quiet at the end that Xie Qingcheng didn't catch his justification. Then, He Yu repeated himself. "I was worried about you."

"Worried about *what*?"

"A lot. For example, with your current condition, I'm worried someone…"

Xie Qingcheng raised an eyebrow.

"I'm worried someone won't behave themselves…"

Xie Qingcheng found this absolutely ridiculous. "He Yu, I would like you to remember that I'm a fucking man."

"Men can also—"

Xie Qingcheng interrupted him with a scowl on his face. "You think everyone is just like you."

He Yu turned his face away and stopped talking.

Seeing him calm down a little at last, Xie Qingcheng went to prepare some tea. He Yu paced a few laps around the room before finally settling down on the rug in front of the tea table, spacing out as he stared at Xie Qingcheng's back.

Ever since he'd accepted his own sexuality, he only found Xie Qingcheng more and more attractive. He was a handsome and tall man with broad shoulders and a narrow waist; looking at him, He Yu thought, would make anyone want to cruelly subjugate him, push him past his limits until he cried and screamed, but also hold him in their loving embrace and draw broken, hoarse moans from his mature body.

As he looked and looked, he felt he had to say, "Xie Qingcheng, you don't understand the youth of today. Thirteen years is nothing. A man as good-looking as you, forget thirty-three, even if you were forty-three, nineteen-year-olds would be into you. Don't go gallivanting around like this anymore, okay? Public morality isn't what it used to be—"

Xie Qingcheng slammed a mug of ginger tea down in front of He Yu.

"So I'm fucking good-looking now? Who was that blind idiot who kept saying I was ugly before?"

"Who?" He Yu said. "That guy has something wrong with his head, no sense of aesthetics at all."

"Get a grip, and stop talking nonsense."

When he bent to gather the brewing implements, his tie dangled down over the counter. It took all He Yu's self-control not to grab Xie Qingcheng by the tie and pull him down for a kiss.

He watched from close up with intent focus as Xie Qingcheng cleaned up after himself. His lowered lashes were beautiful, like wisps of opium smoke, bewitching He Yu and drawing him in.

He stared, mesmerized, for a long time, before Xie Qingcheng looked up and met his eyes. "What are you looking at?"

He Yu only glanced at his watch and said, "Nothing."

Xie Qingcheng gave him a look.

"Right, so, can I stay here for the night? I'll sleep on the floor."

Xie Qingcheng just looked at He Yu. Why was he acting so strange today? It'd been a long time since He Yu had used tracking software to find him; ever since his confession, He Yu had treated him quite respectfully. What screw had come loose in his head for him to show up at the vegetarian restaurant to pick him up, and now ask to stay the night in his dorm?

As if he had made up his mind that he had to spend this night with Xie Qingcheng…

Xie Qingcheng raised an eyebrow. After a long, thoughtful silence, he wasn't able to come to any conclusion. "Did you get in some sort of trouble? Is that why you're so insistent on following me around today?"

"Ge, I'm the chairman of the student government," He Yu said. "What trouble could I have gotten into?"

Xie Qingcheng shot him a chilly glare. He snapped open his lighter and lit a cigarette. "If your school knew what you've done, student government chairman or not, they'd expel you outright."

He Yu chuckled. Despite how barbaric he was in bed, he was quite the gentleman when clothed. He accepted Xie Qingcheng's barb and retorted, "Professor, please don't smoke in front of a student."

Xie Qingcheng paused and stubbed out his cigarette. "If you're going to stay the night, go take a shower. I have more work to do. Give me some quiet."

He Yu's eyes lit up. He immediately shot to his feet, afraid Xie Qingcheng would go back on his word. "All right, I will!"

He dashed off to the bathroom without even remembering to ask Xie Qingcheng for a change of clothes and a towel.

Occupied as he was, Xie Qingcheng also forgot these little details. Once He Yu closed the door, he immediately took out his box of cigarettes again and lit a new one, taking a deep puff. Now satisfied, he turned back to his computer.

The glow of the screen lit his face, cigarette held in one slender hand as he typed with the other.

He Yu never saw the fading bruise over his tattoo, hidden beneath the sleeve of his shirt—a mark left by a set of handcuffs.

Chapter 132:
Youthful Romance

HE YU'S HEART thumped as he rubbed Xie Qingcheng's shower gel over his skin. The masculine, mature scent of Xie Qingcheng's body… It smelled so good. Hot water flowed from the showerhead, striking He Yu's broad back. Steam began to curl through the air, misting the frosted glass of the shower wall.

Amid his reverie, He Yu noticed something Xie Qingcheng must have left behind—a handprint on the glass. With the steam fogging up the shower wall, its blurry imprint became clear.

He Yu's scorching heart thudded in his chest. He raised one hand, laying it over the imprint of Xie Qingcheng's palm, while the other couldn't help but wander downward.

In his imagination, he reached through time and space to fold himself over Xie Qingcheng's back. His hand reached from behind to thread itself between Xie Qingcheng's dripping fingers. He held Xie Qingcheng's hand with the tattooed wrist as they entangled inexorably under the steaming-hot shower spray.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu panted quietly.

He closed his eyes. With that light, almost-cold perfume floating in the air, he felt as if Xie Qingcheng was right there in his arms.

He spent a long time in the shower like that, and if he hadn't checked his watch, he might have stayed there in his trance for even longer.

Once he emerged, dripping wet, from the shower, He Yu discovered he had put himself in an awkward situation.

"Xie-ge!"

As Xie Qingcheng busied himself with his work, he suddenly heard He Yu call out to him from the shower. He frowned and raised his voice to shout back, “What is it?”

“I don’t have a towel, or clothes…”

Shit. Xie Qingcheng put a hand to his forehead. With no other choice, he said, “Wait a minute,” and went to the bedroom to get some loose clothes and a clean towel.

As for underwear… Forget it, He Yu could go commando. It wasn’t like Xie Qingcheng was going to see it.

Xie Qingcheng went to the bathroom and knocked on the door.

The door opened somewhat, revealing He Yu on his best behavior. He didn’t flash Xie Qingcheng, but tilted his head to show half of his damp, pretty face from behind the door.

“Thanks, Gege,” he said quietly. After that, he stretched out a hand and accepted the clothes, like a harmless little dragon poking its head out of its cave.

Xie Qingcheng had no idea what the little bastard had just been doing in the shower while thinking of him. He passed He Yu the clothes and towel, then returned to his computer, donned his glasses, and continued to work.

He Yu dressed, blow-dried his hair, and walked over to Xie Qingcheng to peek over his shoulder. Xie Qingcheng seemed to be searching for something, but it looked like he wasn’t having much luck finding results.

“Ge, what are you looking for?” he asked.

“Information about Zhilong Entertainment’s headquarters.”

“You should use my services.” He Yu felt a bit guilty about tracking Xie Qingcheng without his permission now that he’d been scolded, and he wanted to get back into his pretty gege’s good graces. “I’m a hacker, and my services are free.”

"I don't need you for a little thing like this," Xie Qingcheng said.

He Yu sat down demurely next to him and watched him search. After a while, he realized what must have happened. "Did Chen Man tell you something tonight?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't see any need to keep these things from He Yu. Since he'd asked, Xie Qingcheng gathered his thoughts and explained the general situation to him.

Taking in what he'd learned, He Yu frowned. "Are you sure that the recording is real?"

"I'm not. It certainly looked like an old recording from over a decade ago, but there are methods to falsify these things." Xie Qingcheng thought about it for a minute. "But I *am* interested in the obedience potion Zhao Xue mentioned in the video. It sounds similar to the drug Xie Xue was given. If the recording is real, Zhilong Entertainment must have used it more than a few times to control the artists under their label."

He Yu considered it. "Indeed," he said. "If we find any evidence of Zhilong Entertainment artists having taken this obedience potion, that would basically confirm that the recording is real. And if we can get samples of it, we might be able to cure Xie Xue. But…"

"But what?"

"But I agree with your suspicions, and I'm also curious… If this recording really isn't a trap, if it's a genuine clue provided by a mysterious informant, who's the good guy working behind the scenes?" Despite everything else, whenever they investigated a case together, their mutual understanding synced to an extraordinary level.

He Yu had started off kneeling on the floor next to Xie Qingcheng, but by now he'd brought over a chair so he could sit. He propped his cheek against his hand, watching Xie Qingcheng look up information on the artists under Zhilong Entertainment. Xie

Qingcheng had already found netizens mentioning that the idols under this company would often leave the country and then mysteriously disappear, but he wasn't very good at getting information from the search engine.

Instructing Xie Qingcheng, He Yu helped him find the related forum post, then go down the list of artists from the post and carefully read over all the discussions about each of them. Buried there, they found a scant few age-old rumors about the obedience potion. The comments had first appeared twenty years ago, in 2002.

"Ge, can you make me a recording of Chen Man's video next time?"

"Sure, I'll just ask him to come over and show it to you."

He Yu immediately refused. "I don't wanna."

"What?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I don't like Chen Man. I don't get along with him. If you want him, you're not having me, and if you want me, you can't have him."

"It's just watching a video," Xie Qingcheng said. "What's all this 'want him' or 'want me'?"

"I won't. He can't be here."

Xie Qingcheng had no interest in going around in circles with him, so he dropped the topic.

Before they knew it, it was nearly midnight. They'd found evidence that the obedience potion Zhao Xue mentioned was real, and that it'd been used as a tool to commit heinous acts against the artists under Zhilong Entertainment all those years ago.

"It's more or less confirmed. Let me see if I can find out what they're saying inside the company." He Yu gathered and printed out the information about the missing artists as he summed up the results of their research to Xie Qingcheng.

But this time, Xie Qingcheng didn't immediately agree.

His forehead creased as he pondered what to do. Something was bothering him… For some reason, he was nowhere near as optimistic about their current situation as He Yu.

Krr-chk.

The final page popped out of the printer.

Xie Qingcheng was jolted from his musings by a clamor outside the faculty dorm. It sounded like music from a guitar, along with the shouts of onlooking students.

He Yu raised his wrist to check his watch again—eleven fifty-five—then looked at Xie Qingcheng.

Disturbed by the noise, Xie Qingcheng rose and walked over to the balcony to close the window.

"Ridiculous," he scoffed. "This again."

He Yu followed at his heels. "What is it?"

"What *else* could it be? It's another one of those public confessions you adolescents like to do. You see a dozen of them per semester in college towns. Who knows which idiot it is this time who decided to set this garbage up right under the faculty dorms."

He Yu didn't reply as Xie Qingcheng walked out onto the balcony to take a look.

Just as he said, some boy was preparing to confess in the open space under the dormitory. Candles were set out in a heart shape, their flames flickering in the wind, and a hired band was playing an arrangement of an old love song.

Twelve in the evening wasn't very late at a medical school, and many students were only just returning from evening study hall. Many of them paused to spectate, either in dreamy envy or with shouts of encouragement. Even some of the instructors in the faculty dorm poked their heads out of their windows to look. Most of the instructors living in the dorms were young and unmarried, and they hadn't gone to bed yet either.

"How romantic…"

"Who is it? Who's confessing to who?"

"Where are the boy and girl? Why's it just the band playing down there?"

Unable to resist their curiosity, a student asked the musicians, "Excuse me, who's confessing?"

"We don't know either," one of the musicians said. "We got an expensive anonymous commission online. Oh, right…"

Suddenly recalling something, he pulled out his phone to scroll through the chat with their mysterious client. He cleared his throat, waited for the rest of his band to finish the previous song, then took the microphone and shouted up at the medical school faculty dormitory, as their client had requested:

"This performance of 'My Heart Will Go On' is dedicated by Mister He to his Rose. Happy birthday, Miss Rose."

Xie Qingcheng slammed the window closed, a frosty look on his face. "These students are getting stupider and stupider. Is their cash burning a hole in their pockets?"

As soon as he turned around, he ran into He Yu, who at some point had come to stand right behind him.

"You—"

He Yu lowered his eyes and grabbed Xie Qingcheng's hand. "I'm sorry, Gege. I guess you didn't like it."



Xie Qingcheng paused for a good few seconds before he abruptly realized what all this was about. He was shocked, speechless, and itched to give He Yu a beating, but accustomed as he was to hiding his emotions, all he showed to He Yu was the same cold aloofness as always.

It was then that fireworks started going off outside the dormitory. Small golden lights flew into the sky then burst into bloom—how romantic of Huzhou to not enforce a fireworks ban.

Sparks like a scattering of stars reflected in He Yu's eyes. "I… I've been preparing this for a long time. That's why I was in such a rush that I tracked your phone to locate you, because I hoped you could be with me tonight. Happy birthday, Ge."

Among all the excessively hostile things he could've said, Xie Qingcheng chose a rather sedate option. "Is there something wrong with you? My birthday isn't today."

He Yu pressed their foreheads together. Behind them, fireworks continued to burst beyond the balcony window. No one knew who was confessing, or to whom, but the students whooped and sighed at the beautiful scene.

"I know, but this is the day you defeated death at age thirteen and returned to Moyu Alley."

Xie Qingcheng started.

"I went to ask Auntie Li," He Yu explained. "She didn't know what'd happened to you, but she remembered the date you came back from the hospital after your accident. No one knows how much suffering you went through, but I remember it all. In the past, no one told you, 'Thank you for coming back.' I wanted to make it up to you. I wanted you to know that even if Qin Ciyan is no longer here, you have me to understand you in your entirety."

Maybe the fireworks and chatter outside were too loud, or maybe He Yu's voice grew quieter as he pressed his forehead against Xie Qingcheng's and took his hand. "Ge, this is a birthday

only I can celebrate with you. I know we're facing many obstacles, unsolved cases, and dangers, but look—there are also beautiful fireworks outside…and you still have me. Don't be upset with me for being so clingy today. I was afraid even you would forget this day. I really wanted to say to you, Xie Qingcheng, thank you for your tenacity twenty years ago. Thank you for surviving, so that I had the chance to meet this version of you."

Xie Qingcheng had never experienced anything this absurd in his life. But the passion and sincerity in He Yu's words were unmistakable. In the face of these emotions, he found it difficult to summon any of his temper.

He didn't care much about the suffering he'd experienced, and he didn't fear pain. He Yu's attempts to bring relief to his twenty-year-old wounds didn't stir any great feeling in him. In his opinion, there was no need. The past was in the past, and it'd been nothing much, really.

But for a split second, he felt a sense of regret—not for himself, but for He Yu.

He found He Yu pitiful, even more than Li Ruoqiu had been. Back then, she'd doggedly pursued him until she became the laughingstock of the entire hospital, until Xie Qingcheng could no longer watch and finally offered her his hand out of pity. But He Yu? He Yu was a *man*. There was no meaning to He Yu fawning over him like this, because his pursuit had no chance of ever producing results.

He'd already made his answer so clear, yet He Yu kept on chasing him, like an athlete who already knew he was going to come in last place yet insisted on holding out until he made it to the finish line, far behind anyone else. He Yu's childish passion gave Xie Qingcheng a stuffy feeling in his chest.

"You…" His faintly exasperated sigh turned into a gentle exhalation in He Yu's ears.

That was the one good thing about boys his age. You didn't need to appease them, because they were fully capable of appeasing themselves.

When Xie Qingcheng didn't scold him, He Yu's eyes lit up and his hands tightened around Xie Qingcheng's fingers, his palms slick with sweat.

"Do you like the surprise I prepared for you?"

Xie Qingcheng wanted to say, *What nonsense, I'm not twenty years old, of course I don't like it.*

Then, another firework burst outside, showering a rain of gold throughout the night. Xie Qingcheng saw He Yu's eyes glittering in the sudden brilliance of their glow—his own figure was reflected within them as He Yu looked at him expectantly.

Xie Qingcheng had known this sickly child for over a decade, and rarely had he seen so much light in his eyes. Unexpectedly, a part of his heart of stone cracked and shifted. It took him a few seconds before he realized that this was an emotion called regret.

He Yu held his unresponsive hand, as if awaiting the result of some crucial test. "Xie Qingcheng, do you like it?"

He said nothing; he obviously didn't. Who wanted to play house with some kid? But the strange thing was, after such a long silence, he found himself still unable to deliver this verdict to He Yu's face. Had he really grown more softhearted as he grew older? Xie Qingcheng averted his eyes from He Yu's, reluctant to hurt him in the face of such sincerity.

He Yu, however, took this as embarrassment. Reflecting the rain of sparks, his eyes glowed even brighter. A rare blush gradually appeared on his face.

"You really like it… Really? Ge, I'm so happy."

Enough was enough. Xie Qingcheng turned back around to interrupt the boy's monologue, but before he could, his field of vision darkened as He Yu joyfully leaned in and pressed a kiss to his lips.

He Yu had taken him preparing to deliver a lecture as a willingness to be kissed instead. Xie Qingcheng was struck dumb by this shocking level of self-confidence. He must've been insane to ponder how pitiful He Yu was, when his level of narcissism was this through the roof. He'd take a smidgen of sympathy as reciprocation!

Still, they were already kissing now, and it wasn't especially impolite, so he saw no need to struggle. That would just make it seem like he couldn't handle this middle school level scene.

Backed by a wall of fireworks against the night sky, He Yu stood on the balcony, clutching Xie Qingcheng's hand. He closed his eyes and lightly pressed his lips to Xie Qingcheng's. They rarely kissed peacefully like this—even if it was entirely one-sided on He Yu's part, without any reciprocation from Xie Qingcheng. In that moment, He Yu felt that he wasn't kissing a chunk of ice, but a pool of cold water—chilly as always, but at least it was soft and liquid enough to spill into his heart.

He didn't know whether it was his own misperception, but the mere thought of it summoned moisture to his eyes. When he looked at Xie Qingcheng from a scant few centimeters away, his eyes were damp with tears. He was afraid Xie Qingcheng would see, so to protect his own pride, he closed his eyes and kissed him again before he could react. This kiss was forceful and lingering, and he sought within it something that could fill the pit of desire within his heart. At the same time, he tried to fill Xie Qingcheng from the well inside himself, everything inside him that could let Xie Qingcheng live like an actual person.

He loved him furiously, gently, violently.

As he kissed him and kissed him, a spike of pain shot through He Yu's heart. Xie Qingcheng had given him so much joy, yet never tried to gain anything from him in return. Was it an act of compassion or an act of cruelty? Every medicine was three parts poison. Xie Qingcheng had never realized that by the time he'd used himself as a drug to treat He Yu's disease, he had already become the corrosive in his veins, the arsenic in his bones.

When He Yu went mad and fell in love with him, the sleeping poison activated from where it lay in wait, impossible to suppress.

"Xie-ge." The lingering kiss had ended, yet their breaths were still intertwined. He Yu's throat bobbed. As he gazed at Xie Qingcheng, his eyes were no longer damp, but red. But that was okay. He could pretend it was lust and not anguish.

"Xie-ge," he repeated, quietly gazing into Xie Qingcheng's eyes, before trailing down to the tip of his nose, then to his lips. Unable to resist his rose's allure, the little prince leaned down and kissed him again, then said for the third time, "Xie-ge."

He was an utter lunatic. If Xie Qingcheng showed him any goodwill, or not even that, he would begin to get greedy. He wanted to hold him, to enter him, to seduce him—and as long as Xie Qingcheng kissed him, he wouldn't be going back on his word. It would mean he could do whatever he wanted.

He really wanted Xie Qingcheng so much.

Every time Xie Qingcheng looked at him with his aloof and rational attitude and said, placid as an arctic lake, "You aren't in love with me, and I don't like you that way. We are thirteen years apart in age. This isn't right. You've gotten it wrong," He Yu wanted to take him—the man with as many grand principles on his tongue as a preacher—and push him down on the nearest bed, chair, or windowsill. To let him know exactly who was wrong.

The wicked spirit inside He Yu had wanted to do this for a long, long time. Unfortunately, he had made that stupid, sincere promise that he would pursue Xie Qingcheng properly. It was too late to go back on his word; instead he had to use every chance he got to seduce Xie Qingcheng into a repeat of New Year's Eve.

Tonight, the perfect opportunity had come. He pretended to be on his best behavior.

"Xie-ge, you like it. I'm so happy. As a reward, can you kiss me? Just once, and I won't ask for any more."

Hah. If he kissed him, he would claim it was a sign that Xie Qingcheng was taking the initiative.

He Yu tried every trick in his arsenal, clinging to him, trying to seduce him. Xie Qingcheng was obviously unmoved, but he felt like there was a big fluffy dog rolling around on the floor at his feet, sending fur flying up his nostrils until he wanted to duck away. The scene was becoming a bit humorous.

"Xie-ge, Xie-ge, Xie—"

"How many times have we told you guys! It's dry out, be careful with open flames! You're lighting candles right under a building for a confession? And fireworks too!" A booming voice suddenly began shouting from downstairs: a campus security guard there to investigate the ruckus.

This security guard had a deep hatred for any activities that presented a risk to campus safety. He extinguished all the candles with a pail of water, then furiously turned on the spectating students.

"Who did this? Huh? Which little bastard did this?!"

"Uncle, we don't know!" the students insisted.

"How can you not know?! You only get up to all this hubbub when someone's confessing! Who's the one confessing?" The security guard turned on the band in a rage. "Who hired you?! This is ridiculous! Has the fire department been wasting its PSA budget?! Who did this?!"

"Dage, please calm down, we really don't know," said the leader of the band. "Some rich guy put in the order online, but he still hasn't shown up. We don't know if it's a prank or something."

"That's right, or they might have gotten the details wrong."

The security guard ground his teeth in rage. "Get out of here! All of you! Stop playing around! Imagine, all this ruckus at twelve in the evening. How is this at all appropriate?! Clear out!"

"Ah, but we can't," the leader of the band said. "The order listed a few more songs that we haven't performed yet."

"Didn't you say your client didn't even show up?!"

"Dage, we're an ethical band. As long as the client paid their bill, whether or not they show up, we have to complete the requested services. Please don't be angry. Sit down and enjoy a song."

"Enjoy my ass! Hurry and finish up!"

The students spectating the argument broke out in rowdy laughter.

Xie Qingcheng pushed He Yu aside, a blank expression on his face. "Look at all the trouble you've caused."

"A student did a candlelit confession on the athletics field a couple days ago. Why didn't they go after them, just me?"

"You had them set up a bunch of candles right under the faculty dormitory. Who else would they go after? Plus, it's already twelve at night."

"No one's asleep…"

"Tell them to cut it out down there, first."

With a gloomy expression, He Yu had to log in to the shopping platform and open up the chat with the band. Soon, things calmed down downstairs.

Xie Qingcheng lit another cigarette and stood by the window to watch the crowd slowly disperse. The security guard was the last to leave. Before he did, he noticed Xie Qingcheng looking down from the open window and nodded to greet him. "My apologies, Professor Xie. We've interrupted your rest."

"Thank you for your hard work," said Xie Qingcheng.

Once everyone was gone, it was quiet outside the faculty dorm again. Xie Qingcheng turned around to see He Yu sprawled dispiritedly over the dining table.

"Was that fun? You're so childish. Send an anonymous fruit basket to the security guard tomorrow. He had to pick up all those candles."

"A fruit basket?" He Yu huffed. "I should send him some razor blades!"

Xie Qingcheng looked at him like he would look at a kindergartener, then walked over with his cigarette hanging from his mouth. "Did you also pursue that girl you liked this way?"

At the mention of his own dark history, He Yu nearly caught a case of erectile dysfunction. "Can you stop bringing that up?"

Xie Qingcheng flicked some ash from the end of his cigarette. *No wonder you didn't succeed,* he imagined saying, but he figured it would be too mean. Instead, he put the cigarette back between his lips and murmured, "Go get some rest."

He Yu sprawled on the table for a little longer, then leaped to his feet and snatched Xie Qingcheng's cigarette right out of his mouth.

"Don't smoke," He Yu insisted, then added, "And no! I said I'd celebrate your birthday with you, the one that only the two of us know."

"There's no need for that. I'm not in the mood, and…"

Before he could finish, He Yu took out a cake from the paper bag he'd brought with him. Xie Qingcheng was still traumatized by the last cake He Yu had given him. When he ate it on Neverland Island, he'd had a severe allergic reaction and had to go to the hospital to get an IV.

He was about to refuse, but paused once he saw the name of the store the cake was from: *Ruby*.

Chapter 133:
As Long as It Makes You Happy

RUBY WAS A CHILDHOOD memory for many longtime residents of Huzhou, and Xie Qingcheng was no exception.[3] The bakery on Huashan Road with its sign that said "Ruby: Combining East and West" was the place where Xie Ping and Zhou Muying had taken him to buy cakes for his birthday when he was young.

Miniature sponge cakes, chestnut mousse, whipped cream—his parents had awarded him these treats with a smile every time he got good scores back from a test.

To tell the truth, if He Yu had given Xie Qingcheng something from a viral bakery, it would probably be overly expensive and not very good, and he wouldn't have appreciated the thought. But Ruby wasn't the same.

It was hardly luxurious—the full cake had cost just over two hundred yuan—but He Yu guessed that Xie Qingcheng would have fond memories of it. After that two-yuan milk tea store in Yi Village, he'd discovered that Xie Qingcheng was prone to nostalgia.

"I also asked them for a musical candle." Seeing Xie Qingcheng's expression begin to soften, He Yu struck while the iron was hot. It seemed his guess had been correct.

"Candles again," Xie Qingcheng said. "Just can't stop with the candles tonight, can you?"

"It's fun! A lotus flower candle."

When He Yu took the candle out of its packaging, despite his impassive temperament, Xie Qingcheng raised an eyebrow. "Ah, it… still hasn't changed?"

Now, it was He Yu's turn to be surprised. "You've used one of these before?"

"I did. When I was eight."

One hand in his pocket, Xie Qingcheng walked closer and stood in front of the table, lifting the shoddily constructed plastic lotus flower with evident interest. He studied it for a while, then said to He Yu, "Turn off the lights."

He Yu was overjoyed. "I knew you'd like it. Look how smart I am! If you're with me, I definitely won't let you down—"

"The lights." Xie Qingcheng interrupted his sales pitch.

He Yu shut his mouth and went to flick the light switch.

The room sank into darkness, lit only by the faint glow of the street lamps outside. Xie Qingcheng snapped open his Zippo lighter, stuck the lotus flower candle into the sponge cake, and lit the wick.

With a crackle, the wick burned down to the end. Once the little glints of fire reached the stamen of the plastic flower, the closed bud bloomed, its five pink plastic petals opening up before Xie Qingcheng and He Yu's eyes. The electronic chip inside the candle began to play a song.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you… For your happiness and health, for family and home…"

The smile disappeared from He Yu's face. He hadn't realized it would play this version of the birthday song. Didn't the usual kind just repeat "Happy birthday to you" like an idiot?



He looked up to see the faint smile in Xie Qingcheng's eyes fade when he heard the lyrics of the song.

After a long time, he finally said, "The candle is just the same as before. Nothing has changed."

Thirty-three-year-old Xie Qingcheng stood in his single-bedroom dormitory, staring at the Ruby cake with its musical candle. In the flickering flame, he could almost see his eight-year-old self. Xie Ping and Zhou Muying stood right beside him, and a smiling Qin Ciyan hovered in the background.

They said to him, "Make a wish."

He couldn't remember what wish he'd made at the time. He just remembered the expectant feeling in his chest as he blew out the candle.

Xie Qingcheng watched his younger self blow out the candle, but once he opened his eyes again, his parents and his father figure were nowhere to be found. He watched himself stand there and stare in blank confusion, with not a single person by his side.

"For your happiness and health, for family and home…"

Someone suddenly began to clap and sing, and Xie Qingcheng returned to the present. His younger self disappeared, and the person standing across from him was He Yu, gazing at him under the candlelight.

After He Yu finished his song, he seemed to have the urge to add something, so he said, "I hope you and I can have a happy family and home together."

When Xie Qingcheng didn't reply, he said, "Don't be sad. Happy rebirth day."

He leaned over the table and once again closed his eyes to kiss his Professor Xie on the lips in the gentle, flickering light of the lotus candle. A soft and earnest kiss.

Unfortunately, he chose to add something extremely improper. "I'm waiting for you to sleep with me anytime."

"Fuck off."

By the time they finished the cake and tossed out the trash, it was already one in the morning. Xie Qingcheng said He Yu could have the bed, while he slept on the sofa. He Yu tried to insist on switching, but Xie Qingcheng asserted his authority as the man of the house. If He Yu wouldn't listen, he could go back to his own dorm.

So, after He Yu brushed his teeth, he went to sleep in Xie Qingcheng's bed. Chauvinists were just like that. You could never take care of them for too long, or they'd get terribly uncomfortable.

Neither He Yu nor Xie Qingcheng slept well that night. He Yu lay between the sheets suffused with Xie Qingcheng's scent, and every time he thought about how Xie Qingcheng slept on this bed, he'd get hot all over. Although he had found some release in the shower earlier, he was a vigorous young person, and he hadn't gotten any for way too long. As he lay on the bed of the person he liked, his blood roiled in his chest and he wanted to bury himself in the blankets and take care of his problem. Unfortunately, the bedroom door was open, and if he was too loud, Xie Qingcheng would hear. All he could do was toss and turn, unable to sleep.

Meanwhile, outside in the living room, Xie Qingcheng sat on the sofa, thinking over everything that had happened that day: the recording, the mysterious person who had sent it, the obedience potion, Huang Zhilong's entertainment company…and all the ridiculous antics He Yu had pulled that night.

He lifted a hand and pressed his knuckles to the center of his forehead. It really was too childish.

He was already twenty years old. When Xie Qingcheng was that age, he was studying the questions of life and death. In comparison, He Yu truly was just a child. Regardless, for some

reason, his heart felt less heavy when he looked toward the room where He Yu was sleeping.

When he realized this, Xie Qingcheng's headache worsened. He rubbed hard at his brow, sighed, then threaded a finger through the knot of his tie to loosen it. Then he removed his jacket and lay down to sleep.

At the same time, in the Huzhou City Bureau Forensics Department, the officers working overtime had begun to grow fatigued after the clock struck midnight. Most people in the office were napping, getting some rest before they went back to their work.

Daming, a technician, rushed back with a big bag of milk tea.

"I had to go really far to find a place that was still open. I feel like a delivery driver," Daming said as he distributed the milk tea to his coworkers. "We've had so many cases lately. What a headache! Have an energy boost, everyone. We're probably pulling another all-nighter tonight."

"Wow, it's not like you to be so generous." A tired police officer accepted a cup of milk tea, but she didn't miss the chance to launch a teasing barb at her coworker.

"Yeah, you must have spent over three hundred on an order this size. How much is your salary again? The sun's rising in the west today."

Daming scratched his head in embarrassment. "Everyone takes care of me, so I saw a rare chance to pay it back. Oh, right, where's my shifu? Still in the lab?"

"Yeah, go on over."

Daming went, holding a cup of tea.

An old forensic scientist wearing a pure-white lab coat stood in the lab. He swirled a test tube between his fingers, carefully

examining the reaction occurring inside under the cold fluorescent lights.

"Shifu." Daming handed the cup of milk tea to him. "Have something warm to drink. It's on me."

The forensic scientist didn't look away from his test tube. "There's no need. I'm getting old, I don't drink those kinds of things anymore. If I end up with high blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar issues, all my salary will end up going straight to the hospital."

"I ordered one with no sugar and pure milk. It's very healthy."

"Even the no sugar option has too much sugar. Don't you read the newspaper, kid?" The old forensic scientist huffed in disdain as he thought about junk food. "Take it back."

The fawning smile Daming had pushed onto his face collapsed in the shadows behind the old forensic scientist's back. He darted a glance at the video camera his mentor had placed on the workstation. It'd been a few days since the discovery of the Zhilong Entertainment artist's body, and apparently, thanks to his shifu's stellar technique, the recording in the camera was close to completely restored.

Still, Daming hadn't completed the job he'd taken.

Daming was more like a greasy politician than a technician. He hadn't joined the police force for the same reason that most people did. He grew up in a small village and held a certain misconception about police officers. To him, they were powerful officials who could order the masses about as they pleased, just like the government officials in all the historical dramas. Deep down, he'd never truly corrected this misconception, even after he tested into the police academy and performed his pledges toward his badge.

He wasn't athletically talented, so after graduation, he chose to specialize in forensics. It was delicate work that required calm and patience, and those in the profession would often spend more time talking to evidence and corpses than living people.

Even though his mentor was a famous veteran in the field, Daming gradually found that he couldn't do it any longer. Test tubes and beakers weren't his life's dream. He wanted business dinners, to climb the ladder and make it rich, to parade home with his spoils and ride high on his achievements as everyone talked about the major government position he held.

Unfortunately, reality was bare-bones when compared to fantasy.

Daming was already well into his thirties, but he was still on the lowest rung. He didn't take his work seriously, and he was too insincere. He'd fawn and flatter his supervisors and act fake around his colleagues, practically writing "hypocrite" all over himself. Seeing that he was on track to waste his life away, Daming got the idea to ask around and see if he could transfer to another department. The way he saw it, dead people were never going to offer him bribes. The forensics department didn't have near enough opportunity for profit.

That was, until this murdered starlet had come around. He finally saw his chance to strike it rich.

The person who wanted the video camera had already given him three hundred thousand yuan in cash. Since then, Daming had spent days dreaming about lavish banquets with pools of wine. So long as he managed to get the camera, they'd promised him another ten million. That would be enough for him to quit his job and live off his spoils for the rest of his life.

Unable to resist the allure of money, he'd become a snake lurking in the shadows, tongue flicking out to taste the air as he waited for the moment to strike.

Daming left and came back with a cup of freshly brewed tea. "Shifu, even if you don't want milk tea, you ought to at least drink something and take a break. At your age, shouldn't you be pacing yourself?"

"You're quite filial today," the old forensic scientist said.

"It's how I ought to be, isn't it?" The cup Daming held contained just a little bit of sleeping medicine. Daming was willing to take a risk for those ten million yuan.

He knew this was against the law, but people who understood the law made the scariest criminals. They knew how to find loopholes, and they could weigh the risks and benefits with greater confidence. As long as the prize at stake was big enough, they might decide that breaking the law didn't matter.

"It smells good." The old forensic scientist was tired, and after focusing hard on his work for so long, he felt a bit thirsty seeing that steaming cup of tea.

"It was that last bit of Da Hong Pao in the cabinet. I snuck it out for you."

Thoroughly tempted, the scientist went over to the handwash station to clean up, then accepted the cup of tea from Daming. He walked outside to the hallway window to rest while slowly enjoying the drink.

"Mm, it's good tea indeed. You should have a sip."

Daming's face practically glowed. "I'm not worthy. Shifu, you've worked hard, you should drink it."

The scientist was quite pleased with the flattery. He hummed again, put on a fresh pair of latex gloves, and returned to his workstation. In the meantime, Daming quietly waited to the side. He pretended to help his mentor, but he was just waiting for the sleeping drug to take effect.

Gradually, the scientist began to feel tired. He yawned several times in a row, then sighed. "I'm getting old. What time is it? To think I'm already running out of energy."

He forced himself to continue for a while, but when his eyes refused to stay open, he had to call it. "Xiao-Ming, the results of the reaction in beaker two need to be recorded in ten minutes. Keep an

eye on it for me. I'm going to take a nap in the break room next door. Come get me in half an hour."

This was the moment Daming had waited for. He was so excited he was afraid his mentor would notice the pounding of his heart.

"All right, don't worry," he said, in a voice that he worried was higher than usual from nerves. "Get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on everything."

Unfortunately, the old forensic scientist was far too tired to notice his disciple's abnormalities. He yawned, then turned and left the evidence lab.

Once he was gone, Daming rushed to the workstation, donned a pair of gloves, and opened the lockbox with trembling hands. He retrieved the ten-million-yuan camera from the temporary storage cabinet. When he held it in his hands, he didn't think about how he was holding evidence that could bring justice for a murder victim. Instead, all he saw was his own long-awaited dream of going from rags to riches.

Under the light of the shadowless lamp, his face twisted like the wax of a melting candle. He gulped down a mouthful of saliva, then stuffed the camera into a plastic bag he'd brought ahead of time.

Ten million…ten million!

He could already see the luxurious villa and the beautiful women beckoning him to join them. He physically shuddered in excitement, then—with the highest professional competence he'd ever displayed in his life—he rapidly destroyed any traces of evidence that could point to him as the culprit. Even the paper cup his mentor had tossed in the garbage can, with its remnant traces of the sleeping drug, was tucked into his shirt so he could sneak it out of the police station.

By the time he completed his preparations, his forehead was soaked with sweat. The heavens had smiled upon him: Not a single

person had entered the room while he was working. In addition, the security camera in that room happened to be offline for repairs; he'd heard his shifu complaining about it that morning.

Everything was going remarkably well.

But, behind his excitement, as Daming stared at the video camera in his hands, a thought suddenly came to mind: He was really curious what was in this video camera that could motivate someone to go to such expenses to acquire it.

His shifu had already restored its memory card. Perhaps a portion of the recorded video was watchable now. It was like there was a devil whispering in Daming's ear, tempting him to turn on the machine and view its contents.

His thumb trembled over the "on" button. Daming could hear the sound of his own heavy breathing. As if puppeted by invisible strings, his finger moved toward that button that would open Pandora's box.

Click.

He held his breath in anticipation.

After a few seconds of silence, the video camera's screen actually turned on, casting a faint blue glow across Daming's face.

Daming stared at the screen. After a long moment, he broke out in a cold sweat. His hand slipped, and the camera crashed to the floor.

"H-how…"

The flickering video showed a heroic criminal police officer, a man with an excellent reputation, well-liked by everyone—Zheng Jingfeng!

Zheng Jingfeng faced the screen, showing a smile that looked especially sinister in the darkness of the room to someone behind the camera.

Much like the camera, Daming crashed to the floor in shock. Why would Zheng Jingfeng appear in the victim's video camera? Why hadn't his shifu said anything when a person like that had appeared in their evidence? A chill snaked up his back. Sitting there, he felt as if he had fallen into a dark, bottomless abyss. Compared to Zheng Jingfeng and his shifu, he was nothing at all. Nothing.

Abruptly, he snapped back to his senses and lurched over to pick up his things.

He had to hand this video camera off cleanly to that mysterious client, take his money, and leave the country as fast as possible. Then he would—

Creak.

The door opened.

He saw a familiar figure standing in the doorway, backlit by the hallway lights. Even without a clear look at the figure's face, he knew who it was.

In a terrifying, icy voice that Daming had never heard from his mouth before, his shifu said, "You saw everything."

Chapter 134:
Can You Let Me Do It Once

MEANWHILE, in the Huzhou Medical School faculty dormitory, Xie Qingcheng picked up a phone call, still groggy from sleep. "Lao-Zheng?"

"I want to meet you, alone," Zheng Jingfeng said into the phone.

Xie Qingcheng paused for a moment and looked at the time. "Right now?"

"Right now."

"All right, fine. Tell me where you are and where we should meet." Xie Qingcheng wasn't particularly guarded against Zheng Jingfeng.

Once he had Zheng Jingfeng's instructions, Xie Qingcheng washed up and changed his clothes, getting ready to go out. Though his movements were light, the sound still woke He Yu.

"Where are you going?"

"To buy breakfast," Xie Qingcheng lied. "I should be back shortly. Go back to sleep."

Appeased by his fib, He Yu fell back asleep on Xie Qingcheng's bed.

Xie Qingcheng took a taxi to the location Zheng Jingfeng had given him and found that it was a remote area in Huzhou. Perhaps there was an issue with the closest cell tower—there was only one bar of signal, as if there was a lot of interference.

The building at the address was an old, abandoned factory. Xie Qingcheng walked in.

Zheng Jingfeng was sitting there waiting for him, dressed in plain clothes, with his head lowered.

"Why did you suddenly want to meet?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

Zheng Jingfeng didn't say anything, nor did he raise his head. It wasn't quite yet dawn, and though there was a faint golden light on the horizon, the weak early rays weren't enough to shine through the glass that was covered with a layer of dust. It was hard to see. The door Xie Qingcheng entered through wasn't completely closed, so when the wind blew, it creaked on its hinges.

"Lao-Zheng?"

Zheng Jingfeng didn't answer, but an eerie bell suddenly sounded in the building.

"Drop, drop, drop the hanky, set it lightly behind your friend's back, no one let him know…"

Xie Qingcheng started—this nursery rhyme again?!

Dull mechanical noises sounded from every direction, echoing in the huge old factory.

Xie Qingcheng realized something was wrong, and reached out to touch Zheng Jingfeng, whose head was still lowered. With just a touch—

Thud.

Zheng Jingfeng fell to the floor, and Xie Qingcheng was finally able to see his face. It was a bloody, muddled face, exactly the way Xie Qingcheng's parents had looked when they died, so crushed that one cheekbone was shattered.

A terrifying visage.

"Lao-Zheng…Lao-Zheng!"

"Xie Qingcheng! Xie Qingcheng!"

Xie Qingcheng's eyes shot open, and He Yu's anxious face came into view. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Xie Qingcheng awake.

"You had a nightmare again," He Yu said.

Xie Qingcheng's face was frighteningly pale. Lying on the sofa, he looked like a fish flopping on the deck of a fishing boat, his chest heaving vehemently even as he failed to make a sound. He couldn't speak. His throat felt locked.

The last scene in the dream had been so horrific that it felt like he'd seen more than just Zheng Jingfeng's face. That face was covered in blood, the skin and flesh so hideous that it was almost unrecognizable. In his memory, it could have been Zheng Jingfeng, his parents, or even Qin Ciyan, who died tragically at Yi Beihai's hands. He trembled, still unable to speak.

The nightmare had uncovered his deepest fear—he never wanted to see anyone dear to him die so cruelly again.

"It's all right, don't be afraid. It was just a dream. Xie Qingcheng, it was just a dream."

Xie Qingcheng lay there, exhausted. He was cold all over, except for his palms. He clung to that bit of warmth with everything he had, and it was a long time before he waded out of the nightmare. When he came back to his senses, he found that he was clinging tightly to He Yu's hands.

He immediately let go.

With inhuman calmness, Xie Qingcheng put away the weak expression that wasn't supposed to be on his face and forced himself to sit up.

He didn't look at He Yu's face, but he managed to glimpse the back of his hand. It was covered with red marks from the force of Xie Qingcheng's grip.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely.

He Yu clearly didn't know what to say.

"I'm…going to wash my face."

Xie Qingcheng was in the middle of standing up when a force pulled him back down. He was already a little unsteady on his feet since he'd just woken up, and he couldn't exert force with one of his arms either. In that state, he was easily dragged down and thrown back onto the sofa.

Through his untidy bangs, Xie Qingcheng looked at He Yu's face, the way his teeth were gritted while he fumed with rage.

"Why are you like this when you're with me? Can't you just lie down?" He Yu asked.

"Let go."

He Yu responded by holding him down even harder.

Xie Qingcheng frowned. "That's too hard."

He Yu ignored him and just picked him up. He exercised regularly and was in good shape, so it didn't take much effort for He Yu to pick up a 180-centimeter-tall man.

Xie Qingcheng, on the other hand, looked extremely displeased. "Put me down, dammit!"

He Yu carried him to the bedroom and tossed him onto the bed, following after to hold Xie Qingcheng down with his own body weight.

"You—!"

He Yu pushed his face close and stared at Xie Qingcheng. "It's only four in the morning. Can't you just get a good night's sleep?" When Xie Qingcheng didn't answer, He Yu insisted, "I'll stay with you."

Xie Qingcheng's body was ice-cold. He wasn't young anymore, and he wasn't in shape, so his circulation wasn't very good. His hands and feet were even colder after his nightmare. In comparison, He Yu was very warm. A twenty-year-old boy's body was like a furnace, so from a biological perspective, his embrace should have

been comfortable for Xie Qingcheng. But Xie Qingcheng didn't like it one bit. He didn't like being hugged, especially not by a man.

"I'm not sleepy anymore," Xie Qingcheng said. "Let go."

"Sleep."

"Sleep on your own. Let go of me."

Xie Qingcheng struggled. Those whose desires were negligible tended to forget that others were not as indifferent as they were. Physical contact was inevitable as they fought with each other on the bed. He Yu was a typical twenty-year-old male college student, and not anything like the sexually frigid Xie Qingcheng. How could he bear such friction? The color of He Yu's pupils slowly darkened.

"Xie Qingcheng," he said in a low voice, "stop moving."

Xie Qingcheng felt even more uncomfortable. Not only was He Yu refusing to listen to him, now he was trying to order him around.

"Are you trying to play ninja at four in the morning, you little brat?" Xie Qingcheng made to move off the bed.

He Yu pushed him back to the center of the mattress with a soft thud. His breathing became heavier as he looked down at Xie Qingcheng. "How come you're considerate of everyone else but me?"

Xie Qingcheng was just about to ask him how he wasn't considerate of him when He Yu held his wrists and pressed his entire body onto him.

"Can you feel it?"

He Yu looked at Xie Qingcheng's face, which had turned even paler, though without any change in his expression.

"Listen," He Yu whined, almost as if he was the one being wronged, "I've been holding myself back this entire time, and this is how you're going to treat me?"

Xie Qingcheng stared at him sternly.

"Who's the little brat, Xie-ge?" He Yu asked.

"Get the fuck off of me," Xie Qingcheng snapped.

"Then will you sleep beside me quietly?"

"Get off."

"Xie Qingcheng, you won't even go to bed. You're the little brat."

"Get—"

"Off" was lost between their lips and teeth.

He Yu couldn't handle his burning love, his insane possessiveness, and his indescribable want for tenderness. The rush of desires pushed him to kiss Xie Qingcheng's lips.

This kiss was completely different from the one they had when they watched fireworks and cut cake. Any other man would sense that it contained the sexual desires of a male that wanted to mate; it was the kind of kiss that only occurred in the midst of lovemaking. Xie Qingcheng couldn't withstand such aggressive desire and tried to break free, but he was firmly held down.

Xie Qingcheng had lost his strength in one arm, and he was more helpless before He Yu than ever. He had to endure that passionate, affectionate, and desperate kiss. He Yu was trying to drag him down to the abyss of lust, but Xie Qingcheng just looked at him with those calm peach-blossom eyes while he gasped for breath.

"He Yu, you have to be responsible for yourself," he told him. "Do you understand that? We don't have a future. Don't do something that'll make you fall deeper, that drives you to make mistakes over and over again."

He Yu paused, panting slightly. His dark eyes gazed at him: fanatically, lovingly, and obsessively.

"You said that twelve years too late," He Yu said. "I may have started falling the first time I saw you. Your appearance brought hope to my world. Because of you, I have someone by my side who can completely understand my pain. If what we're doing right now is

wrong, then it was already wrong when you gave me your hand twelve years ago."

Xie Qingcheng thought he was being ridiculous. "I've told you before, you're confusing your dependence on an elder with love. It's time to wake up."

"I'm not," He Yu said. "You wouldn't be able to feel this"—he pressed his hardness against Xie Qingcheng's body—"just because of dependence. I like you, Xie Qingcheng; it's as simple as that. Even if you think I'm wrong, I'll be wrong until the end, until I die—then I'll be proven right. Don't be so upset and don't wake up so easily from sleep, because I'm here. Every day, minute, and second that I'm alive, I'll love you. I will protect you, and I won't leave you."

There was an endlessly deep emotion in He Yu's eyes, and in such close quarters, it crashed right into Xie Qingcheng's chest. He'd thought that his heart was permafrost, unbreakable, but He Yu wasn't throwing pebbles or stones. He turned the entire sky into a meteor shower, and even fields of ice trembled when the strikes landed.

Xie Qingcheng froze for a second, lost in that image. The moment he did, He Yu closed his eyes, and with his eyelashes slightly trembling, he leaned over to kiss him forcefully, over and over again.

These kisses were lustful and lingering, affectionate and eager. Between their wet kisses and rapid breathing, among the twisting and turning positions, amid their gasps for breath, He Yu kept murmuring, "Xie Qingcheng, I love you. I'm not wrong. I love you. I want you. I only want you."

As He Yu kissed and whispered to him, a sour feeling rose in Xie Qingcheng's chest. He thought he sympathized with He Yu's unrequited desire, but there was something else there.

"Xie Qingcheng… Xie Qingcheng…"

Why was he so obsessed with him? But there was no point in asking. The obsession in He Yu's eyes was unmistakable. He didn't

need a reason.

"Look at me, please?"

Xie Qingcheng refused.

"Look at me. I'll always be with you. You don't have to live among the dead, because I'll always stay with you. No more nightmares. I'll always be here."

He Yu was good at reading people, and he could see Xie Qingcheng was touched by his words—more or less.

He looked up and met He Yu's gaze, peach-blossom eyes to almond eyes. Those almond eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

He Yu seemed encouraged; he brushed away the scattered hair on Xie Qingcheng's forehead, hugged him, and kissed him with love that was carved into his bones. The feeling around the large bed became more intimate, and their intertwined lips and teeth blazed, friction burning them until their limbs became tangled. The breathing in the room turned heavy and rapid, with occasional creaking noises from the Simmons mattress when they turned over.

The clock on the wall read 4:30 a.m. He Yu clung to him as if the night had just begun.

However—

Ding ding!

At such a strange time, Xie Qingcheng's cell phone, left in the living room, suddenly rang. The ringing went on and on, jerking Xie Qingcheng out of He Yu's spell.

Suddenly clearheaded, Xie Qingcheng realized what he was doing and pushed He Yu away.

He even thought to himself, *Fuck, that was close.* His peach-blossom eyes were still glazed with lust, but his expression had settled.

He glared at He Yu warily. "I'll go pick up the phone."

He Yu was so angry that he pulled him back forcefully, his pupils going red. "'Pick up'? It's probably just a telemarketer!" He tried to kiss Xie Qingcheng again.

But now that Xie Qingcheng's mind had cleared, it wasn't so easy for him to lose himself again. The phone in the living room kept ringing, too, so it was obvious that it wasn't a spam call. Someone was looking for him.

Xie Qingcheng insisted on pushing away the young man, who was still trapped in desire. He pulled his clothes back into place, got off the bed, and went to pick up his phone.

He Yu was so upset that he punched his Xie-ge's headboard hard enough to leave a crack in the wood.

He flopped down onto the bed, gritting his teeth so hard they were about to crack, just like the headboard. Who was the fucker who'd interrupted him?!

"What happened?" Xie Qingcheng's voice came from the living room, soon identifying the culprit. "Lao-Zheng?"

Chapter 135:
We Won't Give Up

HE YU LAY DEJECTEDLY on the bed, like a young husband who'd failed to make love to his wife on their wedding night and had lost all will to live. He turned his head in sullen silence, looking through the half-open door at his pretty wife on the phone.

He hated Zheng Jingfeng. Calling at such a godforsaken time? Did the bastard think Xie Qingcheng's phone was a twenty-four-hour public hotline?

Finally, after so much difficulty, he'd created the perfect atmosphere with his Xie-ge. It was the first time since New Year's Eve that he'd had the chance to make Xie Qingcheng's eyes go hazy and half trick, half coax him into bed. Now that middle-aged cop who had no passion for his wife had ruined everything! Could these geriatric, menopausal people be considerate of a young man who hadn't gotten any for several months?!

Meanwhile, Zheng Jingfeng had no idea that he'd interrupted a male college student's long-awaited night of passion. From the other side of the phone, he asked, "Xiao-Xie, is everything okay over there?"

"What's wrong? Why are you suddenly calling like this?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I'm glad you're all right," said Zheng Jingfeng. "Come to my house. I just got back from the bureau, and there's something you should know."

This situation was unsettlingly similar to the one in his nightmare. Xie Qingcheng's hand tightened around his phone. "Did something happen to you?"

"I'll tell you in person. I shouldn't say it over the phone."

Right when Xie Qingcheng was about to agree, He Yu came out of the bedroom, wrapped in a blanket with just his messy hair sticking out over top, and put his chin on Xie Qingcheng's shoulder. He'd clearly heard Xie Qingcheng and Zheng Jingfeng's conversation.

"Take me," he said coolly into the phone.

The person on the other side went silent for a moment. "Who is this? Xiao-Yan?"

He Yu raised his eyebrows. "Who?" Even more agitated, He Yu looked at Xie Qingcheng, unimpressed. "When did you get together with all these Yans?"

Xie Qingcheng pushed his head away. "He's talking about Chen Yan, Chen Man."

"Tsk…" He Yu finally figured it out. "Chen Man" did seem like a nickname, but almost nobody used his real name, so he never remembered what Chen Man's real name was.

He Yu was both happy and unhappy at the same time. He was happy because Xie Qingcheng hadn't hooked up with some Da Yan or Xiao Yan, but he was unhappy that Zheng Jingfeng seemed to think it was normal that Xie Qingcheng would be with Chen Man at four thirty in the morning. It sounded like they'd done it quite often before.

The unhappiness slowly took over. He Yu leaned over again, and with a put-on, roguish affect, he said, "Hello, Mr. Zheng. It's me. Can't you tell? It's He Yu."

Zheng Jingfeng needed a moment. "The young man who was speeding at the Skynight Club?"

He Yu was too lazy to correct the ruffian image Captain Zheng had of him. "Yep, that's me."

"Why are you with Xie Qingcheng at this hour of the night?"

"Well…"

Xie Qingcheng pulled He Yu's blanket over his head, smothering him in it, and pushed him aside. "He locked himself out, he's staying the night at my house," he told Zheng Jingfeng.

"Well, then have him come, too," Zheng Jingfeng said. "You two were the ones who told me, so he can listen. Bring him along."

Zheng Jingfeng was actually at a large studio apartment in an old residential complex near his workplace. It was about thirty square meters, and very clean. Zheng Jingfeng's parents had left him the room, so he couldn't bear to sell it. His work was quite busy and he often had to stay through the night, so he would choose to rest here instead of going home in the middle of the night and waking up his grandson.

There was an elderly man sitting in the room when He Yu and Xie Qingcheng arrived. Though he wasn't in uniform, his temperament gave them the sense that he was a veteran cop. This man was Daming's shifu: the old forensic scientist.

"It's them?" the man asked.

"It's them," said Zheng Jingfeng.

The old forensic doctor stood up and smiled as he extended his hand first to Xie Qingcheng, then to He Yu. "Thank you both. If it wasn't for you, the video camera in the celebrity murder case might have been stolen."

He Yu, still sulking about his interrupted sex life, perked up a bit when he heard that. "What, someone was really going to steal it?"

The old forensic doctor looked ashamed. "Yes. I would never have thought that it would be my own apprentice."

"Let's all sit first," Zheng Jingfeng said. "I'll introduce everyone."

Once the initial introductions were out of the way, he said to Xie Qingcheng, "Forensic Scientist Luo is a friend I've known for forty years. Truthfully, I didn't dare tell just anyone in the bureau about the information you guys gave me. It's hard for me to trust other people, but luckily, he was the forensic scientist in charge of the celebrity murder case."

Zheng Jingfeng explained how Daming was caught.

It turned out that when Zheng Jingfeng had received the information from He Yu, he'd told Forensic Scientist Luo about it. They didn't alert the enemy—instead they placed a video camera of the same model into the evidence room to bait any would-be thieves. The video in the fake camera was recorded by Zheng Jingfeng himself; he had wanted to test the secondhand camera to see if it was working. As a result, when Daming turned it on, he saw Zheng Jingfeng's smiling face, which had a terrifying effect on his guilty conscience.

"The real video camera has already been restored, but there's a fine line between what we can say and what we can't say, what we can give and what we can't give," Zheng Jingfeng said. "We can't show the recording to you."

"I understand," said Xie Qingcheng. "Are there any clues you can share?"

Zheng Jingfeng stayed silent. He didn't want to tell Xie Qingcheng—the less he knew, the better it would be for him.

Xie Qingcheng could guess what Zheng Jingfeng's reticence implied. "Why did you want me to come over today, then?"

"Honestly? I wanted to persuade you to stop investigating this matter."

He Yu was so upset that he laughed derisively. "Uncle, *you* used *our* information to prevent theft of evidence, but you called us urgently at four thirty in the morning to come over just to tell us to not investigate anymore?"

He had more he wanted to say—that he and Xie Qingcheng had already rolled into bed, and he was ready to ply Xie Qingcheng until he forgot himself and let He Yu fuck him. But Zheng Jingfeng's damn phone call had interrupted his multimillion-dollar project. What was he going to repay him with? What a joke! Didn't he know that a night of love was worth a thousand gold?

Zheng Jingfeng, of course, couldn't know that he'd ruined Young Master He's night.

"Forensic Scientist Luo's apprentice was caught at the scene two hours ago," Zheng Jingfeng replied gravely. "Under normal circumstances, we would still be in the interrogation room and waiting for his confession, but instead, we're here to talk to you two. Do you know why?" The old cop paused, saw their uncomprehending faces, and continued, "Because not even half an hour into the interrogation, the building caught fire. Nobody was injured, but the interrogation had to be stopped halfway. The arsonist was caught—a mentally ill patient."

"What?" He Yu frowned, realizing how serious the situation was, and stopped cursing about insignificant matters.

"Such a coincidence is impossible," Xie Qingcheng said.

"The arsonist was truly mentally ill, not faking it by any means," Forensic Scientist Luo added. "But his purpose was clear: to attack the building where my apprentice was being held. It was as if he'd been hypnotized to carry out a set of instructions. It sounds unrealistic, but frankly put, it seemed as if he were being controlled."

When He Yu and Xie Qingcheng heard that, they were both silent for a moment, thinking of the blood toxin and the obedience potion. The blood toxin was unique to He Yu, so the obedience potion was the most likely tool.

"In the half hour we spent with Daming, it became clear we wouldn't be able to get anything useful out of him. He has no idea who the mastermind is, but even so, those backing him were still eager to save him—or burn him," Zheng Jingfeng said. "It worries

me—I called you immediately because I was concerned for your safety. That's why I asked you to come over at this hour of the night."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

"Xiao-Xie, and, um…young man. Do you two know what the biggest difference between this case and the previous ones is?"

"What is it?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"Not careful enough," Zheng Jingfeng said. "Too frantic. He seemed like a panicked stray dog, doing things without thinking it through—the opposite of the previous cases, which were sophisticated, calm, and savage. This type of person exposes themselves easily, but they can be quite scary because they're thoughtless. Thoughtless people don't know how to calculate the amount of harm they cause, and have no common sense. They might cause unnecessary harm to others. That's why I told you to not investigate any further. Your lives come first," Zheng Jingfeng concluded.

"With the clues the police currently have, I think the culprit will reveal themselves any day now," added Forensic Scientist Luo. "Doing something as stupid as setting fire to the city bureau building means that the other side is disorganized. Right now, unrelated parties should protect themselves and avoid turning themselves into cannon fodder."

This was why Xie Qingcheng didn't like saying much to Zheng Jingfeng in recent years.

Zheng Jingfeng drew a firm line between the police and the people. Even though Xie Qingcheng and his companions had provided crucial clues to solve a case, and even if the case's outcome was intimately related to Xie Qingcheng, Lao-Zheng could simply turn around and say, "You're not a cop," and exclude him. It had happened at the broadcasting tower, too.

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to argue with Zheng Jingfeng right now. What was the point of reasoning with a bull that'd been this

stubborn for decades? Zheng Jingfeng didn't fully understand his situation, anyway. He had no way of knowing that the only way to cure Xie Xue was by investigating Zhilong Entertainment.

"Last time, you told me to not interfere with my parents' case," Xie Qingcheng said, once his thoughts were clear. "You said I should wait—and I waited for nineteen years. It's coming up on the twentieth year now. Was the criminal caught?"

Zheng Jingfeng sighed. "This time, it's different. I told you that the crime was rushed, so it won't be long before clues are revealed."

"Then how long do you want me to wait this time?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"At the current rate, progress will probably be announced to the public in a week," said Forensic Scientist Luo. "Can you wait a week?"

Xie Qingcheng stood up, letting his silence speak for him. He didn't want to deal with the police anymore. They were good people and they worked hard, but there were too many restrictions.

He said one last thing to Zheng Jingfeng. "Lao-Zheng, if you don't want me to investigate further because you're worried about our target being such a reckless madman since I'm 'not a cop,' you have to be careful as well. You may be a policeman, but you're a grandfather now too. To your family, you're just a normal person."

Zheng Jingfeng shuddered and stared at him with his panther-like eyes. Xie Qingcheng was rarely in a good mood around him and hardly ever expressed his emotions. However, in that moment, Zheng Jingfeng understood Xie Qingcheng—someone whose parents had been sacrificed. He was suddenly reminded that he also had a family and children.

With that, Xie Qingcheng inclined his head at He Yu, who stood up from his seat. They left together.

The fire at the police station had been set by a psychiatric patient whose mental state was completely shattered, so

interrogating him didn't produce any useful information. Daming couldn't give any important information, either. However, even though neither of them produced any clues, the actress murder case did make some progress.

A week after their discussion with Zheng Jingfeng, Xie Qingcheng was having dinner at the medical school cafeteria when he received a call from He Yu.

"Have you been on Weibo?" He Yu asked.

"No, I don't use it. What's happening?"

"Where are you? I'll tell you in person."

He Yu drove to Huzhou Medical School, where he located Xie Qingcheng in the cafeteria. It was mealtime, and it was crowded; since He Yu often went to Xie Qingcheng's class, a lot of the students recognized him. They started whispering as soon as they saw him.

"Look, it's that handsome guy from the university next door."

"Hey, why is he here again? I heard he's an honors student at the university, but for some reason, he's been taking leaves of absence and skipping classes all semester. He's probably spending all his time picking up girls, like a middle school student whose grades drop because of dating."

"He's always trying to curry favor with Xie Qingcheng. Who's he trying to date in his class? You'd think he would've succeeded by now."

"I'm speechless! He's so handsome, but she won't say yes? How high are her standards?"

He Yu made his way through the crowd and found Xie Qingcheng's spot easily. He generally sat in the same area whenever he ate. Xie Qingcheng had ordered clay pot rice for He Yu, and the dish had just reached the perfect temperature when He Yu arrived and sat down.

"What happened?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"The police released clues about the celebrity murder case. News on Weibo travels faster than news on official accounts." He Yu handed him his cell phone. "Look at this."

The report was issued by the official police account. Since the actress was famous and Huang Zhilong couldn't suppress the public's opinion, the number of netizens paying attention to the case increased day by day. On Weibo, they would speculate on who the murderer was every day, and some foolish fans even went to the accounts of the accused celebrities, bosses, and managers to make trouble and accuse them of homicide. One male celebrity with a short temper had ended up reporting the rumor-spreaders to the police. In short, many innocents were implicated for no reason because of this case, and the official police account couldn't just sit by and watch, so they finally released a report.

Who was the murderer? Was it a crime of passion? Was there any progress in the search for the culprit? Everyone clicked on the announcement with great anticipation, but the results of the forensic report were nothing like what they'd imagined.

The actress had died in a strange, unnatural way in her bathtub, and the room was filled with signs of a struggle. Despite that, the final report showed that the actress had *committed suicide*!

Chapter 136:
I Want to Go with You

THE INITIAL POLICE REPORT had showed that the signs of a struggle in the actress's villa were abnormal, very unlike the aftermath of two people fighting. At the time, no conclusion could be drawn because there wasn't enough evidence. Now, after trace testing and uncovering additional evidence, they could confirm that the actress was the only one in the villa when she died. According to their report, she had actually suffered from severe mental illness and dissociative identity disorder when she was alive.

In her final break with reality, one of her personalities wanted to kill the other one, but no matter which personality she took on, it was still just her. The strange traces of a fight in the room, the abnormal killing method, and the blood splatter were all because of this war with herself.

In Forensic Scientist Luo's reconstruction of the suicide, the actress first lost control because of her conflicting personalities and developed the desire to attack herself. She began to play the role of a victim and a murderer at the same time, crying out and hurting herself, thinking she was running away while she was the one doing the chasing, too.

In the end, the murderous personality won, and she "killed" her other personality.

After that, the actress's mental state had collapsed, and the murderer started to self-destruct. That personality was a depraved part of her that she'd always suppressed—something she could never show to the public. Once this part of her had taken over her mind, it was like a hungry beast let out of a long imprisonment, with formidable force. The murderer in her wanted to show off its twisted, perverse personality, and she finally chose a very bizarre

method: putting a video camera above the bathtub, planning to record her entire process of death.

Forensic Scientist Luo had confirmed this by successfully repairing the video camera and accessing the contents of the memory card. When the police opened the video, they saw a distorted, enlarged face.

The first thing the woman on the recording said was, "I hate cameras.

"Yes, it was cameras… Cameras completely emptied me out and shoved in a fake character that I don't even recognize. I played a role every day, roles that had more time in my body than my real self! I feel disgusting, disgusting, *disgusting*!"

She repeated herself three times in a row and grimaced, her pretty face twisting into a hideous shape on screen.

"Those cameras, and those camera lenses—they took away my soul! I don't look like a living person in front of the camera. To show the audience an unreal, perfect image, I was terrified of saying or doing anything wrong… I've been trying to please the camera for so long. I won't do it anymore! I want to reveal the ugliest parts of myself for the camera, leaving only death, rot, and stink in the spotlight! Ha ha! *Ha ha ha!*"

Obviously, the police didn't release the video, only a text description. In the video, the actress said many more similar things, and inflicted bloody violence on herself again and again.

In addition to the video description, there was reliable information that revealed an important clue to Xie Qingcheng and He Yu. Apparently, the actress's mental illness wasn't congenital. In the recording, she said something strange: that the entertainment company used inhumane, abnormal methods to make her face the public as a well-behaved puppet. However, her mental state was scrambled when she recorded the video, and her words were vague, so she didn't mention what those abnormal methods were. She only

laughed senselessly the whole time, buried her head in the bathtub, and pretended to drink water.

The police were currently confirming the information.

"Obedience potion," He Yu said to Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng didn't respond. Looking at the large number of likes, shares, and comments on the Weibo post, he felt a vague unease.

Netizen A: *"Zhilong Entertainment has to be thoroughly investigated!"*

Netizen B: *"It definitely has to do with Huang Zhilong! The police should look into how many artists he's killed!"*

Netizen C: *"What does she mean by 'abnormal methods'? How dare an entertainment company use something like that on their artists! That's terrifying. Were they forced? Was it some unspoken industry rule? This must be investigated thoroughly so the dead and the public can have an explanation! This is so lawless, it's like some mafia crime…"*

He Yu watched Xie Qingcheng read the comments. "Almost all of the comments, tens upon thousands, are asking the police to investigate Zhilong Entertainment," he observed. "It's a serious problem now. Even if Huang Zhilong somehow had protection from the police before, they can't help him this time. Maybe things will turn out like Zheng Jingfeng said, and they can give an explanation."

Xie Qingcheng, however, was silent for a long time. "No," he said at last. "This means trouble."

"How?" He Yu asked, frowning. He wasn't familiar with the way the police moved.

"It's not possible to arrest and investigate Huang Zhilong just because of a video from the deceased, especially when she was a psychiatric patient with dissociative identity disorder," Xie Qingcheng said. "Now that things have come to this, the higher-ups will allow an investigation order, but at best that would allow them to

interrogate Huang Zhilong for twenty-four hours, and they'd have no right to search his company. Which is to say—the police can definitely get results from this, but…"

"But?"

"If he really has the illegal obedience potion, and if what Zhao Xue said in the video about his basement is true, that it's a den for selling stolen human bodies and organs, he'll have time to destroy the evidence." Xie Qingcheng's expression turned ugly as he spoke, and he exited He Yu's Weibo to pull up Baidu to search for Huang Zhilong, scrolling straight to his nationality.

When he saw it was the same as his own, Xie Qingcheng's brows relaxed a little.

"Xie-ge." He Yu understood what he'd just looked up.

"Hmm?"

"Huang Zhilong has a green card for New Zealand. He could destroy the evidence and flee abroad in that time period if he wanted to."

Xie Qingcheng went quiet.

They both knew that if Huang Zhilong ran, all the clues they'd collected up until this point would be useless.

They were pursuing a giant crocodile, and if the crocodile escaped their net, it would muddy the waters and startle the fish and shrimp in the ponds into running away as well. Once that happened, it would be incredibly difficult to obtain the molecular formula or a sample of the obedience potion and evidence of these people's crimes.

Xie Qingcheng returned the phone to He Yu. For a moment it seemed like he wanted to say something, but he stayed quiet in the end.

"Anything else?" He Yu asked.

"No." Surprisingly, Xie Qingcheng continued, "This isn't something we can intervene with any further. We can only wait for the police to continue investigating."

He Yu looked at him, thoughtful. He could tell that learning all this had worried Xie Qingcheng.

After sitting for a bit and nibbling at his food, Xie Qingcheng told He Yu, "I still have things to attend to, so I'll step out first. Take your time."

He left the cafeteria quickly. He Yu gazed at his back, and the suspicion in his eyes slowly grew deeper.

That night, Xie Qingcheng made a trip back to Moyu Alley. He went on his own without telling anyone, and he even opened the doors slowly because he didn't want his neighbors, including Auntie Li, to know.

He didn't turn on the light, and used the scattered light from the street lamps outside to swiftly pack a couple of things, then looked at his watch, closed the door, and left his home.

Just as he plugged in the address of his next destination to his phone and was about to call for a cab, he caught a glimpse of a figure with his hands in his pockets, watching him quietly as he stood backlit in a narrow alley.

It was He Yu, whom he'd seen not too long ago.

"Why are you here?" asked Xie Qingcheng.

"I came to see where you're going at such a late hour."

"There's something at school I have to take care of. I'll be doing some overtime."

"Really." He Yu stood upright and walked closer. "Perfect, that's the same direction I'm going. Let's go together."

"There's no need," Xie Qingcheng said.

"You're not going to take the ride even though it's on the way?"

"I have to go see a friend first."

"Chen Man?"

"No."

"I've known you for so long, but I've never seen you spend time with any other friends," He Yu pointed out. He was very close to Xie Qingcheng now. He stopped in front of him, lowered his gaze, and stared at him.

Xie Qingcheng didn't plan on talking to him for much longer. He went to sweep past He Yu.

As he was about to pass him, He Yu said, "Why won't you tell me the truth? Do you think I can't see right through you, Xie Qingcheng?"

As He Yu spoke, a puff of air foretold his sudden movement. Abruptly, he grabbed one of Xie Qingcheng's hands and pushed him against the wall.

"You—!" Xie Qingcheng said.

He Yu's eyes were dark. "You're planning to go to Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters, aren't you?"

Xie Qingcheng's expression twitched, but his voice was still cold. "What nonsense are you spouting?"



"Nonsense? Really?" He Yu asked, and suddenly grabbed Xie Qingcheng's phone from his hand. The screen was still on, and Xie Qingcheng hadn't exited the cab app. The address that he'd searched for was *"Zhilong Entertainment Headquarters."*

He Yu quietly looked at that line of words, the light from the cell phone painting a silver-blue glaze on his eyelashes. It was hard to say whether his expression was sardonic, annoyed, or bitter. He handed the phone back to Xie Qingcheng.

"That's the overtime you were talking about?" He Yu asked.

Since he'd been found out, Xie Qingcheng decided to stop hiding things. He used his uninjured hand to push He Yu away, then straightened his sleeves.

"Yes," he said with a glance at He Yu. "I have to go to Zhilong Entertainment's basement as soon as possible, before Huang Zhilong escapes and destroys all the evidence. I need more evidence, enough to give the police a reason to search the building. I need to find the place Zhao Xue mentioned in her video."

He Yu didn't move or speak.

"It's all right if you don't understand, but please move aside." Xie Qingcheng assumed He Yu wouldn't be able to accept his conviction.

But to his surprise, He Yu's gaze barely flickered.

"I knew that would be your reaction. That's normal, that's you, Xie Qingcheng." Xie Qingcheng started a little as He Yu sneered at him. "Did you really think I wouldn't be able to tell? You were planning this when we were eating. It was obvious. You don't need to hide anything from me, because I understand you—and I won't stop you from doing this. Everyone else might not understand your decision. They'd probably call it risky and unnecessary. But I know that a lot of your life was destroyed by these criminal organizations. These insane incidents have stolen people and things that are

precious to you, and Xie Xue is your last living relative. You want to protect her."

He understood that Xie Qingcheng would never be able to sit by and watch as Xie Xue's body deteriorated until she turned into a case file as miserable as the two of them. Not only that, but pursuing the truth was important to Xie Qingcheng. If RN-13 was still being utilized by those experimental organizations—or worse, further developed, using the blood and flesh of living people to produce more results—that was something Xie Qingcheng could never accept, let alone stand idly by while it went on.

Xie Qingcheng was silent for a moment. "If you already know, then move aside."

"Since I guessed correctly, let me go with you."

It wasn't the first time He Yu had said this to Xie Qingcheng. He'd heard the same thing during the broadcasting tower incident.

At the time, Xie Qingcheng had been eager to know who killed his parents, but Zheng Jingfeng and Chen Man were unable to tell him anything because of their positions in the force. In his desperation, he could only search for the answer himself. That was when He Yu pushed open the door and walked into his room, holding out his hand.

I can help you, He Yu said. *Xie Qingcheng, I'll go with you.*

He Yu didn't even "like" him then, but he made that offer anyway.

After that, they'd been trapped in the reservoir together and spent a rainy night in the barren hills of the Yi Family Village. Their lives had been in danger every time, and one perilous obstacle after another stood in their way. He didn't want He Yu to struggle through the dangers of the entertainment company's basement with him. Not again.

"He Yu, listen. I want to solve this on my own. Whether I manage to find evidence or grab a sample of the obedience potion,

it’s all to save Xie Xue. You’ve helped me enough; just stop here. There’s no need to keep going.” Xie Qingcheng paused and coughed softly. “Go back to your dorm and rest. You’re just a twenty-year-old student.”

Seeing that Xie Qingcheng was about to leave, He Yu grabbed his wrist, right over his tattoo.

“Is this why you won’t tell me what you’re really thinking? You’re going to solve everything on your own because I’m too young? Or is it because you don’t want to owe anyone anything?”

“Yes,” Xie Qingcheng said, as if it were obvious. “I shouldn’t owe you anything anymore.”

He Yu was angry now. “Xie Qingcheng, do you—do you have a mood disorder? You think you can give everything up, even your life, without batting an eye, but you can’t accept anyone else’s kindness or company?”

“It’s a very dangerous situation. I hope you can…” Xie Qingcheng began, his expression serious.

He Yu didn’t let him finish. He hugged him.

“Xie Qingcheng, listen up,” he said, looking strained. “I don’t regret going to the archives, the studio, or the Yi Family Village with you at all. Like I told you before, I love you. I don’t know if you’ve loved anyone in your life, but you should understand the feeling of not wanting someone important to you to face danger alone. You’re not willing to wait for others to give you results—so why are you willing to impose that sort of waiting and helplessness on me?”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t have an answer for that.

“Xie Qingcheng, do you hate me that much?”

“No.”

“Do you want to torment me to death?”

“No.”

"Do you think I can watch you risk going to Zhilong Entertainment HQ on your own, then, while I lay in my dorm with a clear conscience, doing homework, watching TV, and chatting with my roommates? Do you really think I would?"

He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng for a long while, then slowly straightened up with a sense of victory. As if he saw Xie Qingcheng's heart through his eyes, he knew that Xie Qingcheng wanted to refute him but had no way to.

"Mr. Xie," He Yu said stubbornly, "your cab has been canceled, and your new driver is right in front of you, ready to serve you. Please get in the car."

If this danger wasn't enough to chase He Yu away, then he had to give up. The young man staring at him was an adult, after all; he couldn't be forced to leave.

Still, Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth and said, "If you keep messing around with me like this, you're going to fucking fail your damn finals. You're a student, but you don't care. What's wrong with you?"

"You really wanna know?" Before Xie Qingcheng could stop him, He Yu said, "I was seduced by the professor from the school next door. The more he ignored me, the more I wanted to date him. I didn't have the heart to study. Professor, you're the one who seduced me. If I fail, can you be my private tutor?"

There was a suggestion hidden in his words. Tutor him? Where, and on what? He'd probably end up in bed with him. He Yu didn't try hiding it—the look in his eyes conveyed a meaning that wasn't suitable for children.

Xie Qingcheng thought he was ridiculous for saying such a thing at such a time. "If anything happens to you, I won't protect you. I'll let you die."

He Yu seemed to accept this. "I only have one request," he said.

"What?"

"Kiss me once before I die. To die for love is yet an alluring thing."

Xie Qingcheng ignored him completely, and turned to leave with a crabby expression. He Yu thought he might have cursed at him under his breath.

Contrary to what Xie Qingcheng might think, talking nonsense wasn't the only thing on He Yu's mind. With all the dangers looming ahead, he thought it wasn't good to be so tense. After a bit of banter, the night's serious atmosphere had improved a lot.

As he chased after Xie Qingcheng, He Yu grew serious again. "Really, Xie Qingcheng. I have the blood toxin, so I don't need you to protect me. Just take care of yourself. At Qingli County Hospital, you promised me that you wouldn't sacrifice yourself for anyone else again. You can't forget that."

Xie Qingcheng ignored him and walked to the car. As He Yu was nearby, the sensor key had already automatically unlocked the door. Xie Qingcheng opened the car door, glanced over his shoulder, and said, "Let's go."

"You promised me," He Yu persisted. "Chinese people don't lie to their own."

"Is there something wrong with you? Get in."

The two of them got into the car. Xie Qingcheng glanced at the half-eaten hamburger, still in the bag, that He Yu had left there.

"Didn't eat dinner?" he asked.

"With things this serious, how could I be in the mood to go to a restaurant to have a real meal? Junk food can be pretty good sometimes, too." He Yu handed him the bag. "Want some fries?"

Xie Qingcheng pushed it away. Parents were all like this—they instinctively disapproved when their children ate KFC or McDonalds.

“Then when we’re back, can Gege make me some Yangzhou fried rice?”

“Start the car.”

“I want a lot of sweet shrimp. I want you to make a He Yu special Yanzhou fried rice with lots of shrimp.”

“Just drive the fucking car.”

Chapter 137:
Entering Headquarters

THEY PREPARED THEMSELVES before sneaking into the basement of Zhilong Entertainment.

Before they drove off, He Yu had quietly hacked into Huang Zhilong's private system, cloned the opening permissions of all of his electronic locks, and obtained the original blueprint of the Zhilong Entertainment headquarters.

Though it was nighttime now, the building was still heavily guarded, so it was risky to sneak in from the front. After studying the map for a while, they agreed that it would be safest to enter at the large vehicle loading dock behind the building. Even at this hour, trucks were still going in and out.

In the dark, He Yu stared at the trucks entering Zhilong headquarters with their passes. "You know what this reminds me of?"

"What?"

"The Auschwitz concentration camp on the eve of Germany's defeat," He Yu said softly. "The Nazis started killing a large number of prisoners in the camp because they were witnesses, and they carried out large-scale document burnings to destroy material evidence. Look. These trucks keep coming in and out—empty trucks going in, full trucks coming out. The things inside probably need to stay secret, and even though they'll disguise them during transportation…"

Xie Qingcheng saw He Yu pick up his phone. "What are you going to do?"

"Give them some trouble."

Less than fifteen minutes later, a funeral car from He's Nursing Home turned from the intersection and rear-ended one of the trucks with a bang. The driver of the funeral car got out, cursing, and called the traffic police, insisting that the accident had happened because the truck was overloaded and traveling extremely slowly.

Normally, the traffic police wouldn't stop and check what a truck was holding, but it was different when an accident had occurred. The truck driver was forced to open his truck for investigation.

When it swung open…

"Sea sand," the driver told the traffic police. "It's just some building materials. It's really not overloaded."

The driver of the funeral car that He Yu sent had a mic on him to pick up the conversation at the scene of the accident. He Yu frowned when he heard the words "sea sand."

Sea sand was a type of building material: mud and sand dredged from the sea. If the Zhilong building was being renovated or expanded, it would be normal for the trucks to be carrying sea sand in and out.

The carrying capacity was several tons and everything inside was a muddy mess; it would be near impossible to find any hidden instruments, illicit goods, substances, or even body parts hidden inside the truck. Traffic police had no right to ask drivers to clear the sand and unload their freight over a minor accident like this—sea sand wasn't cheap, and it was sometimes auctioned off by shipping companies if they were unable to make ends meet. This was Zhilong Group's private property; even the administrative department couldn't demand the sand without cause.

"Looks like they're really destroying the evidence," said He Yu. "It's like they've mixed several kilograms of cocaine into ten tons of sand. It'd be nearly impossible to find. If they pour most of the obedience potion into the sand, that's as good as pouring it into the sea, completely diluted and hidden. And with a truck this big, it'd be

easy to hide multiple bodies in the sand, too. I'm not a pessimist, but I suspect if there really are test subjects in the basement, they're killing them right now."

Xie Qingcheng didn't say anything, but he wasn't shocked. After all, killing prisoners before a war ended and silencing witnesses before the truth came out were common practices. The Zhilong Group had no morals to begin with—why would they be any better?

They couldn't delay anymore. Every minute, every second they wasted lost them the opportunity to uncover the truth and save lives.

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng went over their plans. Though each plan was full of holes, they didn't expect Huang Zhilong to happily hand over the obedience potion, and they had no more time to prepare.

In the end, they decided to enter through the high-voltage electrical substation. This entrance appeared to be impossible to break into because it was surrounded by high-voltage nets, but He Yu had started examining it a while ago, and he'd found that this section of the net was controlled by a computer room in the Zhilong Entertainment headquarters. To prevent accidents, staff were on duty there twenty-four hours a day.

It was simple for someone with He Yu's skills to hack into the computers and hijack the software, but the staff member monitoring the computers was going to be troublesome. Once He Yu was in, they would notice immediately, and no matter whether that person reported it to Huang Zhilong or just restored the power while they were climbing over the high-voltage power lines, the results would be disastrous.

"But I do have an idea," He Yu said. "It would just require us to climb faster."

As he said this, he picked up his phone for the second time that night and made a call. This second call was to a twenty-four-hour café near the Zhilong Building.

"Yes, one caramel macchiato to downstairs. Call this number and my friend will come down to pick it up," He Yu said, rattling off a number that he'd looked up in advance.

From where they were standing, they could see what was happening in the computer room.

Not even ten minutes later, the rotund programmer sitting by the window received a call. After what seemed to be some questioning, he stood up and walked out of the room, scratching his head in confusion before he disappeared from sight. He was clearly puzzled over who would order a drink for him in the middle of the night.

"It takes about five minutes to go downstairs and come back up." He Yu unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car. He motioned Xie Qingcheng to come with him. "We have to turn off the high-voltage grid and make our way over within five minutes."

Xie Qingcheng blinked. "When did you calculate that?"

"The first time you told me about the contents of the video of the basement," He Yu replied as he opened his phone settings.

He was very focused and didn't look up at Xie Qingcheng, but Xie Qingcheng watched He Yu's profile, his face illuminated by his phone screen as lines of running code reflected in his dark pupils.

"Honestly, I knew you'd do this one day when I saw that video," He Yu admitted, his fingers still flying across the keyboard.

Xie Qingcheng was speechless for a second. He felt a little touched, then sorry for He Yu—if it had been a girl He Yu liked, how would she be able to resist his sincerity? Unfortunately, it was all wasted on a man like him…

Meanwhile, the fat staff member entered the elevator, and the elevator began its descent.

With that, He Yu hacked into the main computer and began to shut down parts of the power grid. Once the entire power grid was shut down, the red light on the network would turn off. This was

usually a safety signal during network inspections, but now, it'd become the basis for them to judge whether or not the interception was successful.

He Yu, watching the lights go out one by one, let out a sigh of relief and put his phone in his pocket.

He turned to Xie Qingcheng. "Let's go."

Xie-ge was great at climbing over walls, but Young Miss He wasn't quite so good at it. Even though Xie Qingcheng had one bad arm, he was still much more agile than He Yu.

He Yu had only ever exercised with standard gym equipment; he'd never climbed up wire mesh. The prestige he'd just gained by hacking into the computer instantly evaporated, and halfway up the climb, he turned a bit pale. He wasn't sure where to put his feet.

Xie Qingcheng had already climbed over and landed on the other side. He looked at He Yu's bewildered expression through the mesh and checked his watch. "Don't rush, there's still two minutes left. Step over here."

But He Yu was frozen like a cat stuck in a tree. "Goddammit, I can't get over…"

"Step on the third level next to your left foot and move your right hand first."

"I can't!"

"Be careful. Don't rush. There's still time."

While they were struggling, neither of them expected that a guard assigned to check on the night shift in each department would chance upon the high-voltage network's computer room!

"Where's that tub of lard?" the guard muttered, looking around. When he saw there was no one in the room, he pulled out his intercom to angrily summon the programmer on duty. "Hey, fatty, where are you? Slacking off somewhere?"

"Boss! I just went downstairs to grab a caramel macchiato. I'm coming back up now."

"A macchiato in the middle of the night? Caramel, when you're so big? Get your ass back here!"

"Yes sir, I'm coming right now!"

The guard hung up the phone, cursing, and was about to leave when he glanced around the room. He noticed that the main valve button light for the network had gone out at some point.

"Shit! That stupid fatass…!" The guard pulled up a chair to the computer and sat down.

He Yu had disabled all the control programs, but the guard assumed that the programmer must have accidentally disconnected them before he left the room. He cursed under his breath again, furious, and started to reconnect the power grid, one at a time.

This was a sudden, disastrous situation for He Yu. He was only halfway over the mesh when he suddenly heard two beeping noises in the distance. His face turned pale. That was the sign that the power was being restored!

Xie Qingcheng was startled, too, and made a quick decision. "He Yu, jump down!"

He Yu turned to look and saw that the ground was four meters below him, covered with sandy soil. If he jumped now, he'd hit pretty hard.

Xie Qingcheng's face was pale as well. "Jump, now! I'll catch you!"

He Yu was at the top of the fence; one foot was on Xie Qingcheng's side while the other foot hadn't even crossed over. He watched as the reminder alarm went off three times, and the red, high-voltage indicator light lit up—at first from far away, but approaching him quickly…

He couldn't wait any longer!

"Fucking jump!" Xie Qingcheng yelled.

He Yu knew he had no other choice. He gritted his teeth, let go of the mesh, closed his eyes, and fell straight down—

THUD!

Only to hear a muffled sound.

He Yu had landed on Xie Qingcheng, and Xie Qingcheng had caught him around the waist.

This scene would have been very romantic if it had been a girl throwing herself into the arms of a handsome guy like Xie Qingcheng.

But He Yu, a 189-centimeter-tall young man, managed to land with such an impact that Xie Qingcheng staggered backward a couple steps even though he'd successfully caught him. He Yu ended up on top of him in the sandy soil.

Cough!

He Yu's elbow had hit Xie Qingcheng hard, right where his lungs sat in his chest. He coughed again, the faint taste of blood rising in the back of his throat. He Yu, sprawled on top of Xie Qingcheng, looked up to see him coughing with a frown on his face. He immediately got up and helped him up too.



"Ge, does it hurt? Are you okay?"

Xie Qingcheng shook his head, though he continued to cough. "How about you? Are you injured?"

He Yu hadn't thought Xie Qingcheng would actually protect him like that. He lifted his arms to hug him and said in a low voice, "No. You're so cool, Gege. You're so cool."

He Yu was just crazy. What was this kid talking about, at a time like this?

Xie Qingcheng coughed again, then tapped He Yu's head. "Let's go."

There were no protective barriers on the side they were on. From Zhilong's perspective, one million volts was all the protection they needed. He Yu and Xie Qingcheng only ran into one lazy security guard, easy enough to avoid using the cover of darkness, and they soon arrived at Zhilong headquarters' back entrance.

There, they found a heavy mechanical lock with a green dragon cast onto it. This lock was produced by a subsidiary department of the most famous steel factory in Huzhou; the pin alone weighed three kilograms. He Yu felt a headache coming on at the sight of it. He didn't know what to do, but Xie Qingcheng took out something that looked like a blade.

"Move aside," he said.

"You know how to pick locks?" He Yu asked, surprised.

Xie Qingcheng leaned over, carefully testing the lock core with the blade while listening to the clicking sounds the lock made.

"The foundation stone of Zhilong headquarters is required to have the building's completion time, year, supervisor, and contractor written on it," Xie Qingcheng explained. "This lock has the Hugang logo, as well."

"And…? What about it?"

"My neighbor has an uncle who worked for Hugang for nearly forty years. He was in charge of forging iron locks there for thirty years," Xie Qingcheng said. "From 1990 to 2020, he was responsible for the heavy iron locks in those large factories in Huzhou. I've asked him how to pick them before."

"Huh. You Huzhou people are great at hiding talents."

Xie Qingcheng glanced at him but didn't say anything. A moment later, there was a series of muffled clicking sounds from the lock—and it opened. Xie Qingcheng exerted a little force, and the heavy chain fell to the ground, sending up a fine cloud of dust.

Opening the door carefully, Xie Qingcheng and He Yu walked in. But they stopped after just a few steps, when they found a second door!

The second door used iris sensing technology, and only registered users could enter using biometric identification. He Yu stepped up to look at the lock's program code, factory number, and manufacturer.

"I can crack this," he said. "Let me do it."

Now, Xie Qingcheng had no doubts about He Yu's hacking skills. If he said it could be cracked, it could be cracked. Quietly, Xie Qingcheng waited beside him.

As he waited, he sensed something new. In the past, he'd always worked alone, and even though he was able to eventually solve his problems that way, the process was often rocky.

This time, as he invaded Zhilong's basement with He Yu, they were able to work together just like he and Qin Ciyan did in the past. Even he had to admit that things were easier with He Yu there.

The feeling made Xie Qingcheng nostalgic, but a sense of unease crawled up and down his spine nevertheless. He had his own private reasons for guarding himself against others, both in actions and in his heart. This was dangerous.

As he was absorbed in his thoughts, a short and harmonious melody sounded.

"It's open," said He Yu.

The electronic doors slowly slid to either side, revealing a deep, dark corridor. This was a basement designed to look like a wartime air-raid shelter. There was an unsettling chill in the area, and the corridor exuded an aura as imposing as the depths of the sea.

"Welcome to Zhilong Entertainment, guest," a cold, electronic female voice said.

The expectant lights on the damp, cool walls silently lit up, one after another, waiting for them to move forward.

Xie Qingcheng and He Yu held their breath as they walked forward. The color and texture of the walls here matched the background of Zhao Xue's video. It was as if they'd walked into a well-made science fiction movie. When they rounded the nearest corner, the view in front of them opened up—and the scene that was reflected in their eyes instantly gave this science fiction movie a more terrifying shade.

It was a huge, underground rotunda, with complex corridors that extended in eight directions, as if it was built for tunnel warfare. He Yu and Xie Qingcheng were currently at the exit of one of the corridors.

In the center of the rotunda stood a fengshui column embedded with amethyst facets, and in front of the column was a baroque cross that would have taken three people to fully encircle its circumference. At the bottom of the huge cross rested a number of petri dish chambers.

This was the sterile chamber of the research laboratory, where the temperature and humidity could be changed to preserve samples for a long time. If Huang Zhilong had a certain amount of obedience potion, then this would be the best place to store it. Xie Qingcheng

stepped forward, but when he looked inside he was disappointed: Everything in the chambers had been emptied.

He Yu turned on the hidden camera watch that he wore for this occasion, to record their surroundings. He'd actually been collecting evidence since they entered the basement.

"So, Huang Zhilong did destroy evidence before the truth could be revealed," He Yu said. "Let's see what else is down here."

No matter how complicated this basement was, it was in Huzhou, where every inch of land was expensive. The headquarters had to be limited in size, and it would be impossible to actually make it into a sprawling labyrinth. However, every corridor had both a mechanical lock and a biometric lock, so it would take some time for He Yu and Xie Qingcheng to crack them all.

The eight corridors turned out to lead to eight closed rooms. Opening each room was nerve-wracking, because they never knew what unsettling vignette might be waiting for them inside.

"There's nobody here, but there are bloody scratches on all four walls," He Yu said as he entered the first unsealed room and looked around, recording. "The scratches intersect, with both deep and shallow marks. If my guess is correct…that means the force behind them must have waned from strong to weak."

He turned on the Wolf-Eyes flashlight he'd brought and shone it on the walls of the dim room. The flashlight stopped on a mesh ventilation device in the corner of the ceiling, and his gaze darkened.

"This is a gas chamber."

When he was in Europe, he'd visited the notorious Nazi concentration camp gas chambers from World War II. Even though it'd been almost a century since they'd seen use, he felt a chill when he entered the chamber. The walls of the gas chamber had been covered with mottled scratches, as well as mold and faded bloodstains, their original color long since lost.

The moment He Yu walked into this room, he had the same feeling as when he entered the gas chamber at the concentration camps. Here, though, the lingering ghosts were even more intense, since they'd died more recently.

When he closed his eyes, it was as if he was surrounded by people screaming wildly amid the toxic gas—people who died without dignity, like slaughtered animals.

Grimly, He Yu recorded the bloodstains and scratches on the wall for evidence, then headed to the next corridor with Xie Qingcheng.

The next corridor led to an archive room, but the contents had been either moved or burned. Charred ash from the destroyed papers littered the ground. Though they found a few fragments of unburnt paper, nothing of value could be lifted from those remaining pages of private files.

The third room was a specimen room, but the things that had once hung in the formaldehyde were gone now.

The fourth room, an interrogation room. Some torture instruments were visible, and a cold light shone on a cage-like tiger chair—used to hold a single person in place—in the center of the room, but that was all.

The fifth room, an infirmary. Only an operating bed and some basic medical equipment remained.

The sixth room, a padded cell to prevent psychiatric patients from committing suicide. The four corners and walls had been covered with soft material.

Xie Qingcheng and He Yu didn't talk much as they went; they both had the uneasy feeling that there might not be any direct evidence left to prove Huang Zhilong's involvement.

The basement was now unguarded, and the chambers, medicinal supplies, instruments, specimens, and papers had all been

cleaned out, which meant that Huang Zhilong had fled from this "nest" of his and didn't consider it in need of heavy guard.

The seventh room came. The door opened.

What came into view was a location very familiar to Xie Qingcheng: the place in Zhao Xue's video.

It was larger than the other six rooms so far. Instead of just a room, it could be called a whole area. The layout was like a prison ward. Victims like Zhao Xue who were locked up in these small rooms could neither live nor die, only stagnate.

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng took a lap around the space. All the cells were empty, and nobody was there.

But then He Yu stopped in one of the cells.

"Xie Qingcheng, look. There's something written here."

Chapter 138:
Chen Man Showed Up

W*ANG JIANKANG is a fraud! He lied to me… Wang Jiankang, die, die, die, die, die! I'm too young to die! Even if I become a malicious ghost, I will curse him to a miserable death! Die, die, die…*

The crooked writing slanted across the wall. Apart from the writing, the wall was covered in tiny drawings depicting people dying in myriad grotesque ways, all surrounded by the word "death." These inscriptions must have been carved by the person imprisoned here with a blunt instrument. They seemed to be fairly recent; the handwriting could still be clearly read.

A signature was scrawled below the drawings: *Ma Mingshu*.

He Yu stared at it. "I knew this person."

"You knew them?"

"Ma Mingshu was a freshman at Huzhou University—she was one of my classmates," said He Yu. "She dropped out before Wang Jiankang was killed during the broadcasting tower incident. She was an orphan admitted from a rural village, like Zhao Xue, and she was withdrawn, with few friends. No one asked after her when she dropped out. My guess is, at the time, Wang Jiankang was still working for Huang Zhilong, selecting suitable victims from Huzhou University's students and tricking them into coming to this company."

He turned his wristwatch camera's lens frontward and added, "Take a look at this."

Xie Qingcheng followed his gaze to their shadows cast against the wall behind them in the cell phone screen.

"Does this look familiar?"

Xie Qingcheng went still. "It does. This is where Zhao Xue recorded her video."

He Yu nodded. "I only heard your description of that video, but since you've confirmed it, this must be where she recorded her final words."

Handing Xie Qingcheng his cellphone and flashlight, He Yu crouched down in the tiny cell that spanned less than five square meters. He began knocking on the floor tiles, one by one, until he eventually hit on a hollowed-out section. He pried the tile open—just as expected, there was enough space underneath to hide a video recorder.

"So, it's all true," He Yu said softly as he slid the slab of tile back in place. He turned to look at Xie Qingcheng.

Now that they'd confirmed the veracity of Zhao Xue's video recording and the connection between Wang Jiankang and Huang Zhilong, this case became all the more important to Xie Qingcheng. The perpetrator of the broadcast tower murders had killed Wang Jiankang by running him over with an unmanned truck, the same modus operandi used to kill Xie Qingcheng's parents nearly two decades ago. Xie Qingcheng had of course concluded that this organization was inextricably tied to his parents' deaths.

Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the broadcast tower incident, none of their leads panned out and the trail once again went cold. Xie Qingcheng had no way to continue his investigation into his parents' deaths—but now they had a connection between Wang Jiankang and Huang Zhilong. As long as they could bring Huang Zhilong to justice, not only would they be able to treat Xie Xue's illness, it was also likely they could obtain new information on the murder of Xie Qingcheng's parents all those years ago.

He Yu watched Xie Qingcheng, recognizing the meaning of the light that flickered in his eyes.

"Ge, we need more evidence," he said. "We won't be able to come back here, and if we can't knock Huang Zhilong down this time, it'll be even harder to catch him once he flees to New Zealand."

Xie Qingcheng listened, but didn't answer.

"There's one last room that we haven't checked yet," He Yu added.

Xie Qingcheng took a few quiet moments to compose himself. "Let's go," he said.

Soon enough, they arrived at the eighth door. It looked much heavier than the previous ones, and it took a long time for both Xie Qingcheng to pick the mechanical lock and He Yu to crack the biometric lock. Finally, though, with a loud groan, the door swung open.

A chilly gust of air drifted out, like a snake curling around their ankles before slithering upward. Together, Xie Qingcheng and He Yu stepped through the cold mist.

Beyond the door lay a space larger than that of the seventh corridor, more expansive even than the central hub they'd encountered when they first entered the basement. The circular space was similar in layout as well, with a cross the same size as the last one standing at its center.

However, unlike the previous cross, this one had a bloodstained body hanging from it.

Xie Qingcheng had prepared himself mentally for the horrific scenes he might encounter when he stepped into the basement of Zhilong Entertainment. Not to mention, as someone with a medical sciences degree who'd spent years engaging in human experimentation, he'd seen all manner of terrible things before.

Nevertheless, when he saw who was hanging from that cross, he felt as though an explosion had gone off in his head. What was the meaning of this?!

The person hanging there… It was Chen Man.

He was wearing casual clothes, paired with a spring jacket that made him look like a student. Without his police uniform, he looked very young, as if he were only a few years older than He Yu. He'd

been tied to the stone pillar at the center of the circular hall, his head hanging listlessly over his chest and his arms spread wide as if in distress. It was clear that he was unconscious.

Xie Qingcheng blanched, and he was about to rush forward when He Yu stopped him.

"Don't! Look at the ground."

Xie Qingcheng glanced down, just barely making out the dense network of red laser sensors that formed a three-meter radius around Chen Man.

"See that? The moment you approach him, you'll trigger the alarm. Huang Zhilong is an intelligent man. He'll receive an alert the moment this alarm goes off," He Yu said, his eyes on Chen Man. "You can't save him right now."

Xie Qingcheng's expression turned grim. "Is there some way we can disable the surveillance system?"

He Yu stepped forward to study the laser field. After a while, he straightened up with a shake of his head. "Not unless we find the control console."

Returning to Xie Qingcheng's side, He Yu took another look at Chen Man. The man was covered in blood, but it was clear that most of it was the result of whip lashes and other superficial lacerations. His breathing was steady, and although his complexion was poor, it wasn't deathly pale. Between the casual jacket and the fact that Chen Man had recently received a video recording left behind by his elder brother, He Yu could assemble a rough idea of what had happened.



"Officer Chen was probably desperate to find out what'd happened, to verify the truth of that video recording, just like you, Xie-ge. When he saw the news about the celebrity suicide, he had to get to the bottom of things. In the end, unable to restrain himself, he came here by himself." He Yu paused. "I don't know how he managed to get *in* here. It takes skill to break in, but he still got caught… They've strung him up here and tortured him, but they haven't killed him yet. There can only be one reason for that, and I think you know what it is."

Realization dawned on Xie Qingcheng. "So they can use him as a hostage."

He Yu nodded. "Huang Zhilong is a sinking ship. To reduce his guilt, he'll do anything to destroy all traces of his past crimes, but he knows he can't stay in the country. Fleeing across borders is his only way out. If I were him, I wouldn't be sure I could escape—and then Officer Chen delivers himself to my door. Things can hardly get any better."

He narrowed his eyes as he glanced back at Chen Man, who remained insensible beneath the glare of the lights.

"Not only is Officer Chen a member of law enforcement, he's also the only child of Yanzhou Political Commissar Wang's daughter—the grandchild whom he owes the most. He's an extremely valuable bargaining chip, one that can be exchanged for favors with Commissar Wang himself. There's no way Huang Zhilong will kill Chen Man before he flees the country. Not unless he's tired of living."

He Yu turned back to Xie Qingcheng. "Xie-ge, we need to collect samples of the obedience potion, gather evidence of Huang Zhilong's crimes, and find the control console first. We can save him after that."

Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth and looked away, furious that Chen Man had done something so reckless without telling anyone.

He Yu could tell what Xie Qingcheng was thinking. "You realize that *your* actions are practically identical, don't you?"

Xie Qingcheng stared at him.

"If I hadn't followed you back to Moyu Alley, you would've done the exact same thing."

"That's different. You're both just kids. Neither of you should have gotten involved."

"What difference is there between what you just said and what the police said, that you were 'just a child,' when they told you to stop asking about your parents' case?"

"You—"

Xie Qingcheng was struggling to respond when a slight cough came from the giant cross.

Xie Qingcheng started, his head shooting up.

Chen Man had gradually regained consciousness. When he saw He Yu and Xie Qingcheng, he gaped in disbelief.

"Xie—Xie-ge?" Chen Man's chest rattled with coughs. He was beyond shocked. He never could have imagined that he would see them here.

"Chen Man!" Xie Qingcheng shouted.

"Wh-what are you guys doing here?!" Chen Man's shock had barely subsided before he was gripped by fear. "You can't stay here… You need to leave! Hurry! It's too dangerous here… They'll… They'll…"

He was interrupted by a spate of violent coughs before he could finish.

Xie Qingcheng was looking up at him, so he noticed that Chen Man's mouth was bruised and bloody—evidently, he had exchanged blows with someone before he'd been caught and tied up. As Chen Man coughed and coughed, he spat out a mouthful of blood. It was then that Xie Qingcheng and He Yu realized the situation was much more serious than initially anticipated.

Chen Man had internal injuries, and it seemed they were quite severe.

To Xie Qingcheng, Chen Man was like his obedient and sensible younger brother. And Chen Lisheng had sacrificed himself to learn the truth behind Xie Qingcheng's parents' deaths. He already owed the Chen family so much—he couldn't let Chen Man die.

"Chen Man!" Xie Qingcheng shouted. "We're going to find the control console and get you down right away, so don't be scared! Just hold on a little longer!"

Chen Man gazed at Xie Qingcheng, an untold number of words stuck in his throat. He wanted to tell him, but in the end, he faltered and said nothing. In his daze, tears started streaming down his face.

At last, he choked out, "Ge…I'm not scared, but you guys… don't take any risks… Hurry up, get out! Tell my family what happened here… Don't stay here any longer… Don't…"

He broke off, succumbing to the coughing once again.

"Stop talking," He Yu cut in. "We said that we'll save you, so we'll save you. Give me half an hour. I'm going to find the control console."

Chen Man shook his head. "No, don't!" he gasped. "Don't go upstairs! These people have gone mad… When I got here, I-I saw them killing witnesses and destroying evidence!" His brow knotted as the brutal scenes flashed before his eyes, the blood-curdling screams and wretched sobs echoing in his ears. "Th-these criminals have all sorts of weapons, and they're *desperate*. Both of you need to get out of here. If you get caught, the consequences will be unimaginable…"

He Yu wanted to respond, but Xie Qingcheng stopped him. He knew that at a time like this, every second was of the utmost importance, so instead of arguing with Chen Man, he shot He Yu a pointed look. Grasping his meaning, He Yu shut his mouth. With one more shared glance, they set about finding the control console.

It was then that a loud rumble rolled through the area. Behind them, the biometric door opened once more.

Immediately, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng darted into the shadows, listening with bated breath to the sound of approaching footsteps as a pair of people entered the room. The newcomers were two muscular men wearing clothes stamped with the Zhilong Entertainment logo.

"I really have no idea what they're doing, clearing out the basement in such a rush. They even left the mechanical lock lying around."

"Forget it, we're all just runaway dogs at this point—"

"Stray dogs."

"Same difference. In any case, we're running as quickly as possible, so who cares about the lock. Let's grab this guy and get out of here! He's the last person who needs to be transferred. Once he's gone, we'll never have to come back to this god-awful basement ever again. Careful, though, this guy's important. We might be able to use him as a trump card when the time comes."

As they spoke, they walked over to the cross where Chen Man was bound and swiped their employee card, temporarily disabling the laser field.

Xie Qingcheng had never expected such an opportunity. He was about to make his move when He Yu pulled him back.

"Wait."

Chen Man was no longer hanging from the cross, but his hands and feet were still bound with electronic cuffs.

"What's wrong, Officer Chen?" one of the employees asked sardonically. "Can't move anymore? But you were so energetic before."

"I hear you're not even a member of the criminal investigation unit," the other one sneered. "Do you really think your superiors will

reward a beat cop like you for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong?"

Chen Man made no response. With Xie Qingcheng, he was always very soft, but facing these people, he became cold and hard as ice.

"Get up. We're taking you to see the boss."

Chen Man glared at them. "Let go of me. I can walk by myself."

"Oh? This pig's a real tough guy. Don't tell me you think you're still in uniform and that we're street gangsters who have to listen to your orders?"

"That's right," the other man said as he went to pull roughly at Chen Man.

"I said, I can walk," Chen Man snapped.

His toughness was rewarded with a vicious strike from a police baton to his knee.

Chen Man endured it, but he refused to kneel. Instead, he glared ferociously at the gangsters and said, "If you're really that tough, why don't you kill me like you did the other victims?"

"You!"

Their hands shook with anger, but they couldn't cross that line. Chen Man was their boss's hostage; they were all depending on him to survive. One employee spat a mouthful of thick phlegm on the ground before giving Chen Man a rough shove.

"Hurry up and walk!" he snapped. "Go say that to our boss's face if you've got the guts! Fucking pig!"

Chen Man staggered forward, one step at a time. As he passed Xie Qingcheng and He Yu's hiding place, he slowed slightly, his eyes flicking to the side. Then, he straightened his back, as if wanting to walk with the most upright posture he could muster in his current circumstances, and continued marching forward.

"Now." He Yu put down his cell phone, which he'd been fiddling with, and signaled Xie Qingcheng.

They ducked out from behind the thick pillar to attack the two gangsters, each going up against one. The gangsters were completely caught off guard. A pair of strangers breaking in was the last thing either of them had expected. Shouting in angry alarm, they immediately pressed the button on their pagers to request backup.

"Shit! Why isn't this stupid thing working?!"

"Mine has no signal!"

"Mine neither!"

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng were both very competent fighters. He Yu was physically strong and possessed explosive power, and although Xie Qingcheng couldn't use one of his arms, his hand-to-hand skills were top-tier, even better than many police officers'. The two of them quickly dispatched the foolish gangsters.

"Did you really expect your pagers to have signal with me here?" He Yu asked with a smirk.

As it turned out, the reason he wouldn't let Xie Qingcheng strike earlier was because he'd been setting up some software he'd prepared in advance—an upgraded version of the signal jammer he'd used on Neverland Island, built into his cell phone. All He Yu had to do was adjust the program, and his cell phone would block all transmissions within his vicinity.

Xie Qingcheng grabbed one of the henchmen by the hair and forced him to look up at him from where he was kneeling.

"Did Huang Zhilong order you to do all this?"

"No…"

"Speak!" Xie Qingcheng barked.

The henchman flinched. A coward by nature, he met Xie Qingcheng's piercing gaze and was immediately cowed. Lips

trembling, he began to spill the truth: "Ye…yes…"

His partner was even quicker to surrender. To save his own skin, the man launched into a hasty confession as He Yu stood by recording with his wristwatch camera. "Of course it was that bastard Huang Zhilong. He—"

Sssss!

The two of them had barely begun speaking when they both began to convulse, like they were being electrocuted or had ingested poison.

In the ensuing silence, a flat, robotic voice intoned, "Die, traitor."

Xie Qingcheng let go of his interrogatee's hair. Like his partner, the man's face paled, and bluish-purple veins bulged along his neck. The pupils of both henchmen dilated, and before either of them could say another word, they collapsed on the ground with a dull thud.

After a stretch of deathly, unnatural calm, He Yu found what might have been the cause of the henchmen's sudden demise.

"Those ankle monitors…"

They were both wearing some sort of non-removable cuff on their left ankles. He Yu bent down and, without touching the bodies, carefully examined the device in front of him.

It seemed to be custom-made, composed of the newest chip with anti-jamming capabilities and a syringe fitted with a needle on the side. Under ordinary circumstances, the needle would be retracted, but now, it had plunged into its victim's flesh and injected the full contents of the syringe.

Evidently, since he employed such cowardly subordinates, Huang Zhilong had a trick up his sleeve. Where had the despicable bastard gotten the inspiration to create this sort of black-market technology? The legendary weapon known as the "flying guillotine"? Voldemort's guide to being evil? Whatever it was, he had planted it

on his subordinates to monitor their loyalties, so he could kill them the instant they began to leak information.

He Yu was in the middle of studying the device with a bleak expression on his face when he heard the voices of another group of people through the open door, approaching via the dim corridor.

"You go check room number one. You two take room number two…"

"You two check room number eight."

"Hurry up and move! We're running out of time! We have to destroy all traces of evidence tonight, so get it done!"

Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters had clearly descended into a state of chaos. No sooner had the two henchmen arrived to take Chen Man upstairs than more people came down to conduct a final inspection of this basement of evil. Even worse was what they said next.

"Report back as soon as you're done with your inspection! If everything is in order, begin the procedures to destroy this place completely!"

Chapter 139:
A Life or Death Decision

A PAIR OF ZHILONG HEADQUARTERS staff members dressed in the same uniform entered. They, too, wore the deadly ankle monitors.

Carrying four barrels of gasoline, they hurried into the room and gave it a hasty inspection, failing to find the intruders hidden in the dark. Xie Qingcheng and He Yu had already dragged the bodies of the two henchmen into an inconspicuous corner.

"Did team three take that cop upstairs?"

"Looks like it."

"Then let's hurry up."

The two staff members began pouring out the gasoline. Once the barrels were empty, one of them flicked open a lighter and hurled it across the room. The lighter bounced off of the opposing wall in a wide arc before landing in a corner and bursting into flames.

"Let's go!"

The sound of footsteps faded into the distance, blending into the racket outside. After they'd inspected the eight rooms, the staff members set them on fire before reporting back and leaving the scene of destruction. They were like passengers on a sinking ship that didn't want to drown together, but weren't yet allowed to abandon ship—they weren't very meticulous in carrying out Huang Zhilong's orders.

The fire ripped through the gasoline like a dragon awakening from slumber. It roared furiously, scales flashing and breath searing, as it sought to consume the underground city in a single bite.

He Yu and the other two couldn't afford to stay here any longer. With the arsonists gone, they had to get out of the basement

as quickly as possible. It was at this moment that Chen Man cupped a hand over his lips and coughed up another mouthful of blood.

"How are you feeling? Can you hold on?" Xie Qingcheng asked, urgently.

"I'm…fine," Chen Man murmured.

The three of them ran forward as one. They now had enough evidence to merit an in-depth police investigation, but they had yet to find samples of the obedience potion. But it didn't matter—they were out of time. They had to get out of the basement. They'd need to find another way.

However—

"He Yu, stop!"

He Yu halted at the sound of Xie Qingcheng's voice. A split second later, there was a thunderous boom as an alloy steel plate above the door crashed down. The fire had melted through its foundation. The flaming wreck landed right in front of He Yu, shooting sparks everywhere and forcing him to step back.

Even more terrifying than this narrow brush with death was the conflagration that had engulfed the exit.

The evil bastards must have poured an unimaginable amount of gasoline for the area to transform into the sea of hellfire before them. Unable to return the way they'd entered, their only choice was to retreat deeper into Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters.

But the situation there, they discovered, wasn't any more promising.

There was a steel ramp that connected Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters' upper levels to the basement. However, the heat of the swelling flames had triggered the motion-activated ramp's automatic self-defense mechanism, causing it to fold up into the floor above.

He Yu scanned the area before rushing over to a control panel in the corner. He pressed a series of buttons, and an emergency

lever slowly emerged from the groove next to the panel. With the lever depressed, the ramp was forced to obey the manual override, and descended with a rumble. Sighing in relief, He Yu climbed the ramp to the next floor.

As he turned back to Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man, however, he was shocked to find that the ramp had retracted again. Something was wrong with the control panel!

The situation had suddenly become dire. He Yu was the only one who'd made it up the ramp leading to Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters, and Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man were still trapped below. With the ramp retracted, they were stuck.

The flames raged closer and closer. Pale as a ghost, He Yu leaned down and yelled to Xie Qingcheng, "The lever! Try the lever again!"

Xie Qingcheng needed no further instruction; he immediately ran over to the control panel and pushed the lever down again.

With a low groan, the ramp slowly descended once more, but before He Yu could breathe another sigh of relief, there was a sharp scraping sound as the control panel began to spark and smoke!

He Yu could only stare in horror, realizing that the digital panel must be controlled by a central motherboard. Chances were, the motherboard had been damaged by the fire, so now the control panel was starting to malfunction as well.

This was different from earlier. Xie Qingcheng could not release the lever lest the ramp immediately retract. There was a stretch of deathly silence.

All three men understood: Only two of them could escape through the ramp.

Whoever remained would have to hold the lever down, and the fate that awaited that person was to be swallowed by the dragon of flames.

Xie Qingcheng made a prompt decision. “Chen Man, you go first.”

“Ge, you…”

“Go!” Xie Qingcheng snapped.

Chen Man coughed, the rims of his eyes turning red. “Ge—”

“Don’t ‘ge’ me! Get the fuck up there! We’re out of time!”

Chen Man lifted his head with a miserable smile. Then, he walked over to Xie Qingcheng, reached out, and grabbed the lever.

“I’m sorry, Xie-ge, but I can’t do as you say this time.” Chen Man tightened his grip as he turned to He Yu. “He Yu, come down here and take him away!”

He Yu didn’t need to be told twice; how could he possibly stand by himself in such a god-awful situation?

Xie Qingcheng could hardly contain his anger. “Chen Man, have you gone mad? I told you to go, so *go*. Where is all this nonsense coming from?! Hurry up and get up there! Go—”

He was interrupted by Chen Man hugging him with his spare arm.

“You go, Xie-ge. They…” Chen Man lowered his head, tears streaming uncontrollably down his face as he finally told Xie Qingcheng the truth. “When they caught me, before they locked me up in the basement, they injected me with something.”

Xie Qingcheng stared at him, aghast.

“I don’t know what kind of drug it was, but based on what I heard of their conversations, it’s something that’ll allow them to control me…” Chen Man was now choking back tears. “I’ve heard stories over the years of drug dealers retaliating against narcotics officers by injecting their loved ones with drugs. If I end up in their hands, my suffering will only be worse. One time when I was six I saw an undercover agent who’d been tortured to madness at a

sanatorium… Ge, I don’t want to live like that. I don’t want to live without dignity.”

Chen Man lifted his head to gaze at Xie Qingcheng, tears shimmering in his eyes. “Let me stay. This way, I can accomplish something great in the end.”

Xie Qingcheng looked at him in silent horror, his face going pale.

“I-I might not have been very smart, but…but at least I won’t have been an utter burden…”

Chen Man didn’t know what he had been injected with, but Xie Qingcheng could guess. In all likelihood, it was the same drug that Xie Xue had been administered: a new variant of RN-13.

This maneuver was unspeakably cruel. Huang Zhilong was using Chen Man as a shield to threaten Commissar Wang. To that end, he had injected Chen Man with a dangerous new drug—and both this new drug and its antidote were in Huang Zhilong’s hands. Even if Chen Man could be rescued, Commissar Wang would remain wary of Huang Zhilong, allowing him an additional layer of insurance for his escape.

Thick, billowing smoke began to rise as the fire grew higher and higher. They had to leave this place as quickly as possible. Otherwise, even if they didn’t burn to death, they would suffocate.

Xie Qingcheng knew that they couldn’t afford to delay any longer. “Don’t worry about that,” he insisted. “Whatever it was they injected you with, it won’t kill you, and it isn’t some sort of addictive substance. Go up first and ask He Yu to explain.”

“I’m not leaving. I know you’re lying to me.” Chen Man quelled the fragility and trembling in his voice. “Ge, you always say things like that to coax people into doing things your way. To help me get over my brother’s death, you used to lie and say that my brother might come back if I stopped being so depressed.”

Xie Qingcheng immediately began to regret his past habit of speaking nonsense to comfort children. He didn't have the time to argue any further. He gave Chen Man a shove. "Hurry up and go. Think of your parents! They've already lost your elder brother. If something happens to you, how do you expect them to go on?"

Chen Man didn't budge.

"Believe me," Xie Qingcheng said sternly. "I'll find another way out, so let go!"

His insistence left Chen Man feeling a myriad of conflicting emotions.

"Xie-ge, why?" he asked, his voice hoarse from sobs. "Why do you only ever consider these things when it comes to other people? You recognize that my parents would be heartbroken if I died, but you never think about yourself in the same way! I know that you think Xie Xue has grown up, that you have nothing to be concerned about, so you think your own life has no value, but…"

Chen Man gazed at him in the glow of the inferno, the intense emotion that came with staring death in the face seizing his heart. He'd always been introverted, but in this moment, out of impulse, out of sadness, out of despair for their imminent separation and a desire to convince Xie Qingcheng, he opened his mouth to speak.

"Ge, you are not without those who care about you. At the very least, *I* care about you. *I* would die to keep you safe."

Xie Qingcheng stared at him in shock.

Boom!

Another flame-wreathed piece of the building crashed down nearby. The deafening sound seemed to smash into Xie Qingcheng's heart. He'd been momentarily stunned by the intensity of Chen Man's emotional declaration only to be dragged out of his daze by their perilous circumstances.

"Hurry up and get out of here first!" Xie Qingcheng ordered.

"Ge…" Chen Man's eyes were watering. "I'm not leaving."

Xie Qingcheng was livid. “Chen Man,” he ground out through gritted teeth, “listen to me. There’s no way I can leave you here and escape by myself. You’re much younger and more important than me!” Seeing that Chen Man was about to refute him, Xie Qingcheng shot him a stern glare with his peach-blossom eyes. “Go with He Yu. *Now*. I’ll find a different route. If you insist on standing here, then I’ll fucking stand with you. I’ll stand with you till the bitter end!”

Chen Man’s eyes went wide; he’d never expected Xie Qingcheng to say such a thing.

“Decide for yourself,” Xie Qingcheng said, one word at a time. “Are you willing to stake both our lives on a gambit?”

The light in Chen Man’s eyes wavered. Since childhood, he’d always been like this in his interactions with Xie Qingcheng: The older man always crushed his dissent with unwavering strength, leaving Chen Man with no way to object. As a result, he always did as Xie Qingcheng said. Even when he angrily tried to get Xie Qingcheng to quit smoking, in the end, he would ferret out the cigarettes Chen Man kept on his person and light up again.

Even when their lives were on the line. Even now.

Chen Man watched as Xie Qingcheng stood resolutely before him with a calm expression on his face, as if he was determined to spend the final minutes of his life keeping him company amid a sea of fire.

In that moment, Chen Man wavered, the heart he had steeled softening to Xie Qingcheng.

It was then that someone grabbed him by the elbow. Chen Man turned to meet He Yu’s eyes.

He Yu had long since descended the ramp and overheard everything. There were several times when he had wanted to interrupt Chen Man and Xie Qingcheng’s conversation, but in the end, he had done nothing—because interrupting would’ve been no use. The conclusion was inevitable.

However, He Yu could have never imagined that Chen Man would say something so solemn as, "I would die to keep you safe."

His words had touched Xie Qingcheng, whose eyes had been fixed on Chen Man the entire time he spoke. In the end, Xie Qingcheng had even responded by saying, "If you insist on standing here, then I'll stand with you."

Does that mean Xie Qingcheng would willingly accompany Chen Man in death? He Yu worried.

For some inexplicable reason, he recalled the time he and Xie Qingcheng had thought that they would die in that flooded studio. At the time, he'd felt surprisingly relieved, thinking that it wasn't so bad, dying without any worries weighing him down. Was that how Xie Qingcheng felt about the prospect of dying with Chen Man in a sea of fire?

He Yu couldn't help his jealousy and distress; he even resented Chen Man for being injected with the new variation of RN-13. That was a special connection that he and Xie Qingcheng shared alone; why did *he* get to have it?

He Yu was the only one, before!

Only he and Xie Qingcheng—only *they* were kin.

Why was Chen Man allowed passage into their mountains and lakes? How could Chen Man also become a patient that Xie Qingcheng would tend to, someone for whom Xie Qingcheng would falter in his footsteps? Why did Chen Man get to suffer the same wounds?

He Yu grabbed Chen Man's wrist, about to spread his dragon wings and reveal the cold flash of his fangs.

Ultimately, he tucked away all of that hurt and hatred. Instead, he said with barely concealed menace, "Come with me."

Chen Man stared.

"You heard what he said," He Yu said, his voice frigid. "Since you understand, just do as he says. Come on."

Xie Qingcheng looked at He Yu with what seemed to be gratitude in his eyes, but He Yu didn't return his gaze as he pulled the forlorn Chen Man away. The two of them ascended the ramp to the only unlocked pathway that could lead them out to the upper levels of Zhilong Enterprises' headquarters.

The heavy door's biometric system posed little challenge to He Yu. His face set, he unlocked the password in no time at all and pushed Chen Man through.

"You are Commissar Wang's grandson, so there's no need to worry," he told him. "Huang Zhilong won't touch you before he has escaped the country unscathed." As he spoke, He Yu removed his wristwatch camera—the device had already recorded a comprehensive collection of evidence—and handed it to Chen Man.

Chen Man finally realized what he was about to do. He tried to walk back, but He Yu blocked the door.

"Get out of here." He Yu didn't bother speaking any further as he gazed down at Chen Man and pressed a button to shut the biometric door, which slowly began to close between them.

When there was only a small gap left, He Yu met Chen Man's eyes and said, quietly, just for the two of them: "Chen Yan, I know you love him."

Chen Man started in shock, his already wan complexion turning paper-pale.

"It's for the best if you get a hold of yourself and never tell him," He Yu continued. "Mark my words: Xie Qingcheng isn't gay. He'll never fall in love with a man, and he'll never be able to give you what you want."

Chen Man's face was like a ghost, but before he could say anything, the door slammed shut.

With that, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng were the only two people left in the smoke-filled basement. He Yu turned around and made his way down the ramp step by step.

Xie Qingcheng never dreamed that He Yu would be so outrageous as to return after escorting Chen Man away. When he saw He Yu, his resigned expression changed completely.

"Get the fuck back up there! Are you insane? Why did you come back?!" he yelled.

He Yu walked up to him, his face inscrutable, and Xie Qingcheng swore at him again. Things really were getting out of hand. He'd just managed to send one brat away only for another to take his place. They were all dead set on working against him!

But He Yu turned a deaf ear to Xie Qingcheng's diatribe. He couldn't stop thinking about Xie Qingcheng's attitude toward Chen Man, which was far better than his attitude toward He Yu himself. He even started to convince himself that, if Chen Man was the one pursuing Xie Qingcheng, it would be easier for him to get what he wanted.

At least Chen Man was a good person, as far as Xie Qingcheng was concerned, and Xie Qingcheng was amiable toward good people. Now that Chen Man had been injected with RN-13, he'd be able to empathize with Xie Qingcheng as a fellow sufferer of psychological Ebola. He Yu would no longer be the only fledgling dragon at Xie Qingcheng's side.

He Yu didn't have very many things that he could use to bind Xie Qingcheng to himself in the first place; even something as grim as their shared illness counted as a red thread. Now, they were no longer the only ones who shared this illness.

He Yu walked forward, step by step. Then—he covered the back of Xie Qingcheng's hand with his own.

Clasping Xie Qingcheng's fingers, He Yu slowly, resolutely, and inexorably removed his hand from the lever. The ramp retracted, metal fragments fell, and flames danced as the smoke grew thick as dense fog.

In the apocalyptic chaos, as the air grew increasingly stifling, He Yu reached out and pulled Xie Qingcheng irresistibly into his

arms.

"Yes, I *am* insane," he said, a chill in his voice as he held Xie Qingcheng tightly against his chest. Xie Qingcheng went still. "You've known this all along."

He bit down on his lip as he spoke, dyeing the split skin rust-red with blood, before taking Xie Qingcheng's mouth in a vicious kiss. It was a deep and vehement kiss, something that ordinary people would find unbearable.

When the kiss ended, He Yu didn't waste any words as he used his blood toxin on Xie Qingcheng, once again.

"I want you to leave here immediately."

Xie Qingcheng blanched. He hadn't anticipated that He Yu would pull this on him!

He Yu gazed at him, his eyes dark. "Listen to me, Xie Qingcheng. This is my order."

Chapter 140:
You Took the Initiative and Kissed Me

HE YU HAD ONLY used his blood toxin on Xie Qingcheng a handful of times. It happened so infrequently that Xie Qingcheng had forgotten the fact that He Yu possessed such sharp claws.

"He Yu, you…!"

"I told you not to trade your life for anyone else's, but you wouldn't listen," said He Yu softly. "You drove me to this—I have to resort to this to make you do as I say, Xie Qingcheng. Now, go."

He hadn't planned on saying so much to Xie Qingcheng, but when he saw Xie Qingcheng's eyes, he paused and added, "Don't worry. I'm not taking your place because I love you. I'm doing this because I never really wanted to live in the first place. I've no attachments whatsoever. Just now, you told Chen Man that if something happened to him, his parents would be heartbroken, but think about it: If something happened to you, wouldn't Xie Xue be so devastated she'd wish she were dead?"

He Yu smiled shallowly, his expression teetering between arrogance and loneliness. He looked nothing like someone who was about to meet his maker.

"I'm different. No one would genuinely mourn my death."

Xie Qingcheng didn't know what to say to that.

"You're a very rational and astute person. You know that this will result in the smallest sacrifice. So go, Xie Qingcheng. Don't make the wrong choice."

With that, He Yu pulled down on the control panel's emergency lever.

Xie Qingcheng felt as though his soul were being torn apart by the blood toxin. He Yu's words were like invisible strings weaving

into his body and wrapping around his bones and joints to control him. He had no choice but to follow He Yu's instructions like a robot and advance, step by step, toward the ramp.

Hot sweat drenched Xie Qingcheng's back. He was shocked to discover that this time, he couldn't break free from He Yu's control. He wanted to turn back, but He Yu had forced too much of his blood down his throat, and the orders he had given were absolute.

Lingering by the control panel, He Yu watched as Xie Qingcheng climbed the ramp and walked toward Chen Man.

He Yu wasn't a generous person. He had no desire to see Xie Qingcheng and Chen Man get together. Even if he died, he wanted to be the only man that Xie Qingcheng ever slept with in his life. The thought that Chen Man might kiss those lips that were thin as ice in early spring—that another young man might see how beautiful Xie Qingcheng looked in bed—made He Yu so jealous he wished he could drag Chen Man down to hell alongside him.

That was why he'd given Chen Man that frosty warning at the end: *Xie Qingcheng will never fall in love with you. Xie Qingcheng is straight*. *He'll never fall in love with a man*.

These words were thorns lodged in his own heart; just thinking about them hurt. Now, at least it seemed those thorns weren't completely useless. Before he died, he could use them to riddle Chen Man full of holes.

He Yu believed that Chen Man couldn't bear such torture. Eventually, he'd give up. A person only had so much affection they could give over the course of their life, and they had to divide it among their parents, their children, their siblings, their friends, and their lover. Chen Man was someone who'd been raised in normal society. No matter how deep his feelings for Xie Qingcheng, they were only one part of the whole.

He Yu was different. He only had Xie Qingcheng. All the love that he carried in his body, everything he'd had in his entire life—he had entrusted it to Xie Qingcheng alone.

Absent Xie Qingcheng, Chen Man would hurt—but He Yu would die.

"Go," He Yu said to Xie Qingcheng as he activated the blood toxin once more. "Leave this place. And then…"

As if hoping the blood toxin could influence Xie Qingcheng for the rest of his life, He Yu concluded, "Forget about me."

Enraged by these final words, Xie Qingcheng wrenched himself free from the blood toxin's influence. Suddenly out of He Yu's control, he coughed violently—then, he suppressed the trembling of his body and whipped around to shoot a furious glare at He Yu.

He Yu's eyes darkened, but just as he was about to increase the power of his blood toxin and force Xie Qingcheng to submit, a spine-chilling creak came from overhead. Above them, He Yu saw a burning rafter. The wooden beam was already on the verge of falling, and in the instant He Yu noticed it, its final connecting point was reduced to ashes.

With a loud snap, the broken section of wood plummeted straight down.

"He Yu!"

Enduring the excruciating pain, as if yanking thousands of puppet strings from his flesh in the blink of an eye, Xie Qingcheng broke free from the blood toxin's control and rushed toward He Yu.

Crash!

A heap of flaming construction materials fell just as Xie Qingcheng threw himself at He Yu, his momentum carrying him forward as he shoved He Yu aside.

In that moment of imminent death, Xie Qingcheng rolled to a corner of the room with He Yu in tow, narrowly avoiding the falling rafter. But the wooden beam originally formed part of a Y-shaped structure along with a steel reinforcing bar, and when the structure slammed into the ground, a broken section of steel shot out, hitting Xie Qingcheng squarely in the back.

Xie Qingcheng endured the strike without a sound, but he couldn't help spitting up a mouthful of blood.

He Yu trembled with shock. Right away, he reached up to touch Xie Qingcheng's face. "Xie Qingcheng, wh-why would you…"

Xie Qingcheng slapped He Yu so hard his ears rang. "Like hell I'd forget about you—enough with the melodrama! Get *up*!"

His mouth was stained with blood, his face was streaked with ash, and his brow was drenched with sweat from the effort of shaking off the blood toxin, yet he was as unyielding as ever as he dragged He Yu up by the collar.

Still, he had been struck hard in the back, right over his lungs. As Xie Qingcheng staggered to his feet, the movement pulled on his injuries. His face paled, and he couldn't help but gasp shallowly and cough again. It hurt so much, he could barely stand up straight.

He Yu watched with reddened eyes as Xie Qingcheng tried to protect him like this.

He hugged Xie Qingcheng tightly, and when he spoke, his voice was nearly a sob. "Xie Qingcheng, why…why did you do that? You don't even like me… You hate me so much, so why would you…?"

Xie Qingcheng poked him hard in the forehead. "Don't talk nonsense. Hurry up and go. I'll hold down the lever. Move it!"

"I'm not leaving," He Yu said.

"I'll figure out some other way out after you leave. If you don't leave and stay here with me, you'll be wasting both your own time and mine! The clock is ticking. Do you really want to bet against me on this?!" Xie Qingcheng threatened He Yu the same way he'd threatened Chen Man.

Ensure that one person's sacrifice is not wasted by saving yourself, or stake two lives on a reckless gambit. Xie Qingcheng was an indomitable man. None of his juniors could defy him when he stood his ground.

None of them—except He Yu.

He Yu stood in that increasingly stifling basement, bathed in firelight, and gazed at Xie Qingcheng and his scraped-up face and disheveled clothes.

"How will you get out after I leave?" he demanded. "You just want to sacrifice yourself!" The glow of the flames seemed to gild He Yu's face in a layer of gleaming light. His eyes were searing, resolute, and gentle—and also a bit unhinged. "If you won't leave, I won't leave either. Xie Qingcheng, I told you once when our lives were on the line: I'm not afraid of death. If you die, then there won't be anyone important to me left in this world. I don't know how many times I have to say it before you'll believe me." He Yu paused before continuing emphatically, "You're *not* expendable. I can't live without you. I can lose my life, but I can't lose *you*. If you want to die, then we die together."

Xie Qingcheng stared as He Yu, red-eyed, gave his confession, his heart trembling uncontrollably in his chest. These words spoke of a love that was beyond curing…and they touched Xie Qingcheng where he was most vulnerable.

If there was one thing he couldn't bear to hear, more than anything else, it was, "I can't live without you."

In the aftermath of his car accident in middle school, it had been Xie Xue's dependence on him that had kept him alive. As he lay inside the treatment tank and endured endless torment, he thought of his parents' funeral. Back then, Xie Xue didn't yet understand the meaning of life and death. She'd been perfectly docile and hardly reacted at all as she watched Xie Ping and Zhou Muying being pushed into the crematorium after the mourners had said farewell to their remains.

She had still been ignorant to the concept of death.

That is, until she followed Xie Qingcheng to take "mommy and daddy" home a few hours later. She waited and waited, until a staff member at the crematorium brought out two boxes of ashes.

She stood there, refusing to budge. “Where are mommy and daddy?” she asked in confusion.

Tamping down his own grief, Xie Qingcheng told her, “They’re here.”

These ashes, which were still warm but would soon turn cold, and these fragmented bones, some of which hadn’t burned away completely and still retained their original shape… These were their parents, who had once smiled as they hugged them and protected them.

It took a long time for Xie Qingcheng to explain to Xie Xue that her parents were gone. When Xie Xue finally managed to grasp what had happened, tears welled up in her eyes.

Sobbing in fear, she grabbed Xie Qingcheng’s hand and threw herself into his arms. “Gege, will you leave me one day too? I don’t want that! I can’t live without Gege! I can’t live without Gege! Gege has to stay safe. Gege, don’t leave!”

Xie Xue’s sobs were like a paper talisman placed over Xie Qingcheng’s heart, summoning his soul back into his body. Later on, even when he felt like a walking corpse, he would still be awakened by that little girl’s cries and keep stumbling from deep-sea purgatory back to the land of the living.

Those were the words that had summoned him back from hell.

I can’t live without you.

No matter how damaged he had become, he was still needed, still useful. His existence was not meaningless to this world.

But it had been a very long time since anyone had said these words to him in earnest.

As Xie Xue grew up, she began to think for herself. Although she still respected Xie Qingcheng, she often thought that he was too controlling and strict with her. She went from saying “I can’t live without Gege” as a child to “I have my own ideas” and “I can do it myself” as an adult.

Xie Qingcheng knew that she was right, but he couldn't bring himself to move on.

People's relationships were like the growth cycle of a red spider lily, with the new replacing the old. The stems of the plant couldn't bear the weight of the flowers, leaves, and fruit at the same time; just as the leaves died when the flowers bloomed, the flowers withered when the fruit came to bear.

Thus, recognizing that it was time he faded away from her life, Xie Qingcheng had gradually learned to let go. With that, his broken body seemed to have completed most of its tasks. There wasn't anyone left who would so stubbornly insist that they needed him.

The rag doll had sewn itself back into one piece for that little girl, but she didn't need it to take care of her anymore. The shabby old doll was no longer something irreplaceable that needed to remain in this world…

…Until now, when He Yu—his face covered in ashes and splattered with blood—told him: "Ge, I can't live without you."

Suddenly, it seemed the tattered and faded talisman on Xie Qingcheng's chest that was on the verge of peeling off had been pinned firmly back into place by someone new. He Yu refused to allow that slip of paper, the only thing that kept him breathing, to fall.

Xie Qingcheng, I won't leave you, He Yu said to that dying rag doll, whose soul had endured all manner of torture.

The flames crackled, transforming into a magical inferno that sealed their contract. In the center of an invisible force field, the boy stood holding the man.

He used his life to say to Xie Qingcheng:

You are the one, Xie Qingcheng. You are the only *one.*

I can use my life to prove my sincerity—that what I say holds no trace of deception. I would die with you and have no regrets.

Xie Qingcheng, an old teddy bear that no one needed, regarded He Yu in silence.

Then—though perhaps it was He Yu's wishful thinking—Xie Qingcheng's eyes, which only ever grew dazed when overwhelmed with desire, reddened around the edges.

He abruptly closed his eyes. When he next spoke, his voice was low and hoarse, as if touched by some unidentifiable emotion. "He Yu…"

He Yu coughed, then reached out to stroke the loose hair scattered over Xie Qingcheng's brow. "Xie Qingcheng, if you won't leave, then neither will I. I've accompanied you through so many life and death situations; this time will be no exception. I said that I would love you through every minute and every second of my life, that I would always protect you, and now I've done it."

When Xie Qingcheng did not respond, He Yu hugged him. "Don't look down on me just because I'm young, and don't tell me I'm naïve or confused about my feelings. I love you, I adore you, I want you…and now, I'll die with you. I didn't break my promise." He Yu began to choke up toward the end, his voice breaking as if he had been terribly wronged. "Xie Qingcheng, I-I didn't break my promise!"

In the depths of Xie Qingcheng's heart, a certain feeling finally began to stir in response to the young man's delirious declaration of love.

"He Yu," he murmured, his hands shaking slightly.

Their breaths grew increasingly labored as the smoke rose higher and higher. Gradually, He Yu realized that he was becoming dizzy.

"Xie Qingcheng," he said, forging ahead anyway, "if our souls live on after death, then you have to remember, I'll *never* scorn you

for your age or your divorce. So, if there is an afterlife, can you stay with me? If we survive this…will you date me?”

Xie Qingcheng stilled.

“You’ve…never really dated anyone before, have you? I’m great at it… You’d definitely…*definitely* like dating me. If we were together, I’d take you out and make you happy. I would…”

He broke off as a fit of coughing overwhelmed him. The air around them rippled with waves of intense heat. When he tried to finish what he was saying, he started coughing again, and for a moment, he couldn’t speak.

It was then that Xie Qingcheng sank his long and slender fingers into He Yu’s ink-dark hair.

He did it for any number of reasons: pity or loneliness, or the softness that came from all the hardships they had gone through together, or his frozen heart finally awakening.

He Yu lifted his confused eyes to meet Xie Qingcheng’s gaze.

Whatever the reason, Xie Qingcheng tilted his head, closed his eyes, and for the first time in a place outside the bedroom, took the initiative to kiss He Yu on the lips.

He Yu immediately grabbed Xie Qingcheng by his lapels; for a fleeting moment, he felt a greater sense of suffocation than anything that could be attributed to the lack of oxygen in the burning, forsaken basement.

His eyes flew open in disbelief, his entire body trembling. The light within them quivered, and his pupils abruptly gathered focus.

Xie Qingcheng was kissing him? *Actually* kissing him?

Even He Yu’s fingers were shaking. He was very good at kissing, but in that moment, he was more like a figure carved from wood, a puppet on a string, as if he needed someone to manipulate his limbs to move. Something warm slid down his cheek, like a drop of rain, but there was no rain here.

It took him a moment to realize that the sensation was his own tears.

Coming to his senses, He Yu began to reciprocate, kissing Xie Qingcheng back with fervor even as more tears streamed down his face. He wrapped his arms around the man, thinking, if this was the last thing he did in this life, it would be enough.

It would be enough.

He knew that Xie Qingcheng wasn't offering him a kiss of love. Rather, it was a response: a wordless thank you and a helpless apology. This knowledge cut through his elation with an intense stab of pain. Still, as he held Xie Qingcheng and Xie Qingcheng, after a moment of hesitation, finally held him back, He Yu thought, feeling a whirl of joy and disappointment—

This is enough. This is enough.

Xie Qingcheng, hold me. As long as you hold me, even if I turn to ash, to dust, and fade away into the roiling past…I'm no longer afraid.

Surrounded by the roaring fire, the two of them kissed passionately, prepared to burn to ashes in this raging inferno. No matter what they had gone through or how unbearable their shared past, none of it seemed to matter now. They were a pair of lonely souls blossoming amid the flames, supporting each other as they approached the end.

Burning debris continued to fall around them.

He Yu's hot tears landed on Xie Qingcheng's shoulders, hot enough to melt through ice, burning a trail straight into Xie Qingcheng's heart. He dug his fingers into He Yu's hair without knowing why he was kissing him so hard, with such sincerity and searing passion.

In this moment, it was simply what he wanted to do.

Over the course of his life, he had never initiated a kiss with anyone while sober. This was the final and only response he could

give He Yu.

Boom—!

The welding point of another beam melted through, and the huge chunk of metal plunged from the ceiling, crashing into the ground. Xie Qingcheng wrapped his arms around He Yu and led him over to the furthest corner of the room, pressing him against the wall and shielding him with his own body.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

Xie Qingcheng held a comforting hand over He Yu's eyes. In the increasingly hazy air, he said, "It'll be okay, He Yu. It'll be okay. I'm here."

Broken pieces of scrap iron caught fire as they crashed down in the hall behind them. Through it all, Xie Qingcheng held He Yu, protecting him from the sight.

Xie Qingcheng pressed their foreheads together. "Don't be scared… I'm here. I'm with you."

I can't force you to leave, and I know that this is your choice. In that case, I *choose to stay with you and protect you to the end. This is the only thing that I can give you, He Yu…*

The boy's lashes fluttered, and Xie Qingcheng could feel wetness against his palm. Another section of sheet metal fell, smashing into the digital control panel beside them. The sheet was so heavy that it shattered the control panel, splintering it like a web of cracks on ice.

Xie Qingcheng froze, staring at the screen as he suddenly realized something.

"Wait!" He dropped the hand that was covering He Yu's eyes.

"What's wrong…?" He Yu asked, dazed.

Xie Qingcheng stared at the shattered digital display until his eyes lit up. "Take off your clothes! Hurry!" he said.

He Yu blinked in confusion.

Chapter 141:
My Heart Fluttered

IN THAT MOMENT, Xie Qingcheng had figured out a way for both of them to escape.

Their situation had previously been hopeless, but the rafters and sheet iron crashing down had changed everything. If these construction materials were so heavy they could smash through the digital panel, it stood to reason that they could be used in place of a person to depress the lever.

Realizing this, Xie Qingcheng immediately knotted his and He Yu's jackets together, tying one end to a particularly heavy piece of wood and then attaching the wood to the lever. The emergency lever required an enormous amount of force to move. Previously, nothing in the basement could have possibly applied enough force. With the wood tied to it now, however, the lever slowly started to move. It had yet to lower all the way, and the door remained motionless, but He Yu realized what Xie Qingcheng intended to do.

"Great idea!" He Yu exclaimed. Covering his nose and mouth, he dropped to the ground to collect scrap metal and other heavy fallen debris, setting them atop that large piece of wood.

They watched with anxious eyes as the weighted objects piled up and the lever began to lower once more, finally moving past the critical red line.

Screech!

There was a sharp scraping noise, and the heavy door finally rumbled open. Xie Qingcheng and He Yu breathed a sigh of relief, but there was no time to think, much less celebrate. In a rush, they climbed up the ramp, escaping the smoky basement.

"Xie-ge! You—*you guys*!"

Chen Man had been standing by the door all this time, wiping his eyes and trying to compose himself. When he looked up at the noise, he was shocked to see a disheveled He Yu and Xie Qingcheng sprinting out of the basement.

His shock was quickly overtaken by joy. Clutching at He Yu's wristwatch camera, he stuttered, "Y-you're both… This is…"

Gasping, Xie Qingcheng shoved the heavy, fireproof door closed, preventing the hell below from spreading to the ground floor.

They had both inhaled a lot of smoke, and Xie Qingcheng, who was already in poor health, seemed more pallid than ever. He glanced at Chen Man. Though it made him angry, he wasn't at all surprised that Chen Man was still there.

"Let's get moving!" Xie Qingcheng said once he'd caught his breath. "It's not safe here. I'll explain as we go."

Chen Man's sadness had vanished completely in the face of Xie Qingcheng and He Yu's successful escape. Together, the three of them ran forward.

Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters occupied a large area of land. Between the late hour, an inadequate number of security guards, and the fact that Chen Man had entered through the front door and was relatively familiar with the place, their movements went unnoticed.

As they made their way out of Zhilong Entertainment's headquarters, Xie Qingcheng gave Chen Man a rough explanation of how he and He Yu had escaped. Of course, he made no mention of his conversation with He Yu. That was a private matter between him and He Yu; it wasn't fit for anyone else's ears.

Now that they were no longer in danger, the thought of what had just happened left Xie Qingcheng a bit disconcerted. This kid, He Yu… He had everything going for him, yet he just had to go and fall so deeply in love with a man that he didn't even fear dying in a sea of fire if it meant he could stay by his side.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if the little devil had simply limited himself to liking men—after all, if he were gay, that was that. In that case, one might expect him to go and find himself a handsome young man with a gentle and considerate disposition, right? But, no, instead of seeking a more suitable partner, he insisted on courting someone old enough to be his uncle.

While Xie Qingcheng had indeed felt touched in the basement, when he reconsidered their conversation in the raging fire from He Yu’s father’s perspective, he became so livid that he could imagine wanting to cut He Yu from the family tree, to ensure that if the He family’s ancestral hall were dug up a century from now, there would be no memorial tablet to be found even if the excavators burrowed ten meters into the ground.

He glanced at He Yu as he ran.

Even as he sighed over He Yu’s choices, that subtle feeling didn’t dissipate. He examined He Yu’s soot-streaked face; this was probably the ugliest he’d ever seen He Yu, yet Xie Qingcheng’s heart gave an inexplicable tremor at the sight of him.

Dammit, what the hell was he looking at him for? Xie Qingcheng turned away immediately.

The three of them pressed on. They encountered no obstacles, but as they approached the exit, a group of security guards appeared at the end of the corridor.

“That’s right, check over there.”

“Search each room carefully. Make sure we don’t let him escape.”

“Fucking hell, it’s like that cop stuck a pair of wings to his back and flew away!”

Since his henchmen had failed to bring Chen Man to Huang Zhilong in a timely manner, the enemy had finally realized that something was wrong and begun searching for him.

“Go the other way,” Xie Qingcheng snapped to the two precious young masters beside him.

But the other way wasn’t much better; there were six or seven men searching the rooms one by one on that side too.

He Yu hurriedly opened the map of Zhilong Entertainment’s headquarters he had on his phone and locked onto their present location. They could neither advance nor retreat; their only option was to run for the elevator located at the center of this floor before the two groups reassembled, and take their chances on the second floor. That was their only way out.

Forced to make a snap decision, they sprinted over to the elevator while the security guards were occupied searching the rooms. He Yu stabbed at the elevator’s “up” button as he glanced nervously back to check that the security guards were still in their respective rooms.

Don’t come out… Don’t come out…

If the security guards came out and glanced around, they would see the three of them waiting for the elevator. There was nothing that could act as cover, and they had nowhere to hide!

“There’s no one in here—”

“Check the closet and around all the corners—search everything carefully!”

“Clear.”

“The closet’s clear too!”

They could hear the security guards’ conversation, and He Yu spotted the group on the left in his periphery. The head of the security team was already standing by the door. He needed only to glance back and he would spot He Yu and the others waiting for the elevator. It was a matter of life and death, and they were running out of time.

The elevator’s position indicator panel counted down: 6, 5, 4, 3…

By the time it stopped on the third floor, all three of them had broken out into a cold sweat. The pale indicator number hung like a fish bone stuck in the throat.

Hurry up. Hurry the hell up! He Yu thought desperately, his entire body wound tight. With a wolf in front and a tiger behind, this was their only path to survival.

Overwhelmed with nerves, neither He Yu nor Chen Man realized what the elevator's extended stop on the third floor meant.

However, Xie Qingcheng understood immediately. He grabbed the two of them, one in either hand, and was about to bodily drag the pair of brats to the side when he heard a bright *ding*.

The elevator had arrived, and the steel gray doors slowly began to open. Too late. This was their only way out, and they had nowhere left to hide. It was over.

Like a screen unfolding, that chilly metal door peeled back to reveal a brilliant bloom of color.

Finally, the elevator's occupant met the trio of men standing outside face to face.

The woman who had come down from the third floor was wearing a red dress and matching high heels. Even her nails were painted a pale shade of vermilion, beautiful yet dangerous as arsenic. They never could have imagined that they would meet her here: *Jiang Liping*!

The instructor from Huzhou University who'd been on the run, whom they'd neither seen nor heard from since the broadcasting tower incident, and a top fugitive wanted by the police.

To think that they would meet her here—she was working for Huang Zhilong!

Jiang Liping narrowed her eyes, apparently surprised to see them as well.

Recognizing He Yu and Xie Qingcheng, she curled her red lips up in a cold smile. “It’s you.”

Meanwhile, Huang Zhilong was sitting in an armored nanny van and smoking a cigar, his teeth bared in a grimace. From time to time, he glanced down at his watch.

Half an age had passed, but his underlings had yet to find and bring Commissar Wang’s grandson Chen Yan to him. Even more concerning, he’d lost contact with the men sent to fetch him, and his surveillance system indicated that their ankle monitors had stopped working.

Huang Zhilong gnashed his teeth. When the tree topples, the monkeys scatter; with Zhilong Entertainment’s collapse, not a single one of these people could be relied upon!

Luckily, none of them knew enough to leak any *truly* critical information. The most crucial evidence of wrongdoing—the most incriminating proof that would have seen him sentenced to death a hundred times over—had already been destroyed.

As things stood, Huang Zhilong was eager to cut ties with that Duan bastard. If the atrocities he’d committed on that man’s behalf came to light, even if he asked the highest power to preside over his case, his final judgment would be certain: *Death penalty, to be executed immediately.*

Huang Zhilong puffed his cigar uneasily, a vicious glint in his eyes.

He knew that he needed to flee the country as quickly as possible. Given his connections, it would be a simple matter to delay the investigation, but if the police found more evidence, even with certain individuals’ protection, he wouldn’t be able to escape even if he could fly.

People who gathered in the interest of profit would inevitably disperse when there were no returns to be gained. Huang Zhilong

was a veteran of the entertainment industry. He was familiar with the fickle nature of human relations. That was why this Officer Chen was so important. As long as he held that policeman hostage, he would be able to threaten a number of individuals who would have otherwise had no fear of him. For instance, Commissar Wang, or perhaps—

Before Huang Zhilong could finish his thought, his cell phone began to vibrate.

The caller ID display showed an incoming call from his secret lover, Jiang Liping.

Huang Zhilong had an excellent reputation in the entertainment industry. There was barely any gossip about him, and everyone said that he remained deeply in love with his wife, Jin Xiuhe, despite her passing. He hadn't remarried, nor was he prone to womanizing.

Only he knew that the reason why he didn't womanize was because he had too many conflicts of interest with his lover, Jiang Liping. She was his most capable subordinate, and she was deeply devoted to him. In fact, she was so devoted that sometimes he felt he didn't deserve it. She was so valuable to him that he didn't want to give her any cause for disillusionment.

Aside from his two sons, who had long since settled down abroad, the only person he genuinely cared about was this woman. He needed to take her with him.

She was his right hand; his lover. It would be much more difficult to start again overseas without her at his side.

"Hello, Liping? How are things on your end?"

"Everything has been arranged."

"In that case, come find me at the usual place in the underground garage. The situation's become much more urgent than expected. We need to leave now."

"All right. But, Executive Huang, there's something important that I must tell you."

"What is it?"

"The boy with the blood toxin is here. He's in the headquarters right now."

Huang Zhilong couldn't have hoped that the blood toxin would fall into his hands at a critical moment like this. While Chen Man had escaped, He Yu had arrived in his place. This was *the* blood toxin. How many mentally ill people would he be able to control with He Yu's abilities at his disposal? With this trump card, even that Duan bastard would have to pave him a way out. This escape opportunity was a gift from the gods.

He breathed out heavily. "Did you catch him?"

Jiang Liping paused. There was a faint hiss of electricity.

Then, she continued. "The security guards on patrol saw him run into the basement, but there's a huge fire down there right now, and there's no way for us to follow. I have no idea whether he's dead or alive…"

Huang Zhilong exploded in rage. "I told those useless idiots to check the basement carefully before burning the place down! Are they deaf or do they simply not give a shit about what I say?!"

"Executive Huang, please don't get angry," Jiang Liping consoled him, sensing in his anger a hint of fear. "Right now, we must immediately send people to put out the fire in the basement—perhaps we can still save the blood toxin. We have no time to waste, but these security guards won't listen to me. Could you—"

"I'm putting you in charge! They're all to follow your lead! I'm sending them the fucking order right now! Hurry and capture that boy. Make sure he doesn't escape, and don't let him die!"

Jiang Liping agreed, and ended the call. Then, in an empty office on the third floor, she slowly turned to meet the eyes of the three men staring at her.

"You…" He Yu murmured.

After a beat of silence, Jiang Liping began. "You and Professor Xie once picked up a notebook on Neverland Island. That notebook contained a coded message left by an informant for the police with intel on an imminent series of murders. That was the last message the informant left for the police. At the time, they were already on the verge of being exposed. That person signed off with the initials J. L. P. With the Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital incident still weighing on you at the time, I'm sure you assumed that it stood for Jiang Lanpei—but it does not."

Jiang Liping folded her arms, indifferent yet unyielding. "Those three letters are my initials. The mysterious individual who has been leaking information to the police is me. I am the informant: Jiang. Li. Ping!"

Chapter 142:
You Smoked a Women's Cigarette

THESE WORDS left everyone astonished. The informant working with Zheng Jingfeng this whole time was none other than *Jiang Liping*?!

"What? Surprised?" she asked at the visible shock in the men's eyes. Her tone was conversational. "I know Old Man Zheng always thought his informant was a man."

She cast the others a fluid glance. Her eyes still contained the same careless indolence as they had at school, but pride, too, was visible in their depths.

"Not just him—everyone in the police force assumed the informant was a man when they had to guess." Jiang Liping snorted. "As if only men are capable of getting the job done. How fucking quaint. Men have high opinions of themselves, but at the end of the day, regardless of whether they're good or evil, they're all useless."

A man's man like Xie Qingcheng was left speechless by this proclamation. Even Chen Man, who only had a moderate degree of attachment to his masculinity, was at a loss for words. He Yu, on the other hand, quickly recovered and started to process this new information, scrutinizing Jiang Liping with interest.

Jiang Liping lit her slim cigarette with a soft crackle. She took a drag, then continued evenly, "These past few years, I've dealt with all sorts of men, from all levels of society. To tell you the truth, it's much easier to be fair to men than women. The things men want are usually tangible, like money, power, fame, status, and sex. Just like how little boys play with toy guns. Women are different. They're impossible to pin down…just like this smoke."

Her lips parted, and she exhaled a pale tendril of smoke that vanished into the air.

Wreathed in the light, cool scent of her cigarette, Jiang Liping continued, "You have to really think on your feet to keep the truth out of their sight and give them what they want. I've been lucky in that most of my opponents have been stupid men like you."

Her demeanor had often been like this at school, exuding arrogance whether she intended to or not. She'd always used her beauty as a shield, casting an alluring sheen on her feisty and prideful words—like a seductive snake demon who sloughed off her painted skin to reveal a lovely décolletage.

"Well, enough about that," said Jiang Liping. "It hasn't been easy for you to find me here. You can get going. I'll show you the way out."

"You don't have a single question for us?" He Yu asked sharply.

"When you put it that way, I suppose I do." Jiang Liping tapped the ash from her cigarette. "How much have you found out? How much evidence do you have?"

"We recorded…" Chen Man began.

"We haven't found any material evidence yet," He Yu said, cutting off Chen Man without preamble. He gazed steadily at Jiang Liping. "Can you give us anything we can take with us?"

Jiang Liping narrowed her eyes. After considering He Yu for a moment, she got to her feet. She unlocked the biometric safe on the other side of the office, then reached in to take something out. The moment she was about to turn back around, He Yu rushed forward and swiftly put her in a chokehold.

"What are you doing?!" Jiang Liping exclaimed.

"Are you really the informant?" demanded He Yu.

"Of course I am! Why else would I stick my neck out to rescue you guys?"

"You swear you're the one who's been in contact with Zheng Jingfeng? You're the one who left your initials in that notebook?"

"Ridiculous!" Jiang Liping snapped. "Of course they were my ini—" She stopped mid-sentence. As if in belated realization, her hand shook slightly.

"Looks like my memory's better than yours, Miss Jiang," said He Yu. "What was written in that notebook was 'Jiang. Lan. Pei.' Not 'J. L. P.'—not your initials."

Jiang Liping's face paled. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she held her tongue.

"What's your real reason for saving us?" Arm locked around her slender neck, He Yu commanded darkly, "Speak."

Jiang Liping closed her eyes. Then she whipped around without warning, moving with astonishing agility. In an instant, the tables had turned: She threw off He Yu's hold and lunged forward. In her hand was a knife that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and it was hurtling straight toward He Yu's chest.

Everything changed so suddenly that Xie Qingcheng only had time to shout, "He Yu!"

Just as he was about to throw himself at Jiang Liping, her knife stopped an inch from He Yu's chest, the blade flashing with cold light.

"If I actually wanted to harm you all, you'd already be dead," she said crisply. With a deft swipe of the knife, she sliced open the package wrapped in brown paper that she'd taken out from the safe. The contents fell to the floor with a clap. The three of them looked down: It was a bundle of photographs of human test subjects in a basement laboratory.

Jiang Liping let go of He Yu. With a deep breath, she straightened up and swept her hair out of her eyes. "Now do you believe me?"

She stuck the knife point-first into the table, then picked up the thick stack of photographs. She used them to smack He Yu in the face and swore under her breath. "Fucking hell, good thing I've

gotten used to fighting… Otherwise I would've met my end at the hands of a paranoid little brat like you."

He Yu blinked. He'd assumed that Jiang Liping must've harbored nefarious intentions and was scheming to get something from them. He even thought that she'd taken out some obedience potion or the like from the safe—that she was about to drug them with something that would immediately subdue them. But no—instead, here was some real material evidence.

"I only have these photos. I don't dare keep anything else here," said Jiang Liping. "But these should be enough. Go."

"But…why did you get the name on the notebook wrong?" asked He Yu. "You—"

"There's a reason for it, but I don't want to explain it to you, and there's no time now anyway." Jiang Liping closed her eyes briefly. "You're right, I misspoke. I remembered the signature incorrectly. But I am indeed the informant."

He Yu blinked at her, unconvinced.

"Whether or not you believe me is your choice."

Seeing that she didn't intend to expound on this memory slip, Xie Qingcheng opted to ask a different question. "If you really are the informant, why did you commit murder for Huang Zhilong during the broadcasting tower case?"

"You mean why did I kill Wang Jiankang and those other pieces of shit?" Jiang Liping might as well have been talking about fish being butchered at the market; her eyes were cold as ice. "They deserved to die. The organization ordered me to clean up. Why wouldn't I kill them?"

"But you got your hands dirty—" Chen Man began.

Jiang Liping's red dress billowed delicately as she stilled for a moment, then replied, "I've been covered in blood for a long time already. An informant isn't a police officer or an undercover agent. There's no one I can rely on behind the scenes. I have a single piece

of string I can use to link up the clues and guide the truth's kite into the net of justice, but that string is fragile; it'll break as soon as someone yanks it. What right do I have to decide whether I kill someone or not?

"Killing Wang Jiankang and those others was a piece of cake for me. I was happy about it, even. The most painful thing I've had to do in the past few years has been to allow Wang Jiankang and his cronies to live, to be forced to ingratiate myself to them. I had to watch them lay their traps and trick orphans into them, as they carried out illegal experimentation with no regard for human lives, and as they abused their power and forced themselves onto their victims. Their actions disgusted me to my core, yet I still had to serve them, had to sleep with them, had to make them laugh. Tell me, why *wouldn't* I kill them?"

"Seeing as that's the case, why didn't you hand over the evidence to the police as soon as you had it?" Chen Man asked. "The sooner you made a report, the faster the case would've been over. Then those innocent victims could've suffered less."

Chen Man was rather sheltered, and his response betrayed the naïveté of his thinking.

Jiang Liping arched an eyebrow. "Which case? The sexual assault case? The human trafficking case?" She ashed her cigarette, her eyes filled with scorn. "You should've figured out by now how tangled the web behind all this is. They dared to place a target on your back even though you're Commissar Wang's grandson. If I made a report rashly, I would've only exposed myself without affecting the organization's leadership. I need more trust and evidence. That's the only way a little ant like me could shake up the bastards sitting at the very top."

She blew out a ring of smoke. "I've said enough. If you still don't believe me, there's no point in wasting more words. I'll show you how to leave. I know plenty of people think I'm just a homewrecker who sleeps around to get what she wants. Once you

get out of here, you'll believe me." She got to her feet. "I can't be bothered with explaining myself anymore."

Xie Qingcheng looked her up and down before speaking. "Xie Xue mentioned you to me before."

Jiang Liping hesitated. "What did she say about me?"

"She said it seemed like you didn't like her. You weren't a very nice person."

This response didn't seem to come as a surprise to Jiang Liping. She let out a snort. Just as she was about to make some mocking reply, Xie Qingcheng continued. "She also said that Wang Jiankang kept offering to help her with things, but you disrupted all of them." Xie Qingcheng's clear, sharp gaze was fixed steadily on Jiang Liping. "You did it on purpose."

Jiang Liping's mockery never made it past her lips.

"You made sure Wang Jiankang wouldn't get close to Xie Xue."

At Xie Qingcheng's words, He Yu remembered some events from his time on campus.

Jiang Liping's reputation had been consistently awful at Huzhou University. Everyone knew her as a loose woman who slept around with Wang Jiankang and other administrators, trading sex for favors. Because she relied on her feminine wiles to get what she wanted, she was paranoid about pretty female teachers or students who might attract the attention of her patrons, and always kept her guard up around such women. She had once even slapped a student across the face when the girl tried to offer herself up to Wang Jiankang as a shortcut toward getting accepted to a graduate program.

Had her actions actually prevented Wang Jiankang and the others from having more easy opportunities to sink their claws into the girls at Huzhou University…?

If she really was the informant, then this person everyone thought of as a scarlet woman was more like a brilliantly plumaged

pheasant who used her bright colors to draw over the hunters, to ensnare the devils. It was her way of protecting the innocent and frail girls who were standing behind her.

Jiang Liping didn't seem inclined to offer much more explanation. After a pause, she tapped her cigarette again and said, "I've gotten used to being a slut. Being a saint is too boring. It's fine if someone knows about it. No need to belabor the point."

Xie Qingcheng gazed at her for a while. "I won't ask why you misremembered your signature," he said eventually. "But I choose to believe you."

Jiang Liping's fingers trembled around the cigarette. She let her lashes fall, like night-dark peach leaves, and was still for a moment. Then she lifted her face and turned swiftly to the side without meeting any of the others' eyes. A few seconds later, she reached up and quickly swiped at her face. Who knew if she was wiping away a tear that even she wasn't willing to admit had fallen.

In that moment, loud pounding sounded from the other side of the door.

"Who's in there?" a patrolling guard shouted into the office, his voice laced with threat. "Come out, quick! Otherwise I'm going to knock down this door!"

Jiang Liping yanked herself out of her momentary vulnerability. Bringing her emotions back under control, she motioned to Xie Qingcheng and the others to hide. Then she walked over to the door and pulled it open decisively.

The guard froze, his expression rigid. "J-Jiang-jie…"

"What are you yelling so loudly for?" Jiang Liping asked, her eyes widening imperiously.

"Sorry about that, Jiang-jie! It's just that Executive Huang has told us to track down that Chen pig as soon as possible, so—"

Jiang Liping cut him off. "His order's already changed. You're all to go to the basement and put out the fire, and then bring back

the He family's young master, dead or alive. Didn't you get the fucking message?"

"Yes, I got it, but Executive Huang implied that we have to find b-both of them."

Jiang Liping paused. It sounded like Huang Zhilong didn't heed her advice exactly, and had directed some of his forces to continue searching for Chen Man.

"I haven't seen anyone here," she said coldly. "Go look somewhere else."

The guard didn't budge.

Jiang Liping narrowed her eyes. "Why aren't you leaving? What do you mean by this?"

"Jiang-jie, I'm working overtime in the surveillance room," the guard said cautiously. "I saw three people…go into your personal elevator…"

Jiang Liping was taken aback. Her eyes widened a fraction.

The elevator that He Yu, Xie Qingcheng, and Chen Man had entered was indeed Jiang Liping's personal elevator. There were no cameras in that elevator because Huang Zhilong liked to fool around with Jiang Liping in there from time to time. But there *were* cameras in the hallway, though they could be turned off by the organization's upper management as they pleased. Today, Jiang Liping was busy, so she'd made a point to turn off some of the cameras in the main walkway. Who would've thought that…

The guard's manner was still careful, but his eyes took on a cold glint as they gazed down from below the brim of his hat.

"Jiang-jie, there are some miniature surveillance cameras in the walkway. Executive Huang is the only person who can use them. The resolution isn't great, but…" He took out his phone. On the screen was the unmistakable image of Jiang Liping leading He Yu and the others into the office.

By a stroke of luck, it was taken by a pinhole camera, so the resolution was low, and the angle was such that their faces hadn't been captured clearly. That was the only reason the guard hadn't immediately sent this video to Huang Zhilong. They all knew that there was no woman in Huang Zhilong's inner circle that he trusted more than Jiang Liping. Someone had once made a baseless accusation against Jiang Liping that was proven to be false. Huang Zhilong let Jiang Liping deal with that person afterward. In the end, the man was found dead with his corpse hacked to pieces.

"Jiang-jie, could I take a look inside the room?" The guard dropped all pretenses and asked directly.

Jiang Liping's eyes narrowed intensely. Still calm and unruffled, she looked over the guard. He had a gun in his belt. His comportment was still polite, but he'd already un-holstered the gun, and his hand was resting on its jet-black grip.

Jiang Liping lightly rapped on the doorframe, indicating to Xie Qingcheng and the others to make sure they were well-hidden. At the same time, she sneered and said, "Ooh, is it your business if I've hired three bodyguards?"

"It's only standard procedure, very sorry for the inconvenience," said the guard. "You could also let those three bodyguards come out."

"They're taking care of some other things for me right now. They're not in this room."

The guard's eyes flashed dangerously. "I know for a fact that they didn't leave again after they came in here with you, Jiang-jie."

"Are you questioning me?" asked Jiang Liping.

"I wouldn't dare, but this is a serious matter. It's okay if you refuse to cooperate, but I can contact Executive Huang himself and get his permission to search your office."

Amid the ensuing silence, Jiang Liping and the guard stared at each other, neither willing to back down.

"Jiang-jie, if you don't mind, I'll call Executive Huang right—"

"Come in." Jiang Liping interrupted him with a look of annoyance. She stepped aside. "This is so fucking tedious."

The guard walked into the room. Rather than appraise anyone else of his discovery, he'd opted to look for Jiang Liping by himself, so that he would receive all due credit. But when he actually stepped across the threshold and Jiang Liping shut the office door behind him with a crisp click, he began to regret his choices.

A sudden chill, born of some animalistic instinct, overtook him. Such was a human's most primitive sixth sense: On the verge of death, their body would send out a warning.

The guard quickly turned his head, reflexively drawing his gun, but it was already too late.

Bang!

The door to the office was made of shatterproof frosted glass. The blurry outlines of what was happening inside were visible from the other side. Following the startling sound of a gunshot, a fountain of blood arced up, splattering audibly onto the glass.

The dying guard only had time to rasp out a single cry of fright, his eyes bulging from their sockets: "Jiang Liping, you bitch!"

That cry was filled with fear, hatred, and scorn, sublimated into this man's humiliated last words. Those emotions sprayed out toward her along with his blood.

But Jiang Liping acted like she hadn't heard. She let go of the gun that was strapped to her person, then indifferently reached up to wipe away the gore that had splashed onto her face. When it came to killing people, she had far more experience than he did.

It wasn't until this moment that He Yu was fully convinced that Jiang Liping was a professional assassin of the highest caliber. Their earlier tussle must've been child's play for her. If she'd really intended to harm them, they wouldn't be able to escape even if they had ten lives each.

Jiang Liping looked down at the wide-eyed dead body on the ground, then straightened up. Addressing the three unsettled men, she said, "There's not much time left. This is one of Huang Zhilong's most trusted bodyguards. Now that he's dead, the others will quickly realize that something's wrong. I'll draw a map. You three need to get out of here as fast as possible."

She grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper and quickly sketched out a diagram. The stench of blood was heavy in the room. Being right next to the aftermath of such a violent murder made for a deeply disconcerting atmosphere.

Jiang Liping knocked out another cigarette, then took a contemplative drag. She held out the pack to the three silent men. "Want one?"

He Yu and Chen Man didn't normally smoke. Xie Qingcheng looked at her bloodstained face and stilled for a moment. Then he accepted the pack.

"These are women's cigarettes." Jiang Liping's face was a mask of tension, suppressing some strange emotion. "They're mine. Are you really going to take one?"

Xie Qingcheng just looked at her without a word. He opened the pack, holding her gaze beneath his long lashes, then slid out a slim cigarette and lifted it to his mouth. He clicked the lighter, tilted his face ever so slightly to the side, and leaned close to light it. The fashion cigarette hung there between his pale lips, in front of pearly white teeth and the barest flicker of his tongue. He took a drag. Those fine, well-proportioned fingers of his closed around the slender body as he softly knocked the ash from the end.

This stern and unyielding man had accepted the feminine cigarette she'd offered, mint-scented smoke swirling around him. In his own way, he was giving her a wordless affirmation.

Jiang Liping met his gaze for a few more seconds, then turned away. The eyes of this woman who'd just been called a "bitch" by the dead man on the floor held a slight sheen of wetness.

Quickly, she finished her sketch and handed it to Xie Qingcheng. With a sweeping glance, he grasped its contents at once.

"You should go," said Jiang Liping.

He Yu had also managed to gather his wits amid the carnage. "What about you?" he asked.

"I've stayed in this organization for all these years, getting dragged into the darkness with blood all over my hands, because there's something I have to do. I haven't finished it yet. If I leave, Huang Zhilong will only grow more suspicious, and the situation will be harder to deal with," Jiang Liping said decisively. "I can't give up yet."



With a flutter of her red dress, she swiftly straightened out her clothes. "Listen, Huang Zhilong's flight number is K1054. It takes off at noon tomorrow from Huzhou International Airport. Bring all the evidence, including your own."

She swept a glance over He Yu. It seemed that she understood He Yu had been lying to her before; they had to have more evidence they'd gathered themselves.

"Once you get out of here, call the police right away," she went on. "But not the city bureau—make sure you contact the provincial-level police. Go to Chief Hu himself."

"Is there a mole in the city police?" Chen Man blurted out, unnerved. "Who is it?"

"Someone very high up, but he's a clever person. I don't have any evidence that can be used against him," said Jiang Liping. She then spoke a name that filled Chen Man's chest with alarm and dread.

"So, the person who killed my parents—" Xie Qingcheng began.

"It wasn't him. He's just there to shield the others; he doesn't kill people directly," Jiang Liping told him. "The people who actually spill blood are the assassins in our organization. It's very hard to know which one it was for sure."

Xie Qingcheng's nails dug into his palms. "Then, do you know who's really in charge of this organization?"

"I do, but I'm not sure if he uses his real name," said Jiang Liping. "His surname is Duan, and he goes by Duan Wen. A Chinese-Australian man. He's very careful. All his bases are abroad, and there isn't much information on him in the mainland. I can't say anything more."

"Why not?"

Jiang Liping raised her hand to show them a bracelet around her wrist. It was just like the ones that the guards who'd died in the

basement had been wearing.

"It's a monitor for leaks of classified information—black-market technology," she explained. "This organization has some of the world's best and most deranged scientists and engineers working for it. Together, they can come up with ideas and gadgets that are far more advanced than a run-of-the-mill lab. This monitor is one of their designs. I've studied it over the years to find out when the lethal mechanism gets triggered. There are plenty of things I know about, but I can't reveal them. This bracelet is quite expensive. Members at my level, who have direct contact with the upper echelons of the organization, receive one at their swearing-in ceremony. They can never be removed."

"We came across two guards in the basement who were wearing these around their ankles," said He Yu.

"Those are knock-offs that Huang Zhilong made," Jiang Liping said. "Their recognition ability is terrible—as soon as someone disrespects him, they'll set off a chain reaction. Sometimes they'll even trigger the other cuffs nearby. They're like a stupid AI, fit for a clumsy oaf like him." She paused. "The technology that Duan Wen's organization develops is incredibly advanced and unhinged, beyond anything you'd expect. Some of their famous inventions are like things that Leonardo da Vinci came up with. Ahead of their time, and utterly terrifying. This bracelet is one of their most rudimentary devices. As for the more sophisticated gadgets, Huang Zhilong couldn't even imagine them, much less copy them."

She glanced at her phone. The internal surveillance system was open on the screen, and Zhilong Entertainment's messages were rapidly scrolling across it. Someone was reporting that the fire in the basement had been extinguished, but there was no trace of He Yu, dead or alive…

Jiang Liping briskly ended their conversation. "There's no more time. I won't be able to delay them for long. You have to get out of here right away. Is there anything else you have to ask me?"

There were really too many questions they wanted to ask. For example, who was the "Lu Yuzhu" they'd seen in the Yi Family Village? Was she involved with the mysterious organization? Did the two girls who'd gone missing from the crew of *The Trial* have anything to do with the organization too?

But time was running out. If Jiang Liping didn't leave soon, Huang Zhilong would notice that something was wrong. They had to quickly make a judgment call and just pick one thing—

"How did you all find out about the blood toxin?" Xie Qingcheng tried.

He Yu didn't think it was surprising that such a powerful organization could find out about his blood toxin ability. Plus, he didn't want to reveal his secrets in front of Chen Man. And so he spoke over Xie Qingcheng.

"That's not the most important thing," he said. "There's something that matters more—something we really need your help with."

Chapter 143:
Your Reply Moved Me

HE YU OBTAINED a few small samples of obedience potion from Jiang Liping's office.

"They originally gave these to me to use as weapons," said Jiang Liping. "Take them."

She handed the vials to them, then looked at Xie Qingcheng. She'd just said she would only take one more question, but she'd heard Xie Qingcheng when He Yu had spoken over him.

"There are many things I can't tell you because of the bracelet," she said. "But you don't need to worry about the blood toxin. I don't believe the organization would rashly let the one who holds it come to harm."

As she spoke, she swiftly brought them to an emergency exit. Before they parted ways, Jiang Liping hesitated for a moment, then turned to He Yu. "That person who's always been very good to you, that fat…"

Jiang Liping's bracelet vibrated violently; she immediately fell silent. This type of reaction could mean that the bracelet thought its wearer might divulge a secret, but it was also possible that it would send out a warning by mistake.

"Fat?" asked He Yu.

Jiang Liping shook her head. "It's nothing. You should go."

He Yu knew that she was trying to remind him of something, or perhaps she was hinting at who'd revealed he had the blood toxin, but the bracelet prevented her from saying it out loud. He wasn't too concerned with keeping himself out of danger in the first place, so he had no intention of letting an innocent woman suffer for the sake of answering his question.

He Yu didn’t follow up. He gave her one last look, then turned toward the emergency escape corridor.

Fifteen minutes later, Xie Qingcheng, He Yu, and Chen Man exited the premises of Zhilong Entertainment.

Each of them then set out to complete their respective tasks—time was of the essence. The three of them split up, with the imperative that they intercept Huang Zhilong within the country’s borders before he had the chance to flee.

Naturally, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng didn’t explain much to Chen Man about RN-13. They only told him some of the background on the drug and its physiological effects. When it came to the fact that both of them had been test subjects, or past events involving Qin Ciyan, neither of them said a word.

Xie Qingcheng hailed a cab to travel to Meiyu Hospital. He needed to bring the newest iteration of the obedience potion—which was developed from RN-13—to the hospital’s scientists.

When he got into the taxi, he let out a tiny breath of relief. Everything that had happened that night seemed like a dream.

He’d originally assumed they wouldn’t be able to obtain any samples of the obedience potion. Given his overanalytical tendencies, he’d decided to ask a question that he thought would be likely to yield an answer. Getting the obedience potion was more of a reach, and he thought they might be able to come across it elsewhere, so he’d placed it at a lower priority. But luckily He Yu hadn’t given up hope, and Jiang Liping actually had some with her.

Xie Qingcheng’s phone buzzed. It was a text from precisely the person he was thinking about.

Xie Qingcheng, be careful on the road. Let me know when you’ve arrived.

He felt a twinge in his heart, some bygone warmth rushing into him. He lowered his gaze thoughtfully, then sent He Yu a slightly-smiling-face emoji as an appeasement.

A second later, he added: *You too.*

He put his phone back into his pocket and turned his gaze to the brilliant nightscape outside the window. Even in the early hours of the morning, Huzhou teemed with life. As Xie Qingcheng sat in his taxi, listening to the driver ramble on about this and that against the snatches of late-night romance programs from the radio, all the horrifying events that had happened just hours ago seemed like scenes from someone else's life.

Still, Xie Qingcheng had a vague feeling that some things were different now. As soon as he had the opportunity to relax, he thought of the kiss he and He Yu had shared in the burning basement, and the tears that had fallen from He Yu's eyes after Xie Qingcheng took the initiative to kiss him.

He recalled what He Yu had said to him: *Xie Qingcheng, you're* not *expendable. I can't live without you. I can lose my life, but I can't lose* you*. If you want to die, then we die together.*

Xie Qingcheng had been so sure that He Yu's "love" was nothing more than a young man's momentary impulse—a teenager's crush. It was only when they were surrounded by those flames that he understood that there was someone on this earth who saw him as his whole life. It didn't matter if he were nineteen, twenty-nine, or ninety-nine; He Yu couldn't stand to lose him. He was irreplaceable.

His phone suddenly vibrated twice more. He Yu had replied to him with a sticker and a message. Xie Qingcheng carefully read each word of that message, which brimmed with deep emotion. The stirrings of his heart intensified.

"Sir, we're headed to Meiyu, right?" The driver's question interrupted Xie Qingcheng's reverie. "There's a Meiyu Education close to here on this map—just making sure, are we going to the hospital on the east side?"

Xie Qingcheng blinked, caught off guard. “Yes, thank you.”

The warmth blooming in his chest became something complicated as soon as he heard the name “Meiyu.”

Hidden within Meiyu Hospital was a secret of his that He Yu didn’t yet know about. When Xie Qingcheng remembered that secret, then reread He Yu’s message with all its unguarded passion, he felt like something heavy had rammed into his ribs. His heart, which had just begun to thaw, grew cold and silent once more.

He Yu was already on the high-speed train to Hangshi, the watch with the secret recording around his wrist. His destination was the provincial police bureau in Hangshi, and Police Chief Hu was the man he needed to find.

Much to his surprise, Xie Qingcheng replied to the message he’d sent right away. Before, it was unimaginable that Xie Qingcheng would respond to him so quickly. Usually, if he didn’t ignore He Yu completely, it would take anywhere from twenty minutes to a full day before he’d write back.

He Yu’s heartbeat quickened, and he knew it wasn’t only because of the case at hand. He tapped on the notification and read Xie Qingcheng’s message.

The first message was a slightly-smiling-face emoji, while the second said, *You too.*

A smile broke out across He Yu’s tense features, like a frozen stream thawing after a long, frigid night.

He’d never bothered to correct the way Xie Qingcheng used the slightly-smiling-face emoji. Anyone else might’ve found that emoji a bizarre, ambiguous response, but to He Yu, it was the truest expression of Xie Qingcheng’s warmth.

Going forward, he wouldn’t correct him—he’d only indulge him. So what if some other young person ended up freaking out because

of how Xie Qingcheng used this emoji? Lucky them, in his opinion. As long as He Yu was the only one who could understand him, he was happy.

He Yu sent a sticker back to Xie Qingcheng, a moon jellyfish one that he'd made himself. As soon as he sent it, little jellyfish drifted down the entire WeChat interface, like falling willow down.

You kissed me, so I'll be sure to look after myself. Because I know you'll kiss me a second time, a third time, a thousand more times in the future. When I think about that, I love this world so much—so much that death would never be able to take me away. Don't worry, I'll be careful. I love you.

Once he finished typing, he put his phone back into his jacket's inner pocket. He looked out the window, gazing at the pale rosiness on the distant horizon.

Meanwhile, Chen Man went back home. He relayed a rough outline of the night's events to his parents, then—for the first time—he called his grandfather in Yanzhou and asked for his help. The police command center immediately lit up. It was still nighttime, but dawn was about to break. This would be a frantic race against time.

Huang Zhilong and his cronies had also realized something was wrong. They searched all of Zhilong Entertainment, but there was no trace to be found of either Chen Man or He Yu. They did turn up several guards who had died in strange ways, though, and when Huang Zhilong went to download the surveillance footage, he discovered that there was no way to access it from the cloud.

Naturally, this was He Yu's doing. To buy more time for their side, and for Jiang Liping, he'd logged into Zhilong Entertainment's internal system before they left the premises and destroyed all of their data.

After trying and failing to download the recordings for the fifth time, Huang Zhilong turned off his phone with an angry jab. He saw

the reflection of his sweat-drenched face on the screen.

He couldn't keep waiting. He'd wanted to come up with a better plan, but now it looked like he needed to go to the airport right away and change his flight. If the police got their hands on any evidence they could use to detain him, it would become much harder to leave.

He had to *run*.

The idea flashed through his mind and quickly took shape. With shaking fingers, Huang Zhilong made a call to Jiang Liping. He swallowed and tried his best to sound calm. "Hello—"

An hour and a half later, in Huzhou's Meiyu Hospital—

"Rest assured, we'll put in an analysis request to our collaborators' lab right away. If everything goes as planned, we'll be able to synthesize the antidote for your sister soon." The director of Meiyu Hospital happened to be on duty, so Xie Qingcheng had managed to meet with him despite the late hour.

"No need to thank me," the director said. "You've done so much for us that I'd help you unconditionally. Don't worry."

In Hangshi, at the provincial public security bureau—

"Chief Hu? Look at the time, of course Chief Hu isn't in right now," the sentry on call told He Yu in the shift room. He eyed the grime-caked youth suspiciously.

He Yu didn't pay him any mind. He leaned against the sentry post and waited.

The officer was just about to shoo him away when a jet-black Audi glided toward them out of the night. Even if this officer wasn't the brightest bulb in the box, he recognized the license plate. With a shudder, he snapped to attention and raised his hand in a salute.

The window slowly rolled down to reveal Chief Hu's grave visage. He looked straight at He Yu. "I received the call from Yanzhou. You have evidence for me concerning the crimes of the Huzhou businessman Huang Zhilong, is that correct?"

He Yu stood up straight. "Yes, Chief Hu."

In Yanzhou, at Commissar Wang's residence—

After he heard Chen Man's story, the elderly commissar made a flurry of late-night calls, clearing away the red tape as quickly as possible. His complexion was ashen with anger, his lips trembling as he kept muttering to himself: "The nerve of them, insubordinate…"

His wife tried fruitlessly to talk him out of it, but he was furious—he had never imagined his own grandson could come within a hair's breadth of dying at the hands of criminals like these. At last, he summoned a security guard. H was coughing from the anger choking his lungs as he ordered the guard to arrange a plane immediately. He was going to Huzhou to personally preside over Huang Zhilong's capture!

At three minutes past six in the morning, wearing a long black windbreaker and a bucket hat, Huang Zhilong emerged from the secret residence he shared with Jiang Liping. He was carrying a blast-resistant safe that contained his most important files, as well as some mandatory documents. Jiang Liping followed close behind him, a black jacket over her red dress.

"Get in the car."

"Are we going straight to the airport?" asked Jiang Liping.

Huang Zhilong nodded. "Our flights have already been changed. Xiao-Rong and Xiao-Ming will pick us up in New Zealand. I never thought there was any sense in having kids just so that they

could look after me when I got old, but the two of them are going to help their old man out."

When she heard the names of Huang Zhilong's sons, Jiang Liping's eyes darkened inscrutably. "They're not as capable as you. It's really too much trouble to bother them with things like this."

"That's what I used to think too, but I've found they're pretty talented after all. Once we get to New Zealand, you should take some time to teach them more. Even if we don't rely on Duan Wen, we can still make a comeback."

The car sped off toward Huzhou International Airport. In the passenger seat, Jiang Liping lit one of her fashion cigarettes.

"What about those guys at headquarters?" she asked, voice nonchalant.

"I don't know. They should've left the building by now. They've probably made it to the dock and gotten on a ferry headed for international waters."

"That ferry won't be leaving until four o'clock tomorrow afternoon," said Jiang Liping. "He Yu and Chen Man have both been inside headquarters now, and we don't know either of their whereabouts. What if they've gotten their hands on some piece of critical evidence? Considering who those two people are, they could quickly start an investigation against us. Executive Huang, are you sure your men will still be able to escape if they wait until four o'clock tomorrow?"

Gripping the steering wheel tightly, Huang Zhilong bared his teeth in a sinister grimace. "Escape? Once that ferry leaves port with them on board, it's going to blow up! Those pieces of shit would only be liabilities if I kept them around. Did you *really* think I'd let them escape to international waters?"

Jiang Liping's fingers trembled slightly around her cigarette. After a long moment, she looked out the window. "Those guys were your closest associates. They did so many things for you."

"That's exactly why I can't keep them around."

"What about me?"

Huang Zhilong paused. "You're different. You're my woman."

Jiang Liping didn't respond right away. She finished the cigarette in silence before giving him a wan smile. "You do care about me, then. I've chosen the right person to be with."

Huang Zhilong nodded, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

At an underpass near the airport, they encountered a police checkpoint that was testing blood alcohol levels.

Huang Zhilong swore under his breath, one hand gripping the black safe next to the driver's seat. He peered closely at the officers, trying to see if they were real policemen, or if the authorities were already onto him, using a blood alcohol checkpoint as a front to intercept any suspicious people on their way to the airport.

Jiang Liping understood his anxiety. "Let me carry it for you; it'll be less conspicuous."

She reached out for the safe next to Huang Zhilong, but before her fingertips even touched it, Huang Zhilong grabbed the handle and moved it to the other side of his seat. No matter what words of sweet affection he spoke, when all was said and done, it wasn't that he couldn't leave Jiang Liping because of love—it was because he couldn't afford to give her up. He didn't trust her completely, especially after the blood toxin carrier and Chen Man had disappeared so mysteriously.

Both of them fell silent.

With that action, Huang Zhilong had let his true feelings shine through. He knew that his insincere attitude toward Jiang Liping was like a sheet of lovely wrapping paper that had been punctured, revealing the ugly object within.

"It's best if I hold onto this case," Huang Zhilong said, making an effort to suppress his embarrassment.

Jiang Liping didn’t answer. After a while, she let her hand fall.

The atmosphere shifted slightly. The mistrust that hung between them was like vinegar seeping out of a fermenting ball of dough, its acrid note impossible to hide.

The police officer rapped against the window. “Hello, comrade.”

Huang Zhilong snapped out of it. His eyes were vigilant, but he put on an unconcerned air as he rolled down the window. Nevertheless, he silently pushed that all-important case forward until it was right next to his leg.

The policeman raised the breathalyzer. “Would you mind opening your mouth? We’re checking blood alcohol levels here.”

Huang Zhilong let out a sharp breath of relief. By the time he was finished with the check, he could feel the cold sweat drenching his entire back.

The police hadn’t mobilized yet, but he knew he couldn’t tarry.

At last, morning arrived. It was 7:13.

The Huzhou police received a message from the higher-ups to temporarily shut down all ticket inspection in the airport. Plainclothes officers immediately descended upon the airport to check the identities of all travelers who were about to get onto any international flight.

“Huang Zhilong is likely to be carrying lethal weapons on his person. It is imperative that we ensure the safety of other travelers when pursuing him.”

“Let’s be as discreet as possible. We don’t want to draw his attention with any obvious tip-offs.”

“According to the airline, Huang Zhilong’s new flight is FH1045, gates fifteen through seventeen. He should’ve purchased first-class tickets, but he hasn’t scanned his ID in the first-class lounge yet, so

we need to pay attention to gates fifteen through seventeen. Huang Zhilong probably knows people working in this airport, so he can smuggle guns and bullets past airport security. Please lock down the area as fast as you can and start evacuating people for their safety."

Each of the plainclothes officers heard their commander's clear orders through their earpieces. One by one, their responses quickly came through their body microphones:

"Understood."

"In position."

"In position and ready to move."

At this time of day, the terminal was fairly empty, almost desolate. The officers' guns were concealed beneath their jackets. Masquerading as weary tourists dragging suitcases behind them, they calmly slipped into the waiting area.

An old couple was sitting in front of a nearby souvenir shop. Two young people were playing games near a charging station. The aroma of coffee wafted over the area. A woman was using the time before takeoff to review a document on her computer.

Two more people were sitting next to the floor-to-ceiling windows. From their figures, it looked like a man and a woman, but they'd thrown a black windbreaker over their heads, as if they were blocking the light to take a quick nap, or perhaps sharing a kiss beneath the fabric's cover.

"Airport security cameras show that Huang Zhilong and Jiang Liping were wearing long black jackets when they arrived. They brought suitcases and a handheld safe." The commander's voice came over the earpieces again. "Jiang Liping was wearing a red dress under her jacket, and red high heels…"

That man and woman by the windows seemed unwilling to show their faces to the world, but the woman was indeed wearing an elegant pair of stilettos.

One of the plainclothes officers paced around near the couple, then came to a stop. Rather than interact directly with them, he stood up his roller suitcase nearby and looked around. Walking over to a water dispenser, he took a paper cup and filled it with hot water.

As he sipped from the cup, he made a call on his phone. "Hey, Lao-Liu, don't worry, I'm at the airport already. Yeah. That's right, I saw the bakery you mentioned—I told you, didn't I? It's not open yet, though, so I didn't get to buy anything."

These codewords indicated to the commander that he'd spotted a pair of suspects.

The commander instantly switched to another channel and gave an order. A sniper stealthily descended from the airport's second floor to draw closer to this gate. Through the viewfinder, he pointed the crosshairs right at the man who was sprawled out in his seat and rested his fingertip on the trigger.

Meanwhile, the officer was still conversing loudly on the phone in a strong, strident dialect. "All right already, my flight's about to board. Yeah, I was bummed I couldn't try their stuff after you were going on about how delicious it was. If you get the chance, why don't you come out to visit me and bring some over? Don't be a stranger, ha ha ha—aiyo!"

Like a distracted teenager, the officer failed to watch where he was going while he was engrossed in his phone call. He haphazardly bumped into a chair, jostling the cup in his hand. Hot water splashed out, landing all over the man with his windbreaker over his face.

The officer very convincingly put on an expression of abject horror. Before the man could react, he was already scrambling to help him mop up the water.

"Sorry, so sorry! Sir, I didn't mean to—clumsy old me, can't even walk in a straight line! Are you okay?"

Under the pretense of wiping the spill, the officer tugged forcefully on the windbreaker, pulling it down. The sniper tensed, like

a cheetah ready to pounce, waiting for the commander's order to come through the line—

But the plainclothes officer's microphone abruptly went silent.

Then: "Are you insane? Fucking hell! Can't you watch where you're going?" The faces that emerged from beneath the windbreaker didn't belong to Huang Zhilong and Jiang Liping at all. Instead, it was a pair of young lovers in their mid-twenties at most.

The two of them really had been passionately making out under the jacket, treating the waiting area as a love hotel. Shielded beneath the fabric, they held nothing back—the woman's buttons had been undone, and half her bra was exposed. When the jacket was torn away without warning, she dived straight into her boyfriend's arms, terrified.

"Ahh! Pervert!" the girl cried.

"Step the fuck away! The hell are you looking at?!" yelled the boyfriend.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry," the officer said weakly.

The commander brought a hand to his forehead. He'd never expected that the scenario would turn out like *this*.

Just at that moment, there was a hiss on the line. One of the technicians spoke up. "Boss, one of the agents at gate B13 exchanged messages with Huang Zhilong. Most likely that agent helped him enter the airport without going through security, and then he boarded the plane with a fake ID. He probably booked the tickets we found with his real ID to mislead us and buy more time. It's likely that he and Jiang Liping boarded the flight before we closed all the gates!"

"Where's the flight out of B13 headed?" the commander asked, alarmed.

"New Zealand—Auckland Airport. Flight IH8803. It left half an hour ago."

"Fuck!" The commander blanched. He grabbed his mic and switched channels. "Detain the gate agent at B13. Tell the airport to contact the air marshal aboard flight IH8803 immediately. Notify the forces on the ground!"

Chapter 144:
Fatal Shooting

ABOARD FLIGHT IH8803, Jiang Liping was watching the clouds outside the window. The plane soared smoothly through the air, crossing land and sea on its way to a different country.

She could tell that Huang Zhilong was feeling much more relaxed next to her. He'd gotten a hot coffee from a flight attendant and was sipping it slowly, slouched down in his seat, like he was trying to swallow down and digest the stress from the past few days along with that coffee.

The safe was still sitting in his lap, but at least he wasn't clutching it as tightly as before.

Jiang Liping calmly handed him a warm towel. "Executive Huang, would you like to wipe your face?"

Huang Zhilong sighed as he dabbed the sweat from his forehead. "Good thing we brought some obedience potion to make security and the gate agent listen to me. Otherwise this fake passport would've never worked. That was a close call." Abruptly, his face lit up with delight. "See, I managed to get away from right under their noses! What a bunch of incompetent fools! And that Duan Wen sure is a fucking piece of work. I soiled my hands doing his dirty work, but as soon as he can't handle me anymore, he pretends like he doesn't even know me."

"But *we* can't have too many dealings with him either," said Jiang Liping. "If any evidence comes out about our connections to him, it'll only complicate everything."

Huang Zhilong flapped his hand and wearily closed his eyes. "Ah, forget it. It's all over now." He idly clicked his tongue for a while, then muttered, "It's all over…"

Some people were simply greedy by nature. In a time of crisis, their first priority was to flee, but as soon as they escaped with their life, they'd start lamenting the riches they couldn't bring with them. That was precisely what Huang Zhilong was doing now. He stretched out his tall figure in his seat. The relaxed expression on his face gradually gave way to unmistakable disappointment.

"There's one thing I really can't figure out: Who the fuck did I cross?" Huang Zhilong murmured through gritted teeth. "If Hu Yi hadn't died, things wouldn't have spun so far out of control… But I've still got no goddamn clue which member of that cast and crew murdered Hu Yi and dumped his body in that tank. When did I manage to piss off such a powerful bastard?"

"You've pissed off quite a few people," Jiang Liping said blandly. "Some of them might look like they're working with us, but they're just trying to use us and could turn against us in an instant." She tilted her chin toward the safe resting on Huang Zhilong's lap. "For example, take the people mentioned in this case. You could say they're the friends we've accumulated over the years, but in a sense, aren't they our enemies too, Executive Huang?"

Huang Zhilong blinked, then patted Jiang Liping's thigh. "Ah, you're a clever one, aren't you?"

Jiang Liping gave him a tiny smile.

Huang Zhilong wasn't young anymore; this ordeal had left him exhausted. He shifted in his seat and steered the subject away from these nerve-wracking topics. "Once we get to New Zealand, I need to find a good massage therapist who can squeeze the stress out of me. That's what I need to regroup for the *next* fucking round."

Jiang Liping squeezed his shoulder with her soft hand. "You just love the spa so much. That broadcasting tower case was such a production that Duan Wen himself ended up getting involved, but I heard you were getting a massage even then. No wonder Duan Wen got mad and said you were putting on airs."

Jiang Liping's hands were nimble and strong, and Huang Zhilong let out a contented groan. "It's because I hurt my back when I was young, sitting and studying all the time… Never mind. Let me rest."

This was precisely what Jiang Liping had been waiting to hear. "Go ahead and sleep. About the safe, do you want me to take…"

"No need," Huang Zhilong answered before she could finish. He hugged the safe to his chest and fell asleep with his chin resting against it.

Jiang Liping's eyes darkened. She couldn't wrest away this safe by force; it had been designed by scientists from the organization. If Huang Zhilong were to press the safety button on its side, everything inside would be immediately destroyed.

She looked at her watch. The plane would land in New Zealand in one hour. As soon as they crossed the border, she would no longer be able to do the one thing she needed to.

Before boarding the plane, she'd wanted to discreetly let He Yu know that they'd changed their flight, but Huang Zhilong had been watching her so closely that he hadn't even permitted her to use the bathroom. In the end, she hadn't been able to send that message.

She hadn't wanted to throw everything away at the very last moment, and she couldn't let Huang Zhilong's sharp eyes notice anything amiss, and so she had to give up on contacting He Yu and the others. Now that they were on the plane, Huang Zhilong seemed much more relaxed than before. She thought she might have an opportunity to leave his line of sight and find an air marshal. With this goal in mind, she tentatively stood up from her seat.

Huang Zhilong's eyes snapped open immediately. "Where are you going?"

"The bathroom."

"We'll land in an hour. Sit down."

Seeing that Jiang Liping didn't move, Huang Zhilong narrowed his eyes. His placid tone took on a harder edge. "Liping, sit *down*."

He was still holding the safe, and Jiang Liping had no way to grab it. She had to take her seat again. It didn't look like he was going to let his guard down before the plane landed in New Zealand. She had to find some other way to safely get that case away from him. *That* was the most important thing.

Meanwhile, in the cockpit of the plane, the marshal spoke with the flight captain over the radio. After that, he stepped into the flight deck. Voice lowered, he summarized the information he'd received about the situation at hand.

"What?! All right. I understand." After the captain's initial astonishment passed, his face grew solemn again. He had once been a combat pilot; he knew how to keep his cool. "The flight will immediately return to the point of departure."

Having been woken up from his nap, Huang Zhilong wasn't drowsy anymore. With every passing second, he only grew more anxious for the plane to land.

An announcement came over the intercom: "Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing in Auckland Airport in half an hour. We'll be closing the restrooms before then. Please fasten your seatbelts and remain in your seats. If you require any assistance, please press the button to page a flight attendant. Thank you for your cooperation."

Huang Zhilong let out a heavy breath. They would be arriving shortly! So much for the long arm of the law—that was for catching ordinary citizens. As long as he had enough money and power, it

didn’t matter how much blood was on his hands; he could roam free!

While Huang Zhilong was reveling in his imminent success, the airport workers and policemen at Huzhou International Airport were putting the finishing touches on their preparations. Now, they would wait.

In the interest of not attracting Huang Zhilong’s notice and allowing the other passengers to safely leave the premises, the spot that had been designated for their landing was the most open area of the tarmac. Planes from international airlines had been parked nearby. Members of the police force were presently covering up all the Chinese advertisements and signs in the vicinity, such that it wouldn’t be immediately obvious to Huang Zhilong that he was not at Auckland Airport, but rather back at Huzhou International Airport.

These sorts of modifications weren’t challenging to set up, as airports in every country had similar tarmac layouts. In addition, they already knew where Huang Zhilong was sitting, toward the rear of the cabin. In other words, by the time he deplaned, most of the other passengers would have already left through the jet bridge, and so they only needed him to walk a short distance before they could act. He wouldn’t even have much of a chance to take in his surroundings before the police would clear the area and descend upon him.

The ground crew rushed to complete the last tasks at hand.

“Put some more foreign newspapers over here! Shit, get rid of this fucking Huzhou Daily right away!”

“Get the signal jammers working over the whole airport! We can’t let the criminal receive one of those ‘China Mobile welcomes you’ messages! Hurry!”

The police commander received a message: “Captain, IH8803 has begun its descent. It’ll land in the next fifteen minutes.”

Gripping his walkie-talkie, the commander pressed the green "Talk" button. "The suspect is about to land. Everyone, to your positions."

The firearms unit and riot police quickly concealed themselves. All of the airport's security measures were activated. The operation to catch the criminal was on!

"Thank you for flying with IH Airlines. We hope you'll fly with us again."

The flight attendant was terribly nervous, but she called upon her training to maintain her smile, politely and warmly sending off the passengers.

Those passengers, however, weren't so easily assuaged.

"Hey, what's wrong with my cell service?" someone muttered. "I thought we'd landed. Why can't I connect to the internet?"

"Yeah, me too! I thought my roaming data just hadn't activated yet…"

The flight attendant directed them onward with a smile. "Ladies and gentlemen, the airport cell tower is currently undergoing repairs. I'm very sorry for the inconvenience. Please continue down this way. The signal will improve once you reach the terminal. We ask that you move through this area so as not to delay the passengers behind you. Thank you for your cooperation."

Although the passengers were disgruntled, in the end, they quickened their steps and exited the cabin one after another.

Huang Zhilong was also checking his phone continuously. Once he learned that no one around him had any service either, he tried to crowd his way toward the front, Jiang Liping in tow. Unfortunately, everyone else was also in a rush to deplane, so no one stepped aside to let them through. Huang Zhilong didn't want to attract undue attention, so he was forced to give up on cutting the line and instead dutifully waited his turn.

Gradually, the plane's two-hundred-odd passengers trickled out of the cabin.

Huang Zhilong was gripping the safe in one hand and pulling Jiang Liping forward with the other. Following the flight attendant's cheerful send-off, he strode into the jet bridge. He appeared calm, but his forehead was covered in sweat, and his heart was pounding. The shirt on his back was already soaked through, but this was the very last stage. He just needed to get through customs.

Huang Zhilong overheard a pregnant woman in front of him conversing angrily with a member of the ground crew in English. "What's going on? My husband isn't here?"

The ground crew was caught off guard by this turn of events. He replied haltingly, "Miss, y-your husband is…"

The woman put her hands on her belly. "He's a patrol officer at this airport—Marco Evens. He told me before I got on the plane that he would be waiting at the gate. I'm due very soon, I'm scared to be alone. I need my husband to take me through the express lane in customs. You have to find him right away. *Goddammit*, what's wrong with Auckland today? How do I still not have any service?!"

As she continued to rant, a hysterical note crept into her high-pitched voice. A few of the passengers walking behind her shot her sidelong glances.

"You have to contact him, now! This is ridiculous!"

Huang Zhilong was already very anxious to get moving. He glared at the pregnant woman making a racket, but she was too frantic to care about any of the looks she was getting.

"The baby's almost here, I can feel the contractions, I want my husband… What's going on with Auckland today? I don't recognize any of the ground crew—where is he? *Where?!*"

Just as Huang Zhilong was trying to rush ahead with Jiang Liping, he heard the woman's wails. At first, her complaints had

passed him by like a gust of wind, but now, a warning flashed through his mind, like a lightbulb flaring to life.

Something was wrong! This was very, very wrong!

The fact that no one had any cell service; the husband who was supposed to bring his wife through the employee lane but failed to show up; and the stammering ground crew who couldn't come up with a smooth response.

The pregnant woman continued yelling. "What do you mean you can't get in touch with him? I already said, his name is Marco Evens! Are you new here? He's patrolled these gates every single day for the past eight years! How do you not even know who he is?!"

Sweat began streaming anew down Huang Zhilong's face. His physical reflexes had responded even faster than his conscious mind. He felt a chill scuttle from the soles of his feet all the way up his spine. It was like his entire body had iced over.

He swallowed, eyes swiveling frantically as he scanned the hallway. After a few seconds, he recognized where he was. They'd changed the decorations and placed New Zealand's newspapers along the walkway, but Huang Zhilong was a seasoned traveler. He recognized this place. It wasn't Auckland Airport.

It was…

Huang Zhilong let out a roar of fury and terror. He knew… He *knew*!

He had no energy left to spare for putting on an act. He shoved Jiang Liping away from him and drew out a concealed handgun. Face contorted, eyes bulging, he lunged for the quarreling woman like a beast capturing its prey.

This was Huzhou International Airport! The plane had returned to where it came from! They'd been discovered!

As Huang Zhilong grabbed her, the pregnant woman screamed in fright, all the blood instantly draining from her face. He spun her

around and pulled her to his chest, locking her in place.

She screwed her eyes shut and shrieked mindlessly, "Oh my god! Help! *Save me!*"

Huang Zhilong's movements had been near-instantaneous. None of the riot police disguised as ground crew in the vicinity had time to do anything. Even Jiang Liping didn't realize what was going on before he'd already grabbed the woman.

"Don't come any closer!" Huang Zhilong shouted, panting for breath. Sweat was dribbling down his greasy nose. His eyes were frenzied, and the jet-black barrel of the gun was pressed to the pregnant woman's temple. With his hostage in tow, he quickly backed into a corner of the hallway, his gaze warily scanning over all the people around him. "Stay the fuck away!"

He knew that he'd already been exposed. This surprise lying in wait for him had to be the police's handiwork. They'd prepared this ruse to trap him while minimizing the risk to everyone else.

"Don't move." Huang Zhilong's nose wrinkled like a snarling wolf's as he yelled, "Otherwise I'll shoot her dead *right now*!"

The handful of passengers who hadn't yet made it off the jet bridge began to scream at the chaos that had erupted. Shielding their heads with their arms, they tried to hide or scurry away. It was becoming clear that everyone else who hadn't panicked was a plainclothes police officer.

Huang Zhilong gritted his teeth, glowering at the officers around him. He tightened his grip around the woman. More plainclothes officers were rushing over, in addition to the armed police, riot police, and criminal police. This woman was the only shield he could use to cling to life.

"Let go of me!" the woman shrieked hysterically. "Let go!"

"Shut up! If you say another word, I'm going to shoot you!"

The woman fell into a terrified silence. Her hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat, and her eyes were swimming with tears.

"Stay back," Huang Zhilong ordered. "Lay down your guns. Arrange a private jet for me and let me leave! Otherwise this woman will pay the price with her life!"

No one dared to act rashly with a hostage's life at stake.

Huang Zhilong had experience with these types of situations. He quickly retreated until his back was against the wall, between two columns that prevented the others from getting a clear line of sight. He also crouched down, hiding himself completely behind the pregnant woman. This way, even a sniper wouldn't be able to shoot him from the front.

Jiang Liping hadn't moved a muscle, but all the color had drained from her face.

He Yu and the others had already told the police that she was their informant, so law enforcement wouldn't harm her. At this critical moment, one of the plainclothes officers even tried to pull her over to him.

But Jiang Liping immediately shot him a glare, signaling that he had to stay put.

Right now, no one but her could get anywhere near Huang Zhilong. With the way the board was laid out, she was the only one who could move. The entire game now hinged on her choices.

Jiang Liping had been through many crises. She used her years of experience to bring her emotions to heel. Her mind whirling into action, she considered several possible options, then drew her gun—

In the space of a few seconds, she'd deduced that she wouldn't be able to accurately shoot Huang Zhilong. Instead, she pointed the gun at the police officer closest to her. She had decided to keep playing the part of Huang Zhilong's ally, even at this juncture.

"Don't move," she said, keeping the gun aimed at the officer's head as she walked backward. Her entire body was tense, her face twitching slightly with strain. It looked as though she was retreating

to Huang Zhilong in genuine terror. Amid this stalemate, no one dared to take the first shot.

"Don't move." Jiang Liping lowered her voice, staring coldly at the officer. She could sense everyone's gazes upon her, including Huang Zhilong's. "Did you hear us? Prepare a plane for us at once. Otherwise we'll kill this woman!"

She kept backing up, drawing nearer to Huang Zhilong with every step.

Twenty meters, ten meters, five meters—

Suddenly, she heard Huang Zhilong's voice, sharp with warning. "Stop."

She silently stilled.

"Jiang Liping," Huang Zhilong warned, from just a few meters away. "You're not allowed to come any closer either."

Jiang Liping whipped around to glare at him.

Huang Zhilong's savage leer was visible from behind his hostage. He hardly even looked human anymore.

"Stay right there," he snarled. "Don't approach me. Don't come any closer. I'm sorry…" He was so overwhelmed by terror that he started to laugh out loud. "I can't be sure that you won't betray me —who was the one who sold me out? Who helped these useless idiots track us down so quickly? You're the only one left by my side! You're the only one who knows the details of our plans!"

Jiang Liping had expected an outburst like this. She knew his character all too well. Quickly, she took this in stride, feigning flustered disbelief. Then, after allowing these emotions to fade, she turned a shaken, hurt expression to Huang Zhilong.

"Wh-what are you saying? I'm on your side!"

Huang Zhilong showed no discernable reaction.

"Zhilong, you… Are you telling me to just stand here and wait for death?!" She started to step forward.

Huang Zhilong fired a shot into the air. "Stupid bitch!" he screamed. "Stay the fuck away from me!"

The sound of that shot ringing out sent a tremor through Jiang Liping. "Do you suspect me?" she asked. "At this point, you still suspect me? I'm standing here, on your side, right now! You actually *suspect me*? You're willing to leave me here to *die*?!"

Her red stilettos took another step toward Huang Zhilong.

Huang Zhilong gripped the pregnant woman's hair. "If you come any closer…I'll fucking shoot you first!" he yelled.

Fucking shoot you first—shoot you first—

Huang Zhilong's terrified yells echoed through the terminal, vibrating through Jiang Liping's chest. After a few moments of silence, the corner of Jiang Liping's mouth twitched. Slowly, her face contorted into a shaky leer. Her acting was truly impeccable.

"Fine… *Fine!* Huang Zhilong, how could you treat me like this? How could you *do* this?!" A pause. Then, as though she'd made up her mind at last, she shrieked hysterically, "In that case, I surrender!"

She summoned all her skills of deception that she'd honed during her years within the organization. Eyes welling with tears, she was the spitting image of a woman who'd reached the end of her rope and given in to heartbreak and despair. "I surrender! Officers, I want to expose him! I want to be the whistleblower!"

Jiang Liping tossed her gun aside. Raising both hands into the air, she quickly began to walk toward the officers. "You cannot let Huang Zhilong walk free!" she cried. "He's guilty of far more than just killing people! He's given away classified national security secrets! He's sold out undercover agents! If you let him go, the consequences will be unthinkable!"

Huang Zhilong's expression became extremely unsightly. Since when had he done any of those things?!

Still, he saw that Jiang Liping was naming the most egregious crimes. If he'd gotten involved in any of those areas, a random pregnant woman would be far from a sufficient hostage to bargain for anything. Even if he'd gotten his hands on Commissar Wang's grandson Chen Man—hell, even if he'd gotten Commissar Wang himself—the authorities might stop at nothing to capture him.

Huang Zhilong lost his cool. "Jiang Liping! You evil cunt!" he roared, spittle flying. "You're so fucking *full of it*!"

Jiang Liping's scarlet dress fluttered around her. Her eyes, too, seemed dyed with carmine, red and hateful, her gaze needle-sharp as it bored into Huang Zhilong—as if to pierce his heart.

Huang Zhilong suddenly felt a twinge of déjà vu. This scene seemed familiar, as if another woman in red had once looked at him with such desolation, a long time ago…

But he didn't have time to think on it. Jiang Liping had already turned back to the plainclothes officers, walking toward them in her high-heeled shoes.

Huang Zhilong's thoughts were in turmoil. What was she going to do? What was she going to say?

He had to stop her from going over there, had to stop her from revealing any more of his secrets! The things he'd done hadn't only broken domestic laws—he'd also committed crimes within New Zealand's borders. If Jiang Liping brought those things to light, he'd have to face the consequences even if he fled the country!

In that moment, everything came to a head. Huang Zhilong made his choice. He stared at the scarlet silhouette of this woman who was determined to frame him. He saw red, a red deeper than even the color of her dress.

He abruptly released the pregnant woman and pointed his gun at Jiang Liping's back. Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger.

"Look out!"

"Get down! Everyone, get down!"

As plainclothes officers' shouts rang out, so did three gunshots, fired in close succession.

Many things happened, one after another.

The pregnant woman crumpled to her knees, then crawled forward in a terrified panic.

The gun in Huang Zhilong's hand smoked. A bullet had shot out of the muzzle straight toward Jiang Liping.

The sniper on the roof had received the go-ahead to shoot just as Huang Zhilong had revealed his face, giving him a clear line of sight. Training his crosshairs on that man's forehead, he fired.

"Ahhh!" The hostage was frightened out of her wits by the sound of gunfire. Too terrified to even crawl anymore, she threw herself onto her back and began to wail at the top of her lungs. Hot blood spattered her face as it fountained into the air.

Huang Zhilong had been shot right in the head. His body remained standing for several seconds, his hand still gripping that mysterious safe. This CEO of an entertainment company, a man with a glorious reputation, a public figure who constantly spoke of morals and justice, dreams and innovation—this criminal with his hands covered in blood, concealed beneath the glossy image of an entrepreneur—eyes bulging, he wobbled in place, then collapsed into a pool of blood. There was a thunderous crash as he hit the ground.

The chairman of Zhilong Entertainment, Huang Zhilong: In the midst of his attempted escape, he'd taken a hostage, concealed a lethal weapon, and opened fire on someone. Right there, in Huzhou International Airport, the riot police had shot him dead.

Chapter 145:
The Woman in Red

OF HE YU, Chen Man, and Xie Qingcheng, Xie Qingcheng was the only one at the hospital, making him the only one with no idea what was happening at the airport.

"It doesn't look as if this treatment will act slowly," the hospital director was saying to Xie Qingcheng, "unlike the one you prepared for *her*, where all these years have passed and she's still…"

Just as Xie Qingcheng was about to say something, his phone buzzed. It was He Yu.

"One moment please," Xie Qingcheng said. "I need to reply."

"Who is it?" mused the director. "You never replied to your wife this quickly."

Xie Qingcheng gave him a dagger of a glare.

"Pretend I said nothing," the director said.

"This is important, it's to do with the case," Xie Qingcheng said quickly. With that, he tapped He Yu's message window open.

He Yu: *"Huang Zhilong is dead."*

Seeing something so shocking right away, Xie Qingcheng was stunned. Dead? He knew so many secrets; how had he died just like that?

The second text came in. *"The situation demanded it. He'd taken a hostage, so he had to be shot."*

Xie Qingcheng couldn't stand getting information in drips like this. This was one area where he really didn't have any patience, so he texted back: *"What about Jiang Liping? How is she?"*

Sirens blared wildly as the squad cars drove, lights flashing, toward the Huzhou Police Department.

Within one of these cars sat Jiang Liping, her head lowered in silence.

She wasn't dead. Huang Zhilong wasn't that good a shot; his bullet had only grazed her as it passed, striking the airport's bulletproof glass in front of her.

Now, there was blood on her face, and her eyes were blank. It looked as if there was a lot on her mind, like she'd not recovered from her earlier shock in the slightest. Everything was over. Huang Zhilong was dead, but for some reason, Jiang Liping still looked unhappy—disappointed, even.

After a policeman finished dressing her wounds, she said simply, "Thank you." Then, after a pause, "Could you give me a smoke?"

The policeman didn't have any women's cigarettes. All he could get was a standard cigarette from a colleague. "Is this a problem?" he asked as he handed it over.

"Not at all. Men's and women's are the same." Jiang Liping flicked the lighter and lit the cigarette before slowly taking a drag.

The policeman looked at her with an assessing and somewhat reverential look. "I heard you're the informant who was working with Zheng Jingfeng?"

Jiang Liping snorted. It could've been apathy or pride in her expression.

"That's incredible." The man sighed in amazement. "We always thought it was a man…"

Jiang Liping shot him a glance flecked with ice. "I said," she mumbled with the cigarette in her mouth, "men and women are the same."

"Jie, that's not what I meant." Embarrassed, the man waved his hands. "I meant that you're really incredible, way more than

most informants…”

Jiang Liping cut him off, cigarette still in her mouth. “Can I borrow your phone to play some music?”

“Oh, sure.”

Even though Jiang Liping was an informant, she *had* committed many crimes. Her own communication devices had been taken, and one of her hands had been shackled to the bars of the police car window. The police treated her well, though. They knew that the neutralization of Huang Zhilong could not have been so easily accomplished without her help. The policeman handed her the phone.

“Thank you,” said Jiang Liping. She took it and opened a music player to select a children’s song.

“Drop, drop, drop the hanky, set it lightly behind your friend’s back, no one let her know…”

Gooseflesh rose on the policemen’s backs. They looked at each other, wondering why Jiang Liping would play this song that she only used before murder.

Having noticed their unease, Jiang Liping said, “Don’t worry. I don’t want to kill anyone.” She closed her eyes and leaned back against the seat. “The man I most wanted to kill is already dead…”

Amid the music, there was some worry in her features, but it slowly smoothed out. To Jiang Liping, this song that had been involved in both the broadcasting tower and the Cheng Kang incidents, this song that even police found ghoulish—might’ve been just a simple children’s song.

Following its melody, she sank back into a distant memory.

“Sun Ping! You dumbass! You drag us down on every test!”

A ramshackle village school appeared in her memory. The people there were so poor and simple that everything was faded and

colorless.

Back then, her name wasn't yet Jiang Liping. She was Sun Ping, and she was studying at the Hope School in the Yi Family Village. She wasn't too bright, and her grades were often at the bottom of the list. This earned her much scorn and mockery.

"So annoying!"

"Look at her idiot face."

She was the most hated student in the class. When they played "drop the hanky" in PE, she'd be picked for the hanky nearly every time.

She'd run in panic, but due to malnutrition, she couldn't run that fast. The sight of her staggering like a terrified bird sent her classmates into fits of laughter.

"Run faster, Sun Ping."

"Look at her legs, they look like bamboo sticks!"

"Like the sick chickens we have at home!"

Sun Ping didn't know why she never gave up. She was mocked every single time, but she gritted her teeth and clambered forward, like a weak yet persistent bean sprout with her face caked in dust. Amid that humiliating laughter, she stumbled ahead, running with that same perseverance.

In the end, she usually fell to the ground. The school running track was paved with old coal, and the dust would choke her lungs. From the sky, to the earth, to the people, all within a cloud of flying dust, everything was dim and dull—until a bolt of scarlet appeared in the girl's vision.

It was a beautiful woman, with high cheekbones and a shapely nose. There was a certain strength in her features, but she also radiated indolence and sensuality. She wore sunglasses and sexy red heels, with her hair permed in fashionable coils. A red dress with a plunging neckline was wrapped around her alluring, slender waist.

Jiang Liping was too young to grasp the concept of a "beautiful woman," but she was still stunned by this steely yet enchanting beauty.

Surrounded by admirers, the woman walked out into the field. At the sight of Jiang Liping, who'd fallen to the ground halfway through a game of drop the hanky, she plucked off her sunglasses to reveal her phoenix eyes, which could've come straight from an ancient painting.

"Does it hurt?" the woman asked.

"N-no…" Jiang Liping instantly felt stupid and grotesque. In front of a swan, this ugly duckling wanted to bury herself in a crack in the ground.

At the sight of her stuttering and stammering, the woman smiled. "Little girl," she said, reaching out. "I'll help you up."

This was the first glimpse Jiang Liping had of her: Huang Zhilong's wife, Jin Xiuhe.

Jin Xiuhe was the principal of Humanity High School in Yi Family Village, but it wasn't as Xie Qingcheng and the others had thought. Jin Xiuhe was actually a deeply kind woman who knew nothing of her husband's dealings, and the school's founding had been her own project, intended to give the village youth a better educational environment and greater opportunities for learning.

When he learned his wife's plan, it was Huang Zhilong who'd come up with the idea of using the school to seek suitable victims.

At the time, Jin Xiuhe didn't know what kind of person she'd chosen to be with. Seeing her husband wanting to help her so passionately, not only asking to help her with capital and recruiting teachers, but also going into the village to encourage the residents to send their kids to this school—she was terribly moved. His support meant that she could devote more of her time to teaching.

"Drop, drop, drop the hanky…"

The field at Humanity High School was small. Outside of their studies, the students' favorite game was drop the hanky. When Jin Xiuhe was their principal, she'd often stand beneath the foxglove tree by the field and watch them play, smiling.

"Jin-laoshi! I found a four-leaf clover, it's for you!"

"Principal Jin, I caught a butterfly! Do you like it?"

She was from a government official's family, and she'd married a man with no small status of his own, but she'd long grown tired of the schemes and trickery of big-city corporate life. No gift received during business dinners could compare to the little flowers these children gave her or the beaming smiles on their upturned faces.

People could sense human nature, and her kindness earned her the genuine admiration of her students. The girl who loved her best was Jiang Liping.

Because she *knew* it was possible to see them on the field from the principal's office, and she *knew* Principal Jin would come out with a fashion cigarette dangling from her mouth to watch her kids at play, Jiang Liping ran better and better. Slowly, she turned herself from a pathetic, stumbling, ugly little duckling into a student nimble enough to leap properly and earn the principal's applause.

When the "drop the hanky" song ended, and Jiang Liping had outsmarted the other students, she'd turn, grinning, and look for that beautiful woman. No one had ever acknowledged Jiang Liping. Principal Jin was the first teacher to give her encouragement and praise.

How important was a teacher's acknowledgement to a student? It could make scarlet blossom from ash gray, or bring out the stars on a dark night. It could change a person's life.

With one smile from Jin Xiuhe, Jiang Liping felt like all the suffering and exhaustion she'd face after class didn't matter. She didn't want to disappoint her teacher.

"Jin-laoshi, why do you smoke?"

As they grew closer, sometimes Jiang Liping would go to Principal Jin's office to help tidy things up. Curious and unworldly, the girl asked Jin Xiuhe this question.

"I went overseas for school," said Principal Jin. "It was so stressful that I ended up with this habit."

"I thought only men smoked cigarettes."

Tapping the ash, Jin Xiuhe told her lightly, "Men and women are the same."

Her lips had pursed sensually on the words, her beautiful eyes looking out the window at those winding peaks. Sunlight edged her face in gold. There was an indescribable steel to her still-gentle beauty.

"Can I try?" asked Jiang Liping.

"No, you're young, and smoking is bad for you." Principal Jin turned around and handed her a piece of candy. "Here, have one of these."

Jiang Liping took it carefully. "When can I grow up to be like Jin-laoshi?"

"Focus on your studies, and make your way out of these mountains. All of you will become much more accomplished than I."

Jiang Liping looked at her side profile and whispered, "No one's more accomplished than you. Thank you. You've changed so many lives."

Time flew by. In the blink of an eye, Jiang Liping graduated.

She'd been accepted into a truly impressive school—she'd go to Huzhou for university. On the day of her graduation, Jin Xiuhe called her into her office and gave her a beautifully wrapped present.

Inside was an exquisite red dress.

"Congratulations, A-Ping. You're a grown-up girl now. I know you like my style, so I picked one out for you when I was in Hong Kong for work. It's a girls' version. I hope you like it," Jin Xiuhe said, smiling as she stood by the window. The flowers outside were blooming splendidly, filling the boughs. "I knew you'd grow up to be a kind and clever girl."

Jiang Liping was delighted. Grateful tears swam in her eyes. Holding that gift box, she bowed toward Jin Xiuhe over and over, promising to always do good and study hard, to never disappoint Jin-laoshi.

She had no idea that gift would be the last thing she'd ever receive from her teacher.

As soon as she got home, knowing she would soon leave for school, Jiang Liping rushed to embroider something for Jin Xiuhe as a return gift: an intricate springtime wall hanging. She worked through the night until her eyes were red, but as her parents had died when she was little, no one was around to stop her. She continued like that for a week until she finally finished it.

She wanted to bring it to Jin Xiuhe as soon as possible. Even though it was past ten at night, she ran several miles to the school dorms to present her gift, only to find Jin Xiuhe arguing with a man.

"Tell me the truth! Where did those students go?"

Who was he? Jiang Liping couldn't get a good look.

Just as she'd pushed open the slightest crack in Jin Xiuhe's door, a cup of water flew across the room and smashed to pieces. She froze, too afraid to move another muscle.

The person who'd thrown the cup was Principal Jin. That man was standing with his back to the door, so tall he resembled a mountain.

"Calm down for a moment. I've already explained things. They've gone to an acting training camp. You know full well, people

at such companies don't have the time to talk to outsiders. What do you mean, 'disappearances'? This is a joint project we've undertaken with Huzhou Communications. How could it go wrong? Don't listen to the weird rumors drifting around."

"Huzhou Communications?" Jin Xiuhe narrowed her eyes as she drew closer to the man, then slammed a hand down on the table. "Do you think I lost my head after giving birth? That I don't notice anything else, that I'm teaching here without any news of the outside world, and that I'd believe anything you tell me without thinking twice? Take a look for yourself! Take a damn good look at what *this* is!"

She threw a stack of papers at that man with a *thwack*.

The man took it, and flipped through. He stopped after the first few pages.

Perhaps a child's intuition is always strong—Jiang Liping sensed a hint of something horrifying in that sudden silence. It was a ghoulish, hair-raising sensation.

Lowering his head, the man took the stack of papers and walked up to Jin Xiuhe. He placed it gently down on her desk.

Jin Xiuhe in her red dress stared hatefully at him, the loathing in her eyes stabbing like the point of a needle. "So? Is there anything else you'd like to explain?"

The man lowered his head. "If you know everything, why didn't you tell your parents?"

"They're already in their eighties, did you want the news to kill them?! And I want to hear you tell me the truth! Tell me if what this says is true! Did you actually work with that underground organization in Australia to do these…these…" She grabbed one of the pages, her hand shaking with rage as she crumpled it into a ball and threw it in his face. "These atrocities! Did you do it?!"

The wad of paper bounced off his shoulder and rolled down to the door.

Jiang Liping saw. It was a picture of a dismembered girl.

She crumpled to the ground.

Shadows flickered at the door. The man had drawn closer to Jin Xiuhe. "You held so much evidence in your hands, but you're still willing to come ask me for the truth. I don't know if I should feel relieved, or confused… Yes. Xiuhe, I did it."

"You—!"

"I didn't have a *choice*. I don't want to be a regular old teacher anymore. Everyone disdains me, they scorn my talents. During New Year's, when I went to your parents' place, your mom and dad obviously looked down on me too. I've had enough. Did you know, I used to be the most talented student in my village? I'm a golden phoenix from a chicken's nest! I was never meant for mediocrity. I want to fly up and out—do you think a teacher can do that? A teacher can't do anything!"

There was a loud slap. Jin Xiuhe's palm connected soundly with that man's face.

"Stuff your bullshit!" she spat, her whole body shaking. "A good teacher can change so many lives. That's why I left all the luxury of city life behind to work here as a principal! What are you doing? You're *killing* people! Committing crimes! You're really…really worse than a beast. I-I can't believe it… I'd *trusted* you. I let you take so many students from me…"

She couldn't help but shudder. "So many students…and th-they're all…"

"Those were necessary sacrifices," the man said quietly. "We're not committing atrocities, not selling drugs or just kidnapping anyone. That organization in Australia, if you read up on them, you would understand they're a scientific research group. Everything was done for a greater goal, as long as—"

"As long as?" snapped Jin Xiuhe. "As *long as*?!"

He said nothing.

"Have you gone insane?! Those are human lives! Living, breathing, human lives!"

"They were just a bunch of pathetic orphans. Basically ants."

The man tried to embrace her, to calm her down, but Jin Xiuhe pushed him away as if possessed.

"You're insane… You beast… You've gone insane! I'm going to go call the police! *Right now!*"

As they struggled, Jiang Liping saw the man take out a knife. A weapon! He'd been prepared from the moment he stepped into the room.

Before Jin Xiuhe even had the chance to scream, he'd plunged the knife down. Blood splashed.

It was as if that first stab had broken the demon's chains. Pinning Jin Xiuhe down, the man beat her, stabbed her, bound her. The room became a complete mess as the two fought, writhing back and forth.

Despite her terror and fury, Jiang Liping had an urge to rush forward and save Jin Xiuhe. In that moment, the nearly unconscious Jin Xiuhe looked up, and through the crack in the door, saw Jiang Liping.

In the moment their eyes met, it was like the very marrow in Jiang Liping's bones froze to ice.

Jin Xiuhe's scalp was mangled, and her face was covered in blood. Only by those beautiful and proud eyes could Jiang Liping recognize her teacher. She lay crumpled on the ground in her red dress, beaten and bruised—like a crushed red rose.

Jiang Liping stood behind the crack in the door and stared into Jin Xiuhe's eyes. Her head rang; she couldn't say a thing. Her vision grew blurry and then clear as tears spilled out of her eyes. She watched, hands clutching the springtime embroidery piece she'd made for her teacher.

Jin Xiuhe's bloody lips moved, mouthing words in silence.

She thought she was begging for mercy, or crying out in pain, but after a moment, she realized Jin Xiuhe's eyes were focused on her.

Jin Xiuhe was saying: *Leave… Leave this place.*

Those were the last words her teacher said to her.

Before Jiang Liping could react, that burly man picked up the knife again and plunged the blade into the middle of Jin Xiuhe's back. A complete silence ensued, so quiet that a pin drop would seem like a blast of thunder.

Her face drenched in blood, Jin Xiuhe went limp on the floor without making another sound.

For a long time afterward, Jiang Liping had thought it was a dream. Everything she'd seen was too unbelievable for a child's mind to process. She couldn't fathom how anyone could harm Jin Xiuhe. The only thread of clarity in that nightmare was the face of that man she'd seen at the very end: Jin Xiuhe's husband, Huang Zhilong.

Huang Zhilong killed someone. Huang Zhilong committed murder! He killed his own wife! He killed *her* teacher! He killed *their* teacher!

Jiang Liping had been too naïve back then. After she came out of her shock, the first thing she did was report what she'd seen to the Qingli County police department. She howled madly as she made her report, her descriptions hardly coherent.

"He killed her! There was so much, so much blood… Huang Zhilong did it, killed his wife… He killed my teacher… It was *him*! It was Huang Zhilong! *Huang Zhilong!* Go look! There's evidence! In that room! There's blood! Liters of blood! You can do a DNA test! See for yourself!"

But the shadow networks there ran deep, and she was like a moth throwing itself into a spider's web.

Ultimately, the police sent her a follow-up message: "Principal Jin felt unwell and returned to Huzhou for treatment. What is this homicide you're talking about?"

Once Jiang Liping received this news, she understood the seriousness of the situation: There were eyes on her now. She reacted quickly. Jiang Liping wasn't like Jin Xiuhe, who'd been sheltered by her parents from a young age and rarely thought the worst of people, and, even after gathering such damning evidence about Huang Zhilong, couldn't go to the cops before asking her husband about the truth.

Jiang Liping had never had such faith in humanity. She knew such cases could be covered up, and as a witness, she couldn't stay. She fled Qingli County, hiding in all sorts of places. Several times, she petitioned with higher-ups in law enforcement under a fake name, but her reports sank like boulders into the depths of the sea, while she herself was pursued within an inch of her life by shady groups seeking her silence.

She didn't continue her schooling. She tucked that embroidery piece into her bosom, reminding her of her need to avenge Jin Xiuhe.

The amount of suffering and danger she experienced on the path she chose was unfathomable.

She could've chosen to live an easy life, but she couldn't forget how Jin-laoshi looked, lying in a puddle of blood—or the first time they met, when she'd reached out to the child amid the dust.

"Little girl, I'll help you up," she'd said, smiling so beautifully.

That little girl she helped had no parents or family, was alone in the world, and mocked by everyone around her. Jin Xiuhe was the one who changed Jiang Liping's dark and dull life, showing her a way out of that mountain village. How could she forget her murder? How could she let Jin Xiuhe's death lie in darkness?

Thus, in those years of suffering, of erasing her name, of running for her life and flitting between paths of good and evil, of

getting to know what went on behind the scenes—Jiang Liping changed.

Gradually, she went from ignorant to shrewd, from helpless and afraid to possessing a formidable strength…from an average dropout to a woman concealed within the underbelly of society. Sun Ping died, and Jiang Liping rose from her shell. Possessed by unending hatred, endless schemes, and the sum total of her experiences, she changed her appearance and entered Huang Zhilong's company to become his right-hand woman. Once she became a member of the organization, she learned more about the filthy atrocities committed within.

After rising up to join Huang Zhilong's trusted inner circle, she learned everything there was to know about how he'd used that mysterious research group in Australia to hide the terrifying bloodstains from that night.

This man had killed his wife and folded Humanity High School beneath his wings entirely. Not long after, Huang Zhilong resigned from his teaching job and referred Wang Jiankang to take his place. He then went off to start an entertainment company, using the excuse of sending students off for "overseas training" to more easily hide his tracks. He hid things well—*too* well. In front of others, he was always the devoted Executive Huang, a photo of Jin Xiuhe always resting on a corner of his desk.

Having gone through so many trials and tribulations, wearing her painted skin as her disguise, Jiang Liping at last became the person closest to Huang Zhilong. The first time she went to Huang Zhilong's office, when he noticed her staring at Jin Xiuhe's photo, he told her the story of their meeting with a smile:

"I met my wife when I was teaching. She was a student in the neighboring classroom back then. The first time we met, she was distraught about forgetting her uniform before a school presentation. I went up to her and offered her the use of my work uniform. I was only teasing, but she did end up smiling through her tears. 'It's not

like I can use a teaching uniform,' she said. 'Huang-laoshi, I think these clothes are better on you.'"

Telling that story, he didn't see the way Jiang Liping's knuckles momentarily whitened.

"Xiao-Jiang, you look great in red. Just like she did," he said.

Jiang Liping could barely tear her eyes away from that old photograph, but she managed to in the end. She even mustered a smile. "As long as Executive Huang likes it."

That was how she hid in Zhilong Entertainment: her heart covered in bloody wounds, yet persisting.

Every day, she saw the man who killed Jin Xiuhe. Again and again, she saw them disregarding human lives, but was powerless to stop them.

Any softness in her heart had to be eradicated; she couldn't expose the slightest vulnerability, even while she slept. Not a word that'd give Huang Zhilong cause to suspect her could pass her lips.

Even then, Huang Zhilong was still very wary around her. Jiang Liping couldn't get her hands on that ultimate evidence.

The more she knew about these people—the more she learned the truth—the less easily she could expose herself. *None* of the people involved in the organization were innocent. She had to make them pay in blood, and then kill that beast of a man with her own hands.

Before the fall of Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital, she thought none of her hatred would leak out before everything was done. That was when she got her hands on a trail of information that the organization had never let her touch before, when she learned there was someone living under a fake name hidden inside that psychiatric facility.

The mission was sent to her through the organization's internal communications channels. "That deceased woman, Jiang Lanpei, is

very important to Huang Zhilong. The Liang family residence has her earliest files. You have a few weeks to clean them up."

She'd done many "cleanups" before, so she didn't think much of this mission before accepting it. She was idly flipping through the file as she walked, but one glance—one careless glance—brought her world crashing down around her. She nearly collapsed.

What the hell was she even reading?!

She'd *found* her! Jiang Liping thought she was long dead, but it turned out she'd been alive all this time. Somehow, by the time Jiang Liping found her, she'd become ash… How cruel fate was! How senseless!

Jiang Liping shook, gasping for breath.

On that mission dossier the organization sent her were just a few lines of text that said everything.

Jiang Lanpei, deceased.

Original Name: Jin, Xiu, He.

Chapter 146:
Justice Served

JIANG LIPING spent the days after receiving this assignment in a delirious daze. She dared not believe it, but couldn't *not* believe it. She read and reread those scant few words on the internal mission memo so many times her eyes were close to boring a hole through the paper.

Jiang Lanpei… *Jiang Lanpei*…

Jiang Lanpei was Jin Xiuhe?

It was as if those were the only words left in her brain.

She did her preparations mechanically, readying herself to kill Liang Jicheng's wife and son before taking those old files about Jiang Lanpei out of the Liang family's safe.

Liang Jicheng's wife was the first person to return in an attempt to take the files. Jiang Liping killed her first, before reaching into the filing cabinet she'd opened. With trembling hands, she took out a stack of yellowed papers.

She read Jiang Lanpei's full and complete files, and even saw a photo from before her plastic surgeries. Dressed in red, much like Jin Xiuhe had always been, she held that sheaf of paper and read through every sheet. Even though she'd known the truth already, her secret tears still fell.

It really was her.

Jiang Liping couldn't have said how much self-control it would take for her to return to her facade before Liang Jicheng's son arrived.

Shaking, she put that file and the sheet of paper holding Jin Xiuhe's photo into its folder, then pressed it against her chest. In a daze, she stood at the bottom of those stairs for a long time, in the

darkness, waiting for Liang Jicheng's son. Waiting to commit the second murder ordered by the organization.

Only in those scant moments was she Sun Ping instead of Jiang Liping. Only then could she clutch that file and let her tears fall silently and ceaselessly from her face and to the ground.

It *hurt*… It hurt so much…too much…

Why? Why did it take nearly two decades for her to find out that she'd survived? Why did such a good person have to suffer so much torment?

Jiang Liping wept in silence, until she heard the sound of Liang Jicheng's son slamming open the door. That beast's son ran inside and into her field of view before rifling through the cabinet. That was when he discovered his mother's body and started screaming.

He isn't screaming nearly enough, she thought. He'd get a better death than he deserved.

She stepped out of the shadows, holding those papers out in front of her. Filled with hatred and cruelty, she began to eerily sing the song that belonged to the Jin Xiuhe of her memories. As if she was seeking this sinner's death as Jin Xiuhe herself.

"Drop, drop, drop the hanky, set it lightly behind your friend's back, no one let him know… Are you looking for this?"

The man turned.

Bang.

She pulled the trigger.

It was the first time since she chose this dark path that Jiang Liping had taken a shot with such decisive satisfaction.

Liang Jicheng's son was dead. Before she left the villa, she opened the folder one last time to stare at that yellowed page with Jin Xiuhe's photograph. She knew that once she left this place, once she took the car they sent, she'd never be able to show the slightest hint of her true emotions again.

She took one long look at that photograph before closing her eyes, tucking the papers back in their folder, and striding out, her red dress fluttering behind her.

Later on, Jiang Liping learned that Huang Zhilong had personally brought Jin Xiuhe to Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital.

He hadn't killed his wife that day. In that last moment when he was going to put the knife through her neck, he saw her slowly lift her bloodied face and look at him with nothing but scorn.

His hand froze around the knife. Rage engulfed him.

Those eyes…

Those eyes that looked at him as if he were dirt, that threatened to banish him to his basest state—they reminded him of all those years of jealousy and resentment he'd built up for his wife's entire family.

He didn't want her to die anymore. Death was too easy, too gentle. He thought of a more vicious trick: He handed her to the Liang brothers and had them change her name, ensuring that she'd be locked up inside Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital for the rest of her life. It didn't matter if she lived or died. His only request was that no one find her, ever.

He knew that hospital was a "disposal unit" for the organization, the preferred venue with which to deal with corpses or victims that were still alive. Besides, Liang Jicheng and Liang Zhongkong had coveted Huang Zhilong's wife since the beginning. As soon as Jin Xiuhe fell into their hands, she became a tool for them to sate their appetites. Huang Zhilong didn't care for a second.



Jin Xiuhe's mind had been sound when she was first locked inside Cheng Kang. But inside an asylum, what was the difference between a sane person and a lunatic?

In 1887, a reporter named Nellie Brown undertook a similar experiment. She was a mentally sound woman who, through performing an act of madness, was placed under the custody of her local asylum.

While there, Nellie discovered the cruelties of their treatment and the perfunctory care given by the nurses. Once they decided she was insane, they acted as if everything she did was a symptom of her madness, no matter how she tried to explain things to the nurses. When she earnestly told the doctor that she was a reporter—that she'd come to do research—the doctor only thought her sickness had worsened. They used even more cruel treatments on her.

Nellie's terrible suffering only came to an end when *The New York Times* vouched for her, but Jin Xiuhe, two hundred years later, was not so fortunate.

She was locked in a special sickroom and dressed in a typical hospital gown. When the Liang brothers spoke of her, they claimed that she had a severe mental illness and was extremely violent.

Just like Nellie, no one believed Jin Xiuhe no matter how she tried to explain or beg for help. When nurses came to change her medication, they'd only say some perfunctory words with the utmost wariness, then leave her room as quickly as possible. When everyone thought of her as ill, it didn't matter if she was or wasn't anymore.

In order to make her more biddable, the Liang brothers force-fed her the obedience potion provided by the organization. At that time, they'd needed to test its efficacy, so she became their test subject. As the medicine was poured down her throat again and again, Jin Xiuhe truly died. The one living in an asylum was a

madwoman who didn't even remember who she was, a woman named Jiang Lanpei.

The Liang brothers even went as far as to perform plastic surgery on her while they used her as a test subject. In the end, the woman had a stiff face and a broken mind.

When Huang Zhilong heard, he was delighted. Jin Xiuhe's parents hadn't been in the best of health when she'd disappeared. Bedridden and in delirium, they'd soon died. Other than her deceased parents, who else in the world truly cared about Jin Xiuhe's whereabouts? Anyway, given Jiang Lanpei's altered features, even those who'd known her well would have a hard time telling that her new face was hiding Jin Xiuhe's beneath.

"She's a real madwoman now, can't even remember her own name," one of the brothers explained. "Sometimes, she tells the nurses to focus on their studies and asks the doctors how their kids are doing. When she's bored, she sings the drop the hanky song to herself. She drew a window on her wall in chalk, and stares out of it, humming—no clue what she's looking at. When people ask, she mumbles something that makes no sense, like 'she's gotten back on her feet.'"

The Liang brothers' report put Huang Zhilong at ease after long last. "She's really insane," he said.

"Yes, but there's one more thing…"

"What is it?"

"A few students came to the facility to volunteer a while back, and Jiang Lanpei saw them. She was humming, but the sight of them agitated her a lot. We watched her closely, and the trigger was their uniforms," Jiang Licheng said warily. "They looked like Huzhou Communications uniforms."

Huang Zhilong paused in his writing. His eyes flicked toward that photo of Jin Xiuhe he kept on the corner of his desk; the girl in the picture was still wearing the uniform from when she was a student, and the first time they'd spoken had been about uniforms.

Jin Xiuhe had become Jiang Lanpei and forgotten many things, but some part of her heart, he realized, must've remembered how much she hated him.

By the time he came back to his senses, the tip of his pen had torn a hole in the paper.

"Drop, drop, drop the hanky…"

Listening to this children's song inside the police car, Jiang Liping thought of these things as she gave the police an extremely abbreviated account of her experiences. She finished her cigarette and tossed away the stub. Disappointment and serenity were written like fine calligraphy across her face.

The police were deeply unsettled by what she told them.

"When Jiang Lanpei killed Liang Jicheng, she'd put him in Xie Xue's clothes," one of the officers began. "We've been investigating the question of why she'd put a man in women's clothes, but the key was never women's clothes… It was that it was the teacher's uniform of Huzhou Communications. Jiang Lanpei hated Huang Zhilong instinctively, so such actions would give her the feeling that she was taking revenge, right?"

"I think so."

Another officer asked, "When you were at the broadcasting tower and using the idea of Jiang Lanpei's ghost seeking revenge to create that killing countdown, you did it to kill those people in her name, right?"

"Yep."

"Weren't you scared Huang Zhilong would find out?" asked another policeman.

Jiang Liping scoffed. "Once you've been a beast for long enough, you aren't scared of anything anymore. Huang Zhilong wouldn't believe any of it, and he'd never dreamed that the person

who served and fawned on him in bed would be one of Jin Xiuhe's students. And he never believed in the idea of returning someone's kindness, either, so of course he wouldn't suspect a relationship between myself and Jin Xiuhe. He even praised my idea about the broadcasting tower because it'd terrify Wang Jiankang and the others while wrapping up the matter of Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital. A woman approaching him for reasons of justice and righteousness? He never thought much of women, so of course he never imagined I could be the informant. Didn't Huang Zhilong say as much to his friends in the entertainment world, and often?"

"What did he say?"

Jiang Liping blandly repeated Huang Zhilong's words. "'I can't stand those starlets. I get them famous with my funds, and then they turn around and act all high and mighty on me—like a slut making a show of her chastity.'" The scorn in her smile cut like a knife. "It sure is funny. Even in the broadcasting tower case, the person they used to clean things up was one of their so-called sluts, Lu Yuzhu. They look down on women, but can't live without them. I really wanted to kill Huang Zhilong myself. At that moment, I wanted to ask him if he remembered what he did to Jin Xiuhe! If he remembered a clumsy, shy little girl who had to run every time the hanky was dropped, a girl Jin Xiuhe took care of—I wanted to ask *if he remembered*!"

To those monsters who knew their own guilt, that drop the hanky song was a terrifying death knell, but to Jiang Liping, it was the best memory she had of Principal Jin. In that melody, she mourned her, remembered her, and took vengeance for her. She knew she would live in that song's shadow forever.

Jiang Liping looked up, thinking of that night before the broadcasting tower mission, when she was preparing to kill Wang Jiankang and the others.

"Laoshi, I'm avenging you… I'm avenging you," she'd murmured, again and again. In utter glee and deepest grief. Beneath the lamplight, her beautiful face had twisted.

The song looped like a never-ending carousel. Amid the music, she wrote down that name that was a mockery, time and again, writing that name her teacher had lived under without her ever knowing.

Jiang Lanpei. Jiang Lanpei. Jiang. Lan. Pei!

Her tears soaked the paper as she lay across the desk. All those years of pressure from living as a spy hadn't shaken her, but now she burst into unrestrained tears.

Twenty years! *Twenty years!* Her teacher had been abused so cruelly by the Liang brothers for all that time! In endless darkness, that sharp and lovely woman who'd encouraged her with a smile had been driven into genuine insanity.

"Twenty years… Jiang Lanpei… Twenty years!" She wept, tasting blood in the back of her throat. She'd cried herself hoarse.

She avenged her. She could've killed them in much simpler and safer ways, but she had to use the drop the hanky song. That was her melody of murder. She had to wear a red dress and put red heels on their feet, constructing the scene as if the ghost of Jiang Lanpei really had come to take their lives.

Even when secretly communicating with Zheng Jingfeng, she'd left off her usual Jiang Liping initials. Her pen had paused for a long time. At last, Jiang Liping, having learned of all Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital's secrets, tearfully wrote her signature as "Jiang. Lan. Pei."

Laoshi, I will do this in your stead. J. L. P. Jiang. Lan. Pei.

Laoshi, I am you. I want to live as you. I will take your revenge. I don't regret it.

At the same time, in an office of the police station, all of Jiang Liping's actions were being broadcast on a large screen. There were other smaller screens showing each police car's status. Before these

displays sat the police officers, department heads, and other related staff in charge of such emerging cases.

Among them was He Yu, who'd reached Chief Hu in time.

Of the three men who'd escaped the basement, only He Yu was sitting in the police station watching things unfold. Xie Qingcheng was still in Meiyu Private Hospital dealing with the RN-13 specimen, while Chen Man—after reporting things to his grandfather—was being hugged and wept on by his family. Even though the other two would be kept informed, they weren't in the police station watching it all occur.

He Yu was the only one sitting in front of the surveillance cameras and keeping an eye on the police squadron. From time to time, he texted Xie Qingcheng with updates.

He could sense Xie Qingcheng's shock at the revelation of Jiang Lanpei's real identity, but just like He Yu, that shock was followed by a swift understanding of how things had ended up like this.

Xie Qingcheng: *Jiang Liping's safety is paramount, as is yours.*

He Yu: *Are you worried about me?*

No response. One minute passed, and then two…

His phone buzzed. *"No. I'm more worried about her."*

He Yu gave the screens a sidelong glance and quickly shot off a reply. *"How come? I'm jealous. Do you like her better because she's beautiful and formidable, and a woman?"*

This time, he waited for five minutes, but Xie Qingcheng ignored him—probably out of exasperation.

He Yu stared at those police projectors for a while, but still received no response. On the big screen, Jiang Liping was smoking another cigarette. He Yu watched her, then dipped his head before typing off another text to Xie Qingcheng.

"By the way, I forgot to tell you. Ge, I don't like it when you smoke her cigarettes, but I love it when you smoke women's cigarettes. You look so gorgeous."

Seriously, so gorgeous.

Xie Qingcheng's tattooed wrist peeking out beneath his shirtsleeves, so sharp and masculine—but with a slim, dainty fashion cigarette held in his slender fingers.

Back at Zhilong Entertainment, He Yu couldn't help but stare at him. It was terrible when strong men like him did dainty things. He Yu's eyes had revealed how badly he wanted to take that cigarette and push the man up against the wall, grabbing his wrists and kissing those thin mint-and-rose-scented lips. Wreathed in the delicate smell of women's smokes, He Yu wanted to kiss Xie Qingcheng like a girl: fondling, angering, disgracing, bullying him.

Sadly, given the situation at the time, He Yu hadn't had the time to expound on this fantasy, nor could he say too much. Now that things had *finally* calmed down, but he still couldn't grab Xie Qingcheng to dote on him, jealousy engulfed him. His natural ruffian tendencies came out to tease Xie Qingcheng.

This time, Xie Qingcheng did reply, but what he said was impatient.

"It's not the time for your jokes. You must keep your guard up and focus on your safety. Only contact me if anything happens. Talk later."

He Yu stared.

There's no help for it, He Yu thought. His wife didn't get romance. *Men in STEM never understand the appeal of love in the midst of danger!*

Nevertheless, he did put down his phone and focus on those surveillance screens once more, just as Xie Qingcheng had asked.

At the moment, the squad cars were weaving through the streets in groups, on their way back to the station. Because all the

cars had surveillance cameras inside, everyone in the command center heard what Jiang Liping said. On the audio feed, the officers were asking Jiang Liping about those secrets.

"Um, so, in all these years, you kept yourself hidden and endured all of that by Huang Zhilong's side…to get more and better evidence, is that right?"

Jiang Liping flicked the ash from her cigarette. The loyalty bracelet on her wrist was still there, but she'd already sensed its mechanism change.

It was a very expensive device capable of sophisticated judgment. Some of the higher-ups in the organization had to sell out minor tidbits of information in order to fulfill their mission, and the manacle couldn't kill by mistake. That's why its settings were much looser than those of Huang Zhilong's batch of imitations; it could analyze both spoken words and internal responses to tell if the wearer's speech had violated the organization's bottom line.

Even more amazingly, in order to maneuver situations for the organization, it could swiftly eliminate those abandoned by the higher echelons—for example, Huang Zhilong.

Jiang Liping had sensed that the manacle had stopped protecting Huang Zhilong's secrets. She could share most of what she knew about him with others. Only that which would blatantly cross the organization's red lines would trigger its attack.

She paused, voice hoarse. "That's right. You have to rip the thing out by its roots. Otherwise, what use would killing Huang Zhilong be? I'm not so self-absorbed that I'd do all this for the sake of my own grudges. I saw the skeletons piled up in their lair, so my duty is to make sure they are all brought before the law. Even if my hands became stained in blood, I have no regrets."

It was silent inside the car.

"Then, other than Huang Zhilong, can you name those he worked with?"

"It's all in that black safe." To stay safe, Jiang Liping couldn't elaborate, nor could she tell them outright how to open it. She reckoned she would be dead as soon as she told them exactly how. All she said was, "Huang Zhilong was a suspicious man, so he'd always leave something up his sleeve. All the officials, entrepreneurs, and scientists he worked with, he kept evidence on each of them. Enough to prove they broke the law. He was going to use it as leverage to blackmail them into giving him what he wanted, working with him, or trading profits. It may only be one safe, but to Huang Zhilong or the courts of justice, its value is priceless."

When someone at headquarters heard this, they took off their mic to ask the person beside them, "Where is the safe now?"

"In the car with the captain. It's a specially designed password-protected box—it can't be forced open or else the contents will be destroyed. It has to go to IT for study."

Huzhou International Airport wasn't very far from the police department. If they took the highway route through the city, they'd make it in about an hour.

In this atmosphere of long-awaited finality, Jiang Liping let out a faint sigh of relief.

"How long will my sentence be?" she asked mildly of the policeman beside her.

The officer couldn't say.

"It doesn't matter," Jiang Liping muttered to herself. "As long as I can see them all get locked up from jail."

Still listening to the children's song, she leaned her head against the window. Sunshine shone past leaves and the window glass to shine on her face, dyeing her pupils a light brown. The eerie music only filled her with utmost serenity, as if her haunted soul was at peace.

Even though the organization was clearly siloed and many of them wouldn't recognize each other on the street, everything would

come to light once they got to the police department and opened up that safe. None of the guilty would escape. She hadn't gotten to kill Huang Zhilong with her own hands, but Huang Zhilong had died in front of her. Those worms writhing behind the scenes would soon be left exposed in the glaring sun.

She could rest at ease.

"Drop, drop, drop the hanky, set it lightly behind your friend's back, no one let her know…"

The music continued.

This time, there was no blood or death, only that children's song that had drifted over the field of a village school. The sun shone bright that day, and the blossoms on the foxglove tree had been blooming so splendidly. The child, Jiang Liping, hastily crawled to her feet as the song came to an end, and out of the corner of her eye, she could see that woman standing beneath the tree, her red dress fluttering. The woman smiled encouragingly at her and gave her a thumbs-up. Jiang Liping felt as if she had endless bravery—that she could ride the very winds themselves, to soar toward her goal of becoming just like that woman.

Her slowly relaxing expression was clear on the screen at headquarters.

Someone sighed inside the office. He Yu looked to see it was Zheng Jingfeng.

Zheng Jingfeng never could've known that his informant was a woman living in hell. Despite her reasons, this woman had killed people and carried out the machinations of a criminal organization. They could lighten her sentence, but it wasn't a promising situation. As a lifelong criminal policeman, Zheng Jingfeng had met many people who were neither good nor evil, but those like Jiang Liping, who made him sigh with the force of his dilemma, were very rare.

He nearly couldn't bear it. He couldn't imagine how many crimes Jiang Liping had participated in—ones where she might've

not been the one carrying out the murder, but her heart was still tormented and condemned every time.

This woman had no way of upholding justice from where she was. She was a scarlet snake that had painstakingly attained an alluring human form and embedded herself in a demon's lair; she had to hide her soft heart. All she could do was endlessly give the police information and do her best to minimize the deaths of innocents.

Even to the point of possibly blowing her cover. Zheng Jingfeng grew more and more displeased. He sighed gustily and closed his eyes. If only she'd never killed anyone at all.

Jiang Liping didn't share Zheng Jingfeng's feelings.

She didn't care how the rest of her life went. Her greatest regret was having *not* killed someone—the one she most wanted to eviscerate, Huang Zhilong.

She thought it was a terrible shame.

When she joined Zhilong Entertainment, she'd thought, if there came a day when she could kill Huang Zhilong, she wouldn't mind if she had to die right after. She'd dreamed countless dreams of taking up a knife and cutting the flesh from his bones, piece by piece, showing her scorn for this beast in human form.

In the end, Huang Zhilong had died by sniper, so it was more or less a quick and painless death. Such a damn shame. If Huang Zhilong's company hadn't fallen from grace and been abandoned by its supporters—

Hold on.

Immersed in her thoughts, Jiang Liping remembered something. Her gaze flickered.

With the closure of the Huang Zhilong case, many of those earlier mysteries were resolved. She could carefully evade triggering

that manacle's mechanism while providing the police with keywords and explaining everything that'd happened. But there was one thing that she'd overlooked in her haste, one that now filled her with unease: Hu Yi. Young Master Hu had been left submerged in a water tank after his murder. But why?

That man's death had magnified the pressures on Huang Zhilong from every direction. Jiang Liping was sure that Huang Zhilong hadn't been responsible.

Then, who had been? Why did they kill an influential man during one of Huang Zhilong's projects?

The more she thought about it, the more suspicious she found it. Could it be…?!

Jiang Liping's face paled.

Chapter 147:
The Explosion

JIANG LIPING WHIPPED around to one of the policemen. "Can we take a different route? Not the usual way!"

The officer stared. "What's wrong?"

Jiang Liping wasn't sure. She was still wearing the loyalty bracelet, and based on her years of experience, if her guess was right and she said it aloud, the poison mechanism would go off, killing her instantly.

"I'm not sure," she said helplessly. "I have a bad feeling…"

"But we're almost there." At her mumbling, the officer thought she'd started to get anxious about the trial she'd soon face. "Once we're off the highway, there's only another half hour. Don't overthink it—you were an informant. I'm sure the judge will take that into account."

"No, you have to listen to me! I think something's wrong… This is…" Jiang Liping trailed off.

Her stilted words and strained expression showed on the screen. In the surveillance and command center, someone muttered, "Why's she acting up now?"

"I don't know. Jiang Liping's requesting they take another route, but she can't explain why."

"Do they have time to?"

"They're on the highway. Unless they take separate routes and go back, it'll take at least an hour before they get here. I don't think the command center will accept an unexplained delay like this."

"And we can't fully trust what Jiang Liping says. Those cases from back then, the car crash Xie Ping and Zhou Muying were in, and Chen Lisheng's attack… Now it looks like they must've had

something to do with the organization. There's much for Jiang Liping to do once she gets here. A route that'll take another hour, for no reason?" The captain shook his head. "No, it won't fly. Have them return as soon as possible, the quicker the better."

A secretary was preparing coffee for the police working overtime, and also handed He Yu a cup.

He Yu uttered his thanks, then stared thoughtfully at the screen. He felt that they couldn't ignore Jiang Liping, and Xie Qingcheng had emphasized that they protect Jiang Liping in his last message. However, it didn't look as if it would be easy to convince the captain, and the processes at the police department were extremely strict. Dispatch for key cases like this had to go through review; it wasn't something he could change just by opening his mouth.

As He Yu thought, he heard a patter of footsteps outside the door.

"Commissar Wang."

"Commissar, why have you come in person? Didn't you just get off the plane?"

He Yu's head snapped up to see a vibrant old man and his grandson, Chen Man, walk into the police department. Now, *this* was a fucking heaven-sent opportunity!

He Yu immediately rose to his feet and went to greet him. "Uncle Wang," he said politely.

"Oh, Xiao-He, how are things? What's going on?" Commissar Wang was close with He Yu's family, and his grandson had just escaped from danger with this kid—unsurprisingly, he was feeling very amiable toward He Yu.

"Uncle Wang, I've been watching the feed the whole time," He Yu said. "Something's come up. The informant Jiang Liping is requesting a different route back, but she has no reason for it. I feel like…"

He told Commissar Wang what he thought. Chen Man, standing beside his grandfather, agreed with He Yu's assessment. Even though Jiang Liping couldn't say what exactly was off, it would be best to listen to her.

Commissar Wang thought it over. "Makes sense. Where's Chief Hu?"

"Chief Hu's at the airport dealing with the aftermath of the shooting of Huang Zhilong."

"Then I'll go give him a call."

The old man was as good as his word; he left at once. In his absence, Chen Man's and He Yu's eyes finally met.

He Yu had just been acting sweet in front of Chen Man's grandfather, but when faced with Chen Man himself, he didn't bother with the act. He turned away and looked back at the surveillance camera, coldly sipping his coffee.

Chen Man didn't know He Yu liked Xie Qingcheng; he assumed He Yu was acting this way because he was homophobic. Feeling awkward, he pondered for a moment and then sat down beside He Yu. "Young Master He."

"With your injuries, you should be in the hospital," said He Yu. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to watch them get caught, and find out who exactly killed my gege."

He Yu blinked. There was nothing he could say to that. He turned back to the screens.

"Where's Xie-ge?" asked Chen Man.

"He's still in Meiyu Hospital. He has his own matters to deal with."

"Oh." Chen Man paused. "By the way, I have a question for you."

"Hm?"

"What's blood toxin? Jiang Liping mentioned it before, at the media company. You and Xie-ge both seemed unfazed."

"It's the common name for a type of mental illness, nothing special," said He Yu blandly. "They like to study it, just like how some focus their research on stomach illnesses and others focus on leukemia. They gave this illness a random name."

"Oh, so, you have it?"

"No, she was saying it to trick Huang Zhilong. He needed to be distracted, remember?" He Yu lied without blinking.

Chen Man thought it over. "Oh…"

Silence fell. The vibes were extremely weird.

Meanwhile, Commissar Wang had called Chief Hu and immediately sent out a command on the main channel for the squad cars to change routes. He Yu and Chen Man sat quietly, side by side, in front of the screen.

As He Yu stared at Jiang Liping, still trying to convince the police, he turned to Chen Man as if he was interrogating a criminal. "Chen Yan, I have a question for you. Why do you like Xie Qingcheng?"

Chen Man had never admitted to anyone else that he liked Xie Qingcheng. In the basement, in that life-or-death moment, he'd kept his confession vague. All he said was that he valued Xie Qingcheng's life more than his own, but He Yu had read him like a book.

"You don't need to pretend," He Yu insisted. "I told you in the fire that I could tell."

Chen Man was silent for a long time before he finally spoke up, in a voice that only He Yu could hear. "Because…because he's very good to me. After my ge died, he was the one who was there for me. Without realizing it, I started liking him."

Silence fell.

After that admission, Chen Man actually felt relieved. He turned to He Yu. “Is it that obvious?”

He Yu took another sip of his coffee. “I can tell,” he said lightly. “But his EQ is in the toilet. He definitely can’t.”

Chen Man lowered his head. “I know. I’ve liked him for so long and given him so many hints, but he’s never noticed. He just treats me like a pouting child.”

He Yu couldn’t help but arch a brow. He hated Chen Man, but he could understand his exasperation. After all, he’d gone through the same thing. A long silence passed. The two of them drank a cup of coffee together. It was deeply awkward.

Eventually, it was He Yu who broke the tension. “It doesn’t have to be him.”

“Huh?”

“To me,” He Yu said with an air of wisdom, “it sounds like you’re confused about your own feelings, and taking reliance for attraction.”

Chen Man looked at him in confusion.

“Chen Yan, you’re only just in your twenties. Your life is still ahead of you. You know as well as I do that Xie Qingcheng’s more than a decade older than you. He could be your uncle. Do you think it’s appropriate for you to say you like him?” He Yu calmly lectured him. “Your age gap is clear as day. It’s not realistic. Would you date a woman a decade older than you? No? Then, of course you couldn’t be with Xie Qingcheng. And a relationship between two guys is unstable by nature.” After a pause, he added, “This isn’t any of my business, but since I saw everything that happened in the basement, it’s my duty to warn you, given our friendship. I hope you can understand your feelings, and do what’s best for *you*.”

For some reason, Chen Man found He Yu’s middle-aged man lecture familiar, but he couldn’t tell exactly why. He sat with He Yu’s words for a minute. “Thank you,” he said at last, “but I think I can

tell the difference between attraction and reliance. I don't mind that he's older, either. We've known each other for years. I understand my own feelings."

He Yu's knuckles tightened.

Chen Man even went so far as to smile. "I know normal people like you wouldn't get how I feel about him. You might find it unbelievable or disgusting, but attraction is what it is. I hope that one day, we can be together."

If they weren't in the police department command center, He Yu would've thrown his coffee in Chen Man's face.

Attraction? Don't you think dating such an elderly uncle is immoral?! Get the fuck out!

He Yu felt like his fury was going to materialize as an inferno, one that would reduce the entire office to dust in one big burst. And, just at that moment—

Boom!

There was the massive sound of an explosion from the middle of the room.

Everyone jumped, expecting something to have happened at the command center, but they soon realized that wasn't what had happened. The noise of the explosion had come from the screens—there'd been an explosion on the highway!

No one had expected such a thing could happen. In broad daylight, while the police squadron was finishing the case, in front of everyone. Their enemies had used the same trick twice. The surveillance feeds that had been broadcasting in high definition seconds ago went out one after another, creating a wall of black.

After a few beats of silence, chaos reigned in the office.

Commissar Wang had just ended a call and returned to the room. Meanwhile, Chief Hu's command frequency cut in with his message: "Jiang Liping wants to take a different route back? Do as she says! It doesn't matter if it takes longer—"

The captain on duty was as pale as paper. “Ch-Chief Hu,” he said, voice shaking. “It’s…it’s too late.”

“What?”

In the command center, everything was a mad scramble. There were people trying to connect audio feeds, some switching over to highway critical response teams, and others working on emergency reports.

Faced with these pitch-black screens, the captain said in a trembling voice, “There’s been an explosion on the highway. Moments ago! A-all our eyes on the scene are down!”

At that moment on the highway, 120 kilograms of explosives were hidden on a vehicle disguised as a construction truck, parked at the mouth of the tunnel and awaiting the squad cars’ arrival. It was the same exact modus operandi as before, using a vehicle built to have self-driving capability for short distances, waiting in the breakdown lane.

The explosion hit.

They succeeded.

Amid the inferno, onlookers gaped in terrified shock.

Firefighters and police raced to the scene, sirens blaring. Their pressurized hose was turned on and aimed at the roiling clouds of smoke. First responders dressed in bulky protective gear worked to rescue the people and objects caught in the sea of flame.

Among their number was a ghostly, masked figure. He took that safe out of the wall of fire and disappeared from the view of the roadway security camera.

“Executive Duan.” In the blind spot, that ghost took off his mask and called Duan Wen on the phone prepared by the organization. “Jiang Liping is dead. Huang Zhilong’s safe has been reclaimed. Everything has been resolved.”

"Very good."

On a private island near Australia, an energetic man with handsome features sat at his desk, facing a half-played game of chess. He had no opponent. He was moving both the black pieces and the white in a textbook example of "warring with yourself."[4]

While listening to his subordinate's report, he moved them one by one.

The black king had been forced into a corner. Checkmate.

"Since everything's been dealt with, hurry back here," Duan Wen said. "Go to the airport in Hangshi and take the next flight back. Don't get caught in the country by the police once they come back to their senses. Don't do what Huang Zhilong did."

Hearing his subordinate's agreement, Duan Wen hung up. He fiddled with that black king piece and smiled before tossing it aside.

Behind him, a little boy wearing red high heels walked onto the balcony where he was sitting.

"Huang Zhilong's dead?"

"Dead. This game of chess is over." Duan Wen took out a tissue and wiped his fingers, an expression of carefree delight on his face. "Executive Huang was old. He put too much weight on being one of the organization's earliest founders and prided himself on the fact he joined earlier than I did. He couldn't hold himself back and was only getting more intractable. I warned him so many times, but he still did whatever he wanted, ignoring me all the while."

Smiling, he tossed the tissue away. "He would've been eliminated sooner or later anyway."

"He never realized we were the ones who killed Hu Yi," said the boy.

"We only pushed him out of the frying pan. Once he was in the fire, of course he couldn't think straight. What an idiot. After what he did to take care of the camera and the man who stole it for him—panicking and using the obedience potion to send a madman to burn

down the police building—it was obvious he wasn't smart enough to wipe the bottom of a shoe."

"He was afraid," said the boy. "That man in prison, Sha Hong, nearly sold him out. He went to such lengths to kill Sha Hong off before the blood toxin got there, and then never settled himself after that. How was he to know that the actress's camera didn't have anything that would harm him?"

"He shouldn't have made such stupid moves, no matter how scared he was. It's no surprise such an idiot never realized I killed Hu Yi."

"But he seemed to know Chen Man is—"

Duan Wen cut him off. "No, I think he wasn't sure of it himself. Otherwise, he wouldn't have left Chen Man in the basement. He would've kept him with him regardless of how dangerous it was." He grinned. "I did hope he'd kept him, but Huang Zhilong wasn't the type to take risks. No brains or courage, only ambition. I really have no idea how you used him for so long. It took some work, but fortunately we've finally dealt with him and those files he had."

Duan Wen moved to reset the chessboard, and put down a new piece in the empty king's space. "It's time for a new player," he said, eyes darkening.

"Who?"

"The one your killer nearly offed in the production." He leaned back, swiping on his phone to find Lü Zhishu's contact.

"Hello, Executive Lü. It's nothing in particular, I just wanted to ask…" His eyes were like those of a snake peering out of a cave, and a thin, greasy smile hung at the corners of his mouth. "Has your son gotten closer to you recently?"

Chapter 148:
Everything's Over

TALK OF THE HIGHWAY explosion persisted for a full two weeks.

Years Undercover, All for Revenge: The Red-Gowned Spy

Uncovering the Dark Truths of Zhilong Entertainment

Witness Dead in Highway Explosion: Who's Behind It?

Eye-catching headlines like these were at the top of all the major news sites. The agitated public realized that this bombing case was similar to the killing of judge Giovanni Falcone by the Italian mafia. Jiang Liping and twelve of the accompanying police officers were dead. Another eight had been injured, and the safe was gone. To many, this turn of events was a massive blow.

Even though Jiang Liping had divulged *some* information during the process of being taken in, and a handful of mysteries had been solved, she hadn't had enough time to share much of the other important revelations she knew before she died. Now, the massive explosion had reduced her to ash on the wind. There was nothing left.

Dull rains engulfed Huzhou for two weeks, further lowering the mood of those harried officers. Their informant was dead, the trail was blown up, and the evidence had disappeared—worst of all were those twelve lives lost in the explosion.

Grief, condolences, consolation, farewells, memorialization, a press conference…

The atmosphere in the police department was darker than the storm clouds in the sky.

They were doing their best to save the injured, and to examine the clues Jiang Liping had left behind. In those short but extremely

valuable conversations with her, the police had learned that the head of the criminal organization was named Duan Wen.

But unfortunately that might not be his real name. He was just like a mafia boss or a Burmese drug lord: a difficult target that the police had long since suspected but could never get enough evidence to arrest. Catching a crime lord wasn't an easy thing; a few witnesses, some testimonies, and hearsay weren't enough. Sloppy work could lead to something worse. Duan Wen had a foreign passport to boot, and rarely stayed in the country for long.

It was just like the Italian mob boss, Falcone. A major case involving bringing a mafia member to justice had, in a matter of moments, sunken back into an indefinite hiatus.

With the disappearance of the safe in that highway explosion, much of their trail had gone cold. Even though they knew where to start, the investigation had become bogged down into the mud of a stalemate. Everyone involved was terribly dismayed.

Surprisingly, Xie Qingcheng was the calmest—unfazed, as if he'd grown used to it.

He'd waited nineteen years to learn the truth of his parents' deaths. Hope had lit up in him again and again, and had likewise been snuffed out again and again. Before the light of day shone upon him with real, piercing sunbeams, he wouldn't get his hopes up too high. As a result, he wasn't as disappointed as the others.

It wasn't like he had much time for tears, either. At Zhilong Entertainment, Jiang Liping had given them a sample of the new RN-13. Now he could start preparing medicine for Xie Xue, Chen Man, and the other victims.

They hadn't been dosed with very much of the new drug. Treatment could ensure what was essentially a complete recovery. Xie Qingcheng spent all his time in the lab, needing to pay close attention to the development of this antidote. He had no free time to speak of.

Regardless, on the day of the memorial ceremony, he took the time to bring flowers to the cemetery.

After he placed flowers at the deceased policemen's graves, Xie Qingcheng went to another graveyard, the one for regular citizens. That was where Jiang Liping's grave lay.

Xie Qingcheng had come alone to pay his respects; he didn't want to cross paths with too many other people. But, when he arrived, he saw a familiar figure.

"Lao-Zheng…"

"Oh, Xiao-Xie." Standing before the gravestone, Zheng Jingfeng turned to look at him, and nodded with a sigh.

Xie Qingcheng went up to him. "Here to visit your informant?"

"Yeah." Even though he didn't want to look like a softhearted sap, grief and pity were visible in Zheng Jingfeng's lined face. "I never knew…it was her…"

In the wind, those emerald boughs of pine and cypress rustled like the tide.

"Before the broadcasting tower case, this informant gave us a great deal of valuable information. Her reports helped us avoid at least a dozen incidents that would've resulted in a severe loss of life." Zheng Jingfeng sank into a reverie, closing his eyes and sighing. "I never guessed…"

Xie Qingcheng thought about his words before he responded.

"She told us about the person acting as the main 'protective umbrella' in the police department, and you now know you need to pay attention to him when investigating this case in the future," he said. "There's no evidence, so that's all we can do for now." A leaf drifted down to land by the stone steps. "This is the last report your informant left for you."

Zheng Jingfeng's quiet face was the picture of mourning.

"Lao-Zheng, take care of yourself. Don't let him know you know." Xie Qingcheng turned to look at the words carved on the tombstone—

Jiang Liping's grave had her real name upon it: *Sun Ping.*

Beside hers was Jiang Lanpei's new grave. Jiang Lanpei had been held captive for twenty years. Thanks to the account her student Sun Ping had given, one year after her death, she finally had her identity back. Just like Sun Ping's headstone, her plaque held a name that no longer belonged to the darkness.

Here Lies Jin Xiuhe

"In the past, she only ever signed off as J. L. P. But that last time, the one you saw at Neverland, her signature became 'Jiang. Lan. Pei.' We thought it was some kind of hint, but who could've known…" Zheng Jingfeng sighed.

"She wanted to live in the image of her teacher."

Lao-Zheng sighed again. "Then, tell me, did she manage to live like Jin Xiuhe?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

He thought of the day at Zhilong Entertainment, when Jiang Liping had told them she was the informant, and mentioned the signature she'd left on the notebook at Neverland. In the heat of the moment, she'd unthinkingly given her signature as the J. L. P. she was used to, not that singular "Jiang Lanpei." Because of this, He Yu had suspected her of wanting to hurt them, but she'd refused to explain why.

In hindsight, perhaps it was because in Jiang Liping's heart, Jiang Lanpei—which was to say, Jin Xiuhe—was forever kind and pure, while *she* was covered in blood. After she'd killed Wang Jiankang, maybe she no longer wanted to use that name derived from Jiang Lanpei's as a signature.

"Or…did she live as Jin Xiuhe would've wished?" Lao-Zheng mumbled.

The trees rustled in the distance. A breeze took Lao-Zheng's sighing words with it.

Xie Qingcheng still had not given him a reply. Perhaps this was a question only the women buried in front of them could answer.

He stood at their final resting places, then took out a box of Marlboros he kept on him, and a box of fashion cigarettes he'd gone out to buy. He placed them both before Sun Ping and Jin Xiuhe's graves.

"Have whichever one you want. You've worked hard, so there's no need to suffer any longer. Rest in peace."

He closed his eyes and bowed deeply, three times, to these women's graves. Then, he turned and left.

Xie Qingcheng wasn't without compassion, but he had to maintain the stoniest calm. To him, all softness, grief, and regret cost him energy and wasted time.

He had to leave.

As Chen Man and Commissar Wang had been involved, Xie Qingcheng had to think of some cover-up explanations to hide the truth of the human experiments. He also asked Commissar Wang to ensure the whole matter was kept classified in an effort to reduce the number of people who knew.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Commissar Wang, but these experiments were linked to cell regeneration. The less people in the know, the better, or else they ran the risk of unsavory people eyeing it up. If the truth made it to Commissar Wang in its entirety, then *everyone* involved in the experiments, dead or alive—he, He Yu, and Qin Ciyan among them—would be in terrible danger. The mentally ill were already seen as abnormal in the eyes of society, to say nothing of test subjects like them, who had abilities straight out of a sci-fi movie. The consequences would be unimaginable.

So Xie Qingcheng said Chen Man had been injected with a special drug. He told no one, not even Chen Man himself, of the drug's true abilities and the story of its discovery. They were certainly not going to get to the bottom of it in the short term. The roots of RN-13 went too deep; they'd spread for twenty years, and many of those involved were already dead. Even if Commissar Wang investigated personally, it would be very hard to get results in a short period of time.

The Wang family only wanted to know that their grandson Chen Man was alive and well. All Xie Qingcheng needed to do was produce the antidote as soon as possible and give it to them.

"Oh, Professor Xie!" The intake nurse at Meiyu greeted him enthusiastically. "Are you here to see Xie Xue today? Or Mr. Chen?"

"Neither," said Xie Qingcheng. "I'm busy."

The nurse stared. "Then you're headed to…"

"The lab."

What a heartless dage, thought the nurse. *Those two want to see him every day.*

That was *why* Xie Qingcheng didn't want to see Xie Xue and Chen Man too often. Chen Man's excitement required no discussion. And, of course, as soon as Xie Xue had woken up and heard the news of her brother going through such terrible danger, she cried every time she saw him, clinging to him, sobbing, and refusing to let him leave.

He'd spent the last few days carefully calming her down, and he just didn't want to deal with her emotions anymore, so he'd chosen to avoid her.

The nurse took him to the staff entrance, where he swiped his card and went to the top floor. There, the director was overseeing progress in the lab. When he saw Xie Qingcheng come out of the elevator, his eyes widened.

"Professor Xie? What are you doing here? In your state, why are you even coming?" the director asked.

Xie Qingcheng hadn't expected to see him. "I wasn't busy, so I came to take a look," he said, somewhat abashed at being caught red-handed.

The director had no idea what to say to that. In the aftermath of the highway explosion, Xie Qingcheng had finally bowed to the demands of his body and gone for a simple checkup at Meiyu. He and Xie Qingcheng both knew the results were far from cheery. As

an old friend of Qin Ciyan, of course he'd hoped Xie Qingcheng would take good care of himself, but it was as if Xie Qingcheng thought the complete opposite: He was acting more or less self-destructively, as if he didn't care about his own health at all.

The director pulled him aside, grasping for words. At last, he landed on, "You should go home early."

"I really am free today."

"Go home," the director insisted. "I can keep an eye on the medicine for Xie Xue and the others in your stead. Don't waste more energy on this." He saw Xie Qingcheng open his mouth to speak, so he cut in quickly. "Think of Qin Rongbei. Think about what would happen to her if you were gone."

Xie Qingcheng's gaze flickered.

Knowing he'd played the right card, the director patted him on the shoulder. "Go home. Focus on your health. Sometime soon, you'll have to take the time to come and do an in-depth checkup to examine your organ function."

Xie Qingcheng lowered his lashes and stayed silent.

"Go," the director said.

At that, Xie Qingcheng could only swear internally and leave Meiyu. On the way home, he couldn't help but cough, dizziness rising up in him in bouts.

The director was right. He'd been overdoing it lately—but what else *could* he do?

He did want to take a break; he wanted to stop worrying about running out of time and live like a normal person. Better yet, he wanted to hire two assistants to help him. But how could he do that? This was his only choice.

Panting for breath, Xie Qingcheng parked his car. He walked to a convenience store, where he bought a cup of water. Back in his car, the pills he kept there went down smoothly with the water. Then, he leaned back in his seat to wait for his strength to recover.

His speakers rang. Contact: *Little Devil*.

Suppressing his cough, Xie Qingcheng picked up He Yu's call. "Hello?"

He Yu had returned to school. The amount of time he'd taken off far exceeded the acceptable limits, and his adviser had tactfully informed him that any further such absences would impact the student society presidential election for the next term. Regardless of how well he scored on his final exams, his participation marks would be insufficient, and he might even need to retake some subjects.

He Yu apologized very meekly to his adviser and promised he would never request a long absence again. His clever flattery flustered the adviser so much that they felt like they were being too strict on this poor child, and after a few more words of warning, they fled.

Returning to school after such crises was the best possible thing. He could avoid his parents' endless questioning, and also frequently go to the neighboring school to see Xie Qingcheng.

It was impossible not to notice how much nicer Xie Qingcheng had become to him after the basement fire. Even though his expressions were still apathetic and his speech curt, Xie Qingcheng wasn't avoiding him on purpose anymore. Sometimes, emboldened by his success, He Yu would run off to Xie Qingcheng's faculty dorms to get free dinner, then discuss the case with him and such.

Today was no exception.

"Xie-ge, where are you?" He Yu asked into his phone.

"What is it?" Xie Qingcheng said without answering the question.

"I came to visit you, but there's no one in your dorm."

"I'm busy. Go back to your own dorm."

He Yu paused. "But I forgot my key, and it's *so* late, all my roommates are asleep. I don't want to bother them."

Xie Qingcheng sighed. "Wait for me. I'll be about half an hour."

At last He Yu happily hung up.

Xie Qingcheng leaned back wearily in his seat and massaged his temples. Light from the passing cars shone in through the window, illuminating the clean, cold lines of his jaw.

In times of physical weakness like this, he couldn't help but think of the conversation he had with He Yu in the basement of Zhilong headquarters. He'd think of what he felt at the time, He Yu's eyes, and that thoughtless kiss he'd initiated, which he didn't even fully understand himself.

He closed his eyes. His chest felt tight.

That kiss was truly a mistake on his part. Knowing it was a mistake, why had he done it anyway? What kind of impulse and emotion had motivated him?

In the time since, he'd analyzed his relationship with the boy. Now, Xie Qingcheng was sure what He Yu felt wasn't a misunderstanding—that his feelings wouldn't change or budge. If he continued on with He Yu like this, what would that make him?

If he didn't stop this in time, wouldn't he *really* be a scumbag pervert who had improper relations with a university student but refused to take responsibility? Forget He Yu himself—continuing on this train of thought, he wouldn't be able to face He Jiwei either. Even though they weren't very close, it was He Jiwei who'd given him the chance to do practical work by making an exception for him to join the lab to learn. He'd gained so much from that opportunity, then turned around and seduced Executive He's son.

The whole time, He Yu had no clue he was pursuing an entirely impossible outcome, so, so stupidly ready to carve out his heart and

offer it to him. What the hell. Xie Qingcheng knew he was attractive, but would he still be attractive dead? He'd be cremated in a matter of days! Who liked ashes? He Yu was truly an idiot for the ages!

Xie Qingcheng only grew more and more annoyed. Fastening his seatbelt, he turned to gaze at the Meiyu Hospital building still faintly visible behind him.

"Xie Qingcheng, doing something like this will hurt you very much. But, if you insist, I can only assist you. Don't worry, this secret will stay between the two of us. I won't let another soul know."

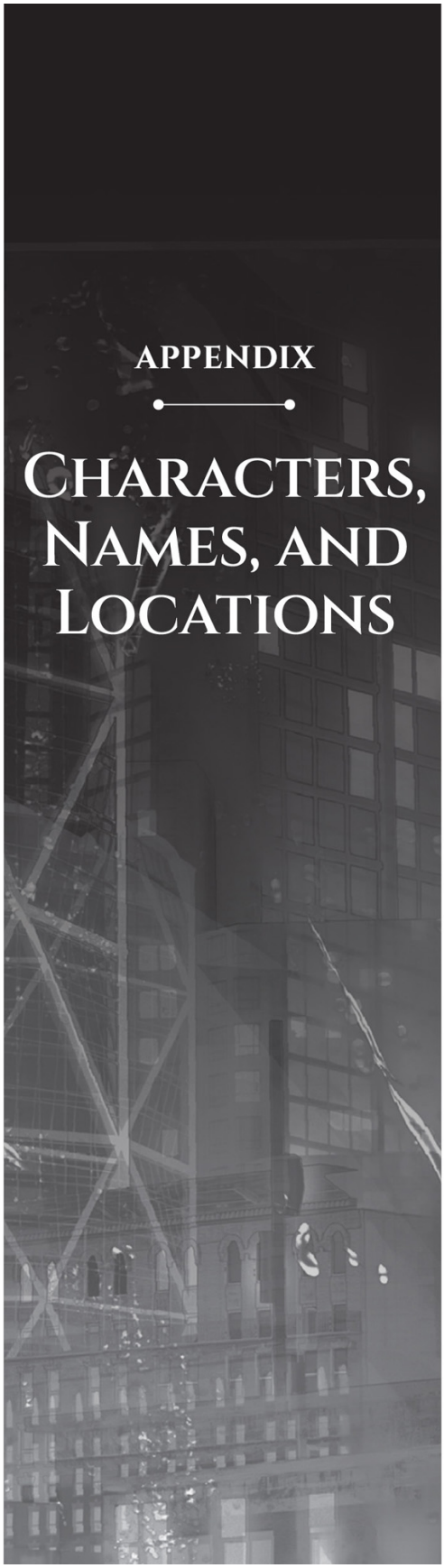
Xie Qingcheng looked at the gold-plated text on Meiyu Hospital, the words the director had said to him echoing in his ears. He closed his eyes, sharp brows furrowing as he coughed. It might've been the wind, or the back of his throat, but he thought he smelled a hint of blood.

The taste of it was like a secret—something only Xie Qingcheng knew. Just like the truth hidden in Meiyu, the one he still hadn't told He Yu about.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Case File Compendium

VOLUME 6



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.

JIANG LANPEI 江兰佩: The now-deceased patient who burned down Cheng Kang Psychiatric Hospital.

JIANG LIPING 蒋丽萍: The morality advisor in charge of He Yu's screenwriting/directing class.

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.

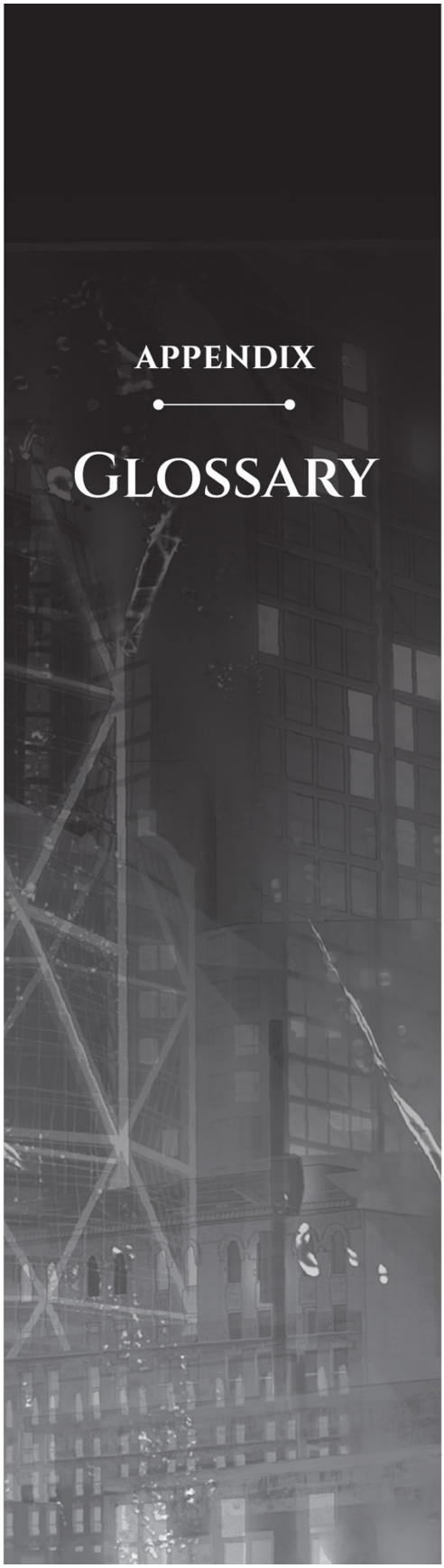
XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

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.

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 & His White Cat Shizun 1

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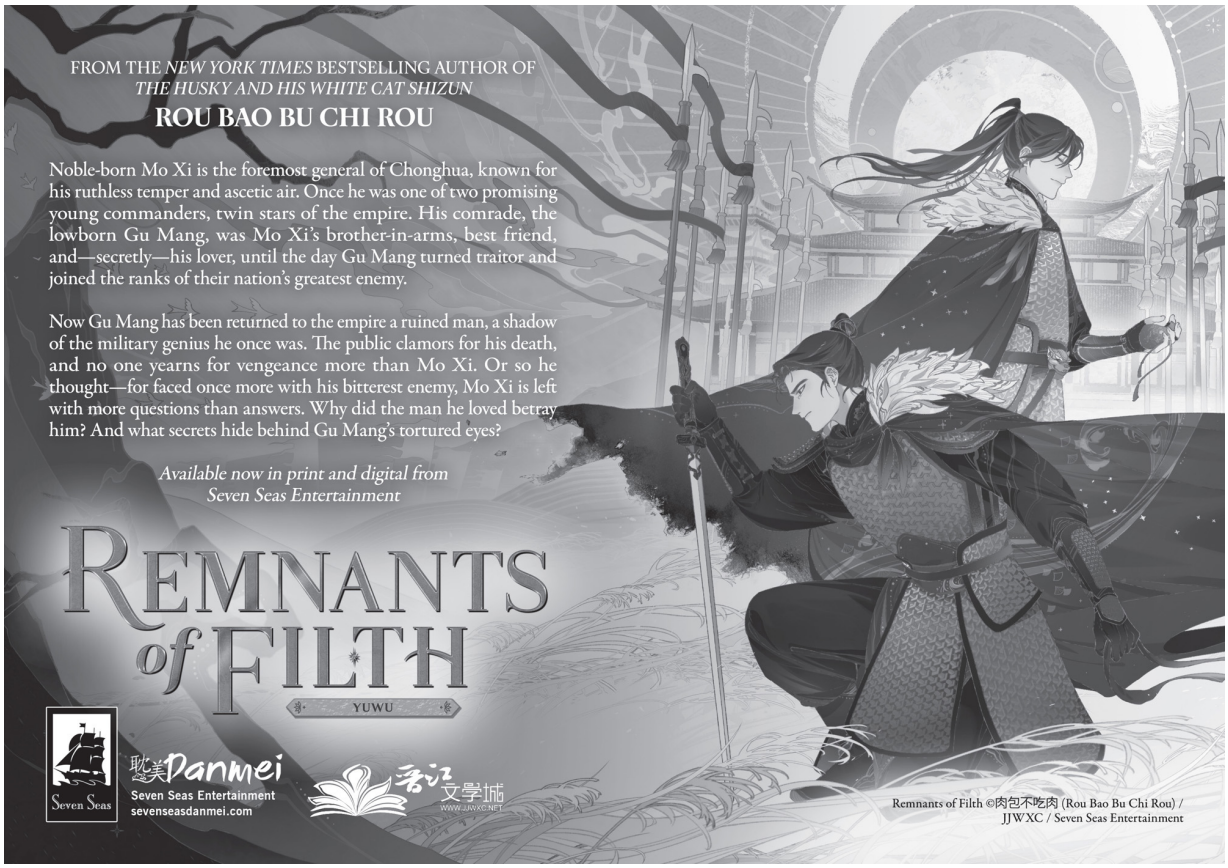
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FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
Noble-born Mo Xi is the foremost general of Chonghua, known for his ruthless temper and ascetic air. Once he was one of two promising young commanders, 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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Footnotes

Chapter 123: I Went Back to the Skynight Club [1] Not necessarily as obvious as it might seem—the Zhilong in the company name (志隆, "ambition" and "grand/prosperous") is written with different characters from Huang Zhilong's given name (志龙, "ambition" and "dragon").

Chapter 127: Ge, Be Reasonable

[2] Traditionally a person's age was considered to increase at New Year every year, rather than on their birthday.

Chapter 133: As Long as It Makes You Happy [3] Ruby is the name of a real bakery in Shanghai, the city Huzhou is based on.

Chapter 147: The Explosion

[4] A martial technique where one's left and right sides fight independently of each other. First mentioned in Jin Yong's Legend of the Condor Heroes.


FUJIFILM

感谢阅读， 回忆长伴。

"Thank you for reading,
may these memories
stay with you forever."

- Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat

Enter the Inferno

Racing to find a cure to Xie Xue's illness, He Yu and Xie Qingcheng's investigation into the forbidden drug RN-13 grows riskier with each new clue they discover. Along the trail of murdered professors and missing young women they uncover an unconscionable crime, and those responsible for it will stop at nothing to bury the truth.

Even worse, the shadowy forces are eager to get their hands on the unique powers of He Yu's blood toxin. And despite his unwillingness to accept his former patient's feelings for him, Xie Qingcheng refuses to let He Yu face this great peril alone.

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
The Husky and His White Cat Shizun
AND *Remnants of Filth*

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