

默

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3

Silent Reading / Priest

默读/*Silent Reading* by Priest - Book 3

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CHAPTER 59 - Reading Aloud (2)

When Luo Wenzhou left the interrogation room, he felt he was somewhat delirious. The lengthy and strenuous process of interrogation was a sort of torment for both parties, especially when faced with a suspect with Xu Wenchao's psychological quality. Not giving the other party a chance to catch a breath in fact meant having no time to catch a breath yourself.

While those rushing around outside were still seeking all kinds of evidence, the interrogator and the interrogated had to read between the lines of each other's expressions for involuntarily betrayed traces of information to mutually deceive and mutually judge—

How much evidence do they actually have? How much did Su Luozhan actually say?

Where did he just contradict himself? Which of his words could be true, which of his words are dodges to get away from the major topic?

Are they tricking me?

How can I trick him to get him to confess?

The least slackening, and Xu Wenchao would immediately have seized the opportunity to quibble and retract. It was hopeless to think of substituting another interrogator.

Everything from Luo Wenzhou's neck up had basically shut down. Wholly relying on muscle memory, he mechanically navigated to his office.

Qu Tong's parents had heard the news and rushed off to Binhai without listening to any counsel to the contrary. Only Guo Heng was

left.

Luo Wenzhou saw his back and thought that Guo Heng was sleeping. He instinctively lightened his steps and picked up a uniform jacket someone had tossed nearby. He was about to drape it over him when Guo Heng suddenly looked up.

The wrinkles around his eyes extended in complex twists and turns from the bridge of his nose to his temples, like the cracks in parched earth. In his eyes, their slightly yellowed whites shot through with blood vessels, there wasn't a trace of sleep.

The previously bustling office of the Criminal Investigation Team was utterly silent. The people were either still busy elsewhere, or else they hadn't been able to stand it any longer and had gone to sleep. The two men looked at each other wordlessly, the air seeming glued together, thick and motionless; the wind of the most powerful air-conditioning couldn't have blown it away.

After a long time, Guo Heng spoke first with difficulty. "Your...your leader surnamed Lu told me everything."

Luo Wenzhou slowly pulled up a chair and sat down across from him.

"He didn't give me too many specifics," said Guo Heng. "He said you were still verifying some details—can you tell me the particulars now?"

Luo Wenzhou paused. "On that summer day twenty years ago, Guo Fei by chance got acquainted with a girl who said she had come to Lotus Mountain with her teacher. The girl was wearing a floral-patterned dress and looked very pretty, but she seemed to have no sense of direction at all. She asked her the way several times. One day, when she got out of cram school, Guo Fei met the girl again. The girl seemed very worried, claimed that the teacher she'd come with was in the hospital, and she couldn't find the way back to the hotel

alone. Guo Fei was a warm-hearted child. At the end of each term, the teachers all commented that she was ‘willing to help others.’ To this day the records are in the Lotus Mountain Elementary School’s archives. She tried to explain the directions a few times, but the girl still didn’t understand. It was only a little detour, anyway, she thought. She’d only be a few minutes late. So she decided to personally take the girl where she wanted to go...”

From the first time he had mentioned the name of “Guo Fei,” Guo Heng had been shaking uncontrollably. His turbid tears rolled from the corners of his eyes, redirected by row after row of wrinkles to the white hair at his temples.

At this point, Luo Wenzhou stopped for a moment and put his hand on Guo Heng’s shoulder. Put together, the skinny shoulders and the heaving chest looked like a slimy and old-fashioned broken-down bellows.

Guo Heng took a difficult breath. “Talk. Keep talking.”

“That girl—she was Su Xiaolan. She tricked Guo Fei into taking a drink that had been drugged. She left her in the hotel, waiting for the killer Wu Guangchuan to get out of the hospital. Wu Guangchuan used his poor health as an excuse to get away from the rest of his team and take one of the company cars. After murdering Guo Fei, Wu Guangchuan hid her in the trunk of the car and left Lotus Mountain. Su Xiaolan took Guo Fei’s pencil box.” Though he knew, judging from Su Xiaolan’s diary, the uniformity of the method of the crimes, and other facts, that the one who’d murdered Guo Fei must in fact have been Su Xiaolan, Luo Wenzhou used his seemingly objective tone to lightly twist the facts. “Su Xiaolan had a twisted relationship with the killer that made her very jealous of the victim. In the middle of their offense, an altercation occurred between Su Xiaolan and the killer because of this. She furiously got out of the car, ran down that slope you discovered, saw the public phone next to the waste transfer

station, and suddenly thought of a means of relief—to call you and let you hear that scream, and also to let your hear the pencil box.”

“Why would she... Why...”

“Because she was jealous that Guo Fei had parents like you, had a happy home, had grown up into a little girl ten thousand times better than her, had things she wouldn’t possess even after living another twenty years.”

At his tone, Guo Heng looked at Luo Wenzhou and for a time couldn’t speak.

“Uncle Guo, you didn’t kill the wrong person then. You were only... too kind-hearted. You didn’t suspect the other person in that house at all,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “But because you killed Wu Guangchuan in front of her, Su Xiaolan was intimidated. She knew for the first time that doing these things would call down retribution. Her life afterwards was painful and deformed, and the frequency of her crimes was greatly reduced. You virtually saved quite a few potential victims—over a hundred at least.”

But Guo Heng covered his eyes, unable to speak for tears.

“Uncle Guo...” said Luo Wenzhou.

“Don’t say it.” Guo Heng absently waved a hand at him. “Don’t trouble yourself to find pleasant-sounding words to comfort me. Thank you.”

Because he’d rashly stabbed Wu Guangchuan back then and scared Su Xiaolan out of using the same method to torment the victims’ relatives, even making her alter her methods, the records of those murdered little girls had afterwards vanished among numerous other missing children, only coming to light once more fully twenty years late.

Guo Heng had been impulsive and easily angered, but he wasn't at all stupid. He could pick out this type of obviously flawed lie.

“So where is my Feifei now?”

“Su Hui, the principal offender from back then, didn't participate in that case. So our conjecture is that Guo Fei must be along the national road that led from Lotus Mountain to the city at the time.”

“Can you...can you still find her? Are you still looking?”

“We can find her,” said Luo Wenzhou. “A person can't be made to vanish just like that. She must still be hidden somewhere. There are always traces. Even if we can't find her for a time, there will still be hope. Even if others forget, I'll remember. Set your mind at ease.”

Guo Heng left the City Bureau by the first rays of another morning. Luo Wenzhou watched him go until he was out of sight. He didn't know what would happen to Guo Heng now, but whether he was sixty, seventy, or eighty, a person still had to live, still had to keep going through his days, still had to turn his eyes forward.

Perhaps Luo Wenzhou was only consoling himself, but he thought that Guo Heng's back had seemed a little straighter.

Luo Wenzhou, dragging heavy steps, returned to his office and half-collapsed into his chair. He let out a long breath, then felt he seemed to have forgotten something. He looked up and saw a cup of already cool coffee set out on his desk.

Right, he'd made Fei Du wait for him!

But clearly Young Master Fei couldn't wait in the bureau for him all night. He must have left long ago.

As Luo Wenzhou picked up the cup of coffee in confusion and looked it up and down, a hand reached out from beside him and lifted the cup. Then, a dim thread of Mu Xiang cologne entered his nose from the cuff of this person's sleeve. Luo Wenzhou subconsciously breathed in, his nose going a little dry.

Fei Du had once again crawled out of some expensive hotel. He'd changed his clothes. Under Luo Wenzhou's confused gaze, he put the breakfast and coffee packed up by the hotel on the table.

Luo Wenzhou subconsciously said, "You really must have nothing better to do. Every day you stay at a hotel instead of going home. Does your company run the place?"

"You could say that," Fei Du answered matter-of-factly. "I own 60% of the interest."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Big bosses who flaunted their wealth in front of the salaried class on purpose were all assholes.

"Didn't you tell me to wait for you because you had some things you wanted to say to me?"

"Oh, right." Luo Wenzhou opened the coffee and drank a big mouthful, attempting to use the coffee to find his lost brain. "I wanted to tell you..."

What had he been going to say?

Luo Wenzhou stopped, finding in wonder that there was a temporary break in his memory. However he rifled through it, he still came up empty. He couldn't remember a single punctuation mark, experiencing an early symptom of Alzheimer's.

Fei Du's white shirt was starting to look a little dazzling, almost giving him double vision.

“To tell you...”

Fei Du watched him babble some words as if talking in his sleep. Then he tilted sideways following the back of the chair; he had actually fallen asleep like that. Fei Du deftly propped up the coffee still in Luo Wenzhou's hand, lightly rescuing the cup that had almost fallen to the floor. Then he arranged Luo Wenzhou's hand in a comfortable position.

The man was frowning faintly. He looked very wan, his eyelids folded into three layers and his ordinarily very clean-shaven chin covered in stubble, oddly giving him something of the dejected “uncle” feeling. His face looked as if it had thinned out. After working nonstop for forty-eight hours, even an immortal would be dispirited. Of course his face wouldn't look very good. But somehow his usual air of a glib-tongued young lordling had disappeared, and something more profound and substantial had been left behind in its wake.

Fei Du turned and leaned on his desk, reaching out two fingers to lift Luo Wenzhou's chin. For a moment he gently scrutinized his face, like a collector of antiques scrutinizing and fondling a piece of Ru official ware¹. After a moment, he stood up straight and sighed soundlessly, admitting that he had been moved by this face.

Lang Qiao, dragging her steps like a dead dog, had just rolled back in from outside. She'd thought she could sleep soundly lying down in the middle of the road, but when she raised her head and unfortunately encountered this scene, all the drowsiness filling her head was startled out of existence. She felt that all the “domineering director-general” pornographic novels she'd read in her life were blowing past before her eyes with a whistle. Standing dumbstruck in the doorway, the policewoman became a stiff corpse.

The “domineering director-general” harboring evil intentions wasn’t in the least flustered. He turned his head, blinked at her, and gave her an unusually thought-provoking smile. He pointed at the big bag of food next to him, indicating that she should help herself. Then he picked up the coffee Luo Wenzhou had just drunk and sipped it, floating out.

The light of the rising sun stabbed Tao Ran’s eyes so he couldn’t quite open them. His colleagues who had rushed over to assist took over for him, and he went to rest. He carelessly shook the soil off of himself and got into a random car. Just then, his phone vibrated. A photograph came from Chang Ning of herself with Chenchen in her arms, tightly clinging to her big sister’s clothes but still struggling to smile at the camera.

“The doctor said Chenchen’s injuries were all light and she could leave the hospital. My aunt says we have to thank all of you. Another day, could I ask you and your colleagues to come over for a meal?”

For the first time, Tao Ran didn’t immediately respond to the goddess’s message. Holding his phone, he fell asleep.

Fei Du took a taxi back to his office. Before the workday had started, he signed the documents he’d promised Assistant Miao he would attend to, then sat alone for a while in a tastefully decorated office.

This was the old President Fei’s office from before. At the door was a waiting room with a liquor cabinet concealed in the wall. Next to it was a large bookcase that reached the ceiling. The upper half was a collection of all kinds of only extant copies, sheepskin rolls, silks, and even bamboo slips, everything you could want. The lower half displayed the watch collection of the office’s previous master.

The other wall was a display case entirely covered in glass, hung full of ancient weaponry. Among them was a broadsword that was said to

have been carried by an ancient emperor. The grip was elegant; after all these years, the blade was still bright as snow. Under the cold light of the display case, it looked as though it were about to break out of the case to eat flesh and drink blood.

Between the couches was a stand 1.4 meters tall, round, displaying around its edges all kinds of currency no longer in circulation, surrounding a small display in the center where the works of three successive winners of a certain international jewelry design competition were arranged—only three years. Before the fourth year's could be put there, the collector himself had gone to lie in the seaside sanatorium like a corpse.

Everyone, on first arriving to his office, would be shocked by the small-scale museum in the waiting room. If a person lingered there for long, money, authority, ambition, and desire would be ready to simply pour out of all his pores.

The office, meanwhile, was half separated from and half connected to the waiting room, linked by a passage wide enough for only one person to pass through. There was a clever curve to the passage that prevented the light from the office from getting in. On two sides, the office had small windows for ventilation, while in back was a huge floor-to-ceiling window from which one could clearly look down on half of Yan City, the flow of traffic slowly lining up and the pedestrians as small as ants all visible at a glance.

Fei Du stood and took a not especially thick folder from a locked filing cabinet. In the folder were some contracts, financial statements, and explanations of changes in major assets. It was a collaboration undertaken in the conglomerate's name with a "Guangyao Fund." When his father had reigned, he'd collaborated with this fund and made a fixed contribution to its subsidiary public interest fund.

The contract term had already expired and the collaboration had naturally come to an end; the other party had shown no signs of

wanting to renew the contract.

And lying quietly at the bottom of the pile of documents was a project plan for “Binhai Marine Resources Recreational Holy Land—Making a Chinese Maldives” that had requested an investment from them. Back then, his father, who had laid down the law for the board of directors, had refused with the reason of “capital investment comparatively large, no mature profit model,” and it had then come to nothing.

“Binhai...” Fei Du heavily traced a line on it with the cap of his pen.

The three great principles of disposing of a body—

First, the place where the body is disposed of is absolutely safe. No one outside of your control will come to dig it up, and no one will discover the secret under the earth.

Second, a place where you could hide the body among ordinary corpses, so anyone who found it wouldn’t call the police.

Third, even if they did call the police, the police would have no way of determining the identity of the deceased.

The third principle had been usable twenty years earlier, but today, with the development of all kinds of criminal investigation forensic technologies, it basically couldn’t be realized. So given Xu Wenchao’s IQ, he would definitely adhere to the first two.

Why would he choose Binhai?

If he threw the bodies off the coast, there would be a great risk of them being fished up. To throw them further out, however, would require a means of getting out to sea, and it couldn’t be done in all seasons. There would have to be some bodies that could only be buried on dry land.

There was nothing in the origins or experiences of Xu Wenchao and the three generations of the Su family to show that they had any connection to the city of Binhai. So what reason had made Xu Wenchao choose it? Could it just have been the freelance photographer happening to think that the scenery was beautiful and untouched?

A week later, with the collaboration of the police in both places, the dust at last settled on this unusually complicated, unusually lengthy, unusually sensational major case.—Under all kinds of coercion and cajolery, the pianist from the racetrack had finally identified one of the other four men in the photographs. They'd had a very strict system of enrollment. They had to have someone introduce them. At first, they only had permission to take the little girl Su Luozhan out to eat. They had to spend a great deal of money and maintain a relationship for a very long time before they were permitted to become “senior members.”

As the “members” mutually identified each other, it was like picking a radish out of the ground and getting a whole string—including those who weren't in the photographs, “old members” who had already withdrawn from the transactions. Among them there was actually no lack of respectable-seeming successful personages; there was quite a sensation when the police came to their doors.

Closely according with the line of thought Fei Du had supplied, Guo Fei's body was found in a wild graveyard in a village along the national road from Lotus Mountain to the city. The people who lived there said that, before they'd practiced cremation, the place had been specially used to bury the bodies of those who had died violent deaths or who had died young. The place had many superstitious legends, and usually no one dared to approach. Back then there had been a villager who'd gotten drunk and mistakenly wandered in. He'd happened to discover a burial mound that shouldn't have been there, gotten scared out of his wits, and spread a good number of ghost stories.

Unfortunately, due to the taboo, no one had gone to check.

The news, evidence collection, public charges... The follow-up work was non-stop. When it came to an end, Luo Wenzhou suddenly realized that it was already the middle of September.

On the first day he resumed a life of normal working hours, he hadn't yet had time to celebrate when he saw a little sports car stopped at the gates, with a familiar scoundrel standing next to it, smiling as he watched a traffic cop hand out a ticket.

CHAPTER 60 - Macbeth I

Before Luo Wenzhou could react, Lang Qiao, walking behind him, sucked in a big breath.

These last few weeks, Lang Qiao had often remembered Fei Du's secretive look before he'd left that day. Each day on the way to and from work she'd let her imagination fly; she had already gone through a string of labels like "seizing by force" and "sodomasochistic love," visualizing a soul-stirring erotic television drama—only there had been too much stress at work lately, so she hadn't had time to leak any "spoilers" to Luo Wenzhou, one of the main characters.

An autumn rain shower had passed a few days before. Comrade Lang Qiao was so startled by Fei Du's sudden appearance that she stepped into a pool of water at the gates and nearly fell flat on her face, flailing her limbs and clinging onto the wall.

Hearing the movement, Luo Wenzhou turned to look at her. First, this damn gay guy jeered at her pose. Then he said, "Why are you wearing high heels to work? None of us can see you unless we're looking down. We all know you're short."

Lang Qiao: "..."

She rolled her eyes and straightened out her heel with difficulty, firmly biting back the warning she'd been about to give him. She thought, *Well, it's his funeral.*

Formerly, Fei Du had worked during the day and fooled around at night. He'd come to harass Tao Ran from time to time, but mostly only to present some new toy as a gift. He hadn't reported to the public security bureau every day for no reason. Luo Wenzhou had frequently worried about him before, although that had been while he'd still been little; since Fei Du had grown into a 360 degree

scoundrel without a blindspot, there'd been nothing worth worrying about.

The city was always active, and everyone was running around toiling; there was also the rush of traffic and the sea of people to separate them. It wasn't unusual for ordinary friends not to see each other for a few months.

But not much more than a month after the last time President Fei had come running to the City Bureau to "send some comfort," Luo Wenzhou suddenly had a strange feeling, as if he hadn't seen him in a very long time.

Fei Du's car was as flashy as before, but he himself seemed much more in line with conventional norms.

He wasn't wearing glasses. There was an earpiece hanging loosely from one of his ears. His cotton shirt had for once been buttoned up to just below the top collar button, and, in an extremely rare occurrence, he was wearing jeans. His hair had been casually pushed back, displaying his clear, handsome brow. It was as if something had washed his whole soul clean. All traces of that air of the scum of the literati were gone. At a glance, he looked like a slightly rebellious but not over-the-line arts student.

Hands in his pockets, Luo Wenzhou strolled over in front of Fei Du, internally cursing in spite of himself—

There were innumerable types of male beauty in the world, and Luo Wenzhou was interested in a fairly broad range of them. He could appreciate the Western aesthetic, full to bursting with masculine hormones and brimming with force; he could also appreciate the traditional aesthetic, clear as the moon, gentle as jade...as long as they didn't display Fei Du's revolting behavior, he wouldn't turn any of them down.

President Fei was of the type he found most unendurable, simply a cobra in human shape. He was immaculately groomed; it was impossible to tell whether he was telling the truth or shamming; he had so many eyes trained on the world that getting close to him could make you feel a touch of tryphobia. There was a sharp and intense feeling of invasiveness about him; if you didn't want to be manipulated by him, you would have to keep your nerves subconsciously strained. Never mind appreciation, Luo Wenzhou's head hurt at the thought of him.

But the style he was attracted to at first sight was a clean and straightforward, somewhat distinctive one; add in some good looks, and it basically hit him dead-center in his most vulnerable point—for example, the way Fei Du looked right now.

Fei Du was young, after all. When he retracted his venomous fangs, he could conjure up a look of brimming youthfulness, mixing the true with the false.

Luo Wenzhou waved a hand, dismissing the little traffic cop from the department next door. He patted the roof of Fei Du's car and pointed to the commercial building across the street. "Turn right and there's a shopping center, didn't you see? That's where the nearest parking lot is. Outside of special circumstances, the public's cars can't randomly park at a public security bureau's gates. You need a parking permit."

Fei Du gave him a wholly unclouded smile. "How do I get a parking permit?"

"We don't sell long-term parking permits wholesale or retail. First, you have to be City Bureau personnel. If you can't manage that, you have to be the family member of City Bureau personnel." Luo Wenzhou, not turning a hair, lowered his eyes, giving his stimulated eyeballs a break. "You want a parking permit just for opening your mouth. Do you have the status, President Fei? A few days after

getting your cast taken off, you're driving around raising hell all over the place—what are you doing here now?"

Without answering, Fei Du asked, "You didn't drive today?"

"I lent my car to a colleague to use to go on a date," said Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du narrowed his eyes and opened the car door. "Perfect. Do you want to get in?"

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

This movement of Fei Du's stirred up a light wind. Luo Wenzhou found to his surprise that he hadn't sprayed on any cologne today; the smell that came from him was a mixture of the detergent from his shirt and some shaving lotion. It was clear and clean, like an autumn breeze washed by cool rain.

This joker had to be doing it on purpose.

Luo Wenzhou's mind was alert, but his limbs rebelled against his brain, taking the initiative to get into the car.

Fei Du very gracefully shut the car door for him and was just walking around to the other side when he saw a "wimpy kid" with a dilapidated briefcase on his back run out of the City Bureau and look all around; it was Tao Ran.

Fei Du stopped in the middle of opening the car door and called to him. "Ge."

"Hey!" Tao Ran grabbed at his hair and walked over to him. His observations were very sloppy; he didn't notice anything different between Fei Du's getup today and his usual one. "This crowd! They realized they didn't need to work overtime today, and in the time it

took me to go to the bathroom, they all ran off, apart from the officer on duty.—What are you doing here?”

“I came by to do something,” said Fei Du.

“Oh, okay,” Tao Ran said carelessly, not even asking what he was doing. “I was just going to call you. Chang Ning says that Chenchen’s parents want to find a time to invite everyone over to eat. Will you go?”

Fei Du let out a long “oh.”

“What?” said Tao Ran.

“Go to Chenchen’s house—when the time comes, we’ll be responsible for chatting with the parents, turning their gazes away, and you’ll be responsible for helping Chang Ning-jie clean up and prepare food?” Fei Du lazily leaned against the roof of the car. “Or you could urge them to prepare a bit of wine, pour a bit into everyone, then have Chang Ning responsible for seeing each one off while you drive the car. The best thing would be for us third wheels to vanish as soon as we walked out the door. Then you can conveniently take her to enjoy the night breeze, see a movie or something.”

Tao Ran hadn’t thought so much about it originally. Having Fei Du’s brief description to light the path ahead, he sparkled all over; he felt uncomfortable speaking and only stood there with a captivated smile.

Just then, the car window facing Tao Ran rolled down and Luo Wenzhou irritably said to him, “Enough, I get the gist of this meal. I’ll pass it on to our comrades tomorrow. Could I trouble you not to stand by the side of the road torturing the single dogs? Mind our image!”

Tao Ran had never expected that he would one day see Luo Wenzhou in Fei Du’s car. He gave a tremendous start. Like a sleepwalker, he

looked at Luo Wenzhou, then looked at Fei Du; he went back and forth three times, suspecting that his mind was somewhat clouded. He then gave a subconscious “oh,” rubbed his eyes, and obediently left.

When he'd walked fully fifty meters away, Deputy-Captain Tao's lengthy reflex arc finally finished running its course and his brain reacted as if he'd had an electric shock—wait, was that Luo Wenzhou in Fei Du's car just now?

Luo Wenzhou, male, interested in men.

Fei Du, male, interested in...humans!

Tao Ran swiftly turned his head back, his neck cracking in protest. The little sports car that had been parked at the curb just now had cheerfully driven out into the road, converging with the immense flow of traffic; there wasn't a sign of it.

“A hallucination,” Tao Ran concluded, making a great show of nodding earnestly as he walked stiffly away.

“Turn left at the intersection up ahead. They're repairing the road, you can't get through,” Luo Wenzhou directed dully, as if he really was just hitching a ride home. He had asked once why Fei Du had come; the little asshole, deliberately mystifying, hadn't answered. Luo Wenzhou simply hadn't asked again, waiting with perfect composure for him to issue a reply.

But Fei Du calmly drove him all the way home without talking any nonsense. “We're here.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Wait... Was that it? Now what?

“We’re really here. I just wanted to drive you while I was on my way.” Fei Du very acutely picked up some bewilderment from his gaze. A very Fei Du smile hovered around the corners of his lips.

As soon as he smiled, the “youthful sun” image he’d maintained the whole way vanished in an instant. Under the painted face were the same familiar formula and same familiar flavor. Fei Du ambiguously lowered his voice and drew close to Luo Wenzhou’s ear. “Or were you hoping I had some other intentions, Captain Luo?”

This was one of a playboy’s customary moves: now distant and now close, reconnoitering while not crossing a line, giving no reason, enigmatically dropping a lure and running away. Anyone who couldn’t resist the curiosity and chased after to investigate would be marching step by step to his tempo.

Luo Wenzhou was a kindred spirit; he knew all the moves perfectly well—though this was the first time anyone had used them on him. He couldn’t pronounce a judgment or ask a question. The sharp rise and gentle fall of this provocation had left his heart and mind full of wild animals; at the same time, he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

With a breath Luo Wenzhou forced down the fur and talons scratching at the pit of his stomach and presented a move of standing his ground. After a pause, he simply opened the door and patted the car. “Nice car, though it’s a waste when you can’t drive fast in the city. Thanks, see you.”

Then Luo Wenzhou very naturally got out of the car, pretending that nothing had happened, and went home to feed his cat without a look back.

Fei Du sat in the car watching his back until Luo Wenzhou had gone into the building. Then he slowly started the car.

“You’re welcome,” he said to himself. “See you tomorrow.”

The next day, Captain Luo returned to his old profession of delivering take-out, swaggering into the office. As soon as he opened the door, he saw a few colleagues moving desks.

“What’s going on?”

“Director Ceng just came by and said we have a new colleague reporting today,” Tao Ran said, showing his head. “We’re getting a place for them to sit.”

“Oh, right, I remember now.” Luo Wenzhou put breakfast on the table and indicated that they should all help themselves. “I’ve been so busy I’d forgotten. I got the transfer order before, is he reporting today?— You all know him, it’s that Little Glasses from the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau. While the investigation into Wang Hongliang was ongoing, he was suspended and also under investigation. The investigation just ended. He seems like a pretty clear thinker and a good worker, so I simply wrote up and had him transferred over.”

Tao Ran stared. “It’s Xiao Haiyang?”

Before Luo Wenzhou could answer, someone stuck their head in through the office’s door. “Captain Luo, Director Ceng wants you to come over!”

Luo Wenzhou gave an affirmative, grabbed a portable package of tofu curd, stuck in the straw as wide as his thumb and stirred twice, drinking as he walked. By the time he got to Director Ceng’s office, he’d drunk the one-time-use cup dry.

Luo Wenzhou was a lazy worm. To save a few steps, he took aim at a hallway trashcan two meters away and made an easy “free throw”; the plastic cup went sailing into the basket.

He hadn't yet celebrated his own perfect shot when the door of the office next to him opened from inside.

Ceng Guangling pushed at his glasses and looked at Luo Wenzhou coldly. "It's a true waste of your talents that you didn't go into the NBA."

Director Ceng had originally been a forensics expert. Later, because old Director Zhang had valued his eternal professionalism and accuracy, he'd forced him into a management position, giving him an assortment of things to attend to one after another. One day he'd make him responsible for presiding over a party member conference, the next he'd make him produce official documents, and the day after that he'd have him take a hand in administering human resources, racking his brain to arrange all kinds of "practice" for him. With all this practice, Director Ceng didn't want to live anymore, thinking every day of handing in his resignation, growing increasingly icy.

When Luo Wenzhou had first been transferred to the City Bureau, he had often gone to crime scenes with Director Ceng. Ceng Guangling's disposition was strict; he couldn't stand the sort of little troublemaker Luo Wenzhou had been back then. Luo Wenzhou got told off by him nearly every day and had long ago cultivated a face of impenetrable diamond to present to him. Wholly unconcerned, he went into Director Ceng's office with a cheeky grin. "That's true. It's all because my heart is devoted to serving the people that I could stand to give up an annual salary of ten million US dollars. I deserve to have my praises sung.—I hear we have an old acquaint..."

Before he could pronounce the "ance," Luo Wenzhou froze.

There were two people in Ceng Guangling's office. One was the expected Xiao Haiyang. Seeing him come in, Xiao Haiyang very properly stood up and greeted him. "Captain Luo."

As for the individual next to him, he evidently wasn't so proper.

“I really am an old acquaintance.” Fei Du’s gaze first made a circuit from Luo Wenzhou’s chest to his knees; when he’d finished enjoying the free show, he smiled as he took up Luo Wenzhou’s words. “I just ate a meal at Captain Luo’s house last month.”

Ceng Guangling was one of the City Bureau’s elders. He’d watched Luo Wenzhou grow from a spoiled child who didn’t understand shit into the captain of the Criminal Investigation Team; even if he never said it, he was still well aware of some annoying details about his personal life. Hearing Fei Du’s words, Director Ceng immediately got the wrong idea, fiercely rolled his eyes at Luo Wenzhou, and said significantly, “Since we all know each other, let’s not waste words.—Last year the City Bureau and Yan Security Uni’s graduate program planned a collaborative research project, with Lao Zhang leading the way. They wanted to use practical experience to get at some theories, and to support their theories with practical experience. Take for example this case we just had, the kidnapping and killing of young girls that spanned twenty years—there’s a lot of research value there. Yan Security Uni has already established a special research group. Xiao Fei is our contact person.—Wenzhou may seem unreliable, but he’s actually pretty good at keeping his private life separate from his public life, right?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

What kind of an unreliable research group would choose this bit of goods as a contact person! Had the alma mater’s other graduate students all died off?

Ceng Guangling said, “Xiao Xiao, you just came. First, get to know everyone. There are many young people on the Criminal Investigation Team now, you’ll assimilate easily. Fei Du—”

Fei Du uncrossed his legs. Under Luo Wenzhou’s extremely pained gaze, he gently and harmlessly called, “Teacher Ceng.”

“Hey, hey, no need to be so polite.” Ceng Guangling was evidently pleased by this manner of address, a trace of a smile involuntarily appearing on his icicle-like face. His voice warmed by at least three degrees. “In fact, I did teach for two years. I suppose you could call me your dashixiong. Your Lao Pan called me. If you need anything, go ahead and bring it up. You can come to my office any time.”

First Luo Wenzhou was on the receiving end of a one-on-one talk from Director Ceng; this middle-aged man’s gaze and suspicions had strayed off into outer space. He raised entirely unreasonable questions and criticisms against Luo Wenzhou’s personal integrity. Then Luo Wenzhou got hauled off to Director Lu’s office for a political awareness-raising meeting about this shitty research project. By the time he dragged his weary steps back to the Criminal Investigation Team, he suddenly found that it was no longer the office he knew—

CHAPTER 61 - Macbeth II

Looking at his office, to which an extra desk had been added, Luo Wenzhou leaned with one hand on the door and silently waited for Tao Ran to explain.

“There’s really nowhere to fit another desk outside,” Tao Ran said carefully from behind Luo Wenzhou. “But set your mind at ease. I just asked Fei Du, and he said he’ll only be coming once or twice a week. He won’t be here every day. Once this research project is over, they’ll disperse. It won’t be very long, he’ll only be in here with you temporarily for a few days...”

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze swept over the enormous air purifier in the corner, then fell on the door—the space originally piled up with junk had been cleaned up, and a fully-automatic coffee machine had been placed there instead, along with a little refrigerator around a meter high. The refrigerator was jammed full of cold beverages with the scripts of all nations written on them. There was a note on the door that read: “Help yourself, don’t be shy.”

This battle array really didn’t seem like “temporarily for a few days.”

Deputy-Captain Tao was rendered speechless. He gave a dry cough and grabbed at the mess on his head, making it even wilder; if you’d taken off his head, you could have used it as a steel wool scourer.

He squinted at Luo Wenzhou’s face and diffidently said, “Anyway, when I saw you in his car yesterday, you two seemed to be getting on pretty...”

Luo Wenzhou, his face expressionless, turned to stare fixedly at him.

“...well,” said Tao Ran.

Luo Wenzhou snorted.

Tao Ran held himself back for a while, but in the end he couldn't resist asking, "What's going on with you two?"

"How do I know what he's eaten wrong?" While there was no one in the office during the midday break, Luo Wenzhou sighed and issued a very pained complaint to Tao Ran. "He hasn't been looking to pick a fight recently. He's been teasing me nonstop instead, the bastard. Doesn't he know my orientation is 'unconventional?'"

Tao Ran: "..."

"Well?" said Luo Wenzhou. "If you have something to say, say it."

"Well, you know, Fei Du, he..." Tao Ran struggled to find the right wording. "I've always thought that children who grow up in those rather complicated surroundings become worldly-wise when they're very young. They have a strong sense of propriety, especially in front of girls. You sometimes get the feeling that all his sweet-talking is just to make you happy, and he doesn't mean anything else by it. He's extremely familiar with all kinds of hints and subtext. If he doesn't want to cross a line, then he'll very carefully avoid it..."

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou understood Tao Ran's implication—either the narcissistic self-love from his teenage years was metastasizing, or Fei Du "wanted to cross a line."

He didn't respond, so Tao Ran could only mumble himself to a stop. The two of them looked at each other helplessly for a moment. Luo Wenzhou couldn't tell what he was feeling. Tao Ran also had a complicated expression of not knowing himself what he was saying.

Luo Wenzhou's feelings for Fei Du had always been very complicated. On the one hand, he really had been very concerned about him, never able to resist looking after him a little. On the other hand, Fei

Du did often make him incandescently angry. They'd known each other over seven years, and most of that time they'd been locked in a head-on struggle. Outwardly, it sometimes had the look of well-matched opponents who appreciated each other's talents.

Whatever Fei Du did, Luo Wenzhou's first reaction was always to wonder what mischief he was up to now, but Tao Ran's words had opened a never-before opened door in his mind.

After a good while, Luo Wenzhou finally asked, "Where is Fei Du?"

"He took everyone out to eat," said Tao Ran. "I waited here to go over there with you, it's that hotel right by the door..."

At this point, his words again came to an abrupt halt, because he'd once again remembered the surpassingly sumptuous midnight snack from a month before. Now he understood what had happened without needing it to be said.

The City Bureau had handled two major cases in the last half year, and Fei Du, under different guises, had participated in both. Yan City's City Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team all knew him on sight. But despite knowing him on sight, most of them still didn't know what he did. They only suddenly saw the light when they saw him reserve three private rooms at the luxury hotel—this was a local tyrant who'd come to make friends with them!

At the thought that as long as Fei Du was present, the officers on duty could refuse grease, refuse fast food, refuse instant noodles, all of "Captain China" Luo Wenzhou's grunts revolted, even including Lang Qiao, who'd "had a glimpse of the truth."

From the other side of the private room's door, Luo Wenzhou heard Lang Qiao selling him with vim and vigor: "Are you leaving when the project's over? Will you come again afterwards? Why don't you simply come work with us when you graduate? You're fated to be at

the City Bureau! We'll leave the desk for you, Captain Luo definitely won't mind! He's just a little sharp-tongued, but his temper's actually very good. He brings everyone breakfast every morning, and sometimes he'll cook up something special at home and bring it to work to give everyone a little extra. His culinary skills are really..."

The person next to her poked at her shoulder.

Lang Qiao shook it off. "What?"

"What about Our Imperial Presence's culinary skills?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Lang Qiao's spine stiffened, and she clutched at her throat, turning her head with a crack. She was just in time to see Luo Wenzhou walk through the door, looking at her with a fake smile. He warmly said, "Eldest Princess, why don't you go home and gather your things? Get ready to be sent to North Korea for a political marriage."

Lang Qiao turned pale with fright. "Imperial Father, your subject child has erred!"

Luo Wenzhou looked up and squarely met Fei Du's gaze. Fei Du was once again perfectly playing the character of the rich kid, with his usual eye-searing getup, the sight of which raised sparks of rage.

What Tao Ran had said was still going around and around on replay, pressing on Luo Wenzhou's arteries like a fishbone in the throat, sticking so firmly that his blood pressure had gone up a few dozen points.

He slowly walked up to the empty seat beside Fei Du. Ignoring the person next to him as much as he could, he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and spoke, adopting a rare bureaucratic tone in front of his colleagues. "First, I'll pass along the gist of the meeting Director Lu just held.—This plan of a collaborative project with Yan Security Uni

was first implemented many years ago. It was called the ‘Picture Album Project’ at the time; it later fell through for certain reasons. Last year Director Zhang was recalling past events and wrote to his superiors a few times. Though he’s recently moved on, if this project can get results, in the future it will supply a great deal of help to your work. I hope you’ll all be able to actively cooperate.”

Luo Wenzhou was very rarely this solemn on private occasions; no one dared to make a sound.

“It’ll be very strictly managed. The research group must follow all of the bureau’s internal regulations in the process of requesting files. They have to be signed out and recorded. Materials relating to details of cases that haven’t been made public can’t be copied, photographed, or removed from the City Bureau. Everyone at the research group has to sign confidentiality agreements. That’s discipline. Besides that—” Luo Wenzhou gave Fei Du a quick look. “I hope our contact person will be able to restrain his easy-going style. The City Bureau isn’t a school, and it isn’t your enterprise. You can’t come and go as you please. I heard Director Ceng say you were planning to come every Tuesday and Friday? Then on those two days you’ll follow normal working hours. If you come late, leave early, or want to change the times at the last minute, you’ll need to have a proper reason and an excuse note. Does this pose any difficulties? If it does, I recommend you switch to a different contact person.”

At first everyone had still been listening solemnly. By the middle of Luo Wenzhou’s speech, the whole table full of Criminal Investigation Team personnel was looking at him with hard-to-describe expressions, not speaking, quietly watching this kind of being “easy-going” pretending to hold the high ground.

He hadn’t finished expressing himself from his high ground; he thought about it, then said to Fei Du, “Besides that, our official resources are limited. You’ve seen that. Ordinarily, only major cases come up to the City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team. You may

run into all kinds of crime scenes. Blood and guts are commonplace. If you see something horrifying...”

Lang Qiao, unable to resist, interrupted him: “Imperial Father, are you going to eat?”

“...you still have to act as if it’s nothing, go back and eat your meals normally.” Luo Wenzhou gave her a cold glance. “We only have the law here. We aren’t prepared for emergency medical care. Comrades who vomit or faint at the least whiff of blood are advised to reconsider their choices.”

Without turning a hair, Fei Du answered, “Thank you for the reminder, Captain Luo.”

Over the last half year, the swords-drawn-bows-bent atmosphere between the two of them had turned into something full of turbulent undercurrents, an increasing torment to others.

Tao Ran could only firmly interrupt Luo Wenzhou’s “education,” stepping forward to mediate: “Oh, why haven’t I ever heard of this ‘Picture Album Project?’”

“It was over a decade ago. You hadn’t even gone to university yet.” Luo Wenzhou gave him some face and let Fei Du off for the moment. “Back then, the miraculous science of psychological profiling had just come to our country from abroad. There were many unsuccessful attempts.”

Xiao Haiyang, who was always rather silent, suddenly spoke. “Why was it called to a halt?”

Luo Wenzhou paused in the middle of wiping his hands on a moist towelette, then, as if nothing was the matter, said, “Our capabilities hadn’t matured then. There was no practical value to it... Enough, go

ahead and eat, don't overindulge and forget your duties. Aren't you going to work this afternoon?"

There were no meetings scheduled for the afternoon. Nor was there any important work. Luo Wenzhou indifferently examined a document about reinforced security procedures throughout the city for National Day, making mental preparations not to have a moment's peace two days out of the week now that Fei Du had been added to the office.

But Fei Du was unexpectedly quiet. He didn't act up or talk nonsense. He sat there peacefully going through some materials, a living person not making as much noise at the air purifier next to him. The greatest commotion his arrival caused was that all the colleagues simultaneously shunned the instant coffee and lined up with their cups to get the freshly ground stuff.

The air-purifier hummed; next to it there were only the small sounds of fingers from time to time flipping a page. It was the sleepy period of autumn. After nesting at his desk for a while, Luo Wenzhou became increasingly drowsy, dozing over the dry official document. When he woke, he found that Fei Du was in the same position as before, but at some point a jacket had been draped over Luo Wenzhou, and the window blowing towards his back had been closed.

Luo Wenzhou stopped the falling jacket and looked over from behind his computer—Fei Du really was very pleasing to the eye. Anyone who had eyes had to admit it. Luo Wenzhou couldn't resist once again carefully recalling Tao Ran's words, admitting that what Tao Ran had said made sense.

Fei Du wasn't a youth who didn't understand the gravity of things; nor was he Zhang Donglai, who'd sleep with any living creature. He was well-acquainted with all the unspoken rules of society; where others had only a vague concept about the word "ambiguity," Fei Du

could split the different shades of ambiguity into a hundred parts and bring each degree precisely into play.

Clearly knowing Luo Wenzhou was gay, if Fei Du had only been joking, he wouldn't have used this degree.

But...

Luo Wenzhou gently moved the mouse, dispelling the screensaver.

He also felt he shouldn't be presuming too far.—Why would this project choose Fei Du, who had just started his studies, as a contact person? Had all the senior students died off? There had to be some kind of strategy at work here; Luo Wenzhou wouldn't have believed otherwise even if you'd beaten him to death.

And Fei Du had started planning last year to enter Yan Security Uni. He'd received his acceptance notice in April, and the frequency with which he ran over to the City Bureau for all kinds of reasons had increased ever since; he was already familiar with the whole Criminal Investigation Team—even with the whole City Bureau.

Didn't the graduate program choosing him as their contact person also enter into these considerations?

This whole clear sequence of events and ideal course of action were permeated with a sense of deliberate scheming.

Fei Du was like an attractive poisoned apple. Taking a bite would clearly turn your guts, but smelling it still made your mouth instinctively water.

Luo Wenzhou moved, slightly relaxing his spine, which he'd been holding so straight it was about to stiffen in place. He strove to rein in his lust, which was about to get out of control, remembering a piece of information Fei Du had let slip—that article of his that had

reportedly been included in an academic text had been a study concerning the victims in criminal cases... Why would it be on that subject?

While Luo Wenzhou was spying on Fei Du from behind his computer, Fei Du suddenly got up and went over to him.

Luo Wenzhou was startled, but he saw that Fei Du seemed not to have noticed his gaze. He only went to the water cooler at the door, not forgetting to bring over Luo Wenzhou's cup, refilling it with water.

Luo Wenzhou thanked him and was about to take the cup, but Fei Du held onto it, his fingertips deliberately moving forward, touching Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du rested a hand on his desk, looking loftily down on Luo Wenzhou. He leaned down and lowered his voice. "If you want to look, Captain Luo, go ahead and look all you want. I don't charge."

Luo Wenzhou didn't move. In the same sort of low voice, he said, "Is it popular at your school right now to harass your superiors?"

Fei Du looked into Luo Wenzhou's eyes with a certain carnivorous expression for a while. Then he smiled, turned, and strolled back to his temporary work station. "If you want to hang someone, you can always find a pretext. If Captain Luo feels my presence is harassment, there's really nothing I can do."

Luo Wenzhou got out his cigarettes, glanced at the air-purifier, then stuck his cigarettes in his pocket and headed towards the restroom, feeling that he'd really been pure of heart and free of desires for too long.

Having somehow made it to the end of the workday, Luo Wenzhou found that Fei Du showed no signs of leaving.

Luo Wenzhou picked up his keys and consciously or unconsciously glanced at the document he was holding. He found that Fei Du was reviewing Xu Wenchao's confession; his gaze had been stopped on a certain page for a long time.

Fei Du seemed to have eyes on the back of his head. Seeming to understand his question from his steps, he slowly said, "Xu Wenchao said that Guo Heng found him while he was in the process of following Wu Guangchuan. After they spoke, Guo Heng had some suspicions about Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan's relationship. When he failed to get assistance from the police, Guo Heng began to investigate Wu Guangchuan in private, and Xu Wenchao tailed him for him."

"Yes?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du leaned back lightly. "This seems a little strange to me."

Luo Wenzhou put a hand on the back of his chair, reaching past Fei Du's shoulder to trace the words with his fingertip. "What's strange about it?"

"Guo Heng asked for Xu Wenchao's help when he had no other choice. We've tacitly acknowledged that Guo Heng divulged the details of Guo Fei's kidnapping to Xu Wenchao during this process."

Luo Wenzhou said, "That's what Guo Heng said himself."

"It's been over twenty years. Guo Heng wouldn't necessarily clearly recall what he'd said. But I've thought all along it was strange for him to share details like the bells in the pencil box with Xu Wenchao."

"In the eyes of Guo Heng and the police back then, this detail had no investigative value aside from proving that the phone call was connected to Guo Fei's disappearance. What's more, it had caused

Guo Heng severe psychological trauma.—Imagine his psychological state then. Under what circumstances would he talk about that detail?”

Luo Wenzhou said, “For example, if someone asked, ‘How did you know it was your daughter on the phone?’”

“How did you know it was your daughter on the phone.” Fei Du shook his head. “That sounds as though Xu Wenchao were verifying the truth of what Guo Heng had said.”

Luo Wenzhou came around at once—only a person who knew absolutely nothing would react to Guo Heng’s words by instinctively trying to verify their truth.

Xu Wenchao meanwhile already knew about Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan’s twisted relationship, and he also knew that Su Xiaolan was the chief culprit in the serial kidnappings. With all that clear as a mirror in his heart, would he have acted like he knew absolutely nothing so convincingly?

“If that’s the case, then Xu Wenchao is too frightening,” said Fei Du. “But if it isn’t the case, why would Guo Heng talk about this detail on his own initiative? Pouring out his heart? If you were Guo Heng, with a child over ten years old and already entering middle age yourself, would you pour out your heart to a boy twelve or thirteen years old?”

“Su Luozhan said she only got the idea of imitating Su Xiaolan after reading her diary, but I was just thinking about it carefully. In Su Xiaolan’s diary, aside from describing her excitement when she called the victims’ families, there was no mention of the detail about the pencil box.” Fei Du tapped the desk with his finger. “So how did the little girl know?”

Luo Wenzhou froze. Before he could follow this frightening line of thought, the phone on his desk suddenly rang.

Luo Wenzhou picked it up.

“You haven’t left yet? Good,” said Director Lu. “This problem is a rather thorny one, Wenzhou. See who’s still on duty and go over there yourself to have a look.”

CHAPTER 62 - Macbeth III

“A car crash?” Luo Wenzhou asked in astonishment. “Why do you need me for a car crash? Send the traffic police next door to deal with it.”

Lu Youliang said, “Have you heard of Zhou Junmao?”

“Which Zhou Junmao?” Luo Wenzhou gave a start, feeling the radiant afternoon light become turbulent. “Not *that* Zhou Junmao?”

Next to him, Fei Du paused. He silently raised his head.

Zhou Junmao was a famous overseas Chinese national, seventy-three years old this year. He had been born in the East Daogou District on the outskirts of Yan City and sojourned overseas when he was young. Starting from nothing, he had worked hard dealing in building materials, and had later built the Zhou Clan Conglomerate, an enormous multinational enterprise. In recent years, as he'd gotten older, he had perhaps begun to think of returning to his roots; the core of the Zhou Clan's investments had begun trending back to China.

Zhou Junmao wasn't an ordinary celebrity. He was low-key and lived simply. He was very public-spirited; he had in particular made outstanding contributions towards building up the infrastructure of his hometown. He was responsible for half of all the prosperity in the East Daogou District; there was a road there called “Junmao Road,” the only road in the whole Yan City area named for a living person.

Half an hour ago, Zhou Junmao had been en route from the airport to his Yan City residence when his car had met with a tailgating truck. The rear of the car had been smashed in, and the old man sitting in the backseat had died on the spot. The driver and the

bodyguard in the passenger's seat had been seriously injured and were receiving emergency care at the hospital.

This was a very bitter traffic accident; it could be imagined that there would be a dramatic impact on the Zhou Clan's stock once the news got out.

And now, the Zhou family's younger son, who happened to be in Yan City, was maintaining that his father had been murdered and insisting that the police handle it.

“Director Ceng has already gone over with the medical examiners. We'll go to the scene to have a look, say a word to the traffic police team, then go to the Zhou house.” Luo Wenzhou was heading towards the airport highway, taking along Lang Qiao, who'd been on duty, Xiao Haiyang, who hadn't felt comfortable leaving early on his first day at work, and an extraneous Fei Du. “Relax, it won't be another month of working overtime. We don't even know what's happened yet. Even if the car crash was deliberate, I figure the economic crimes division will take the lead, and we'll be assisting them at most.”

Lang Qiao stretched out her head curiously. “President Fei, you know so many rich people. Have you met Zhou Junmao?”

“I've met him, though I couldn't really speak to him.” Fei Du, seeming to have become a model student, still maintained his studious attitude sitting in a car headed out to the field. “I'm more familiar with his younger son—the same one who insisted on calling the police.”

Lang Qiao looked down and started researching online. “Zhou Junmao has two sons. The eldest is Zhou Huaijin... Oh, a youthful talent. Went to all the famous schools, started helping manage his family's assets very young, stays abroad most of the year. The second son is Zhou Huaixin. He's a painter? Hey, President Fei, is this the one

you mean? How do you two know each other? Is it because you both like art?”

“Oh, no,” Fei Du answered, “it’s because we’re both wastrels who don’t do any honest work.”

Lang Qiao: “...”

There was no traffic heading out of the city on the airport highway, and it wasn’t yet fully dark. They soon arrived at the scene.

Fei Du was about to get out of the car when Luo Wenzhou pushed him back inside. First he started, and then he came around. His lips moved slightly. He looked at Luo Wenzhou’s receding back like a weasel that had been soothed by a chicken thigh; he didn’t display happiness, only calmly sat waiting in the car.

Luo Wenzhou walked around the scene and found that the dead and wounded had already been taken away and the scene had basically been cleaned up. As long as you didn’t look very closely at the spot circled by yellow tape, you could hardly find any traces of blood. Only then did he beckon, letting Fei Du out of the car.

Fei Du followed him and said lightly into his ear, “Captain Luo, I’m overwhelmed by the favor.”

“Overwhelmed just like that?” Luo Wenzhou glanced at him steadfastly. “Your mental landscape must be very thrilling.—Lao Qiu, where are you looking? Over here!”

The traffic policeman responsible for handling this accident was surnamed Qiu; he was another acquaintance of Luo Wenzhou’s—the world was full of Captain Luo’s acquaintances, covering all walks of life.

Fei Du, looking on from the sidelines, thought that a person like Luo Wenzhou must have grown up in very relaxed and open-minded surroundings. After the experiences he had weathered and the viciousness of the human heart he had known, becoming even more astute and sensitive than his profession required, only through having been doted on and cared for unreservedly in his youth could he have maintained that bone-deep readiness to take the whole world into his embrace.

Sometimes when you stood looking out into the street, watching the people pass by, men and women, young and old, you'd feel that they were all about the same. You're wearing a button-down and pants, and I'm also wearing a button-down and pants; you looked down and saw that the old people jogging by the street and the golden-haired, green-eyed foreigners were wearing the same brand of sneakers, almost giving you an illusion that the whole world was one.

The people living in the sun couldn't imagine the inescapable and customary torment that the smiling and chatting buddy next to them suffered, while a person deep in depression couldn't understand that the human figures rushing past them really weren't forcing themselves to smile.

Just like now, with him and Luo Wenzhou standing together; at first glance, it seemed like they were from the same country.

The body often hid the truth so firmly that not a drop leaked out.

“If you want to know whether there's some inside story to this, you'll have to investigate it. If you ask me, anyway, it looks like an accident that the vehicle driving in back was completely responsible for.” The traffic policeman Lao Qiu called them over to look at the surveillance cameras. “This Bentley is Zhou Junmao's car. It left the airport and drove along normally. The chauffeur's driving was pretty law-abiding, there were no problems. The truck responsible for the accident came

on from the Beiyuan Bridge. We started numbering from the camera at the Beiyuan exit. That's Number One.”

Lao Qiu numbered and arranged the densely-packed cameras on the highway, letting them see one after another. “There weren't many cars going in this direction on the airport highway. Starting at Camera Number Four, the truck was driving in the same lane as the Bentley. There were some other cars between the two vehicles that each passed on ahead. By Camera Number 16, there was nothing between the truck and the Bentley ahead of it, but the distance between them was still pretty safe. Then, you see—”

While passing the eighteenth camera, the distance between the truck and the Bentley ahead of it decreased noticeably. Looking closely, you could see it very slowly gaining speed, as if the driver had forgotten to stop applying pressure to the gas pedal.

Passing Camera Number 20, the speed camera showed the truck's speed approaching 140 kph, clearly over the limit. Then, as if the truck driver had gone blind, at this speed the truck fiercely approached the rear of the car ahead. The twenty-first camera had completely caught the course of the collision. The crash was so savage that, even having made mental preparations, seeing it still made your heart give a thump.

“What about the driver of the responsible vehicle?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“Dead before he reached the hospital,” said LaoQiu. “The driving history showed he'd been driving that truck for ten hours already. A clear case of an exhausted driver. If not for the deceased's relative kicking up a fuss saying it was murder, after watching this, my personal feeling would be that this was in fact pretty simple. The exhausted driver of the responsible vehicle fell asleep with his foot on the gas pedal, so the vehicle kept accelerating, then bang!—it was all over.”

“What kind of person was the driver?” asked Luo Wenzhou. “Did he have a record?”

“The driver was called Dong Qian, forty-nine years old. He was a long-distance truck driver. The person who just came to identify the body was from his fleet. He said this Dong Qian was pretty well-behaved and had been driving on this road close to ten years. He’d never had an accident. Where do you get all these offenders with records running around all over the place from? Anyway, he hardly looks like the kind of person who’d have anything to do with a Bentley. He’d just about measure up to a Xiali².” Lao Qiu accepted a cigarette from Luo Wenzhou. “Captain Luo, do you think this family member is reliable or not? It’s not just some rich people trying to get into the spotlight and on the news?”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t issue any rash conclusions, though when he saw Zhou Huaixin with his own eyes, he found that the person who had reported the case really didn’t seem very reliable.

Having seen Zhang Donglai and Zhou Huaixin, Luo Wenzhou was forced to admit that among Yan City’s locally manufactured wastrels, Fei Du’s style was comparatively normal.

Judging from the usual stature of grown men, Zhou Huaixin was excessively “slender,” a veritable walking sesame stalk. His cheeks were sunken in, making the alert criminal policemen almost suspect he took drugs.

He was wearing a t-shirt with something or other scribbled on it, with a Western-style vest over it that went down to his knees. The vest was slit up to the waist, as if he had two curtains on his front and back. There were seven or eight piercings along his right ear, hung full of metal rings. He’d been wearing thick eyeliner that he’d already cried off, leaving terrifying dark circles around his eyes.

On the wall behind Zhou Huaixin hung one of his own paintings. It was an oil painting, fully three meters long, the colors very dismal.

Luo Wenzhou had very little sensitivity towards the arts. His level of appreciation for works of fine art stopped at “the more realistic it is the better.” Even so, on seeing this painting he had a sort of unbearable sense of asphyxiation. The colors were gloomy and the lines frenzied. At first glance it looked like an ordinary painting of a storm, but looking closer you would find that there was a sun at the top left corner of the canvas, and the rust-like dark red lines didn’t represent the wind and rain; they were sunbeams.

Painted under the bloody sunbeams was a wide swath of reeds. All the plants were drooping their heads left and right with a deathly aura. A few human skeletons appeared among the reeds, looking out of the canvas.

Staring at this painting too long would simply turn your stomach.

“I don’t quite follow your trends,” Luo Wenzhou said to Fei Du, lowering his voice. “What thoughts and feelings is little Young Master Zhou’s work meant to represent?”

Fei Du looked at it a couple of times. The color of the sunbeams must have been too much like blood; he looked away a little uncomfortably. “If I recall correctly, this painting was completed at a seaside villa. Some famous fashion models sprawled on the beach to model for him.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

It turned out that the subject of this painting was “beautiful faces cover bones, all lust is empty.”

“His style really isn’t very charming. I’m not sure about others, but I only bought some of his paintings on his dad’s account.” When he’d finished speaking quietly, Fei Du saw Zhou Huaixin coming down the stairs like a sack of bones, wiping away tears as he walked.

Fei Du, calling attention to himself, greeted, “Zhou-xiong, are you all right?”

Seeing a familiar face, all the grievance in Zhou Huaixin’s heart nearly came pouring out of his eye sockets. He falteringly called, “Master Fei,” then, like an enormous swallow returning to the forest, he threw himself into Fei Du’s arms.

A scent that greatly resembled talcum powder assaulted the senses, winding thickly into a person’s nasal cavities, so choking that Luo Wenzhou turned his head away and sneezed.

Charged at by Zhou Huaixin, Fei Du took half a step back and let him lean on his tidy shoulder, but his hands hung at his sides, not making any voluntary contact, simply displaying a trace of “gentlemanly” grace. He said a few low words of consolation to Zhou Huaixin, then let him lean on his arm, slowly leading Zhou Huaixin aside to sit down.

Amid his sobs, Zhou Huaixin asked, “Why are you here?”

The whole story behind Fei Du’s presence here wasn’t very convenient to explain. He simplified it, saying, “I’m getting a degree, with a training program at the City Bureau.”

It was only then that Zhou Huaixin noticed that there were strangers present. He bent and picked up a handful of tissues from a table. He blew his nose and said, “Are you...the police? Master Fei, your hobbies really are niche... No, this won’t do, my heart hurts, I have to rest...”

Saying so, like a boneless mollusk, he very rudely rested in Fei Du's arms. Luo Wenzhou, smelling the "talcum powder scent," oddly thought that Zhou Huaixin was displeasing to the eye. He spoke in a businesslike manner. "I hear that you insist on believing that Mr. Zhou's car crash wasn't an accident. Could I ask what basis you have to think that?"

Zhou Huaixin struggled to raise his swollen eyelids. "My dad exercises every day. He just ran a marathon in spring. He couldn't just die like that, someone must have wanted to hurt him!"

Lang Qiao, taking notes, speechlessly put down her little notebook and couldn't resist putting in a word. "Young Mr. Zhou, I know you may not be able to accept the facts for a time, but old Mr. Zhou died in a traffic accident. Never mind a marathon, even an Iron Man Triathlon can't prevent against a car crash."

Zhou Huaixin gave a choking sob as though he were dying, as if Lang Qiao were a big-eyed witch persecuting a little princess.

Fei Du waved a hand at her, lowered his head and quietly said, "Zhou-xiong, that can't be taken as evidence."

Zhou Huaixin howled and cried again. "You don't believe me either? My intuition is very accurate. When Dad goes out, he usually takes that big car with the bulletproof glass, and today he happened to take this one and something happened. Is that a coincidence? He just had his seventy-third birthday last week. At the birthday dinner he said he was planning to retire, he wanted to write his will, and to give part of his shares to me and my big brother, and this week, he just came back and then..."

At this point, Zhou Huaixin seemed to notice he'd let something slip. He suddenly shut his mouth, buried his head against Fei Du like an invalid, clutching his own chest and not making a sound.

“Old Mr. Zhou only has two sons. Even if he doesn’t write a will, in the future, his assets will belong to you and your brother.” Luo Wenzhou’s gaze poked Zhou Huaixin like a flash of lightning. “Why do you think this would be a reason for someone to kill him? Young Mr. Zhou, I know you’re upset, but since you’ve reported the case, please treat it seriously. Can you sit up and talk?”

“I don’t know, I’m only concerned about painting, I don’t understand these things at home. You have to go talk to my big brother. I called him, anyway, and he’ll be here first thing tomorrow.” Zhou Huaixin covered his face, avoiding Luo Wenzhou’s gaze. “A car is a such a big murder weapon, much deadlier than a knife or a gun. The streets are full of people legally carrying murder weapons, and if they kill someone, can they just cover it up with ‘I didn’t mean it, it was an accident?’ Don’t you people do your jobs?”

His words seemed unintentional, but those who heard them had their own interpretations. Fei Du’s expression became duller on the spot.

Luo Wenzhou simply lifted Zhou Huaixin, pulling him off Fei Du. “The driver of the responsible vehicle is already dead, young Mr. Zhou. Are you hinting to us that someone wouldn’t stint to give up his own life to kill your father?”

Zhou Huaixin looked at him gloomily through his dark eye circles. “Officer, don’t you believe that money can buy a life?”

Luo Wenzhou and the others spent nearly an hour tangled up with Zhou Huaixin without knowing whether he was really a moron or whether he was deliberately acting helpless. Sometimes it was clear that there was something he was holding himself back from saying, as if he knew something but couldn’t tell others. Only when they were about to leave did Zhou Huaixin stop Fei Du and say indistinctly, “Have you heard the rumors?”

Fei Du gave Luo Wenzhou a look, then patted Zhou Huaixin's shoulder. "Don't think about it."

Zhou Huaixin was unwilling to let go. He quietly asked, "Can you stay with me to wait for my big brother to come?"

Before Fei Du could answer, Luo Wenzhou was already answering for him. "Don't dawdle. You still need to write up a report tonight —'trainee.'"

Fei Du made a gesture towards Zhou Huaixin showing it was out of his power to help, and was then pushed out the door by Luo Wenzhou. "Hurry up."

Fei Du stumbled a little, but he didn't mind at all. Instead, he looked down and laughed as Luo Wenzhou pushed and pulled him back to the work car.

Lang Qiao, opening her big eyes wide, quietly asked, "President Fei, is that snake demon Zhou-whatever interested in you?"

"He isn't," Fei Du answered just as quietly. "He's just cold and lonely."

With bitter hatred, Lang Qiao said, "You're all rotten!"

Luo Wenzhou slammed the car door and separated the two of them. He pointed to Lang Qiao and said, "If you had as much estrogen as that one, you'd be able to get married.—Fei Du, what was it that Zhou Huaixin kept dancing around?"

"The word on the street," said Fei Du, carelessly sitting up straight, "is that the noble and prestigious Mr. Zhou has an illegitimate son."

CHAPTER 63 - Macbeth IV

“Why is it the word on the street?”

“Because I don’t especially believe it.” Fei Du reached out his legs and stretched in the spacious passenger’s seat, causing a tear to appear in his “good student” disguise, a very Fei Du carelessness showing its head. “If there were such a person, the Zhou family would have acknowledged him long ago. Anyway...”

Luo Wenzhou instinctively felt that what came after wouldn’t be anything nice, and he was already prepared to interrupted him. But Fei Du, as if suddenly remembering something, voluntarily cut himself off.

Lang Qiao followed up uncomprehendingly, “Anyway what?”

“Anyway...the Venerable Zhou conducted himself rather properly in recent years. Even if there had been some indiscretion in his youth, it must have been only once. He’s done a great deal of public good over the last few decades. It’s something like the return of the prodigal son. His wife passed away many years ago, so there would be no one to say anything about it. Nobody’s perfect. Doesn’t it seem even more praiseworthy to have done wrong and then turned yourself around?” Acting as if he were in deadly earnest, Fei Du said to Lang Qiao, “Given the Venerable Zhou’s accomplishments, I don’t believe he had any need to cover up his past.”

Lang Qiao nodded her head repeatedly at this, thinking that Fei Du really wasn’t like the “domineering director-general” in pornographic novels. He could be rated as a model of virtue for the age.

Luo Wenzhou gave Fei Du a faint glare of warning. He’d heard the subtext hidden under his virtuous expressions—among their crowd of rat bastards, illegitimate children meant nothing, especially at Zhou

Junmao's level. Never mind that his wife had abdicated long ago; even if she'd been living and firmly attached to the man, she still couldn't have done anything about him fathering any number of illegitimate children.

"Although that's an empty rumor, that doesn't necessarily mean there's nothing to this." Fei Du changed the subject, saying, "Zhou Huaixin was making sense when he said that cars are a flagrant murder weapon. Why don't you look into the driver of the responsible vehicle some more?"

As soon as he'd spoken, a phone call came from Xiao Haiyang.

Xiao Haiyang had been dispatched by Luo Wenzhou to understand something of the responsible driver Dong Qian's personal circumstances from his colleagues.

Xiao Haiyang may or may not have had a driver's license; anyway, this Little Glasses perhaps didn't know the meaning of putting on the brakes. Luo Wenzhou felt that even the phone signal was palpating from the tornado-like speed of his speech. "Captain Luo, I've already spoken with Dong Qian's coworkers, the situation is about the same as Lao Qiu said. There's no referential value. So I took the initiative to look into his bank account, assets, medical history, and family background. Should I report?"

"...Specs, he's already dead, and we aren't in a rush. Come on, take a deep breath and speak a little slower." Luo Wenzhou felt like he was having auditory hallucinations. "You've investigated so much in such a short time? You've even gone through Dong Qian's physicals?"

Xiao Haiyang said, "Dong Qian resided in this city. He was married. His wife died. There were no old people at home. He was a widower raising a daughter. The daughter is called Dong Xiaoqing, twenty-four years old, unmarried, already graduated, works as an accountant at a department store. There's nothing unusual about the father or

daughter's bank accounts or assets. All their expenditures basically accord with their income and living standard. Dong Qian had no unsavory habits and lived rather plainly. His income was pretty good. The family had a six-figure sum in savings and owned a house. His most recent physical exam showed he had somewhat elevated blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar, but all other indications were normal.—Oh, right, Captain Luo, I also found a person at his daughter's place of work. Dong Xiaoqing's colleagues confirm that she hasn't made any large expenditures lately, hasn't found a boyfriend, and hasn't been ill. She's also very emotionally stable.”

Luo Wenzhou had put him on speaker. All three people in the car were shocked by Xiao Haiyang's “eating grapes without spitting out the skin” skill at pouring out words.

Lang Qiao whispered, “My goodness, how very...”

Xiao Haiyang gave a muddled “ah.” “Don't we need to rule out the possibility that he was a contract killer? I don't think my train of thought was wrong?”

Luo Wenzhou gestured at Lang Qiao, indicating that she shouldn't waste words and should learn something from the fellow. Then he asked Xiao Haiyang, “According to what you've said, he had neither young nor old dependents, the family had no debts, and they were fairly well-off financially—so was it just chance that he was for once doing a job with such a short timeframe and such a strenuous assignment, or was it normal?”

Xiao Haiyang paused. “Well...”

“Haiyang, it's in fact very common among long-haul truck drivers to drive when exhausted. The old drivers all know how to doze a little with their eyes open without their foot pressing on the gas pedal.” Luo Wenzhou said very patiently, “Since Dong Qian has driven trucks this many years without incident, and there's been nothing unusual

about his health or emotions lately, why would such an accident happen today? You want to find out whether he was a hired assassin and use the method of exhaustion to eliminate every circumstance you can imagine one by one. This isn't a very rigorous method of investigation, because there are things in this world you can't imagine. If possible, the best thing would be to find a cause for the accident that's supported by evidence."

Xiao Haiyang hastily said, "All right, Captain Luo, I'll go investigate right now!"

"Wait, I was just saying that. We still haven't determined that this was murder. First, why don't you..." Before Luo Wenzhou could finish speaking, Xiao Haiyang had already energetically hung up the phone.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He thought he'd understood why Xiao Haiyang hadn't been well-liked at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau. Aside from being especially bad at conversation, this Little Glasses had just the sort of passion for his work that made it seem like he was ready to seize the throne at any time. In the eyes of Wang Hongliang and the others, he must have been a tremendous hidden security risk. No wonder they hadn't thought at all of bringing him into their own circle.

The person who'd reported the case wasn't being clear about it, all the other individuals concerned were still hurrying towards Yan City, and the medical examiners hadn't yet reached any conclusions, either. Aside from the hot-blooded Comrade Xiao Haiyang, running around seeking the truth, the others had nothing to do. Luo Wenzhou dropped Lang Qiao off on the way and drove back towards the City Bureau with Fei Du, where each would change to his own car and go to his own home.

Refreshing his phone, Fei Du found that the news about Zhou Junmao was omnipresent. He scrolled through a couple of pages. "As

expected, someone at the Zhou family is on top of things.—If I call people and tell them to short sell the Zhou Clan while the US markets haven't closed yet, would that be too kind-hearted?"

There was some traffic to make a U-turn at the intersection. Luo Wenzhou gave him a doubtful look. "Are you talking about that Zhou Huaixin?"

"The lead story says 'Chairman of the Zhou Clan Conglomerate Mr. Zhou Junmao has died in a car crash. The circumstances are suspicious, and his second son has already called in the police.'" Fei Du read the headline aloud with a trace of teasing. "What do you think, just making trouble, right? With Zhou Junmao's sort, even if he died a natural death, everyone would still imagine a wealthy family drama, let alone a real accident. Zhou Huaixin is one of the Venerable Zhou's heirs, and he just happens to be the only one currently in the country. If he hadn't come crying and howling to the police right away to demand a thorough investigation, what role would he be cast in by others? After all, everyone thought that Malcolm and Donalbain had killed their benevolent father."

The line of car headlights up ahead was like a dragon with its head stretching away into the distance. Luo Wenzhou pretended not to notice that these words were alluding to him. As if nothing were the matter, he asked, "What was Zhou Huaixin and the Venerable Zhou's father-son relationship like?"

"An unworthy son, living outside of the mainstream, out of tune with the whole Zhou Clan, with his decathlon-running big brother above him to compare him with." Fei Du shrugged. "What could it be like? If you think about it, you'll know there was considerable strain."

"And what about you?" Luo Wenzhou asked quietly. "As far as I know, you didn't go out of line when you were a teenager, and you're an only child. Why was your relationship with your father strained?"

At first Fei Du froze. Then he turned to Luo Wenzhou and slyly dodged the subject. “Hm? Is Captain Luo so interested in me? I’ve heard that according to the unspoken social rules in our country, people only ask after others’ family backgrounds when they regard someone as a potential mate.”

As he spoke, he half-turned, leaning a little closer to Luo Wenzhou. “Are you sure you want to know? I catch your drift, then.”

Just then the car in front of them shuffled forward. Luo Wenzhou stepped on the gas and leapt forward, then put on the brakes, sending Fei Du crashing back against the passenger’s seat.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then don’t talk about it,” Luo Wenzhou said dully. “Don’t give me any of that.”

Fei Du laughed, not speaking.

The two of them sat in mutual silence for a while. The stoplight at the intersection went through a cycle, and the traffic in the U-turn lane stopped again. They’d have to wait for the next opportunity. The impatient drivers all around honked their horns one after another. Occasionally someone would roll down a window and look out; samples of all kinds of music leaked out of their cars.

The smile on Fei Du’s face gradually disappeared. Perhaps it was because the night was thick, and perhaps it was because the densely packed crowd had a particular feeling of loneliness. He suddenly spoke: “I sometimes find that it can be very difficult for a person to escape his parentage and the surroundings he grew up in.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at him.

“Thoughts, habits, disposition, manners, level of virtue, cultural accomplishments... These things, which can be altered later, are like the branches and leaves of plants. As long as you’re willing, you can

prune yourself into any direction.” Fei Du leaned back in his seat, looking out into Yan City’s night sky with his eyes narrowed. “But the deeper levels, the most essential things, are very hard to alter. The things you encounter in the earliest surroundings of your childhood, when you have no notions about the world, settle into your unconscious mind. Traces of these things will be hidden in all the abstract concepts you take in through your native language. You won’t notice it yourself, but those things will shroud your whole life.”

At this point, it was as if Fei Du had exhausted his greatest efforts. There was a door in his mind, a very thick door with its hinges mottled with rust; even using all his strength, he could only open it this little crack.

Luo Wenzhou waited patiently for a while, but he didn’t continue.

Fei Du said, “Captain Luo, could you lend me your hand?”

Following this advance notice, all the nerves in Luo Wenzhou’s entire body instinctively collected in his right hand laying at his side. Then, Fei Du very slowly and gently covered the back of his hand. His fingers were long and slender, ice cold, but the palm of his hand was warm. He didn’t press hard, leaving him the opportunity to draw back at any time.

An indescribable feeling meandered up from Luo Wenzhou’s right hand. The temperature in the car abruptly went up at least two degrees. The muscles of Luo Wenzhou’s forearm instinctively tensed, but he somehow didn’t pull back his hand. Fei Du bent his head, carefully holding his hand, making Luo Wenzhou think of Luo Yiguo, startled awake by some nightmare, running to his pillow in the middle of the night.

Suddenly, the car behind them honked impatiently. Luo Wenzhou gave a start and found that the light had already changed and there was an empty space ahead of him, inviting others to cut in line.

Fei Du's momentary fragile expression softly vanished in thin air like steam. The ends of his peach blossom eyes turned up, and he quickly bent his head and kissed the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand, fingers lightly brushing the most sensitive place on his palm. When Luo Wenzhou immediately pulled his hand away, Fei Du blinked innocently at him. "Goodness, I'm sorry. Captain Luo's charms are truly too powerful. I accidentally advanced a little too far."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

This joker really had seduction down to a military strategy.

Luo Wenzhou lost his temper. As he drove through the difficult intersection, he said, "Fei Du, have I spoiled you too much?"

Fei Du considered his expression, felt that he'd gone overboard, and thereupon shut his mouth, not pouring any more oil onto the fire. As Luo Wenzhou irritably left the flow of traffic for the west entrance, he held tightly to the handle of the car door as they dizzily flew back to the City Bureau.

"We 'normal people,' proper or not, aren't in the habit of getting it on with our acquaintances." Luo Wenzhou, his face slightly grim, indicated that Fei Du should get out of the car. "If you're hard up, go find your picture-painting little skeleton of a drinking buddy."

Then he shut the car door, turned, and left.

Fei Du sat alone in the service car among the unpleasant smelling aromatherapy, sampling the discomfiture Luo Wenzhou had left behind. He thought that the "taste" was unusually potent; he very much wanted there to be a continuation.

Xiao Haiyang pushed up his glasses and jogged all the way to the hospital, pulling out his ID as he ran, flashing it at a girl who seemed

to have lost her soul. “Are you Dong Xiaoqing? Hello, I’m...”

Dong Xiaoqing’s cold gaze interrupted him.

“The police?” Her eyes were red and her voice was thickly nasal. “I know. Didn’t you also go to my job to investigate? What, you didn’t find anything, so you came to interrogate me, too?”

Xiao Haiyang wasn’t very good at talking to people. He didn’t know for a time how to respond. Flustered, he cleared his throat, then very obnoxiously said, “I was only getting an understanding of the circumstances...”

Dong Xiaoqing stared at him stubbornly.

Xiao Haiyang racked his guts and belly for an age, then very unskillfully opened his mouth and asked, “Did Dong Qian ordinarily take on this sort of difficult job? As far as I know, your family...”

“My family doesn’t have any high-interest loans, no one has an incurable illness, and my dad wasn’t a gambling addict who couldn’t pay his debts. We may have been poor, but we got on all right. We didn’t need to kill someone for a bit of money!” Dong Xiaoqing grabbed her phone; the popular topic was fermenting online, opening its bloody maw towards the girl who was alone in the world. She abruptly hurled the phone at Xiao Haiyang.

“My dad was in an accident. It was his fault, his responsibility. If there’s money that needs to be paid to compensate, I’ll undertake to pay it. If I don’t have enough, I can borrow it. Even if I have to work back-breaking labor all my life, I’ll still return it. But you can’t slander him like this out of nowhere! He’s dead, he has no mouth to speak for himself. Must you dip your buns in human blood to eat them?”

Xiao Haiyang silently picked up Dong Xiaoqing’s phone, not quite knowing what to say. “Well...”

“My mother died in a car crash. Because of that, he didn’t dare to touch a car for a whole year before finally getting back behind the wheel.” Dong Xiaoqing’s tears rolled down in a torrent as she glared hatefully at Xiao Haiyang. “Now you’re saying that he crashed into someone for money? How can you be like this? How can you people be this bad?”

CHAPTER 64 - Macbeth V

What, can the devil speak true? - Macbeth

“Dong Xiaoqing says that Dong Qian always drove long-haul. This job wasn’t just chance. Because Dong Xiaoqing’s mother died when she was young, and he had to work to support his family, he didn’t have time to look after the child and always had a guilty conscience about her. He wanted to save some money for her to use as a dowry. People who hire trucks only want high value. They monitor the drivers’ time very closely. They even have to run to the bathroom when they’re on the road. At some service stations, there are also thieves who make off with trucks. A person driving on his own doesn’t dare to rest. It’s normal to drive ten hours or more straight. As for why something would go wrong this time, it must be an accident. Dong Qian recently had a stay in the hospital because of an allergic reaction, and after he got out, he had trouble sleeping for some reason. It’s very likely this was brought about because of his health... Captain Luo, Dong Qian’s wife died in a car crash. Because of that, he couldn’t drive a car for a long time. Would a person like that deliberately hit someone?”

Luo Wenzhou listened to Xiao Haiyang’s report from start to finish. Because he was afraid the hot-blooded criminal policeman Xiao Xiao would go haring off again, he minded his mouth and didn’t give any more helpful pointers. He only briefly indicated over the phone that he’d gotten it and counseled Little Glasses to hurry home.

It seemed that the Venerable Zhou’s accident wasn’t some wealthy family drama with a complex plot of hiring an assassin to seize contested family assets. An illustrious family like the Zhous would make it onto the news at the least sign of disturbance, with all the conspiracy theorists making merry. Zhou Huaixin may have only been using this as a pretext to make a fuss, get the cops over, manufacture some part true and part false news, officially demonstrating his own innocence to the police—what Fei Du had said made sense.

Fei Du had also said... Ah, Fei Du was a bastard. Luo Wenzhou's chest hurt at the thought of him.

With his chest hurting, he decided to heat up some leftovers. He was just washing his hands when Luo Yiguo slinked in.

Master Cat had perhaps slept enough. It gave a tremendous stretch, bending its shoulders, raising its back, twisting its butt. It gave a rather cheerful, affectionate "meow," sniffed around Luo Wenzhou's feet, narrowed its eyes, and rubbed itself against his pant leg.

Aside from when it wanted food, Luo Yiguo very rarely demanded affection like this, fulfilling the proper duties of a cat. Luo Wenzhou was very willing to give it face. Despite having just washed his hands, he bent down to scratch the kitty's chin.

A gleam passed through Luo Yiguo's big, round eyes. Staring at the exposed hand, its whole body drew back towards its hind legs; seeing that the enemy had fallen for its trap, it jumped up and showed its sharp teeth. This cat was always pestering him; there always had to be some cunning trick. As a veteran litter box attendant, Luo Wenzhou was familiar with all the preludes to members of the family Felidae launching an attack. He'd been prepared and drew back his hand, using the advantage of his superior height to make the damn cat grab only empty air. Then he smacked Luo Yiguo's forehead, pressing it down to the floor. "I knew you were up to something!"

Since discovering that when its litter box attendant started wearing thicker and thicker clothes it became more difficult to bite him, Luo Yiguo had taught itself many hunting techniques. But the enemy was crafty. He didn't come home on time, and he wasn't willing to submit obediently to being bitten. Luo Yiguo was very unsatisfied. It thrashed its tail, hissing at him, and was lifted by Luo Wenzhou with one hand under its soft belly.

“What do you guys think you’re trying to do?” Luo Wenzhou irritably grabbed the cat’s face. “Dad gives you good things to eat and drink, draws an overdraft on his next lifetime’s supply of patience, and each one of you just plots and schemes. Don’t you have consciences? Good-for-nothings!”

Luo Yiguo yowled in protest.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Shut up, you howling sphere!”

The spherical Luo Yiguo was quickly contained, its tail drooping listlessly. It guilelessly stretched out its four limbs to hug his arm.

Luo Wenzhou gave it a furious look, then, still cursing, poured out some cat food. This cat remembered kindness and forgot mistreatment; when there was food to eat, it forgot its enmity. It jumped off of him, rolling, then rubbed against his hand, praising heaven and earth, unilaterally restoring friendly relations between them.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

These capricious things had tormented him into exhaustion.

Luo Wenzhou sat down on the floor of his own home, feeling that his right hand, which had received Fei Du’s harassment, was still faintly burning. When he closed his eyes, he thought of that not-quite-smiling face, the smile making his heart flutter; the uncontrollable flutter made him rather irritable.

This bit of irritability at last climbed to its apex when he struggled awake from a pleasant dream in the small hours of the morning to find that a certain part of his body was behaving inharmoniously.

Before five in the morning, Luo Wenzhou sat at the head of his bed a while, his mind full of a lawsuit, then tore away the quilt, got up, and

went to the bathroom to deal with himself, also washing his face with cold water.

He leaned against the sink, his expression unclear, taking several rough breaths. In a very impulsive clear-headed condition, he thought, *If that asshole Fei Du presumes to tease me again, I'm done being polite. What's the sense in being a "gentlemanly good person" when this is the kind of frustration you get?*

Suddenly, Luo Yiguo, lying at the head of his bed, rolled off with a thump and ran over to the bathroom door.

Luo Wenzhou said, "What?"

Luo Yiguo turned and looked at him, waving its tail. The faint sound of the Five Rings Song came from behind it. Luo Wenzhou froze and thoroughly woke up—his phone, rolled up in his quilt, was ringing.

"Zhou Huaijin's plane landed on time a little past two. He sent a text home saying he'd taken a taxi and they didn't need to meet him at the airport. The roads were clear at that hour. Reasonably speaking, he should have reached the Zhou residence in half an hour, forty minutes at most, but they waited two whole hours without hearing any word and called again. His phone was off!"

Luo Wenzhou strode through a field of police cars towards the Zhou family residence, which was being honored by their presence for the second time in twenty-four hours. "Isn't Zhou Huaijin the eldest son of the house, with a standard private car and standard bodyguard? Why would he catch a taxi from the airport in the middle of the night?"

As soon as he'd spoken, a voice that was asking for a spanking unhurriedly cut in. "That's the kind of person Zhou Huaijin is. His style is usually very low-key, modest and polite. He's good at looking after people. While some people say he's too gentle, doesn't have any

courage, his reputation has always been of conducting himself very well. Not disturbing his staff and bodyguards' rest when he gets back in the middle of the night is exactly what he would do.”

Luo Wenzhou looked up and saw Fei Du, neatly dressed, waiting at the door of the Zhou residence. When he finished speaking, he nodded to Luo Wenzhou. “Captain Luo.”

Both Fei Du's greeting and his speech were calm and unperturbed, as if the person who'd parted on bad terms with Luo Wenzhou the evening before hadn't been him.

Zhou Huaixin had cried himself into a clump of mud clinging to the house's couch, rolling around unwilling to get up. Before Luo Wenzhou had come close, he heard his tearful complaints. “I told you my dad was murdered! I told you, and you didn't believe me, and now my brother's missing! If my whole family dies out, some people are going to be pleased, aren't they? And where are the police? The police are all useless!”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

Zhou Huaixin had already seen Fei Du next to him. He howled, “Master Fei, I'm not talking about you... My brother... If my brother dies, what am I supposed to do? Aren't they going to eat me alive? Oh... No, I can't... M-m-my chest hurts... Give me my medicine...”

A housekeeper hastily trotted over, offering a bottle of vitamins manufactured in some country or other. Fei Du took it and helped him take the pills, appeasing Second Young Master Zhou's fragile little spirit.

The corner of Luo Wenzhou's eye twitched. He noticed that Fei Du had changed out of his studious disguise; he was wearing a fairly formal shirt, and he had put on his glasses again. The shirt was

already a little creased; he clearly hadn't just put it on after being woken in the small hours of the morning.

All kinds of news was still wildly coming up on his phone; apparently the stocks of all the subsidiary companies connected to the Zhou Clan Conglomerate had tumbled; the overseas markets, roiling twenty-four hours a day, had become a short-seller's paradise. Looking at Fei Du's getup, it was obvious what he'd gone to do after leaving the City Bureau. Still carrying the traces of the scent of a vested interest, he was sitting there like a good person, comforting the distressed Zhou Huaixin.

"Has his phone been located? Hurry! Block off the scene, don't let any personnel who aren't concerned with this wander into the Zhou house. It's inadvisable to leak the information at this point.—Has Tao Ran reached the airport? Have him get the security camera records for the taxi stand first." Luo Wenzhou walked over to Zhou Huaixin, who was chewing vitamins. "Young Mr. Zhou, when was your brother's itinerary determined? Who knew the flight number?"

Zhou Huaixin clasped at his heart. "I contacted him yesterday after dad died... Who knew? I guess anyone could have known, I'm not really sure. The assistants at the company normally reserve his plane tickets."

Zhou Huaixin had just spoken when an immaculately dressed middle-aged man rushed in. "Huaixin! Huaixin! I just heard and rushed over from out of town. What's going on? Why are there so many police?"

Hearing the newcomer's voice, Zhou Huaixin, without taking time to finish his vitamins, struggled to climb out of Fei Du's arms. "Hu-dage, my big brother's gone missing!"

Fei Du coolly adjusted his collar and stood, nodding to the harassed middle-aged man from a distance. He quietly introduced him to Luo Wenzhou. "That's Hu Zhenyu, one of the real powers in the Zhou

Clan's domestic general headquarters. He went to university with Zhou Huaijin. His position as one of the Party's crown princes³ is clear."

Luo Wenzhou's eyes involuntarily followed Fei Du's hand as it pulled at his collar, falling on the nape of his neck and his faintly visible collarbones. Then he tore his gaze away and nodded carelessly, turning to Xiao Haiyang next to him and saying, "Two generations of the Zhou family have come to grief one after another. It can't be a coincidence. Dig a little deeper into Zhou Junmao's car crash. You can't only listen to that young lady's statement."

Xiao Haiyang gave an affirmative and quickly ran off.

At this time, the first rays of the morning sun, unwilling to be overlooked, were climbing over the horizon. Yan City, fairly calm before, began to awaken, preparing to descend into a whole day of clamor.

The call from Tao Ran came very quickly. "I've found the taxi. The license number is Yan BXXXXX. The original driver was knocked out and thrown out by the side of the road. He woke up on his own and went to the hospital. Five minutes ago, he got the hospital's assistance to contact the local police station and report the case. We've found the car, it's..."

A technician raised his head. "Captain Luo, we've located Zhou Huaijin's phone!"

Luo Wenzhou looked up. The two people, one on the phone and the other outside it, spoke, almost overlapping:

"By the shore of the Baisha River—"

"Near the Baisha waters!"

Zhou Huaixin's eyes rolled up, and he fell onto Hu Zhenyu. He was lifted onto the couch by a whole crowd of people and slowly came around. He wailed, "Hu-dage, you don't think my brother would let them throw him in the river? I'm going to slaughter that bastard Yang Bo! Where the hell has Zheng Kaifeng gone, why isn't he here when dad's died..."

Halfway through, Hu Zhenyu's expression altered. He gestured over and over for Zhou Huaixin to shut his mouth, but he couldn't control this non-mainstream mental case at all. He began to sweat at once, forcing out an appropriate smile towards the crowd of outsiders. "Huaixin is young. With so many things happening at home, he can't quite take it. His emotions are a little out of control. You shouldn't listen to his nonsensical ravings."

Hearing this, Zhou Huaixin sat up like a corpse coming to life. His eyes were red. "I'm not raving! It must be that bastard, don't think you can keep me in the dark! That son-of-a-bitch has been planning something for a long time, planning to kill my dad and my brother and bully me, when I don't understand anything, right? Even Uncle Zheng is on his side!"

Hu Zhenyu raised his voice. "Huaixin!"

"Send a team of guys to Baisha River," Luo Wenzhou quietly ordered, then turned to Hu Zhenyu. "President Hu, there's been a kidnapping and a suspected murder. It's a major criminal case. Your family affairs and everything else can provide important leads. You have to take responsibility if you conceal important leads. I hope you understand the nature of this business."

Hu Zhenyu was a smooth operator. Under Luo Wenzhou's businesslike questioning, he wasn't at all irritated. He scratched his chin. "Yes, yes, I see the sense. You officers must have heard of the Venerable Zheng. He was our Venerable Zhou's right-hand man when

they were young. While he's no longer young, he's still the mainstay of our conglomerate.

“As for President Yang... Mr. Yang Bo, he's the Venerable Zhou's board secretary, young and promising, very able. He stands out too much from the crowd. It's unavoidable that some unpleasant-sounding baseless rumors would have reached Huaixin's ears. Adding in that President Yang is that sort of... How do you young people describe it? 'Another family's child.' When the Venerable Zhou was alive, he often brought him up as an example to Huaixin. It's normal for their relationship not to be very good. But if you told me he could harm the Venerable Zhou and President Zhou, I absolutely wouldn't believe you.” As he spoke, Hu Zhenyu kept a careful eye on Zhou Huaixin to avoid him having another attack. “The two of them aren't in the country. They were notified about this yesterday and are also hurrying back. They must be in flight now. I'll give you their flight numbers. Could I trouble you officers to take care of them at the airport? We can't have something happen to a third person!”

Yang Bo, a youthful talent who stood out from the crowd, about the same age as Zhou Huaixin but already at a high level in the Zhou Clan. He really did sound like the rumored “illegitimate son.”

Luo Wenzhou looked up at Fei Du. Fei Du silently nodded to him, confirming his thoughts.

Just then, Lang Qiao suddenly rushed in at a jog. “Boss, bad news!”

Luo Wenzhou looked at the members of the Zhou family, whose ears had pricked up at her cry, and gestured at Lang Qiao, taking her outside the door. “What?”

“Look at this.” Lang Qiao held up her phone.

“Zhou Clan Heir Zhou Huaijin Kidnapped” had become headline news in a short time. Underneath there was a link to something that

had already been deleted.

“I sent an emergency notice to the internet monitors to delete it,” said Lang Qiao. “There was a link to a video. Here it is.”

A video appeared on the screen when she clicked. The camera lens swayed, then focused on a man unconscious in a chair. The camera unhurriedly circled his face, filming him clearly from every angle. The unconscious man was in his thirties or forties, very well-preserved, sedately dressed; you couldn't really tell his precise age. Even in this sorry predicament, you could see that he was a dignified person of considerable bearing.

Fei Du only took a glance before recognizing him. “Zhou Huaijin.”

Luo Wenzhou's scalp simply went a little numb.

The kidnappers hadn't asked for money and hadn't killed him. They hadn't immediately contacted the victim's family members; instead, they'd uploaded a video online. What were they even doing?

Had they been watching too many English films!

CHAPTER 65 - Macbeth VI

The person filming was very careful. Aside from Zhou Huaijin himself, there was nothing in the frame but a dilapidated wooden chair and a small section of the ropes binding him. The background was all black. You couldn't see anything. And the video was very short, less than a minute long. It filmed all around the unconscious Zhou Huaijin as if afraid he wouldn't be recognized, striving to let all the viewers see every pore on his face.

Aside from this, the kidnapper didn't make a sound.

"The person who posted this video used a heap of proxies. We won't be able to trace him for a bit," said Lang Qiao. "Boss, this is my first time running into such a quaint kidnapper. What does he want? What are we going to do?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer. He looked down and scrolled through the phone.

Lang Qiao's response had been rather quick; she'd dealt with the video as soon as she'd found it. But the news that Zhou Huaijin had been kidnapped by unknown individuals had grown wings and appeared under several keywords, scurrying hither and thither over the internet.

Luo Wenzhou asked, "What time was this uploaded?"

"6:00 AM."

Six o'clock was when the city began to awaken.

Aside from an alarm clock, what was more bracing than a piece of living, breathing gossip?

Fei Du sighed, taking a step back. He asked, “Captain Luo, should I keep away to cooperate with the investigation?”

Lang Qiao didn’t understand what he meant and let out a single querying syllable: “Huh?”

“Huh yourself. He’s one of the suspects, too.” Luo Wenzhou gave Lang Qiao the phone and rudely turned to Fei Du. “Right now I need to know which people could have taken part in this, and which groups are speculating in the background. Give me a list of names.”

Zhou Huaijin was very low-key and rarely appeared on camera. There were hardly a dozen clear photographs of him in circulation. The ordinary common folk recognized actors and celebrities, but who was going to know what a wealthy heir who spent most of his time abroad looked like?

So how had this video, not even a minute long, managed to attract so much attention? Who was promoting it?

At first glance, Zhou Junmao’s death and Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping seemed closely linked, as if someone had wanted to kill the elder and then act against the younger, the whole thing hiding a “wealthy family drama” with a thousand and one links. But thinking about it closely, it was very strange.

Accepting for the moment that Zhou Junmao’s car crash had been deliberate, then the person who’d plotted it had undoubtedly wanted him dead, and dead moreover without anyone being the wiser—with the responsible driver already dead, if the police couldn’t find any definite evidence of a murder, it was very likely they would handle this case like a traffic accident.

On the other hand, Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping was too ostentatious, with an evident flavor of showmanship and sensationalism. The aims of these two crimes were in direct opposition.

It didn't make sense.

But aside from making the police and the populace jump at their own shadows, what benefit was there to anyone in announcing the kidnapping on such a grand scale under the heavens? With such a sensitive event coming at such a sensitive time, it seemed that the only people who could reap any spoils from it were the capitalists who wanted to take the opportunity to bleed the Zhou Clan dry.

For example, Fei Du's ilk.

If not for the fact that the city's public security bureaus were "not for sale," a certain person would have made enough money in one night to buy two City Bureaus.

"I can give you some people I'm familiar with." Fei Du unhurriedly picked up his phone and sent an e-mail, then said, "But you must know, the whole world is full of people looking to seize an opportunity. Leaving out private investors, I don't know how many institutions are mixed up in this. I'm not an immortal who knows everyone."

"Being able to snatch him from the airport without anyone the wiser looks like the work of a major local operator." Luo Wenzhou's gaze fell on him like a knife. "You aren't going to tell me you don't know everyone in this sandbox, President Fei?"

"As an acting suspect, let me give you a suggestion. Only for reference, not necessarily correct," Fei Du said reasonably. "My guess is the kidnapers may have contacted the people promoting this, but the promoters aren't necessarily the kidnapers, and they didn't necessarily collaborate ahead of time. While *Das Kapital* says that when the profits are 100%, capital will trample on all human laws, I personally think that that valuation isn't very amicable. In reality, everyone knows that even if the profits are 1000%, they're no good if

you aren't alive to receive them. Captain Luo, we may eat buns with human blood, but we don't eat humans."

His words were as cold-blooded and disgraceful as you could ask for. Luo Wenzhou looked at him coldly. For a moment, they seemed to have returned to the time of He Zhongyi's murder investigation, when Fei Du had come to the City Bureau to provide Zhang Donglai an alibi and had spouted a lot of absurd rhetoric.

"All right, let me say it more precisely." Fei Du spread his hands, smiling as he poured oil on the fire. "We don't eat humans in broad daylight."

Lang Qiao was scared stiff by this thick and frozen atmosphere, thinking the two of them were about to come to blows. Their gazes, neither yielding a bit, seemed to be light beam weapons out of science fiction, about to collide in midair. She stood to one side, prostrate with fear, wanting to try to ease the atmosphere but being at the disadvantage of not knowing why the two of them were at odds. After an age, she still hadn't come up with the appropriate wording and wanted nothing better than to switch places with Tao Ran, who had been sent to search the Baisha River Basin.

But just then, Luo Wenzhou suddenly took the lead in averting his gaze, withdrawing from this round of mutual hostilities.

He calmly said, "From the time the video was posted to the time it had spread over the whole internet, not a full half-hour passed. This operator's methods are clearly very mature. The person behind the scenes isn't doing this for the first time. Also, it's likely that they have an irreconcilable rivalry with the Zhou Clan. Adding in these clues, how long will it take you to get me a list?"

When Luo Wenzhou had spoken, Fei Du's phone rang a sweet-sounding e-mail notification.

As if Fei Du had already known what was going on, he passed his phone to Luo Wenzhou without even looking at it. “I figure it must be one of these two or three. This is a list my assistant put together. You can arrange to talk to the people in charge.”

Then he didn’t look again at Luo Wenzhou. He put one hand in his pocket and walked back into the magnificent Zhou residence, very familiarly accepted a cup of tea from the housekeeper, and went to talk to the weeping Zhou Huaixin.

Luo Wenzhou scanned the contents of the e-mail. This person who worked for Fei Du was evidently very reliable. In such a short time, they’d not only put together a list of suspicious operators, they’d also attached the contact information for the relevant management, as well as summaries of cases they had previously been involved in, almost like an exquisite little report.

Luo Wenzhou forwarded the e-mail to Lang Qiao. “Run along and go through the formalities. We not only need to meet with the people in charge, we also need to investigate their work e-mails, phone records, and financial circumstances. You have to get sufficient authority, and get some guys from economic crimes to come help.”

It took him just a few words to order what was a great heap of tedious work for Lang Qiao; all the hairs on the back of her neck bristled just hearing it. But Luo Wenzhou still added, “If Fei Du’s inference that the promoters don’t seem to be acquainted with the kidnappers is correct, there’s no telling what will happen next. These people may do anything to get eyes on them, endangering the victim. Hurry up, don’t delay!”

Lang Qiao sucked in a breath. After he’d laid half a ton of pressure on her out of nowhere, she had no more attention to spare for the turbulent undercurrents between her superior and the pretty boy. She took to her heels and ran.

Untouched for a long time, Fei Du's phone locked itself. The lockscreen was the system default. The metal case had been warmed by Luo Wenzhou's hand. He raised his head and looked at Fei Du from a distance, watching him very familiarly saying something to Hu Zhenyu and Zhou Huaixin, his body language very relaxed; probably he was relating the progress of the investigation into Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping.—Luo Wenzhou didn't go to mind him; anyway, Fei Du wasn't the type to put a word out of place.

A long time before, Luo Wenzhou had thought that Fei Du was a dangerous element—

While there was more or less no ceiling on human nobility and baseness, outside of an emergency situation, the thoughts of a regular person who had grown up in a society with a legal order would be limited—for example, if they knew that there was someone gathering up a crowd to do something bad, the ordinary person's reactions would be along the lines of “go investigate it with daring curiosity,” “report it to the proper authorities,” “avoid it because I don't feel like getting involved,” and so on; sometimes, people with comparatively corrupt morals wouldn't be able to resist the lure of going to wallow in the same mire.

But thoughts like “kill someone and attract the police's notice by dumping the body where they operate” weren't at all normal.

In an age of peace, even a diabolical murderer would know in his bones that driving someone into a fatal position wasn't something ordinary like eating and drinking. All of society was divided up by the red lines of the law, repeatedly reinforced over many years, so that age after age of people unconsciously had a benchmark for what was taboo.

But Luo Wenzhou had clearly felt that Fei Du wasn't the same. In his mind, these taboos were all rules in a game, the same as conduct like “using a legislative loophole to evade taxes” or “accumulating foreign

funds to avoid regulation”; if he didn’t do these things, it was to avoid trouble, and when there was a need to do them, he wouldn’t feel any guilt. He was even willing to make a close investigation into these means of “trifling with the law,” against the day when he had a need to use them.

But Fei Du had sat with He Zhongyi’s mother Wang Xiujuan in an ice cold chair, had spent money like water to show himself on the Skyscreen, had even gone with a fractured arm to rescue Chenchen from under Su Luozhan’s knife in the middle of the night; Luo Wenzhou had thought that he simply had a sharp tongue but a soft heart.

Until just now, when there had been an instant where Luo Wenzhou had suddenly felt a taste of something out of the ordinary among Fei Du’s unassailable smile and consistent asking for a spanking.

Luo Wenzhou remembered Fei Du’s vague speech in the car the evening before and found that he hadn’t been avoiding the subject after all. Fei Du seemed to have grown up in a different place, where the good was truly good and the bad was truly bad; the rules of this place were entirely different from those of the real world. As clever as Fei Du was, he must be well aware of how he didn’t fit in, so he carefully wore a human skin, restricting himself to a circle, imitating Tao Ran, imitating Zhang Donglai, imitating all the people he came into contact with... Only in front of Luo Wenzhou, who’d thought so highly of himself when he was young and had always wanted to pry people’s painted faces off, had he given up the act, simply letting the human skin he wore hang loosely, letting him see the vicious fangs.

For some reason, as soon as this thought appeared, Luo Wenzhou suddenly didn’t want to hold it against him as he usually would have. In his eyes, all of Fei Du’s capricious behavior from yesterday evening to now resolved into something comprehensible. Luo Wenzhou dimly touched that calculating, tense, composed self-protection, a softness made up of a hundred feelings rising in his heart.

Just then, Tao Ran's sudden phone call interrupted Luo Wenzhou's gaze and train of thought.

"We've found the taxi," Tao Ran puffed, "abandoned by the reservoir. There's a lingering smell of ether in the car. Aside from a footprint on the back of the driver's seat, there aren't any very clear signs of struggle. I suspect there was more than one kidnapper, or else how could he have taken a grown man off guard and subdued him while driving? Oh, right, Zhou Huaijin's bag is in the car, his ID, phone, and wallet are all untouched... Hey!"

Tao Ran's words cut off, and he suddenly sucked in an angry breath; Luo Wenzhou could feel him biting back a curse and immediately asked, "What is it?"

"There's someone taking pictures," Tao Ran said quickly. "They may have followed us from the airport. I'll go deal with it."

Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone and rubbed the center of his brow, simply unable to imagine anymore what degree matters had fermented to. He really didn't want to go online again. He issued a series of orders: "The taxi that kidnapped the victim has been found. Zhou Huaijin is over 1.8 meters tall, not a child you could lift with one hand. Anyone who wanted to transport the victim would need a vehicle. Investigate all the security cameras within a three-kilometer radius of the location where the taxi was abandoned, looking for suspicious vehicles. Get in touch with the media, let them know to do as they see fit about stirring up trouble again. Aside from that, get the internet monitoring department to assist..."

Luo Wenzhou hadn't finished speaking when a technician suddenly looked up. "Captain Luo, the person who uploaded that video has uploaded another one!"

Luo Wenzhou's heart sank.

It was the same black background again, with an unconscious Zhou Huaijin. There was also a hand in the frame wearing a black glove. The hand was holding a knife, the bright blade held at Zhou Huaijin's neck. Then it suddenly pressed down—as everyone instinctively cried out in alarm, a wound opened in a very critical location on Zhou Huaijin's neck. The unconscious man instinctively twitched, and blood spurted out.

Next, the camera panned down. The black-gloved hands tore open the front of Zhou Huaijin's shirt and dipped a small brush in the blood that had just spilled. On Zhou Huaijin's chest, the brush wrote: "A cut for each deleted video."

The internet police officer just about to delete the post broke out into a cold sweat and immediately phoned. "Captain Luo, what should I do? Do I delete it or not?"

The morning sun had fully enveloped Yan City; the morning rush hour had started.

A moment's hesitation, and the video was being re-posted at unbelievable speeds, spreading like an explosion.

Zhou Huaixin had of course seen it, too. He screamed at a decibel level that nearly brought down the ceiling. Fei Du picked him up by the waist, wrestled away his phone, and shoved him at the stunned housekeeper. "Take him upstairs to rest."

Just then, a car stopped at the Zhou residence's gates. A young man of twenty-eight or twenty-nine got out, looking hurried, and was about to go in. He was blocked by the police guarding the door. He fished out his ID in a flurry. "Sorry, here's my ID and business card, I'm the Venerable Zhou's..."

Zhou Huaixin turned his head to get a glimpse at the newcomer and immediately began to struggle fiercely. “I won’t! Arrest that bastard! He’s the murderer! You’re even shameless enough to dare to come here! You dare to come to our house!”

Even though Zhou Huaixin was a walking skeleton, his mad efforts now weren’t to be looked down on. Fei Du and Hu Zhenyu, neither of whom looked especially strong at a glance, couldn’t hold him for the moment. Zhou Huaixin flailed his arms like lethal weapons, carelessly knocking off Fei Du’s glasses.

Suddenly, a hand reached out of nowhere, grabbing Zhou Huaixin’s wildly brandished clubs. Lifting him like a chick, Luo Wenzhou roughly held down little Young Master Zhou’s precious head, rolling him into a ball and shoving him onto the soft, genuine leather sofa. He looked loftily down on him and asked, “Do you want a tranquilizer or a rabies shot?”

Zhou Huaixin: “...”

Zhou Huaixin being forcibly calmed down, the young man at the door gave a bitter laugh and was finally able to finish introducing himself. “I’m the Venerable Zhou’s aide, and secretary to the conglomerate’s board of directors. I’m called Yang Bo.”

When he had spoken, everyone’s gazes converged on him—Yang Bo, suspected illegitimate son, suspected criminal, one of the potential beneficiaries of getting rid of Zhou Junmao and Zhou Huaijin...

He’d shown up pretty early.

CHAPTER 66 - Macbeth VII

“I was on a business trip in Canada yesterday. I hurried back when I heard what had happened, and on the way I heard that Huaijin-dage had...” Yang Bo couldn’t quite finish what he was saying. He rested his elbows on his knees and scrubbed at his face, taking several deep breaths. “Sorry, it’s too sudden, I sort of... I really don’t know what to do...”

The criminal policeman sitting across from him scanned Yang Bo with an appraising look. He opened a little notebook and didn’t beat around the bush. He spoke rudely, saying, “Mr. Yang, in order to understand the circumstances, I won’t beat around the bush with you. There are some rumors suggesting you and the Venerable Zhou were father and son. Could I ask if that’s true?”

Yang Bo had long been accustomed to approaching people circuitously; for a time he couldn’t adjust to this rather rude direct throw. His cheeks tensed suddenly. “What did you say!”

Then he rapidly said, “It’s all complete nonsense. It’s an insult to my capabilities, and to my mother and the Venerable Zhou. I don’t know where you heard these lies and slanders. You’re...”

He glared furiously at the police officer across from him, biting down hard on his tongue, just managing to bite back the words, “You’re relying on malicious gossip to solve this case?”

Hearing these words, Zhou Huaixin, who had been calmed down with difficulty, once again showed a tendency to erupt like a volcano. He breathed deeply from the diaphragm and issued a long-distance, “I spit on you!”

The saliva accompanying this “spit” hadn’t yet touched the ground when Luo Wenzhou indiscriminately called over another criminal

policeman and pointed to the stunned Zhou Huaixin. “Separate them and question them individually. With Zhou Huaijin kidnapped in Yan City, anyone who could benefit from his demise is a suspect, including relatives.”

“What? I’m a suspect? Are you crazy! Are you blind!” Two policemen, brooking no argument, “invited” Zhou Huaixin to get up. So angry he was about to hit the roof, he turned to Fei Du, who was looking sympathetic but powerless to assist. “Master Fei, what’s going on with this cop? What’s he’s talking about? I’m going to lodge a complaint against him! You think you’re so fucking great? Look out or I’ll get you for this. You dare treat me like a suspect, I’ll... Don’t touch me!”

On one hand, Yang Bo, brimming with restraint and fury, said, “My mother and the Venerable Zhou were in fact old friends. It was because of that connection that I had the good fortune to get a job at the Zhou Clan, but I’ve only gotten this far because of my own hard work. It’s not the filthy thing you’re imagining.”

On the other hand, Zhou Huaixin was thoroughly ignoring all propriety. “You’ve got some nerve, you were *born* in filth—”

Yang Bo could stand it no longer. He sarcastically retorted, “I really don’t know what standards you drinking-and-driving, indiscriminately promiscuous, weed-smoking people use to judge ‘filth.’”

Watching these two young masters ripping into each other in front of a roomful of police, one spouting off as soon as the other was under control, the veins at Hu Zhenyu’s temples were about to burst. He would have loved nothing better than to stick both of them in a pot.

Fei Du was looking on with great interest. He was just about to pick up his cup of tea when Luo Wenzhou slapped his hand away.

Fei Du: “...”

Luo Wenzhou said, “You came here on purpose to drink tea? Put away your nasty habits. The Criminal Investigation Team isn’t your house. I don’t care if you’re a temporary liaison who’s not on the payroll or whatever. You’re here, so you’ll obey orders. If you won’t do your work, then you can beat it.”

Naturally, Fei Du had his own aim in using every conceivable means to find his way into the City Bureau. But while taking on all kinds of roles that made it suitable and proper for him to appear at crime scenes, he’d still as a matter of course regarded himself as an “outsider.” Suddenly meeting with this unexpected slap, he couldn’t quite collect himself.

In his whole life, President Fei had never before been bawled out like an errand-running lackey. For a time he didn’t know what expression he should use to respond to Luo Wenzhou. He froze in place for a while, then finally, at somewhat of a loss, said, “Oh, so what should I do?”

Fei Du was then dragged into a pile of technicians. Luo Wenzhou told him to enlarge each frame of the kidnappers’ videos and analyze them pixel by pixel.

Compared to Tao Ran, combing over the Baisha riverbanks, and Lang Qiao, rushing around all over the place, sitting and analyzing a video was comparatively light work. But Fei Du was still irritated with it after a few minutes—light as it was, it was still work. Issuing a beautiful conclusion based on minute traces was a perfect intellectual exercise, but sifting out minute traces from a huge quantity of repetitive information was very dull.

Fei Du had just spent a night traversing the evil seas of money. He’d only closed his eyes for a few minutes before rushing to the Zhou house to get in on the action. He’d already been tired; it wasn’t long before his eyelids began to struggle.

Fei Du tried a few times and found that he really didn't have the makings of a lackey. He stood up and strolled around in place to wake himself, overhearing Luo Wenzhou asking Director Lu for guidance about whether he should delete the video.

If they didn't delete it, it was tantamount to letting the criminals lead them around by the nose; it would look really bad.

But seeing as they had no line on the case, if they deleted the video and kidnappers really did take up their knife, that was tantamount to putting the hostage into a more dangerous position. Human life was of supreme importance; they absolutely couldn't do such a thing.

Even Lu Youliang was hesitating.

Fei Du put his hands behind his back, yawned furtively, and said sleepily to Luo Wenzhou, "If it were me, I'd delete it."

Luo Wenzhou shot a glance at him out of the corner of his eye, hastily said a few words to Director Lu, and hung up the phone.

"Look here." Fei Du beckoned to him, opening the kidnapper's video and going forward to the part where the kidnapper drew blood and wrote on Zhou Huaijin's chest. Fei Du bonelessly leaned on his arm, propped on the table, and said to Luo Wenzhou, "The kidnapper made a cut first, then picked up a brush and dipped it in the blood to write. Don't you think that's a little too reasonable for a criminal? If it were me, I'd simply have carved the words onto Zhou Huaijin's chest."

Luo Wenzhou, hand resting on the back of his chair, heard these words and looked down at him expressionlessly.

Fei Du used him as a bracing measure, returning his gaze in odious high spirits. "Ordinarily, when a beautiful man looks at me like that, I

assume he's asking me to kiss him.”

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer him. He very calmly followed up, “You're right, the kidnapper's actions really are a little extraneous. So?”

“So I think this kidnapper doesn't want to hurt Zhou Huaijin at all. He only wants to exchange his hostage for something. He doesn't want to become a wanted murderer. Furthermore, judging from the way he's treasuring his hostage, it's likely Zhou Huaijin is the only bargaining chip he has. Even if you delete the video, perhaps he won't do anything to the hostage. It's better for everyone to go ahead and try to get to the bottom line.”

“Oh, ‘perhaps,’” Luo Wenzhou said quietly, looking at him. “When I go to write up my report, I'll tell everyone, ‘I judged that the kidnapper perhaps wasn't planning on harming the victim, so I decided to try deleting the video to see whether Zhou Huaijin would die or not.’ President Fei, is that what you mean?”

Fei Du hadn't yet answered when Luo Wenzhou put a hand on the back of his neck, bent down, and said into Fei Du's ear: “My good student, when we do this job, we don't get by on brain-teasers. Everything we do has to have grounds and reasons, has to be legal and in compliance with regulations. If there's any part of those words you don't understand, you can ask your shixiong anytime.—I told you to extract information from the videos in order to determine the kidnapper's location. I didn't tell you to cheat the criminals at ‘Fight the Landlord!’”

The boneless Fei Du was taken entirely unawares; under the pressure, he nearly knocked his chin against the table.

Luo Wenzhou, standing over him, pulled back his hand and said with a false smile, “You misunderstood. I wasn't planning to kiss you. Just now, that expression meant I wanted to hit you a little. Remember it next time and dodge.”

Fei Du had yet to voice any protest against his barbarous conduct when there was an uproar near them.

“Boss, there’s a new video!”

Luo Wenzhou temporarily let Fei Du off and accepted a pair of headphones. The whole Zhou villa, including those still under suspicion, held their breaths and concentrated, waiting for word from the kidnapper.

In the video, Zhou Huaijin had woken up, but he was in a much sorrier state than before. His perfectly cut and styled hair was in total disorder, as if he’d struggled and been put down. There were bruises on his face and body, and his expression was of mingled rage and alarm. The ropes had been tied tighter, and the blood from the wound on his neck had stained his shirt. His chest was rising and falling nonstop.

Outside the frame, a voice distorted by a voice changer said, “Read it.”

Zhou Huaijin’s gaze hardened slightly, and veins stood out on his neck. “You guys...”

He’d only said two words when he was kicked to the ground along with his chair. Then the person holding the camera beat the victim. The camera flashed wildly for a while; there were only the sounds of fists and feet hitting a body, and dull moans of pain. Then the screen went black.

Over at the internet police, the atmosphere was thick; they still had nothing.

Zhou Huaixin’s legs folded at the sight. He had no more attention to spare to exchange curses with Yang Bo. He clutched at the clothes of

the people next to him. “I’ll pay! We’ll get some hackers, all right? As much money as it takes, as long as they’ll come. My brother... My brother...”

In the pre-recorded video, the temporary black screen passed and there was an image again; the camera focused on Zhou Huaijin, lying on the ground. The hoarse voice said again: “Read it.”

Zhou Huaijin’s lips trembled a few times. This man born with a silver spoon in his mouth knew very well how to protect himself. He easily made the choice to submit. He struggled to look at a prompter held up somewhere, then stammeringly read, “I’ll ask you a question, and you’ll have...ten, ten minutes to answer. Post the answer on the Zhou Clan’s homepage. I...I already know the answer, if...if you dare to lie, I’ll...”

Zhou Huaijin panted twice, a whimper coming out of his throat. “I’ll...cut a part off of President Zhou. We’re going to...peel off a certain person’s s-skin and have a look.

“The first question: is Zhou...Zhou Junmao a sanctimonious hypocrite, brazenly keeping his illegitimate son by his side, cultivating him as an heir? Is this...this paternity report real... You stole my... Ah!” Having read to this point, Zhou Huaijin came around, his expression becoming agitated. A kidnapper kicked him in the back of the head, and he gave a sob, gently twitching. Then he didn’t move; he may have fainted.

A wrinkled paternity report appeared on the screen.

The kidnapper, using that hoarse, ugly-sounding voice, said, “Ten minutes.”

After he spoke, the video ended, and a timer counting down from ten minutes appeared.

For a moment, the whole Zhou house was deadly silent. Everyone looked at the countdown as though they were looking at a monster. At the same time, a bomb had been dropped onto the fiber-optic-crossed virtual world, blowing up a wide swath of roaring mountains and tsunamis—

“Zhou Junmao’s illegitimate son!”

“The Zhou Clan’s heir has been kidnapped!”

“We’re in the middle of a wealthy family drama!”

Within a minute, Luo Wenzhou’s cell phone and those of the Zhou family members, along with the residence’s landlines, all rang at once, the whole Zhou residence turning into a hotline, the whole world trying to get first-hand information.

Luo Wenzhou looked down. He couldn’t not take Director Lu’s phone call. He hadn’t gotten the word “hello” out of his mouth before Director Lu hurried ahead. “What’s going on? The kidnapper’s done all this and you still haven’t found him? Are there no clues? If you don’t have enough people, get some transferred over! You’ve got to find the bastard, even if you have to dig all the way down! My office phone is about to blow up!”

Before Luo Wenzhou could report his progress to his superior, Zhou Huaixin had already jumped up and seized Hu Zhenyu’s collar. “Answer him, answer him! Hu-dage, post a notice at once answering him yes! Yes, it’s true! That paternity report is real, that Yang is the shameless illegitimate son!”

Yang Bo’s fair face went white, as if he’d been struck by lightning. He froze under everyone’s gazes.

Hu Zhenyu said, “Huaixin, calm down a little.”

“My brother got people to do the paternity test in secret, he showed it to me earlier, it can’t be wrong. That report must be the one they took from my big brother’s bag. It’s irrefutable proof, there’s nothing to quibble about, Hu-dage! Didn’t they say they already knew the answer before they asked! My dad is dead, the dead don’t care about their reputations. Forget about not washing your dirty linen in public, my brother’s safety is the most critical thing!”

Luo Wenzhou’s left ear was full of Zhou Huaixin’s screams, while in his right ear, Director Lu was categorically ordering, “You have to contain this at once, or you’ll be writing me a self-examination when you get back!”

Zhou Huaixin pushed aside a police officer next to him and went to snatch his own tablet, lying on a table. “If you won’t post it, then I will!”

“Huaixin!”

“Don’t be rash, Mr. Zhou!”

In the whole scene, only Fei Du remained aloof, wholly uninterested in whether Zhou Huaixin lived or died, indifferent to pressure exerted by any superiors. He was neither stressed nor impressed; he calmly looked up and said to Zhou Huaixin, “Zhou-xiong, I advise you not to ask or answer anything, or afterwards it won’t be a matter of this sort of immaterial little question. What do you think of that?”

Zhou Huaixin said blankly, “Then...then what do I do?”

Fei Du ignored him, saying quietly to a technician next to him, “Isolate the audio from when Zhou Huaixin was kicked down. I think I just heard that the ‘floor’ sounded hollow.”

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou paused at once and hung up on Director Lu without a word. He strode up to the screen in one step. “Let me

see the whole thing from the beginning!”

All the images once again quickly flashed across the screen.

Fei Du said, “Aside from when the screen went black, the camera lens was very close to the victim. There wasn’t a single full-body shot. It could be that there isn’t enough space, and if they filmed anywhere else, it would easily reveal the victim’s location... Oh, the camera lens only moves side-to-side in a rather limited scope.”

Luo Wenzhou again had the video stop at the part where Zhou Huaijin was kicked to the ground; the camera had only pointed down at him!

Luo Wenzhou put his hand on the shoulder of the technician next to him. “Can you estimate how far the camera moves side-to-side?”

“About a meter fifty... Not over a meter eighty at most.”

“Captain Luo, listen to this bit!”

When Zhou Huaijin fell along with his chair, there was a very strange banging sound, hollow, with a faint echo.

A hollow ‘floor,’ only a meter-something wide...

Fei Du spread his hands. “Is it impossible it’s in the trailer of a truck?”

Before he’d finished, Luo Wenzhou was already contacting Tao Ran. “The kidnappers may be in the trailer of a truck that’s stopping and starting. Search the security cameras around Baisha, put up a roadblock on all exits out of the city, stop any suspicious trucks and search them.”

Without putting down the phone, he called Lang Qiao on another one. “How’s it going over there?”

Lang Qiao quickly said, “I’ve locked in on the Hengda Conglomerate. Hengda’s position is close to the Zhou Clan’s. They’re a major local power, and there’s been serious conflict between the two companies since Zhou Junmao moved operations back into this country. The only time they attempted to reconcile and collaborate on a project, Zhou Junmao quashed it midway. Hengda has a subsidiary fund. Last night, they made no moves, as if they hadn’t reacted yet, but first thing this morning they suddenly went into action in the foreign markets, planning on the Zhou Clan stock falling...”

Before Lang Qiao had finished her report, Hu Zhenyu loudly cried, “What are you doing!”

Luo Wenzhou turned his head. Hu Zhenyu had been distracted, and Zhou Huaixin had snatched his phone away while the screen hadn’t yet locked after being used and quickly used Hu Zhenyu’s account to access the Zhou Clan’s official website.

By the time he was held down, he’d already posted the word “yes.”

CHAPTER 67 - Macbeth VIII

“A truck?” Tao Ran said into one of Luo Wenzhou’s ears. “Lao Luo, it’s unavoidable for vehicles coming into the outer ring to pass through Baisha. It’s all trucks coming and going. Should we search the ones coming into the city or the ones leaving? The kidnappers spirited him away in a vehicle—do you think Zhou Huaixin is still in Yan City?”

Lang Qiao meanwhile said into his other ear, “Boss, should I bring the person in charge back to the City Bureau now, or investigate their outgoing and incoming e-mails first?”

Behind him, a flustered and exasperated Hu Zhenyu was pointing at Zhou Huaixin. “You... You... What are you doing! You’re too impulsive!”

Next to him, Yang Bo’s face and neck were all red. “I’m going to report you for damaging my reputation!”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Chicken Soup for the Soul often posed the question, “Why do humans have two ears and one mouth?” Now he thought he’d understood—even if they’d had four ears, it wouldn’t necessarily have been enough.

Fei Du’s gaze flitted over Hu Zhenyu, then fell on Zhou Huaixin.

Zhou Huaixin straightened his neck. On his opium-addict’s face, aside from the eyeliner, something else appeared, indistinct and indescribable, that made him actually appear rather human.

“I’m not worried about what they say outside, and I’m not worried about any...what do you call it...any losses of market value on any markets—I don’t understand those things, Hu-dage, and I don’t want

to understand them. I only know that I have no one close to me but my brother.” Having finished this proclamation, Zhou Huaixin’s voice fell away, and he stared into Hu Zhenyu’s eyes.

Hu Zhenyu for some reason avoided his gaze.

Zhou Huaixin turned up the corners of his mouth in a half-smile; it was unclear whether he was mocking others or himself. “This won’t sound good, but there are some things that if the old man did them, there would always come a day when they’d be dug up. Paper can’t contain a fire. You don’t really think you’ll have eternal glory?”

Hu Zhenyu in all likelihood had never in his life experienced elegant words coming out of Zhou Huaixin’s mouth. For a time he was speechless.

“Can you find my brother within ten minutes?” Zhou Huaixin’s gaze swept over the surrounding police. “Then go look for him! What the fuck are you all staring at me for? I’m the old man’s legitimate son, and I’m also one of his heirs. I’m deciding to let the dead be sacrificed a little for the sake of the living. Don’t I have that right?”

These words rather sounded like they made sense.

“As long as my brother is all right,” Zhou Huaixin proclaimed, his eyes red, “I’ll announce that my dad’s an asshole. A person has to be adaptable—so I’ll be an asshole’s spawn. Even if my father is conscious underground, he’ll know who wanted to hurt him, who wants to hurt our family. The blame won’t fall on me!”

Hu Zhenyu’s forehead broke out into hot sweat.

Just then, someone coughed heavily at the door and a voice coldly said, “Your family really does belong to you two brothers, but the conglomerate doesn’t. How many business partners and small shareholders does such a large operation involve, huh? Even the old

man didn't dare to make peremptory decisions while he was living. What are you supposed to be, wretch?"

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and saw several Zhou Clan employees scatter in a flurry from the door and an emaciated old man slowly walk in. He was less than 1.7 meters tall and a little stooped, making him look smaller and skinnier. Profound wrinkles came down from his nose to split his chin into three parts. The corners of his mouth hung down heavily, as if he'd never smiled in his life.

Seeing the newcomer, Hu Zhenyu subconsciously stood up straight. "Venerable Zheng."

Yang Bo sucked in a deep breath and quickly walked over, curling up his tall and strong body like a little eunuch to lean close to the man. "You're here at last, President Zheng."

Zhou Huaixin stared at the old man with a sneer on his face, saying nothing.

Luo Wenzhou understood that this was Zhou Junmao's deputy, Zheng Kaifeng.

Zheng Kaifeng treated the Zhou house as his own territory, disregarding the roomful of police, unhurriedly coming in. He looked all around and in a glance understood who was in charge of the scene. He went straight up to Luo Wenzhou and reached out a hand towards him. Very heartfelt, he said, "This is a disgrace. It's put you to so much trouble."

On first meeting, Luo Wenzhou was choked by Zheng Kaifeng's presumption—originally it had been the police investigating a case, and the whole Zhou Clan, including Zheng Kaifeng, were suspects. With a few words he'd twisted the situation to make it seem as if the Zhou Clan was opposing a nameless evil, and they'd happened to find a crowd of police officers to act as hired thugs.

Luo Wenzhou shook his hand rather perfunctorily and calmly twisted the subject back around. “Pernicious criminal cases are within the scope of our duty. It’s just work, no question of trouble or no trouble. Our first aim now is to rescue the hostage. With that as our foundation, we’ll also do our best to reduce this case’s social impact. When it’s necessary, we’ll have to trouble the family members to cooperate with us.”

The corner of Zheng Kaifeng’s eye twitched faintly, and his expression became heavy.

Luo Wenzhou was naturally capable of dealing with everyone; he was immune to all kinds of high positions of power. Wholly uncaring, he drew back his hand and turned to Zhou Huaixin. “Especially young Mr. Zhou. We understand the family’s feelings. If there’s really no other way, for the safety of the hostage, there’s no harm in giving way to the kidnappers. But I hope that’ll be the last step. Your announcement should wait until the last moment of the countdown.”

Zhou Huaixin gave a sharp snort.

“And then there’s President Hu.” Smiling, Luo Wenzhou turned to Hu Zhenyu. “President Hu says that young Mr. Zhou is too impetuous, but you’re pretty hasty yourself. You were already logged into the website’s back-end.—As I see it, everyone should stop talking all over each other and go give your statements.—Let’s have some people over here to separate them and take them away.”

A few criminal policemen came up at this and, brooking no argument, separated the crowd of people constituting the real power in the Zhou Clan.

In this air-conditioned room in early autumn, it seemed that the sweat at Hu Zhenyu’s temples couldn’t be wiped away.

Zheng Kaifeng looked coldly at Luo Wenzhou. “Young man, you’ve got some style.”

Luo Wenzhou grinned at him. “I think so, too. Thank you for the praise, though in my capacity as a person in charge of handling major criminal cases, I don’t look forward to serving you again. Sir, please come this way.”

Having disposed of this crowd of people doing more harm than good, he turned his head and met Fei Du’s not-quite-smiling gaze as he stared at him. Encountering his eyes, Luo Wenzhou’s heart constricted. He felt that Fei Du’s unmatched peach blossom eyes really were supernaturally endowed; give him a powerful enough telescope and he’d be able to look up Chang’e’s skirts.

“Say something useful,” Luo Wenzhou said exhaustedly to Fei Du. “All those wishing to praise my good looks or express their infatuation can line up in the back.”

Fei Du said, “I wanted to pass on that the internet police have a lead on the people who posted the video.”

Luo Wenzhou had been prepared for a protracted campaign against psychotic kidnapers. Hearing this, he froze. “So fast?”

“That’s right, so you’d better not have any grand expectations.” Fei Du paused; then some mood caused him to add, “Shixiong.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

How could he use such an ordinary tone of voice to speak such an ordinary form of address and yet make it sound so sexual? It was really incomprehensible.

While the internet police were excitedly crying out, “We’ve got him!” the kidnapper, secure in the knowledge of his own security, uploaded

a third recording.

This time the camera lens had actually been drawn further away, showing Zhou Huaijin's whole body, and at the same time letting those watching understand the hostage's location at a glance.—The whole space was plastered with black plastic cloth. It was less than 1.8 meters wide, and the height was also very limited. At a visual estimate it was only the height of a grown man. It really did look like a truck's trailer!

Fei Du stared, thoughtfully rubbed his chin, and looked up at Luo Wenzhou. Luo Wenzhou understood what he meant at once; he frowned slightly.—Before, the kidnappers had filmed very close to Zhou Huaijin, carefully avoiding anything that could provide a clue to their surroundings, including during the segment when Zhou Huaijin had been beaten.

Only when they'd determined that the kidnappers might be in the trailer of a truck did the other side send them a film like this...

Had the kidnappers used their magic powers to install listening devices in the Zhou house, or was someone in the room in real-time contact with them?

Luo Wenzhou said quietly to the people next to him, "Get everyone in the house under control, including the cook, housekeeper, gardener, and anyone else going in and out. Hurry!"

In the video, Zhou Huaijin was looking even sorer than before. Someone had splashed cold water all over his face, and it was dripping down; however firm a temperament he may have had, he couldn't work his courage up anymore. He seemed to have been disciplined into submission. This time, he didn't waste any words. Staring in the direction of the screen, he flatly read out the kidnapper's letter. "It's good that you can admit it. Now I'll ask you the second question. Same rules, ten minutes. Why was the famous

entrepreneur and ‘philanthropist’ Zhou Junmao so public-spirited? Are the three public welfare funds under his name for grandstanding or for laundering money? Did Zhou Junmao—Zhou Dalong really think he could change his name and become a nobleman and that no one would know what was under his skin?”

The malicious video cut off abruptly, and the countdown returned.

The atmosphere in the whole Zhou residence instantly tensed. Everyone, including the household staff, was separated.

At the same time, the internet police finally locked onto the transmitter of the video. Lang Qiao, just then at the general headquarters of the Hengda Conglomerate, received the news. She only glanced at it, then took a pair of handcuffs out of her pocket and put them on the person in charge, who had been leading them in circles. “They can’t escape responsibility. Search!”

Ten minutes was both very short and very long. In reality, it was only long enough for people to walk up a few flights of stairs, but on the internet, it was long enough for information to travel around the globe countless times.

In a short time, all kinds of information sprang up, the true and false hard to distinguish. There were people who stood up to solemnly swear that Zhou Junmao’s former name had been Zhou Dalong; they even posted photographs, attaching beneath them the whole story of Zhou Junmao leaving the country to seek refuge with family, running errands and doing manual labor for distant relations, and starting a collaborative enterprise with his first savings. In the end, the most curious thing was why the other founder of the Zhou Clan had vanished from the scene.

Next, the topic moved from Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping back to Zhou Junmao’s unusual car crash. The old philanthropist’s noble and prestigious image of many years came tumbling down in the wake of

one video. Some were saying he laundered money, some were saying he was a traitor to his country, and there were even some saying he had engaged in cross-border human-trafficking... It was a competition of the powers of the imagination of urban legend.

As a focal point of attention, Dong Qian, the responsible driver in Zhou Junmao's car crash, of course couldn't escape unscathed. People had quickly gone back through eight generations of his ancestors. It was as if the seeds of conspiracy were buried in each strand of his hair.

"Captain Luo, it's nearly been ten minutes."

"Take over their official website's bulletin board and issue a response to the kidnappers under the name of the police force." Luo Wenzhou paused. "Say that the financial investigators have already gotten involved in the investigation and are currently verifying the relevant circumstances. Ask them not to spread unfounded rumors. If they have definite proof, they're welcome to report it. Warn the kidnappers to surrender themselves before they bring about any grave consequences."

"That won't work, boss! The number of visitors to the Zhou Clan's official website skyrocketed, it's crashed!"

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

The kidnappers' countdown was down to the last minute.

A call came from Lang Qiao. "Boss, we've found the e-mail where the Hengda Conglomerate bought the promotion, and a portion of the payment vouchers. It really was them uploading the kidnappers' videos..."

Luo Wenzhou said, "Don't tell me they don't know who the kidnappers are."

“They say they don’t know who the kidnappers are,” Lang Qiao said quickly. “This morning, after Zhou Huaijin disappeared, Hengda’s public relations department received a mysterious e-mail with a few blurry photographs attached. They thought it was a fake at the time. They’re not very fastidious over at Hengda. With Zhou Junmao dying yesterday, they wanted to take the opportunity to muddy the waters...”

“Then the person who sent them the videos said the images were composites. They believed it and posted them. At most they’re guilty of malicious commercial competition, right?”

Lang Qiao said, “...ah, that’s what they say.”

“My ass! What are they doing using so many anti-tracking measures for a practical joke? Bring in everyone related to it! Keep tracking the person who sent the e-mails!” Luo Wenzhou glanced at the countdown. Like flowing water, the time was passing unfeelingly. The Zhou Clan’s official website was still in a state of paralysis, wholly unmoving!

“Look, boss, we found this on the chauffeur who drove Yang Bo here.”

Luo Wenzhou accepted a cell phone. He saw that the suspicious chauffeur was logged into an obviously newly-registered Weibo account. The most recent status update openly read: “The police know that the ‘meat’ is in a truck.”

The countdown hit zero—

CHAPTER 68 - Macbeth IX

The Zhou Clan's official website had crashed, and nearly simultaneously, Lang Qiao had arrested the person posting the videos for the kidnappers. The internet police were racing against the clock to use the incoming and outgoing e-mails to track down the sender.

But now the delicate balance and communications channel between the kidnappers and the police had been severed.

The entire internet was extending its antennae, sailing mightily against the current through time and rumor.

In this instant, Zhou Junmao was no longer a person. His whole life, his experiences and his sex scandals, had become an open book, every punctuation mark of it publicly circulated, laid bare before the gazes of the multitude, supplying material for people to sob and chew over, their judgments running rampant—

“It holds together. Who is this illegitimate son that the Zhou Clan has officially acknowledged?”

“An account of Zhou Junmao's mistresses.”

“Zhou Clan A-shares tumbled when the market opened; an inquiry into the different regulations for A-shares in the Hong Kong market.”

“Why did the Zhou Clan's mysterious other founder die young?”

“Zhou Junmao's original name was Zhou Dalong; his whole life was the rise of an underdog.”

“Was Zhou Junmao's late wife actually his cousin's widow? Famous wives in history.”

“An illegitimate son took out a hit on his father. It’s almost like the plot of Oedipus.”

...

And so on and so forth, without exception, covering heaven and earth. Aside from prohibiting the character “Zhou,” expelling it from the Book of Family Names, there was no way to delete all of it.

On the kidnappers’ countdown, zero minutes and zero seconds flashed incessantly. After the Hengda Conglomerate’s shit-stirrers had been arrested, the kidnappers had shut their mouths to the outside world, inauspiciously maintaining silence.

Countless pairs of eyes were fixed on the unmoving webpage.

Luo Wenzhou lifted Yang Bo’s chauffeur’s collar. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a criminal bold enough to pass secret messages right under the noses of the police. Friend, you’re the embodiment of valor!”

The chauffeur was around thirty, with regular features that looked rather proper. But they were “regular features” that were entirely unmemorable. He’d evidently come in with Yang Bo, but it had been ages before anyone had noticed him.

Now that he’d suddenly been seized, the chauffeur’s legs were trembling so much he could hardly stand up. “I... I didn’t do anything, I just...posted on Weibo...”

“Using a newly-registered account to post thieves’ cant. Who’s it for?” Luo Wenzhou swiftly handcuffed him. “Are you keeping a diary, or expressing your feelings towards empty space?”

Fei Du took a few steps back to avoid impacting Luo Wenzhou’s dramatic capabilities. He shook his head, full of sympathy. “I know

the person who incited you is in this house. Perhaps he's even watching you. Think clearly, sir. If Zhou Huaijin has an accident now, your situation will change. What did he give you that you're willing to give up your own life to take the blame for him?"

When he'd spoken, someone called, "Captain Luo, the kidnapers are moving again."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

They acted as soon as he'd mentioned "having an accident." Fei Du was amazing. If it were only possible to sew his crow's mouth shut, Luo Wenzhou thought he would have filed an iron bar down into a needle.

Lacking the Hengda Conglomerate's technical support, the kidnapers seemed to be at their wits' end. In turmoil, they posted a fourth video.

This time, it was only a few dozen seconds long. The camera was shaking furiously, focused on a man in silhouette. The man appeared to be one of the kidnapers. He was wrapped head to toe in black cloth, not showing a single strand of hair. He held the camera with one hand, filming his other hand—that hand was holding a boning knife.

Zhou Huaijin was desperately curled up, the terror in his voice about to solidify. "I don't know, I don't have anything to do with the Asian business, my dad and President Zheng handled all of it, I really don't understand anything about the funds... Stay away! Stay away from me—ah!"

Just then, another voice came from outside the frame. It seemed to be the knife-holding kidnapper's accomplice. His voice, through the voice changing machine, was hurried. "Stop filming, hurry up! They'll catch up soon!"

The knife-holding kidnapper completely ignored him, slowly lifting the knife in his hand.

Zhou Huaijin seethed like a live fish, at last managing to stand on his legs, which were tied to two legs of the chair. He tottered backwards, but unfortunately this young master's hind-brain wasn't very well-developed. He tripped on something and lost his center of gravity. He screamed and fell to one side, out of the frame.

In the moment he fell, the camera lens flashed, as if the knife-holding kidnapper had struck.

Everyone's hearts thumped, including Luo Wenzhou's.

The next instant, the camera steadied again. Because Zhou Huaijin had fallen, the knife had narrowly missed him, cutting through the black cloth firmly covering the walls of the trailer, suddenly cutting a fissure in it with a tremendous ripping sound, as if it had had the force to cut a person apart.

The knife-holding kidnapper clicked his tongue, seeming rather regretful.

Behind him, his accomplice was rushed. "Hurry up! Aren't you finished yet?"

Luo Wenzhou immediately raised a hand to block Fei Du's line of sight—

"No! No! Slow down! I'll tell you, I'll tell you... You're right! You said everything right!" In the video, Zhou Huaijin was panicked enough that he wasn't choosing his words carefully.

Hearing this, the knife-holding kidnapper paused, gently tilting his head.

His flustered accomplice swore. He turned his head and seemed to open the trailer's doors. A ray of light shone in, falling on Zhou Huaijin's miserable face.

Zhou Huaijin's eyes were blinded by the sunlight. He struggled futilely to climb up the wall as he breathlessly said, "Domestically, there's three, three public welfare funds, only one is properly operated to fool people, the others are cover for money laundering and tax evasion. Cross-border supervision of funds is full of holes, it's hard to investigate. This is absolutely true, I have proof! What else do you want to know, I'll tell you everything!"

The knife-holding kidnapper patiently waited for him to finish and nodded in apparent satisfaction. Then, without warning, he stabbed.

"Ah!"

A heartrending scream came from the image. Before the anxious watchers could see what had happened, the whole trailer shook violently, as if the vehicle had suddenly started to move. The video came to an abrupt end.

Fei Du patted the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand and turned to the handcuffed chauffeur, spreading his hands towards the terrified man. "You see? What was I saying?"

The chauffeur's eyes rolled up. He was trying to faint, but unfortunately Luo Wenzhou was categorically unwilling to give him the opportunity. He took him by the neck, lifted him, and gave him a shake. "I'll ask you again. Who are you working for? If you keep holding back, you'll be one of the principal offenders."

The chauffeur's eyes flickered all over the place. He was frightened out of his wits. "I...I..."

Luo Wenzhou let go immediately and loudly said, “Look into his personal accounts, assets, and close relatives, including children, as well as everyone he’s recently contacted on his cell phone, landline, and social media—I don’t fucking believe this!”

“President Yang! It was President Yang!” the chauffeur cried out. “Don’t go after my kids, we don’t know anything! It’s all what President Yang ordered me to do!”

“President Yang?” Fei Du calmly leaned on a rosewood table. “Yang Bo? You mean that kidnapping Zhou Huaijin and revealing his own identity as an illegitimate son was a performance put on by Yang Bo? What did he tell you to do?”

The chauffeur collapsed listlessly onto a chair, his elbows resting on his knees. Looking for a hole to crawl into, he held his head with his cuffed hands and quietly said, “He...told me to register a new account and post status updates to tell them ‘over there’ what you guys were doing, so they could run in time.”

When he spoke the words “in time,” Fei Du’s eyes narrowed slightly.

Luo Wenzhou quickly followed up, “So do you know where the kidnapers are?”

“N-no... I don’t know.”

“Nonsense!”

“I really don’t know, really! I’ve always worked for President Hu, I’m not one of President Yang’s people. He couldn’t trust me entirely. I posted whatever I heard, let them judge for themselves whether it was right or not. I only know they’re still in Yan City, because a truck could be searched going out of it, the risk would be greater. It was better to hide in plain sight. Any, anyway...”

Fei Du said, “Anyway, there was you to pass information to them.”

The chauffeur looked up at him, then quickly avoided his gaze. “They said they’d find a suitable place and drive the truck with him in it into the river, and the kidnappers themselves would break out of the windows and go ashore—they’d run away towards some deserted wild place. When they’d crossed the water, not even a dog would be able to find them, and no...no one would be the wiser.”

Luo Wenzhou turned away and picked up his phone. “Tao Ran, look for a truck with about a two-ton trailer, from last night to early this morning. Eliminate passing vehicles... Right, the kidnappers are still around the Baisha river basin, eliminate the places within a ten-kilometer range where the water is shallow, eliminate villages and inhabited places, eliminate places with relatively level terrain...”

Tao Ran quickly said, “Then there’s only the shelter forest in the northeast, less than a kilometer from me.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Blast the sirens. There are two kidnappers. It’s easy for them to disagree in a stressful situation, perhaps the hostage still has a chance.”

“This does sound like a rather satisfying story. Yang Bo is the illegitimate son Zhou Junmao refuses to acknowledge. He schemes his way into the upper levels and find a suitable opportunity to dispose of Zhou Junmao, then kidnaps Zhou Huaijin, forcing the Zhou Clan to officially recognize him as an illegitimate son, legitimizing him as an heir to Zhou Junmao’s legacy.” Fei Du took off his glasses and wiped them, continuing to question the chauffeur. “Bear with my curiosity. What did Yang Bo promise you?”

“My son...” The chauffeur forced the words out with difficulty. “My son had to go abroad for medical treatment, I had no money and no connections...”

Fei Du shook his head in apparent disappointment. “That old chestnut —”

Luo Wenzhou put the phone down and gave him a warning glance to make him mind what he said.

Fei Du’s tone changed. “I’m saying, Yang Bo could give you what you needed, but can it really be that Zhou Huaijin couldn’t? Even Zhou Huaixin would do. Why would you rely solely on Yang Bo? When you flap your lips and say Yang Bo incited you, how are we to know that you aren’t framing him?”

Luo Wenzhou immediately followed with another question. “Colluding with outsiders, publicizing the Zhou Clan’s scandals, beating down his own company’s stock price—what benefit is there to Yang Bo? Is he harming others without benefiting himself?”

“N-no!” The chauffeur shook his head wildly. “As soon as they acknowledged that he was an illegitimate son, the official website would crash—if it didn’t crash on its own, they’d find someone to make it crash. No one would be able to get on when the time came, or post any statement. No matter what the kidnappers asked, the company wouldn’t admit it, and it would be an opportunity to get rid...get rid of P-president Zhou. Otherwise, why wouldn’t the kidnappers make them post the announcement on the company’s official Weibo?”

“Afterwards, they’d only need to grieve for Zhou Huaijin’s demise, denounce the demented kidnappers, put down all those unanswered questions as slander. After the masses had finished making merry, they’d remember ‘political correctness’ and would of course get in line to condemn violence and sympathize with the victims. The company wouldn’t really suffer a serious injury. With Zhou Junmao and Zhou Huaijin gone, the only one left would be the little skeleton Zhou Huaixin, who isn’t worth mentioning. There’s no need to say

whose hands the company would end up in.” Fei Du spread his hands. “It makes perfect sense. I suppose it sounds very satisfactory.”

The chauffeur stared numbly at him, feeling that there was something behind Fei Du’s words.

“Take him away, back to the bureau!”

In the Baisha River Valley, a motorcade of police cars howling fit to send the mountains tumbling down divided up, heading swift as the wind towards the shelter forest in the northeast, producing almost an atmosphere of siege in the peaceful open country.

After the autumn rain a few days ago, the uninhabited open country was full of mud, the soil having soaked in all the water.

“Deputy Tao, there are fresh tire tracks!”

Tao Ran wiped some sweat away. “Follow them!”

The water in the Baisha River had risen slightly, and the sound of the water grew louder and louder as they followed the river. The indistinct tire tracks quickly led them to the riverbank.

“There!”

“In the water, in the water!”

A white truck was bobbing up and down in the Baisha River, slowly sinking towards the depths as it was pushed along by the rapid current—

In the Zhou residence, aside from Yang Bo, who had been taken away for individual interrogation, everyone held their breath and concentrated, waiting to hear word. Everyone’s expressions were different; everyone had an axe to grind. But Zhou Huaixin, displaying

his true feelings, tightly clutched the arms of a wooden chair, his non-mainstream long fingernails gouging the wood, making it creak.

Each second seemed to be drawn out two weeks long.

“Captain Luo.” Just then, Tao Ran’s voice came somewhat indistinctly from among the sounds of rushing water. “We’ve gone into the container, and he isn’t there. I don’t know if the kidnappers took him or if the water swept him away.”

Zheng Kaifeng’s face sank slightly. Hu Zhenyu’s back stiffened.

Zhou Huaixin stood up at once, banging his hip against the solid wood table but not feeling it at all. There was no trace of blood left in his lips, like a pale clown on the morning after.

“Keep looking,” Luo Wenzhou said heavily.

“Deputy Tao, look there!”

The kidnappers must have been alarmed by the police sirens, driven the truck into the water and ran. The container hadn’t been tightly closed, and Zhou Huaijin, inside it, had floated out along with the wooden chair under him. Like a shoddy life buoy, the wooden chair was drifting like a leaf among a storm, dragging a man who may have been dead or alive.

“I’ve got him!”

“Hold tight, hold tight! Don’t let go! Wait a minute... He’s still breathing!”

Twenty minutes later, the news that Zhou Huaijin had been rescued arrived at the Zhou residence—the knife had cut Zhou Huaijin’s leg, but luckily it hadn’t hit anything vital. The panicked kidnapper hadn’t allowed his accomplice to carefully attend to murder and

dismemberment. He'd been alarmed by the distant police sirens and impatiently stepped on the gas, driving the truck into the Baisha River. Then the two kidnappers had fled in an unknown direction, and Zhou Huaijin had floated out into the river.

Hu Zhenyu heaved a sigh of relief. Zheng Kaifeng silently closed his eyes, perhaps reciting a prayer or something.

Zhou Huaixin collapsed onto the ground and couldn't get up for a long time. Then he tottered into the bathroom and was violently ill.

Someone came through the door after him. Zhou Huaixin thought it was the housekeeper. Gasping, he closed his eyes and reached out a hand, hoarsely saying, "Get me some water."

An opened water bottle was placed into his hand.

Zhou Huaixin poured it into his mouth, then heard the person behind him speak. "That bad, Zhou-xiong? Didn't you already know the outcome?"

Taken by surprise, Zhou Huaixin gulped the mouthful of water he was using to rinse his mouth.

CHAPTER 69 - Macbeth X

“Master Fei.” Zhou Huaixin rather stiffly turned his head and forced a smile. “What did you say?”

Fei Du looked back. People were chaotically going back and forth all over the place, and no one was looking their way, so he closed the bathroom door. The lights in the bathroom were dim, deepening the lines of his eyes and brow, making him look like a sharp ink painting.

“Don’t pretend. I didn’t just meet you yesterday.” Fei Du leaned against the door, very relaxed, looking at Zhou Huaixin with an almost smile. “You only saw your dad a few times a year, and you never cared at all about your family’s property or any legitimate or illegitimate sons. From yesterday up to now, I think the only true words that came out of your mouth were what you said when you snatched President Hu’s phone.”

Zhou Huaixin turned and backed up against the sink, his expression grim, looking at him silently.

“Even if Yang Bo really was your dad’s illegitimate son, he wouldn’t need to put on such a production to be acknowledged. With your old man calmly lying in the morgue, he could easily have come back to this country and requested a judicial appraisal of paternity. What’s he getting at with all this kidnapping and murder? Does he have nothing better to do?”

“Could he get a judicial appraisal just because he wanted to? Are you acting like me and my brother are dead? We’d burn the old man and not give him a single hair.” Zhou Huaixin sneered. “Wasn’t he doing it to get money? For someone from such a humble background, he’s pretty quick.”

“Those three funds being revealed online is enough to land your company in the thick of it. Even if it’s false, an investigation will still hurt you deeply. If he was really after your family’s money, he wouldn’t harm others without benefiting himself like this.”

“I already said that I’m only a painter. I don’t understand you businessmen and your business.” Zhou Huaixin spread his hands impatiently. Skinny as he was, he tried to squeeze past Fei Du to open the door and go out.

Fei Du grabbed his wrist as he reached for the door handle. Zhou Huaixin gave a start, feeling that Fei Du’s ice-cold fingers were like a snake, tightly clamped onto his pulse, beating wildly beneath his unmoved appearance. While Fei Du was rather of the “idle of limb, unable to tell grains apart” type, he still had enough strength to use against a sesame stalk like Zhou Huaixin. With a light shove, he pressed him against a nearby cabinet.

Zhou Huaixin said, “You...”

“Shh—” Fei Du raised a finger, interrupting him. “Quiet, the police are outside.—As soon as that unfortunate chauffeur opened his mouth, I knew it wasn’t Yang Bo. You and I both know how these things work. When you buy someone to act as a scapegoat, you don’t leave evidence. A few years on, you give him more money than he’d earn in his life, and when he gets out, he’ll still have his job. It isn’t a death sentence; it’s about the same as being sent out on assignment to an inhospitable location for a few years. No scapegoat is going to give up his master. We don’t have any special system to protect implicated witnesses in our country. Even if he gives up his master, he won’t necessarily escape criminal responsibility. Never mind sitting in jail for no reason, his family members will be impacted, too. This isn’t established practice.”

Zhou Huaixin squeezed out a few words with difficulty. “I don’t know about your established practices.”

“Don’t play dumb.” Fei Du shook his head. “When we’d just guessed that your brother might be in a truck, the kidnappers immediately abandoned caution and stopped keeping the camera close to hide where they were. Was that because they thought the police were too stupid? They were afraid we wouldn’t find the traitor, and suspicion wouldn’t fall on Yang Bo?”

Zhou Huaixin laughed coldly. “You mean someone framed Yang Bo. Kidnap my big brother, and at the same time get rid of the illegitimate son—I understand. However you look at it, I’m the only one who would benefit. So I’m a suspect now? Then why don’t you tell the police?”

Fei Du loosened the hand holding him and looked at him calmly.

“Go on.” While Zhou Huaixin’s voice was very low, his face had recovered its deranged carelessness. He laughed flippantly at Fei Du. “Lakes of wine and forests of meat don’t breed any kind of feeling. I don’t blame you. If I go to prison because of you, I’ll have plenty to boast about when I get out. It’s a whole grand game, and I’m a mighty performance artist!”

Fei Du sighed gently.

Grinning, Zhou Huaixin asked, “What are you sighing about? Regretting you haven’t slept with me yet?”

Fei Du said, “I couldn’t stomach you.”

“Naturally.” Even in these circumstances, Zhou Huaixin still had leisure to be self-satisfied. “Your out-of-date aesthetic sensibilities certainly couldn’t stomach my type of avant-garde...”

“I couldn’t stomach your type of thinking so highly of yourself, playing the fool while being a real idiot,” Fei Du flatly interrupted

him. “Zhou-xiong, is your big brother really Zhou Junmao’s own son? How good is your relationship with him?”

The smile on Zhou Huaixin’s face stiffened at once. His hands tightened on the door of the cabinet behind him. “Strange, Master Fei. You just said I kidnapped my big brother and framed that son-of-a-bitch, killing two birds with one stone. So why have you switched to asking how good our relationship is? Babbling nonsensically like this... Are you swooning at my beauty?”

Fei Du didn’t respond to his dried-up joke. He straightforwardly said, “When the kidnappers issued the first question and you snatched President Hu’s phone, his phone was logged into your official website’s back-end.”

“That’s right. Amazing, Hu Zhenyu was pretending to be so calm and steady, but actually he was already prepared to expose the matter of the illegitimate son.” Zhou Huaixin clicked his tongue. “Of course I’d try to preempt him. The more real feeling I displayed, the more I’d avoid suspicion...”

“When I warned you to be careful about answering the kidnappers, you clearly listened to me.” Fei Du ignored him entirely, continuing to declaim. “But in the blink of an eye, there you went. Why?”

Zhou Huaixin raised a slender brow. “You’re asking me...”

“Because you’d seen Hu Zhenyu’s movements,” Fei Du said almost inaudibly. “Your company’s management is standard. The official website must have someone specially responsible for it. There must be fixed procedures for posting any news. At any rate, it wouldn’t be President Hu personally looking after it. The first time he personally logged into the back-end, it didn’t accord with convention. This bit of unconventionality confirmed certain of your guesses...”

Zhou Huaixin's expression hung on his face like a mask, not moving a muscle.

Fei Du paused briefly. "Your brother wasn't kidnapped at all."

Zhou Huaixin's breath congealed. After a good while, he gave a sharp laugh and shrugged as hard as he could, nearly swinging his skinny neck off his shoulders. "President Fei, do you mean that all that bustle you and the police did just now was only going along with some play-acting?"

For a moment the two of them were silent. The screen of Fei Du's phone lit up, and the ringtone was about to play. He hung up without even looking. "Why would two kidnapers who knew how use business competition to stir up trouble, who knew how to manufacture public opinion online, turn into turtles without shells as soon as they lost contact with the Hengda Conglomerate and stop taking any precautions not to be traced?"

"The Baisha River Valley is large and sparsely populated. After grabbing the hostage on the road from the airport, it makes sense to choose that place to swap vehicles, but why would they continue to linger there?"

"The Baisha River is already within Yan City's jurisdiction. Entering the city from there, they wouldn't be investigated or have their cards checked, and the roadblocks were only put up after you called the police. There was an interval of at least two hours between your brother getting into the kidnapers' car and you calling the police. Why didn't the kidnapers drive into the city, find a place with enough privacy and space? Is the person behind the scenes who plotted this kidnapping so poor he rattles? Can't he afford to rent a house?"

"Was the traitor planted for us to catch so that the kidnapers could get away in time, or to notify us to rescue your brother in time? Your

brother, faced with a vicious kidnapper, didn't try to threaten him or bribe him. He carefully answered with everything he knew about the funds. Was that because he was afraid the Zhou Clan didn't have enough lawsuits on its hands?

“Two armed kidnappers hold a hostage entirely powerless to resist them, they're driving a truck in the wilderness, and the hostage doesn't manage to die and even gets smoothly rescued by the police?”

Zhou Huaixin, gone pale, made a futile effort to speak. “If you must say that...”

Fei Du interrupted him. “Of course, the kidnappers contacted the Hengda Conglomerate. Hengda took the lead in misleading the police and promoting this thing. The kidnappers themselves didn't understand anything. You could say that the kidnappers chose the Baisha River because they were familiar with the Baisha River Valley. Anyway, the way it looks now, we won't be able to catch the two of them to verify. You could also say that your brother saw that the kidnappers' goal was to ruin the Zhou Clan, and he carefully cooperated in order to save his life. And you could say that he didn't die in the end because of luck, his own good fortune—” Speaking one syllable at a time, he said, “But with so many coincidences all put together, adding in President Hu's suspicious behavior—forgive my limited imagination, Zhou-xiong, but this really is the only possibility I can think of.”

Zhou Huaixin's expression fluctuated several times. After a long time, he said, “I was wrong, President Fei. Yours is the most impressive imagination. I concede defeat.”

He put up a hand to stop Fei Du's words. “Is Yang Bo all that? According to what you've said, Zhou Huaijin kidnapped himself, endured the knife and endured drowning, didn't stint to discredit his own company, all for the sake of framing an illegitimate son? Master Fei, is he crazy, or are you crazy?”

“Zhou-xiong, do you really believe Yang Bo is your father’s illegitimate son? Do you really believe that if there were such an ‘undiscovered talent,’ your father, for the sake of such immaterial things as his dead wife and his reputation, would endure the humiliation of keeping him by his side without daring to acknowledge him?”

“If he’s not an illegitimate son, how could a stupid cunt like Yang Bo get to his present position?” Zhou Huaixin suddenly raised his voice. “Prostituting himself? What bad taste the old man had.”

“I also want to know,” said Fei Du, “whether that paternity report was really identifying Yang Bo. You don’t know, right? Your brother showed it to you.”

“You’re saying that under my dad and the Venerable Zheng’s treacherous noses, he made up an illegitimate son out of whole cloth.” Zhou Huaixin laughed and shook his head. He put a hand on Fei Du’s shoulder. “Forget it, you’re better off saying I kidnapped my big brother. It’s very kind of you, but you don’t need to exonerate me. I’m not going to give myself up. If the police are clever enough, then they can come and investigate. If you want to report me, then go ahead. I don’t care.—Ah, gaining promotion and wealth at your dad’s death really is one of the three great joys of human life.”

Having said this, Zhou Huaixin shook Fei Du off, pulled open the bathroom door, and swaggered out, not looking in the least like a schemer who had just been exposed. He announced with deep self-satisfaction to the police looking all over for him, “You want me to cooperate with the investigation, right? Fine, I’ll go back to the bureau with you in a bit. What’s the rush, let me take off my makeup first!”

Fei Du slowly walked out of the corner bathroom, looking thoughtfully at Zhou Huaixin’s sinuous back.

Just then, a hand patted his left shoulder. As soon as Fei Du turned his head, the hand grabbed his shoulder, pulling him so he stumbled.

“Having secret talks alone in the bathroom with a person involved in the case?” Luo Wenzhou said, staring fixedly into his eyes. “You’d better give me a written explanation.—Also, why didn’t you pick up when I called you just now?”

Fei Du smiled, avoiding the larger issue. “Catching me cheating, Captain Luo?”

“Fei Du.” Luo Wenzhou sighed, suddenly reaching out and taking Fei Du by the chin, very quietly saying into his ear, “Do you know you’re very annoying like this?”

Somewhat astonished, Fei Du raised his eyebrows.

“When you’re holding a chicken leg and aren’t planning on splitting it, don’t go around smacking your lips in front of people. It’s one of the most basic rules of behavior. Didn’t an adult ever teach you?” As he spoke, Luo Wenzhou’s hand slid down towards Fei Du’s waist. It seemed that he touched him, but at the same time it seemed that he only gestured, not making contact at all. The word “adult” was spoken very quietly, a light breath brushing Fei Du’s ear, seeming to carry a trace of huskiness. It struck Fei Du’s eardrum, the lingering sound reverberating ceaselessly.

“Come and do some real work if you can,” Luo Wenzhou released him. “Carelessly fooling around makes you particularly dull.—Let’s go. Time to get off work.”

Fei Du involuntarily tugged at his own collar. Then, as if nothing had happened, he asked, “If Yang Bo refuses to acknowledge it, I suppose the chauffeur’s confession alone can’t be taken as evidence?”

“It can’t,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Our next step is to thoroughly investigate all of the chauffeur’s communications and financial circumstances, then go right through Yang Bo. We’ll get Zhou Huaijin to give a statement, draw portraits of the kidnappers and release wanted notices. Whether we can get to the bottom of this case may even depend on how great our colleagues next door investigating the Zhou Clan are. Perhaps we’ll be able to, and perhaps it’ll come to nothing.”

Fei Du put his hands in his pockets. “That doesn’t sound like something the person in charge of the Main Criminal Investigation Team should say.”

“Then what should I say? I’ll absolutely bring all crimes to justice?” Luo Wenzhou stopped and waved a hand. “I’m not Black Cat Detective. I couldn’t back up that kind of boast. Like this case. Perhaps in the end, when you’ve gotten everything you can from it, you’ll find that the way the circumstances stand, you don’t have enough evidence to throw anyone in jail for a few years. Isn’t that right?”

Fei Du smiled in tacit understanding.

“Of course, there are still some things that make me pretty angry when I think about them.” Luo Wenzhou’s gaze fell on him. “If you can tell me something useful, for the moment I won’t look too closely into what you were doing behind closed doors with Zhou Huaixin.”

“All right, then. I advise you to first keep everyone involved in the country, especially Zheng Kaifeng,” said Fei Du. “Then check on Zhou Huaijin and Yang Bo’s blood relationships with Zhou Junmao.”

Luo Wenzhou snapped his fingers and quickly walked off.

Fei Du took out his phone—he hadn’t had time to look before. The internet was roiling with waves from the stone Zhou Huaijin had

dropped. There were sandbanks hidden under the great waves, and countless hands were fishing around for anything they could get.

As he read, he sank into thought, staring blankly for a while. Then he made a call. Lowering his voice, he said to the person on the phone, "Investigate Yang Bo for me, especially his family background. The more minute the better."

CHAPTER 70 - Macbeth XI

Dong Qian lived in the Wave's Bend Estate.

This was a very new residential area. A few years before, all this had still been damp, narrow little alleys; later, it had been remade into one of the grand city's beneficiaries. Dong Qian's family had been moved out and moved back into a bright and clean resettlement house there.

All the houses constructed in recent years were very advanced, with "radiant floor heating," "central air-conditioning," "new model systems"; recently it felt like rather Western-sounding nouns had become the distinguishing mark of new residences. As a new generation of the city's middle class had begun to buy quality of life, they'd wanted a nice neighborhood, wanted quiet, wanted services, wanted convenience. The old residents had blearily signed the resettlement agreements, finding a place to shelter at the edges of the "quality life," as if they'd also been integrated into the high tide of the "quality metropolis"... Of course, only those who had come to live there knew that this only looked good on the outside.

There was a thick partition between the commercial housing and the housing where former residents had been resettled. The divide was tightly sealed. On one side was bare cement, while on the other was an exquisite man-made landscape, separating the similar-looking houses by class.

When Xiao Haiyang and his colleague left Dong Qian's house, they found that the place where they'd parked their police car had been surrounded by a circle of people.

"This car came first thing in the morning," an old man walking his dog was saying. "I saw it when I was buying breakfast. I don't know what they've been investigating this long."

“Don’t you know there’s a murderer living there? The address they dug up online is that house.” A young person with the look of a student held up his phone for the old man to see. The dog-walking old fart narrowed his eyes in somewhat uncomprehending awe at the gale-force flow of information.

“Hey, are those two police?”

Before Xiao Haiyang could open the car door, he was nearly drowned in the babbling crowd.

“Mr. Policeman, I hear that assassin lives there. Did you come because of that?”

First Xiao Haiyang froze. Then he shook his head repeatedly. “No, don’t make wild guesses. Please move out of the way.”

The young person holding up the phone curiously asked, “Is there really an illegitimate son?”

Before the words were out of his mouth, a fashionably dressed lady yanked him from behind. “Stop asking about this sort of useless gossip. If you keep fooling around online, I’ll take away your phone. —Officer, I’d just like to ask a little question. Did the one who crashed the car die or not? Did you arrest him? Living next door to a murderer, you know...”

Xiao Haiyang’s hand paused in the middle of opening the car door. Then he pretended he hadn’t heard, lowering his head and getting into the car without uttering a sound.

“Hey, why are you leaving? Is that any way to answer? This is a question that concerns mass public safety!”

A man in a parked car nearby grumbled, "I said before we shouldn't buy a house so close to the resettlement quarters. You have no idea who's living next to you..."

Xiao Haiyang didn't wait for his colleague to close the door before stepping on the gas. He left the residential estate's parking lot as if he were being chased. As soon as he drove out of the estate's main gate, a minibus with the logo of a certain news outlet on it met them head-on. The colleague was sharp-eyed. He quickly poked Xiao Haiyang. "Go by the side streets. Don't invite trouble."

Xiao Haiyang spun the steering wheel, turning off into the twisting side streets, out of the corner of his eye glimpsing a few people with cameras over their shoulders getting out of the minibus and chasing a few steps after them. Seeing they couldn't catch up, they laid down their arms and took a few photographs of the police car driving away.

The colleague looked back nervously, determined that there were no complications, then at last relaxed, saying to Xiao Haiyang, "Rumor really does move fast. I'm telling you, Haiyang, times aren't what they were. If you run into this kind of thing while investigating a case, you have to remember to watch your mouth, and if you can't, take a deep breath and run. If there's been no official statement, we can't say a single word too much. That's discipline. Otherwise, I think the boss would give you a seeing to."

First Xiao Haiyang rather inarticulately nodded. After a while, he abruptly asked, "Can Dong Xiaoqing keep living here?"

First the colleague gave an uncertain "yeah," then came around and rather indifferently waved a hand. "It'll definitely be unpleasant for a while, but after a time it'll be all right. Everyone is so busy. Whose memory is that long? Don't worry, in another month or two no one will remember."

With a heavy heart, Xiao Haiyang gave an affirmative. His driving wasn't anywhere near as boisterous as the rest of him. It was even a little overly cautious. He saw a light change from far away and gently braked the car. The old service car slowly came to such a smooth stop that the people inside hardly felt it shake.

"But she herself definitely won't forget," Xiao Haiyang said suddenly.

The colleague looked at him in surprise.

"If in the end we still haven't been able to find clear evidence to show whether Dong Qian is a killer or an innocent, this business will weigh on her heart forever. At first when people ask her, suspect her, she'll argue desperately, unwilling to believe under any circumstances that her father could be an assassin. But this business is going to be like a splinter, coming up every now and then, like Schrödinger's box."

The colleague hadn't expected him to suddenly express so many feelings. Staring, he asked him, "Schrödinger? Isn't that a cat?"

"A box with a cat in it." Xiao Haiyang stared fixedly at the traffic light, his glasses slipping down a little, the frames blocking his eyelids, giving him a rather depressed look. "Each day you don't open it is another day you don't know whether the cat is still alive, and the the box will forever press on your heart, so that you can't think of anything else. Every day, as soon as it gets dark, you'll go in circles around that box, like a fishbone stuck in the throat. Every day, you'll suspect... This kind of wound can never heal."

The average person's everyday conversations were either idle chat or business communications. In the culture of Eastern people, discussing feelings with people you weren't very close with didn't seem so "everyday"; it would give people the awkward feeling of talking intimately to comparative strangers.

The colleague hemmed and hawed a while, not knowing how to respond to this rambling speech. In the end he only gave a dry laugh.

But Xiao Haiyang seemed to be immersed in his own world, neither feeling any of his colleague's awkwardness nor expecting an answer from him. Having said what he was going to say, he closed his mouth and sank into some other place.

In the Wave's Bend Estate, Dong Xiaoqing sat alone in her living room, holding her phone; next to her, a local TV station was playing the sensational news about the Zhou Clan at regular intervals. From time to time, the name of the responsible driver, "the individual Dong," flashed by in an unobtrusive corner. There were three cups of leftover cold tea on the coffee table, announcing the recent presence of guests.

The person on the phone spoke very gently. It was their human resources manager. "Look, Xiao Dong, you've really had a lot going on at home lately. Even though it's the busy season now, everyone really feels for you. I asked the boss what to do, and the higher-ups think that you should rest for a while, take care of yourself and not worry about work... If you have any trouble, you can always tell the company, and if we can resolve it, we'll definitely do our best to help you. All right?"

This was a tactful dismissal. Dong Xiaoqing understood it. She didn't want to make an ugly scene, so she did her best to force her voice not to shake. "All right, Manager Wang. Thanks for going to the trouble."

"Hey, no trouble, no trouble at all." The person on the line relaxed at having successfully dealt with her. On account of Dong Xiaoqing's sensibility, his voice softened even further. "There's nothing I can do for you in these circumstances, but I've just submitted a report to the boss to request an additional quarter's salary and supplement for you..."

The unflagging sounds of knocking came from outside the door. “Miss Dong, are you home? We’re the Yan City Evening News, we’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“...give it to you all at once. While it might not be much, it’s still better than nothing. If you need a letter of recommendation in the future, feel free to come to me.”

“Miss Dong? Strange, there must be someone in there, I can hear voices... Hello, is there anyone home?”

Dong Xiaoqing took a difficult breath and held her head.

These clamorous noises were like water, powerfully flowing back and forth. They weren’t necessarily well-intentioned nor necessarily ill-intentioned, but the person caught in their eddies, unable to struggle out, unable to catch a breath, understood how it felt to be drowning.

But while drowning, this person couldn’t complain about this or that individual drop of water.

Then who should they go reason it out with?

Since time immemorial, no one had been able to offer an explanation.

Dong Xiaoqing didn’t know how she managed to finish the phone call with her job. She’d become a mechanical walking corpse. After a long time, she finally came back to herself.

The people at the door had finally left. She’d taken out the phone’s battery herself. The thrill-seeking news item on the TV had concluded at some point, and the daily variety show had begun to play again.

She curled up numbly, vague gaze fixed on a piece of paper under a teacup that had a phone number written on it—the policeman

wearing glasses had left it, telling her to call him any time if she remembered any clues or had any difficulties.

Hypocrite, thought Dong Xiaoqing, her face expressionless.

The clamorous doorbell rang yet again.

Dong Xiaoqing gave a start. She felt an indescribable anger and swiftly stood up, snatching a glass off the table, spilling half of the water onto the couch. The person at the door tried knocking, muttering “no one there” to himself. Then there was a creak, and the express delivery person, as usual, shoved a package into the little compartment in the hall and quickly left.

Dong Xiaoqing hastily pressed some paper napkins onto the couch to soak up the water, hesitated a moment, then looked out the peephole to investigate. Determining there was no one outside, she quickly opened the door a crack and took the express delivery package inside like a thief.

The package wasn't at all heavy. It was tightly wrapped. She remembered she hadn't bought anything, so who would send her a package at this time? Dong Xiaoqing suspiciously read through the packing list. Then she froze instantly—

It had come from the address of the freight company where Dong Qian had worked when he'd been alive. The sender and the recipient were both Dong Qian.

After Zhou Junmao's cause of death had been thrown into suspicion, in Dong Qian's capacity as suspect, all of his personal possessions at his home and place of work had been searched by the police, only excepting this package sent in the same city that had taken two or three days to arrive by “Chinese Expressly Slow Delivery.”

Dong Xiaoqing impatiently tore the package open with her bare hands. The first thing to fall out of it was a black-and-white memorial photograph of a woman. The same photograph was hanging in her living room; it was her mother, who had died when she was a small child. After that came horrifying pictures of the scene of a car crash and the death certificate that had been issued after the rescue efforts had failed at the hospital.

There was a newspaper clipping stuck to the death certificate, a story related to the car crash Dong Xiaoqing's mom had died in.

Dong Xiaoqing thought at first that these were relics her father had been storing and was about to ignore them when her gaze inadvertently swept over a few sentences of the old newsprint. It was as though a bucket of cold water had been splashed directly into her face; in an instant she woke from her muddled state—the main character of this news clipping wasn't the woman who had died innocently in the car crash; it was a rather renowned entrepreneur of the time.

The entrepreneur had been driving along when he'd suddenly been rear-ended by a truck. His sedan had lost control and gone into the next lane, dragging in a passing van, fermenting a multi-car pile-up. The driver of the sedan and the responsible driver had died on the scene, while Dong Qian and his wife had been riding in the van. They'd both been taken to the hospital. The wife had been critically injured and had unfortunately passed away when rescue efforts failed.

Dong Xiaoqing impatiently shook everything out of the package—inside there was an unintelligible diagram of vehicle routes, some mimeographed hand-drawn pictures, a photocopy of an enormous bill for something or other, several close-up photographs of license plates, and a pile of personal information about some strangers.

And one of them was Zhou Junmao!

There was a photograph stuck behind the biographic sketch of Zhou Junmao; it was of the Bentley the old man had been riding in at the time of his car crash.

Dong Xiaoqing's heart jumped, and her hands began to tremble. She saw an envelope under the pile of documents with "Xiao Qing" crookedly written on it. This was Dong Qian's sloppy, somewhat childish awkward handwriting!

A few days had passed in the blink of an eye since Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping, and not only had the level of enthusiasm not calmed, it had become even more intense. All the photographs and articles concerning Zhou Huaijin participating in business conferences in his youth were turned up, and even the Zhou Clan's mysterious other founder, who had disappeared decades ago, was once again brought up.

"This person's Chinese name was 'Zhou Yahou'... Gosh, he was pretty good-looking." Lang Qiao was walking around and around the office. "He was part-Chinese, part-American, with slightly more Chinese heritage, and married an ethnically Chinese woman, a second-generation immigrant from a rich family. He dropped out of a famous school to go into business.—Zhou Junmao was entirely his footman back then, and don't even mention Zheng Kaifeng. He'd just left the country illegally and was a hooligan dodging around here and there."

Tao Ran looked up in surprise. "Zheng Kaifeng left the country illegally?"

"He ran for it when he was in his teens," said Lang Qiao. "He spent a few years working for a human smuggler, then somehow hooked up with Zhou Junmao and got himself a legal identity. Looking at the miserable state he was in then and comparing it to the way he is now—the ups and downs of human life...really are hard to predict."

Someone next to her protested, “Qiaoqiao, don’t pace like that, you’re making me dizzy.”

“I’m hungry, comrade!” Lang Qiao howled in anguish. “Our zookeeper is ten minutes late. My stomach is digesting itself.”

She’d just spoken when the aroma of jianbing floated in from the corridor. Lang Qiao leapt to the door in two steps, like a citizen of enemy-held territory seeing the liberating army. With deep emotion, she cried, “Boss!”

Luo Wenzhou went around her. “Settle down.”

“Starving children don’t have to settle down.” Lang Qiao hastily grabbed the stuff out of his hands. “Hey, why did you buy so many different kinds today?”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t answer, thinking, *Who knows what that menace is going to refuse to eat?*

It was Friday, time for Fei Du to report to the bureau again. Luo Wenzhou had originally bought breakfast as usual, but at the last moment he had thought of this complication and wandered over to buy something else, accidentally making himself late.

Pretending nothing was going on, he strolled over to his office, saw Fei Du’s empty desk, and immediately, with an air of propriety, put on a stern look. “Didn’t I emphasize discipline? What is this, now? Tao Ran, call him and see why he’s not here yet. Where’s he fooling around now?”

Tao Ran: “...”

Luo Wenzhou belatedly noticed that everyone’s expressions were very strange. “What are you all looking at me for?”

Winking and gesturing, Lang Qiao pointed at the jacket on Fei Du's seat. Deliberately "lowering" her voice to a level that everyone could hear, she said, "He came half an hour ago and went to Chief Lu's office."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Tao Ran slowly added, "Oh, right, Director Lu just called the office looking for you. I picked up, and he swore and asked me, 'Is there any way to improve Luo Wenzhou's lax discipline?'"

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

The whole Main Criminal Investigation Team ate Captain Luo's food while collectively roasting Captain Luo.

CHAPTER 71 - Macbeth XII

Fei Du was as nice in front of Director Lu as he was rotten in front of Luo Wenzhou.

His clothes resembled a student's, but he hadn't paid a student's prices for them. Grandpa didn't understand these costly details, anyway; Lu Youliang thought this young person seemed unusually tidy and unusually spirited. Coming through the door, he smiled at him, and the whole office became a little brighter.

Of course, if the young fellow could have gotten a neat crew-cut, the impression would have been even more perfect.

Lu Youliang passed him the list of documents that had been requested by Yan Security Uni. "I've had a rough look. There aren't any big problems. There are a few that may not be possible; I've ticked those off. You can revise it a little and print another copy, and then everything will go smoothly."

Fei Du very properly thanked him and accepted the list edited by Director Lu. He scanned it quickly. Before he could ask any questions, Lu Youliang was already explaining to him, "These cases are all rather old. They were selected for study during the original Picture Album Project. Their referential value isn't great. I was afraid you'd be doing duplicative work.—If your Teacher Pan asks about it, tell him what I told you. He'll understand."

However idle a leader was, he still wouldn't personally sift through lists to save others from "duplicative work." Fei Du wasn't deaf; of course he could hear that this was an excuse. Thereupon he obligingly bit back his questions.

Having finished with proper business, Lu Youliang very kindly took an interest in Fei Du's personal circumstances. He'd just moved on

from his studies to the middle-aged-and-elderly's favorite subject of a "significant other" when the phone on his desk rang.

Director Lu gestured at Fei Du and picked up. After a couple of sentences, he began to frown.

Fei Du calmly observed his expression, hearing Lu Youliang meticulously explaining: "...it must be objective and even-handed. Mind your diction very carefully. When you've finished writing it, bring it over here for me to have a look... Fine. This is the thing we have to keep a firm grasp on.—Garbage like rich people fighting over inheritances will make a lot of noise for a few days and everyone will lose their heads, but it still won't have any impact on your next meal. The children are what really matters to the common people."

Fei Du waited for him to hang up, then asked, "That was about the kidnappings, right?"

"Ah, yes. It's already been handed over to the Procuratorate. There's nothing we can change about how it turns out now." At this point, Lu Youliang paused and, deliberately or not, studied Fei Du's expression, then lamented, "That's how it is sometimes in this profession of ours. The victims are abjectly waiting for you to get them justice, and you clearly know who did it, but the outcome often can't be everything you could wish. Your luck may be bad; you may not be able to gather the critical evidence. Or it could be that the evidence is solid, but the outcome is that the law can't hold him."

Fei Du nodded as he spoke. "Rules and procedures are a rigid framework. There will always be some exceptional circumstances that they can't deal with."

The corner of Lu Youliang's eye twitched lightly, expecting his next words to be out of line.

He didn't expect Fei Du to play it safe, adding, "But it's a framework that's undergone endless refining to be able to take into account the interests of the greatest number of people. It's Pareto efficiency. Without it, there would be even greater inequality. So sometimes, even though we know it may hurt some people, we still have to uphold that framework."

Director Lu stared. "Wh...what sort of efficiency?"

"Simply put, it's the most optimal choice from the standpoint of everyone's overall benefit." Fei Du smiled. "My family does a little business. Being around my elders, I've picked up some of their theories."

Director Lu slowly shook his head. Looking at Fei Du's calm and easy expression, he seemed to relax. "It's good for young people to learn a bit of something. It has the effect of smoothing out their mental states.—Your Teacher Pan was an angry young man back in the day. That's why he changed professions and went to teach."

Fei Du displayed a timely trace of curiosity.

But Director Lu was unwilling to continue. He only waved a hand at him. "Enough, you must be busy."

Fei Du stood up at this. At the same time, his gaze swept Director Lu's desk from above.

There was a picture frame on the corner of Lu Youliang's desk with a group photograph inside it. The hair of the men in the photograph was still thick, and their waistlines were still "inverted." Only the lines of their features still gave some impression; looking closely, you could just recognize them—from left to right were Director Lu, old Director Zhang, Fei Du's academic advisor Pan Yunteng, who he'd been at some pains to arrange to study under, and Luo Wenzhou's late shifu, Yang Zhengfeng.

There should have been a fifth person in the photograph. Yang Zhengfeng was pulling someone's elbow with his right arm, but the person's face was hidden under the picture frame; only a bit of skin showed.

Fei Du's gaze glanced off the picture frame. As if nothing had happened, he took the list of case materials permitted to be requested, as edited by Director Lu, and walked towards the Criminal Investigation Team.

Silently, one step at a time, he was following up the hardly visible threads; he pondered as he walked, the drooping ends of his peach blossom eyes long and fine, seeming to have a sort of absent-minded indifference—until he heard Luo Wenzhou's "bitterly resentful" voice.

"Eating one person's food while serving another!" Luo Wenzhou was denouncing someone in the office; it was audible some steps from the door. "It really is the textbook definition of eating one person's food while serving another!"

Fei Du looked up at once and saw Luo Wenzhou, hands in his pockets, swaggering out of the office with his back to him. As he backed up, he pointed at the crowd of ingrates in the office. "You aren't my *real* children..."

He hadn't finished when he bumped into Fei Du, who hadn't dodged at all.

"Oh, sorry." Luo Wenzhou didn't know who he'd bumped into and was about to turn around when an arm came around from behind him, half embracing him as it helped him keep his balance.

Fei Du leaned forward lightly and quietly said, "No problem."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Instead of walking through the rest of the wide hallway, Fei Du just had to turn and squeeze through the narrow gap next to Luo Wenzhou, shoulders faintly brushing against him, hands deftly reaching out to measure the width of Luo Wenzhou's waist. Then he said, preening odiously, "Director Lu told me to pass along to you that if you're late again he'll deduct your wages."

Lang Qiao, wanting nothing but to see the world in chaos, said, "President Fei, the boss just asked where you'd gone to fool around."

"Oh," said Fei Du, smiling brightly, "you shouldn't carelessly besmirch the reputation of a man of Director Lu's age."

"Have you eaten?" Tao Ran gestured at a table next to him, laid out with breakfast. "Take whatever you like. I don't know what dietary restrictions you have."

Naturally Fei Du, who could put himself together first thing in the morning, wouldn't have lacked for time to eat a leisurely breakfast. So he waved a hand at Tao Ran. "No, I..."

The words "I've already eaten" were on the tip of his tongue.

Tao Ran added, "Wenzhou bought it. No need to be polite with him."

"...eat everything, no dietary restrictions." Fei Du wrenched his words around 180 degrees and casually picked up a red bean cake. "Thank you, shixiong."

Absolutely shameless!

Having witnessed the international standard in lying through one's teeth, Luo Wenzhou was simply speechless.

Xiao Haiyang sat at a desk in a corner, hearing the others' wholly unrestrained talk and laughter, not knowing how to blend in with them. He could only look on from the sidelines, feeling ill at ease.

Tao Ran aimlessly looked around and happened to see his predicament. Catching his gaze, Xiao Haiyang pushed at his glasses subconsciously, lowering his head as though looking for a sense of security, putting on a look of concentrating on his work to make his incompatibility with the group less awkward.

Tao Ran noticed his unnatural gestures. A moment later, when he was pouring himself some water, he strolled past Xiao Haiyang with his teacup in his hand. "Xiao Xiao—"

Xiao Haiyang subconsciously straightened his back in haste. "Deputy-Captain."

"No need to be so reserved." Tao Ran patted his shoulder and leaned casually on his desk. "This isn't Wang Hongliang's territory. Relax a little."

Xiao Haiyang had absolutely no intention of relaxing. He sat there like a coffin board, nervously listening to his admonition.

Tao Ran sighed soundlessly. His gaze swept over the two autopsy reports on Xiao Haiyang's desk—they were Zhou Junmao's and Dong Qian's. The two of them had plainly died in the car crash; on neither had either suspicious injuries or drugs been detected. On this subject, there was no question at all.

"We've already questioned Zhou Huaijin." In order to get Xiao Haiyang to relax, Tao Ran deliberately used work as a buffer, opening a subject of conversation.

"He said that he got into a taxi driven by one of the kidnapers, and while they were driving through a fairly desolate patch, another man

flagged them down, asking to carpool—that was the second kidnapper. Zhou Huaijin didn't think it was suitable and refused him, but he wasn't especially on his guard. The kidnapper who was pretending to flag a taxi used that as an excuse to keep pestering them, and with his accomplice's cooperation took Zhou Huaijin unawares... Hey, Xiao Xiao, you don't need to take notes. This isn't a formal meeting, I'm just chatting.”

Lang Qiao put the crispy fritter from her jianbing into her mouth, gnawing it like a squirrel, then put in a word. “I think there's a problem here. How could the kidnapper guarantee that Zhou Huaijin would get in his car?”

Tao Ran thought about it. “We reviewed the film from around the airport taxi stand. It was the small hours of the morning, and the attendant had already left. There weren't many passengers waiting for taxis, or many taxis looking for business. So there were no split lanes, only one line of passengers and one line of taxis. If the kidnapper had been waiting for an opportunity to cut in line, it shouldn't have been hard to pick up Zhou Huaijin.”

“You really could do that, but it's still not fool-proof. What if some lowlife cut in line?” said Lang Qiao. “You know, yesterday we took it in turns questioning Yang Bo until he couldn't take it anymore. He burst out and kicked up a fuss about how Zhou Huaijin hadn't been kidnapped at all. He'd put it all on himself.”

“That's impossible,” another criminal policeman said. “What's the sense for a wealthy heir in getting beat up and nearly swept away in a flood? And he discredited his own company. It's all over the city now, and all the departments concerned have entered the investigation.—Why would he want to make life difficult for himself?”

Lang Qiao said, “And what if the Zhou Clan isn't his own company?”

Tao Ran put down his teacup. “Where did you hear that groundless rumor?”

“What groundless rumor? I’ve spent ages going through old newspapers. Just a few months after the Zhou Clan’s founder—that Zhou Yahou—died, his widow quietly married Zhou Junmao. The older brother dies and the younger brother marries his sister-in-law, and the sister-in-law holds a great quantity of stock. Doesn’t sound very nice, does it? In a foreign Chinese-language tabloid I found, they talk about Zhou Junmao and his wife as though they were Ximen Qing and Li Ping’er⁴, and they say they’d definitely been sneaking around behind Zhou Yahou’s back when he was alive.” Lang Qiao knocked on the desk. “All right, friends, now comes the important part—I verified Zhou Yahou’s date of death and Zhou Huaijin’s date of birth, and found that they happened in the same year. That’s very subtle.”

“You mean that Zhou Junmao killed Zhou Yahou, then accidentally raised Zhou Yahou’s son, and now Zhou Huaijin has found out the truth and taken revenge on him?” Tao Ran shook his head. “Come back and concentrate on the details of the case. Didn’t I tell you to find potential witnesses from the airport taxi stand? You don’t do any work. You only guess blindly.”

“It’s not me guessing blindly,” said Lang Qiao. “When we got out of the Zhou house, the boss went to find Director Ceng to check on Zhou Junmao’s blood relationship to his three supposed sons—right, boss? Great minds think alike!”

Declining to comment, Luo Wenzhou walked into his own office. “Get to work and stop staring at me. I don’t have the results yet, anyway.”

Hearing this, the silent Xiao Haiyang suddenly put in a word. “But there’s absolutely no intersection between Dong Qian and Zhou

Huaijin. If Zhou Junmao's car crash was deliberate, how could Zhou Huaijin have gotten Dong Qian to give up his life?"

"But there's also no intersection between Dong Qian and the other Zhou Clan people," said Lang Qiao. "We've analyzed it. Supposing Zhou Junmao was murdered, there's no doubt someone wanted to pass it off as an accident, while Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping was done with great fanfare, as if they were afraid others wouldn't know—those are clearly contradictory. So I've been thinking, could it be that Zhou Junmao's death really was an accident, and Zhou Huaijin used this opportunity to make a fuss and destroy Zhou Junmao's reputation?"

Xiao Haiyang's expression was grave and pensive.

"We need a real basis, not wild stories." Tao Ran waved a hand, interrupting everyone's boundlessly roaming imaginations. "Enough. When you're finished eating, get to work."

The portraits of the kidnappers drawn according to Zhou Huaijin's descriptions had been issued, but they'd sunk like stones into the sea; there had been no echoes.

Thus far they hadn't found any witnesses, and the truck that had driven into the Baisha River had been stolen. Neither on it nor on the snatched taxi had they found any useful traces.

Zhou Junmao's car crash and Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping were both full of suspicious points, both hard to make headway on.

Aside from the Zhou family's driver, who'd been caught on the spot, everyone seemed very suspicious. But these suspicious individuals were unwilling to obediently confess; each time one opened his mouth it was to attack another. Allegations filled the air, and none of them were reliable.

So even Yang Bo, under heaviest suspicion from the police, had been gotten out by his lawyer the evening before.

Thus far, the Criminal Investigation Team seemed to have fallen into a bottleneck. They could only wait for the outcome of the financial investigation into the Zhou Clan, hoping to scoop up some motives and leads.

Luo Wenzhou read through all the suspects' statements.—Zhou Huaixin was like a mad dog, doing his utmost to bite Yang Bo; Hu Zhenyu, trying to gain the upper hand, said that Zhou Huaijin and Zheng Kaifeng had recently disagreed about the development of the company's strategy, and Zheng Kaifeng had gotten very close with Yang Bo in the last couple of years; Zheng Kaifeng meanwhile firmly denied that Yang Bo was Zhou Junmao's illegitimate son, always dodging, like a sly old fox...

Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin. Just then, the phone on his desk vibrated.

Luo Wenzhou looked down; it was Fei Du, sitting across from him.

In this small place, where every breath and bowel movement could be heard, Mr. Fei, who was so close to him, didn't open his mouth when he had something to say; he had to use the office's WiFi to send him a WeChat message: "Shixiong, can I take you out tonight?"

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him. Fei Du seemed to be focused on the screen of his laptop; if not for the suspicious trace of a smile at the corners of his lips, he would have looked absolutely upright and proper.

The "upright and proper" Mr. Fei moved his fingers, and another WeChat message appeared in front of Luo Wenzhou's eyes.

He said: "I like your abs."

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and looked at the never closed door of his office; in the half-public space, people made phone calls, came and went, wholly unobstructed; people often came by to grab a drink, and the talkative would say a few words in passing to Fei Du. Each of their movements took place in front of everyone's staring eyes...

And in this sort of environment, there was someone covertly harassing him.

Luo Wenzhou's throat was a little tight. He shot Fei Du a look from behind his monitor that gradually acquired a slightly carnivorous air.

Just as he was about to pick up the phone and respond, a completely oblivious colleague charged in and loudly said, "Captain Luo, this must be urgent. Director Ceng told me to give it to you!"

Luo Wenzhou nearly knocked his phone onto the floor.

The above-mentioned colleague entirely failed to notice anything unusual about the atmosphere. He cheerfully handed over the folder and left as quickly as he had come.

Luo Wenzhou gave a dry cough, pulled in his legs, which had been stretch out under the desk, and absent-mindedly opened the folder.

A moment later, his gaze hardened.

The results of the DNA test were clear. The two Zhou brothers were both definitely Zhou Junmao's biological children, while Yang Bo had no blood relationship to Zhou Junmao.

"Is Zhou Huaijin still in the hospital?" Luo Wenzhou thought about it, picked up his jacket, and stood up. "I'm going to have a chat with him."

Fei Du said, "I'll come with you."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him.

Fei Du gently licked his lips, and his gaze swept faintly around the office. While he didn't open his mouth, he seemed to be silently saying, "It's a little crowded in here."

Luo Wenzhou paused. He didn't respond, silently letting him follow.

No sooner had they left than Xiao Haiyang suddenly received a text message from Dong Xiaoqing.

Xiao Haiyang hadn't expected Dong Xiaoqing to voluntarily contact him. He was very taken aback. He saw Dong Xiaoqing's message: "Officer Xiao, could you please come to my house? I want to give you something."

Xiao Haiyang immediately called her back, but Dong Xiaoqing's phone was already off. He had a sudden ominous premonition.

"Deputy-Captain Tao," Xiao Haiyang said, shooting to his feet, "I have to go out."

CHAPTER 72 - Macbeth XIII

Theft, assault, murder... These behaviors had evident goals and consequences, and came with clearly stipulated penalties. Provided you could catch the wrongdoer and find the evidence, the victims would be able to attain some approximation of justice.

But this justice wasn't always possible to attain.

For example, someone throwing rocks on the highway for fun, leading to a crash in which an innocent passerby died; someone making off with the lid of a well and the power line to a streetlamp, leading to a person walking by at night falling into the well and losing their life; or the cream of society casually making some decision, leading to a destitute and homeless person losing hope and killing themselves... To whom should these go to ask for justice?

Among victims' family members, there were no distinctions between the noble and the lowly; neither did pain and indignation distinguish between the light and the heavy crime. If, seeing the harm they had caused, the killer could endure internal guilt and the torment of their conscience all their life, perhaps that could have been some slight consolation; unfortunately, the consciences of most people in the world weren't so profound. Faced with catastrophic self-condemnation, they would often be beaten down by self-paralysis and a variety of excuses—

I didn't do it on purpose.

I wasn't doing it to you.

I didn't expect this to be the outcome.

From a certain point of view, I'm a victim, too...

Then who put you in that position?

In the final analysis, fate was the murderous bitch.

There was something wrong with the City Bureau's service car. The steering wheel would never return to a neutral position, and the brakes were slow to respond; you always felt you were about to accidentally rear-end the car in front. The whole car gave off a dispirited air of preparing to go on strike. Luo Wenzhou had thought that a wastrel like President Fei, who took luxury cars for bumper cars, would bristle when he'd driven two steps. He hadn't expected that he would only frown slightly at the outset, then quickly become accustomed to the doddering service car, not seeming at all ill at ease.

Luo Wenzhou noticed his route and couldn't resist asking, "Where are we headed?"

"Heng'ai Private Hospital," said Fei Du. "Zhou Huaijin stayed in the public hospital for a day, then, on the evening of the day he finished giving his testimony, he moved to a private one his family holds shares in. His brother said the noisy surroundings weren't conducive to recovering from physical and mental trauma—I figure it was in order to avoid the media."

"Didn't he just get a little cut on his leg? Tao Ran said it was only a flesh wound. I vehemently condemn this conduct of wasting medical resources." Luo Wenzhou pointed at Fei Du. "You should all be more careful. Extravagance and corruption are often the first steps of moral ruin!"

There was also perhaps something wrong with Fei Du; he could never say more than three proper sentences at a time without his system nearly shutting down. At this point, he immediately saw an opening to get in some teasing. "That counts as extravagant? So having you sitting here in my car right now, am I being extravagant beyond rescue?"

Half of Luo Wenzhou's face was hidden by a pair of sunglasses. Hearing this, he couldn't resist sighing. Despite having palpably taken a hit, he forced out a deadpan tone. "Darling, only with a face as thick as mine could anyone put up with your priggish style of flirtation. Is this the sort of summons you used to talk little idiots into your bed before? No wonder you were so successful."

Fei Du averted his not at all well-disciplined gaze, smiling without speaking.

Yan City's public security authorities were all near the city center, not far from each other. With Fei Du's changed course, the two of them had to drive past the Procuratorate.

The air of early autumn was dry. The sky was high, the clouds thin, and the sunlight was unbridled. As the police car drove past the back door of the Procuratorate, they saw a middle-aged woman standing at the side of the road.

She was holding a bottle of water. Around her neck hung a display board. On the board were a few smiling, dimpled little girls. The woman's eyes were a little vague. Seeing a police car, her gaze subconsciously followed it, passing through some of the numbness of the apathy she had picked up.

"That's Qu Tong's mother," Luo Wenzhou told Fei Du after a look. "I saw her a few times when she came by to give testimony. How can she have changed so much after just a couple of months?"

Fei Du said, "Director Lu was just talking to me about that business today."

"Oh?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du paused, then, meaning something by it or not, continued the subject. “It may have been my mistake, but I thought the old fellow was testing my ideas.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression didn’t change. His eyes calmly turned, passing through the sheltering sunglasses to peek at Fei Du. “What ideas?”

“I don’t know. It sounded like...maybe he thought I was going to pay an assassin to butcher Su Luozhan and that crowd of pedophiles on behalf of the victims’ families.” Fei Du shrugged. “What, does it seem like my sense of justice is that strong?”

For a while, Luo Wenzhou didn’t answer. He changed his previously indolent posture, sitting up and crossing his legs, his body language clearly becoming more business-like.

“He also crossed off some old case files I’d requested for review,” said Fei Du. “I think I more or less understand. By coincidence, those cases all have some flaw. Some failed for lack of evidence, and in some the suspect submitted a diagnosis of mental disorder to show...”

“Fei Du,” said Luo Wenzhou, laughing, “was Chief Lu testing you, or are you try to get something out of me?”

At the sparsely trafficked intersection, the stoplight changed from yellow to red, and Fei Du slowly stopped the car.

“I do actually understand something of this. My shifu got drunk once and let it slip.” Luo Wenzhou was silent for a while, then said, “If I’m not mistaken, all the cases Director Lu crossed off must have been those transferred over during the original Picture Album Project?”

Fei Du hadn’t expected him to be so cooperative. He couldn’t resist giving him a look.

“Aside from the one who said he had a mental disorder, the others were all unresolved cases. At the time, the person leading the Picture Album Project combed through those cases from a different point of view, hoping to be able to find a breakthrough.”

Fei Du listened quietly.

“They were limited by the level of technology and by the passage of time. A lot of the evidence had vanished, and psychological profiling wasn’t suitable to supply evidence in court, whether from the point of view of maturity or from the point of view of credibility. In the end, these unresolved cases could only serve as research material; there was no way to bring the suspects to justice. The elders and experts involved in the Picture Album Project were stymied. Afterwards, one after another, the suspects in those cases met with misfortune.”

“What kind of misfortune?”

“Some had unusual accidents, some disappeared, and one committed suicide, leaving a note confessing to the crime. One by one, the names on their desks faded away. It was too much of a coincidence. If it wasn’t the heavens suddenly opening their eyes and bringing down retribution, then it could only be one circumstance—murder. The killer was highly intelligent and understood the victims even better than they understood themselves; furthermore, he was familiar with the police’s methods for working cases. 100%, it was one of our own people. The Picture Album Project was therefore called to an immediate halt, and everyone involved was suspended and investigated.”

At this point, Fei Du understood why, when Tao Ran had asked about the Picture Album Project at the table, Luo Wenzhou had avoided answering. The people involved in this case must all have been the cream of their profession or experts in related academic fields. If they hadn’t yet retired, by now they had probably become respected and prestigious elders and administrators.

“And after that?”

“After that, the investigation team fixed on a suspect,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I’m not too clear on the details, but there was no evidence to charge him with. This person was the key figure in the Picture Album Project. Many of my elders who participated in the project had been his students.”

Fei Du immediately asked, “Who was he?”

Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “I’m not sure. The Venerable Yang didn’t tell me. I tried investigating afterwards, and his file had been sealed. Though from what my shifu said, I think he’s dead.”

“You’re not sure,” Fei Du said quietly. “Meaning you investigated.”

Luo Wenzhou neither acknowledged it nor shook his head. “I’ve already said this much. It’s your turn to put your cards on the table.— Why did you get into Yan Security Uni? Why did you scheme so hard to be involved in the renewal of the Picture Album Project? Don’t tell me you had nothing better to do and were simply curious.”

Fei Du was silent.

The two of them sat side by side in the narrow front of the car, the distance of only a few fists separating them, but there seemed to be a thick, ice-cold wall between them.

Fei Du’s gaze flickered slightly. Luo Wenzhou seemed to hear the sound of one sluice gate after another opening in his mind as their master coolly weighed which security doors he needed to open, how much he needed to reveal, to obtain what he wanted.

When the car’s GPS showed that they were almost at their destination, Luo Wenzhou finally managed to pry a few words out of

Fei Du's mouth.

“You know I always suspected that my dad had something to do with my mom's death,” said Fei Du. “Even though you eliminated him from suspicion, I still had that feeling. I couldn't get rid of it. Theoretically, intuition is connected to a person's subconscious, and I wanted to know where my deep-rooted suspicion came from, so I tried to think of a way to trace back to when I was little.

“I remember my house had a basement that only my dad had the key to and even my mom couldn't go in, like Bluebeard's locked room. I plotted in secret for half a year to get the key and the code, then slipped inside...”

Luo Wenzhou acutely felt his voice stop at some complication.

“...I saw an open folder on his desk, and inside...uh...” At this point, Fei Du seemed to choke on air; he began to cough. He looked outside, closed the car window, and continued somewhat hoarsely, saying, “I'm sorry, I choked.—Inside was a paper. I gave it a rough look. I was little then, I only just knew how to read. I only vaguely remember terms like ‘vicious case’ and ‘psychological trauma.’ The name on the paper was ‘Fan Siyuan.’ I investigated him later, but found that he was a mystery. Aside from his teaching at Yan Security Uni, there were no other leads.”

Luo Wenzhou didn't reply. He could tell at once that Fei Du was talking nonsense—he'd seen all kinds of papers on his parents' desks when he was little, and aside from the time he'd gotten hit when he'd torn up his dad's meeting notes and folded them into an airplane, he couldn't remember a single punctuation mark of any of them.

“Why would a businessman have that in his secret study? Don't you think it's strange?” Fei Du drove the police car into Heng'ai Private Hospital's parking lot. “After I broke in, my dad stopped using the place and moved everything in it, not leaving anything behind. In all

these years I still haven't found where he put those things.—That mysterious paper is my last memory.”

“Oh,” Luo Wenzhou replied flatly. When the car had come to a stop, he unfastened his seatbelt. It was unclear whether he'd accepted Fei Du's part true, part false explanation. “If you want to ask about something after this, you can just ask me straight out. I like to say things clearly. If I can tell you, I'll answer right away. You don't need to peddle sex appeal. If I can't say, then even if my brain cells are missing half their chromosomes, I still won't say a word. You don't need to use such roundabout tactics against me.”

After a pause, Fei Du finally realized what he meant. “Wait, you think I asked you out because of this?”

Luo Wenzhou ignored him and went to open the door. Fei Du grabbed his shoulder.

“Shixiong.” Not only was Fei Du not angry, he was smiling. “I've wanted to ask for a long time, are you a little afraid of me?”

Luo Wenzhou nearly raised his eyebrows past the frames of his sunglasses. “Afraid of you? Why would I be afraid of you?”

“Afraid I'll squander your emotions, afraid I'm not in earnest, afraid you won't be able to control yourself with me and won't be able to end things...” One word at a time, Fei Du said, “Which of my guesses is right?”

Luo Wenzhou's expression sank. He lifted a hand to shake him off. “You're overthinking...”

Fei Du said, “Or afraid I'll make it so you can't get out of bed?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Never in his life had he seen someone who dared to boast so shamelessly. It really was an enriching experience.

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. He simply shut his mouth and pulled Fei Du out of the car.

As soon as the two of them left the parking lot, they saw vehicles belonging to every kind of news media surrounding Heng'ai Hospital's doors, and a crowd of people craning their necks to look. Suddenly, someone called out, "They're coming out!"

The sound of shutters clicking filled the air.

"Get ready, get ready!"

"Hey, guys, wait until they get closer."

"Don't crowd!"

"How inconvenient." Fei Du stretched out his head to look. "Zhou Huaixin didn't tell me his brother was getting out of the hospital today."

In fact, Zhou Huaijin's wound hadn't been as serious as the water he'd swallowed in the Baisha River. After a bit of treatment, he'd been ready to leave the hospital. But he was, after all, a spoiled young master who'd been born with a silver spoon in his mouth; of course his flesh was more tender than that of the ordinary person. He spent three days in his own hospital, then cautiously left out the door in a wheelchair.

Zhou Huaixin had come personally pushing the wheelchair to pick him up. He'd been prepared for the mess at the doors. Wearing an enormous article of black clothing, he crudely sheltered Zhou Huaijin behind a human wall. Then he took off the non-mainstream jacket

and screened Zhou Huaijin with it, blocking him from the cameras behind them.

Zhou Huaijin laughed good-humoredly. “Let them take pictures if they want to. There’s no need to shield me.”

Zhou Huaixin went along pushing him out. He was silent for a moment, then said, “Ge, don’t you want to say anything to me?”

Zhou Huaijin’s demeanor was unsurpassed. Even sitting in a wheelchair, his face haggard, he was still very pleasing to the eye and mind. He really didn’t seem like Zhou Huaixin’s full-blood brother. “Say what?”

Zhou Huaixin looked behind himself; among the racket, he quietly said to Zhou Huaijin, “Ge, no matter what, no matter what you’ve done... You’re still my brother.”

“What are you saying? If I’m not your brother, then who am I?” Zhou Huaijin said after a pause, laughing. As he spoke, he reached out a hand towards Zhou Huaixin.

Like an ill-favored skinny dog, Zhou Huaixin stared at his hand for a while, then, as if he had been well-trained, lowered his head and let Zhou Huaijin stroke the top of his head lightly. His tense shoulders gradually relaxed, and on his living ghost’s face something that could have been called a peaceful smile appeared.

Zhou Huaijin warmly said, “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Zhou Huaixin nodded meekly, draped the jacket he’d just removed over Zhou Huaijin, and carefully pushed the wheelchair, avoiding the rocks on the ground.

A pair of eyes watched them from afar, thinking, *How tender.*

What did it matter if they gave the clueless outsiders a show? They were fabulously wealthy; there were bodyguards and a luxury car to take them on their way, in the grandest style. Let them take a few pictures today; tomorrow they'd go on the news and say, "The inheritance dispute is nonexistent, the Zhou Clan's future is as secure as the brothers' affection is deep."

No one would ever know what filth lay beneath their bright and fresh skins. Everyone was waiting for these social celebrities's pretentious performance; who would worry about the human lives hidden between the lines?

There were people who, from birth to death, were only worthy of appearing at the edge of the frame of someone else's news.

But why?

Zhou Huaixin's phone rang. After a pause, he picked it up. "Master Fei?"

"Look up. Across from you."

At his words, Zhou Huaixin searched all around, then saw Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou at the parking lot across from him.

"The police want to talk to you and your brother about something." Fei Du beckoned to him. "How about it, can you extricate yourself? Should we arrange a place first?"

"All right, let's..." Zhou Huaixin looked around and found that the media representatives who had been lying in wait for them had turned their cameras in another direction. There was a young woman around twenty holding a bouquet. Not coming over, she timidly bowed towards the brothers from a distance.

“What’s going on now?” Zhou Huaixin frowned. “Master Fei, wait a bit. I’ll call you back.”

A bodyguard jogged over, bent, and said to Zhou Huaijin, “President Zhou, this young lady is a relative of the responsible driver in old President Zhou’s car crash. She hasn’t shown her face before, but today she somehow learned that you were getting out of the hospital and came over to find you. I don’t know what she wants.”

The bodyguard hadn’t yet finished when the girl began to stammer. “I’m the only person left in my family. With my dad causing this kind of accident, we could ruin ourselves and still not be able to make amends... I...I wanted to come over and have a look, to personally apologize to you, maybe you won’t think it’s worth much...”

Zhou Huaixin looked at Zhou Huaijin.

“Tell her to come over here,” said Zhou Huaijin. “She’s not the one who hit him. I feel pretty bad for her.”

Zhou Huaixin didn’t think this was anything too unusual. His brother consistently showed this kind and courteous behavior when he was outside. He turned to say a few words to the bodyguards, and the girl was allowed in as the others murmured resentfully.

Across the street, Fei Du narrowed his eyes. “What’s going on with that girl? She looks a little familiar.”

“I think it’s...Dong Xiaoqing?” Luo Wenzhou stared, then he fished out his phone—Tao Ran had just sent him a text message asking for leave, with the reason that Dong Xiaoqing claimed to have something to give the police, and he was accompanying Xiao Haiyang to go see her. “What’s she doing here? Isn’t she...”

Some sort of horrifying intuition leapt up Luo Wenzhou’s spine. He had no time to consider. He put a hand on the guard rail around the

parking lot and leapt over.

Fei Du stared. Then he quickly followed.

At this time, Dong Xiaoqing had already arrived in front of Zhou Huaijin, carrying her flowers. Her face was pale, and her body was trembling faintly. She carefully bowed to both Zhou Huaixin and Zhou Huaijin and twice said, “I’m sorry.”

Zhou Huaijin reached out to take the flowers in her arms. “I know it was an accident, young lady. It’s all right.”

Luo Wenzhou dashed to the hospital doors, but he was blocked by the heap of media and bodyguards. “Police! Everyone get out of the way!”

It seemed that tears began to glitter in Dong Xiaoqing’s eyes. She bent and pushed the enormous bouquet of scented lilies towards Zhou Huaijin.

Zhou Huaixin reached out a hand to block her. “My brother is allergic to flow...”

Before he could speak the “ers,” he saw something flash behind the flowers. In that split-second, Zhou Huaixin had no time to think about what it was. He instinctively pushed away Zhou Huaijin’s wheelchair, and a cold sensation pressed against his underbelly, followed by a sharp stab of pain spreading from it. Zhou Huaijin fell to the ground along with his wheelchair. He looked back in disbelief —

Dong Xiaoqing fiercely stabbed the melon knife into Zhou Huaixin’s abdomen, hysterically crying, “I’ve come to send you on your way!”

At the same time, Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang, who had just reached the Wave’s Bend Estate, were entirely unable to drive the police car in

—the estate was surrounded by fire trucks.

Xiao Haiyang swiftly looked up. Dense smoke was billowing above the houses. Along with the firefighters' back-and-forth struggle with their high-pressure water cannons, the sounds of cursing and crying voices rose and fell...

His heart gave a lurch.

He couldn't see clearly where the fire was, but it seemed to be near Dong Qian's house!

CHAPTER 73 - Macbeth XIV

Dong Xiaoqing was a young girl. Who knew where she got so much strength? She tugged and yanked fiercely, pulling the knife out of Zhou Huaixin.

Her eyes were red. She looked deranged. Flailing the bloody knife, like a yaksha in human form, she charged at the stunned crowd.

The tightly-packed crowd competed to out-scream each other. Aside from a couple of warriors who ducked into corners to recklessly take pictures, most of the people didn't want to lose their lives over a job. They pushed and shoved, scattering in all directions, people going every which way, becoming a perfect human barrier, blocking the Zhou family's baffled bodyguards.

Luo Wenzhou's adrenaline was boiling, nearly steaming out of the top of his head. He didn't think at all, only instantly gave chase. After he'd run a dozen meters, his lagging consciousness finally caught up with his swift legs, and he remembered Fei Du. He turned back to look.

Exceeding Luo Wenzhou's expectations, Fei Du hadn't fainted and hadn't thrown up. He was only somewhat stiffly standing next to Zhou Huaixin. The expression in his eyes, without his glasses to block them, was only a little vague. He was still clear-headed. He stood facing Luo Wenzhou in profile, gaze deliberately avoiding the surrounding blood. He glimpsed Luo Wenzhou out of the corner of his eye and even calmly waved at him.

For a moment, Fei Du's fear of blood didn't seem very grave.

Luo Wenzhou thought that something was off but he didn't have any time to think carefully. Dong Xiaoqing had already passed through the crowd and was about to escape from Heng'ai Hospital. Luo

Wenzhou roughly assessed her direction, avoided the crowd by pressing close to the wall, and stepped over the planters at the side of the road, giving chase like a martial artist in a film.

From Dong Xiaoqing's murderous attack to her smooth escape, everything had happened too fast.

The inside of Fei Du's head buzzed. The blood spreading from Zhou Huaixin's underbelly seemed to be a heavy hammer, banging on his chest, banging so hard his soul was jolting inside his flimsy body.

Though it was a little inconvenient to get sick at blood, in fact there weren't many opportunities to see blood in daily life. Occasionally he would get a small cut, feel nauseated for a while, and then it would pass.

Fei Du didn't know how long it had been since he had been directly faced with a scene like this. His ears roared, and his limbs nearly lost control, his fingertips convulsing as if in reflex. All his muscles and bones pulled taut in an instant, making him stay upright and seem clear-headed, while in fact his consciousness was blurred.

Fei Du clenched his fists tightly, joints cracking. He forced his gaze away and, amidst the irregular lurching of his heart, went towards Zhou Huaijin in big steps.

The fallen wheelchair lay on one of Zhou Huaijin's legs. He was sitting numbly and helplessly on the ground. The next instant, he was lifted by his collar.

"It's likely his internal organs have been injured. Abdominal bleeding is very dangerous," Fei Du said to him, voice cold and rushed. "Do you want him to live? If you do, hurry up and call your hospital's best first-aid personnel out here. President Zhou, I know you aren't lame, stand up!"

Zhou Huaijin tottered, then stood firm. He stared at Fei Du in alarm for two seconds. Then he seemed to wake from a dream. He grabbed his phone.

Zhou Huaixin was instinctively flopping on the ground like a gutted fish. He was surrounded by a crowd of people, but none of them dared to rashly touch him. The more he struggled, the more blood there was. Fei Du heard Zhou Huaijin babbling to get people over, then saw him toss the phone aside and throw himself at Zhou Huaixin, words pouring messily out of his mouth, useless phrases like “look at me,” and “it’s all right.” Some emotion made Fei Du raise his sweat-drenched eyelashes and meet Zhou Huaixin’s gaze.

Zhou Huaixin’s eyes were growing dimmer and dimmer, his gaze more and more unfocused. In Fei Du’s eyes, he underwent a bizarre change—he became a pile of unfamiliar organic waste.

Fei Du clearly felt that he was split into two parts. Half of him was nauseated and dizzy because of the blood ceaselessly pouring out of Zhou Huaixin’s wound, while the other half, like an animal that had strayed from the pack, was watching Zhou Huaixin’s eyes, unable to connect this dying person to the Zhou Huaixin he knew. Numb among the others’ lamentations of anxiety and pain, he instinctively tried to fit in, futilely searching for what the ordinary person should theoretically feel.

But however he searched, it wasn’t there.

“Everyone fears death, but actually what they fear is only the unknown. Death itself isn’t painful at all. There’s even pleasure in it. You must have personally experienced it.

“Have you noticed the eyes of those animals as they approach death? That’s the expression of having found the truth—the truth is, ‘life’ is an illusion manufactured by your nervous system. It’s a false self-awareness.

“A person’s consciousness is like flowing water, changing incessantly, and death is the last direction it flows in. Unless you can understand or control the whole process of certain changes in your consciousness, your life doesn’t belong to you. Things that don’t belong to you deviate from your perception every time they change. Every moment is death. The only thing that doesn’t change is this sack of skin made of carbohydrates. If you feel an emotional connection to the sack of skin, isn’t it like anthropomorphizing the pork on your plate? It’s a sort of delusional disorder.”

The thick scent of blood poured into Fei Du’s nasal cavity, and all of his organs roiled. The first-aid personnel, foreheads covered in sweat, charged out of Heng’ai Hospital, surrounded Zhou Huaixin, and began emergency treatment. After an interval they took him away as quick as the wind. Fei Du followed the whole way to the emergency room. Then at last he could stand it no longer. He abandoned Zhou Huaijin and turned into a restroom.

Dong Xiaoqing had murderously attacked a person in front of a crowd. She was covered in blood. Her hair tie had broken, and her hair, meticulously styled into large curls, hung loose behind her. The perfectly set hair bobbed up and down in the wind, from time to time tangling on the horrifying weapon in her hand.

“Dong Xiaoqing!” Relying on his height and long legs, Luo Wenzhou was constantly closing the distance between himself and Dong Xiaoqing and had already run out onto the road after her. “Stop! Do you really think you can run!”

Perhaps Dong Xiaoqing was already worn out. Her steps had slowed. Hearing him, she suddenly stopped. She turned back and looked at Luo Wenzhou, raising the knife towards him.

Luo Wenzhou wasn’t afraid of her wielding the knife and stabbing him. From his point of view, there wouldn’t be anything frightening

about ten knife-wielding Dong Xiaoqings. But he really had no ideas as to the young lady's motive and was afraid that in her unstable mental state she would kill herself. He quickly stopped a few steps away from her.

“Calm down.” Luo Wenzhou pressed his hands down, looking at Dong Xiaoqing with a gaze that was as steady and gentle as possible. Trying to stabilize her, he spouted some nonsense on the spot. “Listen to me, young lady, the person you stabbed just now didn't die, the consequences won't be grave. Don't be afraid. It's all right.”

Dong Xiaoqing was still under psychological stress, but she was starting to come around. Her hand holding the knife was shaking, whether out of fear or regret that she hadn't stabbed Zhou Huaixin a second time.

“I'm a police officer,” Luo Wenzhou said in a deep voice, getting out his ID and holding it up. “If there's anything you need, you can tell me.”

Dong Xiaoqing backed up a step. Her gaze finally focused on Luo Wenzhou. A moment later, the mania on her twisted, bloody face gradually calmed, and only deep-rooted grief and indignation were left behind. The rims of her eyes reddened. She was like a mute; the whole world was full of people who couldn't hear her voice, and when she happened to encounter an ear that deigned to inquire into her circumstances, she didn't know where to start.

Luo Wenzhou carefully tried getting a step closer. “Relax. Don't keep holding up that knife. Isn't it heavy? It's very dangerous.”

“I...” At his words, Dong Xiaoqing subconsciously lowered the point of the knife a little and incoherently said, “My papa, he...”

Luo Wenzhou kept an eye on the knife in her hand, cautiously planning how he would wrest it away from her. As he calmly

approached Dong Xiaoqing, he continued speaking. “Your dad was wronged. We all know that. In the future, we’ll restore his good name.”

He didn’t expect that Dong Xiaoqing’s tears would come spilling down when she heard these words. “My papa... My dad wasn’t wronged.”

Luo Wenzhou stared. “What did you say?”

“He’s one of those people, too. They...”

Just then, a fierce wind swept by. With no warning at all, a little sedan appeared out of nowhere and accelerated after turning a corner, running right into Dong Xiaoqing. There was no way Luo Wenzhou could have reacted. Dong Xiaoqing brushed past him as she flew up; the words had hardly had time to leave her throat.

The shards of the front windshield were like raindrops blown by a gale, spraying right in Luo Wenzhou’s face, and the responsible car, with no hesitation, once again accelerated, flooring the gas pedal, charging right towards Luo Wenzhou. Luo Wenzhou used what must have been primordial force to dodge, but one of the car’s side mirrors still swiped him. The side mirror broke off on the spot. Ignoring the pain, he instinctively tensed his muscles and shielded his head, taking the opportunity to roll towards a siding far from the main road.

The perpetrator was extremely experienced indeed. Knowing his risk would increase with every second he lingered, he didn’t waste time turning around and renewing his attack. He ran into Luo Wenzhou in passing, saw he hadn’t killed him, then decisively gave up.

The road at Heng’ai Hospital’s back door was rather desolate, and this wasn’t rush hour. The road was empty. The demented car with its shattered windshield whistled past, leaving no trace!

Half of Luo Wenzhou's body had been numbed by the collision. It was a good while before he struggled to climb to his feet. Only then did the others successively react and rush over. As he went towards Dong Xiaoqing, he contacted the City Bureau's office. "Nanshan Road at Heng'ai Hospital's back entrance, a white sedan, model XX, license plate Yan CXXXXX, send out a notice to the whole city... No, the whole county, the whole country. Even if he's driven into the Pacific Ocean, cast an anchor and haul him back!"

The shape of Dong Xiaoqing's head had changed. One shoe had flown directly across the street. Her bare hands and feet were covered in dirt. She was badly mangled; she couldn't have been more dead.

"Fucking asshole." Luo Wenzhou couldn't resist uttering a curse. His brow ridge itched, and he went to rub it, his hand coming away covered in blood—he'd been cut by the spraying glass.

Luo Wenzhou took a few deep, violent breaths. "What's going on with Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang? Did they get to Dong Xiaoqing's house?"

Lang Qiao had first unquestioningly carried out his orders. Now she finally had a chance to speak. "I was just about to report to you, Deputy Tao just called saying there was no one at Dong Xiaoqing's house, and it was on fire... Boss, what's going on here? Also, why did you want a notice on that car?"

Luo Wenzhou squeezed his eyes shut.

The people who had just been frightened into scattering all over by Dong Xiaoqing's attack gathered together once again. They didn't dare to approach, only stood at both sides of the road, pointing and gesturing.

Dong Xiaoqing had fallen in broad daylight.

The girl's temper had been fierce, and she had been unyielding. On the one hand, she'd claimed to be prepared to ruin her family compensating the victims; on the other hand, she had incessantly defended her father's reputation.

So why would she run the desperate risk of assassinating Zhou Huaijin?

And why would she contact Xiao Haiyang beforehand?

What had she wanted to do? What had she wanted to give Xiao Haiyang?

And then there was what she'd said just before her death: "He's one of those people, too."

Who were *those people*?

Who had been so bold as to commit murder right in front of a criminal policeman?

For a time Luo Wenzhou couldn't quite catch his breath.

Meanwhile, in Heng'ai Hospital, Fei Du had nearly vomited up his guts. His hands shook as he rinsed his mouth.

Fei Du irritably unbuttoned two buttons of his shirt and splashed cold water onto his face, pushing his wet hair back. He put two breath mints in his mouth. When the mints had completely dissolved, he finally got up the strength to walk upright. Fei Du glanced apathetically at his white-faced self in the mirror and stuck his incessantly trembling hands into his pockets.

Zhou Huaijin was bent over, curled up on a hospital bench, nervily wringing his blood-soaked hands. All the veins in his neck were standing out. Suddenly, a wet paper towel descended from the

heavens. Zhou Huaijin looked up numbly. He saw that Fei Du had walked up to him, but he wasn't looking at him, only at the operating room light.

“Go ahead and wipe them off.” Fei Du spoke first. “I think President Zhou isn't very familiar with me, but I've occasionally gone out partying with Huaixin.”

Zhou Huaijin pulled himself together, forcing himself to answer. “I know. Mr. Fei, I've looked forward to...”

“I'm the one who's looked forward to meeting you,” Fei Du interrupted. “Zhou Huaixin can't get off the subject of his brother for three sentences at a time. Every time he brings up President Zhou, he sounds like an unweaned baby. I've heard so much about you my ears are going to grow callouses.”

Zhou Huaijin took a deep breath, his hands lacing together tightly.

Just then, for some reason, a few medical workers hastily ran past them. Their movements startled Zhou Huaijin. He stood up fearfully and stared towards the operating room for an age. As if he could neither sit nor stand still, he wandered back and forth where he was. The refined mask that usually hid his face had vanished entirely. His hair was a mess, his hands involuntarily pressed together, as if begging the mercy of some unknown god. He whispered in self-consolation, “It's all right, it's all right... It'll definitely be all right.”

“When such a long knife goes in and out, it's very unlikely to be all right,” Fei Du heartlessly interrupted him again. “President Zhou, while it's said that life and death are ruled by fate, he still did it for you.”

Zhou Huaijin's shoulders fell feebly. “I know, I just...”

“I’m not talking about him getting in front of the knife for you,” Fei Du said somewhat aggressively. “President Zhou, you know what I mean. I’m talking about the whole course of this thing in its entirety. —Do you believe there will be retribution for those who fool the whole world? If you keep on fooling, it’s possible that that bad luck will become reality.”

Zhou Huaijin shook.

“Do you want to start with how you planned your own kidnapping?” Fei Du said.

A few black-clothed expressionless bodyguards drew close, tensely circling Fei Du.

There was a faint satirical smile at the corners of Fei Du’s pale lips; he entirely disregarded these shoddy goods—if there’d been any use to them, Zhou Huaixin’s life wouldn’t be hanging by a thread in the emergency room.

After a good while, Zhou Huaijin waved a hand and spoke quietly. “You’re right. All of you can scatter. Get out,” Zhou Huaijin said to the bodyguards. “Let me talk to Mr. Fei.”

Fei Du walked over to a vending machine and bought two bottles of water. He passed one to Zhou Huaijin.

“I found the people.” Zhou Huaijin drank half the bottle in one gulp, took a deep breath, then spoke without beginning or end. “Including using Hengda for support. That was also my choice.”

“Weren’t you afraid the police would get there late and your fake drowning in the river would turn into a real one?”

“There were people looking on from the sidelines. If anything had gone wrong, they would have rescued me. The people we found were

all locals, familiar with the roads. It wouldn't have been easy for the police to catch them—and even if they did catch them, there was no need to worry. I could just have given evidence that they were kind-hearted passersby.”

That really was very convenient.

Fei Du nodded. “You're hardly ever in the country, so you wouldn't be very familiar with the terrain. I suppose it was Hu Zhenyu who got you in touch with the kidnappers? Why did you choose the Baisha area?”

“I came up with the plan and made the decisions. The others were only following my orders. There's no need to drag in others.” Zhou Huaijin paused, then forced himself to nod. “I chose Baisha first because it was on the road from the airport, and second because the person helping me was a local. Also, we didn't have any obvious connections to Baisha. We were unlikely to be suspected.”

Fei Du said, “The person helping you?”

“Just a friend I did a little favor for once.” Zhou Huaijin shook his head. “Nothing to do with this thing.

“I... When I suddenly heard the news about his death, I felt that there was an opportunity,” Zhou Huaijin said hoarsely. “I'm only a bright and shiny mascot in the conglomerate. Zhou Junmao had covered everything up. Even though he was dead, there was still his henchman Zheng Kaifeng. I wouldn't get my chance to speak.”

Fei Du said, “I'd have thought that from the standpoint of identity and experience, President Zhou would be better placed than Yang Bo.”

“Identity?” Zhou Huaijin laughed bitterly. “What identity? I'm only a fig leaf.”

CHAPTER 74 - Macbeth XV

“My mother was pregnant with me when she married Zhou Junmao. I’m her son with her previous husband. Of course, they told others I was born ‘premature.’” Zhou Huaijin laughed bitterly. “Outsiders all thought Zhou Junmao was capable, dedicated, public-spirited, patriotic—a standard of virtue and prestige. Mr. Fei, I don’t suppose you also think that?”

Fei Du looked up in faint surprise.

“Oh, I’ve heard that old Mr. Fei never remarried after losing his wife.” Zhou Huaijin had evidently misunderstood the reason for his surprise. He spread his hands a little self-mockingly. “What, are these things very hard for you to understand?”

Fei Du said quietly, “So you’re saying you’ve performed a paternity test?”

Zhou Huaijin shrugged. “What would be the point? I’ve known since I was little that I wasn’t his biological son. Zhou Junmao wouldn’t have gotten it wrong himself. If he hadn’t been sure, he would have done a test. I had no illusions about him. Huaixin is his true only son, and he still didn’t care about him at all, never mind me.—You may laugh, but the fact that he never poisoned me is the result of a many-sided game of chess.”

Fei Du’s hands were still trembling uncontrollably. He had to apply some force to twist the cap off the ice-cold water bottle. At the same time, he glanced at Zhou Huaijin as though nothing were the matter.—Though Zhou Huaijin looked very young, from the date recorded on his ID, he was already thirty-eight.

It seemed that Zhou Huaijin wasn’t too clear on the fact that paternity testing technology hadn’t been widely available thirty-eight

or thirty-nine years ago.

“Are you hinting that Zhou Junmao,” Fei Du said, considering his wording, “would have used some not very appropriate means?”

“If not, how else would my biological father have died? Did he really die of a heart attack?” Zhou Huaijin said coldly. “His right-hand man Zheng Kaifeng was a local thug. Birds of a feather flock together. There’s nothing they wouldn’t have done.”

“How do you know?”

“My mother told me before her death. When she was young, she was unsatisfied with my biological father’s desire for control and some of his...not very easy to accept hobbies, but she didn’t want to divorce him. Meeting all kinds of seduction, she started an affair with Zhou Junmao. Then, egged on by those two pieces of scum Zhou and Zheng, she conspired with them to do this. But could an adulterous couple find eternal happiness?” Zhou Huaijin, temperate as jade, showed the barbs that had been hidden under his skin for decades. “It’s ridiculous. Not long after, she found out that this man was even worse than the last scumbag, and she inconveniently had me. Zhou Junmao always thought that she had evidence of their conspiracy to murder Zhou Yahu, and because of that—and because of the company shares she held—he held his nose and pretended I didn’t exist.”

Fei Du’s misgivings were growing heavier and heavier. “Thought?”

“My mother had a secret safe deposit box at a private bank. No one but her and her designated heir could open it. That was the key she used to keep Zhou Junmao under lock. Later it fell into my hands.” Zhou Huaijin sighed. “Zhou Junmao is dead now anyway, so I can tell the truth.—In the safe deposit box there was only a package of expired emergency heart medication. Otherwise, would I have had

any use for such inadequate and serpentine means to ruin his reputation?”

“You say you’re Zhou Yahou’s son.” Fei Du slowly asked, “Who knows that?”

“Zhou Dalong was virtuous and moral on the surface, but he considered himself to be extremely potent. How could he let others know he was raising another man’s child? Aside from Zheng Kaifeng, I think everyone else would have been in the dark. Though Huaixin...” At this point, Zhou Huaijin again looked up at the operating room light. He paused, then said with difficulty, “Since he was little, Huaixin has been more sensitive than other children. I think he must have guessed, he just never said. That child...I watched that child grow up. My mother was tormented all her life by that murder, and she was getting on in age when she had Huaixin. Postpartum depression made her nervous problems worse. She had no attention to spare to take care of him. In the Zhou house, aside from my mother, a stupid murderer, he was the only person I had a blood tie to. He was so small, so innocent. Even though that person’s blood flowed in his veins...he only had me, and I only had him.”

This pair of brothers had grown up in a twisted home. With evident reasons to hate each other, they had been forced over time to depend on each other for survival.

Zhou Huaijin pressed his hands together and held them to his forehead. “If there is such a thing as retribution, why would it fall on him?”

Fei Du knew that, according to social etiquette, he should now reach out a hand and pat the red-eyed Zhou Huaijin on the shoulder a couple of times to indicate consolation, but his heart was full of indifferent weariness. Like a cold-blooded animal with a slow metabolism, he couldn’t be bothered to reach out that hand.

He tilted his head and studied Zhou Huaijin. He responded in a flat voice: “You just said that Huaixin was the old man’s ‘only son’—so you already know that Yang Bo has no blood relationship to Zhou Junmao?”

“You’ve investigated Yang Bo and Zhou Junmao’s relationship? The police in this country move pretty fast.” Zhou Huaijin blinked hard a few times, striving to calm his feelings. He said hoarsely, “Yang Bo... He’s very superficial, ambitious but incapable, trails after Zheng Kaifeng every day, professing to be Zheng Kaifeng’s student, when in reality he’s only learned the surface-level skills. Why would such a person, without qualifications or abilities, his background and his academic record unremarkable, be promoted to such a position at a young age? Of course people started guessing, and that’s when the ‘illegitimate son’ rumors started to flow.

“The rumors were in fierce circulation for a while, but neither Zhou Junmao himself, nor Yang Bo’s backer Zheng Kaifeng, said anything to clarify. As time went on, the joker might really have thought he was an unacknowledged prince.” Zhou Huaijin twisted the bottle of water and shook his head. “He secretly collected his own DNA and Zhou Junmao’s, privately found a not too aboveboard paternity testing organization... He’d even do that by stealth. Some people really aren’t suited by nature to mount the stage.”

Following along, Fei Du said, “You discovered that he’d privately found someone to perform a paternity test.”

“I knew the person in charge of the illegal workshop from playing basketball with him, something along the lines of a golf buddy,” said Zhou Huaijin. “A typical example of ‘white trash,’ a scammer. He knows quite a few people’s secrets. He seems like a gourd with a sealed mouth that can keep anything contained, but actually in private deals he’ll give up anything, as long as you can meet his price.”

“He told you about this business—”

“You ought to say, he gave me this business as a free gift,” said Zhou Huaijin. “What I bought was another service. I had him swap in a sample from Huaixin.”

Yang Bo, a poor devil who had nothing, had somehow been recognized by the big boss. Most likely he'd felt proud and grateful, perhaps even somewhat awed. He must have conscientiously followed the man he owed a debt of gratitude to, daily exhausting all his resources to make himself seem less average; perhaps he would even have taken the old man with his legendary life as his idol.

But what if he'd found out one day that perhaps all he'd obtained had only been because he was his “idol”'s legal heir?

At first, he would inevitably have been shocked, then quickly hateful, because this meant that his mother had betrayed his father and their family, while his idol had betrayed his trust.

But perhaps this person had a natural weakness and baseness. His none-too-firm hatred couldn't last long. He would quickly have some different thoughts—it turned out that he should have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, on an equal footing with those “youthful talents” who relied on their fathers to make their way.

Were Zhou Huaijin, Zhou Huaixin, and all their strutting friends in any position to look down on him?

Why wouldn't Zhou Junmao acknowledge him?

He was Zhou Junmao's son, and Zheng Kaifeng's protégé. Everyone knew that relations between Zheng Kaifeng and the Zhou Clan's eldest son were strained. They were sons of the same father, so why did he have to work for a living instead of having a share in the profits of the enormous family property?

To say it another way—couldn't the Zhou Clan be his?

“So it was you,” Fei Du said quietly. “He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear his hopes ’bove wisdom, grace, and fear.”

Zhou Huaijin closed his eyes, lips moving faintly, almost inaudibly adding the next line: “And you all know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy.”

Fei Du looked at him with a trace of ridicule. “Goddess Hecate, you've expended a great deal of magic to make Yang Bo think he's Zhou Junmao's illegitimate son, give him unlimited hopes. To what end?”

“Yang Bo is one of Zheng Kaifeng's people,” said Zhou Huaijin. “I don't know why Zheng Kaifeng would value him, but the old thing really does treat the joker as his confidant. When Yang Bo was promoted, it was Zheng's opinion against everyone else's. Even Zhou Dalong had some veiled complaints—though in the end he also accepted it. It's a contest, and I don't have enough people or resources. I had to think of some way to break up my opponents' alliance. I needed to stir up Yang Bo's ambition, use him to drive a wedge between Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng. I wanted to make them all pay the price.”

Fei Du looked at him coolly.

“It's true. At this point, I have no need to trick you.” Zhou Huaijin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Mr. Fei, although my methods haven't been very aboveboard, it's not as if I used a violent criminal's methods to get revenge. You can criticize me from the standpoint of virtue, but you must admit that what I've done isn't altogether inexcusable.”

“President Zhou,” Fei Du said slowly, “it's not for me to say whether you should be criticized, nor whether you should pay a price. To start

with, we'll see how to define your conduct of wasting police resources cooking up such a big farce. Next we'll see what the results of the investigation into Zhou Junmao's car crash say."

"I didn't expect that Zhou Junmao would die in a car crash. According to my script, the DNA appraisal workshop's head would have told Yang Bo the results, and I would have 'accidentally' gotten ahold of them and run to Yang Bo to excoriate him. First I'd get him angry, then I'd get flustered and assert to him, 'Dad won't acknowledge you.' I understand Yang Bo. He's very superficial. Meeting with that kind of attack, he'd start to ramble. If my luck was good, I could get some recordings that would be useful in the future. Meanwhile Yang Bo would have been provoked. It's likely he wouldn't have been able to hold back, wanting to show me by getting himself 'brought back into the fold.' I had follow-up arrangements for that.—But you can see now that Zhou Junmao died at the wrong time. I had to abort my plan when it had just started."

"When you heard the news of Zhou Junmao's death, you realized at once that while it had upset your plan, it could also be an opportunity. So you hinted to Zhou Huaixin that he should call the police, attract their notice and the notice of the public using Yang Bo as a pretext. Then, when the car crash had been thrown under suspicion, you put together a fine game, making Zhou Junmao's death even more bewildering. First you shifted the blame onto Yang Bo, and then you used the business of the public welfare funds to lead the police to investigate Zheng Kaifeng. While the Zhou Clan was unstable, you'd wipe out your two enemies at one fell swoop, at the same time whipping up the flames of public opinion to completely destroy Zhou Junmao's reputation—"

Zhou Huaijin's throat moved. He didn't expound, as if silently acknowledging it.

Fei Du said, "Weren't you afraid that the Zhou Clan wouldn't recover from the attack, and when it came to you, it would be a shambles?"

“The current Zhou Clan is Zhou Junmao’s ‘Zhou,’” Zhou Huaijin said quietly. “Whether he’s living or dead, it’s inextricably linked to his reputation. It’s another part of him. I wanted to destroy his gilded image. As for the rest... Isn’t it all worldly possessions? Mr. Fei, if you’d also had a thorn in your heart from the time you were little, would you not dare to pull it out because you were afraid of being reduced to poverty and ruin? Money, things... To people like us, sometimes they really don’t have the power to attract.”

Hearing the words “a thorn in your heart,” Fei Du’s fingers tightened even further, nearly twisting the water bottle. Just then, a few medical personnel carrying plasma for a transfusion darted past in front of them, hurrying towards the operating room. There seemed to be an ominous rhythm to their steps.

Zhou Huaijin shot to his feet. “Doctor, my little brother, he...”

The Zhou family was Heng’ai Hospital’s major financial backer. A staff member who had the look of a nurse said tactfully, “Set your mind at ease, we’re doing everything we can to save him.”

Zhou Huaijin understood the implication. His steps tottered.

Fei Du took his elbow. “Mr. Zhou, is Huaixin also a worldly possession to you?”

Zhou Huaijin looked like someone had stepped on his tail, his expression altering abruptly. But Fei Du was unwilling to let him off. “When you and your henchman Hu Zhenyu were echoing each other, he’d already realized that something was going on, but he didn’t make it public. He even cooperated in helping you two play the game down to the end. Do you know what he said to Hu Zhenyu?”

“I don’t...”

“He said he didn’t understand any of your business, he only wanted you safe and sound.” Fei Du’s voice was fast and harsh, like a short, sharp dagger, stabbing into Zhou Huaijin’s ear. “When I tried to get it out of him afterwards, he wanted to take the blame for the ‘kidnapping’ in your place. Mr. Zhou, there’s a question I want to ask you. This whole time, you’ve been telling me a story of a prince’s vengeance, full of cause and effect. Why haven’t you said a word about the murderous woman with the knife? It’s like you know why she was so deranged. Can you tell me—”

The operating room door opened from inside, suddenly interrupting Fei Du’s words.

The clock on the hospital wall, marching ceaselessly forward, seemed to pause. Zhou Huaijin’s panicked gaze watched the doctor coming out. And at the same time, the phone in Fei Du’s pocket vibrated. He got it out and looked. Luo Wenzhou had sent a concise and comprehensive message: “Dong Xiaoqing is dead.”

Fei Du stared, letting go of Zhou Huaijin on the spot. His first reaction was to call back. “How are you doing?”

It was noisy where Luo Wenzhou was. Before he could answer, in front of Fei Du, Zhou Huaijin had fallen to his knees with a thump. He heard the doctor saying, “I’m sorry, Mr. Zhou. We really...”

CHAPTER 75 - Macbeth XVI

The shrieking police cars had stopped in a circle around the scene where Dong Xiaoqing had come to grief. The surveillance camera at the intersection clearly showed the whole course of the responsible car hitting her, then absconding.

“Right, it’s that car.” The place where the car mirror had hit Luo Wenzhou smarted fiercely, the flesh already swollen, though it seemed nothing was broken. It was having no impact on his ability to hop around the scene issuing orders. “The son-of-a-bitch had his face wrapped up, and he was dressed in full battle array, not showing a hair. This definitely isn’t his first time doing this kind of thing. Suddenly turning at that speed and hitting someone, it’s easy to mess up and flip the car over, and he absolutely had his escape route planned out in advance.”

“Captain Luo, are you all right?” The colleague reviewing the security camera footage next to him was appalled by the sight of him. “Why don’t we get a doctor to look after you?”

“I’m all right. It won’t kill me.” There was an anger in Luo Wenzhou’s heart that could have burned a hole in the ground. He was afraid that if he breathed too deeply he’d blow the earth out of the solar system. He forced it down, doing his best to calmly say, “I need everyone to investigate all of Dong Xiaoqing and Dong Qian’s social relationships afresh—all of them—especially Dong Qian’s. The fleet he worked for, his clients, the rest stops he passed through, where he bought food to eat...”

“Captain Luo, why don’t you at least get a bandage? Your arm is bleeding.”

Interrupted for the second time, Luo Wenzhou at last exploded. “We still don’t know where the murderer who ran someone over in broad

daylight is, what the fuck do you all keep staring at me for?”

The circle of people around him was stunned silent as cicadas in winter by his roar. The little physician who'd been called over didn't even dare to breathe deeply.

Luo Wenzhou irritably wiped his scraped forearm on his shirt, then noticed that he'd lost control and quickly took a deep breath, forcing down his unhelpful exasperation at the speed of light.

“Sorry, that wasn't aimed at you guys.” Luo Wenzhou lowered his head slightly, his voice relaxing. “This murderer killed someone right in front of my face, and I actually let him get away. It's a problem I have. I'm filled with anger. I was taking it out on all of you.”

The colleague next to him knew his temper and was very understanding. “Boss, it's already lucky that you're all right. Who could have stopped him? You aren't a Transformer.”

Luo Wenzhou forced a smile at him and said, “The murderer had his face and head obstructed at the time. It's not very likely he'd give us his car's information to investigate as we liked. I think...”

He hadn't finished when word came from his colleagues who had been searching for the responsible car according to his orders. “Captain Luo, we've found the owner of the responsible car. It's an ordinary white-collar worker, a woman, taking a professional qualifications exam today. She says she was running late, she was in a rush, and had to find any empty spot. She made do with parking her car illegally, and since she was afraid of getting a ticket, she purposefully found an out-of-the-way place without security cameras. The owner had another test after. She didn't know someone had made off with her car until we contacted her just now.”

Luo Wenzhou signed deeply. His crow's mouth had made another correct prediction.

“Captain Luo, the traffic camera network caught the responsible car!”

“Go after it!” Luo Wenzhou said heavily.

But they were too late.

Half an hour later, the police found the broken-down car in the yard of an abandoned factory. The previously well-maintained white sedan’s front windshield had died a violent death, and there was only one side mirror remaining, making it look like One-Ear⁵ in the cartoon. The car’s four doors were wide open, and there was no sign of anyone. The cracked headlights and twisted bumper, faintly blood-spattered, formed a mocking smile.

Luo Wenzhou heard the technicians who had come along quietly commenting—

“What a sorry state it’s in. Can it still be repaired?”

“Repaired my ass. Who’d drive a car that had killed someone?”

“But this car isn’t cheap. I think it’s the kind where the basic car is three or four hundred thousand? Is the owner rich?”

“I don’t think so, she’s working away to test for a certificate so she can get work.”

“If I were the car’s owner, I think I’d go mad. Isn’t this an unmerited calamity?”

This group of technicians had been called over straight from the City Bureau. They hadn’t gone to the scene of the murder and hadn’t been face to face with the corpse. At first they didn’t make an association with the hair-raising murder; the scrapped “murder weapon” touched

the eternal insecurity of a salaried worker—they observed the law and discipline daily, working hard and scrambling every day, saving a bit here and a bit there, in ten years saving up for a house they could only come home to sleep in, in five years saving up for a car that was always stuck in traffic on the highway, carrying a load of loans, thinking it was a disaster if they ran late and couldn't make full-time hours.

Years of struggle and frugal living, then someone had casually made off with it and destroyed it in an instant. There was no one to take your grievance to; after all, compared to the girl who had become a pile of rotting meat, there didn't seem to be anything that bad about losing a car. It could even be called lucky.

Doors and locked courtyards deter gentlemen; they don't deter villains. All kinds of laws and regulations seemed to exist only to control honest and decent citizens. Looked at like this, "honesty," "decency," "civility," "sensibility"... These qualities were all errors that wouldn't make you anywhere near as happy as a mad dog going around biting everyone.

When Luo Wenzhou went over, the technicians doing their work consciously closed their mouths under the influence of his low pressure system. He walked around the scene, knowing that the murderer's choice to ditch the car here had been carefully deliberated and extremely secure. He had planned ahead of time how to escape with no one the wiser; by now he must have disappeared into the sea of people.

He went back alone to sit in the police car parked outside the scene and lit a cigarette.

The cigarette smell and faint scent of blood together made Luo Wenzhou squint. He thought about it, got a bottle of water out of the car, carelessly poured it onto the grazes and lacerations on his

exposed skin, then did his best to send brief and accurate notifications to all parties involved.

When he got to Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou hesitated, guessing that he would be at the hospital, taking advantage of Zhou Huaijin's shaky mental state to worm something out of him, and thereupon only sent him a text message. He didn't expect Fei Du call him back before he'd put the phone away.

Hearing his non sequitur question, Luo Wenzhou slowly breathed out a smoke ring. "What would be going on with me?"

Fei Du was silent for a moment. Over the phone, Luo Wenzhou heard his light, lengthy breaths. They lingered in his ear, for no reason calming him down.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been calm for two seconds when chaos suddenly erupted in the background on Fei Du's end of the phone. Someone cried out something, followed by hasty footsteps and a babble of voices.

Fei Du looked up and saw Zhou Huaijin kneeling on the floor. Reading the body language of the medical personnel, he already knew the outcome of the rescue efforts.

The Zhou Clan was Heng'ai Hospital's major financial backer. No one dared to slight them. One after another they made a production of coming up to help Zhou Huaijin to his feet. The director of the hospital and the heads of all the departments also shortly came over one after another. Their "condolences" sounded like a group of frogs in a pond after it had rained, croaking unanimously.

Fei Du, holding up the phone connected to Luo Wenzhou, thought clearly, "It looks like Zhou Huaixin is gone."

As soon as the thought appeared, there was a lurch in his heart, like driving over a pebble in the road.

“I think that based on your abilities, it should have been very easy to chase down Dong Xiaoqing.” Without blinking, Fei Du stared at the dark doors of the operating room. At the same time, he spoke to Luo Wenzhou in a steady voice. “You’ve been involved in many hostage situations. It’s impossible that you wouldn’t be able to calm down a knife-wielding girl. Even if she’d planned to finish herself off after she’d killed him, I believe that if she’d only hesitated for a second, it would have been enough of an opportunity for you to subdue her. So why did she die? Did something unexpected happen?”

Fei Du’s wholly unwavering voice was like a bowl of warm water, pouring into Luo Wenzhou’s ear over the phone signal. For some reason, his restless emotions were rinsed clean by these brief words. Luo Wenzhou put out his cigarette, pressed his thumb to his forehead, and for no reason at all very much wanted to see Fei Du.

“I can’t explain clearly in a few words—my colleagues from the bureau are already at Heng’ai Hospital. What’s going on with Zhou Huaijin? Did he confess anything?”

“He confessed. He planned the kidnapping himself.”

“Fine. Tell them to get him under control and take him back to the City Bureau.” Luo Wenzhou paused, then added, “Wait for me at the hospital.”

Fei Du seemed not to notice the softened voice that last sentence was spoken in. He hung up and went to Zhou Huaijin’s side.

There were no tears on Zhou Huaijin’s face. There was hardly any expression. He was only staring at the operating room in disbelief... until a person covered in a white sheet was pushed out. Suddenly he found the strength somewhere to force apart the people trying to

hold him back, heedlessly throwing himself forward. His first reaction was to pull away the white sheet covering the face of the deceased, needing to see clearly for himself.

Zhou Huaixin lay there quietly, his face pale, somewhat ashen. He didn't seem anything like he had when he'd been alive. He put Fei Du in mind of a painting he'd bought from him.—The painting was of an intersection on a bustling high street. Upright buildings and billboards had been carelessly daubed with big gray blobs of varying thickness. The street was filled with walking skeletons, each brightly dressed in a different style of clothing, separating the skeletons by sex, age, and social class.

Zhou Huaixin's artistic abilities were limited, neither here nor there. He normally chose subjects that would make people think anyone who hung them in his living room was crazy. Quite a few of the people who bought his paintings had only done it to curry favor with him, and after buying them had put them in the bottom of a chest to gather dust. Fei Du and his other drinking buddies had jeered at him when they'd bought paintings, often asking him, "Great Master Zhou, when are you going to die? When you die, this painting will really appreciate!"

Now it was all right. For those paintings lying under beds, in basements, in storage rooms, the greatest news that would raise their stock had finally arrived; they had hope of seeing the light of day again.

"President Zhou! Don't look, President Zhou!"

Everyone hurriedly tried to pull Zhou Huaijin away. Zhou Huaijin's lips trembled. He seemed not to have reacted yet.

Fei Du looked him up and down. "President Zhou."

Amid the chaos, Zhou Huaijin with difficulty pulled together the remains of his intelligence and looked at him weakly. “I... Forgive me, I’m... My head’s not quite...”

Just then, the police came in. Having received Luo Wenzhou’s notification, they wanted to take Zhou Huaijin away.

Fei Du stood with his back to them, lightly waving a hand, indicating that they should wait a moment. He himself went over to Zhou Huaijin and said, “They have their procedures for handling cases. I’m afraid I’ll have to trouble you to go with them. President Zhou, believe me, I can look after Huaixin for you for the moment.”

Zhou Huaijin’s gaze swept over the surrounding policemen. He seemed to want to turn back to look at Zhou Huaixin again, but perhaps he didn’t dare; whatever the reason, in the end, he still hadn’t looked.

At this point, past the initial shock, Zhou Huaijin was once again instinctively preserving his image in front of outsiders. He shook off his bodyguards’ support and stood up straight, nodding to Fei Du. “Then I’ll ask you to help.”

Fei Du calmly jabbed another knife into his heart. “Huaixin defended you with his life because he hoped you would live well. President Zhou, look after yourself.”

Zhou Huaijin had his back to him. His footsteps tottered.

“Oh, right.” Fei Du looked at his back. “There’s another rather important matter I just forgot to mention—in fact, when we tested Yang Bo and the Venerable Zhou’s blood relationship, we also collected samples from you and Huaixin. President Zhou, I don’t know how complicated your family relationships are, but DNA is simple and clear.”

Zhou Huaijin's pupils contracted. When Fei Du's voice paused, he had a certain dim premonition and turned around.

Fei Du made a show of shaking his head pityingly, covering up the trace of a smile at the corners of his lips. "It's very strange. The results of the paternity test were clear. You're Zhou Junmao's son."

There was a moment where it seemed that Zhou Huaijin didn't understand Chinese. He stared numbly at Fei Du. Then his disordered reflex arc managed to run its course, and he immediately leapt up and grabbed Fei Du's collar, incoherently saying, "What did you say? Say...say it again..."

When a person's inner world came tumbling down, you could see a magnificent sight by looking into his eyes, like an avalanche on a high mountain, a tornado sweeping over a village, a tsunami dozens of meters high grandly striking land, a meteor shower falling down—

Fei Du clearly felt that incomparable pleasure, what sadists and serial killers had jointly pursued in fascination from time immemorial.

The criminal policemen next to them suspected Zhou Huaijin wanted to assault him and quickly swarmed around, getting him under control. Zhou Huaijin, reported to always show a graceful bearing in front of others, crumbled, yelling, "No! No! Say it again! Impossible!"

"Are you all right?" A policeman helped Fei Du keep his footing.

"I'm all right." Fei Du straightened his collar. "Look after him. If you really can't control him, sedate him. Don't worry. When he wakes up, he'll tell you everything.—You've worked hard. Go ahead now. I'll wait for Captain Luo."

The policeman heard him, nodded, and hastily went after his colleagues. Having gone a dozen steps, for some reason, he turned back to look at Fei Du and felt an inexplicable trace of terror.

Fei Du methodically made arrangements for dealing with Zhou Huaixin's remains. He notified the medical examiner, then cleverly shook off the director of Heng'ai Hospital, who wanted to question him about the circumstances. He waited at the hospital door for Luo Wenzhou to come.

Luo Wenzhou had been afraid he wouldn't be able to stand the sight of blood and had simply taken care of all his visible wounds. He'd been prepared to take a dehydrated Fei Du straight to the hospital. But Fei Du was not only in one piece, there was even a rare trace of rosiness on his usually pale face.

The two of them briefly exchanged information—Luo Wenzhou hesitated, then concealed what Dong Xiaoqing had said to him, while Fei Du roughly summarized Zhou Huaijin's confession, omitting how he had step by step forced Zhou Huaijin to the point of collapse.

After hearing the Zhou family's bizarre wealthy family drama, Luo Wenzhou looked sidelong at Fei Du and couldn't resist saying, "So your so-called fear of blood was also just you messing with me?"

Fei Du smiled without answering. He only said, "Shixiong probably isn't in the mood to go out with me today. Could I trouble you to take me home?—To the villa. You've been there before."

Fei Du's activities were normally in the city, and he lived in a mid-sized apartment near the conglomerate. Luo Wenzhou stared for a moment, then realized that Fei Du meant the house his mother had died in. "What do you want to go there for?"

Treasuring words like gold, Fei Du said, "Things to do."

Luo Wenzhou frowned, dimly sensing that there was something not very normal about Fei Du.—After he'd learned about Dong Xiaoqing's death, his first reaction had been to call back and ask Luo Wenzhou

what was going on with him, but now, seeing him covered in blooming bruises, he hadn't asked a single question. A person who normally talked so much nonsense, he was now leaning back in the passenger's seat, not saying a word, resting his eyes.

It wasn't at all far from Heng'ai Hospital to Fei Du's family's villa. Without traffic, it was a twenty-minute trip. Luo Wenzhou stopped the service car at the gate of the gloomy and magnificent residence. He poked Fei Du. "We're here."

Fei Du opened his eyes; his gaze was so cold his eyes seemed to be made of inorganic material. He didn't even say thank you, only wordlessly opened the car door and made to go.

Luo Wenzhou finally couldn't resist grabbing Fei Du's wrist. "Wait. What's the matter with you?"

Fei Du struggled, but naturally he couldn't shake him off. He sighed, seeming extremely exhausted. Almost inaudibly, he said, "Let me go."

The more Luo Wenzhou looked at him, the more he thought something was wrong. Of course he didn't stop worrying and let go. "You..."

He'd only said one word when the next instant he was pushed back against the driver's seat. The wounds on Luo Wenzhou's back throbbed with pain, half-immobilizing him and pinning him to the spot. Ice-cold lips stopped his breath—

CHAPTER 76 - Macbeth XVII

In all his years of doing criminal police work, Luo Wenzhou had never encountered this kind of “assault on a police officer.” He was taken wholly unawares and short-circuited on the spot, subconsciously reaching out a hand to push...and pushing empty air.

As if having anticipated his reaction, Fei Du released him after a touch, backing off a bit. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, and their corners were subtly curved, brewing a trace of a smile.

It wasn't any kind of a warm and genial smile; it was rather ill-intentioned.

At this point Luo Wenzhou tasted the flavor of mint he'd left behind—not at all sweet, but rather cold, diving right through the crack between his lips, blowing through his throat, infecting his chest, riding roughshod over his clamoring heart.

Fei Du's tempo was precisely accurate. He didn't fiercely pursue with a single kiss; staying now near, now far, he gave him an interval to resist and consider. His gaze, like something physical, skipped lightly over his features, keenly hearing Luo Wenzhou's breath catch.

This seemed like a good opportunity to pursue his advantage. The next instant, Fei Du regrouped and came back stronger, grabbing the hand Luo Wenzhou had pulled him with, pressing it to the back of the seat. Like a cheetah patrolling its territory, his straight nose gracefully and unhurriedly brushed Luo Wenzhou's cheek. He deftly pried open Officer Luo's lips, not meeting any firm willpower to resist.

It was as if an immersion heater had appeared out of nowhere in the narrow car. The thick air heated with lightning speed. Fei Du's breath enveloped everything.

Luo Wenzhou wasn't any kind of man of honor to sit there calmly and be kissed. A whole day of emotional vicissitudes had critically depleted his willpower, and moreover it had been a long time since he'd encountered an expert kisser like Fei Du. With his intellect's spirit struck dumb, his impetuous body was drawn on by the trace of warmth already existing in his heart; it answered involuntarily, acting first and asking permission later, ordering him to raise his hand and press it to the back of Fei Du's neck, ready to draw him into his arms.

At this point, the icy chill of Fei Du's body called back some of his intellect. The remains of Luo Wenzhou's reason caught a breath and bawled into his ear, "What the fuck do you think you're doing!"

The veins stood out on the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand holding Fei Du's neck. Exerting the radical willpower needed to resist pepper spray and torture on the rack, he grabbed the back of Fei Du's neck and lifted him off.

Fei Du tumbled back into the passenger's seat, raising his eyebrows rather regretfully. Then, seeming not at all concerned, he casually opened the car door. Under Luo Wenzhou's gaze, about to roast him into a human skewer, he lightly wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb. "I've settled my fare. I suppose I can go now, shixiong?"

His expression cold, Luo Wenzhou said, "Get the hell out. Go."

His reaction seemed to please Fei Du. The bastard unhurriedly got out of the car, then bent down and waved at him through the window. "Drive slowly on the way back. Also, the bruises on your waist are really dreadful. Shouldn't you go to the hospital to have them looked at? I couldn't bear to touch them."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

A breeze came through the opened window, and he only then noticed that his shirt had been untucked at some point by that foul hoodlum

Fei.

“But your abs really do feel good,” Fei Du commented, pouring oil onto the fire. He stuck his hands in his pockets and easily turned and left, heading towards the empty villa.

There were two flames rising by turns in Luo Wenzhou’s heart, steaming out of the seven apertures of his face. There was no way to reconcile them. He was simply about to explode.

Agitated, he glared at Fei Du’s back in the rearview mirror, the faint bit of warmth in his heart leaking away entirely; he didn’t know whether he wanted to peel off Fei Du’s clothes or simply peel off his skin.

As he glared, Luo Wenzhou suddenly inadvertently noticed that the sleeve of Fei Du’s trim shirt was moving without any wind. At first he thought it was some embroidery on the shirt reflecting the light, but looking closely again, he found that Fei Du himself was trembling involuntarily, as if he was freezing, or as if he’d been electrocuted.

Luo Wenzhou frowned, hesitated for a moment, then couldn’t relax about it. He opened the car door and followed.

Fei Du hadn’t even closed the gate, perhaps thinking the security in this wealthy neighborhood was too good. The doors stood wide open. Maybe because no one had lived there for a long time and he’d been worried it would be a problem to deal with weeds, Fei Du had had the yard covered in stone. There wasn’t a single blade of grass growing; it looked flat and cold.

When Luo Wenzhou caught up, Fei Du had already gotten out the keys and opened the door.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Hey, are you...”

As soon as he opened his mouth, he saw President Fei, who had just been flamboyantly domineering and taking liberties, shake all over. His hand pressed down on the doorknob, as if trying to support himself, not expecting the door to open inward at this pressure. Fei Du stumbled and fell right to his knees.

The vestibule was floored in big slabs of ice-cold marble. His knees hit it without any cushioning with a dull thump that made Luo Wenzhou feel his own legs were about to give out. He quickly went to support him.

The unusual color in Fei Du's face seemed to have been used up; he was even somewhat paler than usual. There was a trace of cold sweat at his temples, and his hands and feet shook incessantly, as if twitching.

“What’s wrong?” Luo Wenzhou pulled him into his arms and put a hand to his face. “What is it? Fei Du, talk to me!”

“Maybe it’s...low...low blood sugar...” Fei Du groaned almost inaudibly, putting a hand on Luo Wenzhou’s knee, trying to stand, but his arm went weak, and after a struggle he dropped back down.

“Low blood sugar?” Hearing this bizarre explanation, Luo Wenzhou at once irritably jeered at him, “Taking advantage of me tired you out, did it? I’m really impressed—”

Saying so, he simply picked Fei Du up.

With Fei Du’s tall and slender stature, his presence was very imposing wherever he stood. Picking him up, though, Luo Wenzhou felt it didn’t take nearly as much effort as he would have imagined. He could faintly feel the bones under a thin layer of flesh; evidently he was of the constitution that became skinny through lack of exercise.

Thinking about it carefully, it did actually make sense. For a young man in his early twenties to fracture a bone at a single bump, not even as sturdy as the frames of his glasses, he had to be the sort of person who relied on his youth and went out partying, always a little unhealthy. There was hardly ever any flush in Fei Du's face; sometimes when he'd partied too hard with his drinking buddies, there would be a clear lack of vigor about him. A clear case of a typical "young lord with renal deficiency."

But there was some cold and unyielding particular quality about him that made a person forget he was an attractive but useless "embroidered pillowcase."

Luo Wenzhou laid Fei Du flat on the couch, then straightened up, shifting his bruised back. "Don't die. Is there anything to eat here?"

Fei Du didn't speak. He feebly pointed at the kitchen.

Luo Wenzhou walked two steps away, then turned back and picked up a blanket from the couch, throwing it over Fei Du. He turned and went into the kitchen.

The kitchen was bright and clean, probably because someone regularly came in to clean it. The kitchenware was basically for decoration; some things still had tags on them. Luo Wenzhou opened a few cupboards, found where the condiments were kept, and got out a bag of sugar. Then he picked up a barrel of purified water, poured half a glass, and dissolved some sugar in it.

Luo Wenzhou was just about to carry it out for Fei Du to drink when he thought of something else and looked down at the barrel of water that had already been opened, thinking, "How long has this thing been here? It hasn't expired?"

He smelled the water and turned over the barrel to look at the manufacturing date, suddenly discovering that it had been bought a

week before. Luo Wenzhou stared, then noiselessly opened the door of the refrigerator next to him. The fridge was rather empty. There were some cans of milk, some fruit, and a bit of not very sumptuous pre-made food. All of it was very fresh, basically enough of a reserve for a person to temporarily come and spend the night here—had Fei Du just been coming back here lately by coincidence, or did he regularly come to stay here for a few days?

As far as Luo Wenzhou understood, even before Fei Du's mother had died, he hadn't been living here permanently. He'd normally lived in an apartment near his school with a housekeeper to take care of him, coming back here every weekend. Only when he was making arrangements after his mother's death had Fei Du come back to live here for a part of a year.—His father had never been there. It had been appalling to think of a child living on his own in an unlucky abode, so Tao Ran had often come to see him then, until half a year later Fei Du had moved back into the apartment in the city, and the people who had been worrying about him, both obviously and in secret, had relaxed slightly.

Luo Wenzhou had thought that he had never sold the place only because it was hard to get rid of a house where someone had died, but now it seemed...

He thoughtfully turned his head and looked at Fei Du lying on the couch.—This place really did have the makings of a haunted house. Even though it was exquisitely decorated, brightly lit, swept so clean there wasn't a speck of dust, it still made you feel gloomy, well-suited to suicides and hauntings.

Since he'd walked through the door, Luo Wenzhou had dimly felt that there was something wrong with this house, but after all he'd last been here seven years ago; he was already doing pretty well being able to find the door. For a time he couldn't think of what the problem was.

He put the sugar water in front of Fei Du, wanting him to drink it himself, but he found that Fei Du's hands were shaking so hard he could hardly hold the glass. He could only bow to his fate, snatch the glass away, and hold it up for Fei Du to drink.

Fei Du sighed gently. "Shixiong, I'm going to love you until you can't escape."

Luo Wenzhou was so stirred up by his slightly nasal voice that his scalp went numb. Not turning a hair, he said, "Hurry up and drink. What's all the chatter for? You'll choke."

Having finished drinking a glass of sugar water, Fei Du finally had some strength. He sat bonelessly on the couch. "It's all right. I just got sick at the blood and got a little dehydrated after throwing up at the hospital. Zhou Huaijin was there, so I didn't have attention to spare for anything else at the time."

Luo Wenzhou looked him over and suddenly asked, "Do you often stay here by yourself?"

Fei Du opened his eyes at once. Though his posture didn't change, Luo Wenzhou could feel Fei Du's nerves tense instantly.

"It's far from your company, from Yan Security Uni, from the City Bureau...even from your academic advisor's house," Luo Wenzhou said slowly. "As far as I know, none of the places of entertainment your crowd of wastrels frequents are around here, either—why would you come over to stay on your own in an unlucky abode?"

"What's the problem?" After a pause, Fei Du showed him an unassailable smile. "It's my home."

While his tone was gentle, his answer was a defensive one, a needle hidden in silk floss, impossible to answer.

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a moment. As soon as he considered it, he wanted to smoke. As his gaze subconsciously searched for an ashtray, he asked Fei Du, “All right if I smoke...”

Before he’d finished, Luo Wenzhou paused. Their gazes fell simultaneously on the ashtray on the coffee table.

Fei Du reacted, his expression altering immediately.

At the same time, Luo Wenzhou’s blurry memories and faint intuitions finally came together and cleared up—yes, he remembered now!

Neither Fei Du nor his father smoked. This ashtray had been used by his mother when she’d been alive.

When he’d been investigating her death, Luo Wenzhou had come to the Fei house a few times to talk to Fei Du’s father. Once, just like today, he’d asked the master of the house if he could smoke, and Fei Du’s father, that powerful and astute man, had pulled out a ceramic fruit bowl from under a table and offered it to him, claiming that since his wife had passed, he’d cleared away all of her things so looking at them wouldn’t bring up painful associations, and he’d also moved all the furniture in the room.

He’d said then...

“I changed the position of the TV and removed the piano that used to stand there. The coatrack at the door, the vases she liked to arrange flowers in... I can’t look at any of them, I’ve moved them all away.—I’m sorry, Officer Luo, I don’t smoke. Since she passed, there are no ashtrays in the house. You’ll have to make do with this.”

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze immediately swept the whole living room. The TV, the piano, the retro coatrack at the door, even the vases in the

vestibule and living room, had all been returned to their original positions!

In the vases were extremely realistic fake flowers. They'd been specially ordered from somewhere and were made to look like fresh flowers that hadn't been changed in too long, exactly the way the floral arrangement had looked on the day when they'd first come here after the case had been reported!

Luo Wenzhou finally understood what was strange about this place. It was like a large-scale exhibit, its time fixed at seven years before—

"I'm a little tired." Fei Du tore away the blanket over him and sat up, ordering his guest to leave in a somewhat stiff voice. "I can't entertain you any longer. Have a nice weekend."

Luo Wenzhou wasn't to be gotten rid of that easily. He leaned back against the soft couch. "Hey, just now you were saying you were going to love me so I couldn't escape, kissing and groping and taking advantage, and now you've changed your mind just like that. President Fei, that's a little unfriendly."

Fei Du tensed all over, but his hands had stopped trembling as though he had Parkinson's. He concentrated and forced a smile, glibly saying, "That's all right. If you feel like you've gotten the worst of it, you're free to demand..."

He hadn't finished when Luo Wenzhou was already beside himself with anger. He leaned over and grabbed Fei Du's collar, hauling him up and pressing him into a corner of the couch. "I've spoiled you rotten—do you really think I wouldn't dare to do anything to you?"

CHAPTER 77 - Macbeth XVIII

At first Fei Du was rather shocked, but he quickly relaxed. Secure in the knowledge of his safety, he embraced Luo Wenzhou. “Well, Mr. Policeman, what would you dare to do to me?”

Fei Du undoubtedly had a beautiful pair of eyes, especially when he smiled, his irises refracting light in several layers. The gradations of a natural human eye couldn't be replicated by even the highest grade of contact lens; it was a miracle of the accumulated accomplishments of hundreds of millions of years of slow evolution, containing the most complex and changeable moods and desires, the subtlest and most tortuous emotions, like a mustard seed in a fantasy novel, the whole world in a grain of sand.

Evidently, Fei Du's “mustard seed” had an indestructible outer shell.

Luo Wenzhou gazed at him from close up. His throat moved. Then, without saying a word, he tore open his collar. The movement was rather rough; shirt buttons scattered over the floor. With his skin exposed to the slightly cold air, a layer of gooseflesh rose on Fei Du's neck. The tattoo on his chest was revealed. It was a beast that seemed about to open its mouth and eat someone.

Luo Wenzhou's gaze swept over it, and he paused slightly. “I remember last time at West Ridge, that was a different picture. Did it wash off?”

Fei Du was touching him now and then, taking petty advantage, magnanimously letting him look. “Supposedly the nanotechnology that simulates a real tattoo is more waterproof than a synchronized swimming team's mascara, but of course that's just false advertising, so I would advise you...*hss*...not to lick it.”

Luo Wenzhou's lightly calloused fingers closed on Fei Du's neck, forcing him to lift his head. Fei Du didn't mind at all, as if what had fallen into Luo Wenzhou's hands wasn't his own precious throat but a tie bought at a street stall that he would let someone tear apart without regretting it.

Luo Wenzhou looked loftily down at him. "Why didn't you get a real tattoo? Afraid of the pain?"

Fei Du nodded calmly. Before his nod was finished, Luo Wenzhou suddenly drew his hand tight. With his airflow suddenly strained and a most vital place squeezed, Fei Du gave a momentary physiological shudder, but Luo Wenzhou could feel that the pulse in his carotid artery was as calm and steady as a flat line, not speeding up at all. Fei Du even forced out a trace of a smile towards him. "I can't...tell if...you like this?"

"If your breathing is obstructed for a minute, there will be an unbearable burning pain in your lungs. Then you'll begin to feel dizzy due to lack of oxygen, and your eyes will start to fill with blood. Your brain, which hasn't fully evolved, will be panic-stricken and cut off other life functions, disregarding the consequences in its attempt to survive. Your limbs will be numb and powerless. You'll lose your ability to resist, start to be unable to feel your body. Your muscles will spasm. Within a few minutes you'll die." Luo Wenzhou abruptly released his neck. "It'll be a rather ugly death, too.—You're afraid of pain, but you aren't afraid of that?"

Fei Du seemed to know how to avoid choking. When Luo Wenzhou released him, he didn't instinctively gasp for breath, only gently moved his neck, carelessly saying, "It's another sort of exper..."

"You aren't afraid I'll do anything to you," Luo Wenzhou interrupted him, pressing a hand behind his ear, "aren't afraid I'll use force, aren't afraid I'll hurt you. When I squeezed your neck, your heart rate didn't

even increase. Why? Do you trust my moral character too much? Huh?”

Somewhat astonished, Fei Du laughed. “What, I can’t trust you?”

Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly gave an “oh.” “If you trust me so much, then answer a question for me—I remember your dad threw that ashtray away. Did you buy one exactly like it, or get the old one back?”

Fei Du hadn’t expected that he’d make this kind of sudden thrust halfway through a perfectly nice flirtation. His pupils contracted slightly. At such a short distance, there was no way to hide even such a slight alteration from Luo Wenzhou’s eyes.

“Why? Because you’re still investigating her death?”

Fei Du immediately pushed him away. Luo Wenzhou had been prepared. The moment he pushed him, he encircled Fei Du’s shoulders and pressed down, familiarly using the moves he’d normally use to arrest a criminal on Fei Du, easily twisting his hands behind his back, kneeling on the couch with one knee to trap his legs.

Fei Du struggled a few times and found that no effort would get him out of this position—of course, given his battle abilities, even if his effort had been enough, it still wouldn’t have been much use against an expert.

President Fei, a gentleman who used his words and not his fists, had no opening to resist. He could only ridicule. “Captain Luo, if you don’t want to put out, then just say so, and we can be friends. I think using force doesn’t look very good...”

At this point, his complaint abruptly came to a halt.

Because Luo Wenzhou had suddenly bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Wenzhou not very gently stroked his ruffled hair, clearly seeing panic flash across Fei Du's face.—It really was strange that a playboy who could flirt a person into a fantasy, who was equal to anything, would panic like a child someone had confessed their feelings to for the first time because a person kissed his forehead.

It was as if he'd never known warmth in his life.

For some reason, this bit of panic made Luo Wenzhou's heart throb more distinctly than Fei Du's earlier seductive arts. His throat moved slightly. He had a strong impulse to kiss Fei Du again and resisted only with difficulty, slowly relaxing his hold.

"You aren't afraid I'll hurt you, you'd hand over your body and your life to me without a care, but you're afraid of me asking a few immaterial questions," said Luo Wenzhou. "Is telling the truth for once harder for you than dying?"

Fei Du quietly maintained his calm, neither answering nor acting up.

"In fact, I also have a suspicion I've never been able to let go of. If I tell you about it, will you listen?" Luo Wenzhou said suddenly.

Fei Du didn't respond, and Luo Wenzhou paid him no mind, starting to relate. "When I'd just graduated, I thought I was destined to do great things. When I had nothing else to do I liked to go online to read those 'However-many Great Unsolved Cases' posts, follow the blind analysis of falsehoods concerning the facts of the cases as though it was the real thing. Sometimes when I had an opposing view, I'd get into fights with people. In the end, I came to the same

conclusion about each case—that the people who talked about these things online were all stupid cunts.

“At the time, transmigrating into the Qing Dynasty and marrying a prince was all the rage among girls. Sometimes I’d hear my female classmates discussing it and I’d think, if I were going to transmigrate, I’d go back to the Victorian era to ferret out Jack the Ripper.”

Captain Luo had weathered a thousand storms; his face was extremely thick. He exhibited his stupid inglorious past without a single care. The odd thing was that Fei Du didn’t take the opportunity to make any sarcastic comments.

“The outcome was that after I started work I discovered that it wasn’t like that. The city had a policy just then that anyone just starting out had to spend a year doing grassroots work, so I went to a local police station for experience.” Luo Wenzhou waved a hand in front of Fei Du’s eyes. “Do you know what a little cop at a local police station is responsible for?”

Fei Du looked up at him.

“Things like keys locked into houses, lost dogs, little brats knocking each others’ teeth out in a fight, the tenant upstairs springing a leak... Everyone and their mother comes to you with their trifles. The biggest thing we’d be responsible for was catching a few pickpockets. The only thing that could be called a ‘case’ was your family’s business, and it seems my handling wasn’t all that satisfactory. I did that for a year and thought that if I had to do any more I’d hang myself, so I simply dragged Tao Ran to test into positions at the City Bureau—and in fact we got in afterwards because I called in some connections.”

At this point, Luo Wenzhou himself shook his head. “But then it wasn’t any better at the City Bureau, with everyone knowing you were a fastidious but incompetent child of an official. I’d get

reprimanded every day, especially by Lao Yang. He'd say all kinds of ugly-sounding things, make me do anything no one else was willing to do, as if he had some grudge against me. Every day I was mistreated, and every month I'd get my bit of wages that wasn't enough to buy cigarettes with. I forced myself to stay for half a year. I had my letter of resignation all printed and was about to send it up when Lao Yang told me to come with him to get in touch with an informer. We were investigating a prostitution gang.

“That kind of gang will usually be somewhat of an underworld nature. Many girls had been abducted and coerced by them using all kinds of tricks. Lao Yang was talking to the informer when, all of a sudden, a girl with her face all bloody ran out. There were two guys with sticks and switchblades chasing her. The girl was crying and calling for help as she ran, and everyone around was acting like they'd seen it all before. The hot blood rushed to my head and I ran over to fight them. When I'd shaken them off, another crowd appeared.”

Luo Wenzhou spread his hands. “Have you ever stirred up a hornet's nest?”

“...Why would I want to stir up a hornet's nest?” said Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou sighed rather pityingly. “Then I'm afraid you can't understand the situation we were in—but even though we got into a gang fight, we did save the girl. Lao Yang got cut on the backs of his thighs and his back to shield me, and broke a kneecap. In the end, even though I'd made such a mess, he didn't reprimand me first thing afterwards. He even said that although I was unreliable, there was something of a policeman in me. Maybe he'd reprimanded me so much I'd developed Stockholm syndrome. I was totally overcome at hearing an occasional good word. I went home and tore up the letter of resignation, and from that time on I became the old man's devoted dog.”

Fei Du's expression softened, even showing a trace of a smile.

“But that isn't the important point of this story.” Luo Wenzhou dropped his purposefully entertaining playful tone, his voice becoming grave. “The important point is, the injury to Lao Yang's knee remained. He was also fat. The older he got, the worse it got. He was more accurate than the weather forecast when it was about to rain. Whenever he could avoid taking the stairs, he absolutely wouldn't take the stairs. But when he gave up his life in an underpass crossing a street on the way home from buying groceries at the market, there was clearly a pedestrian crossing fifty meters away.”

Middle-aged and elderly people who had problems with their legs and feet were all conscientious about avoiding sky-bridges and overpasses, even if it meant a little extra walking. Yang Zhengfeng had been going home from the market. Outside of work, the old man's greatest hobby had been strolling through the market and going home to cook. He walked that route every few days. It was impossible that he wouldn't stay on the sidewalk every day, insisting on challenging his knee's endurance.

“Why would he take the underpass?” Luo Wenzhou said quietly in the utterly silent living room. “The place where the wanted criminal was hidden was far inside. There was no way a person outside could have seen him. I couldn't understand it. I even quietly investigated Lao Yang's phone records from that time—nothing. There was nothing. The records of the phone he had on him were very clean. Aside from the phone call he'd made requesting backup, for some days before there wasn't even a suspicious telemarketing scam call.”

“On the way home from buying groceries, an old police officer encountered a wanted criminal and called for backup,” said Fei Du. “What else?”

“There was an eyewitness,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Lao Yang only had some celery and a bag of ground meat on him. He was totally

unarmed. He didn't act rashly at first. Only because an old lady walking her dog passed by and somehow disturbed the wanted criminal, and he saw that a bystander was in danger, did he charge ahead."

"And the wanted criminal?"

"The wanted criminal's mental state was irregular. We couldn't get any answers out of him. We investigated the eyewitness, and there were no issues. The surrounding residents confirmed that the old lady lived nearby and walked through there every day to walk her dog in the park across the road."

Coincidence, unassailable cause and effect, an old criminal policeman dying for a just cause. It was a perfect accident—

"I mentioned this suspicious point at the bureau," said Luo Wenzhou. "My colleagues and superiors all cooperated to investigate and collect evidence, and in the end we came up empty-handed. You know, when someone dies a violent death like that, their friends and relatives often can't accept it, often imagine a hypothetical murderer, so there's a direction for them to vent their grief in..."

Fei Du responded, "Just like me back then."

"Like you back then." Luo Wenzhou suddenly grabbed his hand. Fei Du subconsciously pulled it back, but the man gripped it tighter. "After that happened, I dimly sensed that perhaps there was some basis for you to question the outcome of your mother's case so fiercely, but, Fei Du—"

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him. "You can remember her forever, never abandon your search for the truth, but you can't trap yourself inside it. Actually, what I forgot to say to you that day..."

Fei Du used a bit of strength, forcefully pulling his hand away. “The cause of her death isn’t what’s trapping me.”

Luo Wenzhou froze.

“It’s not that.” Fei Du shook his head and averted his gaze, staring at the ashtray on the table. He was silent for a long time. As if using up the last of his strength, he forced out, “I know how she died... It’s not that.”

If a soul could sweat, Luo Wenzhou would have been drenched. He’d really used up everything he had to pry Fei Du’s mouth open a crack. He hurriedly followed up, “You know how she died?”

Fei Du firmly clenched his teeth, as tense as a string about to snap.

Luo Wenzhou was about to say something milder when Fei Du abandoned his guest in the living room, wordlessly standing and walking straight to a bedroom on the second floor.

Luo Wenzhou was about to follow when his phone suddenly rang. Frowning, he picked up. “Tao Ran, what is it?”

“I think you know about the fire at the Dong house? It’s been put out, and we’ve gone in now,” Tao Ran said quickly. “The fire was set deliberately. Someone lit some kind of paper product on fire and threw it onto the couch, then left.—There’s a camera installed across the corridor from Dong Xiaoqing’s house. It got a frontal shot of the person. Male, about a meter seventy-five, tightly wrapped up, not even showing his face.”

CHAPTER 78 - Macbeth XIX

Fei Du had gone upstairs. There was a click, as if he'd locked the door from inside.

Luo Wenzhou sighed silently, forcing his attention back to the phone, saying to Tao Ran, "You're saying someone set the Dong house on fire. What was there worth burning in the Dong house?"

Tao Ran looked up at the scene of desolation in Dong Xiaoqing's burned house. Strictly speaking, the circumstances weren't all that grave. The fire had started in the living room and burned up a good part of the furniture and blackened the walls. The TV's carbon fiber frame had melted a little, but the wall the TV was on and the surrounding cabinets were all right, and in a drawer, the property ownership certificate, bankbook, and other such important items were unscathed.

"We've investigated the Dong family three times over, including the father and daughter's browsing history, e-mails, and social media. We also searched the house. If we somehow still missed something, either it was something very unremarkable..."

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him. "No, that's too big a scope."

"...or it wasn't in the house at all at the time." Tao Ran didn't get angry at all over being interrupted. He unhurriedly added the end of his sentence, and after a paused asked, "Do you have something pressing to take care of over there?"

Luo Wenzhou was at a loss for words.

Tao Ran said very understandingly, "Then let's hang up. When I've finished taking care of things here, I'll give you a report."

“Tao Ran, wait,” Luo Wenzhou said quickly. “The complexity of this thing may exceed what we imagine. Be careful when you’re out in the field. Starting from now, no one taking part in this investigation is permitted to operate on his own.”

Tao Ran had worked with him for many years. Hearing his anxiety, he smoothly acknowledged, “Got it,” then hung up the phone.

“Deputy-Captain Tao.” Xiao Haiyang, the rims of his eyes red, came over. “It was the paper. I think the criminal’s aim was the paper product he used to light the couch on fire.”

Tao Ran said, “For what reason?”

“When one residence catches fire in this type of building, the neighbors to either side will report it very quickly. Unless he made sure the thing he wanted was entirely burned up, it’s likely some traces would have been left behind because it hadn’t finished burning.” Xiao Haiyang’s speech inadvertently sped up even more. “Also, Dong Qian’s level of education wasn’t high. I’ve been to the house a few times; aside from a few advertisements someone had shoved in, there were no books in the living room. Everything needed for writing and drawing was in Dong Xiaoqing’s study. After the arsonist on the security camera footage broke into the Dong house, he stayed a full ten minutes. It doesn’t take that long to start a fire. He must have been looking for something...”

“After he found it, he lit it on fire, made sure it was nearly burned up, then threw in onto the couch, lighting up the whole room.” Tao Ran frowned. “Don’t you think that’s strange? Since this person could get into Dong Xiaoqing’s house without anyone the wiser, couldn’t he have just taken whatever he wanted? Why did he have to set the room on fire, making such a commotion and leaving an impression of himself? Was he purposefully calling for the police to investigate an arson?”

Xiao Haiyang stared, reduced to silence.

“Haiyang, I have a feeling that in his eyes, whatever Dong Xiaoqing had wasn’t any particularly amazing secret. Making such a mystical production of burning it... It’s to provoke us.” Tao Ran pointed at his phone. “Go investigate whether it really was Dong Xiaoqing who sent you the text message, or if someone stole her phone number.”

Xiao Haiyang put a hand on the phone, but his feet didn’t move. “Deputy-Captain Tao, is Dong Xiaoqing really dead?”

Lang Qiao had sent the photographs of the scene to Tao Ran, and Dong Xiaoqing herself was already in the hands of the medical examiners. Tao Ran sighed and patted Xiao Haiyang on the shoulder.

“I...I talked to her quite a few times, and I privately assessed her. She absolutely wasn’t the sort of person to pick up a knife and harm someone. Even though she had negative emotions, they were aimed at the people accusing her father. She never directed her anger towards the car crash victim’s relatives,” Xiao Haiyang said. “She stabbed someone, and immediately afterwards the criminal ran her over to shut her up, and her house was burned at the same time. There must be someone behind this manipulating...”

Tao Ran slowly pulled Xiao Haiyang’s phone out of his hand. He saw that it was open to a news website Xiao Haiyang had been looking at.

Zhou Huaijin and his brother being attacked at the hospital door had already become public. The report only had a brief line of news, simply naming the casualties and identifying the killer, but the onlookers were all exhibiting their imaginations to add what they thought was an appropriate sequence of cause and effect to the bizarre story.

Xiao Haiyang’s voice shook somewhat. “She wasn’t like they’re saying. Really.”

“When he was alive, my shifu asked me something.” Tao Ran gave the phone back to Xiao Haiyang. “The old fellow asked me, ‘Do you believe that heaven’s law is clear and brings appropriate retribution?’”

Xiao Haiyang stared blankly at him.

“I said of course I couldn’t believe it. Wasn’t that feudal superstition? Anyway, the old sayings are always self-contradictory. Sometimes they’ll say, ‘Heaven’s law is clear and brings appropriate retribution,’ and sometimes they’ll say, ‘The good don’t live long, a scourge lasts a thousand years.’ You don’t know who to listen to.” Tao Ran laughed. “My shifu said, ‘You must believe it, because you’re a criminal policeman. When you’re chasing down suspected killers, you are heaven’s law. The reason those words are feudal superstition is because you’re useless, because you can’t find the truth and clear away an injustice.’—Those are rough words, but the sense isn’t rough. Let’s encourage each other, little comrade. Start with the text message. Don’t waste time beating your head against a brick wall. Go on.”

Xiao Haiyang opened his mouth, pushed up his glasses, and quickly went to ask for technical assistance.

Tao Ran looked around the disordered scene of the fire. He sighed. Perhaps because he’d just mentioned Yang Zhengfeng to Little Glasses, he subconsciously got out his phone, hesitated, then opened Zero Hour Reading.

The newest guided reading topic threw itself into his eyes—“*So foul and fair a day I have not seen.*—Macbeth. Contributor: The Reciter.”

“88.6 FM” were Yang Zhengfeng’s dying words. Only Tao Ran had heard them, under extremely frantic circumstances. He hadn’t even

had a recorder on him at the time. There was no evidence apart from his disordered memories.

After Luo Wenzhou had pointed out the suspicious point of the underpass, the police had conducted a routine investigation into those questionable last words—they'd turned the head of the radio program and the relevant personnel upside-down, but they'd come up empty-handed. Any way you looked at it, it was an audiobook program for the amusement of a minority of the population.

The conclusion issued by the investigation team was that the portable radio in Yang Zhengfeng's pocket had fallen out in the struggle and had been tuned to that frequency; Tao Ran may have inadvertently heard a voice announcing the frequency on the radio, and under the circumstances had experienced some cognitive dissonance.

Tao Ran hadn't given up. He'd pursued the program on his own for two months. Aside from doing the equivalent of retaking middle school extracurricular reading, he'd come up with nothing. Even he would have accepted the cognitive dissonance explanation...if not for the fact that he'd developed a habit of listening to audiobooks and, whiling away the time when he was bored, discovered the ID "The Reciter."

Before, The Reciter wouldn't necessarily appear once in a whole year. Tao Ran had suspected that he was jumping at shadows, and that there wasn't anything wrong with the books this person chose—but this year there had been three cases in a row, all faintly reflected in a wholly unrelated reading program. If it was coincidence, then it really was too coincidental.

Standing in the scorched living room after the fire had been put out, Tao Ran stared at the subject line for a full minute, then gave a light shiver.

On the other end, Luo Wenzhou, heavily weighed down, hung up the phone and walked a few circles around the living room on his own. He decided to go upstairs to see Fei Du. When he reached the stairs, he inadvertently looked down and saw the path to the basement.

Luo Wenzhou's steps suddenly paused. He somehow remembered Fei Du's description of the basement on the road to Heng'ai Hospital.

Luo Wenzhou's feet, prepared to climb the stairs, inexplicably turned and headed down.

There was a bend in the stairs leading to the basement that kept the light from upstairs from shining in. The surroundings became increasingly dim. There was an additional security door installed at the end of the stairs, with a keypad lock on it.

Luo Wenzhou exchanged a helpless look with the keypad lock, got out his phone, and called Fei Du. It disconnected after two rings. The owner of the phone upstairs evidently didn't want to talk to him.

Luo Wenzhou opened the keypad for entering the code and examined it for a moment. He found that there was also an alarm attached—that was to say, if someone tried to force the door or entered the wrong code, an alarm like the wailing of ghosts and howling of wolves would go up over the whole villa.

“Maybe the alarm will startle the quail upstairs. It's more civilized than kicking down the door, anyway.”

That lousy idea appeared in Luo Wenzhou's mind. While the wounds on his back wouldn't get in the way, they still hurt pretty badly. He didn't want to be kicking down doors today. He reached out a boorish paw, carelessly entered six digits on the keypad, then quickly blocked his ears.

But after a moment, the expected alarm didn't come. The light on the security door flashed twice. There was a click, and the lock slid open.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He awkwardly put down the hands blocking his ears and stared at the security door in front of him. He only then realized that he'd just entered the date of Fei Du's mother's death.

Luo Wenzhou absolutely hadn't expected to have the dumb luck of accidentally guessing the code. He was dumbfounded for a good while. He hesitated, looked upstairs, and gave Fei Du another call—this time the phone was simply off.

"Well, don't blame me," Luo Wenzhou whispered. "I take silence as acquiescence."

With justice on his side, he entered the residence's most secret corner. He encountered the underground gloomy dampness, turned on the light, and immediately froze—

The basement didn't contain the desk Fei Du had spoken of. It was very open and spacious. The floor, the walls, the cabinets, the ceiling...all of it was white. In the midst of it was a luxurious projection setup, with a screen as big as one in a movie theater's small screening theater. Right across from the screen was a reclining chair. There were belts on the chair, and a computer next to it, along with some complicated equipment for an unknown purpose. There was also a small refrigerator.

For no reason, Luo Wenzhou's palms broke out in cold sweat. He gently opened the small fridge. There were some small medicine bottles in it, the labels all written in some unknown foreign language. He couldn't understand them.

Perhaps it was his mistaken impression, but he seemed to faintly smell a trace of blood.

What had Fei Du been up to here?!

In an instant, Luo Wenzhou's heart rate sped up to 150. For a space of time his mind went blank, and he nearly froze in place, ten thousand bees flying around his ears.

After a good while, he gently bit his tongue and shook his head hard, gaze traveling all around. He thought, "No, that's not it. There aren't any convenient weapons here."

Given Fei Du's weak constitution, if he'd really wanted to do anything, he couldn't very well do it bare-handed.

Luo Wenzhou struggled to calm down and look carefully at the belts on the chair. His heart, which had come up to his throat, crashed back down into his chest. Luo Wenzhou breathed a sigh of relief—he found that he was jumping at shadows. The belts on the reclining chair were fashioned like safety belts; you could fasten and unfasten them yourself. It wouldn't be very useful for murder and dismemberment.

He touched the leather recliner, took separate photographs of the inexplicable instruments and the drugs, and stealthily sent them to Lang Qiao, telling her to investigate what these things were.

There was a set of headphones hanging on the back of the recliner. Luo Wenzhou picked them up and brought them close to his ear, turning on the audiovisual equipment.

First the unhurried music of "You Raise Me Up" flowed into his ears over the extremely high quality headphones. Luo Wenzhou had never noticed how pretty this song was; he was just sighing over the truth that expensive electronic equipment really was better when, without

any warning, a hysterical scream suddenly stabbed through the music. Though Luo Wenzhou's psychological quality was superb, he still gave a fierce shudder.

Then the large screen suddenly lit up. He swiftly looked up—

There was a direct broadcast of a murder playing on it. This was a deranged homicidal maniac from abroad from a few years ago. The killer had already been given an injection and sent to their foreign god, and the video had been taken care of by the government, though it was still going around on the dark web. The victim in the video screamed like a dying farm animal. The sound of the scream intertwined with the music on the exquisitely good headphones, like two whips flogging your soul.

Luo Wenzhou, unable to stand it any longer, tore off the headphones and fast forwarded. There followed videos of beheadings, videos of executions by firing squad, videos of extremist organizations abusing prisoners of war and hostages, bloody photographs...

Luo Wenzhou's phone, which was on vibrate, buzzed suddenly. He gave a start, nearly dropping the phone onto the ground. His voice sounded off when he picked up. "Hello?"

"Boss, where are you? Can you talk?" Lang Qiao asked, keeping her voice low. "Have you wandered into some kind of underground rehab center?"

Luo Wenzhou frowned. "What rehab center?"

"I found someone to have a look at those photographs you sent," said Lang Qiao. "That's electric shock equipment, and the drugs are emetics, tranquilizers, and some others..."

Luo Wenzhou didn't clearly hear what she said afterwards.

Fei Du's ability to vomit himself into dehydration at the sight of blood, the ceaseless trembling of his hands just now, the constant repetition of the song... It seemed that all of it had an explanation.

CHAPTER 79 - Macbeth XX

“Hello? Hello? Hello?” When no one spoke on the other end, Lang Qiao at once became rather nervous. “Are you still there, boss? Give me a peep, you not making a sound is making me panic!”

“Okay,” Luo Wenzhou answered absently. “I’m all right.”

When he’d finished, he didn’t listen to Lang Qiao jabbering but hung up the phone on his own initiative.

There was no ventilation in the basement. The air was stale. Against the white background, a faint smell of blood permeated. There was a long hair caught on the headphones hanging on the back of the chair. Luo Wenzhou carefully plucked it off, his fingers brushing over the cold back of the recliner.

The confining belts showed clear traces of wear and tear.

This was a typical setup for “aversion therapy”—while the screen projected images, the stimulus of the electric shocks and drugs would force the person who had bound himself to the recliner to establish a conditioned reflex, making him associate the deeply ingrained pain with the images he was seeing, triggering a physiological loathing, with the aim of “correcting” some type of behavior...or some type of thought.

The human body was like a precise instrument. Seeing delicious food, it would crave it. Seeing a beautiful person, it would be attracted. It would feel pain when beaten, shed tears when heartbroken... Each type of sensation corresponded to a feeling transmitted by the sensory organs. And rough “aversion therapy” was like pulling out the wires of the human body and forcing them into incongruous ports, and using a soldering iron to reinforce the connection.

But how could a flesh and blood human being become a circuit board, have his connections casually switched?

Even a circuit board might short circuit under that kind of “personalized modification,” so what about a living body?

The corner of Luo Wenzhou’s eye twitched fiercely, remembering Fei Du’s ever-changing tattoo. Was that to hide scars?

Were his frequent trips back here to come to this place and “recharge his batteries?”

Wasn’t he afraid he’d accidentally do himself some irreparable harm?

He might even simply kill himself, and his body would rot in the black and lightless basement. No one would find it for months.

A well-fed, well-dressed young master, exquisite down to the frames of his glasses, wasn’t he afraid of becoming a heap of rotting meat, being revealed under the light of day along with the maggots?

Oh, right. Maybe Fei Du really wasn’t afraid.

He had absolutely no reverence for life and death and no care whatsoever for his body. He’d stop at nothing, because it seemed he really didn’t care about anything. If he croaked here one day, he’d likely still be very calm. He didn’t care who he went around with, didn’t care who he slept with. Everything about him was a large “whatever,” and yet he’d still rather come here alone and tie himself to this electric chair, playing with his life, rather than leak the tiniest bit of sincere speech to anyone.

Wrapped up in the gloomy atmosphere of the basement, when the initial shock and profusion of feelings had passed, an anger boiled up in Luo Wenzhou that made him dizzy. He’d have loved nothing better than to charge up to the second floor and break Fei Du’s door down,

drag him to the bathroom sink, and teach him a good lesson with cold water—time after time, the asshole had disregarded his warnings, trailed after him pretending to be in absolute earnest, until he'd been ready to take him seriously, ready to take him into his heart...

It turned out that he'd only been diverting himself before retreating to his windowless, doorless bastion, coldly keeping everyone a thousand li away. Insulting himself this way, he was also insulting others' regard.

Luo Wenzhou turned and left the basement, charging up to the second floor in a few steps.

Fei Du hadn't gone to the room he'd stayed in when he'd been a teenager. Instead he'd occupied the bedroom where his mother had killed herself. There wasn't a sound inside the room. He was holed up in there, doing who knew what.

Luo Wenzhou concentrated, then knocked on the door.

Fei Du's eyes moved slightly. A bit of living energy suddenly appeared in his eyes like glass marbles. He looked quietly at the door.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Fei Du, open the door. I have something to say to you."

Fei Du stared at the door, not moving a muscle. He thought of something, and the corners of his mouth suddenly went up gently in a half-smile, as if he were watching a movie and anticipating some plot point.

Luo Wenzhou paused, then issued an ultimatum in a heavy voice. "You're shutting me out? Fei Du, I'll give you another half a minute, and if you still haven't opened up, I won't come knock on your door again."

There was a rattan rocking chair in the bedroom by the window, overlooking the house's little garden, though now all you could see was a field of limestone slabs; there was really nothing attractive.

Fei Du stretched out his legs and indolently leaned back in the rattan chair. At his movement, the bird's nest-like chair rocked lightly. Hearing Luo Wenzhou's words, he uncompromisingly lowered his eyes, looking out the window.

"Then don't knock," he thought apathetically. "Leave."

The second hand of the clock on the wall didn't miss a breath. As good as his word, Luo Wenzhou waited exactly half a minute. Then the sound of his even footsteps came from outside, knocking on the stairs one after another, gradually getting further, gradually becoming inaudible.

Fei Du was silent for a moment, then turned on the little screen at the head of the bed, connected to the security camera at the front door, and as expected saw Luo Wenzhou open the door, leave the unlucky abode, get in the car, and go.

Fei Du stared after the lousy car for a while. His gaze was limited by the camera lens, and the car quickly vanished. He thought there was absolutely nothing stirring in his heart. Only, like at the moment he had witnessed Zhou Huaixin's body, it was as if he'd driven over a pebble in the road. Another lurch.

Though perhaps this time what he'd driven over had been a brick; the car slanted at a rather large angle.

Fei Du thought, "Too bad. Next time I go the City Bureau, there'll be another frosty look."

But that didn't matter. He wouldn't stay long at the City Bureau, anyway. The car that had driven over the brick was still functioning properly. A few bumps, and it would continue going forward. This wouldn't get in the way of anything.

He silently closed his eyes. Perhaps the low blood sugar and dehydration after throwing up hadn't been fully alleviated; he still felt exhausted. He'd meant to get rid of Luo Wenzhou, then go to the basement for a while, but he was so tired he didn't want to move at all. From resting his eyes, he shifted right into a light sleep.

As he dozed, perhaps remembering and perhaps dreaming, in his half-sleeping, half-waking state, he thought of something that had happened when he'd been a teenager.

At that time he really hadn't wanted to live with others. He'd dismissed all the housekeepers, but he didn't know how to do anything himself, so he had to regularly go to Tao Ran's house to scrounge some food. That day he'd gone to the police station as usual to wait for Tao Ran to get off work. While passing through an estate, he'd encountered an altercation between the property management and the property owners. They were all talking at once, about to break out into a brawl; the cops had been called to break it up.

The cops were Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran. Fei Du saw them from afar. He saw Luo Wenzhou, standing like a male model among the babbling middle-aged and elderly representatives of the property owners and property management, like an actor from an idol drama who'd mistakenly ended up in the cast of a domestic sitcom, unusually awkward and out of key.

The two young police lackeys tried to cajole the community dispute to a resolution, running up against a new problem as soon as they'd solved an old one, pushed and pulled back and forth by both sides. Restrained by his position, Luo Wenzhou bore with it for five minutes, then presumably had borne it up to his limit. He exploded into a

rage, wading into the battle as a third party, one against two, launching an indiscriminate attack while Tao Ran sweated in the background.

Because the great scoundrel's combat strength was unsurpassed, the two sides that had originally been fighting each other had no choice but to temporarily reconcile, presenting a unified front. Luo Wenzhou had unexpectedly achieved the result of "resolving a civil dispute." When Tao Ran had dragged him away, Luo Wenzhou turned back and called from a distance, "Go register a complaint! Don't be cowards! If you don't dare, you're a bunch of losers. Grandpa's badge number is XXXXX—"

Tao Ran, filled with dread, covered his mouth. Unable to speak with his mouth, Master Luo had to put up with second best, sticking up his middle finger at the legion of old ladies that had dared to hinder him.

Walking by at a distance, Fei Du could still hear him heroically announcing to the heavens, "Nothing but trifles all fucking month, and they want to order me around—what the fuck am I doing being a cop, I don't wait on people!"

Tao Ran said, "You can't throw away your work ID!"

He hadn't finished the sentence when across the street a pickpocket snatched a girl's wallet. Luo Wenzhou entirely forgot that he'd just thrown his work ID into a garbage can. Like a well-trained Great Pyrenees, he howled, "Stop!" and gave chase, enveloped in the flames of war.

Afterwards, the thief had been caught, and the girl who'd lost her wallet treated them to skewers—Fei Du scrounged a meal. He didn't know why he remembered it so clearly; he could even clearly see the order the dishes were served in... Perhaps it was because the food had been so inedible.

In the twilight glow, they were surrounded by boasting people with bottles of beer in their mouths. The scents of cumin and chili powder wrapped in recycled cooking oil floated for ten li around. All around was the noise and smoke of humanity, all the people sitting there sweating like rain. As usual, Fei Du hadn't wanted to talk. He'd had something to drink, then sat quietly to one side playing on his game machine.

Right, supposedly Luo Wenzhou had been the one to buy that game machine. No wonder he'd looked at it quite a few times.

Luo Wenzhou had distastefully passed him a mushroom skewer. "Tao Ran, going out for skewers is a grown-up pastime, what are you always taking him around for? Hey, you eat mushrooms, right? You shouldn't be here. You don't fit in."

Don't fit in.

Fei Du smiled. He didn't want to fit in.

After they'd said goodbye to the owner of the stolen property, history's most unreliable people's police officer Comrade Luo Wenzhou ran grovelingly back to the scene and exchanged a helpless look with the garbage can that had swallowed his work ID. Making a face that could have amused Fei Du for a whole year, he tried his luck for three minutes, then pulled a length of iron wire from his pocket to pick the garbage can's lock...

The sound of the picked lock clicking open seemed to ring in his ears. Fei Du woke up a little. Just then, a draft passed over the back of his neck, and he froze at once, looking over in disbelief, stupefied to find that Luo Wenzhou, who had gotten into his car and driven away, had returned, and he had a length of iron wire in his hand.

Fei Du: "..."

This guy really was an experienced burglar.

Luo Wenzhou stuck the wire in his pocket. “I said I wasn’t going to knock again. Get out of there.”

Seeing Fei Du frozen, not making a sound, Luo Wenzhou, brooking no argument, charged in and lifted him to his feet. “What time do you call this?”

Fei Du answered instinctively, “...six-thirty.”

Luo Wenzhou choked at this answer, raising a hand to smack the back of Fei Du’s neck. “Do I need you to tell me that? Can’t I tell time? You’re still sitting here meditating at this hour? Haven’t you eaten?”

Fei Du had been sitting too long. His legs were rather numb. He tottered the whole way as Luo Wenzhou dragged him, then was even more shocked when he saw the side dishes on the dining room table, along with very complicated-looking noodles.

The noodles cooked in the little pot were still steaming. The kitchen, purely decorative for ten thousand years, had actually opened for business. The desolate first floor was filled with strange cooking smells, turning the whole atmosphere of the haunted house strange.

“There aren’t enough of your lousy supermarkets around here. I had to drive around for ten kilometers to buy groceries. What’s the benefit of living in this damn place aside from acting like a prick and flaunting your wealth?” Luo Wenzhou picked up a bowl and asked, “Do you eat water-cooled noodles?”

Fei Du hadn’t yet had time to nod when Luo Wenzhou issued a viewpoint in his place. “When you’ve just thrown up, you’d better make do with something hot.”

Fei Du: “...”

Then why did you ask?

He'd thought he had no appetite—every time he'd been tormented half-dead by being sick at blood...or other things, he'd gone to the hospital to be put on an IV drip. But he took the bowl from Luo Wenzhou's hands and accidentally ate all of it. The noodles had been cooked to moderate firmness, a little chewy, but not hard to digest. He felt warm when he swallowed them, the ice-cold stone in his stomach quietly thawing.

“You... Hey, wait, I don't...” Fei Du put down his chopsticks and was about to say something when Luo Wenzhou uncompromisingly took his bowl and refilled it.

“When you're finished eating, come back to work overtime with me,” Luo Wenzhou said. “No rest this weekend.”

Fei Du: “...”

Luo Wenzhou raised his eyelids and looked at him. “Do you have any objections?”

Fei Du quietly took the bowl. “No, none.”

“Based on my experience, when you're unsatisfied, eight or nine out of ten times, there are two basic reasons,” Luo Wenzhou suddenly said after waiting quietly for him to finish eating. “The first is that you haven't had enough to eat, and the second is that you haven't slept well.”

Fei Du stared.

“Drinking sugar-water and taking sleep aids doesn't count.” Luo Wenzhou looked at him meaningfully. Before Fei Du could react, he added, “The remaining one or two times, the circumstances are

rather complicated.—This is what I wanted to tell you last time in front of Su Xiaolan’s box of ashes. Later I forgot.”

Fei Du indicated that he was all ears.

“Go wash the dishes. Don’t use the dishwasher for a lousy couple of dishes like this,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I’ve put dish soap and a dishrag there. First wipe away the grease, then rinse it with water. Do you know how to?”

Fei Du: “...”

“If you don’t know how, you can learn slowly,” Luo Wenzhou said. “The person who cooks doesn’t do the dishes. That’s a basic principle.”

Who knew whether Fei Du had ever washed a dish in his life? He hesitated, then went. Luo Wenzhou wasn’t worried about him dropping a dish and breaking it—anyway, he had the money.

“When a person’s been burned to ashes and become about the same as a piece of apatite, there’s nothing there worth revering. So why do we treat it like a big deal?” Luo Wenzhou crossed his arms and said from behind Fei Du, “Why are there holidays to mark the beginning and end of each year? Why do you have to make a public confession and stroll around in the streets together before getting in bed with someone? Why, to live together legally, in addition to needing a certificate, do you need to invite your friends and family to a useless ceremony? Because life and death, dark and light, partings and meetings, all have the meanings people have endowed them with. You can’t see them or touch them, you don’t know what use they have, but the difference between you and me and a lump of chemicals lies in those bits of meaning.”

Fei Du paused.

Luo Wenzhou reached around from behind him and took his wrist, guiding him to put the clean bowl back into its original place. “If you don’t understand, I can tell you later slowly. You called me, and that’s a ‘ceremony,’ too. I gave you the chance to repent. Now it’s too late for returns.—Come on, let’s go back to the City Bureau.”

CHAPTER 80 - Macbeth XXI

Lang Qiao didn't know what was going on with Luo Wenzhou. She waited with her heart in her throat for ages, thinking their Captain China had once again gone in alone to some spider demon's Cavern of Silken Webs. She didn't dare to leave, prepared for him to call for backup.

In the end, no cry for help came. She only received an order to keep her mouth shut.

Luo Wenzhou said: "Keep what I asked you about before secret. If you behave, I'll bring you some red braised pork another day. If you dare to leak it, you'll be the main ingredient!"

Lang Qiao: "..."

She thought that if her willpower had been a little weaker, she would have become the first eldest princess in human history to commit patricide over red braised pork.

As Policewoman Lang cursed her boss for a scoundrel, she ungrudgingly arranged the information related to all sides of Zhou Junmao's case.

The whole day of sudden happenings was truly dazzling. The whole city was welcoming the weekend while looking on at the wealthy family drama. Only the City Bureau, with a new wave rising as soon as the last one had calmed, was still working overtime.

"I arranged to go see a movie with a schoolmate this weekend." Lang Qiao hung off the door of the conference room. Pressing her fingers to her eyelids to avoid unnecessary lines around her eyes, face expressionless, she wailed, "Why do we have to work overtime again, it's such a pain!"

Luo Wenzhou quickly walked up behind her, casually asking, “A male classmate or a female classmate?”

Lang Qiao said, “...female.”

“What do you want to hang around with a bunch of girls all day for? You aren’t a lesbian.” Luo Wenzhou carelessly waved a hand. “It’s better to work overtime than go to a movie with a girl. At least here you’ll get the princess treatment.”

“Good grief, what rotten country’s princess gets ordered around like a donkey? The kind that’s doomed to total annihilation and the burning of its ancestral tombs, I think.” Lang Qiao rolled her eyes at Luo Wenzhou’s back, then gave Fei Du a strange look. “Hey, President Fei, why haven’t you left yet?”

Fei Du didn’t answer, because he’d pondered it the whole way and still couldn’t understand why he, as a temporary member of staff, had to come back to ungrudgingly work overtime with them.

Therefore he could only smile at Lang Qiao.

When he came into the conference room and sat down, Fei Du finally said to Luo Wenzhou, “I don’t think I get overtime pay.”

“No need to think, you don’t even get a salary, just a bit of a subsidy for the project,” Luo Wenzhou said. Without waiting for Fei Du to answer, he added, “Though given our salary, the difference between having it and not having it is the difference between zero and nearly zero. Do you care?”

Fei Du: “...”

Luo Wenzhou had stolen his lines, leaving nothing behind. There was no place to start ridiculing. He could only straighten his clothes and

sit upright.

As soon as she entered the conference room, Lang Qiao professionally set aside her cherished idea of a movie and gave a careful analysis of the state of affairs. “Right now there are two things that we can basically determine: first, Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping really was a performance he put on himself. Hu Zhenyu was evidently his accomplice, and he’s been brought along for questioning, as well. Second, Zhou Huaixin really was killed by Dong Xiaoqing. There are security camera tapes and eyewitnesses, no room for dispute. But we have no clear suspect or motive for Dong Xiaoqing being killed in order to silence her soon after, nor for the fire set at her house. But according to our inferences, it’s likely it was related to Dong Xiaoqing’s objective to assassinate Zhou Huaijin.”

“How is Zhou Huaijin now?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

“In custody,” said Lang Qiao, “but his mental state is very bad. He’s been curled up in a chair ever since he got here, holding his head and not making a sound. We brought him food and water, but he hasn’t moved. He’s been fasting up to now.”

“What are the circumstances with Dong Qian and Dong Xiaoqing?”

“Dong Qian was reticent. He normally had contact with few friends or family members.” Tao Ran picked up the subject. “Pretty much the only people he had relatively close dealings with were his coworkers at the fleet. Because the customers he accepted jobs from weren’t fixed, he didn’t always drive the same route, so he didn’t regularly visit any service stations or eateries. But his coworkers did remember something—Haiyang, you found it, come tell us about it.”

Named without warning, Xiao Haiyang stared, subconsciously standing up. “Yes, sir!”

A good number of hands reached out from beside him to pull him down. “Talk sitting down.”

Xiao Haiyang lowered his head awkwardly and pushed at his glasses, switching over to rapid-fire mode. “Dong Qian’s coworkers remembered that he often shopped online. Express delivery people were always looking for him. On average he received two or three packages every week. I investigated the father and daughter’s online shopping records and found that Dong Qian’s frequency of ordering online really has been very high for the last year, and the frequency of returning goods has also been high...”

Luo Wenzhou looked up. “Get right to the important point. Do you think there’s a problem with the express delivery, or with a seller?”

“The express delivery,” Xiao Haiyang answered without thinking. “Over eighty percent of the goods he returned had been delivered by the same express delivery company, called Quick Conveyance Express Delivery. I looked into it. Because of its slow delivery speed, high prices, and irregular management, the company’s market share is currently very low—in a survey of online shopping, less than 5% of businesses use Quick Conveyance. Meanwhile, over 50% of the goods Dong Qian received were delivered by Quick Conveyance, a tenfold difference. It can’t be coincidence.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. “That makes sense. And so?”

“If the paper document that the arsonist burned was an important item, it would have been hard for us to miss it when we were investigating him. But what if while we were searching, that document was on the way? It usually takes Quick Conveyance Express Delivery three to five days to deliver within the same city. That makes the right time difference.”

Having heard this much, Luo Wenzhou’s expression sank. He interrupted, using his full name. “Xiao Haiyang, are these pure

guesses, or do you have some basis?”

Xiao Haiyang hesitated somewhat in front of his forceful question. “I...I have a basis...”

“Don’t play stupid with me.” Luo Wenzhou’s tone became stern. “Everyone on the team is here now. If you have something to say, say it. I know your brain is up to it.”

In order to guarantee that this thing wouldn’t fall into the hands of the police, the person who had sent the express delivery package had purposefully used a delivery service that took most of a week to deliver within the same city, but how could he have guaranteed that the police would have finished all they needed to do for their investigation within those three to five days?

If the police had been inefficient and spent a couple of weeks investigating, wouldn’t the package have arrived right in front of them?

What Xiao Haiyang had just said seemed reasonable, but in fact there was an implication in it, hinting that they had a traitor.

When this Little Glasses had something to say, he was categorically unwilling to come right out and say it; he always had to dodge around it. Perhaps this bad habit was left behind from the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau—the first time Luo Wenzhou and the others had come to look at He Zhongyi’s body, he’d put on an act of being a hothead who couldn’t control his mouth to hint that the place where the body had been dumped wasn’t the place where the murder had been committed.

This was the same old trick now.

Luo Wenzhou said, “What is the basis for your judgement?”

Xiao Haiyang slowly lowered his eyes. Through his glasses, he met his young superior's eyes. "I requested that the Quick Conveyance Express Delivery Company submit to me all the express delivery orders and information and found that before Dong Qian died, there was a package sent from his fleet to the Dong house."

Fei Du put in a word. "You just said 'there was a package sent,' not 'Dong Qian sent home a package.' So, Officer Xiao, you think that Dong Qian didn't send that package himself."

Xiao Haiyang said, "If Dong Qian really did assassinate Zhou Junmao, he used the method of the car crash to make it unnoticeable, make people think it was an accident. So what would he leave Dong Xiaoqing? The identity of the person who wanted Zhou Junmao dead, or a vindication of himself for being the real murderer? That doesn't make sense, unless he wanted to put his daughter in danger, or make her suffer her whole life."

"What you mean is, someone sent some things to Dong Xiaoqing to incite her to kill Zhou Huaijin. Then, to prevent those things from reaching the police via Dong Xiaoqing, he silenced her, and at the same time set her house on fire." Luo Wenzhou fixed his eyes on Xiao Haiyang, pressing on and asking, "Why? If this person could brazenly run Dong Xiaoqing over right in front of my face, why couldn't he kill Zhou Huaijin himself? Are you telling me an ordinary little girl is a safer bet when it comes to killing someone than a professional? Also, I can't understand why they needed to burn the house. Was it simply to provoke the police?"

"That's what I think," Xiao Haiyang said without any hesitation. "Before we set out, Dong Xiaoqing sent me a text message saying that she had something to give me. We investigated afterwards and discovered that an unknown individual had stolen Dong Xiaoqing's phone number and sent me a message posing as her. When I went to investigate at the Dong house three days ago, I left a piece of paper with my contact information on it for Dong Xiaoqing. According to

the timing, I received the text message right around when the arsonist broke into the Dong house. It's likely the criminal saw my contact information and purposefully lured us there. There's no question that he was attracting the police's attention."

"Besides that, we also investigated the delivery person at that express delivery company who regularly had contact with Dong Qian. This person's whereabouts since Dong Qian's death are unknown," Tao Ran added, pulling out an evidence bag. There was a photocopy of an ID in it. The man in the photograph had a crewcut. His appearance was very unremarkable. He could disappear into a crowd in the blink of an eye. "This is the personal information the vanished delivery person left behind at the company. It's a fake. The company's management has been a mess for a while. They must have just taken a look at the ID without verifying it and then simply employed him."

Luo Wenzhou looked at Fei Du. "What's your professional opinion?"

Fei Du cleared his throat, closed the notebook he'd been pretending to take notes in, and said, "One person ran over Dong Xiaoqing at Heng'ai Hospital. At the same time, another person set fire to the Dong family's house. And before that, there was also a mysterious express delivery person who got in touch with Dong Qian. They know how to fake IDs. They have a certain level of technology. To put it another way—there may be more than three criminals involved in this case. They have planning and they have technology. It's likely an organized criminal gang."

As Fei Du spoke, he very calmly stood up. Really looking rather like a scholar, he pulled over a whiteboard and drew a circle with a marker. "For a gang, the simpler their goal is, the more unified they are, so it's easier for them to assemble. For example, mutual benefit. On top of that mutual benefit, they'll frequently employ methods of force or brainwashing to make their members stay loyal—"

“For example, the drug trafficking gang, and Su Xiaolan and the others’ chain to kidnap and market children,” Tao Ran picked up.

“Right. Even an international terrorist organization carrying the banner of so-called extremist beliefs still has behind it a complicated economic background and a chain of interests.” Fei Du smiled. “It’s very hard to tie a group of people together relying solely on psychopathy. After all, being a psychopath is a very individual experience.”

“Concretely?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“For example, among those who all target the police, there are psychopaths who want to challenge the police force’s intelligence, psychopaths who only want to kill policemen, and also psychopaths who want to have some sorts of indescribable relations with people in uniform...”

Everyone was coaxed into laughter. Luo Wenzhou laughed dryly, interrupting the increasingly improper Fei Du. He picked up the notebook Fei Du had just shut and put it into the desk. “Shut up. We’re holding a meeting, be a little more serious!”

Fei Du seriously changed the subject. “These sorts of particular differences will lead to instability among a gang, making it very hard to form an orderly organization.—Therefore, Officer Xiao, plotting Zhou Junmao’s assassination, inciting Dong Xiaoqing, then killing her and setting fire to her house to get rid of the evidence—this whole series of events has as its only motive to provoke the police? I personally think that isn’t very realistic.”

Tao Ran said, “So your conclusion is...”

“Plotting to assassinate Zhou Junmao, sending something to Dong Xiaoqing, and lighting the fire for the police to see—this series of events either wasn’t all done by the same group, or there was another

reason. It's not very likely it was simply aimed at the police. Finding out what's actually going on will have to wait until we've had a chat with Zhou Huaijin."

Xiao Haiyang didn't make a sound.

Fei Du looked him. "Actually, I think Officer Xiao's train of thought is very interesting. When a criminal does something incomprehensible, the average person will think that they're doing it to cover something up. Why do you think so firmly that it was to provoke the police?"

"Because Dong Qian died, too," Xiao Haiyang said suddenly. "You've silently acknowledged the part about Dong Qian assassinating Zhou Junmao, but what if he was also a victim from a certain point of view? 'For matters the police can't resolve, give the victims an opportunity to take a tooth for a tooth.'—Haven't there been cases of vigilanteism like that..."

Xiao Haiyang suddenly noticed that he'd said too much and tightly shut his mouth.

Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du's gazes fell on him simultaneously. The conference room temporarily quieted.

Luo Wenzhou looked deeply at Xiao Haiyang. "Fei Du is coming with me to see Zhou Huaijin. Tao Ran, try to find the mysterious delivery person based on the information and the photograph on the fake ID. Apart from that, keep searching the security cameras around Dong Xiaoqing's house to track down the arsonist's trail. It's likely this person changed his clothes after leaving the scene. Take note of his height and distinguishing characteristics.—Meeting adjourned."

Fei Du's gaze swept the place where he'd sat, not finding the notebook he'd just been holding, and he was feeling somewhat suspicious when he heard someone behind him give a "Hey!" He

turned his head. Luo Wenzhou opened the notebook and smacked it facedown against Fei Du's chest.

The page it was open to was the one Fei Du had been on while pretending to take notes during the meeting. Actually, he'd been scrawling idly—

It was a profile sketch of Luo Wenzhou sitting next to him with his chin in his hand.

CHAPTER 81 - Macbeth XXII

“Letting your mind wander during a meeting?” Luo Wenzhou lowered his voice, poking Fei Du’s shoulder. “You’ve had enough to eat and drink now, and your blood sugar isn’t low, right? Disgraceful.”

Fei Du hadn’t deliberately evaded anyone when he’d been drawing. He very easily took the notebook and flipped through it. He spread his hands. “Where did the other one go? Shixiong, why’d you rip out a page of my notebook?”

With justice on his side, Luo Wenzhou said, “I confiscated it.”

Then he restrained his smile and opened the door of the interrogation room.

The sound of them coming in the door startled Zhou Huaijin. He looked up emptily at Luo Wenzhou. In less than a day, this person had gone from a youthful genius whose age couldn’t be seen at all to a haggard-faced middle-aged man with drooping eyes. For women and men alike, a bright and shiny sack of skin was this fragile; if just a bit of vigor vanished like smoke, the body would be past its freshness date in the blink of an eye.

Before Luo Wenzhou could speak, Zhou Huaijin broke the silence. He said hoarsely, “Can you show me the results of the paternity test?”

Luo Wenzhou froze, but a folder was passed over from behind him—Fei Du seemed to have expected that he would ask for this. He was prepared. “Yours, Huaixin’s, and Yang Bo’s are all there.”

Zhou Huaijin took a deep breath and spent a full minute just opening that thin folder, as if he was opening the tragedy of his life, his hands shaking dreadfully.

Fei Du altered his earlier slightly malicious bearing, giving him a fresh glass of warm water. "Wet your throat before we chat. I think President Zhou is a man of faith? According to your views, people have souls. Huaixin's worries haven't passed, and he must not have gone far. Don't make him see you unwell."

For a person experiencing extreme grief, this sort of kindly advice was simply a powerful means of provoking tears. Past the end of his endurance, Zhou Huaijin let out a sob, his whole body shaking for a long time. He took the tissue Fei Du gave him and wiped his face. "I'll tell you whatever I can. What other questions do you have? Do you want the identities of the people who helped me fake the kidnapping?"

"President Hu has already given up those details," Luo Wenzhou said. "Mr. Zhou, I don't know whether you've heard. Dong Xiaoqing, the killer who murdered your little brother, was hit by a car and died not long after escaping from Heng'ai Hospital."

Zhou Huaijin's expression congealed for a moment. Coldly, he said, "Really? That's really too good for her."

"The person who hit her did it deliberately," Luo Wenzhou added, gaze fixed on his expression.

Zhou Huaijin backed up, crossing his arms in front of his chest, adopting a very defensive posture. "If I'd done such a thing, I hope I would have done it myself."

"President Zhou," said Fei Du, "why was Dong Xiaoqing silenced shortly after committing the crime? Evidently someone was afraid she would say something after being arrested. Though she was the killer, she was only a knife. Don't you want to know who was holding that knife?"

Zhou Huaijin's cheeks immediately tensed.

“No matter what, Dong Xiaoqing is dead,” Fei Du continued. “However much you hate her, however much you want to hack her to pieces, it’s no use. Even if you could drag her out to flog her corpse, she still wouldn’t feel anything. Are you reconciled?”

Zhou Huaijin’s feelings were instantly aroused. He looked at Fei Du, his eyes bloodshot. After a long time, he asked, “What do you want?”

“Of the questions I asked you before, there’s one you still haven’t answered,” Fei Du said. “Why haven’t you asked the reason Dong Xiaoqing wanted to kill you? Do you know something? Did you know Dong Xiaoqing?”

“I didn’t know her,” said Zhou Huaijin. “I’d never seen her before. At least if I’d suspected there was something wrong with her, I wouldn’t have had the bodyguards let her in when she approached.”

Fei Du nodded. “So you remembered something later.”

Zhou Huaijin must have been parched. He picked up the water Fei Du had poured him and drank it in one gulp. “I really have done some dishonorable things, but Huaixin was innocent in all of this, from beginning to end. If you can get justice for him, I don’t care if the Zhou Clan goes bankrupt and becomes worthless here and now, whether I’m the genuine heir or not—Mr. Fei, you understand what I mean.”

Fei Du weighed his words and expression. Like a nimbly-reacting chameleon, he at once accordingly adjusted the tempo and tone of his speech, very directly saying, “I understand. I profited off your company at a precarious moment. It seems you didn’t take offense, so I won’t apologize.”

Zhou Huaijin looked up at the ceiling, the lights mercilessly jabbing his pupils. He seemed to hesitate, not knowing where to start. Only

after a good while did he say, “Have you had a positive outcome in your investigation of the Zhou Clan’s public welfare funds suspected of money laundering? If you haven’t found anything, please look a little closer. There must be something there. Unfortunately they always defended against me, not letting me near the related business, so I have no evidence now. But I know that the Zhou Clan isn’t a bunch of Buddhist devotees. They didn’t only use legal means when building the family fortune.”

Luo Wenzhou asked, “Are you talking about Zhou Junmao being suspected of murdering Zhou Yahou?”

“Not only that.” Zhou Huaijin shook his head. “It’s not only that thing. ‘Steal a hook, and they hang you; steal the whole country, and they make you a prince.’ The Zhou Clan’s general headquarters are abroad, the waters are deep. After so many years of success and fame, there are many things there’s no way to investigate. In the midst of the shock after Dong Xiaoqing struck, I remembered something. Many years ago, my life intersected with hers... This has to do with Zheng Kaifeng.

“You must know Zheng Kaifeng’s origins by now—he started out as an underling for a human smuggler, and afterwards joined up with Zhou Junmao and went around everywhere in the style of a successful personage, but actually inferior people are always inferior. They can never change what’s in their bones. To this day he hasn’t learned how to stand up as a civilized human being.”

The corner of Fei Du’s eye twitched lightly, and the tip of his pen paused briefly on the page.

But Zhou Huaijin was wholly unaware, entirely sunk into his recollections. He went on, “This must have been...over twenty years ago, shortly after Huaixin was born. My mother’s postpartum depression was becoming more serious. She was nearly a madwoman

with no way to communicate. She had no attention to spare for him, so I moved his crib into my room and kept him with me every day.”

Luo Wenzhou looked him over. “I’ve heard that a little whelp who howls every night can bring new parents to the point of collapse for quite a few years. Mr. Zhou was very patient from a young age. Couldn’t your family afford a nanny to take care of a small child?”

“There aren’t many young men in the world who would sincerely like a baby. I was only afraid.” Zhou Huaijin gently closed his eyes and took a deep breath, reaching out a hand towards Luo Wenzhou. “Could you give me a cigarette? Thank you.—The fact that I could survive right under Zhou Junmao’s nose relied entirely on my mother’s protection, but her mental and physical state were getting worse by the day then. I was desperate. Looking at her every day, I saw my fate hanging in the balance. Huaixin was a straw I clutched at randomly. I hardly left him during that time. Sometimes I even crushed up my food and fed him a mouthful or two. I thought that no matter what Zhou Junmao wanted to do, he’d have scruples about doing anything to his own child.

“Huaixin had wet the bed that night. He was howling. I got up in a blur to change his diapers. When I’d taken off the old ones, I found that there weren’t any new ones, and was going to go to the storage room to get some...but I found that the lights were on in the study on the first floor, and Zhou Junmao, who had been away from home for several days, was having a secret meeting with Zheng Kaifeng inside.

“At the time, the conglomerate’s main strategy was directed at East Asia. The Zhou Clan wanted to take advantage of the country encouraging foreign investments to seize the market and get cheap labor. Zheng Kaifeng personally took the helm in this. His suitcase was at the door then. He must just have gotten off a plane. If Huaixin hadn’t been waiting, when I saw the two of them, I definitely would have turned back and run for it, but there was nothing I could do. I had to stay as quiet as I could and pass by the study, creeping towards

the storage room, but just then I heard Zheng Kaifeng say, ‘Dead as a doornail, don’t worry, there’s absolutely no trace...’ That sort of thing.”

At this point, Zhou Huaijin paused and put his hands to his forehead, pressed hard on his temples, and took a deep breath. “When you live each moment in fear for your life, you know the feeling, you’ll be especially sensitive towards certain key terms—as soon as I heard the word ‘dead,’ before I had time to put it together with its context, my first thought was that they were going to kill me. I was so scared my hands and feet turned cold and I froze in place.

“Then I heard Zhou Junmao say, ‘I saw the news. It seems there was a little accident.’ Then Zheng Kaifeng said, ‘You mean Dong? There’s no need to worry about him, he doesn’t know anything. He wasn’t looking where he was going and got tangled up. It’s his bad luck.’ Zhou Junmao laughed and said, ‘There’s nothing in the world money won’t buy. It doesn’t matter if it’s a little expensive, as long as it saves trouble.’”

“Wait a minute,” Luo Wenzhou said suddenly. “Mr. Zhou, could you give me an exact time? When was this?”

It had been more than twenty years, after all. The fact that Zhou Huaijin could roughly repeat the words was the contribution of his extreme terror and racing adrenaline at the time. It was really very hard for him to remember other details immediately; he involuntarily frowned slightly.

Fei Du examined his weary face and rhythmically tapped the wooden table with his pen cap. “President Zhou, studying and working during the day and taking care of a small child at night is difficult even for an adult. You must still have been in school then. Did he have an impact on your performance? Were you sleepy during class?”

“I was all right, my classwork wasn’t serious, only basic courses every afternoon...” Zhou Huaijin blurted an answer. At this point, he seemed to catch the distant tail of his memories. “Right, that was business school—I was attending business school at the time. I was seventeen. It was my first year.”

That was twenty-one years ago.

“You said the door of the study wasn’t closed,” Fei Du continued. “Then it must not have been winter and cold, nor summer, when you would need the air-conditioning on?”

“Right! It wasn’t cold or warm then. If it wasn’t September, then it was October.—My mom’s mental state was fragile. Once night fell, no one would casually move around in the house, and most of the people employed in the house didn’t understand Chinese, so they dared to talk with the door open.”

Luo Wenzhou exchanged a look with Fei Du, then looked down and sent Tao Ran a text message: “September or October twenty-one years ago, did something happen to the Zhou Clan or the Dong family?”

Tao Ran’s voice quickly came through his earpiece. “It did, I was just going to tell you. On September 16th of that year, Dong Xiaoqing’s mother died in a car crash.”

The corner of Luo Wenzhou’s eye twitched—the date of Zhou Junmao’s death in a car crash was also the sixteenth, the first day Fei Du had “taken up his post!”

“When I’d heard up to that point, I didn’t dare to linger any longer and quickly ran. But I always remembered that event. Information wasn’t flourishing then. It wasn’t easy if you were abroad and wanted to know domestic news. I saw a checked luggage tag on Zheng Kaifeng’s luggage and saw that the abbreviation for the city of

destination was Yan City, so I secretly found a friend I trusted who was studying abroad in China and asked her to help me find information related to Yan City, the surname Dong, and unusual death.”

Luo Wenzhou looked down and read through the old news articles his colleagues outside had sent to his phone. “Did you find the news that a well-known Chinese businessman had died in a car crash?”

“Yes. Three months later, the company he’d built up on his own was acquired by a foreign investor. The source of the foreign investment was a shell company registered in the Cayman Islands by the Zhou Clan.” Zhou Huaijin spread his hands and said, “You see, when a murderer kills someone and receives no punishment, when he acts for the second time, he’ll be even more ruthless. To draw an inappropriate analogy, it’s like someone who cheats at games will develop a habit of cheating generally. Two hooligans became famous entrepreneurs and succeeded in entering polite society by killing one Zhou Yahu. If they killed another roadblock, they’d succeed in taking over his domestic network, making an advance of ten years at once—while foreign investments were being encouraged at the time, the truly good projects wouldn’t go to companies that weren’t on their home soil. President Fei, you’ve had some contact with business. Do you know how much it costs to accumulate the connections needed to compete with local trademarks in a strange place?”

Fei Du sighed. “I also know that buying a truck driver who just happens to be looking for death can’t be done for any amount of money. Your honored father was the sort of person who’d flip the chessboard if he couldn’t win.”

“That woman...the one named Dong.” Zhou Huaijin covered his eyes with his hand. In a rather weak voice, he said, “When she struck, she said something, only I heard it...and Huaixin.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘One wasn’t enough? Why couldn’t you let even my dad go?’”

Luo Wenzhou frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. She seemed to think that by some means I’d used that responsible driver’s...her father’s desire for revenge to bring about Zhou Junmao’s car crash.” Zhou Huaijin shook his head. “But my capabilities really aren’t that great. If Zhou Junmao’s death really was deliberate, I recommend you go to Zheng Kaifeng.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned, suddenly remembering what Dong Xiaoqing had said to him before her death.

“He’s one of those people, too...”

If Dong Xiaoqing’s mother’s death hadn’t been an accident but a conspiracy—then the responsible driver and the target both dying on the scene was exactly the same circumstance as in Zhou Junmao’s car crash.

Could *they* be a group of “road assassins” who didn’t stint to give up their own lives to take another’s?

Was there a “death fleet” under Yan City’s bright daylight?

Luo Wenzhou stood up at once. “Bring Zheng Kaifeng in.”

Tao Ran had been listening in on Zhou Huaijin’s interrogation. “Wait a minute, Dong Xiaoqing thought that Zhou Huaijin was the killer behind the scenes? I don’t quite understand, why would she think that?”

“That depends on how much information was in the mysterious package she received. For example, did she know that Zhou Huaijin

plotted his own kidnapping, that Yang Bo wasn't the Zhou Clan's illegitimate son at all, that Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao had conspired together at the car crash twenty years ago?" Fei Du, coming out of the interrogation room, put in a word. "When Zhou Huaixin called the police, he made a lot of noise and talked a lot of nonsense to stir things up. Among that, he said he thought that someone had divulged Zhou Junmao's itinerary and the make and model of the car he was riding in to pull Dong Qian into the rumor that this was a power struggle between the wealthy involving an assassination. For Dong Qian to succeed in his suicidal attack, there must have been someone inside the Zhou Clan who was in touch with him, collecting that information for him. Who do you think that person is most likely to be?"

Lang Qiao said, "Also, no one in Zhou Huaijin's family knew he was actually Zhou Junmao's biological son. Is it possible that's the result of someone's deliberate misdirection? For example, when Zhou Huaijin was little, it's possible his parents simply weren't sure, and there were always people saying that the child looked like Mr. Wang from next door—after all, Zhou Huaijin really doesn't look like Zhou Junmao. Then there was a 'friend' who came over to say that there was a new technology that could make a paternity determination, but with as big a conglomerate as the Zhou Clan, it definitely wouldn't do to make a big fuss about that kind of thing and give people a show, so they could only do it privately, in secret. The 'friend' volunteered to help—just like Zhou Huaijin framing Yang Bo..."

Just then, the phone rang wildly, interrupting Lang Qiao. For some reason, she had a foreboding feeling at the moment she picked up. "Hello?"

From the other end came the voice of one of the criminal policemen who had been set to follow Zheng Kaifeng. "Qiao'er, tell the boss, Zheng Kaifeng's run for it!"

CHAPTER 82 - Macbeth XXIII

Lang Qiao looked out the window at the gloomy and overcast sky, feeling increasingly like there was no light in the world. “Dage, that can’t be, how could he run off? When did you find out that he’d run? There are quite a few of you, can’t you even keep an eye on an old fart?”

Luo Wenzhou reached out and took the phone from her.

The criminal policeman on the other end felt very wronged, because prior to this, aside from needing to keep a few key individuals in the country because of the Zhou Clan’s economic problems, the investigation targeting Zhou Huaijin’s kidnapping had mainly focused on Yang Bo, Hu Zhenyu, Zhou Huaixin, and other such people. Of course people had been left to watch Zheng Kaifeng, but they hadn’t classified him as a key focus of surveillance and hadn’t watched him closely—after all, neither the inheritance dispute nor the battle between the legitimate and illegitimate sons had any connection to the old fellow.

If not for the unexpected development of Dong Xiaoqing attacking the Zhou brothers, come the weekend, the tail on him may have been dispersed.

“This morning, Zheng Kaifeng went to the Zhou Clan building downtown as usual. We followed him all day. When he left the office, we were watching as he got in his car in the parking lot and followed to Zheng Kaifeng’s villa in the city. Then we heard the boss tell us to bring him in for questioning. The car hadn’t pulled into the house’s yard yet, and we stopped it. Then we found out that the old man in the car wasn’t him!”

“Someone palmed off a fake on you and you didn’t know. Are your eyes for breathing or eating?” Luo Wenzhou simply wished iron could

turn straight into steel. Then his speech paused slightly, and he said, “Bring in all the accomplices who lured you away. Tao Ran, take people to the Zhou Clan building and investigate the security camera footage. Get a search warrant. Zheng Kaifeng’s office, his domestic bank accounts, his residence... Search it all. He’s definitely done something, or else why would he run?”

“Lang-er, you guys get in touch with the traffic department, set up roadblocks on all the highways and national roads in and out of the city. Notify the security checkpoints at all the airports, train stations, and long distance bus stations, focusing on Zheng Kaifeng’s distinguishing characteristics. Everyone move. There’s still time now, we can’t let him leave Yan City!”

Lang Qiao had been looking forward to getting off work once Zhou Huaijin’s interrogation was over. Taking a taxi, she could still make it to the evening screening of the movie. Now it seemed the plan had fallen through entirely. She couldn’t resist a howl of anguish. “Why has so much been going on lately? It’s all because Mercury’s in retrograde!”

Tao Ran thought what she was saying still had to do with the case and quickly asked, “Mercury?”

“The planet,” said Lang Qiao feebly. “In retrograde.”

Deputy-Captain Tao, who had grown up in a cave on a hilltop, was bewildered. He didn’t understand this thieves’ cant. “Huh? In retrograde towards where? Don’t they all move from west to east?”

“...” Lang Qiao took a breath and patted Tao Ran sympathetically on the shoulder. “All right, Deputy Tao, we all know you don’t have a girlfriend.—I’m saying, this year really has been abnormal. From the first half of the year to now, how much overtime have we worked? Each month’s workload surpasses all of last year, one case after another, and all of them major cases—if it’s not something wrong at a

sub-bureau, then it's a case of serial kidnapping and murder floating to the surface after more than twenty years, and now it's a wealthy family drama, going all over the city—listen, leaders, colleagues, are we still living in a peaceful cosmopolitan metropolis here? Why do I feel like I'm on the front lines in Syria?"

She didn't mean anything by this, but Tao Ran heard her, and his heart lurched—

True, this frequency wasn't normal to begin with.

In fact, this city was too big, with too many people. There would always be places that sheltered and condoned evil that the people living in the light wouldn't notice, but the reason a chronic condition could become chronic, could exist for a long time, was that it had evolved methods of survival and concealment. Otherwise, it would be thrown off as society constantly progressed...but surely it wouldn't happen so coincidentally, in such concentration?

Everything that had happened in the last half a year seemed to be a series of firecrackers strung together—one spark, and they were all vying to explode.

For no reason, Tao Ran once again thought of that mysterious "Zero Hour Reading" and couldn't resist calling Luo Wenzhou to a stop when he'd already gone to the door. "Wait, Lao Luo!"

Luo Wenzhou's steps paused.

Tao Ran said, "Do you remember when shifu..."

Luo Wenzhou gave an "Ah!" Not waiting for him to finish, he quickly replied, "Right, right, I know, the anniversary of Lao Yang's death is coming up soon, I'd nearly have forgotten if you hadn't reminded me, so we absolutely have to come to a pause in this case as soon as

possible, and in a few days we'll buy some flowers and go see shiniang⁶!”

Tao Ran froze at once.

Luo Wenzhou gave him a deep look and pushed Fei Du's shoulder. “If there aren't enough service cars to deploy, drive your own. When you get back I'll reimburse you for gas. If you don't want to work overtime this weekend, then move quickly!”

He quickly finished and, urging Fei Du, left in a hurry.

“Deputy-Captain Tao, are we going to the Zhou Clan building now?”

Tao Ran only came to himself when Xiao Haiyang suddenly spoke behind him. “Huh? Oh... Right, let's go—some of our colleagues from the economic crimes branch must still be there. I'll drive, you give their leader a call...”

Just now, Luo Wenzhou had not only interrupted him, he'd also said something wrong—something only someone who was familiar with the subject would understand was wrong.

Their shiniang was Lao Yang's wife, a career woman with a busy job. When Lao Yang had been alive, they had only seen this shiniang a few times. Later, when Lao Yang had died in the line of duty, she'd taken a hard blow and thought that the police had snatched away her dear one; after that, she'd been especially unwilling to see any of his colleagues from when he'd been alive. So Luo Wenzhou and the others also did their best not to bother her, each year going in secret a day early to sweep his grave. During the Spring Festival, while Lao Yang's daughter Yang Xin was on winter break, they'd take the opportunity to take her out and give her some presents and New Year's money.

They certainly wouldn't "buy some flowers and go see shiniang"—shiniang was allergic to pollen. Yang Xin had told them during last year's Spring Festival, when Luo Wenzhou had been seized by a sudden whim to buy a bouquet, so they both knew.

Tao Ran frowned. What had Luo Wenzhou been hinting at by interrupting him with such a nonsensical statement?

"This car of yours is too flashy." Luo Wenzhou shut the door of Fei Du's enormous SUV. "If the parking lot's a little full, it'll be hard to get it in, and it's a gas guzzler.—Hey, watch the doors."

Fei Du steadily drove the car out of the gates, turned at the intersection, and flipped on the car radio. The signal was perfectly clear, without any trace of abnormality.

"It looks like there's no listening device installed here." Fei Du turned the sound down on the radio, then reached out for an inconspicuous device under the dashboard, scanned the surroundings, saw that there was nothing unusual in the car, then laughed. "After all, I change cars every day. I don't know myself how many I have."

Luo Wenzhou nodded somewhat wearily and stretched—

The mysterious package sent to the Dong house had just brushed shoulders with the police investigating the house; because of this, Xiao Haiyang had hinted that the person who'd sent the package was familiar with the City Bureau's manner of handling cases and was likely one of their own people. Luo Wenzhou had openly contradicted him then because he'd been refusing that guess.

Because the investigation of the Dong house had been obvious. Even the neighbors living in the same estate knew the times they'd come and gone; they wouldn't have been able to avoid the eyes of someone who had been paying attention. If the person who'd sent the express

delivery package was in fact the criminal, it would have been very easy to avoid the police; there was no need for a mole.

Xiao Haiyang's guess couldn't serve as evidence.

They were all colleagues he worked with day in and day out. Luo Wenzhou was absolutely unwilling to suspect anyone for no reason.

But the timing of Zheng Kaifeng's flight really was too delicate.

Dong Xiaoqing had attacked Zhou Huaijin around midday. The circumstances had been too confused; Luo Wenzhou had only cared about catching the killer, and Fei Du had been with Zhou Huaixin. Neither had been able to spare attention for anything else. No one had been able to control the scene, and there had been many reporters present. Before the first wave of police had arrived, the reports had already gone out to all kinds of media.

If Zheng Kaifeng had fled immediately after seeing the news, that would have been fairly normal—though if that had been the case, he'd have left the city by now, run to who knew where.

But it was clear that when the news of Dong Xiaoqing attacking Zhou Huaijin had just gone out, Zheng Kaifeng had been totally calm, not thinking he could be implicated in this in any way—because neither he nor Zhou Junmao had known that, twenty-one years ago, there had been a terrified teenager outside the door of the study.

So why had he immediately run off in a panic after Zhou Huaijin had told them the inside story of what had happened twenty-one years ago?

Who in the Criminal Investigation Team...or the whole City Bureau was his listening ear?

“Reasonably speaking,” Fei Du suddenly said, “you shouldn’t be in my car right now. After all, looked at from every point of view, I rather seem like the ‘mole’ among you.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at him.

“First of all, I know Zheng Kaifeng. I’m more familiar than any of you with the Zhou Clan.” Fei Du’s hands lay loosely on the steering wheel. “Second, the whole thing happened after I came. According to ordinary logic, on the basis of analysis of credible historical record, the newcomer is always the most suspicious.”

Luo Wenzhou laughed noncommittally. “In your eyes, is your shixiong the sort of scum who’d suspect a person right after confessing his feelings for him?”

Fei Du froze.

Luo Wenzhou didn’t wait for him to speak, saying, “I know it’s not you, because you’re really a rather solitary person. Your relationships with other people go no further than mutual benefit. I really can’t think of what Zheng Kaifeng might have that would be more attractive to you than my good looks.”

Fei Du: “...”

When he was flirting, honeyed words came effortlessly out of his mouth. He considered his own level to be very high. But having experienced this deity’s ability to use honeyed words to flirt with himself, he knew that he still had some things to learn on this subject and should be more modest.

“That’s true.” Fei Du had no choice but to echo his boast. “Do you mean that now I can let my mind wander, pull the car over, and kiss you?”

“No, we’re on business,” said the upright Captain Luo, scrupulously separating private and public interests. “Anyway, I know you’re thinking your shixiong may be a mental deficient, only you won’t say it right out on account of my handsomeness.”

On account of those bowls of noodles in the evening, Fei Du really didn’t want to take a dig at him, but apart from that he really had nothing good to say, so he could only shut his mouth.

“Actually, it’s because of what I heard you ask Zhou Huaijin in the interrogation room,” said Luo Wenzhou. “After his little brother was stabbed, Zhou Huaijin didn’t ask why Dong Xiaoqing had done it, and you deduced then that he might have some idea about Dong Xiaoqing, but he’d only remembered it after receiving a shock. Otherwise he wouldn’t have run the risk of letting her get close at the outset.—Hu Zhenyu is one of Zhou Huaijin’s people, Zhou Huaixin is his precious little brother, Yang Bo is the person he’s been carefully plotting against. If this had had to do with the three of them, his reaction wouldn’t have been so slow.”

Fei Du nodded. “True. I thought this afternoon at the hospital that Dong Xiaoqing may have something to do with Zheng Kaifeng.”

Luo Wenzhou said in a businesslike manner, “If you were colluding with Zheng Kaifeng, you couldn’t be clueless about him. Considering how clever you are, you definitely would have deduced approximately what Zhou Huaijin was going to say before he opened his mouth. So it’s impossible that Zheng Kaifeng would only have been notified then.”

This reason sounded much more justified. Fei Du accepted it without any objection. “Him running then really was rather belated.”

But Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Fei Du, if I didn’t have a reason, didn’t have any logic, if I’d only said, ‘I trust you,’ what would you have done?”

Fei Du froze. Then the corners of his eyes curved craftily, and he purposefully lowered his voice. “I’d be very moved, wanting nothing better than to go down on one knee at your feet.”

“Less of that fucking nonsense.” Luo Wenzhou leaned back. “You’d only have thought I was either stupid or lying.”

Fei Du smiled, but he didn’t refute him.

“Do you still remember Wang Xiujuan? He Zhongyi’s mother. If she was the one sitting here, even if you were holding a knife to her chest, she still wouldn’t think you were going to kill her. Would you think her trust in you was stupid?”

Avoiding the important point, Fei Du said, “It’s very rude to judge an elderly lady’s intelligence behind her back—anyway, we’re nearly strangers. She doesn’t understand me.”

“I’ve known you over seven years, so I think I can be counted as understanding you,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I also choose to trust you. Of course, if you let me down one day, I’ll be very hurt, so hurt I may not love you anymore.”

Fei Du should have taken advantage and come back with some teasing, but he oddly felt something spread over from beside him, pressing on his chest, that left him temporarily speechless.

Fortunately Luo Wenzhou at once changed the subject. “Oh, right. I just handed out assignments to everyone and only didn’t say what the two of us were going to do. Why do you seem so understanding?”

“You told them to go arrest people, hunt down the fugitive, inspect surveillance footage, and investigate evidence, sending all of them around in circles. Only you didn’t mention Zheng Kaifeng’s disciple Yang Bo, as if you’d forgotten about him. I suppose you actually

didn't want to inadvertently alert the enemy?" Fei Du said. "There's three kilometers to go to Yang Bo's hotel—"

Luo Wenzhou felt that if he spent long enough with Fei Du, he would start to get lazy. There were so many things he could leave unsaid. He paused, then said, "Actually, before Dong Xiaoqing died, she said something to me."

The enormous luxury SUV travelled through the night like a black monster. As Fei Du held the huge beast's reins, his eyes turned slightly towards Luo Wenzhou.

"She said Dong Qian wasn't innocent. 'He's one of those people.'"

At this point, Fei Du's half-closed eyes suddenly opened considerably wider.

"I guess you can also hear the problem? I've been wondering who *those people* could mean," Luo Wenzhou said quietly. "It definitely can't be Zhou Huaijin and his people.—If, like Zhou Huaijin says, Dong Xiaoqing thought that some person had used Dong Qian's desire for revenge to entice him into giving up his life to bring about Zhou Junmao's car accident, in her eyes, Dong Qian definitely wouldn't belong to that group."

"You're saying that there's a specialized team that fakes accidents to murder people," Fei Du said quietly, "who when necessary will even sacrifice themselves like suicide bombers?"

"It's rather outrageous, but it's the only way to explain certain things.—I didn't say this before because I didn't understand what Dong Xiaoqing meant. I was afraid of disturbing your judgements... What are you laughing at?"

Fei Du stamped on the gas pedal. While his car was very steady, it still lurched. "Actually, that all makes sense."

“Careful.” Luo Wenzhou grabbed the handle next to him. “My young friend, this isn’t how you shake a car.—What all makes sense?”

“I got some friends to privately investigate Yang Bo. His father died over a decade ago. He was driving under the influence and ran into another car. Both sides died on the scene.”

Luo Wenzhou immediately sat up straight.

CHAPTER 83 - Macbeth XXIV

Yang Bo's educational record was average, his qualifications were inadequate, and his origins were common. Aside from having a bit of cleverness and looking rather decent, he had no other strong points. So why had he been able to reach his current high position in the Zhou Clan at such a young age?

Under normal circumstances, this question had only two possible answers—this person was either a crown prince or a concubine.

But with Yang Bo, the circumstances evidently weren't normal.

Luo Wenzhou immediately asked, "Who was the victim in that case? What connection did they have to the Zhou Clan?"

"That just happens to be the most incomprehensible thing of all," said Fei Du. "The car that was hit then was a seven-seat business car. There were five people on it, including the driver. Four died, and one was injured. The location was a prefecture-level city in T Province. All the people were office workers from a local real estate investment company. On the day of the crash, they were going to the local seat of government to submit a project plan for a bidding contest their company was participating in. The Zhou Clan wasn't participating in the bidding contest. From both the public and private standpoint, none of the victims had any association with the Zhou Clan."

When you couldn't find a private resentment, you had to consider who had a vested interest, so Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself for a moment, then asked, "Who got the project they were bidding for in the end?"

"Since the whole team came to grief, the local business abandoned the opportunity, and the project went to an obscure little company in the end. If I told you the name, you wouldn't know it." Fei Du

paused. “Although I could give you another very useful piece of information.”

Luo Wenzhou was listening carefully for the meaning behind his words. He could tell that the black moth next to him, finally behaving for a moment, was ready to spread his wings again. So he tightened his belt and cleared his throat, affectedly saying, “Although I may lag behind a little, anything you can find, I can definitely find, too—though I’ve determined to hear out your improper request first. Go on.”

“You have to answer a question for me.” Fei Du paused, then added, “It’s a personal question, of course.”

Luo Wenzhou raised his eyebrows high, thinking, “Am I the sort of person to sell out my privacy for work?”

Putting the question so clearly, Luo Wenzhou only took three seconds to come up with an answer. He said resolutely, “Deal.”

“If you investigated that company’s finances, you’d find that they had a large debt. If they couldn’t pay when it came due, the equity shares they’d used as collateral would go to the creditor—simply speaking, it was like they had an invisible shareholder, and that shareholder just happened to be called Guangyao Fund.” Fei Du turned off onto a side road. The hotel Yang Bo was staying in was already in sight. “Do you recognize that name?”

Luo Wenzhou’s brow furrowed tightly. He thought he must have heard that name somewhere, but the information he came across in his daily life was too jumbled. It was hard to put it in order.

Fei Du drove openly up to the hotel. Because his car was so eye-catching, the attention of everyone who saw it was drawn to the logo; it was an unconventional way to be inconspicuous.

Luo Wenzhou looked down and searched for ‘Guangyao Fund’ on his phone. There wasn’t much information. This enterprise seemed not to like publicity. There was only a link to the company’s website. The website was very properly set up. Luo Wenzhou hastily scrolled through a long and tedious explanation of its corporate culture. Suddenly, he saw the Guangyao Fund’s logo.

Luo Wenzhou looked up at once.

Fei Du slowed the car, unhurriedly adding, “So you’ve remembered. The place where Xu Wenchao disposed of the bodies—that piece of undeveloped seaside land belongs to them. Isn’t that rather a coincidence?”

“Darling,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly after a while, “you have a rather horrifying way of putting things.”

The market was like a battle field. Tremendous changes were common. Animosity would gradually arise among many partners who’d happily worn the same pair of pants in the beginning; either they couldn’t share their trials and tribulations, or they couldn’t enjoy the same pleasures. In the end they’d break up, divide up their luggage, and go their separate ways—among these, Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng were simply a model pair. They’d both been strangers in a strange land, mutually supporting each other; one owed a debt of gratitude, the other did all he could to be worthy of it. Based on this summary, you could have made a legendary film.

But now it seemed that what was behind this “legend” wasn’t “crossing a river in the same boat” but “sharing a common goal.”

As well as “wallowing in the same mire.”

Thirty-eight years ago, Zhou Junmao had seduced his big brother’s wife. The big brother, Zhou Yahou, soon after died of a heart attack,

handing over his household and career on a silver platter. The cause of his death was now in question.

And this wasn't a unique occurrence. Twenty-one years ago, the course of the Zhou Clan's advance into China's interior had been extremely smooth; there hadn't been the slightest hint of a failure to acclimate. The stumbling block hindering them from purchasing a domestic brand was knocked aside by a car; the enormous market awaited their indomitable pioneering and subjugation. Compared to this, what did Dong Qian and his wife, unluckily caught in the middle, count for?

How many cases like this were there? How many lives stained the hands of the famous public-spirited returning overseas Chinese?

To this day, no one knew.

Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng were an excellent and most understanding pair of partners in flipping chess boards and cheating at cards, trampling on law and order time after time to easily attain what they wanted. As time went on, the feeling of being invincible would undoubtedly have become habit-forming.

Finally, perhaps because the opportunity had been ripe, perhaps because some circumstance had pressed, this impregnable alliance had crumbled from within, formally entering into a period of internal strife.

So...what part had Yang Bo of the dubious past played in all of this?

"I really want to make you carry out your obligation and answer my question now," Fei Du said suddenly, "but...I think there's something wrong with that truck in front of us."

Luo Wenzhou followed his line of sight and saw a freight truck with a huge logo for fresh produce delivery at their three o'clock, silently

circling around the hotel, in the end driving into the hotel's underground parking lot.

“At this hour, all the supervisors must have gotten off work, so who's going to receive the goods they're delivering? There are many things that won't be fresh in the morning if they're left to sit out all night,” Fei Du said quietly. “Also, if I recall correctly, that high-end cold chain transport is under the Zhou Clan's banner.”

Luo Wenzhou's original train of thought had been: Zheng Kaifeng had taken a fancy to Yang Bo, a nothing of a downy-headed brat; there had to be some link between the two of them; through Yang Bo, they could pick up some traces. He hadn't expected to reap such a harvest!

Luo Wenzhou said, “Wait, is it possible Zheng Kaifeng is in that truck?”

Fei Du shrugged lightly.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Follow it.”

Maintaining a certain distance, Fei Du very cautiously turned into the underground garage's other side. The security guard on duty hurriedly came out to block their way. “Sorry, this is the exit, you need to...”

The car window slowly rolled down, and a police ID flashed out.

The security guard froze, seeing the long-haired man in the driver's seat turn his head and half-smilingly curve his eyes at him, index finger at his lips. “Shh—“

Yang Bo wasn't like Zheng Kaifeng. In the investigation into Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping, he'd been very carefully looked after. There were people watching him from downstairs, from the surrounding

area, even from inside the hotel itself, so he could be retrieved anytime he was wanted for questioning at the bureau.

Day after day, Yang Bo had been tormented by the police, tormented by the media, and tormented by himself. His condition could be described as not having eaten or slept well. As soon as he closed his eyes, he thought of that paternity test report, which had made him feel such a profusion of emotions, but which he now would have loved nothing better than to wish out of existence.

When he'd first gotten that report, he'd been disbelieving—disbelieving that his mother could actually have betrayed his family. After the shock had passed, he hadn't been able to keep down his secret delight, feeling that he'd instantly become a prince fallen on hard times in a story. It was as if his internal organs had been made of a different material; for days after he'd floated when he walked.

He, Yang Bo, an ordinary person who had grown up in ordinary surroundings, was Zhou Junmao's son, Zheng Kaifeng's disciple. The two people in charge of the Zhou Clan carefully looked after him. When you were a step away from the heavens, wasn't all that was required that one step?

But worldly affairs are hard to predict. To this day Yang Bo couldn't understand how things had developed to this point.

Yang Bo lay heavily on the big hotel bed, hands covering his face, feeling the stubble he hadn't had time to take care of. He opened the news feed on his phone and saw a screenful of blood; the photographs of the crime scene where Zhou Huaixin had been stabbed hadn't even been pixilated.

Yang Bo thought that he ought to have been pleased, but now he oddly felt rather panicked and nauseated.

Just then, his phone vibrated. It was a number of unknown origin. He answered weakly, "Hello..."

"It's me," came Zheng Kaifeng's familiar voice from the other end. "Are you in the Fragrant Palace Hotel now?"

For no reason, Yang Bo caught feeling of anxiety from his voice. He instantly sat up. "...I'm here, Venerable Zheng, do you..."

Zheng Kaifeng urgently interrupted him. "Come down. Take care to avoid the policemen following you. When you get to the underground parking lot, come see me. I'll send you the license plate number."

"Venerable..."

Before the bewildered Yang Bo could get out a sentence, the phone was hung up.

He stayed where he was for a moment, staring emptily, not knowing what was going on, feeling rather helpless. Soon after, a few messages arrived on his phone. The first was the license plate number. Then there were some photographs. The comment on the photographs was: "These are the policemen following you. Careful!"

Yang Bo instantly broke out in a cold sweat. His hands were shaking a little. He forced himself to concentrate, took a deep breath, changed into exercise clothes, picked up his phone and wallet, and went out, pretending he was going to the hotel's gym for a midnight run.

As soon as he opened the door, he came face to face with a male attendant pushing a small cart, raising his hand preparing to knock on the door.

The attendant wasn't at all embarrassed. He greeted him, smiling. "Going to exercise, sir? Do you need room service?"

Yang Bo focused on the newcomer's face, feeling a chill go up from the base of his spine to his neck—this man was one of the policemen in the photographs!

Face pale, he stiffly shook his head. “No need, thank you.”

These words used up nearly all of his strength. When he'd said them, Yang Bo subconsciously lowered his head, wanting to lock the door and leave immediately.

But the “attendant” spoke. “Wait, sir.”

Yang Bo's spine stiffened at once. Even his breath paused.

The cop pretending to be an attendant said in a low voice, “Don't forget to take your key card.”

Yang Bo's heart was beating fit to burst out of his chest. He plucked out his card and strode away without looking back.

His back was already soaked with sweat.

The “attendant” watched him leave, narrowed his eyes, and quietly said, “Something's wrong with the ‘monkey's attitude. I suspect he may be about to run. Everyone look out.”

He'd just spoken when a familiar male voice came through his earpiece. “Got it. Someone arranged to meet him in the underground garage. Hook me up to the real-time surveillance for the underground garage outside of the Fragrant Palace Hotel. The guys outside, seal off the garage's entrances and exits for me. Prepare to catch a turtle in a jar.”

After a moment's pause, the “attendant” recovered immediately. “Yes, boss!”

Fei Du drove against the direction of traffic into the underground garage's exit, silently blocking the exit ramp with the car. The real-time surveillance footage quickly arrived on Luo Wenzhou's phone. Two men got out of the truck that had just driven in. Though they both wore delivery uniforms, there was no attempt at a performance—these two men were tall and robust, their movements incomparably agile, their gazes alert. As soon as they got out of the truck, they began to search the cars scattered around to see whether there was anyone inside them.

“Captain Luo.” The voice of another one of the criminal policemen responsible for surveilling Yang Bo came over his earpiece. “Yang Bo just went into the gym, casually did a couple of laps, then went into the bathroom. I waited outside for five minutes, then forced the door pretending to be doing the cleaning. He'd already left by the bathroom window... Captain Luo, when Yang Bo saw me, he looked away at once. I suspect he recognized me.”

Luo Wenzhou wasn't at all taken aback. “Understood.”

Then he cut his connection to his colleagues and turned to say to Fei Du, “Yang Bo is coming down. He's been regularly called into the City Bureau for questioning, my people have been following him for a week, and during that week, the numbskull didn't notice at all. But today he's suddenly acquired some IQ. I suspect someone's just leaked a list of the people assigned to tail him—if Zheng Kaifeng really is in that truck, why would he run the risk of coming to get Yang Bo? Zhou Huaijin said that Yang Bo privately went to find someone to run a paternity test for him and Zhou Junmao. That shows the joker may not know anything at all. Does Zheng Kaifeng really like him that much?”

Before Luo Wenzhou had finished, a figure appeared in the surveillance footage. It was Yang Bo, wearing exercise clothes. Yang Bo stood there, looking in alarm at the men dressed up as delivery people, constantly making gestures of wiping away sweat. Just then,

the container of the cold chain transport opened. The camera couldn't see what was inside the container, but Yang Bo's body language changed immediately. He very respectfully said something towards the container.

Fei Du said, "Zheng Kaifeng is inside."

Whatever the person in the container said, Yang Bo's expression changed, like an elementary school student who'd come to class in the morning having forgotten his backpack. He looked all around with extreme caution. Then the two hefty fellows in delivery uniforms picked him up, one on each side, and lifted him into the truck—

"Get them, move!" Luo Wenzhou firmly ordered the criminal policemen already guarding the garage's entrances and exits.

As soon as he spoke, sudden police sirens rose like the tide, swelling through the whole underground parking lot. The people inside the cold chain truck were caught off guard and instantly panicked. The fake delivery people hurriedly threw Yang Bo into the container and jumped into the truck. Before the doors were even fully closed, they hit the gas pedal. The cars parked next to them met with unmerited calamity, being roughly clipped by the truck, shoved this way and that in a heap.

Then the truck very quickly clearly distinguished which direction the police sirens were coming from. Flooring the gas pedal, it drove as if it was about to take flight towards the other exit, where there was no movement.

Luo Wenzhou went down in his seat, pulling over and buckling the seatbelt he'd undone when Fei Du had stopped the car. "Block that truck!"

His first time acting as their field staff, Fei Du's performance was outstanding. He casually blurted out, "Yes, sir."

The truck hadn't expected there to be a car driving the wrong way at the exit, and moreover the car had no intention of getting out of their way, but was coming right towards them. The driver cursed loudly, subconsciously turning the steering wheel and narrowly avoiding the oncoming car. Before he could relax a little, he heard a loud sound. In an extremely short time, the big SUV had put on extremely high speed, turning in place in a surpassing display of driving skill, crowding the truck towards the wall of the garage.

The little truck's windows broke at once, and the doors warped, the wheels on one side rising high—

The container banged open. Along with Yang Bo, holding his head, a good number of men who looked like hired thugs gushed out.

Sitting in the newly-reinforced car, Fei Du, while entirely uninjured, had been choked by the seatbelt. He coughed and said, "Shixiong, I can't deal with the fighting..."

"I wouldn't dare to trouble you with that." Luo Wenzhou pushed open the door. At the same time, the police cars that had been behind encircling and intercepting came along, tightly surrounding the miserable truck, quickly rounding up the thugs.

Luo Wenzhou got out a set of handcuffs. His gaze went past the alarmed Yang Bo, who was holding his head, falling inside the cold chain container—the inside of the cold chain container was very cozily arranged, with a thick rug and a few genuine leather chairs. Zheng Kaifeng was sitting in one of them, his expression like a Shar Pei governing a country.

Luo Wenzhou knocked on the door of the truck with the stainless steel handcuffs. "President Zheng, please alight."

Fei Du had been rather severely choked by the seatbelt. He got out of the car, stumbling a little, and tripped on something.

“Barbarians!” Fei Du looked on as the criminal policemen collected the thugs, shaking his head, leaning his hand on the hood of the car, pressing his other hand to his chest and coughing a few times.

Just then, he saw that there seemed to be some flashing light under the truck’s container. It was very weak. Only when it hit Luo Wenzhou’s light-colored pant leg did it appear, flashing faster and faster, almost the same as the police cars’ lights...

First, Fei Du stared. Then his pupils contracted, and he immediately threw himself forward, grabbing Luo Wenzhou by the waist and pushing him back.

Luo Wenzhou’s back was wounded to start with. Grabbed like this, he couldn’t keep his footing. Before he could grab onto anything, there was a sudden enormous sound in his ears—

CHAPTER 84 - Macbeth XXV

Would Zheng Kaifeng, an extremely audacious and avaricious person, be willing to die?

But if someone was plotting to assassinate him, then who had placed the bomb on the truck?

Since the killer had the capacity to place a bomb on the truck without anyone being the wiser, why hadn't he made it a little simpler, taking him unawares and stabbing him to death, or stealing a car and hitting him head-on?

Why couldn't all these murderers lately do their jobs properly? Why did they always have to make headline news?

Any one of this series of questions merited repeated thought and deliberation.

But in Fei Du's mind, where a mysterious black hole always seemed to be revolving, a sudden Big Bang seemed to occur. All his thoughts lost gravity, floating out of the frame of logic.

Perhaps the light reflecting on Luo Wenzhou's pants was just the effect of the wildly flashing police lights mixed together. Perhaps this momentary sense of crisis was only his own paranoia... Then this silly joke could keep Comrade Luo Wenzhou entertained for his whole life.

But in that instant, Fei Du was deferring to his most basic instincts.

There was no reason for it.

Luo Wenzhou was knocking on the container's door and blustering in front of Zheng Kaifeng when Fei Du, entirely without warning, threw himself at him from the side and shoved him towards the SUV. Fei Du

grabbed the car door with one hand, pulled it open without even looking, and, while Luo Wenzhou was unsteady on his feet, pushed him inside.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a spark suddenly flare under the container.

Fei Du only had time to reflexively pull over the car door he was holding. Before he'd had time to entirely shield himself with the door, the huge impact had already arrived. The car door slammed into his back.

After Fei Du's car crash, he'd had the whole car reinforced and the glass changed. This was his first day driving it after it had been repaired following its thorough tossing. The crash protection was indeed good, but he hadn't expected that he'd meet a bomb head-on this time.

However good a car was, it still wasn't a tank. The car door couldn't withstand the extreme test, warping at the moment of explosion, the bullet-proof glass shattering along with it. Fei Du's last awareness was the feeling of his arm, which had been struck by the car door, hurting as if it had shattered, along with his shoulder. He didn't make a sound, because his lungs had been nearly laminated by the hit.

All the vehicles in the underground garage cried out in unison, their alarms rising to the ceiling. Unable to reverberate to the skies, they could only echo back and forth in the cramped space. The fierce fire spat up dangerous long tongues, instantly consuming the truck's container. Some car's windows broke, raining shards of glass onto the ground. The container's door flew up several meters.

Fortune was like the wind, changing in a moment. It had only taken a week for the "well-known overseas Chinese entrepreneur" Zheng Kaifeng, who could summon hundreds at one call, to become a

“criminal suspect,” and then to become a crispy-on-the-outside, tender-on-the-inside scorched sparrow.

When Fei Du had pushed him, the back of Luo Wenzhou’s head had hit the steering wheel. He felt he’d nearly gone deaf.

He instinctively caught the person who fell into his arms, not realizing what had happened. The huge noise in his ears collected into a long, thin sound, like mosquito’s whine. Luo Wenzhou felt something sticky on his hands and subconsciously twisted his fingers. His eyes opened wide, still with a trace of blankness. His limbs seemed to belong to a marionette, clumsily moving on their own.

Then the smell of blood, smoke, and scorched material rolled over him like a tsunami.

“Fei Du...”

Luo Wenzhou’s suspended heart was instantly electrified. First it trembled. Then it began to beat wildly as if in revolt, nearly overloading, about to burst out at any moment.

“Fei Du!”

Fei Du’s consciousness was floating beside his body, going in and out. He had become a radio in a state of disrepair.

He could hear intermittent shouting, could hear someone calling his name.

But he couldn’t work up any interest. He felt it was rather annoying.

Someone pulled open his eyes. Fei Du saw a light. Apparently, if you followed the light, you could find your way back to consciousness, but he wasn’t particularly interested in that. Thereupon he only looked aside, aloof and unconcerned.

The faint light grew farther and farther away from him, and he was swallowed up by the boundless darkness behind him. There was a slamming sound, as if a door somewhere had closed heavily—

Fei Du's weak consciousness sank to a deeper place. Here, he was indifferent to wealth and poverty, stupidity and intelligence. He had no coherent impressions. He wasn't even wearing the painted skin he'd woven with utmost care over many years.

He seemed to have become a small boy. Because his legs were short, he wanted to run around. But as soon as he lifted a leg, a reasonless terror surged up in his heart. The man, like an enormous black shadow, looked coldly down on him from above his head. Very softly, he said, "Only dogs like to run around and play. Fei Du, are you a little dog?"

Confused, Fei Du was pulled by him. He saw a little puppy. The little dog had perhaps just been born; it was smaller than a palm. Its eyes moist, it ran falteringly towards him. He reached out a hand. The little dog also clumsily reached out a plump forepaw, standing on its hind legs, throwing itself at his hand, cautiously sniffing his icy palm.

He felt an unreasoning warmth in his heart and stroked the fluffy little head.

In his soft but ice-cold voice, the man sighed. "There's unhealthy blood flowing in this child. It must be corrected."

The puppy cried out sharply, roughly lifted by his hand.

The warmth in Fei Du's hand instantly disappeared. Then, cold metal rings descended onto his fingers. There was a bundle of threads leading from the backs of the rings, their other ends passing through a complex installation, tied to a constricting neckband. If the threads slackened a millimeter, the band would tighten a centimeter. If the

threads went entirely slack, the neckband would clamp tightly around his throat.

Fei Du couldn't breathe. He instinctively stretched out his arm, fingers tightly squeezing together, desperately pulling at the threads on the metal rings. When the threads were at their tightest, the living band around his throat released slightly. A large quantity of air surged into his windpipe, and he coughed violently.

"You have to learn to breathe slowly." The man laughed in satisfaction. "Clever. It seems there's no need for anyone to teach you. You've already learned how not to asphyxiate."

Then the scene in front of his eyes changed again. Fei Du was tied to a chair. He could only move the fingers wearing the metal rings. The pain of asphyxiation wrapped him up like dark clouds. His whole body was cold.

The man walked over, humming a tune, carrying a tiny puppy in one hand. He placed it in Fei Du's palm and asked, "Is it soft?"

It seemed that children and small animals could naturally become friends without needing to try. The little dog smelled the boy's cold terror and struggled to push at him with its warm head, licking his fingers.

The man laughed, asking, "Is it cute?"

Fei Du hesitated a moment. Finally, he nodded. The next moment, the frightening pain descended without warning.

The band around his neck instantly tightened. The warm feeling was still in his hand, but his throat was stopped by the ice-cold iron hoop. Fei Du subconsciously squeezed his fingers together as usual, trying to pull tight the threads that could alleviate his pain.

The life-saving air entered his tormented windpipe, but at the same time, the little dog let out a mournful cry.

Fei Du immediately realized that his hand was closed around the little dog's fragile neck. He hastily let go, and the band around his throat closed all the more fiercely around his neck.

Fei Du struggled desperately, the ropes and metal rings on his body like living evil vines, savagely digging into his flesh—

Holding his phone, Tao Ran paced at the doors of the ICU ward, his head covered in sweat, hearing his colleague on the phone quickly saying, “Zheng Kaifeng and Yang Bo died at the scene. The others had been contained and distributed among the police cars nearby. Everyone had a place to hide at the time of the explosion. A few were slightly injured, and one guy got hit when the container door went flying, which was a little unfortunate, but the others are all right. The only people rather close to the explosion at the time were the boss and...”

The colleague said something else afterwards, but Tao Ran had no attention to spare, because a person who looked like a nurse had come out. “That...Fei Du, was it? The one who was just brought in—are his relatives here?”

Tao Ran hung up the phone directly. “I-I-I’m here...”

The nurse asked, “You’re a relative?”

The question brought Tao Ran up short. He suddenly realized that Fei Du didn't have any so-called relatives. Of his direct blood relations, one had been in the ground for over seven years, and the other was a vegetable. He'd been living wildly all these years and had become a leader without a following, a person with no roots or ties.

The nurse was only asking in passing, not caring about his momentary hesitation, quickly saying to him, “For unknown reasons, the patient’s breathing and heart rate suddenly stopped just now. We’re attempting resuscitation. You two should prepare yourselves.”

Tao Ran felt a cold breath rise from his chest to the top of his head. “What, wait...”

Having made the notification, the nurse had fulfilled her assignment. Time was life. She had no time to comfort with tender words. She hurriedly ran off.

Tao Ran instinctively ran a couple of steps after her, then remembered that inessential personnel weren’t permitted up ahead. He could only stop helplessly. Only then did he realize that the nurse had just said “you two.” He quickly turned his head and saw that Luo Wenzhou had come to stand beside him at some point.

Luo Wenzhou’s lower leg had been broken. His back had been hit twice in one day and had been put in a splint. His head had hit the steering wheel too hard, leading to a concussion. He looked like a mummy of the modern era. He was dizzy, leaning on the wall propped on a crutch. Who knew how he’d hopped out of his hospital room?

Tao Ran quickly helped him sit down. “Did they finish your IV drip that quickly?”

“I pulled it out,” Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly. “It won’t kill me.”

On this unlucky Friday, the suddenly erupting cases had stirred the whole City Bureau up into a pot of porridge. Everyone was up to their ears in work. Tao Ran had run around in circles from the emergency room to the orthopedics department to the ICU, attending to one, unable to attend to the other. He sweated even harder. “What good

can you do hanging around here? You can't work a cure, and they won't let you in for a visit. There'll be trouble if your wounds get infected. Hurry up and get back to your room!"

The hospital was full of all kinds of strange medicinal smells, all mixed together, bitter and stinking, making a person not dare to breathe deeply. Everyone's steps as they ran by, all the talk, all the sounds of phones vibrating... For Luo Wenzhou, all of it was a torment. It was as if the sound waves had physical form, stabbing into his temples one after another.

Luo Wenzhou was so dizzy he wanted to throw up. He didn't make a sound, closing his eyes and leaning back against the stiff, cold chair.

Tao Ran said, "Hurry up, don't hang around here making trouble. Get up, I'll carry you."

Luo Wenzhou gently shook his head. "When other people get brought in there, they have someone waiting outside. If he doesn't have anyone, I'm afraid he'll be broken-hearted and won't be willing to come back."

Tao Ran could only clearly hear what he was saying by pricking up his ears. It was really very hard for him to connect Fei Du's heartless scoundrel attitude with the word "broken-hearted." He felt that Luo Wenzhou's concussion was making him talk nonsense. Thereupon he said, "If he could still know who was or wasn't waiting for him, he wouldn't have been brought in there.—Go on, isn't it enough if I wait here? Aren't I someone?"

Luo Wenzhou really didn't have the strength to say much to him. He only nearly inaudibly said, "It's not the same."

His friends were met by chance, parting and coming together at their own inclinations; though old acquaintances were lasting, the people still came and then went, in the end not becoming a concern that

could tie a person's soul, in the end still remaining outsiders.—Of course, Luo Wenzhou didn't dare to make too much of himself and take himself for an insider. He felt he was like a moth watching a flame burning across the river, starting to hesitantly flap his wings because of a faint attractive force, flying across the difficult terrain, only drawing close after numerous twists and turns.

He'd finally come into position to glimpse some images revolving on a lampshade, just reached out his feelers to touch that unusually colored light...

Tao Ran took a full half a minute to come around. Then he distinguished an unusual meaning in these words. He stared uncomprehendingly for a good while; then his intellect was pulled back by his suddenly ringing phone. He racked his brain for words. "Are...are you all right?"

Showing no expression on his face, Luo Wenzhou waved a hand at him. "Pick up the phone."

The phone call was from Lang Qiao. It had to be something urgent. Tao Ran couldn't not pick it up. He could only stand up and walk quickly to the corner.

"Deputy Tao, all those people from the cold chain truck have confessed. They're all Zheng Kaifeng's privately kept thugs. These people's salaries all get paid out of a secret foreign bank account. The guys at economic crimes want to follow that lead down to the end, thoroughly investigating the shell company.—Also, going through Yang Bo's phone records, we found that he had a phone call with Zheng Kaifeng before he died. Zheng Kaifeng sent him some photographs. They were of the guys responsible for tailing Yang Bo."

The early autumn wind swept over the sweat on Tao Ran's body, chilling him all the way through. "Got it."

Lang Qiao said, "...how are the boss and President Fei?"

Tao Ran stuck his head around the corner and looked at Luo Wenzhou, sitting there stiff and silent, held together by bandages and splints, seemingly about to become one with the wooden chair. "Don't worry, they'll..."

Before he'd finished, Luo Wenzhou suddenly released his hold on his crutch, propped his elbows on his knees, slowly leaned forward, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER 85 - Macbeth XXVI

Tao Ran stood at the corner of the hospital corridor, staring and blocking the way. When some medical personnel pushing a hospital bed impatiently asked him to “Make way, please,” he plastered himself to the wall as if waking from a dream.

“...Deputy Tao, hello, Deputy-Captain Tao, are you still there?”

While his mind was faltering, Tao Ran hadn't heard what Lang Qiao had said. He hastily lowered his head and scratched his nose. “Yes, I'm here, what else is there?”

Lang Qiao lowered her voice. “Recently, first Zhou Junmao died in this country, then there was Zhou Huaijin's kidnapping and Zhou Huaixin's stabbing, and now Zheng Kaifeng and Yang Bo have been blown up... These people aren't commoners. Deputy Tao, you have to prepare yourself. Director Lu heard about this and hurried back at once, and before he'd sat down, he got called away by a phone call.”

Tao Ran frowned. “What do you mean?”

Lang Qiao sighed. “I'll tell you straight out.—The Zhou Clan has made a lot of domestic investments these last few years, and their backing abroad is even more deep-seated. Since we started our investigation into their company over here, those people have been thinking of ways to obstruct us. Now they're making a fuss because of Zheng Kaifeng's death and Zhou Huaijin and Hu Zhenyu being arrested without explanation. There's news on the foreign media saying this is a domestic plot against the Zhou Clan. We just received an urgent notice asking the boss to present a written account of everything that happened today, and to write a self-examination. Before the internal investigation has concluded, the relevant person in charge will be temporarily...suspended from duty.”

Tao Ran leaned back against the hospital's mottled white wall, not caring that he was getting white dust all over his back. He paused for a second. "I didn't hear you clearly, Xiao Qiao. Say it again."

Lang Qiao didn't dare to make a sound.

Tao Ran's tongue went around his mouth three times, clearly counting each one of his wisdom teeth. Exerting incredible strength, he managed not to say anything.

If before he'd been covered in sweat worked up running around but chilled to the marrow by apprehension, then now, while Tao Ran's body temperature had been gradually brought down by the autumn night's wind, his internal organs seemed to have been dropped into a boiling pot, roiling anger igniting all the blood in his body. Tao Ran took a few deep breaths without making up for the oxygen used up in the combustion.

Tao Ran asked, "What did Director Lu say?"

"There's nothing Director Lu can do," said Lang Qiao. "These two things that happened today were so big and made too bad of an impression. There's everything you could want now, conspiracy theories, people suspecting that our handling of cases is irregular and that we're incompetent. You know that there was the Wang Hongliang business first, and everyone's still hung up on it. Many people think the police can't be trusted..."

The good doesn't go out the door, the bad goes a thousand li.

Charging alone into the midst of a drug trafficking gang to obtain crucial evidence, competently leading the rescue of a bus full of kidnapped children, working through the night to find evidence to unearth a major unsolved case from over twenty years ago—that was all as it should be, all part of the job, there was no use mentioning it.

Only when something went wrong would everyone be panic-stricken and start pointing fingers; for a time, everyone seemed to be endowed with piercing eyes that could see through your uniform and skin to the word “conspiracy” embedded in every crevice of your bones.

Everyone wanted you to explain yourself; if a main culprit couldn't be found in a shocking case, they wanted someone to be responsible for it.

“It's all right.” Perhaps because it was Lang Qiao who had called him and a man would always be somewhat more reserved in front of a young lady, Tao Ran finally succeeded in minding his words. “It's all right, Xiao Qiao, there's no need to be nervous. Treat it as a routine report. I'll write up the account and the examination when I get back. Don't disturb Captain Luo—anyway, there's not much difference to him right now whether he's suspended or not. Are you going to make a handicapped person go back to work overtime? It'll save him asking for leave.”

Lang Qiao said, “So now...”

“Now you should all do what you need to do. Don't stop investigating Zheng Kaifeng. Keep digging, no matter what the obstructions. Zheng Kaifeng is dead. He can't make any trouble, can he? Second, work from Zhou Huaijin and Hu Zhenyu. Zhou Huaijin wants to cooperate with us, and Hu Zhenyu is the real power in the Zhou Clan's Yan City headquarters. Even though they don't have conclusive evidence in their hands, at least they understand more than we do. If needed, have Zhou Huaijin issue a statement. After all, he's the genuine heir to the Zhou Clan. Third...third...” Tao Ran paused, the joints of the fingers holding his phone turning white, the veins standing up on the back of his hand. He tried a few times without being able to get out the third thing.

How could he say it—we have a traitor among us, we have to do a thorough investigation?

How could they investigate?

Summon each person alone to the “little dark room,” interrogate them all like criminals, treating those who confessed leniently and those who refused to acknowledge their crimes harshly?

Wasn't the storm outside enough? Did they have to add internal strife on top of it?

Who should he talk to about it?

Who could he trust now?

“Deputy Tao, what's third?”

“I...I haven't thought of it,” Tao Ran answered her with some difficulty. “Let me think first. Wait until I get my train of thought in order.”

Lang Qiao was fooled by his seemingly calm and sure voice. Just then, Tao Ran called to her, reiterating, “Don't bother Captain Luo. Everything else is really all right. Don't worry.”

Merely listening to his voice, you could almost hear one of Deputy-Captain Tao's habitual pleasant smiles.

Lang Qiao didn't suspect him. She said “OK” and hung up the phone.

There was a breath caught in Tao Ran's chest that wouldn't go up or down. As soon as the dial tone came from the phone, the last drop of calm he'd squeezed out vanished without a trace. He'd have loved nothing better than to leap up and stomp a world-shaking pit in the ground, roar out a reverberating, “Fuck your ancestors!”

Everyone who passed by Tao Ran subconsciously quickened their steps after getting a clear look at his expression, afraid he was an aggrieved relative preparing to pull out a knife. Two patrolling special guards watched him, fully alert.

Tao Ran suddenly raised his phone and aimed it at the wall across from him, wanting to smash it.

As the phone was about to leave his hand, Tao Ran remembered the pocket lint on his salary card—he'd paid his mortgage this month, the remaining money wasn't enough to buy him a passable new phone, and he'd still have to contact his colleagues, still have to summarize the circumstances as they developed, still have to prepare a report for their superiors; he didn't dare to be out of contact.

So he hastily snatched back the phone before it could die in the line of duty. There really was no outlet. He could only take apart the plastic phone case and use it as a scapegoat, crushing the innocent object to bits.

Just then, a woman's voice that seemed to always hold a smile said, "Hey, Xiao Tao, who's got you so worked up?"

Three people had gotten off the elevator across the hall. One of them was a young person walking a few steps behind carrying things, and the other two were a middle-aged couple. The man was very tall; aside from his grave and reserved expression, he was simply a middle-aged edition of Luo Wenzhou. The woman was wearing a long-sleeved dress and smiling brightly. You couldn't see her age very clearly.—Tao Ran had seen them a few times. These were Luo Wenzhou's parents.

Tao Ran stared, then subconsciously stood up straight. "Auntie, uncle, hello."

Luo Wenzhou's mother Mu Xiaoqing took an apple from the fruit basket the aide was carrying and gave it to Tao Ran, casually stroking his head. "Look how angry our Xiao Tao is."

Tao Ran didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Captain Luo is over there."

Luo Wenzhou's father Luo Cheng gave him a very reserved nod and looked over. Then, hands behind his back, he walked a few steps towards Luo Wenzhou. Arriving in front of the injured person, the old man didn't speak. He blocked the light and coughed heavily.

Luo Wenzhou looked up, red-eyed, and exchanged a look with his dad. Then he picked up the crutch he'd dropped at some point and leaned on it to get to his feet, moving aside and giving his dad a place to sit in a well-trained manner.

Luo Cheng didn't wait to be asked. He lifted his pant legs gently and sat with a clear conscience in the injured person's spot, imposingly looking down on all creation, occupying the lousy hospital chair as if he were sitting on the Iron Throne.

Then the old fellow issued an appraisal of Luo Wenzhou's latest look. "Pick up a ragged bag and you can go panhandle on the subway."

Luo Wenzhou, his face wooden, didn't make a sound.

Luo Cheng added, "And you've been crying? Isn't it just a suspension and writing a self-examination? That bad?"

Tao Ran: "..."

He'd given strict orders to keep this hidden—while paper couldn't contain a fire, at least they shouldn't bother Luo Wenzhou now. He hadn't expected that his own father would come and rip the paper right away!

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and looked at Tao Ran. Tao Ran hastily avoided his gaze, preparing to make himself scarce. “Uh... You guys talk, I’m going to take a call.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Wait!”

Tao Ran’s steps paused. He looked at him in extreme awkwardness.

Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes, growing silent amid the thick medicinal smell.

His ears were still ringing, replaying the enormous sound from the moment of the explosion again and again, and he was having auditory hallucinations, thinking the door in front him that barred nonessential personnel was about to open and pronounce judgement on a person’s life.

Tao Ran said, “Wenzhou...”

“Go back and see Uncle Lu,” Luo Wenzhou said suddenly, interrupting him. “Have him deal with this matter strictly, the stricter the better—while I’m suspended and under investigation, conduct an internal investigation in the Criminal Investigation Team from top to bottom. No one concerned is permitted to leave. Have them hand in their comms and prepare to each give a statement.”

Tao Ran froze at once, then quickly came around—this was a good opportunity to catch the mole!

Just then, Luo Cheng spoke again. “Even if it was the President of the United States murdering people within our borders, we’d still have the right to investigate it.—We welcome those investing money and infrastructure. It’s best for everyone to make money together, develop together. As for the rest, it ought to be handled as it should. Yan City has developed to such a point that there are people willing to ride our

coattails. What decade do you call this? We have no need to curry favor with ill-intentioned gods of wealth.—Those are my words, Xiao Tao. Please pass them on to your Director Lu along with the rest.”

The breath Tao Ran had been carrying fell to the ground, and he turned, about to go.

Just then, the ICU’s door opened again. Luo Wenzhou’s crutch slipped somehow, and he wavered, nearly toppling over along with the crutch. He simply stuck the hindrance under his arm and was about to hop over on one leg. Tao Ran was afraid he would shake up his brain, and hurriedly reached out to hold him back, then strode forward on his own. “Nurse!”

The nurse pulled off her mask and looked down at the sheet in her hands. “We needed a ‘notice’ for the patient who just came in and printed it out, but now his condition has stabilized a little. Look here. If you don’t want to sign, it’s all right.”

Tao Ran hurriedly asked, “So how is he now?”

“The most dangerous period hasn’t passed yet, I can’t say,” the nurse said. “Things seem to be moving in the right direction now. He’s young, after all. We’ll wait on the notice... Ah, you with the crutch, what’s going on? Are you also staying in the hospital here? Why aren’t you in your room this late?”

Tao Ran said, “Going, we’re just going. He was worried, that patient in there is...”

Luo Wenzhou said, “He’s my lover.”

The nurse didn’t say anything.

Tao Ran bit his own tongue, nearly biting off a piece. Blood rose before his eyes; it hurt so much he nearly cried.

“So can I stay here a while longer?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

The nurse may have been stupefied, or she may have been very worldly. She gave an “Oh,” didn’t say anything else, turned, and left.

Tao Ran, Mu Xiaoqing, and Luo Cheng—all three simultaneously turned six eyes like six searchlights onto Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou paid no attention to these irrelevant individuals’ gazes and didn’t explain at all that he’d been using the “future tense.” He tottered to the corner garbage can, bent over, and threw up.

The series of life-saving measures was quick and scientific; it didn’t change at all based on the patient’s weak willpower.

There were a few seconds where Fei Du temporarily returned to consciousness under the strong stimulus, yanked out of his boundless nightmares, dimly hearing the din of medical apparatus rising and falling like the tide. These rhythmic sounds somehow changed form in his ears, turning into a familiar tune.

The gloomy villa, the woman’s gaze, the withered flowers, the limiting electric shocks... All his experiences turned into outlines, filling with this song he’d looped hundreds of thousands of times.

“You can’t yield! You can’t submit!” The woman’s frenzied, hysterical voice suddenly pierced through the chaos in his eardrums. “What did I give you to read? ‘A person can be destroyed, but he can’t be defeated.’—Fei Du! Fei Du!”

“Fei Du!”

CHAPTER 86 - Macbeth XXVII

Fei Du was always falling asleep without noticing. Sometimes he would intermittently wake up for a while, not knowing what had happened, not knowing what dimension he'd managed to muddle his way into, almost entirely losing his perception of time and space.

This was a very novel sort of experience for him, as if he'd undergone a lengthy hibernation. His brain, wavering between crashing and rebooting, had never been so spacious.

About three days later, he developed some vague concept of his surroundings and dimly remembered that he was in the hospital because of a bomb. He could give the medical personnel simple reactions, and sometimes in the midst of his confusion he could feel that someone had come to visit him—because someone regularly took advantage of not being watched to touch the non-injured and non-intubated places on his body, a conduct really not very much in accord with standards of medical ethics.

However, visits to the ICU were only permitted for half an hour, and only one person could go in at a time. Fei Du spent most of his time unconscious or half-conscious, and he had no concept of time. It was really hard to cooperate with these brief “prison visits.” If he could move his eyelids or fingers a little in response when the visitor called to him, it could already be counted as having made a deep connection.

Tao Ran, dressed all over in protective clothing and wearing overshoes, ran out with a rustle and very excitedly said, “I saw his eyelashes move when I called him!”

“Impossible,” said Luo Wenzhou, “I just went in and called loud enough to wake up the person in the next bed, and he didn't react at all. You must have made a mistake.”

Tao Ran didn't think he sounded at all displeased. "He really did move, and not only once. If the doctor hadn't pushed me out, he may have opened his eyes."

The crippled god Luo was increasingly indignant. "Then it must have been because I called him, and you're just stealing the credit.—Hand me the protective gear, I'm going in there again, I'll have him move again for me..."

At this time, fortunately, Luo Wenzhou's mother Madam Mu Xiaoqing came over and led the two of them away before the medical personnel could shoo them off.

Mu Xiaoqing said to Luo Wenzhou, "What you just said sounded very familiar. When you were still curled up in my belly and hadn't grown into such a big clod, your dad was just the same. He had to have you move for him. If you ignored him, he'd poke you through my belly. I think it's all that prodding that's made your brain so disordered now."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Not disputing for the moment any slanderous rumors of the "disordered brain" variety, the relationships in this analogy seemed to be rather ethically dubious.

Next, Madam Mu turned to Tao Ran, and using a kindly "looking after the feeble-minded is everyone's responsibility" tone, said, "So we can't hold it against him as if he were an ordinary person."

Tao Ran: "..."

He only now faintly realized that Luo Wenzhou seemed to be somewhat jealous.

Mu Xiaoqing directed Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran like laborers, having them take the fruits and beverages in her car and divide them between the nurses' station and the office of the doctor in charge. While they were passing through the waiting room, the TV on the wall was broadcasting the local news—they were reporting on the whole story of Zhou Huaijin's self-kidnapping.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran paused simultaneously. Mu Xiaoqing understood; she took away Luo Wenzhou's cigarettes and left.

“...so you're saying that you decided to plan this when you heard about the car crash? Can I ask why?” asked the reporter who'd been granted sole interview rights.

“Revenge.” Dressed in brightly-colored “livery,” Zhou Huaijin, without any makeup at all, sat in front of the camera. But his posture was casual, his expression firm, and he still had his wealthy lordling's manners. He said, “Because of some groundless rumors, my father always bore me a grudge. I've had a hard time living in his shadow.”

The reporter asked, “Did he mistreat you? Was there domestic abuse?”

Zhou Huaijin laughed and very skillfully said, “It's harder to imagine than ordinary domestic abuse. At one time I thought he wanted to kill me. While our relationship was like that in private, we had to show a harmonious surface for outsiders to see. After I became an adult, he still controlled me. If not for his death, I wouldn't have been able to return to the country when I wanted. Otherwise, I can assume the responsibility for saying that my father Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng engaged in some conduct that I couldn't accept.”

“For example?”

“For example, using cross-border enterprises to gain illegal profits, malicious competition, even some major criminal activity,” said Zhou

Huaijin. “I couldn’t endorse that, especially not when I heard that he had an illegitimate son. I was very angry. It may be rather cold-blooded to say this, but when I first heard the news of his death, I didn’t feel shock or grief; I started thinking about how I should use it. In the end, I settled on this rather extreme measure to pull away his painted face and frame the supposed illegitimate son for it, hitting two hawks with one arrow—that was my plan.”

“You couldn’t easily return to the country, so you also had a helper.”

“I did. Hu Zhenyu was my schoolmate, and my old friend of many years. He hid that part of his identity when he joined the Zhou Clan. Only people fairly close to us knew about our relationship.”

Next, the screen changed, showing the evidence to the people gathered in front of the television—there was the secret e-mail address Zhou Huaijin and Hu Zhenyu had used to communicate in code, a confirmation for the money Zhou Huaijin had paid to the “kidnappers,” his confession about faking the kidnapping, and so on.

“Ordinarily, with this type of sensational criminal case, the reports wouldn’t be broadcast until at least a few months had passed,” said Tao Ran, “but these are special circumstances. The media and Zhou Huaijin prepared in a rush. It’s hard for Zhou Huaijin to say things tactfully without going into his family’s rotten business of legitimate and illegitimate sons. I think he’s performing so well because he really wants to get revenge for his little brother. He’s parading himself in public without any scruples about his image, reducing the resistance quite a lot for us.—Oh, I’ve already sent up the report in your place. From what Director Lu says, once this blows over, everything will be all right.”

But Luo Wenzhou didn’t look happy. He reached out a hand towards Tao Ran.

Tao Ran was very understanding. He looked all around and pulled out an illicit carton of cigarettes. Like university students skipping class, the two of them furtively slid out of the hospital's inpatient department, finding a secluded corner.

Luo Wenzhou threw his crutch aside. With his leg held up, he put a cigarette in his mouth. "How's the internal investigation going?"

"No developments." Tao Ran sighed. "We've examined each person from top to bottom, really like criminal suspects. Luckily, since even you've been suspended, everyone knows this thing is serious. They've been fairly cooperative.—But we really haven't been able to find a problem with anyone. By process of elimination, the mole can only be me."

"When Zhou Huaijin was being interrogated, everyone who could see the security camera footage knew what he said." Luo Wenzhou thought about it, then said, "But you told me that before Yang Bo came downstairs, he received the photographs of the guys following him that night. That's rather strange."

In order to standardize management, the City Bureau had replaced its "mobile officing system" aimed at field personnel the year before. After a job file had been created, if you needed to go out into the field, you would log yourself under the relevant heading. If there were any urgent circumstances, these formalities could be completed upon return, though it required a superior's signature. Ordinarily, work like shadowing someone wasn't very urgent, so everyone logged themselves more diligently than they worked.

The tail on Yang Bo had been in four-hour shifts. There had been a duty roster at the start, but when actually doing the work, the members of one group would regularly swap shifts around at random. Luo Wenzhou ordinarily only contacted the person in charge of each small group when he needed something, so without logging into the office system to check, even he wouldn't have known

whether the people keeping watch that night were the ones on the duty roster.

But the photographs sent to Yang Bo had contained very accurate information.

Tao Ran nodded. “Right. The only people who would have known who was keeping watch that night were the people in the group, or someone who had logged into the system to check attendance.”

“You and I are the only people in the whole Criminal Investigation Team who have the authority to check on field work, and then there’s the deputy heads of each department and everyone senior to them.” Luo Wenzhou’s voice was almost as light as the smoke coming from the cigarette in his fingers. “Either the mole is one of our people, or the system we spent a great deal of money on got hacked and the internet police are all good-for-nothings who didn’t notice—which answer do you prefer?”

Tao Ran felt that either of them sounded like a pain in the ass. He rubbed his face wearily. After a while, he forced himself to concentrate and said, “There are two rather good pieces of news. Do you want to hear?”

Luo Wenzhou pointed to his ears.

“With Hu Zhenyu’s cooperation, the investigation into the Zhou Clan is currently going much smoother. There may be conclusive evidence of them using those three public welfare funds for false accounting and cross-border money laundering. Aside from that, they’re also suspected of spreading rumors, rigging the market, maliciously discrediting their competitors, and bribery.”

“We aren’t leading the economic investigation.” Luo Wenzhou stretched out his arm, tapping cigarette ash into a garbage can. “What else?”

“I haven’t finished yet.—Because they’ve found evidence, we’ve requested assistance from abroad—do you still remember the mysterious shell company Zheng Kaifeng used to pay his thugs’ wages? Under the guise of a ‘service fee,’ it paid a deposit last year, and recently it paid out the remainder. The time the deposit was paid matches the time Dong Qian began frequently sending and receiving packages, while the remainder was paid the day after Zhou Junmao’s car crash.”

Luo Wenzhou stared. “How big of a number?”

Tao Ran said, “Added together, it’s six figures.”

Luo Wenzhou said immediately, “But we haven’t found the money.”

“The deposit wasn’t large. It was in a foreign bank account held by a shell company. The person in charge caught wind and fled, but this shell company has sent things to Dong Qian. There must have been contact between them. We haven’t been able to track down the remainder yet. We suspect it entered the country through an illegal private bank, and before it could be delivered to Dong Qian, the Zhou brothers were sounding the alarm and plotting kidnappings, getting the police involved in an investigation.” Tao Ran said, “The night of Zhou Junmao’s car crash, Yang Bo, in his capacity as secretary to the board, called Zhou Junmao’s driver to send his regards and chat. The driver says he thinks he let slip what car Zhou Junmao was riding in—also, we found the materials for manufacturing a bomb by hand in the basement of Zheng Kaifeng’s Yan City villa.”

Luo Wenzhou tapped lightly on his own knee. “What you mean is, Zheng Kaifeng and Yang Bo conspired at Zhou Junmao’s car crash, one hiring the assassin, the other supplying inside information. Then, when Zheng Kaifeng knew that this may have been uncovered, he wanted to take Yang Bo and run off in a panic, and in case he was

stopped by us, he first placed a bomb under the container, planning to die taking us along?”

“That’s our surmise from how it looks now,” said Tao Ran. “We’re just missing a bit of evidence.”

Luo Wenzhou went silent—from Zhou Junmao’s car crash to the whole series of bizarre events afterwards, they had been all at sea, both the Criminal Investigation Team and the investigation into the Zhou Clan, all of them at a standstill. But as soon as Zheng Kaifeng died, it was as if the City Bureau’s luck had changed; everything became smooth, and they could quickly get at a rough approximation of the truth.

“I have a feeling,” said Luo Wenzhou suddenly, “that the key evidence won’t be hard to find. This case may be resolved very soon.”

Tao Ran stared. He could tell that he was insinuating something.

Luo Wenzhou put out his cigarette. “I’ve been thinking about something these last few days. I don’t know whether it’s a coincidence—Fei Du’s father is in a vegetative state because of a car crash.”

Tao Ran: “...”

He’d been prepared to listen attentively, thinking that Luo Wenzhou, suspended from duty and hospitalized but still not forgetting to worry about work, might have some brilliant idea. He hadn’t expected that the moment he changed the subject, it would be to talk about Fei Du.

Tao Ran still hadn’t worked out how these two people, who previously had started fighting as soon as they saw each other, had ended up together, and one of them seemed to be about to lose his mind over it—he couldn’t stand not talking about Fei Du for three sentences.

“Hold out another couple days.” Tao Ran patted his shoulder. “The doctor says in a few days when he wakes up and his condition stabilizes a little more, they can move him to an ordinary hospital room, and you’ll be able to look at him as long as you want, all right?”

“Do you have any proper business in your head?” Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes at him. “I’m being serious with you.—I’ve had nothing to do in the hospital these last few days, so I went to investigate that reading program you told me about. It used to be broadcast on the radio. I had to slip out a good few times to find the announcer from back then, and he found me a list of what they broadcast.”

Tao Ran subconsciously sat up straight.

“Back then, we hadn’t noticed the ID ‘The Reciter,’ because The Reciter didn’t turn up around the period when Lao Yang died. You have to go a little while before that, to the time Fei Du’s father had his car crash. Then, the book The Reciter chose was *Wuthering Heights*.”

For a time Tao Ran couldn’t speak.

A mysterious audiobook program, a listener making meaningful requests, an old criminal policeman’s questionable death, one paranoia-raising car crash after another... All of this sounded too mysterious, as if there was some mystical invisible web beneath the peaceful and prosperous earth that you could only touch by penetrating to the deepest places—and because it was too bizarre, even if you saw it with your own eyes, you would still think it was your own mistake.

“If I weren’t already overly suspicious because of this,” Tao Ran said after a good while, “I might think you had brain damage from the

concussion—I'd really love for Fei Du to get up and jump around tomorrow.”

Fei Du—only Fei Du could know what had happened in that “Wuthering Heights”—if there really had been such a “Wuthering Heights.”

“But he hasn’t said a word in all these years. There hasn’t been a trace of any unusual behavior,” said Tao Ran. “Listen, is that child deeper than the Mariana Trench, or are we insane?”

The “Mariana Trench” cut through the ICU for another two days before finally being “released upon completion of his sentence,” taken to a single room where visits were permitted any time.

With his hospital bed moved to and fro, transported here and there, however insufficient Fei Du’s energy was, he was still shaken awake.

He struggled to open his eyes. Perhaps because of the medication he was on or simply because he had been lying down too long, everything wavered in front of him. He couldn’t see anything clearly. Fei Du was very unaccustomed to letting other people move him around like this. In the suddenly bright surroundings, he frowned fiercely and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to struggle, at least to understand what was going on with himself. Suddenly, something blocked his eyes.

Then warm lips lightly touched his forehead. A sense of familiarity about the sensation made Fei Du calm down.

“I’m here,” this person said into his ear. “Everything is all right. Rest now, we’ll talk when you wake up.”

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This seemed to be a voice out of his dreams, so familiar it made him tremble, fulfilling his long-held expectation.

Fei Du's tightly-knit brow slowly relaxed and he let himself give into his involuntary drowsiness amidst the imagined smell of cigarette smoke. Before he sank into deep sleep, he kept thinking of holding the hand covering his eyes—unfortunately, there was an IV in one of his arms, and the other was firmly immobilized by a cast. His limbs were very useless; he had to let it go.

As soon as Fei Du had his self-awareness, it seemed he had once again grasped the staff of fate. It was as if there was a guardian mountain in his heart where not a blade of grass grew, which couldn't be hurried, which didn't require any will to live; by nature it could skillfully sweep away all distracting thoughts and strive to the greatest extent possible to cooperate to readjust his failing bodily functions. Each time he slept was time for "recharging his batteries." Each day he woke, the speed of his recovery was visible to the naked eye.

Of course, Luo-shixiong's "care" couldn't go unmentioned.

This person claimed to be coming over to take care of him, but in fact all the regular work was done by the nurse's aides.

Luo Wenzhou's daily task was to come over and eat three meals, then idly watch basketball games and cooking shows on the TV in his hospital room. When he'd seen that Fei Du's strength was used up and he'd fallen asleep, he'd leave.

The most angering thing was that each time he ate, he had to find a place with a draft, making the smell of pork rib soup float over without wasting a single sliver. At the same time, the TV was

broadcasting the process of a steak being cooked in high definition, accompanied by sizzling—it looked and sounded delicious, surrounding Fei Du, who, like a rigid corpse, could still neither speak nor move, ganging up to make him experience from the heart how it felt to have kindness requited with enmity.

Fei Du, who was on a nutrient fluid drip, fixed his silent gaze on Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou met his gaze, seeming not to notice the silent condemnation in it, continuing to issue a small oral treatise. “My mom’s boiled this pork rib soup into I don’t know what. I keep telling her that with her rather low skill level, she should braise in soy sauce, but she won’t listen. She keeps saying soy-sauce braised meat isn’t healthy, it has to be clear broth. Look. The seasoning was added at the wrong time, the amount of salt isn’t right, and don’t even mention the cooking time. If you fed it to a cat, I figure the cat would go out and bury it.”

Then, before Fei Du’s eyes, as he jabbered distastefully, he downed half the bowl in one go.

Fei Du: “...”

Luo Wenzhou exchanged a long look with him, then seemed to suddenly understand something and leaned forward. “What are you staring at me like that for? Do you want to eat?”

Fei Du blinked his eyes at him lightly.

Without any hesitation, Luo Wenzhou put the last piece of pork rib in his mouth. “Wait until you can call me ‘ge,’ and I’ll give you a taste of something good.”

Fei Du: “...”

Actually, he wasn't at all interested in the pork rib soup. He only thought looking at Luo Wenzhou was very interesting. On his own, this gentleman could make as much noise as a hundred people. As soon as he walked in, the cold and spacious hospital room became lively.

When he was finished eating in front of him, Luo Wenzhou didn't trouble the nurse's aides. Limping and jolting, he cleared away his bowl and chopsticks, then snuck a look outside like a thief. Seeing that the medical personnel didn't intend to come back for the moment, he quickly closed the door and strolled over to Fei Du's bedside. "I'm going to do something that transgresses discipline. Don't make it public."

Fei Du lowered his eyes, sweeping a glance over his body, feeling that from head to toe there was no place affording an opportunity for "transgressing." Thereupon he looked rather expectantly at Luo Wenzhou, wishing to learn some fashionable means of entertainment from his shixiong.

...then he saw Luo Wenzhou pull out a small bottle of honey from somewhere.

"Oh," thought Fei Du flatly.

He really wasn't the sort of person who couldn't stand to go a month or two without eating extravagantly.

"On the down-low." Like an opium-peddler, Luo Wenzhou kept his voice down and said to Fei Du, "I'll just give you a mouthful. There won't be more."

Saying so, he poured a few drops of honey into the bottle cap, mixed in a bit of water to dissolve it, then dipped a cotton swab into it, carefully daubing it onto Fei Du's bloodless lips.

While Fei Du thought that this degree of “transgression” didn’t accord with his expectations, he was very willing to give him face and gently licked, thinking, “Peach blossom honey.”

As the same time, his gaze swept over the man in front of him—Luo Wenzhou seemed to have gotten a little thinner. You couldn’t make up for serious injuries with some pieces of pork rib. He couldn’t quite put weight on his injured leg; it hung weakly in the air, making it hard for him to maintain his balance. His rolled-up sleeves revealed nearly healed scrapes; there were only a few shallow traces remaining. Coming close, you could smell whiffs of washing detergent warmed by his body heat coming off his cuffs and collar.

“That warm skin must feel very nice.” The thought came into Fei Du’s mind out of nowhere. He narrowed his eyes slightly, noiselessly switching over into a beast in human clothing’s point of view, thinking that Luo Wenzhou’s currently somewhat haggard face looked very stirring.

Though President Fei, his body crippled but his will obscene, was only a living corpse who could blink his eyes, it didn’t prevent him from sweeping his gaze over Luo Wenzhou a few times, “from the neck down to the knees up,” feeling that he was definitely more delicious than the much-criticized soup.

Luo Wenzhou was feeding him the water with single-hearted devotion, afraid the cotton swab would hurt him, taking care not to let the sticky honey water get everywhere. A single bottle cap of honey water nearly caused him to break out all over in sweat. He had no attention to spare to notice a certain capitalist’s serene but ill-intentioned expression.

“Listen, what were you doing getting in the way back there? If you’d just hidden behind your car, at most you’d have gotten a bit of a scratch,” Luo Wenzhou said softly as he unknowingly fed him water. “Weren’t you a professional psychopath planning on opening a Killing

Without a Trace training center? What are you doing getting out of your sphere and into the sacrificing your life for others business?”

Fei Du’s eyes curved gently.

“Like hell you’re smiling,” Luo Wenzhou said. “I nearly thought your ‘masterpiece’ was about to become a lost art. A couple days ago I went on purpose to buy a frame for it. Now it’s been mounted, I’m going to hang it at the head of the bed later.”

At first Fei Du was rather perplexed, not understanding what this so-called “masterpiece” was supposed to be.

After a good while he finally came around—at the meeting that day, he’d drawn two portraits while taking notes. Both were of Luo Wenzhou. One had been properly dressed and posed, while other one had been rather more “relaxed”; in it, he’d been dressed rather casually...wearing only a tie.

The former had been smacked against the artist’s chest by the great Captain Luo; the latter had been torn out by him on the spot.

Fei Du involuntarily imagined that drawing “hanging at the head of the bed,” greatly admiring the thickness of Luo Wenzhou’s face. He subconsciously pursed his lips, and a water droplet rolled down. Luo Wenzhou hastily reached out to wipe it away—

By coincidence, Fei Du licked, the tip of his tongue touching his hand. The two of them froze simultaneously.

Then, before Luo Wenzhou could react, Fei Du simply pursued his advantage, circling Luo Wenzhou’s fingertip with his tongue, drawing a half-circle on the pad of his finger.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

As though nothing at all were the matter with him, Fei Du unhurriedly withdrew the magic powers of his lips and tongue, looking calmly at Luo Wenzhou. His eyes, larger because of his drastic weight loss over the last few days, curved in a half-smile, their corners hooked; in those eyes was the President Fei-style gaze that had once given Luo Wenzhou such a headache.

Though he didn't make a sound, Luo Wenzhou read from his expression that he was saying, "Wait until you call me 'ge,' and I can answer, and I'll give you a taste of something good."

Among those lying seriously injured and ill, only able to slightly move their features, Fei Du could have been a world champion of taking advantage.

Luo Wenzhou had underestimated the enemy for a time. He felt the finger he'd licked was somewhat numb. He heated up, his throat rolling insistently. "You..."

Just then, the phone in his pocket vibrated. "...just you wait!"

On the other end of the phone, Tao Ran was bewildered. "Huh? Wait for what? Is it inconvenient for you to pick up the phone right now?"

"I wasn't talking to you." Luo Wenzhou irritably put the phone on speaker. He thought about it, was still unreconciled, and tapped Fei Du on the forehead. "What progress have we made today?"

Suspended and on sick leave, at his leisure in the hospital, he could still remotely control the Criminal Investigation Team's operations.

"We've found a record of something Dong Qian received from abroad," said Tao Ran. "It was just when Zheng Kaifeng sent his first 'deposit.' The sender's address was the shell company's foreign illegal private bank's exchange point. The contents were listed as a contract. We've found a duplicate of that contract—Dong Qian stored it at his

fleet's warehouse, anonymously. None of his colleagues knew that the things in that box were his. We only found it after getting the agreement of the manager and the other employees who'd stored things there and carefully searching through everything.—It's a 'Foreign Investment Proxy' contract, written in English. I figure Dong Qian didn't understand what it was, so he left it behind and didn't send it to Dong Xiaoqing with the rest.”

Many foreign illegal private banks operated under the cover of being a pawnshop or a currency exchange. Illegally-obtained cash would change hands several times in their underground network, then be deposited into a bank under the name of some organization, again called an “investment”; it would be converted into some sort of property, being washed completely clean as it went in and out several times, and would “legally” return to its owner's hands.

In order to assassinate Zhou Junmao, Zheng Kaifeng had paid two sums of money to the truck driver Dong Qian. Owing to the police force's unexpected involvement, the enemy had been spooked and the remainder payment hadn't gone through, but they'd already cleared up the trail of the deposit—the money had been remitted from Zheng Kaifeng's company abroad, had passed through the illegal private bank and been washed clean. The whole process had been nearly complete. If this plot hadn't come to light, in a while, Dong Xiaoqing may have received some unexpected investment income and lived on in ignorance and prosperity.

While Dong Qian's family hadn't been prosperous, neither had they been poor. Cautious and conscientious common people who had never seen such a sum of money wouldn't necessarily be moved if they did see it—because they'd know it was dirty money, and they'd simply have no concept of what to do with such a sum, unable to work up true covetous thoughts. So why had Dong Qian been willing to give up his life?

Luo Wenzhou said, “What else was in the anonymous storage in the warehouse?”

“A photograph of Dong Qian’s late wife and a paper man—the kind you burn for the dead—kneeling, with Zhou Junmao’s name written on the back of its head,” Tao Ran said. “We went through all the shops in the area that do business in funeral goods, and one of them recognized the paper man. It had been made to order a month before Zhou Junmao’s car crash. The owner found the bill, too, and the signature and contact information really were Dong Qian’s. Because the kneeling little man was very strange, the shop’s owner suspected he was doing some kind of evil witchcraft, so it made an especially deep impression on him. The physical description he gave matched, too.

“I’ll try to sum up the whole case.—Dong Qian’s wife died in a car crash twenty-one years ago. He’s been raising his daughter alone all these years, never knowing the truth about his wife’s death. Then one day, suddenly, a mysterious express delivery person comes to his door when he hasn’t bought anything and delivers a mysterious package to him. Inside, the truth about his wife’s death is revealed.

“When the shock passed, Dong Qian began communicating with this mysterious person. He pretended to be shopping online, repeatedly purchasing things and returning them. In reality, through the delivery person, he was communicating with the mysterious individual behind him, who sent him evidence and proposed a collaboration with Dong Qian.

“Dong Qian wasn’t concerned about how much money he could get. The circulation of this cross-border dirty money was too complicated for him. He must have had his heart entirely set on revenge. He didn’t even feel like getting someone to translate that complicated capital contract. During this whole process, Zheng Kaifeng didn’t show his face, and he wholly concealed his own role in the old case. He must have even used Zhou Huaijin’s name to put a hit out on Zhou Junmao

—that’s why after she found out part of the truth, Dong Xiaoqing ran the risk of going to stab Zhou Huaijin.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Then how do you explain that package sent from Dong Qian to himself before his death?”

“I surmise it must have been sent by Dong Qian,” Tao Ran said. “While Dong Qian’s goal was revenge, there was still a large sum of money involved that would later come to his daughter’s bank account. If Dong Xiaoqing didn’t know anything, she might have been scared out of her wits by so much money.—Only he didn’t expect Dong Xiaoqing’s temperament to be so fierce.”

Luo Wenzhou was still frowning. “So according to your reasoning, who was responsible for running over Dong Xiaoqing?”

“Do you remember the security camera over their neighbor’s door?” Tao Ran said. “The one that caught the arsonist.—Our technicians discovered that the security camera’s web host had been invaded. Someone was watching Dong Qian’s house through the camera.”

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“The last time Haiyang went to talk to Dong Xiaoqing, she removed an express delivery package from the package box at her door,” said Tao Ran. “The label was very clear. You can see through the camera that Dong Qian had sent it to himself.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at Fei Du. If Fei Du’s expression had been somewhat indolent before, now he was thoroughly awake, his gaze sharpening as it fixed on the phone set to speaker.

Luo Wenzhou said, “But if I recall correctly, the last time Xiao Haiyang went to the Dong house was a good few days before Zhou Huaijin was attacked. Why didn’t the person who ran Dong Xiaoqing over do anything then?”

“Because during that time there were always reporters hanging around her house, and she was hiding inside, not coming out. It would have been too risky to break in to kill her, and furthermore no one could be sure what Dong Qian had actually sent home. If Dong Qian had just sent some irrelevant stuff, they’d only be putting us on the alert if they acted rashly.”

Luo Wenzhou thought of something and dully gave an affirmative. “Go on.”

“Three days later, Dong Xiaoqing went out. First she stopped in at a flower shop to buy fresh flowers, then she got on a bus and went to Heng’ai Hospital. No one knew there was a knife hidden in her bag. At the time, the girl just seemed like the harmless and innocent relative of the responsible driver, who’d felt guilty and gone to pay a visit to the victim’s relatives. I think the person following her also hadn’t thought that she had it in her to go stab someone in public.”

Having heard this much, Luo Wenzhou was silent for awhile. Then he said, “After Dong Xiaoqing received the package Dong Qian sent home, she spent three days by herself, and in the end still chose to get revenge.”

A person could do anything on impulse, but an impulse could only last so long. The greatest misfortune couldn’t keep a person impulsive for three days. During those three days, what had Dong Xiaoqing done while she’d been on her own?

Perhaps she had been deliberating some way to judge the authenticity of the information in the package, or perhaps she had been plotting how to retaliate against the Zhou family.

She’d had Xiao Haiyang’s contact information, and she could also have called 110 at any time.

Had she hesitated?

Had there been a moment when she’d picked up the phone and dialed a number, thinking of handing over everything she had to the police and waiting for society to give her an outcome—whether her father was a victim or a murderer?

With some struggle, Fei Du bent his arm with the IV in it, using his knuckles to rhythmically tap against the railing of the hospital bed. Luo Wenzhou grabbed his fingers.

“Don’t fool around,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “I’m not a spy. I don’t have a Morse code interpretation function.”

Tao Ran took a moment to realize who he was talking to, then hurriedly asked, “Am I on speaker? I thought there was an echo.—Is Fei Du there? Fei Du, are you awake? How are you feeling today? When we came to see you the day before yesterday you still weren’t

very clear-headed. Did you see the fruit I brought you? Xiao Qiao brought you a bear, too.”

Most of the fruit had already gone into that greedy-guts Luo Wenzhou’s belly, and the bear’s head had been wrapped up in the bag the fruit had come in by the fidgety Luo Wenzhou, posed pressed into a corner with two paws up, a robber bear caught by the police after having gotten through robbing a bank, the display rather stylish.

Tao Ran said, “You really gave us a scare that day, you have no idea. Lao Luo even...”

Luo Wenzhou’s reaction was quick as a flash of lightning. Hearing his tone, he had a premonition of what Big-mouthed Tao was going to say and interrupted him at once. “He can’t talk yet, and he can’t eat, the fruit all went as tribute to me.—Enough, no more nonsense, get back to business. What’s the basis for your suppositions? Dong Xiaoqing’s house isn’t in some backwater. If someone started following her when she went out that day, then why didn’t we spot it?”

The dutiful Comrade Tao Ran’s attention seemed to be like a compass needle. While it could sometimes be perturbed, with a light adjustment, it would always return on its own to his work.

As soon as Luo Wenzhou interrupted, he immediately forgot what he’d been about to spill, hurriedly getting back to business. “Because at first the focus of the investigation was wrong.—There are about a dozen surveillance cameras along the stretch of road Dong Xiaoqing took from going out to the flower shop. Eight of them caught her. Afterwards, she got on a bus fifty meters away from the flower shop, heading towards Heng’ai Hospital.—At the time, we focused on those eight cameras, the passengers who got on at the bus at the same stop as her, and the cars following the bus. We came up empty.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned, now and then rubbing the dry, cold interstices of Fei Du's fingers.

“Later, we were gathering clues around the flower shop and looking at the civilian security cameras. The second time around, we found a biker.”

Luo Wenzhou hadn't heard clearly. “A biker? You mean one of those riding a bike all wrapped up, without a trace of skin showing?”

“Right. This biker was caught by a security camera at the side door of a bookstore. His face was tightly wrapped up, and he was wearing sunglasses. This was less than a hundred meters from the bus stop where Dong Xiaoqing was waiting for the bus. Then the person took a shortcut to the next stop along the route Dong Xiaoqing's bus was taking, stayed on for two stops and then got off again. He didn't have any contact with Dong Xiaoqing in the interim, so we didn't notice him at first.”

“Could it be a coincidence?” Luo Wenzhou said. “This person may not have wanted to take the bus originally and just got tired of riding. I don't think we can suspect someone just for wanting to avoid a sunburn?”

“It's not coincidence.” Tao Ran said very definitely. “That stolen car that ran over Dong Xiaoqing joined up with the bus Dong Xiaoqing was on between the stop he got off at and the next one. After we discovered this issue, we went back to search the cameras around Dong Xiaoqing's house—there were three cameras that caught him. We drew his approximate path and found that he'd been practically following Dong Xiaoqing. His was riding faster than she was walking, and he purposefully went by quite a few side roads. It's unrealistic to try to avoid all the security cameras, but he very carefully avoided the ones that could have caught Dong Xiaoqing.”

The follower hadn't appeared on the same cameras as Dong Xiaoqing and had avoided getting on or off the bus at the same stops as her, keeping the danger of being noticed by the police to a minimum. And even if his luck had been bad and the police had noticed him, the biker's impenetrable get-up would make him difficult to recognize.

This person was a professional, cautious, well-trained in anti-reconnaissance measures—

“The biker was responsible for following her the first half of the way, and the killer in the stolen car for the back half. If Dong Xiaoqing had calmly gone and delivered the flowers and left, the stolen car would have been abandoned before the owner could report it. They didn't expect that she would try to stab Zhou Huaijin.”

If Zheng Kaifeng had purposefully adopted Zhou Huaijin's identity in his dealings with Dong Qian, then, as soon as he found out that Dong Xiaoqing had attacked Zhou Huaijin, he would have understood that Dong Xiaoqing definitely knew something, and there must have been problem with the package Dong Qian had sent her, and thereupon determined to silence her.

“Key evidence.” Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Tao Ran, it's not enough to put together a sequence, we need key evidence.”

“That's hard.” Tao Ran sounded rather weary. “Zheng Kaifeng's been burnt to a paste. All the indications we have now can only prove that Zheng Kaifeng, Yang Bo, and those others had some connection to this series of cases.—The Zhou Clan's headquarters are abroad. It's not our territory, we can't investigate just like that. If we hadn't caught Zheng Kaifeng's thugs, and if the people at the illegal private bank Zheng Kaifeng used to move the money hadn't fled, we may not even have found out about the transaction between Dong Qian and Zheng Kaifeng.”

“Got it,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I appreciate all your hard work these last few days.”

Just then, Fei Du struggled lightly, pulling his hand out of Luo Wenzhou’s, rather awkwardly writing on his palm, “In a while...”

Before he’d finished writing the second half of the last character, Luo Wenzhou understood what he meant and gripped his fingers again. He said a few words to Tao Ran before hanging up, then gently tapped Fei Du’s thigh. “You’re only an auditor. Why do you always want to state your views? If you dare knock that IV out, I’ll hit you.”

With the only part of him he could use to express an opinion held by Luo Wenzhou, Fei Du could only look at him helplessly.

“In a while,” said Luo Wenzhou. “I know. Although Zheng Kaifeng is dead, in a case spanning so many years, involving so much resentment and animosity, it wouldn’t seem very natural if the evidence turned up too close together, right?”

Fei Du blinked at him.

“I have a feeling,” Luo Wenzhou said suddenly, “that you have a deeper understanding of this case than we do.”

Fei Du quietly returned his gaze.

Luo Wenzhou squeezed his fingers. “Last time you made me exchange personal business for information. What are you going to make me exchange next time?”

Fei Du pressed on his palm.

Luo Wenzhou let go slightly, letting him write.

Perhaps on purpose, each stroke Fei Du wrote was drawn out very long. His well-cared-for nails were rounded and neat, sweeping over the lines of Luo Wenzhou's palm.

“Put,” Luo Wenzhou read out the first character he wrote. “What should I put where for you?”

Fei Du wrote another character on his palm.

Luo Wenzhou stared at his palm for a good while as if he couldn't read, his eyebrows very expressively rising and falling for a moment. Then he snorted a laugh and shook his head, poking Fei Du's face. “Dream on, darling.”

Fei Du looked at him with a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

Luo Wenzhou put his hands on the sides of his pillow, bent down and looked at him, then very carefully, avoiding his injured shoulder, lowered his head and gently touched his lips. “It really is time for you to be dreaming. Go to sleep, I'll come have dinner with you when you wake up.”

Then he straightened Fei Du's covers, turned off the TV, and pulled the curtains shut. He walked out, said a few words to the nurse's aide waiting at the door, and slowly left, leaning on his crutch.

In consideration of Fei Du's mental state, the times Luo Wenzhou came to “harass” him every day were fixed to help him establish a clear regimen and save him from being unable to distinguish the passage of time. After a few days of this, Fei Du nearly had a conditioned response to him. As soon as he saw Luo Wenzhou shut the curtains and leave, he'd automatically feel a heavy sleepiness. But perhaps because he'd gotten worked up over Tao Ran's phone call, Fei Du suddenly couldn't sleep.

Zheng Kaifeng's cold gaze, Yang Bo's panic-stricken face, Zhou Huaijin's reddened eyes, Zhou Huaixin covered in blood... All of them spun around before his eyes.

He watched attentively as Luo Wenzhou's back disappeared at a corner. The nurse's aide came in to adjust his IV drip.

Fei Du let out a breath, feeling rather cold.

Another half a month later, Luo Wenzhou resumed his post and went to the City Bureau to report. The day after he once again took control of the Zhou family case, someone called the police hotline to report a crime—

CHAPTER 89 - Macbeth XXX

In Yan City's Ping'an District, the police station on Ping'an Road received a report from the central hotline. There was a very old apartment building in their jurisdiction that had originally been an office building. It had been out of repair for many years, and the rent and housing prices were very cheap, so it was very welcome among out-of-towners and those looking for cheap housing. People came and went; the composition of the residents was very complicated. They were always having disputes.

One household had smelled an indescribable stench for several days in a row. There was a pregnant woman in the household who couldn't stand the stink. Her family determined that the stink was coming from next door and proceeded to go open negotiations, but no one answered the door of that apartment. The pregnant woman's family then went to the building's hardly better than nonexistent property management. The property management did a search and discovered that that apartment had been rented out and the tenant hadn't left any contact information. The owner's number had been disconnected long ago.

The irate pregnant woman's family thought that the property management was being deliberately inactive and wanted to break down the door. The two sides began to fight, and in the end the police were alerted.

The Ping'an Road police station dispatched two civil policemen who were experts at resolving neighborhood disputes. As soon as they arrived, before they had time to engage their dispute resolution function, the crappy apartment's door met another fierce kick from the pregnant woman's family member and, at this critical juncture, the door shaft gave out a crack and collapsed, coming to a tragic end.

It was as if the seal had been broken on a stink that could have served as a “biochemical crisis”; it nearly knocked everyone at the door flat. One of the old civil policemen thought he’d smelled this before and suddenly remembered something. His expression altered. He ordered everyone not to go in. He got out shoe coverings and a truncheon, then carefully searched through the apartment, finally pulling open the door of the fridge—

Three hours later, the City Bureau’s police cars were occupying the lot in front of the apartment building.

While Luo Wenzhou was still lame, he had already become accustomed to peacefully coexisting with his “third leg.” According to what he said himself, he’d have no problem climbing up to lift off a roof or going underground to catch a thief; going to a crime scene was easy.

He held his crutch horizontally behind him, as if carrying a big sword in a game on his back, firmly planted on one leg in front of the fridge, leaning forward to examine their dear friend inside.

There was a man’s corpse in the fridge.

It had gotten cold early this winter. All of Yan City’s districts were turning their heating on early. Because no one had been paying the bills, the electricity in this apartment had been shut off about a month before. The early heat had piled on top of the stopped refrigeration, the temperature had risen rapidly, and the corpse had had a “centennial conference” with the many different varieties of mold in the fridge, producing a fantastic biochemical reaction.

Lang Qiao had wanted to go support Luo Wenzhou. She persisted for half a minute, nearly went into shock, and fled from the battle, running to the door and clamoring, “Boss, do you have sinusitis?”

“Between his work and his daily life, what kind of rotting substances hasn’t a police officer who’s familiar with the kitchen seen? The ignorant are easily surprised,” Luo Wenzhou said without looking back, then waved a hand at the medical examiner. “Enough, I’m done looking. Take it away.”

“Captain Luo.” Tao Ran passed him a folder. “Look, this was found under the pillow of the victim’s camp bed.”

Luo Wenzhou put on gloves and took it.—This was a very ordinary folder. There were only a few thin sheets of paper inside. Each sheet had a photograph stuck to it, with the name, sex, home address, and other basic information of the person in the photograph next to it. In the corner there was a clearly indicated date, and a number of unclear meaning. Some had been printed, some had been written by hand. The handwriting was very heavy, with incorrectly written characters throughout.

Dong Xiaoqing’s photograph suddenly registered—it was on the first page. An X had been drawn over the photograph in red pen. Because of this, the case had come to the City Bureau right away.

A criminal policeman next to them looked over. “Why does this look like an elementary school student’s handwriting?”

“An overdeveloped ‘elementary school student’ who kills for a living.” Tao Ran’s line of sight went all around the room—this was a studio apartment. Aside from the bathroom, there was only one room, with no distinction between living room and bedroom. The surroundings were very crude.

A refrigerator that had been used to hide a body, a cloth couch so dirty you couldn’t tell its original color, a short-legged coffee table, an old-style cabinet, a TV covered in dust, and a simple camp bed were all its furnishings.

There were some opened up yellowing publications, a poker set, and some mercury loaded dice piled on the couch. There was a stack of beer bottles and used take-out containers in a corner, also smelling from the heat, though their stench paled in comparison to that of the master of the house.

In a suitcase at the bottom of the cabinet, aside from a clean change of clothes, there were also quite a few tools for committing crimes: rubber gloves, a head covering, rain boots, tarpaulin, illegal cutting tools, an iron hammerhead, an iron club, a taser, and some common lock picking tools. In the middle of the cabinet some neat stacks of hundred yuan bills were displayed. At a glance, there was between one and two hundred thousand, laid out in a circle as an offering to a kindly-faced porcelain Buddha.

“Lang Big-eyes, don’t you like ‘Léon?’” Luo Wenzhou said to Lang Qiao. “Here’s a locally produced ‘Léon,’ come and pay your respects.”

“Seeing as you’re my boss, I can pretend I didn’t hear that,” Lang Qiao said darkly. “I can’t live under the same sky as those who insult the man of my dreams.”

Luo Wenzhou sneered at this unscrupulous woman who didn’t even dare to raise her voice to defend the man of her dreams, then turned to Xiao Haiyang. “Who was he?”

“This is the ID card from his wallet. Wang Xincheng, male, thirty-nine, but I just looked it up, and the ID card is a fake. The picture doesn’t match the identity information.” Xiao Haiyang gave the realistic fake ID to Luo Wenzhou. The man in the photograph had a crewcut and unprepossessing features. His eyes stared directly ahead of him; perhaps it was a psychological effect, but he seemed unusually fierce and malicious.

“Those who need fake IDs generally all have records. It’s likely he’s an escaped criminal,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Go to the database and

compare—”

Xiao Haiyang hastily gave an affirmative.

“Captain Luo, there’s 120,000 yuan altogether in the cabinet.” Tao Ran had very quickly counted up the cash being offered to the Buddha. “That’s the number written next to the date on the page with Dong Xiaoqing’s materials. It must have been the money that bought her life. The date on the last take-out receipt is the day before Dong Xiaoqing’s death. If this is the killer who ran over Dong Xiaoqing, it’s likely he died right after getting the money. These sorts of criminals all live in the moment. Even though he was offering it to the Buddha, it must only have been for one night.”

“He’d just silenced her when he was silenced himself.” Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Over a month has gone by. If only the Ping’an District’s saved security camera footage hasn’t been deleted yet... Go investigate. If there’s nothing, then try to collect something from the civilian security cameras in the area... There’ll be clues.”

Tao Ran could hear that he was implying something and looked up to exchange a look with him. Luo Wenzhou shook his head towards him, gaze falling again on the weapons inside the cabinet—the head covering and the rubber gloves were of a very familiar style; he could recognize at a glance that they’d been worn by the killer who’d brushed past him in the car with the smashed windshield.

Luo Wenzhou tapped the ground with his crutch, slowly walking out of the reeking crime scene. He had a premonition—this was the “key evidence” they’d been waiting for.

Luo Wenzhou turned out to have made a prophecy.

A few days later, using the photograph and DNA, Xiao Haiyang found the true identity of “Wang Xincheng” in the database of wanted criminals. This person’s original name was “Wang Li.” He’d been a

long-haul truck driver who'd fallen behind on a debt because of a gambling addiction, then out of desperation had stabbed his creditor and his whole family, then fled into the night. He'd been put on the wanted list by the local police; they hadn't known that he'd been engaging in a business that required no assets ever since.

The medical examiners confirmed that Wang Li had died of poisoning. His stomach contained the remains of beer; their conjecture was that he'd been entirely off guard and drunk beer with a powerful poison mixed into it. There were traces of poison and beer on the ground; the victim must have knocked over the beer bottle as he struggled. But no beer mixed with poison had been found on the scene.

Apart from this, the police found a kettle in Wang Li's apartment, half-filled, but there were no hot water vessels in the apartment.

That meant that someone had come knocking on Wang Li's door, likely bringing money, and had met with a very polite reception. Wang Li had not only drunk the poisoned beer, he'd even poured him a cup of hot water.

This person, holding the cup, had looked on coldly as the idiotic killer had been poisoned and fallen to the ground, struggled helplessly, then stopped breathing altogether.

Then, he'd stuffed the body into the fridge—this way, the time the body was found would be greatly delayed, and a lot of the evidence would have vanished over time—and taken away the bottle containing the poisoned beer and the cup he'd touched in order to dispose of them, coming and going without a trace. By the time the body was discovered, he'd have made a clean getaway.

Perfect.

If not for the fact that that idiot Wang Li had left a “manifest” under his pillow...and if that unfortunate porcelain cup hadn’t had a lid.

The cup’s lid had fallen to the ground along with the beer bottle during Wang Li’s struggle. The cheap product hadn’t held up; the lid had broken to pieces. While the poisoner had carefully taken the shards away, he’d unfortunately been in too much of a hurry and hadn’t noticed that there was still a piece under the couch.

And on it just happened to be Zheng Kaifeng’s fingerprint.

At this point, all the evidence had unhurriedly, systematically arranged itself in front of the police, as if there was an invisible hand personally tying together the sequence of cause and effect—

Starting from thirty-eight years ago, when Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao had murdered Zhou Yahou to accumulate their bloody starting capital.

Twenty-one years ago, in order to make a domestic advance, the Zhou Clan had played the same old trick; in the process, the innocent Dong Qian and his wife had been pulled in. Dong Qian had suffered the loss of his loved one, but he had always been in the dark, living an ordinary life amidst inescapable grief; but his name had been entered on the devil’s list.

Then, Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao had finally passed through the golden stage of partners with mutual interests pulling together and entered the stage of sharing the same bed with different dreams.

At this stage, perhaps because the time had been ripe, perhaps because there had been internal strife between the two of them, Zheng Kaifeng had once more pulled up the foreshadowing buried twenty-one years before, using Yang Bo, who’d thought he was Zhou Junmao’s illegitimate son, coordinating with him to kill the Zhou Clan’s illustrious leader.

Zhou Junmao's death had been like a stone exciting thousands of waves, making the crown princes, real and fake, each with their own axe to grind, get into a farce of a tug-of-war. He'd originally thought he could slowly reel in the net, not expecting the "knife" Dong Qian to slip up.

Dong Xiaoqing had tried to assassinate Zhou Huaijin and mistakenly killed Zhou Huaixin; the killer had hastily silenced her, and the police had interrogated Zhou Huaijin that day.

As if heaven's net had wide meshes but nothing escaped it, the twenty-one-year-old secret had been unexpectedly revealed, exposed under the bright light of day.

Zheng Kaifeng had caught wind and run. He'd taken cash and knocked on the door of the killer who'd assassinated Dong Xiaoqing, murdering the murderer with a poisoned cup. Then he'd gone to pick up Yang Bo, wanting to slip away, not expecting that he'd run into a police ambush downstairs at the hotel. Zheng Kaifeng had come to a dead end and used his final trick—mutual destruction.

It only took four steps to get from "mutual interests" to "mutual destruction"; this was the sequence among normal partners, and it turned out that abnormal partners couldn't act any differently.

Following the discovery of Wang Li's body, it appeared that all the key figures in this business had died off, and the remaining trivialities—such as who had been the mysterious delivery person making express deliveries to Dong Qian, the biker following Dong Xiaoqing, and never mind who'd set Dong Xiaoqing's house on fire, there was also the moron who'd sent the text provoking the police—all those answers had died with those concerned. They could only put them down as "Zheng Kaifeng's subordinates," like the private bodyguards they'd snatched from Zheng Kaifeng's truck.

A rest had been drawn over these six heavy lives.

These six lives, like six icebergs, had simultaneously struck the Zhou Clan, that multinational Titanic. Murder, money-laundering, international crime... The legend of an era was facing the setting sun, dismally sinking into the era's boundless sea.

Fei Du took his phone off speaker and said to Tao Ran, who had been telling him the progress of the case over the phone, "Thank you, ge. I understand."

Over the course of a month, Fei Du had gone from being entirely unable to move to being able to move half his body. While walking upright was still rather a problem, at least he could sit up and say a few sentences.

After the nurse's aides had been dispersed, Fei Du received a caller at the hospital—Zhou Huaijin seemed to be in an even sorer state than Fei Du, who'd nearly been blown to smithereens. He sat next to him rather stiffly; having finished listening to the sequence of cause and effect, he sat dumbly where he was, not speaking for a long time.

"That's roughly how it went." Fei Du was sitting in a wheelchair, leaning forward. "Mr. Zhou, you may be sick of hearing this, but I'll say it again. You have my condolences."

Zhou Huaijin squeezed his eyes shut.

Fei Du's gaze passed through his rimless lenses, calmly peeling Zhou Huaijin down to the bone. "Actually, there's something I don't really understand. Why did Zheng Kaifeng wait so long to kill your esteemed father?"

"Zhou..." When Zhou Huaijin opened his mouth, his voice came out very hoarse. He hurriedly cleared his throat. "Zhou Junmao's health had always been very good, but at last year's physical exam, they

found a shadow in his chest. Though it later turned out to be a false alarm, it had been a bit of a shock to him. He brought up making a will many times in the last year—Huaixin must have told you.”

Zhou Huaixin really had babbled something about that when he’d called the police. Fei Du nodded lightly.

Zhou Huaijin laughed bitterly. “He wouldn’t acknowledge me, wouldn’t leave me a penny. The legacy would naturally have gone to Huaixin. You knew Huaixin. He was pretty clever, but he didn’t have it in him to take over a business—especially not one that was partly illegal.”

There was no need for him to go on. Fei Du already understood.—In his later years, Zhou Junmao had finally remembered that he had a good-for-nothing son and known he absolutely couldn’t handle the complicated Zhou Clan, so he’d wanted to clean up his estate for Zhou Huaixin, gradually exit from some not-so-legal spheres.

He’d betrayed Zheng Kaifeng, who’d crawled out of the mud with him.

Zhou Huaijin looked down and rubbed his eyes. He stood up to bid farewell. “Thank you, President Fei. I won’t disturb your rest anymore...”

Fei Du interrupted him. “What are your plans for the future?”

Zhou Huaijin smiled bitterly. “Plans are out of the question. I still have to go back and cooperate in your investigation of the Zhou Clan.”

“You didn’t have decision-making powers, and you didn’t participate. Strictly speaking, you’re also one of the victims,” said Fei Du. “Set your mind at ease. Under ordinary circumstances, you won’t be implicated.”

Zhou Huaijin said, “Many thanks for your blessing.”

“But I still have some other misgivings.” Fei Du tapped lightly on the arm of the wheelchair with his uninjured arm. “Zhou-xiong—you don’t mind if I call you that? I suddenly thought that all your family’s tragedy, you and your brother’s...your esteemed mother’s, it all stems from Zhou Junmao inexplicably believing without having done a paternity test that you weren’t his biological son. I haven’t been able to understand this.”

Zhou Huaijin stared.

“Apart from that, there are still many suspicious points about this case. Never mind the details, the most unfathomable thing is this—Zhou-xiong, you’ve known Zheng Kaifeng since you were little. Do you think he’s the sort of ‘martyr’ who’d blow himself up when he’d come to the end of the line?”

Zhou Huaijin said, “You mean...”

“And then there’s Yang Bo,” said Fei Du. “All of you thought Yang Bo wasn’t especially useful and constantly questioned how he’d gotten the post of secretary. What was it Zheng Kaifeng liked about a person of such average abilities? He had to bring him along when he murdered Zhou Junmao, and when he fled into the night? Don’t you think that’s very strange?”

As he spoke, Zhou Huaijin opened his bloodshot eyes wide.

“We can only investigate this far here. Our reach really doesn’t extend to all the transactions that happened abroad.” Fei Du looked deeply at Zhou Huaijin, speaking one word at a time. “Zhou-xiong, have you considered what happens if there’s someone else behind this? If Zheng Kaifeng was a chess piece in all of it?”

Zhou Huaijin was looking at him in shock.

“You have my contact information.—Also, I’ve thought all along that what your esteemed mother kept locked up in that safety deposit box couldn’t just have been a package of heart medication to terrorize Zhou Junmao with. What do you think?” Fei Du gently blinked at him, lowering his voice. “I hope Huaixin can rest in peace. I liked his paintings. Go on, I’ll see you out.”

Zhou Huaijin, his soul elsewhere, left the hospital, having no attention to spare to tell the half-incapacitated patient not to see him out. Fei Du watched him get into his car; his lips finally displayed a somewhat cold smile.

He slowly turned the motor-powered wheelchair, slowly and thoughtfully gliding back to his hospital room...and saw a lady at the door.

She was evidently of advanced years, but that didn’t at all stop her from being pleasing to the eye. She was dressed in a dark gray raffia tweed suit. Fei Du couldn’t help looking in admiration at the small silk kerchief around her neck. Her figure could still be called fair and graceful.

The woman held a box of food and flowers for visiting a patient, and she was looking into Fei Du’s hospital room.

Fei Du suspected she had gone to the wrong room, and thereupon slowly glided over in his motor-powered wheelchair and greeted her. “Hello.”

The woman turned her head when she heard him and looked him over, her eyes widening slightly.

Youthful beauties were common, but middle-aged beauties were rare.

Fei Du involuntarily opened his playboy barrage. Gently pushing at his glasses, he urbanely said, “Young lady, have you lost your way visiting a patient?”

Seeming stunned by being called a “young lady,” she didn’t make a sound.

“With you standing there, I feel my hospital room is about to light up.” Fei Du pushed the wheelchair into the room and handed her a flower someone had given him. “I’m rather familiar with the inpatient department here. Where are you going? Can I see you there?”

¹ Extremely rare Song Dynasty porcelain.

² Refers to a line of hatchbacks and sedans produced by the Chinese car company Tiajin FAW. Cheap and common, is the implication.

³ Descendants of prominent communist officials, strong implication of nepotism and cronyism.

⁴ Characters from the very racy Ming Dynasty novel of manners Jin Ping Mei/The Plum in the Golden Vase. Ximen Qing is a rampant social climber, and Li Ping'er is one of his concubines.

⁵ That is, *Black Cat Detective*. One-Ear is a villainous mouse who lost his ear in a police raid.

⁶ Wife of one's teacher.



默读

3

Silent Reading / Priest