

默

读



4

Silent Reading / Priest

默读/*Silent Reading* by Priest - Book 4

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CHAPTER 90 - Reading Aloud (3)

Since Fei Du had started to be able to eat some ordinary food, his troublesome nature had immediately been revealed beyond doubt. He'd turned up his nose at the hospital's tasteless, watery fare. In fact, President Fei's original idea had been to move to a private hospital with fine scenery and hire a cook, bringing his crowd of beautiful assistants over to chat and making them run any necessary errands as he recovered. At any rate, it didn't matter to him whether he would be reimbursed for medical expenses.

Unfortunately, Fei Du's energy reserves had been void at the time, and it had been hard to speak. Before he'd finished stating this perfect plan, Luo Wenzhou had already decided on an idea for him.

Luo Wenzhou said, "You don't like eating this? All right, I'll cook for you and bring it over.—So many problems. How come you're so hard to support?"

Fei Du could only tactfully express that shixiong was wounded himself; he didn't want to trouble an injured person.

Having heard this, Luo Wenzhou nodded, then rejected his objection, having the final word: "No need for you to worry. It's settled."

While Luo Wenzhou's handiwork was admittedly pretty good, it certainly didn't rise to the level of being able to go on the "Celebrity Cook-off" program. He could only make plain home cooking. But somehow, for the sake of these plain home-cooked meals, Fei Du obediently held his nose and stayed at the public hospital; when he thought of it afterwards, he couldn't understand it himself.

He could only ascribe it to the fact that he'd never eaten a "free lunch" in his life.

For the Criminal Investigation Team, the Zhou Clan case had temporarily come to a close, but the economic investigation was far from reaching a conclusion, and the follow-up work was very complicated. Luo Wenzhou had been very busy ever since returning to the City Bureau, and today he had one meeting after another and really couldn't get away. He could only delegate Madam Mu Xiaoqing to go to his house to watch the stewpot and Luo Yiguo, and trouble her to go to the hospital.

Before leaving, Luo Wenzhou had directed Tao Ran to tell Fei Du about it.

He hadn't expected that as soon as Tao Ran called, Fei Du would greet him with the sentence, "Ge, you're on speaker, President Zhou is here, and he wants to hear something of what's going on from you."

Tao Ran, with his compass needle-like attention, had heard this and immediately changed direction, entering work mode and casting all matters about moms and delivering food far, far away. When he'd hung up the phone, there had been some doubt in Tao Ran's mind; he'd thought he'd forgotten something. He'd turned it over in his mind, determined that he'd said everything he ought to have said, hadn't said anything he oughtn't to have said, and thereupon had relaxed and concentrated his attention on writing a report.

This had produced the current calamity—

Looking at the living Fei Du in front of her, there were a few seconds where Mu Xiaoqing really did think she'd gone to the wrong room.

The last time she'd seen Fei Du, he'd just been brought out of the ICU. He'd been unconscious at the time, his face entirely bloodless, his IV-bearing arm so thin you could see the bones; there'd been hardly any skin showing not covered in bandages. He'd looked like a piece of porcelain that would shatter at a touch. Despite being out cold, his brow had been furrowed, as if he'd been enduring some agony that

couldn't be covered up even by deep sleep. He'd looked as pitiful as could be.

Mu Xiaoqing had later heard that he could have ducked behind his car and made it out with a scratch at most and had only been injured like this for the sake of protecting her unfortunate son, and had thereupon, in connection with Fei Du's delicate-featured face, imagined a story of an infatuated youth being carried off by a rotten scoundrel; every time she'd come by his hospital room, her maternal love had nearly overflowed.

So afterwards, when Fei Du had woken up and Luo Wenzhou had kept his parents from coming to visit with lies like, "I still haven't talked to him about going public, and we haven't gotten to the point of meeting the parents, so if you guys go over in too much ceremony I'm worried he'll be stressed," Mu Xiaoqing had actually believed it!

Seeing him in the flesh now, she finally realized that her imagination had run too far off course.

Being half-incapacitated didn't hold up Fei Du's ability to flirt. He had a dark gray jacket on over his hospital gown, his hair was perfectly styled, and he was wearing a pair of rimless glasses. Before he'd spoken, there was already part of a smile in his peach blossom eyes, reflecting from his cold glasses with a powerful and mysterious aura. He was simply rather demonic—simply a different person from the "poor child" in the hospital bed.

How come this wasn't at all like what Luo Wenzhou had said?

"Oh, thank you, the inpatient department is a little confusing." Mu Xiaoqing looked him up and down, looked up at the number plate at the hospital room's door, verified it was the right one three times over, then asked, "Do you know a Luo Wenzhou?"

Fei Du's originally unassailable smile froze as he dimly sensed that something was off. Then he answered very cautiously, "Oh? He's my colleague—excuse me, you are..."

Mu Xiaoqing took the words "he's my colleague" and chewed them over in her mind. According to her seasoned sense of taste, she couldn't sense any other meaning behind these words.

Were all young people so calm and unblushing about their romances now?

Mu Xiaoqing gave an "oh" and nodded understandingly, thinking that it was no wonder that that brat Luo Wenzhou, for once sending her to bring food today, had first exhorted her, telling her not to say this and not to say that, as if Fei Du had been of an uncommon easily embarrassed breed in the present age.

After all this fuss, what Luo Wenzhou had said outside of the ICU that day had been entirely unilateral bluster!

Mu Xiaoqing realized what was happening and was immediately overjoyed, knowing she had Luo Wenzhou by the pigtails. She familiarly handed over the food and the flowers, sitting in the chair in front of the hospital bed, very warmly saying to Fei Du, "Me? I'm his neighbor. He said he had something to do today that he couldn't get out of, and my husband just happens to be in the hospital for a few days, so he entrusted me with bringing you food while I was here—your colleague brings you food every day? He's very good to you!"

Fei Du was extremely sensitive to others' expressions. More and more, he thought there was something off about this middle-aged "beauty," so he avoided the serious question and simply agreed, endorsing the fact that Luo Wenzhou was very good to him, then changing the subject. "Thank you, but are you really already married?"

Mu Xiaoqing knew perfectly well that this was wholly insincere flattery, but looking at Fei Du's face, the flattery still put her entirely at her ease. Beaming, she said, "You're a very well-spoken child. My son is already as tall as an electricity pole!"

Fei Du: "..."

That description...really sounded very robust.

Madam Mu Xiaoqing's heart was as big the Pacific Ocean, able to swallow Asia in one go. While she'd been temporarily astonished by the great change in Fei Du, she recovered very quickly, hastily pulling back her imagination, which had wandered out of the solar system, adjusting to reality at the speed of light—after all, removing everything else, Fei Du truly had saved her son under those circumstances, and Luo Wenzhou's fluctuating emotions outside the ICU had been real.

So she very happily started asking after Fei Du's family.

Fei Du didn't know whether today's "good Chinese neighbors" were all so immediately familiar. While he wasn't unable to hold his own, he was still entirely unprepared to meet this mother-in-law-style cross-examination. He hadn't had a chance to rest his body and mind after his contest of wits with Zhou Huaijin, and now he was meeting with these "heavy losses." And most importantly, he felt he'd just made a blunder—

Finally getting Mu Xiaoqing to get up and bid him farewell, Fei Du hurriedly sent a message to Luo Wenzhou while her back was turned: "Who came to deliver food?"

Then, as if nothing were the matter, he maintained his smile and went over in his wheelchair to open the door for Mu Xiaoqing. "Where is your family member's hospital room? I'll take you to the nearest door."

Mu Xiaoqing was happy after their chat and had already forgotten her initial nonsense. As soon as she heard the question, she casually answered, “The leg department.”

Fei Du looked at her blankly. “...what?”

Mu Xiaoqing said, “No, that’s wrong, there’s no such thing as a leg department. What is it? Limb department? Lower limb department? Where do people normally go with athlete’s foot?”

Fei Du: “...”

Her mouthful of nonsense absolutely had to come from genes very similar to Luo Wenzhou’s.

“Come this way with me.” Without demur, Fei Du took her towards the main doors. Before parting, he attempted to make a “temperate and gentle” impression to wipe away his earlier revolting behavior from this lady’s mind. He persisted in going down in the elevator with Mu Xiaoqing, accompanying her to the inpatient department’s main doors as if he were respectfully delivering the Empress Dowager. “You can just continue on ahead.”

All smiles, Mu Xiaoqing said, “Don’t take me any further. Hey, how come you’re suddenly all polite again after we’ve been talking?”

Fei Du gave her a very measured smile. “As it should be.”

Just then, the phone on his knee vibrated. Fei Du glanced down and saw that in his haste Luo Wenzhou had answered with two words: “My mom.”

In the biting cold wind of early winter, Fei Du quietly broke out in sweat. “Goodbye, auntie. Take care.”

Mu Xiaoqing sighed. “Ah, I’ve been a ‘young lady’ for less than half an hour, and now I’ve become an ‘auntie.’”

With great difficulty, Fei Du maintained his unwavering expression. He said elegantly and “bashfully,” “It’s that...you really are too young. I made a mistake at first. I’m really sorry...”

Mu Xiaoqing only wanted to hear the first part of what he’d said and happily ignored his earnest apology. “I really love talking to you. It’s been years since I’ve received flowers from a handsome young man. I suppose even Luo Wenzhou hasn’t?”

Fei Du’s eyes instantly opened wide—wait, what did she mean, “even Luo Wenzhou hasn’t?”

These words seemed to have some rather profound significance.

But before he could react, Mu Xiaoqing produced an even more ruthless sentence.

She said, “Haha, I’ll have to take this home and show it off to my old man.”

Then, holding the flower, Madam Mu Xiaoqing skipped lightly away, entirely carefree.

Fei Du: “...”

If he’d been able to move a little more freely, he’d probably have knelt down before her.

During a gap between his meetings, Luo Wenzhou remembered Fei Du’s message just now and was very surprised that Tao Ran hadn’t explained things clearly to him. He was a little worried Mu Xiaoqing hadn’t been able to control her mouth and had talked some nonsense, so he called back. “What’s the matter?”

In a somewhat strange voice, Fei Du said, “Nothing. I love you, shixiong.”

Luo Wenzhou knew perfectly well that the words “I love you” coming out of Fei Du’s mouth were about the same as “Have you eaten?” but he still accidentally bumped into a drinking fountain in the hall.

Then, that evening, he received a frank and ardent bouquet of roses. The sweet fragrance assaulting his nose made Luo Wenzhou think for a moment that Fei Du had done something to let him down, but recalling Fei Du’s condition, even if he’d wanted to do something, it would have been a case of “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” so he calmed down at once and cheerfully took the flowers home and put them in his study, and when Luo Yiguo came to investigate, he ruthlessly locked it out, whistling happily.

Madam Mu Xiaoqing now had unspeakable handles on both of them, but their daily peaceful coexistence as each harbored his own intentions was now a good deal more harmonious than before.

Finally, after another month and more, during the first snow of midwinter, Luo Wenzhou was no longer limping, and Fei Du had recovered enough to leave the hospital.

The heating inside the car was too strong. Fei Du accidentally dozed off. When Luo Wenzhou poked him awake, he opened his eyes and looked around, finding that the surroundings weren’t at all familiar.

“It’s five minutes to my house,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Wake up, or you’ll get chilled and catch a cold.”

Fei Du quietly repeated, “Your house?”

Luo Wenzhou, remaining calm, kept his attention fixed on the road ahead and forced out a “matter-of-fact” expression. “Right. I’ve

prepared all the usual daily necessities. I'll drop you off and you can see what's missing and make a list for me.”

Fei Du perhaps got the wrong idea. He silently accepted this arrangement, at the same time subconsciously licking his lips.

Fei Du had been to Luo Wenzhou's house twice. It was about a hundred meters square, with an additional complimentary basement. It was a little too big for a bachelor, though a cat could gambol around inside to its heart's content.

They went inside. The heating was turned up warm, and the scent of cooking meat floated out from the kitchen to greet them, a smell of home uncompromisingly wrapping around the people who'd come in from the frozen, snowy day as if it could melt them.

Because Comrade Luo Yiguo's revolutionary integrity was insufficient to win others' trust, and there was chicken cooking in the kitchen, Luo Wenzhou had locked the cat in the bathroom before leaving. Luo Yiguo was beside itself with rage over this arrangement. Hearing the front door, it scratched the door even more furiously, yowling. As soon as the door opened, it threw itself forward to scratch up its litter box attendant's face.

But before it could put this plan into practice, Luo Yiguo smelled a stranger's scent, came to a halt two meters from Fei Du's feet, opened its eyes into circles, then, terror-stricken, fled back to its provisional jail, noiselessly hiding behind the door.

Fei Du was like a household guardian. As soon as he came, there was no need to guard against the cat jumping on the dining table. Luo Wenzhou for once ate a meal without having to keep his eyes and ears peeled; it was so tranquil he was nearly moved.

He was even more moved by the fact that Fei Du actually didn't get up to any tricks. Not only did he not raise any objections to Luo

Wenzhou deciding on his own initiative to bring him home, his temper was also very good; no matter what you said to him, he would always answer “fine,” and he was temporarily keeping down his troublesome nature, not being picky at all about the daily necessities Luo Wenzhou had prepared... Of course, at nightfall, Luo Wenzhou found out that he had been moved too soon.

CHAPTER 91 - Verhovensky I

Luo Wenzhou himself ordinarily lived in the guest room—because the guest room and its bathroom were the closest to the front door, so if he slept late in the morning, he could discharge the whole mission of dusting cat hair off his face, getting dressed, and washing up within two minutes.

So when, using the master bedroom as a guest room, he carried in fresh bedding to lay out for Fei Du, Fei Du evidently got the wrong impression.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't yet straightened up when a familiar Mu Xiang scent came up from behind him. Then he was hugged from behind, one very badly behaved hand hooking around his waist, the other hand lightly brushing past his neck and pressing his lips; then there was a breath at his ear.

Luo Wenzhou's ear buzzed. His body didn't wait for instructions; without authorization, it was already half on fire. He grabbed Fei Du's wrist, thinking his own palm was so hot it was humiliating.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Don't mess around."

Fei Du had discovered long ago that Luo Wenzhou couldn't resist Mu Xiang, especially when there was only a tail-end left of it, so before leaving the hospital, he'd especially had his assistant bring over a bottle. Now, he turned a deaf ear on Luo Wenzhou's weak resistance, obligingly letting him grab his wrist, licking the back of his neck. "Shixiong, you're pretending to be a saint."

Luo Wenzhou shivered. He was caught off guard when Fei Du pushed the backs of his knees, pushing him onto the quilt he'd just spread out.

Fei Du's freshly-washed hair was wet, water droplets gathering at the ends, glittering in the dim light of the bedside lamp, dazzling. A droplet suddenly took shape and dripped down. Luo Wenzhou's throat rolled with it.

Fei Du, with a smile that wasn't quite a smile, added, "Though I like your type of 'pretend saint' that shows the wolf into the house. You must taste very good."

"Get off." Like a Chinese soft-shelled turtle, Luo Wenzhou was internally hot and bothered but still reached out a hand to push him. Gritting his teeth, he said, "Just out of the hospital and you're courting death?"

Fei Du had seen that the enemy's will to resist was very half-hearted. He let him push, not dodging away. As expected, Luo Wenzhou's strength was no greater than Luo Yiguo's. He only gave a light shove. Fei Du didn't retreat, so Luo Wenzhou's hand on his chest changed its meaning; it seemed he wasn't refusing but taking advantage.

Luo Wenzhou felt Fei Du's heartbeat. He'd heard that it had stopped once, so when Fei Du had just gotten out of the ICU, he'd been unable to resist listening to Fei Du's heart, thinking that he'd have done anything to make that weak and sluggish heartbeat liven up again.

...now that it had livened up, Luo Wenzhou was somewhat regretful, wanting to eat his words from back then.

As he was lost in thought, Fei Du came close. All the muscles in Luo Wenzhou's body suddenly tensed, and his breath caught.

Fei Du first faintly touched the corner of his lips. Then, with a trace of huskiness, he said like a sigh, "If I'm courting death, dying in bed with you would be a fine ending."

Luo Wenzhou really didn't want to hear the word "dying." His countenance instantly changed. "Stop talking..."

The poor rebuke "stop talking nonsense" hadn't made it out when Fei Du sealed his mouth.

This time there was a faint taste of lemon between the lips and teeth—the new toothpaste he'd bought.

Fei Du demonstrated for him on the spot the "gift of gab" that could tie a cherry stem into a knot, stirring Luo Wenzhou, who'd firmly believed himself to be "free of distracting thoughts," into a pot of porridge, boiling away his last bit of reason. By the time Luo Wenzhou came around, he was already helplessly kissing back. He subconsciously pressed Fei Du's back, his hands escaping the control of his brain, starting to grope around on Fei Du's body under the direction of a different organ...until he accidentally touched the back of Fei Du's shoulder.

Being touched in an injured place obviously made Fei Du give a start of pain, but he really was something; for the sake of certain unspeakable aims, he bore up without making a sound. But Luo Wenzhou's head cleared instantly; he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He suddenly pulled a trick, unexpectedly turning over, pressing Fei Du onto the fluffy quilt with incomparable swiftness. Before Fei Du could react, there was a chill at his wrist, and he heard a click. His left hand had been cuffed to the head of the bed.

Calming his wildly racing heartbeat, Luo Wenzhou, his face stern, twisted his neck, which had become stiff as a stone. "Settle down."

Fei Du tilted his head and shook his wrist. The handcuffs made a crisp sound. He laughed carelessly. "Are you planning to be this intense right at the start?"

The taste of “pretend saint” really could be called superb; it lived up to the hype.

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes at him, irritably grabbing a handful of his own messy hair. He stood and shook out the quilt, pulling it out from under Fei Du, quickly and efficiently wrapping him up into a big cocoon. Then he tapped Fei Du’s head.

Fei Du: “...”

No, this didn’t seem to be the right direction.

When he’d finished tapping, Luo Wenzhou impartially and incorruptibly smacked him a few times through the quilt. “Sleep.”

President Fei absolutely hadn’t expected this Officer Luo, who’d said he wanted to frame a nude drawing of himself, to really be a “true saint.” As if he’d unexpectedly met one of the country’s guardian beasts in the middle of a downtown street, he stared blankly in shock for a while, pulling in disbelief at the handcuff locked on the head of the bed. “Luo Wenzhou, are you going to make me sleep like this?”

Of course that wasn’t what Luo Wenzhou was thinking. After a moment, he came back in carrying a blowdryer. He turned it up to its highest setting, aiming it at President Fei’s “sexily dripping” head and blowing noisily, using exactly the same movements as when he dried Luo Yiguo’s fur after giving it a bath.

Hearing the familiar sound, Luo Yiguo looked in through the crack at the door, discovered that the litter box attendant was carrying out the “infeline abuse” against another person, and was instantly worried, afraid that it would be its turn next. It hurriedly slipped noiselessly away on the pads of its paws.

Long hair in his face, unable to speak without eating hair, President Fei could only close his mouth.

Luo Wenzhou did this task very proficiently. In less than five minutes, he'd simply and conveniently finished dealing with President Fei's precious head. He not very gently grabbed at it, then was about to turn off the bedside lamp. "That's better. Go to sleep."

Fei Du deftly reached out his remaining free hand and pulled Luo Wenzhou back. "Shixiong, I was wrong. Let me go, I guarantee I won't mess around."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him expressionlessly. The TV in the living room was just replaying a skit; a timely line of dialogue floated in through the crack in the door: "You thousand-year-old fox, what strange games are you playing with me!"¹

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

In this strange situation, against this strange backdrop, the two of them looked at each other helplessly for a moment, then finally found the humor in this scene and simultaneously began to laugh.

Fei Du, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, leaned back against the pillow—the pillow was very soft, with a slightly sweet scent.

Perhaps Luo Wenzhou had sprinkled some sleep aid onto it, or perhaps Fei Du had been tired out by the tossing around; as soon as he touched the pillow, his eyelids began to droop. He raised his free hand against the gentle light of the bedside lamp, half screening his eyes, murkily saying, "Then what did you bring me home for?"

Luo Wenzhou sat silently at the side of the bed for a while. “I want to take care of you. Can’t I?”

Fei Du paused. His eyes, about to close, silently opened wide again. “Haven’t you been taking care of me these last couple of months?”

Luo Wenzhou turned, propping his elbows on his knees and putting his face in his hands, looking at him. “Do you think I was taking care of you because you got in the way of a bomb for me?”

Before Fei Du could answer, Luo Wenzhou slapped him through the quilt. “You bastard.”

Fei Du moved slightly, making the handcuffs at the head of the bed rattle. With his head of messy hair blowdried fluffy and soft by Luo Wenzhou, he looked helplessly at him, not knowing which of them was the bastard.

Luo Wenzhou suddenly remembered something and asked, “When we were going to grab Zheng Kaifeng, what was the ‘personal question’ you wanted to ask me in the car?”

Fei Du thought about it a while, lowering his hand, firmly blocking his eyes. “I forgot it at the hospital. How about I think of another one? For example...what position do you like?”

“That wasn’t what you wanted to ask then,” Luo Wenzhou said positively. Then, when Fei Du thought he was going to avoid the question, Luo Wenzhou unexpectedly answered in earnest.

He said, “I like it when you can see each other’s faces.—This sort of question you’d know the answer to at once if you tried doesn’t have any value. President Fei, are you this witless when you’re conducting business? How come your company hasn’t shut down yet? I’ll give you another chance to make a deal, all right?”

With Captain Luo forcing a deal, Fei Du didn't agree or disagree. He was silent for a while under the soft bedside light. Then he said, "Xu Wenchao... The one who kidnapped and murdered those children. The place where he disposed of the bodies belonged to a project company under the banner of the Guangyao Fund. Because some formalities couldn't be completed, the project was constantly put off, and that unused piece of land became a safe burial ground—you already knew that. I'll tell you something you don't know. The project plan for that project came into Fei Chengyu's hands for him to invest capital in. Fei Chengyu didn't, giving the reason that there was 'no mature profit model.'"

Fei Chengyu was Fei Du's father, the founder of their conglomerate.

"No mature profit model" didn't sound at all unusual, but Luo Wenzhou could hear something horrifying in Fei Du's voice. He subconsciously sat up straight. "Your dad had a connection to the Guangyao Fund?"

"They used to be very close cooperative partners." Fei Du held up two fingers, indicating that this was his second question. "I investigated after I took over the company. Before, he contributed a great deal of money to a public welfare fund under Guangyao's banner. In its early stages, the company's management was irregular, and the accounts were very hard to look into. But judging from the few remaining materials, this Guangyao Fund is long-established, and almost none of the projects they collaborated on ever made any money—"

The corner of Luo Wenzhou's eye twitched.

"I understand Fei Chengyu. He was very greedy, astute, and unfeeling," Fei Du said slowly, each word seeming to stick in his throat, coming out very heavily. "There were some projects you could tell from looking at the name were ridiculous investments. I don't believe he'd have been fooled time and time again."

Luo Wenzhou pondered this silently for a moment. “Is there anything else?”

“No.” Fei Du shrugged. “Do you think it was easy for a ‘young master’ to get into the convoluted conglomerate he left behind? It took me nearly two years just to get access to the company’s key encrypted documents.”

Both openly and in secret getting rid of a whole stumbling block of reinforcement.

Fei Du swallowed back this last sentence and, feigning high spirits, leaned back against the head of the bed, half sitting up. “Now it’s my turn to ask you. Do you...”

Luo Wenzhou reached out to block his lips. “Do you want to think about it? Don’t waste another opportunity. If you really can’t remember, I can repeat everything we said in the car that day.”

Fei Du was silent for a long time, his originally frivolous-seeming peach blossom eye growing calm. After a while, he finally said, “This is my first time meeting such an energetic competitor in answering questions.”

Not letting him off, Luo Wenzhou stared into Fei Du’s eyes.

He’d felt that when Fei Du had made him trade personal business for information, it hadn’t been entirely a joke. He really had wanted to ask something then, but he’d quickly regretted it and hadn’t wanted to say it. Zheng Kaifeng’s truck had appeared then, giving him a chance to extricate himself—if Fei Du had only wanted to make a somewhat obscene joke, he could easily have said it while they followed; matters hadn’t reached the stage where there was no time to say a sentence.

The corners of Fei Du’s mouth tensed involuntarily.

Luo Wenzhou waited for a moment. His expression somewhat dismal and his voice slow, he said, “All right, or you can tell me tomorrow...”

“I wanted to ask...” Fei Du started hastily, then, partway through, he smiled. “It’s a silly question. If you didn’t insist on asking, I’d have forgotten.—Didn’t you say then, that you weren’t the sort of scum who’d confess his feelings to a person and then turn around and suspect him? So I wanted to ask, when did you confess your feelings, and why don’t I know about it?”

“You don’t know?” Luo Wenzhou raised his eyebrows. “I don’t think I was very subtle. You’re such an expert at picking out meaning from other people’s punctuation marks, how can you say you don’t know?”

“Do you really not understand, or are you playing dumb? Fei Du.” Luo Wenzhou sighed, reaching out to stroke Fei Du’s chin. “You’re going to say you don’t understand why my mom went to the hospital to bring you food, either, isn’t that right?”

Fei Du: “...”

Luo Wenzhou held his chin, making him look up. “Also, you came here today planning to sleep with me. You never meant to stay for long, right?”

Fei Du was temporarily speechless.

He was clearly the one who’d made provoking sexual advances first, the one who’d gone out of bounds in his attempts, but when he really was pulled in, he was at a loss and instinctively wanted to take to his heels.

But while his instincts wanted to run, in his heart he didn’t really want to run. The two impulses collided, throwing him into a dilemma. He could only stay where he was, stiff with panic.

Luo Wenzhou laughed, cutting off his other road.

He said, “Dream on.”

Then he came over carrying a quilt, threw it down next to Fei Du, put some cotton around Fei Du’s handcuff, and turned off the bedside lamp. “If you want to get up to go to the bathroom at night, wake me up so I can uncuff you. Sleep.”

CHAPTER 92 - Verhovensky II

Staying at the hospital for over two months, Fei Du had more or less made up for a whole lifetime of lost sleep; he'd really slept rather too much. Today he'd scraped up some sleepiness because of the soft pillow, but then he'd gone through a session of mental and emotional turmoil; once he lay down, it was somewhat hard to calm his state of mind—especially with his partner in turmoil sleeping very innocently next to him.

He could only arrange himself into a comparatively comfortable position and close his eyes, thoughts turning through his mind like a revolving horse lantern. He thought of what he was pursuing, thought of what his next step should be, thought of what he'd revealed to Luo Wenzhou, and what he was still concealing...and so on.

The suddenly appearing bomb on Zheng Kaifeng's truck had not only made Fei Du take a turn at the border between life and death, it had also upset his plans quite a bit.

For example, because of his hospital stay, the Picture Album Project had had to temporarily change to a different contact person. The new contact person had evidently only accepted the assignment for course credit, not going to the City Bureau at all aside from going over to go through the procedures to get materials; also, because of the Zhou family case, the City Bureau was frantically busy during this period, so all the work of setting up the 'Picture Album' was basically at a standstill.

For another example, with the Zhou Clan's case coming out, *those people* had without warning shown their fox's tail in public view. Though in the end they'd used a very crude method to murder and silence, managing to cover things up and make the City Bureau pin

together some evidence to wind up the case, those who were paying attention would all have their own suspicions and guesses.

Of course, from Fei Du's point of view, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

But now that the public authorities had been alerted, it meant that the degree of difficulty of his original plan to dispose of *those people* without anyone being the wiser had become much, much higher.

And then...

And then there was Luo Wenzhou.

Yes. Leaving aside his numerous and complicated middle- and long-term plans for the moment, there was still an extremely urgent "trivial matter" in front of him, forcing Fei Du to make a difficult choice—today he'd bewilderingly ended up staying at Luo Wenzhou's house; what should he do tomorrow?

Should he stay on here in a muddle, or make a quick cut, take his leave, and go?

Fei Du was by nature capable of living alone, and later he'd learned how to fool around, but no one had ever taught him what a long-term, stable relationship looked like.

Thinking of all the inconveniences involved and the huge uncertainty in the future, Fei Du felt an inexplicable restlessness and anxiety; he simply couldn't understand why he didn't pry open the handcuff, jump barefoot out the window, and run away.

But fortunately, while Fei Du was being tormented by a thousand unbearable thoughts, his wounded shoulder and chest sudden flared up, the pain interrupting his numerous and disorderly thoughts.

For a moment Fei Du couldn't quite catch his breath. He quietly pulled aside the quilt covering him a little, then habitually rolled over and lay flat, drawing his breathing out long and slow, using the pain as a sleep aid.

Not only did Fei Du not make a sound, he was secretly relieved—he had a warm love for indisposition. For him, bodily pain was sometimes like a strong sedative; while he was focused on resisting pain, he could often get rid of distracting thoughts, his desire for control attaining the greatest release; it was a very addictive business.

In the midst of this half-stifling ache, Fei Du finally ceased the torment he'd been subjecting himself to half the night. His body, covered in cold sweat, gradually relaxed, and he began to feel slightly sleepy.

Unfortunately, when he was just about to vanquish insomnia, Luo Wenzhou made him fail at the last minute—this bit of goods, perhaps afraid he wasn't sleeping well, got out of bed, thinking he was being quiet, and opened Fei Du's handcuff. The metal clicked, uncommonly ear-splitting in the silence, stabbing like a needle through the sleepiness Fei Du had with difficulty gathered up.

Fei Du: "..."

He really was too grateful for Luo-shixiong's "thoughtfulness."

Luo Wenzhou also seemed to be upset by his own somewhat loud movements. He held his breath in the dark, cautiously watching Fei Du's movements.

Fei Du, keeping his eyes closed, pretended to be asleep. But the more he pretended to sleep, the more his nerves acted up; they were ready to jump up and do the tango.

After a while, Luo Wenzhou finally finished watching and gingerly got back in bed. The mattress shook slightly. At last he'd calmed down; Fei Du breathed a sigh of relief. He relaxed his tense limbs, ramblingly thinking that sleeping in the same bed had its bad points. It was all right when you could close your eyes and sleep after some "exercise," but if you were having a touch of insomnia, the person next to you breathing and turning over was disturbing, especially someone like Luo Wenzhou, with his presence...

Luo Wenzhou of the powerful presence rustled once again, annoyingly turning over and showing signs of getting up.

At a loss, Fei Du truly had a slight collapse, wishing to take a hammer and knock out Luo Wenzhou and then himself.

Luo Wenzhou had absolutely no idea that he was disturbing his pure dreams. He propped both hands on the mattress, half rose, and looked over to study Fei Du's "sleeping countenance" by the faint light of night. He looked for a while, then he really couldn't help himself; he leaned close and kissed Fei Du lightly, then gently pulled him into his arms—he could only do these things by stealth while Fei Du was sleeping, or else the joker would probably climb all over him.

Fei Du: "..."

Like a corpse, he let Luo Wenzhou move him around; the breathing he'd thought was bothersome was now right at the base of his ear, and the rising and falling chest was pressed closely to his back. One of the quilts had been set aside unused. It was a particularly crowded position.

Fei Du helplessly thought, "Forget it."

The words "forget it" seemed to be a magic spell; the results were instant. As soon as he thought them, all the bothersome details around him settled, and Fei Du actually slept through the night.

However, while his sleep had been calm, he was scared awake.

At six in the morning, Luo Yiguo woke punctually from its first sleep, feeling that something was missing. Thereupon Master Cat gave a big stretch, teeth bared and claws extended. Then, shaking its head and waving its tail, it trembled, resettling all of its bristling fur, and went to patrol its “fiefdom,” in the end squeezing through the crack in the door into the master bedroom, which was two degrees higher than everywhere else.

Luo Yiguo stretched itself out, standing on its hind legs and grabbing the edge of the bed, curiously smelling left and right. Then, gathering up its courage, it meowed and leapt vigorously onto the bed, lowering its head to sniff Fei Du’s hand, lying outside the covers.

Halfway between sleeping and waking, Fei Du felt a ball of fur rub against his hand and subconsciously reached out to touch it, touching a soft and warm little living creature.

First he froze. Then he moved entirely from sleepiness to stress. Fei Du sat up at once, his pupils instantly contracting, all the blood in his body pushed out to his limbs by his sharply rising blood pressure. His hands and feet went numb, and his neck seemed to be squeezed by an imaginary metal ring, making his breath stop involuntarily.

Luo Yiguo had been seriously identifying the strange smell; it was startled into a jump by Fei Du’s sudden corpse-like rise, all the fur on its body bristling, back leg missing a step on the edge of the bed, sending it tumbling down.

Still badly shaken, the human and the cat stared at each other helplessly for a moment, finally disturbing the master of the house. Luo Wenzhou blearily took Fei Du into his arms, gently slapping his waist. “Don’t mess around... It’s still dark out.”

Fei Du only then pulled himself together, slowly letting out the breath caught in his throat, fully waking up.

Luo Yiguo had ducked under the little rattan chair by the bedside, showing only its head, gingerly resting on its front paws, its two sharp ears laying flat, staring at him like a rabbit.

Fei Du returned its gaze for a moment, then slowly moved Luo Wenzhou's arms aside, noiselessly got out of bed, and left the bedroom.

Luo Yiguo stared at his back in alarm. Suspecting that the litter-scooping idiot had been killed by the "bad guy," it hurriedly jumped onto the bed to investigate. It circled Luo Wenzhou twice, finding to its gratification that the litter box attendant was still breathing. It then relaxed and stepped on him without any mercy, ran out of the bedroom, and continued to scout out the enemy situation.

But the "enemy" hadn't stormed and captured its scratching post; nor had he looted its bed. He was only staring vacantly at the floor-to-ceiling window of the balcony. Luo Yiguo was still afraid of him and wavered in place, not daring to go over, filled with misgiving and beginning involuntarily to chase its own tail. By the time it caught itself, it found that Fei Du had been staring at it for a while. Luo Yiguo hurriedly put on the brakes, opening its large eyes wide and stiffening into a museum exhibit.

Fei Du still remembered what this cat had looked like when it had been small. Back then, it had still been a tottering kitten with its tail stuck up, with down like a chick's on its head, looking like its head was too big for its body, its expression moronically confused.

On Tao Ran's account, he'd reluctantly brought the little cat back to the apartment in the city. Aside from giving it food and water every day, he'd basically turned a blind eye to the cat. The kitten had been naturally clingy. Despite being ignored over and over, it still wouldn't

let him off, coming over to cuddle. If he didn't pay attention to it, it would cry out, making so much noise Fei Du couldn't stand it.

One day, the kitten reached out a paw towards him, its claws hooking onto his pant leg; then it flopped on the ground, shamelessly demanding attention. Fei Du's patience finally ran out. As he frowned, staring coldly at the cat, deliberating who he should give it to, Fei Chengyu suddenly arrived.

The moment he heard the sound of the keys, Fei Du grabbed the cat hanging off his pant leg, breaking off the kitten's claws. The kitten's weak cry hadn't yet come out when its voice was cut off by the boy squeezing its neck. Then it was roughly thrown into a drawer.

When the drawer had just been closed, the man opened the door and came in. Fei Du, a book in his hands, walked calmly out of the study, as if he'd just been disturbed by the sound of the door opening.

Fei Chengyu still found the cat food and litter box in the apartment. Fortunately, he'd just cleaned the litter box and hadn't yet poured out the cat food.

Fei Chengyu asked, "What pet have you been keeping?"

"A cat." With an absent-minded look, Fei Du, who wasn't yet fifteen at the time, seemingly casually said, "That busy-body policeman gave it to me."

Fei Chengyu turned to look at him in great interest. "The little cop knows how to amuse children. Where is the cat? Let me see it."

Fei Du looked at him, gave a strange and cold laugh, then spread his hands towards him. There were a few bloody cat hairs on his palms. "Here it is."

After he'd seen this, Fei Chengyu didn't say anything about it, only calmly lectured him, ordering him to buy another cat that was about the same and give it back; if he could get a little closer to the police officer at a suitable time, there would be benefits for the future. Without looking up, Fei Du listened indolently, perhaps hearing some of it. At the same time, in front of Fei Chengyu's face, he cleverly wove together some of the cat hairs from his palms, soundlessly blowing them towards the man's back when he turned to leave—

Having finished inspecting his "favorite work," Fei Chengyu had left in satisfaction.

That had been Fei Du's first rebellion, his first deception, his first time knowing that no one on earth was omnipotent, and even a demon could be easily tricked by his own excessive self-confidence.

Though that kitten from back then had now grown into a very large cat, supposedly of an eccentric disposition, and it shed—

Fei Du averted the gaze that was making Luo Yiguo nervous, slowly walking by it, filling its bowl with cat food.

Luo Wenzhou usually got to work at eighty-thirty. If he could get out of bed at 8:10, it was already good. Each morning it was like fighting a battle. But today he opened his eyes before eight, reaching out a hand to feel around. Feeling emptiness, he gave a start, rolled over, and got up. He stared blankly at the already cold half of the bed for a good while, then charged out, almost frightened.

Luo Wenzhou only relaxed somewhat when he saw Fei Du sitting out on the balcony, drinking coffee.

Heated up sandwiches and another cup of coffee were laid out on the little table in the dining room. Fei Du must have gone down first thing in the morning to buy them. Luo Yiguo's bowl was still half full of cat food. The asshole cat, whose loyalty lay with whoever fed it,

was crouching on the couch, licking its paws, evidently having eaten and drunk its fill, having no intention of acknowledging its has-been litter box attendant.

“So early,” Luo Wenzhou whispered. Then, frowning, he walked over and snatched away Fei Du’s coffee. “Who told you to drink this? Go to the kitchen and get the milk from the left-hand cabinet.”

Fei Du tapped his watch. “You’ll be late.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t deign to wrangle with him, planning to let him see what a “tornado of a man” was like.

But when he’d finished washing up and was thoroughly awake, Luo Wenzhou looked at Fei Du’s tidy outfit and involuntarily felt alarmed.

He bit off half a sandwich at once. In between nearly choking to death, he asked, feigning indifference, “Where are you going today?”

When he heard this, Fei Du put down the milk, his expression somewhat awkward.

Like a student who’d just input his university entrance exam ID and was waiting to see his results, Luo Wenzhou’s heart went to his throat, having a tragic collision with the breakfast he’d just swallowed. He was afraid that Fei Du was going to say, “I’ve thought it over, and I’d better take my leave.”

Fei Du said, “You don’t have an extra parking spot here, do you?”

Luo Wenzhou’s suspended heart smashed back down into his chest, his budding good mood bursting into full bloom as it fell. He really couldn’t cover it up, smiling involuntarily.

Looking at his expression, Fei Du was very taken aback, thinking, “I didn’t think this crummy estate would have adequate parking.”

Then he heard Luo Wenzhou joyously tell him, “Haha, you’re right, there isn’t one.”

Fei Du: “...”

What was his problem!

Luo Wenzhou efficiently put back his breakfast and tossed him his keys, not asking where he was going. “For the next few days, drive my car when you go out. Come the weekend, I’ll think of a way to get you a spot... One at most, don’t drive your ‘imperial harem’ over here.”

Fei Du said, “What about you?”

Luo Wenzhou waved at him with great vigor, ran into the basement, and carried out the big bike. Moving like a mad dog, he rode it away with a clatter, giving the bicycle a rocket’s momentum, dashing towards the City Bureau like a flare.

CHAPTER 93 - Verhovensky III

In the end, the “flare” wasn’t as fast as a four-wheeled product of modern technology. After showing off all morning, Comrade Luo Wenzhou had the misfortune of being gloriously late.

Though in this respect, Luo Wenzhou was a habitual offender; being fifteen or twenty minutes late wasn’t enough to make him feel guilty. He swaggered into the office, very calmly accepting everyone’s welcoming eyes on him. “Morning, children. Have you eaten?”

The welcoming eyes developed a film of expectant soft light, the starving masses looking at him with deep affection.

Empty handed, Luo Wenzhou laughed aloud, complacently proclaiming, “I’ve eaten.”

The tender gazes immediately darkened, turning into hateful arrows, wanting nothing better than to pin Luo Wenzhou to the ground and step on him ten thousand times.

Soon after, however, the dining hall downstairs delivered some steamers of freshly made soup dumplings. Learning that Captain Luo had put these on his card, the mood of the masses stabilized once more, and Captain Luo once again became everyone’s good captain.

As she handed out dumplings, Lang Qiao asked, “Boss, did you get up late again?”

“I didn’t,” said Luo Wenzhou in a seemingly very casual tone. “I gave someone my car to drive this morning, so I biked over.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t have the bad habit of treating his car like a wife. In this respect, he was rather generous. When he was making visits in civilian clothing and couldn’t conveniently drive a service car, he’d

often use his private vehicle for public work, and he'd occasionally lend it to his wretchedly poor colleagues to use for going on dates. But the important point in what he'd said wasn't "lending the car," it was "this morning."

A charitable colleague probingly asked, "Who's driving your car so early in the morning, Captain Luo? You must have had someone over last night?"

Luo Wenzhou smiled in an obvious attempt at a cover-up, not saying yes and not saying no, enjoying the special treatment of "all rising to applaud." Afterwards, he still had to preen, showing off while pretending to complain. "What are you all making such a fuss about? I've drunk a bellyful of a northwest wind that I haven't finished digesting yet. Ah, times like this I think that being single has its good points."

Hearing this, everyone felt that the dumplings in their mouths had lost their flavor somewhat. While their stomachs were full, they still rather wanted to rise in rebellion and kill this slut.

Luo Wenzhou harvested their death glares in perfect contentment, turned on his computer, and logged into the City Bureau's Mobile Officing System.

Since the identities of the criminal police officers tailing Yang Bo had been leaked, he'd developed a habit of logging in when he had nothing else to do.

"Right, boss," said Lang Qiao, "Director Wang from admin said yesterday that the end of the year is coming up, and the bureau is planning to put together a general safety propaganda campaign to hang up in buses and subways. He wants our team to send a few people. The one's who'll make a better impression."

“Tell Lao Wang that my people are this city’s public security authorities’ foremost troupe of folk dancers...no, of fashion models. Tell him to come over and pick. He can take whoever he likes. We sell our bodies but not our talents...” Luo Wenzhou stretched, then scrolled down the page. “Hey, what is this? How did a trifle like some brats running away from home end up in front of me?”

The Mobile Officing System’s full name was too long, so everyone had picked out a nickname for it, calling it the “card-puncher.” The system’s design concept was actually very advanced; it was an internal network spanning the whole city. But it hadn’t been extended by being made compulsory, and its functions coincided in many places with Public Security’s pre-existing internal network, creating many redundancies. Therefore, like many activities of no clear purpose that the City Bureau undertook every year—like this propaganda campaign that no one was going to see, for example—it had become an “image project.”

Apart from those needing to think about the little bureaucratic burden of the “card-puncher” when going out into the field, others only swarmed like bees to log in to inquire into their work records when it came time to write year-end summaries.

Luo Wenzhou’s privileges were fairly high. Apart from being able to inquire into the City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team’s fieldwork status, he could also see what each district’s sub-bureau’s criminal investigation department was up to. If the sub-bureaus or the local police stations encountered something relatively complicated and needed to send it up, they’d first do a simple write-up and have the program push it up to the appropriate department’s head.

But the case that had shown up in front of him now was really something of a triviality—a group of middle school students running away together.

There was a private school in the city that included junior and senior middle school, called Yufen Middle School. Yufen Middle School was sealed off, its students all boarding at the school and going home only once a week. But this week, some senior middle Year 1 students had hopped the school's walls during the night and run off. One of the students had left a letter for his teachers and parents, explaining the reasons he'd left. It came to nothing more than "too much stress," "loneliness," that sort of thing.

When Luo Wenzhou had read this, he was baffled. "Listen, are we going to be responsible for tracking down lost golden retrievers next?"

This was how Yan City's Public Security System operated normally: cases of suicide, accident, missing persons, and so on would be handled by the low-level local police stations' civil police. If, after the civil police got involved, they found that the case was rather complicated and required the cooperation of specialized criminal investigation techniques, they would report it to the criminal investigation team of the sub-bureau whose jurisdiction they were in.

Usually, only major cases that crossed jurisdictions or that were particularly ugly would disturb the City Bureau.

Lang Qiao strolled into his office and looked over. "Oh, that! I know about that. First, it crosses jurisdictions, and I hear they've asked the internet police to assist. It's not something a local police station or two can resolve. There are rather a lot of departments cooperating on it, so maybe when they were sending it out they accidentally ticked off the City Bureau, too."

Tao Ran asked in surprise, "Why do they need the internet police to find missing persons? Did that crowd of brats run away to an internet cafe?"

“No, it’s because the letter that the kid who led them left behind has become popular online.” Lang Qiao opened her social media on her phone and showed it to them. “A lot of people reposted it. Kids these days can’t leave the internet for a moment. If they see this somewhere, they might not be able to resist replying out of vanity, so we’ll be able to fix their location.”

Luo Wenzhou swept his eye over it. “It’s been three days already. They haven’t been found yet?”

Teenagers running away from home wasn’t the same as small children going missing, and the students who had gone missing were in senior middle school, fourteen or fifteen years old, both male and female. Because they’d left on their own, the probability that they would run into danger wasn’t high; and then, they were still young, so they would be relatively easy to find; ordinarily they’d be snatched up very quickly.

Of course, it was even more common for the brats to obediently come running home when their money ran out before anyone could find them. It was really rather unusual for them not to have been found after three days.

“Who knows where they’ve gone?” Lang Qiao shrugged. “When I was their age, I was too busy dating to make that kind of mischief and upset my teachers and parents...”

“Right, and you definitely didn’t have time to study, either.” Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes, interrupting her. “The mind of a three-year-old, and you’ve still made some progress.—Stop playing humble, get ready for the meeting!”

Since the City Bureau was having some idle days following the inhuman workload of the last half-year, Luo Wenzhou indolently hosted a plenary session on playing games...no, on ideological education. The main contents of the meeting were Deputy-Captain

Tao reading out soporific study materials in a flat voice while their middle-aged and elderly colleagues whispered in each others' ears, complaining that the children couldn't study properly, and the youngsters, with Captain Luo himself leading the charge, teamed up to defeat a boss.

It would be better if every day could be like this—all of Yan City wrapped up in cold and snow, everyone yawning as they went to work and school, the Public Security System hibernating in a quiet conference room, the biggest case at hand a matter of some senior middle school students running away.

The boss in the cell phone game was knocked out. Luo Wenzhou winked at everyone around him, exchanging high-fives under the table. At the same time, he couldn't help letting his mind wander, thinking, "What did Fei Du do when he was at school?"

His mother had just died, and he'd had that dubious father. A fifteen-year-old child, unwilling to say a single superfluous sentence to anyone, so loaded down with worries that a hoisting jack couldn't have lifted them. Had he heard his teachers' lessons? Had he been like other children, worrying about what university he would test into? Could he have had the leisure to lose himself in an early romance?

"Boss, we're doing another round, hurry up and join."

Luo Wenzhou pulled himself together and once again picked up his overheated phone, feeling that perhaps Fei Du was poisonous, slipping into his mind to harass him at every opportunity; it really was irritating.

Fei Du, more wronged than Dou E, currently had no knowledge of his "crime"; he was driving familiarly towards Yan Security Uni.

There were three knocks on the door of Pan Yunteng's office. He looked up and called, "Come in."

When the City Bureau had restarted the Picture Album Project, Dr. Bai's husband Pan Yunteng had been the person in charge of it at the Yan Security Uni end, and he was also Fei Du's temporary academic advisor—before school had started, Fei Du's originally determined-upon advisor had received a rare opportunity, so he'd gone through his school contacts and settled Fei Du on Pan Yunteng, letting him "by chance coincidence" start in on the Picture Album project.

"Fei Du?" Pan Yunteng stared when he saw him. "Are you out the hospital? Sit down."

While Fei Du had been in the hospital, Pan Yunteng and Dr. Bai had of course gone to visit him. He still clearly looked unwell. His cheeks were pale, and he was more heavily dressed than usual. On going downstairs, he'd had a taste of Yan City's bitter winter, and sitting in the car with the heating blowing on him the whole way hadn't warmed him up. His hands were still stiff.

He said thank you and accepted a hot drink from Pan Yunteng. He held it in his hands for a while, and his reddened fingers finally returned to life somewhat.

"I don't need any follow-up treatment. There's no point in staying at the hospital. Anyway, it was uncomfortable there. I'd rather go home and recover," said Fei Du. "Also, I was worried that if I stayed any longer, the whole semester would have passed. What would I do if you made me repeat a year?"

"Let's be serious with each other." Pan Yunteng didn't respond to his joke, gravely saying, "I can understand a criminal policeman on the front lines sometimes encountering danger, but this is my first time hearing of a student who'd gone over to examine some documents getting involved in this kind of thing!"

“Just coincidence. The City Bureau didn’t have enough service cars, and I lent them my car.” Fei Du leaned back easily in his chair. “I’ve heard that the self-examination Captain Luo wrote on my account could have been assembled for publication? So it must be clear enough.—Teacher, have you read the homework I handed in?”

Pan Yunteng glared at him, then opened the paper he’d handed in on his computer. There was a TV in his office. Teacher Pan was devoted to his studies and of a serious disposition. Even when he occasionally relaxed, what he watched was the legal channel—since Fei Du had come in, the TV had been broadcasting “Rural Police Stories,” describing a woman who’d died by the side of the road after leaving her home. There had been skid marks next to her, and the local police had quickly found the responsible car. The responsible driver had admitted that he’d been driving drunk in the middle of the night and had run over the victim.

But the victim’s body hadn’t shown signs of having died from being struck; there seemed to be some other hidden circumstances behind her death.

Presumably because he minded the noise, Pan Yunteng turned off the TV. Fei Du turned in the swivel chair. “It must be very easy for the medical examiners to distinguish whether a person died of being hit by a car or was run over after they were already dead. What’s the point of that kind of ‘plot?’”

“If you’d carefully read those files you arranged before, you’d have found that in fact the majority of criminals don’t have sufficient common sense or intelligence.” Pan Yunteng reviewed Fei Du’s paper at a glance. Without looking up, he said, “Some kill entirely in the heat of the moment, and some are very stupid. Murderers will even believe wild rumors and attempt to mislead modern criminal investigation techniques. Truly difficult to trace criminals are very

rare.—Yes, communal trends. You’ve used the word ‘trends’ very delicately. Why did you want to write about this subject?”

“Because you’re right. Aside from in a few rather remote regions, it’s very difficult to avoid modern criminal investigation techniques, and it’s often even more challenging for a person’s psychological endurance. But communal crimes are another thing. Sometimes members may not think they’re participating in criminal activity at all,” said Fei Du. “The more sealed-off the surroundings, the easier it is to create an abnormal group. Prisons, for example, or human trafficking in remote mountain regions, and so on. Of course, the same possibility exists in a developed region, but the cost will be comparatively high.”

Pan Yunteng looked at him.

Fei Du’s scarf was still around his neck, half hiding his smile. He explained why he’d come. “Teacher, these three recent major cases have all been communal matters. Can we make it a special topic in the Picture Album?”

Pan Yunteng’s eyebrows rose up very high. If he hadn’t chosen this contact person himself, Pan Yunteng almost would have suspected that Fei Du had other intentions.

Fei Du quietly explained, “I don’t like leaving things unfinished.”

“I’ll consider it.” Pan Yunteng waved a hand at him.

Fei Du didn’t pester him. He nodded, stood, and bid him farewell. At the same time, he wasn’t very concerned about Pan Yunteng not agreeing—if he really didn’t, he could also make the current contact person withdraw due to some unforeseen event.

He hoped that his luck would be good and his paper would convince Pan Yunteng. Having to use unconventional methods would be a

burden on an injured person.

CHAPTER 94 - Verhovensky IV

When he'd gone out in the morning, the sun had been shining brightly, the sky clear enough to see for thousands of li, but around evening clouds came out of nowhere to provocatively drop a snow shower.

Using his bicycle as a snow plow, Luo Wenzhou slid it along the ground as he walked. When he was about to reach the City Bureau's gates, Tao Ran suddenly came hurrying after him and hung a very festively-wrapped box from his handlebars. "You left so quickly, are you in such a hurry to go home and cook? This is some cured meat my mom sent from home, all natural eco-friendly food made from organically fed pigs. I've just been handing it out in the office. This is your share."

Before Luo Wenzhou could say "thank you," he saw Tao Ran put his hand on the box of meat, his index finger quickly tapping on it three times.

As soon as the weather turned cold, Tao Ran had started wearing a down coat like a tortoise's shell, wrapped up so firmly you could see nothing but his eyes. When Luo Wenzhou looked over at him, he saw that there was no smile in his eyes and immediately knew that this "local specialty" box didn't purely contain local specialties.

Luo Wenzhou paused, then thanked him as if nothing were the matter and weighed the box in his hands. "When I see cured meat, I know it's really winter.—Why so heavy? How much did your mom send you?"

"A whole lot," Tao Ran said. "I even went and gave a box to shiniang yesterday."

Luo Wenzhou instantly froze—when Tao Ran had tapped the box, he'd been indicating that there was something in it other than cured meat; adding in these words, he meant that the thing came from shiniang—Yang Zhengfeng's widow.

The two of them silently exchanged a look.

The only thing that could have come from shiniang was something left behind by Yang Zhengfeng.

Tentatively, Luo Wenzhou said, "Shiniang doesn't like seeing us, and it's not a holiday right now. She didn't throw you out when you went over to bother her?"

Lao Yang had given up his life three years ago. If she had something, why was she only now willing to hand it over?

Tao Ran paused, something indescribable filling his gaze.

The night wind carrying snow was chilly and piercing. It could blow through your flesh straight to your lungs. The red banners at the City Bureau's gates had been hung up for National Day and hadn't been taken down yet. They fluttered in the snowy wind, so red they seemed about to pierce the twilight.

Luo Wenzhou stood up straight, suddenly having an ominous premonition.

"Shiniang...shiniang went to the hospital last month." Tao Ran subconsciously looked at the murky light, then aimlessly at his own feet, quietly saying, "They've found she has lymphoma."

Luo Wenzhou was stunned. "What?"

"Late stage," Tao Ran said, sounding as if the winter wind had choked him, pronouncing the words with difficulty. "She doesn't...doesn't

have long.”

“I’m going to go see her.” After a moment’s staring, Luo Wenzhou suddenly turned and got on the bike, stepping on the peddles. “What’s going to happen to the child? She hasn’t graduated yet...”

Tao Ran grabbed his elbow, shaking his head at him.

“It’s too late today. Go home. Don’t disturb her rest.” Saying so, Tao Ran tapped again on the wrapped box of cured meet, meaningfully saying, “And it’s not like everyone likes you at a glance. She won’t necessarily be happy to see you. Go home and eat well. I’m off. You ride safely.”

“Tao Ran!” Luo Wenzhou spit out a white breath, saying at his back, “Did she get sick because of Lao Yang? Is this all because Lao Yang died and she’s been depressed ever since?”

Tao Ran waved at him from afar, not answering.

There was no answer to give; however they dug into the cause, it still wouldn’t change the effect. At this point, it was too late to say anything.

Perhaps it was fate.

Whether you had genius, ability, or magic on your side, however great a fortune you possessed, however vast your power and influence, none of it mattered.

The box of cured meat Tao Ran had hung on his handlebars really was heavy, encumbering Luo Wenzhou’s front wheel. He went face-first into the wind, his progress difficult.

When he’d gone out in the morning, this bicycle’s two wheels had been like a pair of magical wind-and-fire wheels; on his way back in

the evening, they seemed to have become misshapen metal circles.

As Luo Wenzhou was riding the bicycle across the street, he glanced to the right, passing the parking lot at the shopping center's doors. He suddenly instinctively looked up, then immediately realized that the car he'd just passed looked somewhat familiar.

Luo Wenzhou quickly put his feet on the ground to brake the bicycle and turned his head to look, coming face to face with his own car.

His head covered in bits of snow and ice, he opened his eyes wide and exchanged a helpless look with his car. The car's engine was running, letting out a droning sound; snowflakes revolved in the warm light of its low beam headlights.

Had Fei Du come to pick him up?

Luo Wenzhou's heavy heart seemed to have had a maglev installed; it rose in midair with a flutter, swimming around his chest. He focused, then casually strolled over to the car's window, bending down and planning to knock, when his surprise suddenly turned to fright—

He didn't know how long Fei Du had been waiting; he was curled up in the driver's seat asleep. The heating inside the car was obviously turned up high, and he, perhaps afraid of the cold, had the doors and windows tightly sealed!

A cold breath inundated Luo Wenzhou's chest, his lungs nearly bursting, and he hit the car window a few times. "Fei Du! Fei Du!"

When he was getting ready to break open the door, Fei Du finally woke up. He moved somewhat hazily, as if he'd forgotten where he was, then noticed the sound next to him.

Fei Du rubbed his eyes and unlocked the car door. "Did you get off..."

Before he finished asking the question, Luo Wenzhou grabbed his collar and pulled him out of the car, howling into his ear, “Were you trying to die, or do you have no fucking common sense!”

Fei Du stumbled. Suddenly pulled from the inside of the car that was as warm as springtime into the cold wintry air, he shivered, thoroughly waking up, realizing what he’d done—Fei Du hadn’t meant to smother himself; he’d gotten out of the car to stroll around while waiting for Luo Wenzhou, but he really couldn’t stand the cold and had gone back to the car to warm up for a while. He just hadn’t expected that his stay in the hospital would have injured him to such a degree; before the blood had fully circulated to his hands and feet, he’d accidentally fallen asleep.

Fei Du very rarely did stupid things like this in front of others; he was quite upset. “I actually...”

“Go, go, get the hell over there.” In his rage, Luo Wenzhou didn’t want to hear his explanations. Pushing and pulling, he tossed Fei Du into the passenger’s seat, then charged around and got into the car, pulling out of the parking spot like a whirlwind, leaving a ten-meter trail of exhaust. Then he remembered something and, swearing, got out of the car and brought over the forgotten bicycle and box of meat, dragging them into the trunk.

He slammed the car door thunderously and furiously drove home.

Fei Du had reached his present age with little experience of people howling into his ear. His ears rang from Luo Wenzhou’s outburst, and he hadn’t quite pulled himself together, like Luo Yiguo after knocking over and breaking a porcelain bowl.

After a period of dumb staring, he finally pulled himself together. To cover up the awkwardness, he showed an overly slick smile, put one hand on his head and the other, very ill-manneredly, on Luo

Wenzhou's thigh. Lowering his voice, he said, "Shixiong, are you so worried about me?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't want to fool around with him. He slapped away his paw. "Get away."

The invincible President Fei instantly changed tactics, slowing his voice. "I was just too cold and got in to warm up. I wasn't going to stay long. I was...oh, I was resting my eyes just now."

Luo Wenzhou coldly said, "Were you resting your ears, too?"

Fei Du: "..."

Fei Du's few sentences of justification started up a counter-reaction. Luo Wenzhou had recovered from his initial almost overpowering fear, and it was as if some button had been pressed; he took a deep breath and unleashed a lengthy and explosive lecture upon Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou naturally came by his superior ability to improvise lectures and scoldings from his father. Starting from an enumeration of every shameful thing Fei Du had ever done, he came down to him thoroughly forgetting the doctor's orders as soon as he'd gotten out of the hospital, going out to play who knew where first thing in the morning, trying to make himself sick.

Finally, he issued a rather forceful question in response to Fei Du's paltry explanation. "You're cold? If you're cold, why don't you wear long underwear?!"

This question rendered Fei Du speechless. He could only keep quiet, listening to the lecture all the way home, not attempting to put in another word.

Seeing that, after going inside with the box of cured meat in one hand and the clanking bicycle under the other arm, Luo Wenzhou still

showed no signs of ceasing hostilities, Fei Du, without any warning, suddenly hugged him, kissing him like a surprise attack, this time saying the proper lines. “Shixiong, I was wrong.”

“...” Luo Wenzhou kept his face as stern as possible, but his voice relaxed uncontrollably. “Don’t give me that.”

Fei Du lowered his head slightly, burying his face against his neck. He thought about it, then said, “Can I make it up to you with my body?”

Luo Wenzhou had known he couldn’t expect anything good to come out of a scoundrel’s mouth. He lightly smacked the small of his back, then gave him the bicycle, saying, “You can put the bike away in the basement—get some exercise before we eat, you look like you need it.”

Fei Du knew when to quit. He held the handlebars, pushing the big, crude bike into the basement. There was a full-length mirror on the cabinet in the stairwell. Coming back up, he carelessly looked up and found that there was a rather indistinct smile at the corners of his mouth.

The bicycle’s chain had just been oiled; Fei Du’s neatly pressed pant leg had picked up a clear stain in the process of moving the bike. He paused, as if not understanding what he had to smile about. Just then, Luo Wenzhou hurried him from the kitchen. “Don’t just wait around to eat, come over here and help. Can you wash vegetables?”

The one-time domineering director-general, reduced to being a porter and vegetable-washing lackey, scratched his nose. “...no.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “You can’t do anything! You’re as useless as Luo Yiguo... Ah, you little whelps!”

Luo Yiguo was harmlessly licking its paws, not knowing how it had ended up dragged in. Hearing these words, it was beside itself with

rage, jumping down from the top of the fridge, landing with perfect precision on Luo Wenzhou's instep, stamping furiously, then taking to its heels and dashing off.

In the winter night, with the frost like flowers, the city was ablaze with lights—

...and there were also unknown corners where unimaginable shadows spread.

The girl was hiding inside a garbage bin, her feet in a sticky mess, the pungent smell constantly assaulting her nasal cavity. She was trembling, curled tightly into a ball, biting her own wrist. In the dark, she heard a man's rough breathing not far off, and the dull sound of a sharp blade cutting through bone.

She was fifteen years old, as tall as an adult. Perhaps she ought to act like an adult, push open the garbage bin and go out to fight him.

There had been two of them at first. Two against one. They may have had a chance.

But she was too cowardly. She never dared to face things, didn't dare to resist at all; she always instinctively hid.

Suddenly, the sluggish and heavy footsteps sounded again, coming closer and closer. The girl's heart shuddered along with the steps. In the extremity of fear, her whole body started to go numb.

The footsteps suddenly paused, stopping outside of the garbage bin.

How far away was he? One meter? Half a meter? Or...thirty centimeters?

The girl held her breath. Separated by a thin plastic bin from an insane killer, she seemed to already smell the blood on him.

Suddenly, there was a gentle knock on the plastic garbage bin.

A boom.

The girl's tense nerves instantly collapsed. She shivered violently, the metal zipper of her jacket knocking against the side of the plastic bin

There was a strange soft laugh in the dark. In a hoarse voice, a man crooned a wildly off-key song: "Little rabbit be good, open up as you should..."

The girl gave a heartrending shriek. Not two meters from where she was hiding lay a boy's corpse. His eyes had been smashed, and his limbs had all been chopped off; they lay in a neat row beside him. The torso was covered with Yufen Middle School's uniform jacket.

It was ten-thirty at night.

Luo Wenzhou locked up everything in the house that contained caffeine, held down Fei Du's head and gave him a cup of milk to drink, forcing him to go to sleep.

"It's ten-thirty." Fei Du looked at his watch, scoffing at this regimen for the middle-aged and elderly. "Never mind the night life, the social scene hasn't even properly gotten started yet. Shixiong, let's talk it over..."

Luo Wenzhou refused negotiations, rejecting him with one sentence. "Shut up. Lie down and sleep."

Fei Du thought this brazen dictatorship of Luo Wenzhou's was very unreasonable. He was getting ready to protest when he saw Luo Wenzhou get a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket.

Fei Du wisely submitted to the circumstances, immediately lying down without making a sound.

Luo Wenzhou stayed with him until around midnight. When he was sure Fei Du was fully asleep, he got up and kissed him gently, leaving the bedroom and closing the door. He got the box of cured meat Tao Ran had given him out of the kitchen storage room. Amidst the smell assaulting his nose, he found a thick folder.

As soon as he opened it, a handwritten letter fell out.

This was...the kind of red-squared writing paper that very few people would use in this era, written all over in fountain pen in a handwriting Luo Wenzhou had seen countless times—it belonged to the old criminal policeman Yang Zhengfeng.

The letter was addressed to his wife. Yang Zhengfeng wrote: “Jiahui, I’m writing this letter just in case. Just in case I die unexpectedly one day and you find what I’ve left behind, I hope it won’t put you and Xinxin in danger. In my profession, no one wants to endanger his family. But I have no one else to entrust this to.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart lurched.

“When you’ve finished making arrangements for my funeral, at all costs remember not to contact anyone at the City Bureau. There are people there who have changed. I don’t know who they are. You must be careful. Wenzhou and Tao Ran and the other children were all brought up by me. I’m certain of them, but they’re all too young. They may have an abundance of heart, but their abilities are insufficient. Don’t involve them, and don’t get too close to them, in order to avoid the younger generation making a pointless sacrifice.”

CHAPTER 95 - Verhovensky V

Luo Wenzhou, carrying the kraft-paper envelope, went to the balcony, opened the window, and lit a cigarette. Luo Yiguo, attracted by the scent of cured meat, was swept by the icy breeze and immediately ran off shivering, tail between its legs.

Before him was the coldest night of the year, behind him an indulgently warm room, and in his hands a final testament, the paper of which had been crumpled.

“I don’t know who my enemies are, and I don’t know how long they have existed. They have a colossal organization and vast wealth, hold countless privileges and high-quality resources, but they still won’t be satisfied. They still have to get what they want in spite of others, placing themselves above the law—I suspect that these people are connected with many murders, even that they’ve been privately supporting wanted criminals, using them as assassins.”

At this point, Luo Wenzhou’s hand tapping out cigarette ash paused, lightly trembling in spite of himself.

His gaze swept once more over the words “privately supporting wanted criminals, using them as assassins.” In the Zhou Clan case, the killer who had run over Dong Xiaoqing had been a wanted criminal who had obtained a high quality false ID from somewhere and was making his living as an assassin.

Amidst the darkness, there seemed to be a slender thread passing through the thick haze, dimly revealing a fragile structure.

“Jiahui, do you still remember Gu Zhao? My one-time good friend, my brother. To this day no one dares to mention him. He has turned into a disgraceful ‘history,’ needing to be covered up at the edges of group photos. Though Teacher Fan went astray, he was right when he said

that Gu Zhao wasn't that kind of person. There had to be something else behind it.

“Teacher Fan has come to grief, but he did it for the sake of private vengeance. Sometimes I think, why am I doing this? I don't know. I've been working for over twenty years. Reasonably speaking, I should withdraw from the front lines, focus on management, attend meetings and give speeches, not deal with all kinds of criminals every day. I should go on steadily to retirement, see Xinxin graduate and start a family, take care of myself and live out my allotted lifetime. I should pretend that I don't know anything. I truly want it to be that way, to do my duty. No one could criticize me for it.

“But as soon as I close my eyes, I think of Teacher Fan, think of Gu Zhao, think of those who died unsatisfied on National Road 327, and of those children whose whereabouts are still unknown.

“Jiahui, I can't do it. I hope you can forgive me.

“This world is too complicated. Countless sordid things have been accumulating underground for a long time, like chronic illnesses that can never heal.

“But I still think that time is a series of great waves constantly rushing towards the shore. Each time a wave rises it bears down menacingly, but every time it flows out again it sweeps away some of the stains—for example, we now have all kinds of investigative technology; we can detect lies, we can compare DNA. Perhaps very soon the surveillance camera network will be everywhere, covering every corner.

“Perhaps when the next wave hits, all of this will be revealed under the bright light of day. If I'm gone then, please see that day in my place, and hand these things over to those who can continue the investigation.”

When Luo Wenzhou finished reading, he exhaled a long breath, carefully folding the letter according to the creases that were already there. The letter Yang Zhengfeng had written to his wife wasn't long, but there were a few parts he didn't quite understand. But he understood why Lao Yang had said that he "had the heart but not the ability."

He strove to remember the days before Lao Yang's sacrifice. He vaguely recalled that Yang Zhengfeng had been smoking like a chimney; when others had asked him about it, he'd only said that he was worried about his daughter's university entrance exams, and they, a group of ignorant youngsters, had made fun of him for it...

What had Lao Yang felt then when he'd looked at him?

Had he thought he was useless?

Therefore, like a solitary hero with no one to rely on, the old criminal policeman had walked alone into the darkness on his dangerous path.

Luo Wenzhou stared emptily out the window for a moment, then turned and went towards the study.

Luo Yiguo was just walking back and forth in front of the bedroom door beside the study, looking like it wanted to go in. As Luo Wenzhou passed by, he bent down and lifted its two front paws, hanging them over his arm, carrying the cat into the study. "Don't bother him."

Luo Yiguo meowed and rolled into a ball, settling down on his legs, watching as he logged into the intranet and entered the keywords "National Road 327."

Basically all the material that came up had been scanned in; this had evidently been very long ago, another old case. It was rather hard to read.

This had been a sensational business fifteen years ago—

“National Road 327” was a highway outside of Yan City, detouring around Lotus Mountain, constructed over thirty years ago. It had once been one of the major traffic arteries. Later, it had weathered many changes and gradually been superseded by the land-reclamation highway that passed through the mountain, becoming deserted. Aside from those who were going to one of the few small towns along National Road 327, very few people would deliberately avoid the mountain road to take it.

This case of serial murder had occurred along that desolate road.

The victims had all been short-haul truck drivers—short-haul truck drivers usually went on the road alone to economize, and they had to carry their belongings on their persons. They were comparatively soft targets.

Perhaps the killer had believed in folk superstition, thinking that a person who died by violence would spontaneously develop photographic abilities, recording an image of the last thing they had seen before their death. Therefore, the victims’ eyes had been smashed, their condition in death appearing especially miserable.

The body of the first murdered driver had been abandoned beside the truck, having been stabbed a dozen times, with fatal wounds on the chest. Everything he’d had on him had vanished, with not even a penny left behind. The truck’s container, meanwhile, had been missing one small-scale refrigerator. Aside from the driver, there had also been a heap of messy footprints at the scene. Analysis showed that they had likely been made by two men and one woman.

Apart from this, there had also been a suspicious bloodstain on a front wheel. Because it wasn’t human blood, it didn’t attract attention at first.

Less than two months later, there was another similar case on National Road 327.

The killers had perhaps learned from experience. Aside from the eyeballs having been smashed as before, the second victim hadn't been wildly stabbed but had died at one strike. The victim had been short and skinny; he had been crouching in front of the truck's door at his death, and there weren't many defensive wounds on him. According to conjecture, for the sake of his life and safety, he had obediently handed over his property when the knife-wielding robbers had threatened him, not expecting that the criminals would be unwilling to let him go. Entirely unresisting, he had been fatally stabbed from behind.

For the third murder, the killers' criminal methods went up another grade. This time, they had learned to play with the victim. After the victim had been killed with a single strike, they had dug out his eyes and chopped off his limbs, arranging them beside him, so savage that it was infuriating.

The local police had quickly handed the serial robbery and murder case over to Yan City's City Bureau, and the City Bureau had established a special investigation team.

Luo Wenzhou's gaze stopped on the names of the special investigation team's leads, seeing that the team leader was Yang Zhengfeng, while the deputy team leader was an unfamiliar name—Gu Zhao.

Luo Wenzhou frowned, now and then stroking the cat.

If this Gu Zhao was an elder who had worked with Lao Yang and had gone through many cases, why had no one ever mentioned him?

Luo Yiguo had only wanted to find somewhere to sleep. Settling down with difficulty on the litter box attendant's lap, it still had to bear with all this fidgeting, so it hit the litter box attendant's hand with the pads of its paws, leapt off his knees, and ran off.

Luo Wenzhou paid no attention to it, continuing to scroll down.—The special investigation team had found that in all three robberies, the looted trucks' front wheels had small quantities of animal blood on them. Thereupon the special investigation team's manpower had performed a large-scale search along the national road, focusing on areas with a high incidence of accidents where the road was narrow. As expected, near the location of the most recent murder, they had found skid marks and a dog's body.

The special investigation team suspected that the criminals had used small animals as bait, lying in ambush along pitch-black and narrow stretches of road. When the target vehicle drove by, they would suddenly throw out the dog, forcing the truck to slow down, then sending out the gang's female accomplice to nearly get run over, forcing the truck to stop and luring the victim outside.

National Road 327 wasn't a set out of *Journey to the West*; people seeing a woman on her own wouldn't be very much on their guard. As soon as the victim got out of the truck, her accomplices would come out to implement the robbery and murder.

Through informers, the special investigation team had found a peddler who captured and illegally sold stray dogs. Following this lead, they had in the end determined the killers—the principal offenders were a pair of brothers from a small town by the national road. The older brother was named Lu Guoxin, the younger brother Lu Guosheng. Their accomplice was a female delinquent, Lu Guoxin's girlfriend.

There was nothing worth saying about Lu Guoxin. He was an idle, unemployed young man with a record of imprisonment for robbery.

The younger brother Lu Guosheng, however, was comparatively special; he was a university dropout.

This Lu Guosheng had been frequently absent. Because his conduct had been poor and he had failed out of too many courses, the school had postponed his graduation and withheld his diploma. Afterwards, he'd managed to get hired as an office worker at a small transport company, then got fired because of a fight. He'd become increasingly embittered after returning home and determined to get revenge on society, easily fitting in with his scumbag big brother, plotting out this series of robberies.

Having looted the goods, the three of them spent lavishly, easy come and easy go; when the money was all spent, they started worrying about their next haul. But Lu Guosheng wasn't like the other two; he was a natural anti-social element. He wasn't interested in the pocket change the truck drivers were carrying, but in carrying out murder after murder he'd found the pleasure in it. He was the key figure in this. Of the other two, one was a thug, and the other was bait, attendants at his beck and call.

The police quickly arrested Lu Guoxin and his girlfriend, but Lu Guosheng, the most dangerous one among them, had fled and vanished off the face of the earth.

Luo Wenzhou input the full name "Lu Guosheng" and found that his wanted notice had yet to be removed. Fifteen years had passed, and he still hadn't been caught!

In a society where even a drug-user would be reported by their neighbors, how could a vicious wanted criminal hide for fifteen years?

Unless he had run to some uninhabited place and was living as a hermit... But could a person like Lu Guosheng really have endured

the loneliness and the desire to harm?

Luo Wenzhou rubbed the center of his brow, lit another cigarette, and went through the other things in the kraft-paper folder.

The first page in the folder was a photograph—Luo Wenzhou had seen it countless times in Director Lu’s office, but Director Lu had arranged this group picture so that one person was hidden by the frame; this time, he was finally seeing it in full.

The fifth person was standing in a corner with Yang Zhengfeng pulling his elbow. He didn’t seem very comfortable with the camera. His posture was rather reserved, and his wide grin looked somewhat forced.

Gu Zhao... Was this person Gu Zhao?

Luo Wenzhou tapped twice on the keyboard, searching for “Gu Zhao,” but there was very little information, only a sketchy disciplinary report. Luo Wenzhou read through the disciplinary report a few times over, seeing wording like “serious breach of discipline” and “illegal activity.” There were no clues as to what this person had actually done.

Aside from the letter for Shiniang and the old photograph, the kraft-paper folder also contained a stack of candid photographs that had come from who knew where.

There were men and women, young and old. They seemed no different from ordinary city residents. Luo Wenzhou thought about it, then scrolled through the wanted notices. In less than half an hour, he had found quite a few people matching the photographs in the internal network’s database; without exception, they were all escaped criminals.

Just then, the door of the study creaked open, suddenly breaking off Luo Wenzhou's train of thought. Without looking up, he scolded, "Luo Yiguo, how annoying are you!"

Then the power cable at his feet moved. Luo Wenzhou looked down and saw Luo Yiguo, fangs bared, attacking the power cable; the black cord was shiny with saliva... So who was at the door?

Luo Wenzhou immediately looked at the door, finding Fei Du leaning against the door frame, looking at him.

"I went out to pour myself a glass of water," said Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou shivered, subconsciously closing the page he was looking at, then, flustered, stuffed Lao Yang's folder in a drawer. He stood up. "I...I'll pour it for you."

Luo Wenzhou only came around after pouring the water—Fei Du was a grown-up, and he had arms and legs; why did he need someone else to pour a glass of water for him? And why had Luo Wenzhou, going online in the middle of the night, acted like he'd been caught committing adultery?

Fei Du silently took the glass from his hands, brushing Luo Wenzhou's fingertips. He suddenly thought, "Me staying here is actually inconvenient for him, too."

He had to get up in the middle of the night and hide in the study when he wanted to look at something in his own home.

Hiding like this under the same roof was a strain on both of them. Why was this necessary?

Fei Du looked down, considering these words, thinking over and over of how to bring it up, but when he'd finished drinking the water, he still couldn't say anything.

He was like a traveller walking through a desert, his whole body parched, and Luo Wenzhou and his little house were like a half-filled bottle of water dropping out of the heavens. Even if it contained arsenic, even if cold intellect was prying his fingers open one by one...he still couldn't bear to let go.

The two of them remained in mutual silence for a moment. Then Luo Wenzhou suddenly spoke. "I'm investigating the truth behind my shifu's death. A new lead has just turned up."

Fei Du hadn't expected him to reveal this; he was startled.

"There's too much involved. The fewer people know, the better," Luo Wenzhou said, looking directly at him. "I'm not eliminating the possibility that this may have to do with you. There are many things I haven't cleared up right now, so I have no way to assess whether or how much I can tell you, so you'll have to give me a few days.—I've been frank up to this point. Does that work for you?"

Fei Du had never seen such a clear analysis of secrecy and candor. He stared blankly for a while, then subconsciously nodded. "That works."

Luo Wenzhou relaxed. Watching Fei Du slowly drink the water, he'd suddenly had a premonition that if he didn't say something, events would happen that he was unwilling to see.

He put an arm around Fei Du's shoulders. "Now you'd better..."

Without any warning, Fei Du pulled his wrist, pushing him. Luo Wenzhou's balance faltered, and he reeled back against the arm of the couch.

Fei Du pressed him against the couch with his knees, tilting his head to look at him. Suddenly, he smiled. "Although, shixiong, you can't expect to get rid of me using only your words?"

CHAPTER 96 - Verhovensky VI

Luo Wenzhou marveled at Fei Du's godlike ability to change his mood, helplessly reaching out to prop himself against the back of the couch. "You..."

Fei Du quickly searched him, first removing the hateful handcuffs, then taking half a second to consider whether he should retain them for his own use. Then he wisely abandoned the thought—he didn't have Mr. Policeman's professional familiarity and could easily end up hoist with his own petard.—Thereupon he raised his hand and threw the handcuffs into the dining room.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Wisdom grows out of experience. Very good, the child would be able to hold his own out in the world.

Luo Wenzhou carefully held his waist, sighing. "Don't you know you aren't supposed to do strenuous exercise now?"

"It doesn't have to be strenuous. Don't you like it a little more gentle?" Fei Du pushed a knee between his legs. His hands, already cold after having left the covers not long ago, slid under Luo Wenzhou's clothes, so cold it made him give a start. Fei Du kissed him. Quietly, as though raving in his sleep, he said, "You're going to like it. Trust in my technique."

Luo Wenzhou looked at Fei Du in some surprise. "Wait a minute, what did you say?"

You may have misunderstood something...

Fei Du met his gaze, two inverted images reflected in his eyes, as if they had encircled Luo Wenzhou entirely, refracting layer after layer

of light, unbelievably dazzling.

Then he smiled at Luo Wenzhou. “Ge.”

Luo Wenzhou couldn't resist sucking in a breath. His scalp went numb, and there was an instantaneous change in his body.

Of course Fei Du felt it. Pursuing his advantage, he pressed lower and lower on his back. “I want you.”

This had originally been just a casual line of flirtation, but the instant he said it, it raised a mighty uproar in Fei Du's heart, as if an uninvited spring breeze had ruptured a vast field of snow, creating something out of nothing, sweeping everything away, the enormous echoes surging through his heart, quivering endlessly.

As if he'd inadvertently spat up a bloody piece of his true heart.

Fei Du involuntarily closed his eyes, almost piously finding Luo Wenzhou's somewhat dry lips, repeating the words in his mind.

“I want you,” he thought.

All his life, he'd constantly dodged, constantly struggled, and constantly broken away; there had never been any person or thing he'd been reluctant to leave.

This was the first time he had been seized by a strange longing, invisible waves rising in his calm chest, submerging his keen senses.

Fei Du even temporarily forgot all his routines and techniques, his mouth full of honeyed words growing silent; he could only follow his instincts in drawing near the quarry he seemed to have been pursuing for ages.

Luo Wenzhou had endured his seductions time after time, thinking he was about to become a great personage who had broken free of his vulgar urges and attain a textbook level of “incorruptible by riches or rank, unbending before the powerful.”

He hadn’t expected that on the eve of victory, the enemy’s offensive would ascend a grade out of nowhere.

He had no time to work out what was different, his iron will crumbling at this “sugar-coated bullet.”—The final bits of his intellect were only sufficient to give a hard-pressed cry, reminding him, “The couch is too hard, it’s easy to get hurt. Go back to the bedroom, don’t forget to lock the door.”

Then his long-winded “intellect” was abandoned in the unfortunate living room along with his shirt.

“Say something if I hurt you, and tell me if you can’t take it, all right?” Luo Wenzhou spoke into Fei Du’s ear, his breathing rapid. Fei Du’s hair was stark black against the snow white pillowcase; Luo Wenzhou could only maintain a roughly human appearance by gritting his teeth. “I know you like to torture yourself, but I don’t like that. I don’t like you being in pain.”

Fei Du didn’t have the attention to spare to consider the meaning behind his words, because he was only now finding out that he and Luo Wenzhou perhaps had different views on certain subjects.

“No.” Fei Du gave a dry laugh. “Wait a minute...”

Unfortunately, it was already too late.

Luo Wenzhou caressed the somewhat protruding bone of Fei Du’s wrist and pressed it against the pillow. He licked his own canine tooth and began to interrogate him. “Who was it that told you I like to bottom?”

Just out of the hospital, only Fei Du's self-awareness was functioning well. Now, the weak function of his heart and lungs was revealed. He was almost breathless. As a well-known "defender of ladies," while he was in an awkward position, he still didn't particularly want to give up the name. So he was silent.

Luo Wenzhou was amazed. "They've gotten you into this mess, and you're still restraining yourself?"

Fei Du thought about it and saw the sense in this. He thereupon came to a rapid decision. "Lang Qiao."

"Oh." Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly concluded his brief "interrogation" and lightly ground his teeth. "Good, very good."

He didn't know who the traitor hidden among the shadows was, but he'd caught this ingrate, at any rate.

The night was long. Luo Yiguo came to the door of the master bedroom time and time again, jumping up to pull on the handle, discovering to its surprise that the door was locked from inside. Its whiskers shook, its bean-sized brain pondering for a while, feeling that everything was very unusual today. Bored, Luo Yiguo ran a few circles, chasing its tail. Then, finally, unable to think of an explanation, it charged into its long-unused cat bed, where it stretched hugely.

Oh, yes. There was also a talkative female comrade who was perhaps going to have to eat cilantro-filled buns for breakfast tomorrow.

Fei Du thought that he'd just closed his eyes when it began to get light.

He woke when the first sliver of morning light pierced in through the crack in the curtains; only he didn't want to move.

While Luo Wenzhou had been so careful as to be somewhat annoying, it had still been rather difficult. Fei Du had been tormented half the night by his wounds intermittently acting up; in the end he'd perhaps been too tired and fallen asleep, or perhaps had simply passed out. At any rate, his wounds hurting didn't impact his sleep, so he hadn't said anything.

Fei Du turned his head and looked at Luo Wenzhou, who was wrapped around him, and let his busy thoughts go blank and roam freely for a good while. His disordered mind finally returned to its proper place and he belatedly thought, "What did he mean I like to torture myself?"

Considering it, he thought it could have been because of his hospital stay. There was no privacy in front of medical personnel, and they'd of course had to clean away the scrawling tattoo sticker. The electric shock scars would have been uncovered—so...did Luo Wenzhou think he was an intense S&M enthusiast?

Fei Du was caught between laughter and tears when Luo Wenzhou's phone, which he'd thrown at the bedside, rang.

At first Fei Du paid it no mind, but while the ringtone was about to blow off the roof, Luo Wenzhou was still sleeping like a dead dog, showing absolutely no signs of movement. Fei Du could only gently push aside the arms wrapped around him, awkwardly raising his upper body, and reach past Luo Wenzhou to get the phone. When his fingers had just reached it, Luo Wenzhou, half-asleep, pulled him back down, hugging him tighter.

This person was selectively deaf. Refusing to listen to the cry of "Ah—five rings—," he rubbed his face against Fei Du's neck, rolled over, and continued to sleep.

As a veteran problem case when it came to getting out of bed, Captain Luo could commit all manner of crimes to manage another five minutes of sleep without any shame.

Unfortunately, when he had shared a bed with the cat, Luo Yiguo had taken none of this. If he didn't get up on time to make "offerings" to it, it would jump on him from on top of the wardrobe, crashing down to make the dead rise. Luo Wenzhou had a tremendous capacity for lazing around in bed and no opportunity to put it to use. This time he'd finally gotten a chance to put his revolting behavior on display, so he absolutely had to get his fill of rolling around.

Fei Du looked at the phone's screen. "Darling, telephone."

Luo Wenzhou turned over and lay on him, unconsciously stroking Fei Du's arms for a while. Then he murkily groaned, "...answer it."

Tao Ran's first phone call had already disconnected because it hadn't been picked up for too long. He was evidently richly experienced in this matter. He quickly called a second time.

Fei Du had no way out. He could only answer. "It's me, I can't get him to wake up. I'll put the phone next to his ear, and you can make do with saying what you have to say."

"...huh? Uh... Haha." Tao Ran first babbled out some meaningless filler words. After looking around for an age, he finally found his tongue. "All right... Well... Something's happened, rather... rather urgent. Can you get him to hurry over?"

Fei Du said, "I can try."

Tao Ran gave a dry laugh. "You just got out of the hospital. Look after your health. You shouldn't...well...I mean...you know what I mean."

What Tao Ran meant was perhaps that he thought that Fei Du had stewed Luo Wenzhou in a pot and eaten him. Fei Du sighed towards the ceiling, putting the phone's speaker to Luo Wenzhou's ear.

Tao Ran didn't know whether the person on the line had changed. He just kept talking. "...Wasn't there that case a few days ago of the group of middle school students running away? No one took it seriously at first, but one of the boys died last night. Reasonably speaking, this case shouldn't have come to the City Bureau..."

Luo Wenzhou silently opened his eyes.

"The killer smashed his eyes and chopped off his limbs and put them to one side—"

Luo Wenzhou said, "Where?"

"In a back alley in the Gulou District," Tao Ran said heavily. "Captain Luo, you have to get here as soon as possible."

Luo Wenzhou got himself ready with inhuman speed. When he was running out the door, Fei Du had just finished buttoning his shirt sleeves. When he'd put on a knitted vest and hadn't yet smoothed it out, Luo Wenzhou ran back in.

Fei Du glanced at the unlocked study door, understanding. He very considerately pretended not to know. Without looking up, he asked, "Did you forget something?"

"I forgot this." Luo Wenzhou strode up in front of him. Under his stunned gaze, he bent down and kissed him fiercely, feeling up and down his body. Seeing that he really didn't look like he was in pain, he then grabbed Fei Du's hand and slapped the back of it twice, scolding, "You wretch, who told you to provoke me!"

Fei Du: "..."

Having completed this swaggering display, Luo Wenzhou looked at his watch and ran off like the wind again. The little tornado he'd brought with him took a long time to disperse.

Fei Du slowly walked to the front door, taking out the keys Luo Wenzhou had forgotten there, exchanging a helpless look with Luo Yiguo. He suddenly said to the cat, "At his age, your dad should be a little steadier."

Luo Yiguo gave a soft cry, courteously expressing, "I'll agree with anything you say, as long as you feed me."

Between one breath and the next, Fei Du's chest ached dully. He rested against the front door for a while, then closed the study door and shuffled over to open a can of cat food for Luo Yiguo.

Luo Yiguo's mood was always very stable when it had eaten and drunk its fill. It circled around Fei Du, looking for pets, making a ring of fur around his pant legs.

Fei Du watched it for a while, then finally bent down and tentatively held out a hand towards it.

When his fingertips had just touched the cat, his phone suddenly rang. Fei Du pulled back his hand as if awakening from being possessed. He pinched the bridge of his nose and resumed his cold and considering expression, picking up the phone. "Teacher Pan."

Pan Yunteng didn't waste time making small talk. He said, "If you think you can do it, then you can come back."

Fei Du smiled quietly, waiting for the rest of what he had to say.

"But remember this," Pan Yunteng said coldly. "I don't know who you are and I don't care what you want, but I'm the head of the Picture

Album Project this time. Any materials you request at the City Bureau, you need my signature and approval, or else you won't see a single word."

It seemed that after reading his paper, Teacher Pan had made inquiries about him.

Only Fei Du knew that Fei Chengyu's car crash had been reaping what he'd sowed.

To an outsider...especially to someone who knew something of the truth about the previous iteration of the Picture Album Project, he would seem like an orphan enduring in silence, devoted to investigating the "truth" behind his father's car crash.

"Of course," said Fei Du. "Wasn't it always that way?"

When Luo Wenzhou arrived, police cars had already tightly surrounded the scene.

The Gulou District was a scenic spot. There were hardly any residential neighborhoods around, and, to protect the old buildings, the nearest hotel was over five hundred meters away. Here, the day was as bustling as the night was silent.

"The body is still here. We were waiting for you to have a look before letting them take it away." Tao Ran came out to meet him. As he spoke, he looked Luo Wenzhou up and down, feeling that this Luo Wenzhou was somewhat different from the usual one. Dragged out of bed first thing in the morning, he didn't show even a trace of impatience. His mood was very steady. He was like a lion that had spent half a lifetime bristling and then turned into a big, soft cat when someone had come by to smooth its fur.

Luo Wenzhou nodded at first, then asked in confusion, "What do you keep looking at me for?"

More embarrassed than the interested parties, Tao Ran gave a dry cough and averted his gaze. To this day he still wasn't used to the entirely different relationship between the two of them.

Luo Wenzhou sighed, saying sincerely to Tao Ran, "Taotao, the young lady lives in the same building as you, you see her every day, she's interested in you—and look at you. I don't know what you get up to all day. It's been half a year. I'm worried sick about you.—If I were in your place, I figure we'd be having a shotgun wedding by now."

Tao Ran: "..."

When Luo Wenzhou had finished playing the large-tailed wolf, he got down to business, passing through the cordon and entering the scene.

This was a small alley with antique façades pressing in on both sides. The little street between them was narrow and deep. There were two big plastic trash bins at the side of the street. One of them had fallen over, just blocking the body behind it. If the sanitation workers hadn't been carefully doing their jobs, the body may not have been found for some time.

Before Luo Wenzhou had gotten close, a strong smell of blood assaulted his nose. It was almost impossible to tell what the boy's features had originally looked like. The cut-off limbs laid out next to him threw themselves into Luo Wenzhou's eyes, aligning perfectly with the pictures he'd seen last night from the National Road 327 case.

Xiao Haiyang had been taking pictures of the body. As he was photographing, he thought of something, and his movements paused. He zoned out, and was startled when Luo Wenzhou went by him, hastily standing up straight. "Captain Luo."

Luo Wenzhou responded, then looked closely at the boy's body. "Have the parents been notified?"

"Yes, they must be on the way here now," Xiao Haiyang said hurriedly. "The victim is named Feng Bin, fifteen years old, in senior middle Year 1 at Yufen Middle School. He wrote that letter online for his teachers and parents. The medical examiner just took a look and said that the fatal wound may be on the neck. There are clear defensive wounds on his hands and head. It's likely he fought with the killer before he died. We'll have to wait until they've taken him back for examination to get more concrete information."

Luo Wenzhou said, "What do they do in this child's family?"

Xiao Haiyang immediately answered, "According to the school registration materials, his father runs a small business, and his mother is a housewife. They must be fairly well-off, but he's not really rich. When his parents get here, I'll question them to find out whether they'd offended anyone in business recently."

Luo Wenzhou, perhaps deliberately, said, "Jabbing out his eyes and cutting off his limbs... Why do I think I've heard that somewhere?"

Xiao Haiyang froze. Then he gently pushed at his glasses. "Captain Luo, have you heard of the National Road 327 serial robbery and murder case?"

Luo Wenzhou looked at him.

"A case from fifteen years ago," Xiao Haiyang said. Then, like a robot, his speech rapid, he recited the facts of the National Road 327 case as though he'd learned them by heart, not one word different from the summary online. "Captain Luo, the principal offender Lu Guosheng is still on the run. Could this have to do with him?"

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes. “Fifteen years ago? You know all about what happened fifteen years ago—how old were you then?”

Xiao Haiyang said, “I read it on the intranet, and...and my memory is rather good.”

“Your memory isn’t only rather good, it must be eidetic.” Luo Wenzhou stood up, indicating that the waiting medical examiner should collect the corpse, saying to Xiao Haiyang, “Your grades must have been pretty good when you were in school. Why did you have to be a police officer? Our salaries are so low.”

Xiao Haiyang seemed to have been shut up by this question. Flustered, he avoided his gaze. After a long pause, he pulled himself together. “I...I’ve dreamed of being a police officer since I was little.”

“You also wanted to save the world?” Luo Wenzhou laughed, not asking him again. He only looked up towards the end of the street—there was an ambulance parked there.

Luo Wenzhou asked, “He’s so thoroughly dead, what did the ambulance come for?”

Xiao Haiyang let out a gentle sigh of relief. “Oh... Oh, right, Captain Luo, I just forgot to tell you, when the killer was committing the crime last night, there was an eyewitness on the scene.”

CHAPTER 97 - Verhovensky VII

“The eyewitness is called Xia Xiaonan, a girl, in the same class as Feng Bin. A handful of students left together a few days ago. We don’t know why it was just the two of them together. Perhaps they parted ways with the others.” Xiao Haiyang followed Luo Wenzhou like a point-and-speak device; if you didn’t know something, you could point him and find out. “When Feng Bin was killed last night, the girl was hiding in the garbage bin nearby. The boy may have wanted to protect her.”

As Luo Wenzhou strode towards the ambulance, he asked, “Since these students are still in the city, why haven’t they been found after all this time?”

“They got unregistered phone cards from somewhere. They’re hard to trace.” Xiao Haiyang paused, then said, “Anyway, they’re all old enough to have taken money with them when they ran away, and they left a letter. No one really thought anything could happen to them. The local police are always busy, more pressing things will sometimes take priority...”

Luo Wenzhou had also done low-level police work, so of course he understood what was going on. He waved his hand to interrupt Xiao Haiyang. “You mean these students both had their phones on them? When did the murder occur?”

Xiao Haiyang paused. “The medical examiner just had a look. The initial conjecture is that it was before midnight.”

“Before midnight.” Luo Wenzhou’s steps paused. “If there’s nothing wrong with the girl, why didn’t she call the police afterwards?”

Xia Xiaonan, the only eyewitness in this frightening dismemberment case, had not only not called the police, she’d spent half the night

squatting in the garbage bin, giving the sanitation worker who'd found her such a bad scare that he'd cracked open a fast-acting heart pill.

The fifteen-year-old girl was very slender, with a small melon seed-shaped face and delicate features, a beauty in embryo—though her current condition wasn't especially dignified. She was rancid and reeking, sitting numbly in a corner, tightly clutching a backpack in her arms, her face dreadfully white and her eyes pitch-black, like a mindless life-sized doll.

When Luo Wenzhou went over, he found that Lang Qiao and a few other female police officers were there, along with a clutch of medical personnel, standing in a circle around Xia Xiaonan. None of them dared to approach.

Luo Wenzhou appraised the strange atmosphere. "What's going on? What are you all watching?"

"Don't come over here, boss, the child may be in shock," Lang Qiao said quietly. "She doesn't react when you talk to her, and she screams if anyone comes close. Even that especially kindly-looking doctor over there can't get near her. We're waiting for the parents now to see whether we can force a tranquilizer on her."

Luo Wenzhou bent down, trying to meet the girl's line of sight from afar. Xia Xiaonan's gaze met his briefly and, seeming unable to focus, emptily brushed past.

"A good number of police stations with the assistance of the school and the parents have been searching for them for three or four days. All right, the police couldn't find them, and we let a bad guy get to them first." Lang Qiao whispered, "What do you call this?"

"Look through the security cameras nearby. This is a scenic district, there aren't many blindspots, and the killer couldn't have been

invisible—aside from that, don't let the guys be idle. Send them to ask around the convenience stores, the supermarkets, the restaurants... A group of kids runs away, they can't do without eating or drinking. Someone must have seen them." At this point, Luo Wenzhou suddenly frowned slightly, pointing to the backpack in Xia Xiaonan's arms. "Er-Lang, look, what's that on her backpack? Is it filth or blood?"

Before Lang Qiao could focus and have a close look, there was a sudden sound of sharp braking behind her, the tires letting out a sharp squeal, as if opening up a rut in the ground.

All the assembled police and doctors shuddered.

Lang Qiao turned to look and said in a whisper, "Oh no, I was afraid of this."

An exquisitely dressed middle-aged woman threw open the car door and flew out before her feet had touched the ground. Like a reed whipped around by a strong wind, she swayed for a few steps, then without warning fell to the ground, getting blood over half her body. Her face terrified, she grabbed the police officer who'd rushed over to help her up, nearly pulling his pants off. "Where's my...my son? Where's my Binbin?"

"That seems to be the victim Feng Bin's mother," said Lang Qiao quietly.

"Tell the medical examiners to hurry up and get the body in a body bag." Luo Wenzhou pushed her lightly and said, "Don't let her see. Have her identify the face and then quickly take it away. She can look when we've finished investigating and the body's been sewn back together."

But it was too late.

Feng Bin's mother was a thin and frail middle-aged woman, without any flesh on her body, but when she saw the medical examiners go into the little alley, she instantly leapt up and with extraordinary strength pushed away her husband and the police officer trying to hold her back, needing to rush forward and see.

She took one look that tore apart the rest of her life.

Not making a sound, the woman sat down on the ground. The medical personnel who had been watching Xia Xiaonan had to rush up in a body to save her. She was carried away unconscious. As soon as she opened her eyes, Feng Bin's mother saw Xia Xiaonan curled up in a corner and shuddered violently, immediately reviving, crawling over to grab her. "Student, you know something, right? Do you know who killed my Binbin?"

With Feng Bin's mother pulling at her jacket, Xia Xiaonan's whole body spasmed, and she let out an inhuman-sounding howl.

For a time, the sounds of crying and wailing, consolation, questionings, and the teenaged girl's high-decibel, never-ending shriek bombarded everyone's ears, turning the scene into an unbearable mess.

Luo Wenzhou's head swelled at the noise, and he put his hands over his ears, turning to look at the dim and antiquated little alley—had the killer really been Lu Guosheng from fifteen years before? If it really had been him, how should they account for it to the parents? Tell them that a specter who'd roamed freely for fifteen years without the police having any hint of him had killed their son?

Why would Lu Guosheng suddenly show himself? Did he have no money? And why would he fix on a middle school student? Was his strength failing after fifteen years? Having no helpers with him, did he lack the confidence to attack an adult?

Also, the victim Feng Bin's body had been covered with his own school jacket, as if the killer had been worried he'd be cold. What did that indicate? Had the killer felt remorse and repentance after committing the crime? But if he really did still have this last remaining spark of human feeling, could he have dismembered an underage boy and smashed his eyes?

Why?

Feng Bin's father falteringly backed up to the side of the road. He was suddenly powerless to take care of his wife's feelings. He forced himself to maintain his calm. He had a businessman's sociable disposition; when Luo Wenzhou looked over at him, he even nodded and seemed to be trying to smile, but the attempt failed.

"I've been too busy at work. I might not see him even a couple of times a month, and I sent him to a boarding school, as if he were a burden I had no place for." His father said, "Was I wrong?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer.

As Feng Bin's father spoke, his spine folded up, and he squatted down, curling into a ball, slowly covering his face.

"Have Xia Xiaonan's parents been notified?" Luo Wenzhou pinched the bridge of his nose, turning to ask his subordinates, "Where are they? Why aren't they here yet? When can we get the girl to talk?"

On the road, which was slowly coming to life, the first hints of traffic showed up. Suddenly, a motor-powered wheelchair came upstream against the current, traveling towards them. The old man in the chair must have thought this means of transportation was too slow. He was stretching out his neck, looking up ahead like an elderly tortoise. The wheelchair went over a pothole and he overbalanced, falling out of the motor-powered wheelchair.

Tao Ran was nearby. Witnessing this small-scale traffic accident, he ran over to help the old man up. “My goodness, sir, why did you come over here riding that thing? Are you all right? The road is closed up ahead, you can’t...”

The old man struggled, grabbing Tao Ran’s wrist, saying indistinctly, “Houlán...”

Tao Ran stared. “What?”

The old man looked at him mournfully, his lips shaking.

“Xì...Xì Ào...nán!”

“Xia Xiaonan’s parents are both dead. There’s only her grandfather. He had a stroke a few years ago, with considerable after-effects. His mind is clear, but it’s hard for him to move around, and no one can understand him clearly when he speaks.” By the time they got back to the City Bureau from the crime scene, it was already noon. Having used an extraordinary degree of Chinese listening comprehension, Tao Ran had managed to communicate with Xia Xiaonan’s grandfather. He sighed. “It’s too pitiful. It would have been better if he’d just lost his mind altogether.”

Luo Wenzhou asked, “How could she attend a boarding school with a family background like that?”

“Her family is very poor, and her grandfather’s medical fees couldn’t all be covered by insurance. Yufen was recruiting some good students for prestige, being very generous over school fees. And the old man is rather stubborn. He won’t let anyone treat him like an invalid. He ordinarily does all the household chores himself, not letting anyone take care of him.”

“The others are one thing,” one of the criminal policemen next to him said, “but I really can’t understand how a girl like Xia Xiaonan could

run away—I just looked it up, and this girl’s senior middle school entrance exam scores were in the top fifty for the whole city. As long as she kept up her grades, Yufen would give her 20,000 yuan in scholarship. And the teachers at the school say her temperament is introverted, but she’s particularly sensible. She’s never made anyone worry about her studies. Would she run away from school because she was lonely and bored? Could she be hard-hearted enough to cast aside her grandfather? If so, the girl really has no conscience.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t respond. He pulled up the letter Feng Bin had left behind on his phone. This thing had gotten quite popular online. The news of Feng Bin’s murder hadn’t gotten out yet; people were still attacking the school system and the Chinese style of parenting.

Luo Wenzhou thought about it, then sent Fei Du a link to the letter. When he’d sent it, someone put their head in at the door. “Captain Luo, Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan’s homeroom teacher is here!”

Fei Du’s phone buzzed quietly, notifying him that he had a new message. His phone was lying under something, and he didn’t hear it at first.

Assistant Miao passed over a pen for him to sign with and looked down at Luo Yiguo, arrogantly strutting around next to her. She really wanted to play with the cat while Fei Du was reading the document, so she asked, “President Fei, does the kitty scratch?”

Fei Du said, “Yes.”

Assistant Miao: “...”

She quietly drew back her outstretched hand and looked all around the simply-furnished, modern-styled apartment. “Are you...living here now?”

Fei Du gently pushed at his glasses, looking up at her.

“Oh...” Assistant Miao hesitated, then very tactfully said, “It feels very different from your office. It doesn’t seem to be the same style.”

Fei Du smiled noncommittally. Compared to his office, the overwhelming majority of human residences on earth were as crude and impoverished as a public toilet, but that wasn’t his style at all. Just then, he came upon a framework agreement. Fei Du skimmed it; there was nothing wrong with the contents, but there was a particular scent on the pages. He paused, then picked it up and smelled it—mint, sweet basil leaves...and a trace of berry scent mixed in.

Fei Du raised his eyelids and looked at Assistant Miao. Assistant Miao gave him a wry smile. President Fei’s indiscriminate appreciation for beauty was no secret; even Zhang Donglai knew that he was partial towards externally graceful and reserved but internally stimulating people and things. Often people would use this knowledge to bad ends.

Fei Du put down the contract, got out a moist towelette, and wiped his hands. “Since when has our company been so particular that even our printer paper needs to be specially made? What’s our special relationship with the Saudi royal family?”

Assistant Miao quietly explained, “It’s President Su’s new assistant.”

“Didn’t President Su also invite me to dinner?” Fei Du laughed silently, but his expression was rather cold. “Lao Su worked for my father for over a decade, so he thinks he’s an elder statesman now and can act as prince-regent.”

Assistant Miao didn’t dare to respond—after Fei Du had come to power, nearly all of old President Fei’s trusted aides had been dispersed. The better ones had been transferred elsewhere to enjoy their retirement, the worst ones had been sent directly to eat prison

food on the strength of some wrongdoing, and there were others who had voluntarily resigned for all kinds of unexpected reasons. Now Su Cheng was the only elder statesman remaining, and he was the one with the most mediocre natural endowments.

“Though I like his kind of self-important idiot—when you get back, tell him that I have no time. At his age, he should wipe his own ass clean before trying anything else. Showing off these vulgar tactics is beneath his dignity. If someone wants to see me, they can come see me themselves. I don’t especially like these roundabout methods.” At this point, Fei Du’s tone changed, and he blinked at Assistant Miao, his voice turning mild. “Why don’t you guys block these things for me? Aren’t I your great leader? What, I haven’t been back in so long, you all don’t love me anymore?”

Assistant Miao had long been accustomed to this inconstancy of his, suddenly turning hostile while also seeming to be joking. Without turning a hair, she asked curiously, “Who is it that wants President Su to recommend them to you and is making him do it in such an indirect way?”

“Some insignificant people.” Fei Du quickly finished signing the remaining documents and took Assistant Miao to the door. Before she left, he remembered something, saying, “Oh, right, haven’t food prices risen lately? Tell HR to raise everyone’s standard lunch stipend by thirty percent. You can only have the energy to work if you eat well.”

The boss wanted to hand out money! Assistant Miao had absolutely no objection to this. She gave a crisp affirmative; even her footsteps became more lively. “President Fei, how do you know that food prices have risen?”

Because he’d seen a price tag while chopping vegetables and asked a superfluous question, receiving a harangue from a certain person about “not knowing the bitterness of the mortal world.”

Fei Du didn't answer, using the tip of his foot to push Luo Yiguo back into the room. Smiling brightly, he shook hands with Assistant Miao and bid her farewell.

Fei Du opened the window to disperse the lingering smell of perfume.

Those people were too cautious. All these years, they'd never shown a trace of themselves before him. But during the Zhou Clan case, they'd been forced to break off their arm for survival, losing Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao, two of their major bankrollers. Now they must be struggling, needing urgently to dig up a new source of capital.

It seemed that his conduct over the last few years, his confusing reputation, his externally lax but internally strict methods, his displays of wanting to pull out Fei Chengyu's respirator at the seaside sanatorium, and his abandoning his enormous company and exhausting his resources to get involved in the new iteration of the Picture Album Project...all of this had finally laid the slow groundwork, forcing *those people* to start attempting to get in touch with him.

Although...

Fei Du pulled his phone out from under the dining table, planning to open the reading program's app—there was another force faintly discernible in all this; it even seemed to have unintentionally helped him. He'd tried again and again to investigate it, without result; who could it be?

Just then, he saw the link and the attached message that Luo Wenzhou had sent him.

Luo Wenzhou said: "There's something wrong with this letter. Can you take a look at it for me?"

There was a forty-something female teacher accompanied by a male student in the City Bureau's reception room, chatting with the officer responsible for receiving visitors. These were Feng Bin's homeroom teacher and class monitor.

Luo Wenzhou listened from the door for a while, glancing at the student's clothes. The boy had his school jacket hanging over the crook of his arm. Standing to one side, he seemed nothing like his awkwardly developing downy-headed peers. Seeing Luo Wenzhou at the door, he gave him an urbane smile, and Luo Wenzhou somehow thought of the teenage Fei Du. Looking closer, he found that the brand of the student's shirt was particularly familiar—he'd seen more than one of these when he was arranging the wardrobe for Fei Du. He had no idea how the name of the brand was meant to be read.

A little whelp wearing such an expensive piece of clothing?

Luo Wenzhou frowned; Yufen Middle School really was a rich kids' club.

“Boss.” Lang Qiao quickly walked over and quietly said into his ear, “The camera at the intersection caught the killer.”

Luo Wenzhou turned his head at once.

“I didn't know, so I asked some elders to have a look. It seems that... it really was that Lu Guosheng.”

CHAPTER 98 - Verhovensky VIII

“The boy Feng Bin was at a crossroads near the Drum Tower. He waited there about five minutes, and then Xia Xiaonan came.” In the Criminal Investigation Team’s little conference room, Lang Qiao opened a segment of security camera footage taken from the Gulou District, near the place where the crime had occurred.

“Just the two of them? Where are the others?” Luo Wenzhou came close to watch the security camera footage. “Wait, pause it, look at what Feng Bin has in his hand.”

Lang Qiao paused the recording and enlarged a part of it. Though it was night and there were few sources of light, through the high-definition camera, you could still clearly that Feng Bin was holding a plastic bag with a supermarket logo on it, and there were some snacks and drinks inside.

They had all been adolescents; they knew at a glance what was going on with these two—the boy had found an excuse to leave first and waited for the girl at a prearranged spot so the two of them could get away from their classmates’ lines of sight without anyone being the wiser and secretly be alone for a while. These half-grown teenagers had gotten together to carry on a half-understood romance; not having as many “important subjects” to rush towards as adults, they would often still have a touch of childhood innocence, like these funny and embarrassing snacks and Western fast foods.

So this was why they had left the others.

“BD Supermarket... I think I remember that’s a chain. Go determine how many of them there are in the Gulou District and ask around at each one. The other children are likely nearby.” Luo Wenzhou turned his head to deliver orders, then said curiously, “Couldn’t they have

found a better place for their date in the middle of the night? Why did they have to sneak into the Drum Tower?”

Lang Qiao rolled eyes like ping-pong balls towards him. “Boss, are you a local?”

Luo Wenzhou was perplexed.

“There’s a little scenic spot behind the Drum Tower called Lovers’ Mirror. It’s actually just a big polished stone. Legend says that if you stand in front of Lovers’ Mirror, the reflection will rise to heaven. The goddess’s seventh daughter saw Dong Yong in that mirror and fell in love at first sight. The words ‘Celestial Beings Bestow Agreement’ are printed beside it. When lovers stand in front of Lovers’ Mirror, the gods bear witness and they’ll be together their whole lives.”

Hearing this rumor, which sounded like the kind of insincere propaganda handed out to tourists, Luo Wenzhou snorted derisively. “The Bureau of Civil Affairs isn’t enough for you people? You need the Jade Emperor to grant you a certificate, too? What, do you get to buy a house if you collect seven certificates?”

These brazen heterosexuals. Truly, they were never satisfied.

Lang Qiao: “...”

She really was at a loss to understand how a pure and romantic beautiful young girl like her had no boyfriend, but there was actually a man who was willing to take a bit of goods like Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou changed the subject. “The Drum Tower is a tourist attraction. They must clear people away when they close up in the evening. So did he get his eye on them when they snuck in?”

“No.” Lang Qiao had to get down to business along with him. “The killer started following them at the intersection. Watch—”

She pressed “play” again; the camera at the intersection quietly spread out its line of sight, seeing off the boy and girl who didn’t even dare to hold hands.

The tranquil night was silent for a moment. Then a man suddenly appeared on camera.

Seeing him on the screen, Luo Wenzhou was startled—because this killer wasn’t anything like the weakling who only dared to attack children that he’d imagined.

At a visual estimate, this person was at least a meter seventy-five tall, with a physique that could be described as healthy and strong. He was no older than forty. There was a cigarette in his mouth when he casually strolled over from the corner to follow Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan at a moderate distance.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Is there a shot of his face?”

“There is. Another camera caught it. I’ve printed these out.” Lang Qiao handed out some printed screenshots to the colleagues around her.

Luo Wenzhou took one look and was sure that this was without a doubt Lu Guosheng. He’d closely examined the wanted poster from the National Road 327 case only last night; the principal offender’s face had made a rather strong impression on him.

Lu Guosheng’s eyes weren’t quite the same size; when he looked straight ahead, his eyeballs weren’t quite aligned. His cheeks were gaunt, his chin long, his features deeply-carved. The left corner of his mouth was a little crooked. The man in the screenshot was thirty-eight or thirty-nine; there were some signs of the passage of time on his face, but the outlines of his features looked the same as before. The changes were small.

You could see that Lu Guosheng had been living comfortably these last fifteen years as a wanted criminal. He hadn't aged much.

Before Luo Wenzhou could speak, Xiao Haiyang was already saying positively, "Yes, that's Lu Guosheng!"

This time, even Lang Qiao gave him a strange look.

Luo Wenzhou nodded. "All right, Xiao Qiao. Keep talking."

"The killer followed them to the Drum Tower tourist attraction. To get in without buying a ticket, you have to take the side door. There are some narrow alleys in between. You've seen the place, it's rather out-of-the-way, and it all looks about the same. Very complicated. The killer struck there—you can watch the next part, I don't want to watch it a second time."

Saying so, she put on the next segment of film, turned, and left.

This segment of security camera footage came from a camera on the protective hip-and-gable roof of the Drum Tower. The shot was rather distant. In a little intersection at the edge of the frame, the two teenagers suddenly appeared, fleeing in confusion. There was none of the sweet and peaceful handholding atmosphere left. The boy's back was covered in blood. The girl stumbled as he pulled her, falling to the ground. Though there was no sound in the video, it still clutched at the heart.

The warm moonlight suddenly took on a raw, bloody edge. The teenagers' affectionate but immature emotions had been disrupted by a suddenly appearing evildoer, a turn of events out of a nightmare.

Enduring fear and pain, Feng Bin threw the items he was holding one by one at the human-shaped monster; then, pulling the beloved girl, he ran madly, fleeing by any path.

They called for help as they ran, but the tourist attraction that had been cleared of the public was deserted. Perhaps their luck was bad and there was no one to hear, or perhaps the patrolmen had heard the cries for help and were afraid of bringing trouble on themselves, hiding further away instead of going over to help.

The human-shaped monster's footsteps were already right behind them; as they cried out to heaven and earth in the empty streets, neither heaven nor earth answered.

The Drum Tower, full of man-made romance, cast down its cold gaze. At this critical juncture, Feng Bin in his panic lost his way in the intricate little alleys. The two of them, turning this way and that, circled back to where they'd started from.

Running right into the knife-wielding killer!

Everyone in the conference room broke out in cold sweat as they watched this scene. Someone even jumped up and hit the corner of the table.

Holding on to Xia Xiaonan, Feng Bin turned and ran. He saw a guard booth not far off. As if seeing the light of dawn, the boy ran desperately towards it, hitting the window of the booth.

Somebody, anybody, come help them...

But his last hope very soon turned to hopelessness—there was no one in the guard booth.

The criminal was now in front of them, the bloody knife less than fifty meters away. Xia Xiaonan's face was as pale as death with fright; Feng Bin, in his panic, chose the worst possible path.

The alley where the murder had happened was a dead end street!

What they found after they ran into the little alley wasn't caught on camera.

About half an hour later, Lu Guosheng left the little alley. He took off his jacket, put it on inside-out to cover up the bloodstains, and very calmly walked away.

There was dead silence in the conference room.

Lang Qiao had her back to the screen. "Have you finished?"

Someone whispered, "I'm going to throw up. This is a horror film."

"So Lu Guosheng chased two children into a dead end street, then killed one and left the other behind. Why?" Luo Wenzhou spoke first to break the strange atmosphere. "We saw the scene of the crime. Those two garbage bins were the only place where a person could hide. The children were scared out of their wits and made two fatal mistakes; running into the dead end street was one of them. The girl had no way out; hiding in the garbage bin was the only thing she could do—think about it, if you were the killer in that situation, wouldn't you open up the lids of the garbage bins to have a look?"

Luo Wenzhou's gaze went around the conference room. "Unless the girl can turn invisible, then there's something wrong with Lu Guosheng's head—was Xia Xiaonan injured?"

"No," said Lang Qiao, "I just confirmed it with the hospital. Aside from when she fell herself, there are no other evident wounds on her, and she wasn't sexually assaulted. Also, the stains on her backpack really are blood. They're extracting the DNA for comparison now, but they don't have a result yet."

Luo Wenzhou asked, "Were Xia Xiaolan's wallet, phone, and other valuables in her backpack?"

Lang Qiao stared. “No. You mean...”

Tao Ran put in a word. “In the National Road 327 case, Lu Guosheng snatched every penny he could, leaving the victims with nothing.”

Lang Qiao frowned, feeling that she hadn’t been conscientious enough about her work. Otherwise, why would everyone else be as familiar with the details of this so-called National Road 327 case as though enumerating their family treasures, while she didn’t know anything?

“Also, when Feng Bin was calling for help on the way, where had the patrolmen and on-duty personnel at the tourist attraction gone?” Luo Wenzhou said. “Were they all conveniently not at their posts, or had they talked it over and decided not to get involved in others’ misfortunes? Contact the tourist attraction and summon everyone on the night shift.”

In a case where the suspect and his means were this evident at a glance, it seemed that the only thing left to do was to put out another wanted notice for Lu Guosheng. But in the midst of such simple cause and effect, there was a host of questionable points, as if the case was hidden in the Drum Tower’s drizzling night mist.

Luo Wenzhou lit a cigarette at the end of the corridor. Then, suddenly seeming to sense something, he turned to look at the busy Criminal Investigation Team. Lao Yang’s words were caught like a fishbone in his throat—“There are people there who have changed.”

Luo Wenzhou got out his phone and dialed the City Bureau’s HR department. “Hello, Director Li, it’s Xiao Luo from the Criminal Investigation Team... Oh, no, I haven’t been working hard.—Well, my superior wants me to write an evaluation for a new colleague... Who knows what’s gotten into Lao Lu now? Could you send me the Criminal Investigation Team’s new child’s CV and political

examination materials? Thank you, thank you, I know, another day I'll treat you to a meal..."

Because the City Bureau had gotten involved, the pace of the investigation went from that of an ox pulling a cart to that of the Space Age.

Before evening that day, the brats no one had found a trace of for the better part of a week were all brought back—the police had found the BD Supermarket where Feng Bin had bought snacks, discovered on the supermarket's security cameras that the runaway students had all gone through there to buy stuff more than once, and guessed that they had to be staying nearby.

Following a brief search in a radius around the supermarket, all of them were found at a convenience hotel and brought back—one of the students, perhaps while chasing celebrities, had gotten to know the hotel's lobby manager and gotten them in through the back door without registering.

The four students wiltingly stood lined up against the wall in the reception room, explaining in front of their homeroom teacher and the police why they'd wanted to run away—they said that there was too much stress at school and Christmas was coming up, so they'd gone out together to relax.

Their parents, burning with impatience, were exasperated when they heard this disgraceful reason, wanting nothing better than to slap these brats until they turned into spinning tops.

At the same time, the Drum Tower's employees were being interrogated by turns, turning up something fishy. The tourist attraction's security department, from the person in charge down to the patrolmen, had long-standing problems. They were all remiss in their duties; it was common practice among them to get together to

gamble during the night shift. Now that something had happened, this finally came out.

At this point, aside from the murderer Lu Guosheng still being on the loose and the shocked girl still being in a stupor in the hospital, this whole case seemed to have been uncovered.

The students who had been brought back were taken away by their parents and teacher one after another. One of the boys was roughly pulled forward by his mother, with his enraged father's handprint on his face, swollen to twice its original size. His physiological tears were flowing non-stop. In this sorry state, he still kept turning his head, staring abjectly towards the City Bureau.

Luo Wenzhou, who was seeing them to the gate, was thoughtful for a moment, then called him to a halt. "Student, wait a moment."

The boy's parents stopped, hurriedly forcing down their anger, politely asking, "Is there something else, Comrade Police Officer?"

Luo Wenzhou walked over and considered the boy. He was a fair-skinned teenager, slightly fat, crying as he walked, looking a little younger than the other students who in reality were his peers. He seemed to be somewhat introverted. As soon as he saw Luo Wenzhou approach, he lowered his head uncomfortably.

Luo Wenzhou said, "What's your name?"

The boy quietly stammered, "Zhang Yifan."

Luo Wenzhou kept his voice as gentle as possible, asking, "Is there something you'd like to say to me?"

The boy's undeveloped larynx moved gently, the gazes of his teacher and his classmates at once falling on him. Luo Wenzhou frowned

suddenly; those silent gazes made him uncomfortable for some reason.

Zhang Yifan's father couldn't stand his son's mincing manners. He raised a hand like a bear's paw, firmly slapping the boy's back. "If there is, then say it, and if there isn't, then say there isn't. Does it take so much effort to say a few words? Just looking at you makes me angry!"

The boy's face was panicked, like a person with social anxiety forced to talk to a powerful stranger. He began to cry again at once, blurting out, "There's...there's nothing."

Luo Wenzhou wanted to follow up when the boy buried his face against his mother's shoulder, walking away as quickly as though he were escaping.

Lang Qiao stretched, walking over. "Boss, this matter seems to have been resolved for now. When are we writing our report?"

"Don't be in such a hurry." Luo Wenzhou watched the boy leave hurriedly, then hung his jacket over his arm. "I'm going to go get an expert opinion first."

Lang Qiao stared. Before she could work out who the "expert" was, Luo Wenzhou asked her with a genial expression, "Xiao Qiao'er, what do you want for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Buns!" Lang Qiao didn't have a sliver of suspicion of his ill intent, gladly saying, "Thank you, imperial father!"

Luo Wenzhou looked at her with a fake smile and walked away.

CHAPTER 99 - Verhovensky IX

Luo Wenzhou had been in a hurry when he'd left that morning and taken a taxi to the Gulou District. When he walked out of the City Bureau's gates, an unoccupied taxi just happened to be driving by.

His fingers, stuck in his pocket, twitched, but somehow he didn't reach out to flag it down. Instead, he waited half a minute for the light to change, then crossed to the parking lot across the street.

When his steps fell on the evenly laid out crosswalk, Luo Wenzhou's gaze had already become a scanner, inspecting the parking lot from east to west.

Halfway through his inspection, this self-styled senior official began to ridicule himself—the human heart was weak; if it had one thing, it always wanted another. Fei Du had been seized by a whim to pick him up once, and the second time, he was scrambling for everything he could get, looking out for Fei Du to come again.

But what if he didn't come?

If he didn't come...that didn't mean anything.

Luo Wenzhou had arms and legs; he was half as tall as a house standing up, in excellent health with a healthy appetite. He could take down a whole class full of delinquents barehanded. It was a piddling two or three kilometers to his house; jogging there and back wouldn't exhaust him. Hoping for someone to come pick him up was really shameless.

After all, Fei Du had never said he was going to pick him up after work.

He hadn't even clearly indicated what was happening between the two of them.

Luo Wenzhou was human; sometimes a human couldn't avoid being covetous, couldn't avoid being endlessly greedy.

In the beginning Fei Du had been like a dangerous plant emitting a rare perfume, indiscriminately attracting everyone who passed by. The more Luo Wenzhou's intellect had flashed warning signals, the more attracted he had been. All the so-called "seductive" people and things on earth were probably like this—you knew they were poisonous, but you wanted to go take poison.

Then had come the cataclysm of the bomb and nearly parting forever; like an invisible dark hand, it had pushed him into the swamp called "Fei Du." He wanted to love him, wanted to take care of him, wanted to slowly unwrap his convoluted, unknowable heart like opening a beautifully wrapped package. Luo Wenzhou had started on a path with his one-sided declaration, had made his preparations for a long and arduous journey, carrying a traveling bag of patience on his back.

But he'd had him by his side only a few days when that bastard had once again thrown him off his proper pace. It was as if he'd been bewitched.

The sudden physical intimacy had made him throw away all his defenses, filling his heart with deep-rooted desires. It had also pushed him onto a roller coaster. All the things he'd originally planned to take his time on had at once become things he was itching with impatience to get on with.

Luo Wenzhou was impatient to hear Fei Du say what he'd been thinking when the bomb on that fatal cold chain truck had gone off, and why he'd grabbed him.

He was impatient to open up Fei Du's maze-like chest and see his own progress, see how far he'd gone. Impatient to hear a few sentences of truth come out of his mouth, to hear him own up to all the facts.

But this was wrong. Luo Wenzhou understood that.

Dealing with a bad guy required quick wits, bravery, and strength. Dealing with Fei Du, however, required huge amounts of patience and perseverance.

Performing this almost harsh self-reflection, Luo Wenzhou's expectations lowered with every step he took over the crosswalk. When he'd crossed the ten-meter wide road, he'd managed to force his heart, floating in midair, back down to the ground. Luo Wenzhou considered the endurance of that reinforced glass heart, making a surefire mental preparation—he thought, even if he went home now and found that Fei Du had run off after sleeping with him, he could very well accept that as a normal phenomenon.

As for why he'd let that empty taxi go by at the door and insisted on crossing the road...

Luo Wenzhou found himself a reason. He'd just been planning to cross the road and buy a bag of roasted chestnuts.

Thinking this, his gaze burned as it fell on the little roasted chestnut cart, as if he wanted to swallow the peddler's whole pot in one go... Then, the next instant, Luo Wenzhou saw his own car behind the little stand.

Fei Du had the heating on this time, and he'd also opened the car's window. His elbow was sticking out the window. He was thinking about something. From his profile, he seemed to be staring fixedly at the roasted chestnuts.

Luo Wenzhou's reinforced glass mental precautions immediately crumbled. He stood a few steps away as if his feet had been glued to the ground.

He'd been in too much of a rush when he'd gotten up that morning. There were many things he hadn't had time to think over carefully. Seeing Fei Du again after the space of a day, all those intimacies he hadn't had time to dwell on—the feel of his skin, his subtle expressions in the lamplight, their mingled breath...all of it spun through his mind like a running-horse lantern. Luo Wenzhou's throat moved gently; he even felt his blood pressure rising.

The things you couldn't get enough of after you'd had a taste truly were one of the great torments of the mortal world.

Just then, the roasted chestnut peddler's spatula stopped, and he began to hawk his wares, his clear shout traveling far away, simultaneously startling the two of them at a distance of a few meters apart.

Fei Du's far-wandering mind at last returned. He felt around in his coat pocket, pulling out a bill. He was about to pass it over through the window. "Excuse me, could I..."

Before he'd finished speaking, he was cut-off midway.

"If you eat that now, will you have any appetite for dinner? What's your problem?" As if he'd just shown up, Luo Wenzhou, pretending nothing was the matter, pressed his hand back. Then, without waiting for Fei Du to speak, he said to the roasted chestnut peddler, "I have some change. Give me two jin²."

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Wenzhou took the well-wrapped chestnuts and got in the car. Deliberately looking a little displeased, he said to Fei Du, “Don’t come over here on purpose tomorrow. It’s not far for me to walk back.—If I hadn’t been coming over to buy something, I may have gotten a taxi at the gate. Wouldn’t we have missed each other, then?”

Fei Du happily said, “Oh, all right.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Was it too late to take back what he’d just said?

He felt rather gloomy but couldn’t show it. Having just established the principle of not eating snacks before dinner, he looked down and peeled a chestnut. After he’d peeled a good number and eaten them, he very benevolently bestowed one upon Fei Du. “It’s not good for your digestion to eat too many. I’ll just give you a taste. There’s no more for you after this one.”

Fei Du didn’t quibble with his idiotic style of being strict with others and permissive towards himself. While he was stopped at a red light, he lowered his head and took the chestnut from Luo Wenzhou’s hand with his mouth, licking Luo Wenzhou’s fingers in passing, saying ambiguously, “Sweet.”

The “enemy” was again launching an offensive without prior notice. Luo Wenzhou took a direct blow to the chest, nearly coughing up blood out of unsatisfied lust. “Are you looking for trouble? Who was it that passed out last night?”

Fei Du didn’t care about that. Taking no notice, he was about to continue the seduction when Luo Wenzhou called him to a halt. “Shut your mouth.”

Fei Du heard a trace of humiliated anger. He was a cut above in this contest of shamelessness. He laughed silently and obligingly shut his

mouth.

The only sound left in the car was the babbling radio reading out the roads that were blocked up with evening rush hour traffic. The two of them were temporarily silent, an indescribable atmosphere filling every corner of the car along with the buzzing heating, almost making it impossible to sit still.

Luo Wenzhou gazed at Fei Du's profile out of the corner of his eye, suddenly feeling that he seemed to have returned to his distant childhood, to the first time he'd ignorantly held the hand of a boy he liked. He could no longer clearly remember whether the hand had been rough or slender; only the feeling of fireworks going off in his heart was still vivid in his mind.

As he'd grown older and become more experienced, he'd begun to feel that a physical exchange was all there was, as trivial and tasteless as any other bodily function; that vivid glow he'd felt in his chest had never appeared again, as if it had been sealed by something.

Now the monk Tripitaka had come on his great road to unseal the Five Elements Mountain.

The mountain collapsed, the earth opened, and the wild monkey, eating the wind and drinking the dew, gave a great cry, once more seeing the light of day.³

Luo Wenzhou suddenly said, "Do a U-turn up ahead. Let's go to the Drum Tower."

As Fei Du shifted to the U-turn lane, he said in surprise, "I just heard an update on the radio. Didn't they say that the runaway students had all been found and the suspect determined?"

“Oh, right,” thought Luo Wenzhou, “there’s just been a murder at the Drum Tower.”

He stretched his legs carelessly, saying very forthrightly, “The killer is a suspect who escaped in the National Road 327 serial robbery and murder case. There are many suspicious points here. Oh... I wanted to have another look.—Did you read that letter I sent you?”

His speech was too earnest, as if this was what he’d meant to say in the first place. Even Fei Du was taken in, restraining his playfulness.

“Yes.” Fei Du nodded. “What’s the real name of the child who left the letter? What are his relationships with his classmates at school like normally?”

Luo Wenzhou pulled himself together, towing back his soul, which had travelled a circle around the world, with difficulty focusing his attention on the murder at the Drum Tower. He considered Fei Du’s words for a moment, then somewhat doubtfully said, “His relationships with his classmates? Why do you ask?”

Wouldn’t the normal reaction be to ask about his relationship with his parents?

Because the letter Feng Bin had left on his dormitory’s desk before running away had been addressed to his parents. It opened: “Dear Mom and Dad, I’m leaving you this letter because I worry every day, pondering in pain what I was born for.”

It seemed that because he lived most of the year in a boarding school, his familial relationships were weakened and he felt uncared for; adding in his adolescence, the stress of his studies, and plenty of other factors, this had produced an emotional break.

“Tell me first. Otherwise, it’s only a letter. I can’t interpret too much based on it.”

“The boy was called Feng Bin, in senior middle Year 1 at Yufen. His relationships with his classmates were all right. According to his teacher, he was an average student, neither good nor bad. His family background is also pretty good, though he’s very ordinary in that rich kids’ club. Pretty good-looking, studied music for a few years. Aside from that, there’s nothing unusual about him. He fit in pretty well, had no sharp edges. Not one of those boys with leadership qualities, but also not the kind who gets isolated by the whole class.” Luo Wenzhou paused. “Come to think of it, the children who ran away were all of that type—aside from Xia Xiaonan.”

“And who is Xia Xiaonan?”

When an underaged victim was mentioned on the news, the real name wouldn’t be used. Fei Du hadn’t caught up yet.

“An eyewitness to last night’s murder,” Luo Wenzhou explained briefly. “This girl is a scholarship student. Her family’s finances are rather tight. She may not have any common language with her peers, may be out of place in her class.”

The evening rush hour was fairly smooth in the Gulou District. They reached their destination in less than twenty minutes.

“Do you see the little yellow building on the left-hand side? That’s the convenience hotel where the students were staying the last few days. Another two intersections on there’s a BD Supermarket. Turn there.” As Luo Wenzhou pointed the way, he said, “Last night, close to nine, Feng Bin left the hotel, telling his classmates he was going for a walk. About half a hour later, Xia Xiaonan left too, saying she wanted to buy basic necessities. They met at the crossroads behind the supermarket.”

Fei Du said, “A secret date?”

“Yeah,” Luo Wenzhou agreed. Then his heart moved. Seemingly carelessly, he said, “Did you go on secret dates in middle school?”

Fei Du was caught off guard. The corners of his mouth instantly stiffened.

He’d never had an immature adolescence like that.

Fei Chengyu wouldn’t have permitted it.

Fei Chengyu had always thought that the body could develop, could mature, could have desires, but if, because of the appearance of some mere hormones, you developed symptoms such as “adolescence,” developed illusory so-called “feelings” towards someone, what would be the point? Wouldn’t it be as stupid as a dog in heat?

After a pause, Fei Du immediately adjusted, displaying an ambiguous smile. “Shixiong, are you trying to ask about my exes?”

Then, before Luo Wenzhou could answer, he casually said, “No, I was attending a public school. There were only a few children from wealthy families there, and I didn’t fit in very well. Anyway, there were too many girls who liked me. If I’d chosen one, wouldn’t I have been hurting the others?”

Saying so, he slowly rounded the supermarket, stopping the car at the intersection where Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan had met.

The Drum Tower tourist attraction had closed and locked up again. Following the murder, the whole area seemed unusually solemn. The gambling security department had been made an issue of, and the person in charge of the tourist attraction had temporarily replaced the night shift. Even the sanitation workers were working harder than usual.

Luo Wenzhou had keenly felt Fei Du's momentary unease and looked at him deeply. He didn't blindly press on, changing the subject. "The killer started following them here."

Fei Du rolled down the window, looking all around and frowning. "Strange."

"What is?"

"This place is open on all sides." Fei Du lightly tapped on the car window. "An ordinary mugger wouldn't choose to have his stake-out here—how would you select your target? How could you be sure where the people going by were going to go next? What if they were going to take the next turn onto the main road? The uncertainty is too great, and furthermore, basically all intersections with streetlights have surveillance cameras. Even if he wasn't afraid of being caught on camera, he still wouldn't need to purposefully show himself, would he?"

Luo Wenzhou understood his implication. "You're saying that it's likely the killer knew where the children were meeting for their date, and which way they were going to go, and had staked the place out ahead of time!"

Lu Guosheng hadn't returned to his original profession; Feng Bin had been his target!

But why?

When Lu Guosheng had been sent into hiding by a wanted notice fifteen years ago, Feng Bin hadn't even been born. What grievance could Lu Guosheng have against him?

And how had Lu Guosheng known where Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan had arranged to meet?

And there was also that girl, who hadn't been harmed at all...

CHAPTER 100 - Verhovensky X

Fei Du stopped the car by the side of the road. The two of them walked the path Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan had taken walking towards the east side door of the Drum Tower.

Around the winter solstice, the days were shortest and the nights longest. Night was already beginning. A cold moon partway between a crescent moon and a half moon hung up high by a distant corner of the Drum Tower, tainted by a bit of clear mist, an echo of the light of the snow on the roof tiles.

“So the reason they ran away was that their studies were too stressful and they wanted to celebrate Christmas?” Fei Du tightened his scarf, thoughtfully saying, “Do you believe that reason?”

“Who hasn’t been young once? Little whelps would do anything. Sometimes it won’t necessarily agree with adult logic.” Luo Wenzhou absently blocked the wind for him, carefully examining the surroundings.

He hadn’t had this feeling when he’d come here during the day, but now that it had gotten dark, the whole Drum Tower scenic spot had become a great maze. All the street lights looked exactly the same, stretched out in long lines, like some sort of secret bewitching array in a wuxia novel.

Aside from the landmark of the Drum Tower itself, all the little alleys seemed to be identical. Even the antique-style old shops had their closed doors in about the same positions. There were three-way intersections everywhere. Sometimes you’d run into a street sign or two, like winning the lottery, but their directions were unclear. Walking through here, it was easy to lose track of where you’d gotten to.

The two of them had good senses of direction, especially Luo Wenzhou. After a good number of years working as a front-line criminal policeman, he had a particular sensitivity towards geographical layouts and human facial features. But despite this, he still felt somewhat disoriented shuttling along the little streets at the side door.

“No, come back, it’s not there.” Luo Wenzhou turned on his phone’s flashlight, considering a rare street sign for a good while, calling back Fei Du, who had turned in the wrong direction. “Did those two brats really have nothing better to do? What were they doing here in the middle of the night?”

Fei Du suddenly said, “Going to the Drum Tower at midnight, the two of them must have been going to see the Lovers’ Mirror?”

Luo Wenzhou had been standing on the little step next to the street sign; taken unawares, he missed a step and stammered, “Wh-what?”

“Lovers’ Mirror is one of this city’s top ten scenic locations for a date. It’s in the Drum Tower scenic area,” Fei Du said in surprise. “Haven’t you ever heard of it?”

Luo Wenzhou measured others by himself, thinking that if he didn’t know something, then no one knew it. He’d wanted to sneakily lead Fei Du over on the pretext of “investigating the details of the case” and receive certification from the venerable Jade Emperor, but he absolutely hadn’t expected this—that Fei Du would disregard his proper duties to the extent of investigating scenic locations for dates when he had nothing else to do.

“Why would I have heard of a stupid thing like that?” Luo Wenzhou said grumpily. “I can see your specialty is fooling around with girls and little fools. If you spend all day thinking about useless things like this and your company hasn’t closed down yet, your resources really must be plentiful.”

Fei Du was very wronged, because this just happened to belong to the small category of things that were his “proper business”—the Drum Tower’s leading attraction for couples was very simply and crudely made, but the outcome was extraordinarily good; all the bosses who were thinking of branching out into this sphere had devoted a great deal of thought to studying this issue among others and remained perplexed. Fei Du not only knew that there was a Lovers’ Mirror at the Drum Tower, he could even recite the annual turnover of the little photo shop next to the Lovers’ Mirror.

After a momentary blankness, he keenly noticed the flustered exasperation in Luo Wenzhou’s words. Fei Du’s heart suddenly moved lightly as he realized something.

Fei Du exerted all his effort to manage to keep from smiling, pretending not to know that the “investigation” was a pretext.

Luo Wenzhou, meanwhile, felt that he’d done the most idiotic thing possible and determined that he absolutely couldn’t let Fei Du know, pretending that he was a decent people’s police officer and the “investigation” wasn’t a pretext.

With the two of them firmly grasping both sides of the “pretext,” they looked at each other with respectively “innocent” and “upstanding” expressions, then averted their gazes, each harboring his own intentions.

Fei Du very properly said, “A full price ticket for the Drum Tower tourist attraction is twenty or thirty yuan. Since Feng Bin’s family circumstances are good, he shouldn’t care about a bit of money like that. Choosing to come at night was likely because he didn’t want others to find out about his relationship with this girl.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded with a great show of earnestness. “Makes sense. What else?”

Fei Du: "..."

The experienced and able President Fei had never before experienced this type of "pretending not to be on a date" date. For a time he was at a loss for words.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Let's go up ahead and have a look. What do you think is the motive for the cover-up? Schoolyard romances ordinarily get hidden from teachers and parents. Not many people would hide from the die-hard followers who ran away with them?"

Fei Du went along with his topic, saying, "Two possible circumstances. Either he felt the relationship was beneath his dignity, or it was to protect her—since Feng Bin expended so much effort to take the girl to see the Lovers' Mirror, I surmise that it's the latter."

"Oh, so—" After Luo Wenzhou gave a seemingly absent-minded nod, he suddenly changed the subject. "You didn't use to care about getting a little fine for parking against regulations. You were always hanging around parading yourself at the City Bureau's gates. Why is it that lately when you come to the City Bureau driving my car, you're paying attention to the rules and going to the parking lot? Is it the former or the latter?"

Fei Du paused.

Luo Wenzhou raised his eyelids, looking at him, pointing to his own ears. "Why don't you take the opportunity to own up? I'm listening."

"Neither." Fei Du pulled himself together and smiled ambiguously, touching Luo Wenzhou's waist and lowering his voice. "Isn't it a public security bureau? I'm afraid I'll be arrested for being an 'uncertified driver.'—Mr. Policeman, when are you coming with me to receive certification at the Lovers' Mirror?"

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

The asshole had known all along! He'd been playing dumb!

Fei Du was as bothersome as could be, not at all lovable. Right now, Luo Wenzhou thought that there wasn't a single adorable thing about him, from the roots of his hair to his heels. What had he spent these past few months constantly thinking about him for? This bit of goods was only fit for dragging home, stripping naked, and throwing on the bed.

Between the branches of the old trees that had lost all their leaves, you could see the ancient bell on top of the Drum Tower. The night was limpid.

The two of them had finally torn away the seriously damaged pretext, tossing aside this murder case where the murderer was evident at a glance.

"When I was fifteen or sixteen, I also plotted to run away with a group, though the reason was better than celebrating a Western holiday—KFC or some company like that was putting together a middle school basketball competition, and the prize was a basketball signed by an NBA celebrity, who just happened to be the basketball player I liked. So I got together a group of people, got a sick note from a classmate's cousin who was a nurse, told my parents the school had organized a competitive summer camp, and ran around playing basketball for half a month."

Fei Du: "..."

This was a recollection so wretched it really made you sigh in admiration.

"We did get the prize, and I fooled my mom by saying a classmate had brought it back from abroad." Walking beside him through the

peaceful little alley, Luo Wenzhou took his hand, felt it was cold, and gave him the still warm bag of chestnuts to hold, keeping watch out of the corner of his eye to make sure he didn't sneak any. "Later there was a parent-teacher conference. As soon as the teacher talked to my mom, the whole thing came out. When my dad got home and heard about it he gave me a hell of thrashing."

Fei Du thought that a late-stage problem child like this couldn't be kept down with simple force.

"My dad, he seems pretty severe, but actually he's very fair and reasonable," Luo Wenzhou said. "When he got a handle on his temper, he said to me, 'A forcibly picked melon won't be sweet. If you don't like going to school, then forget about it. Do what you like.'"

Luo Wenzhou's ridiculous stories of domestic trivialities had an unbelievable attractive force for Fei Du. Each time he occasionally said a few words like this, Fei Du felt that he'd encountered a hidden easter egg. Seeing Luo Wenzhou suddenly stop, Fei Du couldn't resist following up. "And then what?"

Luo Wenzhou said, "At first I was pretty happy, thinking that the old fellow had 'found salvation' and changed his ways. I didn't expect that he would 'fairly and reasonably' stop my senior middle Year 2 school fees and allowance.

"While I cut class sometimes, I wasn't really prepared to become a dropout, so I had to go out and earn my school fees when I was on vacation. The old fart was as good as his word. He really didn't give me a penny. I carried water barrels for people for a couple months for the sake of that basketball... Don't laugh."

If he could have preserved this story like a specimen, Fei Du felt he could have enjoyed it for half a lifetime.

“You always let me take the lead in telling this sort of embarrassing story.” Luo Wenzhou poked him with his elbow. “Your turn.”

Fei Du: “...”

There really was nothing fun about his whole endless upbringing, but he couldn't bear to spoil the mood, so he had to rack his brains for a good while, finally managing to pull something out of his memories that would oblige.

“All right,” Fei Du said, “I'll tell you a secret.”

Luo Wenzhou indicated that he was all ears.

“Around the Spring Festival one year, I went to pay a New Year's call on a friend.” Fei Du paused, then said, “I saw a bicycle downstairs at his house, a racing bike with a gearshift and an especially flashy paint job, with a pattern like a poisonous snake. It seemed to be calling out to me.”

Luo Wenzhou somehow felt that the bike he'd described sounded familiar.

Fei Du licked his lips, very cautiously arranging his diction. “So I left a New Year's present for it...by glueing its back wheel with chewing gum.”

Luo Wenzhou's footsteps abruptly paused—he'd remembered. During the Spring Festival one year, Tao Ran had been unable to go back to his hometown because his duty schedule had been full, so Luo Wenzhou had ridden his bike over with presents to represent the citizens of Yan City in delivering comfort to the police comrade.

Before going, he'd thought of a certain little whelp with no one to look after him and had brought along a limited-edition game machine to give to Tao Ran to pass on to him.

In the end, he'd stayed twenty minutes at Tao Ran's house, and someone had messed around with his bike, which he'd left downstairs—some wretched child had stuck a few small firecrackers to his back wheel with chewing gum. Luo Wenzhou hadn't noticed it when he'd gotten on the bike and reached out his foot to peddle—

And he'd nearly been launched into orbit by the explosions!

Maintaining his smile, Fei Du guiltily took a small step back.

“Fei Du!”

President Fei reaped the consequences of lascivious activity. In order to entertain a beauty, he voluntarily gave himself up to the authorities as one possessed; it was too late for regrets.

He didn't receive any “leniency” for his confession. Luo Wenzhou grabbed him and gave him a good seeing to. He was pushed against a wall from behind.

Fei Du said, “Wait...wait a minute.”

“Wait for what?” Luo Wenzhou laughed menacingly as he held his chin. “Rape doesn't have to wait for a stoplight.”

Fei Du said, “There's blood on this wall...”

Luo Wenzhou froze, then immediately let go. Fei Du stepped back, his steps somewhat disordered, averting his gaze, his face growing paler.—Luckily the blood on the wall was already dry, so he didn't throw up on the spot.

There was a line of blood splatter on the wall that was very easy to overlook on the dark red surface. If not for Fei Du's extreme

sensitivity to the smell of blood, they probably would have overlooked it.

“The security cameras only caught Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan running out of an alley being chased by the killer.” Luo Wenzhou touched the bloodstains on the wall, then paced around, finding fragments of a glass bottle in a hidden corner. “Feng Bin must have been taken completely unawares when he was attacked. He tried to fight back, throwing the snacks and drinks he’d bought—the sanitation workers must not have noticed and cleaned it all up.”

Fei Du lightly rubbed the center of his brow. “Feng Bin had already been cut when he ran away?”

“Yes.” Luo Wenzhou nodded. “The wound was on his back.”

His back having been injured, it was likely Feng Bin had at the time been embracing Xia Xiaonan...perhaps even kissing her. Perhaps he’d been making mental preparations the whole way and only at this point had gotten up the nerve to daringly touch the girl he treasured.

This was a stretch of road where every corner was suitable for kissing. The moonlight swirled, the fresh snow was clear, the streetlights frequently drew two people’s shadows out together, inseparably intertwining.

But this daydream-like scene had suddenly been shattered by a knife.

“The killer followed them all the way from the intersection,” Fei Du said slowly. “On the path we just walked through, there were at least three or four spots that would have been more ideal for acting. But the killer chose to act here. Why?”

The first time Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan encountered Lu Guosheng, while Feng Bin had been cut and the two of them had truly been hard pressed, they’d still escaped—because just as Fei Du had said, the

geographical conditions here weren't "ideal" for a murderer. The other end of the little alley was clear and open, with many branchings. If the two children had run fast enough, they likely would have succeeded in shaking Lu Guosheng off!

Yes, if they hadn't muddled their way back to where they'd started from, perhaps they would have made a smooth getaway.

If they hadn't come back themselves...

Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du simultaneously fell silent. This sweet road leading to the Lovers' Mirror where celestial beings bestowed agreement had suddenly become bone-chilling.

Any boy who had just kissed the person in his heart could instantly attain the greatest courage of his life. Feng Bin hadn't had time to think much; he'd certainly used all his strength to protect Xia Xiaonan.

But what had the girl whose hand he'd been holding so tightly been thinking at the time?

With what kind of gaze had she looked at their joined hands?

Just then, an extremely faint sound of soft rubber-soled footsteps came from the other end of the little alley, treading almost noiselessly on the ground, only slightly coming to people's awareness in this nearly stifling silence. Ominous ripples at once spread out through the night. Luo Wenzhou felt a thrill of fear, pulling Fei Du behind him. "Who's there? Come out!"

In answer, someone came out apprehensively. It was one of the tourist attraction's patrolmen.

The patrolman was perhaps somewhat nervous. The flashlight he was holding flashed up and down. "What-what are you doing? We're

closed.”

The false alarm past, Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly took his work ID from his pocket and flashed it. “Police. I came to have a look.”

The patrolman let out a long breath and smacked his own chest, squeezing out a polite smile. “Oh, oh, all right, I see you’re busy.”

Saying so, he nodded and made a slight bow, making to leave.

“Wait a minute,” Luo Wenzhou called to stop him. “Could I ask for your work ID number?”

The patrolman froze, then obediently took off his work card and offered it to Luo Wenzhou with both hands. “Whatever you like, officer.”

Luo Wenzhou calmly looked over the ID number and the photograph, then returned the work card. “Aren’t you afraid to be patrolling on your own in a place where a murder has just happened?”

The patrolman’s manner was unassailable. He smiled openly. “The murder didn’t happen in this street. That street is sealed off. I couldn’t go there if I wanted to.”

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze swept over the patrolman like the edge of a knife. When the patrolman had been made rather uneasy by his stare, he finally waved a hand, showing he could leave.

When this brief interlude had passed, Fei Du took up the previous topic. “We can’t eliminate the possibility that it was coincidence. After all, I nearly also went the wrong way just now.”

But Luo Wenzhou didn’t respond. His mind was clearly replaying that segment of security camera footage—the first time Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan had run out from under Lu Guosheng’s eye, Lu Guosheng

hadn't expended his efforts chasing them. His bearing as he'd walked through the intersection had been almost leisurely, as if he was certain his target couldn't get away.

"I thought that letter of Feng Bin's was very off," said Luo Wenzhou, "but I couldn't concretely tell where it was off, so I sent it to you. Have you reached a conclusion now?"

"I have something for your consideration.—While the letter opens 'Dear Mom and Dad,' the whole of it doesn't sound like it was written for his parents," said Fei Du. "'We're all very anxious, there aren't any truly carefree and peaceful people around us.' 'What we wanted before we now don't want at all.' And there's that line at the beginning, 'pondering in pain what I was born for.'—There's a great number of lines paraphrased from a book called *All About Lily Chou-Chou*, translated from Japanese. It's a story about a murder that concerns schoolyard bullying. I'm not sure whether he was hinting at something."

Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself for a moment. "Come on, let's go to the hospital. I want to see Xia Xiaonan."

At the same time, he sent the work ID number he'd just seen to Tao Ran, who was on duty for the evening. "Contact the person in charge of the Drum Tower and look into the patrolman with this ID."

CHAPTER 1 01 - Verhovensky XI

“Xia Xiaonan? I just had a look at her. She still hadn’t woken up.” The criminal police officer responsible for keeping watch at the hospital had just eaten dinner and was walking unhurriedly towards the inpatient department. “What’s wrong, boss? Didn’t you say we were going to wait a few days for the child’s psychological state to stabilize before questioning her?”

The sharp sound of car horns came over the phone. Luo Wenzhou quickly said, “Xia Xiaonan isn’t an eyewitness, she’s one of the suspects. Get your eyes on her!”

“Huh? Who? You’re saying Xia Xiaonan is...”

As he pushed open the door of the hospital room, the policeman’s voice abruptly came to a halt.

Luo Wenzhou’s heart sank.

“Boss, Xia Xiaonan is gone!”

Luo Wenzhou stamped on the gas pedal.

“Xia Xiaonan is a local. Her father was called Xia Fei. He had lung cancer and couldn’t go out and get regular work. He made a bit of money working snack counters. He died a few years ago. Her mother spent all her time looking after a sick person and a household full of children and the elderly. She must have been rather depressed and taken things badly. She died jumping off a building.” Fei Du had his phone on speaker. Tao Ran’s voice came over the line. “All the appraisals this girl has ever gotten have basically been ‘sensible’ and ‘introverted,’ and her grades have always been very consistent. One of those students who goes to class even when she’s sick and wears her

uniform when she's on vacation. For children like that, studying and attending a good university is the only way to change their fate."

"Does her family have any involvement with the 327 case or Lu Guosheng?"

"No, they're just ordinary common people. Aside from being rather tragic, there's nothing special about her family. The last three generations haven't been near Lotus Mountain. They don't even have relatives around there. I have no idea how she could know Lu Guosheng, or what kind of grievance she could have against Feng Bin that would make her want him murdered and dismembered."

Luo Wenzhou finished dispatching his troops and hung up his phone, turning to Fei Du. "You mentioned schoolyard bullying. Is it possible that Feng Bin was bullying her, so she wanted to use every possible means to get revenge?"

"Have you had a handwriting analysis performed on Feng Bin's letter? If you're sure that the letter was written by him, then I don't think that's it. That letter doesn't like the tone of a victimizer," Fei Du said. "Anyway, wasn't Xia Xiaonan scared out of her wits? If she set this up, then her acting is too good."

Perhaps out of the habit of being a boss, Fei Du had a profound understanding of structuring his words in a way superiors would like—he very rarely brought up messy suppositions to upset others' trains of thoughts. He would give his conclusion if he had one; if he didn't have a conclusion, he could present a clear analysis of the course of his conjectures. It was very straightforward.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him in the rearview mirror, then said to Tao Ran, "Contact their homeroom teacher. Then there's the other runaway students. Get in touch with their guardians and arrange for permission to talk to them.—We're almost at the hospital."

“All right,” Tao Ran agreed. Then, somewhat hesitantly, he asked Fei Du, “What do you mean by the tone of a victimizer?”

His body language very relaxed, Fei Du leaned back in the passenger’s seat, the passing lights now bright, now dim on his face. An irrepressible fragrance of chestnuts wafted off the closely-woven fibers of his wool coat.

“Even when victimizers grow up, learn ‘political correctness,’ and start to worry that their own children will be bullied, denounce schoolyard bullying in line with mainstream society, when they recall their own conduct from their youth, there’ll still be a kind of bragging in between the lines of their words. Because subconsciously, they don’t believe that was victimizing; they think it was an accomplishment—so-called schoolyard bullying in the final analysis is the social order within a community.”

Unless one day they suffered from the same circumstances.

“But the teacher and parents were all just here, and they were in a public security bureau,” Tao Ran said. “If people really have been bullying them, why didn’t the children tell us?”

Fei Du laughed. “Tao Ran-ge, a sealed-off boarding school can become a sort of ecological environment, forming its own rules and ‘laws.’ What you think of as the natural patterns of behavior may be inconceivable to others—for example, if you told the ancients two thousand years ago that we actually live on a globe, would any of them have believed you?”

Luo Wenzhou turned the steering wheel. The hospital was already visible up ahead.

At first they had thought that Xia Xiaonan was a surviving eyewitness and hadn’t sent too many people to keep an eye on her. They’d only been worried she would have no one to look after her and had left

someone to accompany her at the hospital. A group of people from the City Bureau was just now hurrying over one after another, the police cars further blocking up the already crowded parking lot.

“Her grandfather was staying with her, so I went out to have dinner.” The police officer who’d been ordered to watch at the hospital looked vexed. “The old fellow went to the bathroom while I was gone. He can’t move very well, so it must have taken him about ten minutes. And she ran away.”

There was a little garden set up in the inpatient department to give the patients a place to move around in. The building’s security cameras had caught Xia Xiaonan silently leaving her hospital room. She’d crossed the little garden and gone over the stone wall. They didn’t know which direction she’d gone in.

Xia Xiaonan’s grandfather’s forehead was covered in sweat. He stood trembling, leaning on his wheelchair, babbling something incomprehensible at length. Seeing that no one could understand him, he simply yelled in his urgency, like an inferior mythical beast that had mistakenly wandered into the human world, ugly and helpless.

A criminal policeman was about to go up to him. Luo Wenzhou blocked him. “Wait. Don’t tell him yet.”

He went up to the old man. The old man cast aside his wheelchair, tottering towards him, shouting a lengthy tirade. Seeing that Luo Wenzhou didn’t answer, he at last remembered that he was half a mute and that the person coming towards him couldn’t understand what he was saying. Then he tugged at Luo Wenzhou’s clothes in frustration, helplessly closed his mouth, and began to cry.

Luo Wenzhou patted his hand. “Sir, aside from school, where would Xia Xiaonan go?”

The old man moved his stiff tongue, forcing out a long syllable: "... home."

"Just home? Does she never go anywhere to enjoy herself? Are there any friends whose houses she drops in at?"

Hearing this, the old man suddenly filled up with sadness. Without any warning, he opened his mouth with its missing teeth and began to wail.

The coldest frost of the year sorrowfully descended, covering the longest night of the year.

It was as if a light snow had fallen.

Luo Wenzhou went with some people to take Xia Xiaonan's grandfather home. At the same time, obtaining the old man's permission, he went into Xia Xiaonan's room—it was called a room, but actually it was just a bit of space partitioned off, just big enough to put a bed. There wasn't even a door, only a curtain for some light covering. The "nightstand" was an old abandoned sewing machine. There was a cheap pink plastic pen on it, the only thing in the room that made it look like it belonged to a young girl. There were no surplus cupboards in the room; her few pieces of old clothing were gathered at the bedside, covered with a piece of white cloth. The space under the bed was full of books, most of them textbooks and exercise books; not even the ones from elementary school had been thrown away.

Fei Du bent down and picked up an exercise book to flip through it. He saw that all the empty space in it had been written full of notes. The handwriting was beautiful and tidy. In some places there hadn't been enough room to finish writing, and she had even used small slips of paper in layer after layer, making the two-hundred page exercise book as thick as a dictionary of modern Chinese.

He skimmed Xia Xiaonan's notes. He could clearly feel that the child's logic wasn't very clear. Any slightly difficult subject required a great deal of analytical notes for her. It was evident that her abilities were rather average; her consistently excellent grades had come from an investment of time and energy.

Luo Wenzhou said, "What do you think?"

"Tao Ran was right." Fei Du closed the exercise book. "She really is one of those girls who goes to school when she's sick and wears her uniform on vacation.—If Feng Bin's murder is connected to her, it's likely she was compelled."

"Supposing she was compelled, where would she have gone now? She isn't home, and she isn't at the hospital. I sent someone to watch out at the school, and there's no movement so far. This Xia Xiaonan doesn't have any friends she could open up to normally..." Luo Wenzhou's tone changed. "Could she have gone to find the person who compelled her?"

"Find him and do what? Settle the score? Give him a beating or arrest him and bring him to justice?" Fei Du looked at him helplessly. "Shixiong, if her way of thinking was like yours, she'd long ago have proclaimed herself hegemon of the school. Who would dare to compel her?"

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Fei Du's tongue had perhaps achieved spiritual enlightenment. Before, when they hadn't gotten along, even if he'd agreed with Luo Wenzhou's views, he'd agreed in a scathing and sarcastic way. Now that they were getting on, even if his views were different, he could still retort in a way that would put Luo Wenzhou entirely at his ease.

Luo Wenzhou's voice softened in spite of himself. "Then where could she have gone?"

Fei Du didn't answer at once, his gaze searching around Xia Xiaonan's little room that was like a snail's shell. He saw a smudge on the tablecloth hung over the broken sewing machine at the bedside, like the mark of someone frequently rubbing it over the years. He pulled away a corner of the tablecloth—it was the box for needles and thread.

There was a small picture frame in the needle and thread box with an old family photograph inside. On the paper backing of the picture frame was written: "For my daughter Xiaonan." The handwriting looked a little more mature, but it was still somewhat similar to Xia Xiaonan's writing.

"Fro...ha...ma-ah." The sound of panting came from behind them. Xia Xiaonan's grandfather had come to the door at some point and was staring at them.

Just then, the photograph slipped out of the opened frame. There was a letter pressed behind it—it was the suicide note Xia Xiaonan's mom had written before her death.

Fei Du slowly looked up. "Tao Ran said her mother died jumping off a building. Where did she jump from?"

Luo Wenzhou gave a jolt of horror.

The sound of police sirens swept by, leaving a trail of red and blue afterimages along the winding highway.

"Xia Xiaonan's mother was called Sun Jing. She worked at a junior middle school when she was alive. She jumped off the school's administration building. I've already sent you the address," Tao Ran said quickly. "The firetruck and ambulance will be there soon!"

“The Forty-third Middle School.” In the car, Fei Du read through the brief account Tao Ran had sent. “The school Xia Xiaonan went to. When her mother jumped, Xia Xiaonan was at self-study—you could see the classroom from the administration building. Perhaps she wanted to have a last look at her daughter.”

“Her mother extricated herself, leaving behind a house full of children and the elderly, and she jumped off a building right in front of her child. Wouldn’t Xia Xiaonan resent her? Why do you think she would follow in her footsteps?”

“It’s very common. A person often becomes what he hates most.” Fei Du shrugged. “The more taboo it is, the more attractive it is when a person is desperate. For example...”

Before he could finish, Luo Wenzhou suddenly grabbed his hand.

CHAPTER 102 - Verhovensky XII

Fei Du looked up in surprise. “What’s wrong?”

In that instant, Luo Wenzhou’s body had acted faster than thought.

Since Tao Ran had started talking about Xia Xiaonan’s family, he’d been thinking of Fei Du, thinking of that summer weekend seven years ago, when he opened the door on the room full of withered flowers with the endless song playing upstairs. The quiet and empty great residence had been full of floating dust. When he’d arrived, there’d been a “grand ceremony” awaiting him.

He’d gone back there countless times in his dreams. Did Fei Du recall her over and over?

What was he thinking when his recollections ended?

Luo Wenzhou had no idea what he’d been planning to say when he’d impulsively grabbed Fei Du’s hand.

What could he say?

This was a painful memory, after all, a scrape on the heart. He couldn’t make it better with a few words.

“Don’t be nervous.” Fei Du patted his hand. “Unless something unexpected happens, my guess is that even if she’s standing on the rooftop, she won’t jump in the end.”

“I thought you weren’t wearing enough just now. There’s a padded coat in the trunk.” Luo Wenzhou racked his brains for something to say. “Go put it on.”

Fei Du had been driving his car for a few days and had never noticed that that lump in the trunk was an article of clothing—he'd thought it was scraps to use for cleaning the car. Hearing these words, President Fei felt that both his spirit and his eyes had been abused, like an unconventional form of domestic violence.

He shook Luo Wenzhou off without another word and hurriedly walked off in his immaculate attire.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Wait a minute, I wasn't finished yet. How do you know she won't jump in the end?"

His colleague's voice came through his earpiece. "Captain Luo, the girl really is on the roof of the administration building!"

High up, the wind was even more biting cold. It pierced to the bone, making a rustling sound as it rubbed past.

Xia Xiaonan's hospital gown was thin. Her skin had already lost sensation. She looked down from on high at the nearby darkened classroom building.

She remembered she'd been doing a physics exam then, racking her brains to distinguish the difficult-to-parse concepts, chewing off a corner of her pen cap. Suddenly, the class became agitated. Her desk mate jabbed her with an elbow, shouting into her ear, "Come look, someone's about to jump!"

The tip of her pen made a sharp cut in the paper. Xia Xiaonan's heart swayed. She turned her head and saw a person jumping off the administration building across from them, like a heap of ashes that had come out of nowhere.

Half the class stood up, falling over each other to get to the window and look, crowding aside Xia Xiaonan, who had been next to the window to start with. Everyone looked; only she didn't dare.

Until the police had belatedly come to clean up the scene, Xia Xiaonan hadn't known who had jumped, and she hadn't had time to take a last look at her.

In all the fifteen years since her birth, this delicate-featured young girl had lived the words "didn't dare" written large. She didn't dare to step forward bravely, didn't dare to open her mouth to demand a share in her family's burdens; she always wanted to pretend she was an ordinary girl like the others, who could block up her ears and study, ignoring what was happening outside the window.

She didn't dare to speak up for others, and she didn't dare to speak for herself. She didn't dare to resist all the unreasonable bullying and humiliation. Her past life had only taught her to be silent and exercise restraint, waiting for the inconstant wind of fate to blow the bad things away. But fate never sent charcoal in snowy weather; it could only pile frost on top of snow.

She also hadn't dared to run off with that simple-minded boy, hadn't dared to throw away her phone, hadn't dared to come out of the garbage bin—

When everything was over, she hadn't even dared to go look at Feng Bin.

As long as she didn't face up to that, she could pretend that it had all been a nightmare; none of it had happened.

Xia Xiaonan held the ice-cold guard rail with both hands, her palms "tasting" the raw-sweet rust, a long string of tears falling from the top of the eighth floor.

Luo Wenzhou clipped on his walkie-talkie. "Don't turn on the sirens, tell the firetrucks and ambulance to keep quiet, too. Take care not to

startle her! Anyone with quick reflexes who's good at talking, get ready to go up with me, move fast! Is the air rescue cushion ready?"

Police, firemen, and medical personnel crowded around on all sides, turning the courtyard of the school, which had been peaceful after school had let out, into a pot of porridge. The manager of the administration building was scared to tears.

Fei Du silently avoided the crowd, walking towards the classroom building across from the administration building. After he'd gotten the keys from the manager and asked for information, he walked directly into the junior middle Year 2, Class 6 classroom.

The classroom was deserted. A negligent student on duty hadn't cleaned the blackboard entirely, leaving a corner of writing that seemed to be an algebra problem. Fei Du looked out the window and turned on the classroom's lights.

Then he opened the window, facing the girl who was already standing outside the guardrail.

Xia Xiaonan had been staring at that classroom all along. She hadn't expected that the lights would suddenly turn on inside it; for a moment she panicked.

At the same time, the highly efficient firemen had quickly filled up the airbag and were trying to guess where she would fall. Luo Wenzhou, taking along a group of firemen and criminal police officers, went out on the rooftop. The long, neat hem of Fei Du's coat was blown behind him by the wind from the window, his sleeves flying up.

He narrowed his eyes, meeting the gaze of the girl on the rooftop, who was at her wits' end.

“Young lady.” Luo Wenzhou, arriving on the rooftop, addressed Xia Xiaonan from afar. “It’s too windy. You should be careful.”

Xia Xiaonan’s body suddenly shook. She grabbed the railing with both hands and swiftly turned her head. She didn’t speak, instead letting out a scream.

Luo Wenzhou put his hands in front of his chest, spreading them open for her to see, very gently making a gesture of pressing down.

“If a person comes to the point where she wants to jump off a building but can’t say a word about it to anyone else, don’t you think that’s a pity?—Little girl, you can actually speak, can’t you?”

Xia Xiaonan didn’t speak. Her cold little face was white. She looked at him expressionlessly, then turned her head back to the lit-up classroom.

Fei Du smiled at her, pointing to the seats lined up against the window. When he’d counted to the fifth one, he pulled out the chair and sat down, opening the window next to him.

A junior middle school student’s seat was rather small and narrow for a long-limbed adult man. He curled his legs up awkwardly under the table, propping his elbows on top of it.

Xia Xiaonan’s gaze had followed him involuntarily. Now she gave a start—that was the seat she’d sat in before.

Luo Wenzhou quickly made some gestures. While Xia Xiaonan’s attention was focused elsewhere, a few policemen and firemen separated and moved in towards her. This way, her movements would be contained within a very small area. Even if she really did jump, probability that the air rescue cushion would catch her would be greatly increased.

Luo Wenzhou lowered his voice and said into his walkie-talkie, “She’s on the west side of the roof, about a meter and a half from the corner. Rescue workers on the seventh floor move into position—“

“Copy.”

The voice had just come over the walkie-talkie when firemen climbed out of the windows on the seventh floor’s western corridor and waited tensely for orders, in case she fell.

The firemen on the ground were holding up the air rescue cushion, constantly making slight adjustments to its position.

“My mom jumped from here.” Xia Xiaonan was silent a moment, looking towards the lit-up classroom, then finally spoke. When she wasn’t screaming, her voice was soft and sweet, a touch nasal, seeming very gentle. “Stay away from me.”

The criminal policemen stealthily drawing near simultaneously looked at Luo Wenzhou. Luo Wenzhou gestured for them to stop.—While they couldn’t get close, at least their position meant she couldn’t go that way.

“We know. It truly was a tragedy. Are you planning to follow in her footsteps now?” Luo Wenzhou said. “Little girl, what trouble are you in?”

But Xia Xiaonan didn’t answer him at all. She only whispered, “If I jump, it’ll all be over.”

“You’re wrong.” Luo Wenzhou sighed. “I really ought to let my medical examiner comrades come over to give you the pop sci explanation. Jumping isn’t a sure thing at all. Do you know what happens after?”

“If you fall from here, you’ll become an uncontrollable falling body. You won’t necessarily fall headfirst, and you may not die immediately. For a minute, or even a few minutes, you’ll be able to clearly feel the pain of all your bones being broken, your organs being pierced. You’ll be a bloody mess on the ground, in ten thousand times more pain than now.”

Xia Xiaonan trembled and gave a sob.

“If you don’t die immediately, according to regulations, of course we’ll have to do everything we can to save you. The probability of survival would be very small, so ‘according to regulations,’ we’d basically be adding to your suffering. It’ll leave you no dignity, a rather ugly sight. Then the medical examiners will hastily stitch you up into a human-like appearance, and notify your grandfather to come identify the body.” Luo Wenzhou said, “But that’s all right, he has experience, anyway. He’s identified too many bodies in his life.”

Xia Xiaonan kept staring at the lit-up classroom, choked with sobs.

The firemen at the seventh-floor window climbed up a few meters like geckos, approaching Xia Xiaonan, while the policemen on the roof narrowed their ring of encirclement a step. Luo Wenzhou exchanged looks with his colleagues, then carefully walked another step forward. “If you’re in some difficulty and you don’t say it now, you won’t have an opportunity to say it later. You aren’t even afraid of death, so what’s the point of keeping a secret?”

Xia Xiaonan at last turned her head to look at him. “She hated me. That’s why she jumped from here.”

Everyone had thought she would say something related to Feng Bin. They hadn’t expected the girl to suddenly say this. For a time they all stared.

Just then, Luo Wenzhou's phone vibrated. He saw that Fei Du had sent him a voice message.

Fei Du unhurriedly said, "Standing where she is, Xia Xiaonan will have discovered by now that before her mom jumped, she was watching her, waiting for her to look up, then jumping on purpose so she would see."

Luo Wenzhou looked in horror at the classroom building across from him.

Fei Du said, "Otherwise, there are hundreds of thousands of tall buildings in the world. Why did she choose this one? Why did she have to jump in this direction?"

Luo Wenzhou said to Xia Xiaonan, "Who hated you? Your mom?"

"She hated me." Xia Xiaonan pointed to the classroom building. "She was looking at me like this, I don't know for how long, until someone in the class noticed her, until I looked up and saw her... She wanted to jump so I'd see it, to show me that she was finally free of us.

"My dad and my grandfather were sick. All the family's money was spent on them. In the end, they couldn't do any more chemotherapy, they could only buy traditional medicine from some quacks, go with a 'conservative treatment.' At night there was only a curtain door separating me from them. Often I heard my dad in so much pain that he couldn't sleep, tossing around, moaning and groaning, waking my mom. She'd have to get up and take care of him. Then she'd cry non-stop—aside from her job at the school, she had another job. She worked day and night to earn money, and when she got home, she couldn't even sleep well. Sometimes my dad said, 'If you really can't take it, then let's get a divorce. We won't be a burden on you.'

"But I was afraid. If she was gone, what would I do?"

Xia Xiaonan lowered her gaze, looking at the only illumination nearby. She felt she was standing upon the clouds, in an unreal place, so she involuntarily pulled out the words she had buried for many years. “I knew she had insomnia, weak nerves, depression, but when my dad said that they should get divorced, I would run out crying, begging her not to abandon us. Whenever she couldn’t stand it anymore and poured something out to me, I wouldn’t listen. I was afraid that if I listened, I’d have to take responsibility.

“I’d only fob her off. Every time I’d tell her, ‘Mom, I don’t understand any of this, I’ll study hard and in the future...in the future I’ll get into a good university, find a good job, and you’ll be able to rest and live in comfort.’”

As Xia Xiaonan said the last few words, she was sobbing almost too hard to speak. The rooftop’s railing creaked as she shook.

Luo Wenzhou immediately responded, “So you want to imitate her now, cast off the encumbrance of your grandfather? You think he doesn’t have the good grace to die, that he’s a burden on you, so you’re taking revenge on him?”

Xia Xiaonan shook her head hard.

Luo Wenzhou purposefully made his voice cold. “But from how it looks to us, that’s just what you mean to do. Otherwise, what other meaning is there in you falling down and turning into a bloody pulp?”

“Is there any meaning in death?” Xia Xiaonan said loudly. “If she can escape, then why can’t I escape?”

“Because Feng Bin is waiting for you over there,” Luo Wenzhou said. “He died with a grievance. Have you thought about how you’re going to explain yourself to him? Xia Xiaonan, you can escape the living, but do you really think you can also escape the dead?”

“Feng Bin” seemed to be a taboo name; Xia Xiaonan once again lost control and began to scream. But while she was standing outside of the guardrail, her hands were tightly holding the railing. Luo Wenzhou took notice of her body language and realized that Fei Du had been right. At the critical moment, this girl didn’t have the courage to make the leap.

He decisively waved his hand. At this time, the fireman nearest to Xia Xiaonan had already gotten within five meters of her during their conversation. The fireman immediately charged out and grabbed Xia Xiaonan’s arm before she could react.

Xia Xiaonan screamed, nearly losing her balance. The other two firemen who had been hanging outside the seventh floor encircled her, one on each side. Like a helpless worm, the girl was brought down from the rooftop by the crowd, the sound of her crying breaking into the whistling night wind.

Luo Wenzhou walked over and looked towards the classroom building across from him. He saw Fei Du, one hand in his pocket, rather calmly closing the window, gesturing towards him from a distance.

“There are hundreds of thousands of tall buildings in the world. Why did she choose this one?”

“...what kind of mother would choose that time, leaving her corpse for her child to find on purpose?”

“She hated me.”

“She...”

From the next building over, Luo Wenzhou responded to the WeChat message Fei Du had sent him: “Xia Xiaonan said her mom hated her.

Is that true, or did you use some kind of trick to make her misunderstand?”

“It’s true.” Fei Du, who had just been calm and charismatic, was so cold his fingers were fumbling. With forced poise, he managed not to shiver like a quail, leaning against the classroom’s heater when he’d closed the window. “Of course, a long-term depressive mood was the main cause. Though when a person’s mental condition is extremely unstable, she’ll make all kinds of cries for help towards her friends and family. If she doesn’t get a response, it’ll be adding frost on top of snow for her—in extreme circumstances, she’ll even hate those close to her.”

Luo Wenzhou typed into his phone: “Last time you said you knew how your mother died. So she...”

At this point, he looked at Fei Du’s figure leaning beside the window, saw the whole building silent, all the classrooms sunk into sleep in the darkness, and him standing alone in the small sliver of lamplight.

Luo Wenzhou’s fingers paused, and he deleted what he’d just typed.

Just then, a phone call came from Tao Ran.

“We’ve rescued Xia Xiaonan,” Luo Wenzhou said. “We’re bringing her back.”

“Yes, I know,” Tao Ran said. “I wanted to tell you that I just got an answer back from the Drum Tower tourist attraction. They investigated the patrolman you mentioned. They really do have such a person, the work ID number and the name match, but...”

Luo Wenzhou raised his head.

Tao Ran said, “That patrolman ought to be a woman.”

CHAPTER 103 - Verhovensky XIII

Xia Xiaonan had been rescued, but her connection with the strange case of Feng Bin's murder remained hidden in a dense fog.

What had that mysterious patrolman been up to? Why had he wanted to get into the Drum Tower scenic spot, and why had he followed Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du? This also defied understanding.

The moon and stars had been fine, and perhaps the Jasper Lake⁴ had been frozen over and all the wintering immortals had come to surround the Lovers' Mirror. At first they had only wanted to watch a courtship in this romantic setting, not expecting that this Lovers' Mirror had been truly shoddily manufactured; midway through, the channels had gotten mixed up, and a grim, bloody crime thriller had been inserted.

The crowd of immortals had in unison found their appetites gone and uncompromisingly pulled up a double handful of black clouds, covering up the bright starry sky, leaving it as murky and dark as the bottom of a pot, each scattering.

By the time Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du returned home after dealing with the problem of the girl jumping off the building and getting Xia Xiaonan settled, in the mortal world, even the romantic settings in the eight o'clock time slot were about to sing their last notes.

Luo Wenzhou was so hungry he felt that even the air had thinned out a little. As soon as he opened the door, he was thrown off by finding that while his belly was empty, Luo Yiguo's food bowl contained both dry food and a can of cat food. The hard-hearted old cat had eaten and drunk its fill and licked itself glossy and was sprawled on its cat bed. Hearing the sound of the door, its sharp ears turned in half circles, but it paid it no mind, let alone coming out for a greeting.

Luo Wenzhou gained a deeper understanding of his position in the household—it turned out that what Master Luo welcomed every day was a walking meal ticket. As for the useless two-legged litter box attendant himself, it didn't have any interest in him at all. As long as it had something to eat, it didn't care where he went or whether he lived or died.

Other living beings would be all right missing a meal; Luo Wenzhou was only worried about the patient going hungry.

When they'd just brought Xia Xiaonan down, he'd wanted to tell the patient to leave, but Fei Du had been unwilling.

Seeing that it was already so late, Luo Wenzhou had wanted to stop somewhere to buy takeout on the way. Fei Du hadn't said what he wanted to eat, only make nitpicking comments about every restaurant along the way, the implication being that he was equally unwilling.

“You just had to come home to eat. What is there to eat at home? Will congee and salted vegetables suit your tastes? You're a bigger problem than even Luo Yiguo.” As he complained, Luo Wenzhou hastily put a bowl of washed rice into the freezer to chill, then started to chop meat and preserved egg, setting up the pressure cooker in a flurry. He irritably scolded Fei Du, who was standing by idly, “And you're as much in the way as Luo Yiguo!”

Fei Du, holding his game machine in his hands and walking around aimlessly, and Luo Yiguo, who at some point had come over to observe human cooking, one standing and one crouching, turned their gazes on him at the same time.

Luo Wenzhou looked back at the two of them. Within half a minute he was utterly routed. Having been defeated, he ungrudgingly went to work.

Fei Du could race motorbikes in a rainstorm with a crowd of aimless rich kids, could party with his drinking buddies until the middle of the night, could spend money like water, could spout a mouthful of glib talk; clearly he ought to have been flamboyant to his heart's content, but at the same time he was excessively controlled and reserved. Whether he was laughing or angry, the majority of it was brought out for show. Any real emotion was like a trace element that you needed a special instrument to get an inkling of.

Luo Wenzhou turned his naked eyes into microscopes, faintly discerning something that might have been his own mistake; Luo Wenzhou felt that Fei Du was “sticking” to him a little—just a little, about the viscosity of rice boiled soft.

Perhaps, having crossed paths with Xia Xiaonan, who'd kept saying, “She hated me,” internally he wasn't nearly as untouched and unassailable as he seemed

At Luo Wenzhou's direction, Fei Du took up a small cutting board and set about “mixing the salted vegetables.” The salted vegetables were leaf mustard bought from the store, which needed to be chopped up thin, then mixed up with cilantro and chili pepper, then have sesame oil and other such condiments added, a personal version of the northeastern dish “Tiger Vegetable Salad.”

No matter what you had him do, Fei Du would learn it very quickly, remembering when you'd said it only once and soon getting it right... only his knife work was a little lacking. He kept having to pause to look around for the right angle for the knife. The vegetable knife came down against the cutting board time after time, the sound almost carrying an echo, unusually hypnotic. When Luo Wenzhou had used the pressure cooker to cook a pot of his own version of preserved egg and lean meat congee and steamed some frozen buns, Fei Du had just finished chopping a small amount of leaf mustard.

Luo Yiguo, looking out from on top of the oven, stared curiously at Fei Du, observing what he was doing but not daring to rashly make trouble in front of him.

With his arms crossed over his chest, Luo Wenzhou watched his Master Fei and Master Cat. His heart, left behind on the icy rooftop of the administration building, finally seemed to return to his body, slowly sinking into his chest, producing a flower, the scientific name of which was “calm.”

While Fei Du was going back and forth over a chili pepper with the vegetable knife, Luo Wenzhou suddenly spoke, seeming casual. “Hey, do you want to...stay here with me after this?”

Fei Du’s hand slipped, and the knife fell, cutting the chili pepper in half on the cutting board.

The chili pepper, which had died unfulfilled, sprayed a pungent grievance up to the heavens, like a biological weapon, simultaneously drawing a round of sneezes from Fei Du and Luo Yiguo, their eyes watering from the spice.

Luo Wenzhou had been prepared, dodging a meter away, laughing like a dog—then he seized the opportunity to cover up his question just now, laughing merrily as he passed Fei Du a box of tissues.

Fei Du turned his head and fixed his reddened, streaming eyes on Luo Wenzhou’s somewhat flustered figure, having an impulse to answer, “All right!” But as soon as he opened his mouth, he couldn’t help turning his face away to sneeze again. The momentary impulse, like a weak flame in a storm lantern, died invisibly after having risen silently.

First thing the next morning, Luo Wenzhou was called down to the forensics department. The results had come out on the analysis of the blood on Xia Xiaonan’s backpack; the blood really was Feng Bin’s, and

there was also a hidden bloody fingerprint on the inside of the strap of the backpack that perfectly matched Lu Guosheng's fingerprints as recorded in the system.

“So when Lu Guosheng finished killing Feng Bin, he hauled Xia Xiaonan out of the garbage bin, searched her bag, took her money and cell phone, then gave the bag back to her.” As Tao Ran spoke, he was helping to block Lang Qiao—while His Majesty wasn't paying attention, the wretched eldest princess was miserably swapping buns all around. “But I still don't think Xia Xiaonan could be an accomplice. Just think about it. Don't you think it would be terrifying? Never mind a little girl, if I weren't a police officer, I definitely wouldn't dare to have dealings with a vicious person like Lu Guosheng.”

“And there's the suspicious patrolman.” After parting with her last cilantro-filled bun, Lang Qiao stuck out her head and put in a word. “At first I thought he was part of Lu Guosheng's group and was pretending to be a patrolman to come clean up the blood on the crime scene, but now I've thought about it, and what would be the point of cleaning up the blood? Lu Guosheng came face to face with Xia Xiaonan. We'd come to that conclusion as soon as we ran an analysis. He didn't even bother wearing gloves to commit a murder, why would he care about a bit of blood at the crime scene?”

Luo Wenzhou looked at her, and Lang Qiao quickly drew her head back, not daring to come into his line of sight again. She'd been racking her brains for an age, and she truly couldn't think of what she'd done to offend their boss. She simply felt that this gay guy's heart was like a needle at the bottom of the sea, entirely impossible to find under any weather conditions.

Lang Qiao felt for a time that her future was lightless and without prospects and wished to exchange one gay boss for another; for example, that domineering director-general Fei was all right.

“How is Xia Xiaonan?”

“I’m going to try having a talk with her in a while,” Tao Ran said. “Oh, right, I just contacted the teacher at Yufen, and those students. The teacher didn’t say anything and agreed to come over after class, but none of the students’ parents are very willing. We may need to talk to them again.”

When someone else’s child got hurt, a parent would naturally have some fear after the fact, but if, because of this, a public security bureau started summoning their own child for questioning day in and day out, that would be truly unpleasant.

“Understood.” Luo Wenzhou sighed. “If they’re really unwilling to come over, we’ll go make house calls one by one—first, let’s go question Xia Xiaonan.”

Xia Xiaonan was sitting there quietly, like a lantern with a picture of a girl on it, drawn in fine lines, vivid and realistic, but still only paper; if you weren’t careful for a moment, she could be burned to ashes by the flame.

She looked at Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou, not making a sound, then lowered her head again, her messy shag cut hair drooping from her temples, falling onto her shoulders.

Luo Wenzhou was rather expert at dealing with the utterly evil type, but seeing Xia Xiaonan, he felt his head swell and thereupon ceded the court to Tao Ran.

“Xia Xiaonan, right?” Like a well-spoken elective teacher, Tao Ran sat down across from her, a kindly look on his face, flashing his work ID. “I’m called Tao Ran. I work in the Criminal Investigation Team. I’d like to clear up a few points with you.”

Xia Xiaonan didn't look up, as if she hadn't heard, focusing her whole attention on picking her nails.

An hour later, Tao Ran walked out of the interrogation room in utter helplessness.

It was as if Xia Xiaonan had a snail's shell on her back. If there were signs of trouble outside, she'd retreat inside, trembling with fear. If you used soft words to try to persuade her, she wouldn't make a sound. If your manner was a little more forceful, she'd cry. Her crying was heart-rending; at one point she nearly went into shock. Tao Ran was at a loss. He'd had to send Luo Wenzhou, playing bad cop, out to the observation room midway.

From a certain point of view, she could be called unmovable either by force or persuasion.

From beginning to end, she only nodded her head three times.

The first time was when Tao Ran asked, "Were you there when Feng Bin was murdered?" The second time was when Luo Wenzhou lost his patience with her evasiveness and asked, "Did you collude with the murderer ahead of time? Otherwise, how would he have managed to trap you guys in those complicated little streets?"

The third time, it was when Tao Ran asked her, "Do you know who wanted to hurt Feng Bin?"

This time, Xia Xiaonan gave a clear answer. She said, "It was me."

As soon as the words "It was me" left her mouth, she collapsed, her nerves as thin as gossamer, like an old computer that was about to be scrapped and would crash as soon as you tried to play Spider Solitaire and wouldn't turn on again after. As for why she'd wanted to hurt Feng Bin, how she knew Lu Guosheng, where she wanted

criminal had gone after doing his business, they could get nothing out of her.

People who got involved in this kind of vicious crime, provided they weren't demented psychopaths, would often disavow involvement; even if they couldn't succeed in disavowing, they would subconsciously describe themselves as helpless victims—pleading innocence and shifting responsibility were common human reactions. They'd very rarely admit things so openly, unwilling even to make up a motive.

Xia Xiaonan's grandfather was waiting in the corridor. After his granddaughter had been brought to the public security bureau, the old man had finally noticed something was off. He'd asked around everywhere and managed to pin together some of the circumstances; he was frightened and overwhelmed. Seeing Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou walking towards him, he immediately stood up, at a loss, like a student who'd done something wrong.

Tao Ran poked Luo Wenzhou with his elbow. "Go talk to him."

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou turned tail and ran. "Director Li! Hey, Director Li, I've been looking for you all day. Have you found the materials I asked for yesterday? I need them in a hurry!"

Tao Ran: "..."

Bastard.

Because Xia Xiaonan was unwilling to cooperate, the whole case had reached another impasse.

Towards evening, the Criminal Investigation Team, having come up empty after a whole day's bustle, put their heads together in the conference room.

“The little girl won’t say anything aside from admitting over and over that she was the one who caused Feng Bin’s death.” When Xia Xiaonan’s mood had stabilized, Lang Qiao had also gone to talk to her. “Also, getting at it in a roundabout way, I found out that she has no idea that Lu Guosheng is a wanted criminal who ran for it fifteen years ago. When I mentioned him, she started to shake, not reacting even when she peeled back her nail. It was real fear, not faked.”

“Their homeroom teacher just came over to talk to me.” Tao Ran came in with a notebook under his arm. “She says that since Xia Xiaonan’s grades are good, her disposition is quiet and gentle, and she’s pretty, there are quite a few boys in the class who like her, but she’s never seen her get close with anyone—not the girls, either. The atmosphere in their class is very good, everyone is very friendly, hanging out all the time at school, like one big happy family. There’s no bullying.”

Lang Qiao said, “A teacher wouldn’t necessarily know whether there was bullying going on at school, though?”

“No.” Xiao Haiyang pushed at his glasses. “A teacher might not know about trivialities like individual fights and targeted attacks, but if there was long-term collective schoolyard bullying, she’d definitely know what was going on, unless she’s a young teacher who just graduated and has no experience at all. Either the schoolyard bullying really is nonexistent, or the teacher is lying.”

Xiao Haiyang’s political examination was sitting on Luo Wenzhou’s desk. He hadn’t had a chance to open it yet. Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou looked at him. “Didn’t I send you guys to talk to the students?”

“We talked.” Xiao Haiyang spread open his notebook. “Altogether, there were six students who ran away. There are four children aside from Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan, three male and one female. The girl is supposed to be running a fever from fright and shock and wouldn’t

see us, but we saw the three other boys. But none of them gave us any answers. It was as if they'd agreed on their lines in advance. They categorically asserted that they ran away to have fun. When the murder occurred, they were all waiting at the hotel. They didn't know that Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan were together, and they didn't know what the two of them had gone out for."

Luo Wenzhou thought about it. "I remember there was a fat little boy called Zhang Yifan. Stammers when he talks to strangers. He didn't say anything either?"

Xiao Haiyang shook his head.

Luo Wenzhou said, "What about the tourist attraction angle? Are there any clues about the fake patrolman? On the night of the crime, Lu Guosheng finished his murder and swaggered away from the scene. Are there any cameras that could have caught where he went after?"

A few travel-worn criminal police officers shook their heads at the same time.

Luo Wenzhou frowned and suddenly stood up, putting on his jacket and making to leave. Lang Qiao quickly said, "It's almost time to get off work, boss. Where are you going? Surely it can wait till tomorrow."

"I'm going to talk to those students again." Luo Wenzhou drank the tea on the table in one gulp. He knew that when he got off work today, he wouldn't see Fei Du in the parking lot across the street, so he held no expectations towards the words "get off work." More dead than alive, he said, "When I'm finished talking to them, I'll just drive home."

Lang Qiao looked at her watch. "But Yan Security Uni said their contact person is coming over soon. If you're not here, who's going to

sign his transfer orders?”

Luo Wenzhou waved his hand irritably. “Whoever. Who is he to make me wait respectfully to receive him? Don’t I have a job? Does he think everyone is as idle as those wretched students? Tell him to come again tomorrow.”

Before he’d finished, he heard a voice at the door saying, “Is your schedule already full today?”

CHAPTER 104 - Verhovensky XIV

Dumbstruck, Luo Wenzhou watched Fei Du, hands in his pockets, walk into the room. He'd changed into clothes of an academic style; there was even a book stuck under his arm to complete the disguise. Knocking lightly on the doorframe, Fei Du swept his gaze over the whole Criminal Investigation Team, which was giving off an air of needing support, and issued a collective nod in greeting. "Is my desk still in its place?"

Though Fei Du hadn't spent very long at the Criminal Investigation Team, since ancient times it had been true that it was easy to go from frugality to extravagance but difficult to go from extravagance to frugality; there was no harm if there was nothing to compare with; everyone remembered the midnight snack specially delivered by the six-star hotel and the endless drinks and snacks. Under the influence of this powerful sugar-coated bullet, they'd nearly developed a conditioned reflex—on seeing this handsome man, their first reaction was to secretly start salivating.

Luo Wenzhou looked on as his unworldly lackeys displayed their atrocious behavior, occupying his office and clustering around Fei Du as though welcoming a household god of wealth; then he finally came around—no wonder when he'd told Fei Du not to come pick him up last night, the wretched child had agreed so readily!

Tao Ran tapped on his shoulder from behind. Lowering his voice, he said to Luo Wenzhou, "Are you two spicing things up?"

Luo Wenzhou at once restrained his lost expression and displayed an unfathomable coolness, meaningfully saying to Tao Ran, "Oh, you. A person like you, sitting at home all day fantasizing about a wife, presently belongs to the germinal stage of socialism, do you understand? Germinal! You haven't even managed being well-fed and

clothed, and you're going after cultural and ideological attainments? Spicing things up has nothing to do with you."

Tao Ran: "..."

With deliberate impatience, Luo Wenzhou looked at his watch. "Only coming over at this hour—was he reserving a table at the dining hall? I really can't do anything with him."

Tao Ran maintained his smile, earnestly pondering how to break off relations. "Weren't you just going to pay home visits to those runaway students?"

"That's right." Luo Wenzhou waved his invisible tail. "If I weren't waiting for him, I'd have left already. He's holding me up.—Fei Du, don't waste time, if there's anything you need me to sign, put it in order right away."

Tao Ran watched Luo Wenzhou pull apart the crowd to go into the room and grab Fei Du. He really couldn't resist smiling, feeling that his two anxieties had cancelled each other out, like fighting fire with fire. He truly felt at ease. But his easy smile hadn't yet fully formed when the phone in his pocket vibrated. Tao Ran fished it out to look and saw that Chang Ning had sent him a message.

Chang Ning said: "My friend gave me two tickets to a water acrobatics performance this weekend. She just ditched me at the last minute. Do you want to come?"

Like someone suffering from dyslexia, Tao Ran spent ten minutes reading this short message, wanting nothing better than to pull every word apart and chew it over, swallowing it down into his belly.

Chang Ning wasn't one of those forward young ladies. Even when she was inviting him to see a performance, she had to first give a long

string of reasons. And for her, this was already a clear display of her intentions, but...

When Lao Yang had been alive, he'd talked quite a lot with Tao Ran—each time he'd seen Luo Wenzhou's revolting “Why the hell am I so handsome?” attitude, he'd wanted to complain about him and couldn't calm down.

Not long before his death, Lao Yang had shown Tao Ran a picture on his phone of his daughter's university admission notice, showing off. Then, thinking of something, he'd suddenly sighed and said to Tao Ran, “A blink of an eye, and my child is so grown up. My generation has muddled its way through more than half our lifetimes. I remember when her mom first agreed to marry me. It was my superior who introduced us. I felt so happy then, thinking that I'd somehow managed to trick myself a wife and wouldn't have to be a bachelor anymore. I didn't think of anything else. Now I think I was too careless. I only thought about how good she was. I didn't know I was a burden.”

At the time, Tao Ran had laughed and ridiculed the old fellow for bragging while pretending to complain and hadn't taken it to heart. He'd only thought back to it long after, understanding what he'd meant. In times of peace, who didn't want a family to spend his days with, a wife and kids and a warm house? But in times of danger, you'd want nothing better than to be a monkey who'd emerged spontaneously from a crack in a stone, without father or mother, without family or friends, a barefoot ruffian, stark naked and free of cares.

Tao Ran sighed softly. As his colleagues babbled next to him, he deleted the “All right” he'd nearly sent and instead replied, “I'm sorry, I have to work overtime this weekend.”

He wanted to use the weekend to secretly go see shiniang, even if shiniang wouldn't see him, and drop some things off to display his

kindly intentions. The photographs Lao Yang had left behind were still waiting for him to investigate, and there were also those shocking phrases... Tao Ran pinched the center of his brow, feeling that in his bones he wasn't the sort of person who did great things; as soon as he took anything to heart, he'd be uneasy night and day, tossing and turning endlessly. In spite of himself, he envied Luo Wenzhou, who'd use the sky as a blanket if it came falling down.

Ten minutes later, Luo Wenzhou, wrapped in his comforter the thickness of the sky, kidnapped the Criminal Investigation Team's chief financial backer.

"President Fei, I bet you've never gotten a telling off in your life?" Luo Wenzhou said, sitting in the car. "Come on, I'll take you to get a telling off—the Xingfu Gardens Estate on Hongzhi Road, turn on the GPS if you're not familiar with it, let's go."

Luo Wenzhou had thought all along that if there was anyone who could say anything useful, it would be that pudgy little Zhang Yifan, so he was planning to go talk to him again.

These students had already been questioned at the City Bureau the day before, and today Xiao Haiyang and the others had gone over again. The parents were already out of patience. They might agree once or twice but not a third time; going again this time, even using his belt to think, Luo Wenzhou could imagine the expressions the parents would make.

As Luo Wenzhou considered this, he opened Xiao Haiyang's record and political examination, which he'd gotten from HR—Xiao Haiyang's parents had divorced, and his mother had died of illness. His father had had custody of him before he'd grown to adulthood. His father and stepmother ran a car dealership, and he had a younger half-brother who was about to take his university entrance exams. His family circumstances were all right, but they weren't wealthy. The family was all ordinary people. No close relatives had been involved

in a crime, died a violent death, or even had any background with the public security authorities. He himself had graduated a few years ago and his background was clean and simple, so there wasn't much material.

Luo Wenzhou frowned—this was strange.

Fei Du glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. He didn't ask what he was reading, only pointed out to him, "We're almost there."

Luo Wenzhou closed Xiao Haiyang's file and looked up at the big field of high-quality estates up ahead, temporarily calling back his thoughts. He gave a frustrated sigh and said, "How about this, you pretend to go to the bathroom and come back when they're done throwing their tantrum."

Fei Du unhurriedly drove ahead according to the GPS. "Don't worry, as long as there's a female member of the household, I won't get a telling off."

"..." Luo Wenzhou reached over and put a hand on his waist. "Seducing a married woman right in front of my face? Little whelp, you must not want to live anymore?"

Fei Du smiled silently.

However, President Fei didn't have an opportunity to seduce a married woman—when they knocked on Zhang Yifan's door, the trembling boy indicated that his parents weren't home. They'd gone out for the evening to a dinner party.

The adults were usually busy, so they'd paid a great price to send their child to a boarding school, entrusting the teachers with full responsibility—this couldn't be taken as not caring about the child; when they'd spent so much money, how could they not care?

As long as his grades and his manners were good, they'd reward him, buy him things. If he did something wrong, dared to run away, then of course he'd have to be punished, punished by going without meals, having his allowance taken away, being shut into the house to reflect on himself.

Clearly distinguished rewards and punishments: a principled education.

As for what the adolescent child was thinking, that wasn't important. What valuable ideas could a group of little whelps have? There were children starving in Africa; what did this child, who could have anything he wanted, have to quarrel about?

“Do sit down.” Zhang Yifan was rather polite; he poured water for them. He was only very shy with strangers, unwilling to look up and meet his guests' eyes, sitting in front of them looking as dejected as though he were being interrogated. “Some other police officers came by today. Do you want to ask the same questions?”

Luo Wenzhou looked him up and down. “Do you still remember me?”

Zhang Yifan looked at him quickly, then nodded.

Luo Wenzhou slowed his voice. “I don't know whether you've heard. Last night, Xia Xiaonan slipped out of the hospital and climbed up to a rooftop—“

Zhang Yifan was surprised, immediately raising his head, his hands squeezing into fists. “Oh!”

“We rescued her.” Luo Wenzhou made a gesture. “Just a little more, and she'd have jumped off the building.”

First Zhang Yifan let out a big sigh of relief, then he hurriedly followed up, “Is she all right?”

“She wasn’t injured,” Luo Wenzhou said, watching the boy’s reaction, then adding, “Although after we brought her back, she admitted to us that she colluded with the murderer who killed Feng Bin, that she was the one who wanted to kill Feng Bin... You guys are already over fourteen, so I don’t think that can be called being all right.”

Zhang Yifan first opened his eyes wide and blurted out, “No!”

Then, all the blood drained clean out of his face. Zhang Yifan clenched his teeth. In the abundantly heated room, sweat gathered at the tip of his nose.

Just then, Fei Du put in a word. “Do you also like Xia Xiaonan?”

His words were like a restless spark. The pudgy boy’s face went from white to red, and he closed his mouth tightly, holding himself back so fiercely he seemed about to explode. But when Luo Wenzhou thought he wouldn’t be able to hold back any longer, the boy suddenly looked at Fei Du, gaze flitting over his coat, worn open, his wristwatch, and his indolent but alert posture. In that instant, Fei Du clearly read fear in the boy’s eyes.

As Fei Du stared, Zhang Yifan, like a balloon with the air let out, shriveled up in front of their eyes, tightly covering his mouth. Then, unable to sit still, the boy seemed to arrive at some decision. He stood up and went into his bedroom. A moment later, he came out carrying two envelopes and pushed them in front of Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou took them in astonishment and opened them to have a look. He found that there were two bank cards inside.

“On those is the education fund my mom deposited for me and the New Year’s money I’ve saved up since I was little. The PIN is the same for both cards. It’s my birthday, the date you recorded at the police bureau—there should be 300,000 altogether... Oh, and there should

also be some interest.” Zhang Yifan struggled to sit upright, using a posture he must have learned from some traitor to the nation bribing an enemy agent in a TV drama, clumsily lowering his voice to say his lines. “I’d like to ask you to look after Xia Xiaonan. She’s not that kind of person, there must be some misunderstanding here.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Fei Du: “...”

This was a moment that could truly go down in history. The largest sum of money and goods Captain Luo had ever been offered as a bribe in his career, and the briber was a minor!

Where were today’s children learning these things from?!

Luo Wenzhou tapped gently with his fingers, returning the bank cards to the envelopes.

“You won’t tell me the real reason you ran away, won’t tell me about Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan’s relationship, and won’t tell me who had a grievance against Feng Bin at school—and you want to use these things...to have me do what? Privately let Xia Xiaonan go?” Luo Wenzhou sighed wearily. “Darling, are you crazy?”

CHAPTER 105 - Verhovensky XV

Fat little Zhang Yifan looked foolishly at Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou put the envelopes on the table. He laughed angrily. “You want to buy off a police officer with 300,000? Isn’t that pretty ridiculous?”

Zhang Yifan didn’t hear that this was a joke; he actually took it for the truth. His round little face showed a trace of the panic of someone who had come to his wits’ end. He haltingly said, “But...this really is all I have...”

“Where did you learn this from? Encounter any trouble, and you pull out two cards to deal with it.” Luo Wenzhou’s smile gradually cooled. He looked sternly at the boy. “You think you can resolve a murder with money? What wretched teacher taught you this? Tell me, and I’ll have them out of education tomorrow!”

At home, Zhang Yifan was afraid of his dad. Outside, he was also afraid of stern and powerful men like his father. He was scared silent as a cicada in winter by Luo Wenzhou, not making a sound.

“If Xia Xiaonan killed someone, it doesn’t matter whether she did it with her own hands or colluded with someone else. She still has to pay the price. Covering up from the police where a criminal who’s been wanted for fifteen years has gone, colluding with a wanted criminal, harming a classmate—what kind of resentment warrants such deranged behavior?”

With every sentence Luo Wenzhou spoke, the boy’s face grew whiter.

“Never mind killing someone, there’s also dismemberment—“

That day at the City Bureau, the police had only questioned them; they hadn't told the students the details of Feng Bin's death. The teacher and parents of course wouldn't have mentioned such bloody things either. Zhang Yifan had been locked up since coming home and hadn't yet returned to school. Suddenly hearing the word "dismemberment," he was so scared he jumped up off the couch. "Dismemberment? Feng Bin was... was..."

Luo Wenzhou very much wanted to describe how Feng Bin had looked in death, but when the words reached his lips, he looked at that still childish face and swallowed them down. He only asked, "Why did you want to run away? Who egged you on? Who wanted to hurt Feng Bin?"

"No-no one! No one wanted to hurt him!" Zhang Yifan shook his head over and over again. As if he'd learned his lines a thousand times over, he blurted out, "We went to celebrate Christmas..."

Fei Du put his cup on the table and quietly interrupted Zhang Yifan.

"Christmas?" he asked. "What's special about Christmas?"

Zhang Yifan was like a squirrel with its neck squeezed. His pupils contracted, and he curled up. A frightening silence spread through the exquisitely-decorated living room of his home.

After a good while, the boy could hold back no longer. He began to sob unrestrainedly.

"I'll call your parents." Luo Wenzhou reached out to pick up his phone from the table. "What are they doing attending a dinner party? Are they dining with the Chairman?"

Zhang Yifan threw himself at him immediately, holding Luo Wenzhou back with both hands.

His palms were soaked with sweat, sticking to the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand. They were ice-cold.

Luo Wenzhou felt that his ten fingers together didn't feel like those of a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old strapping young man but instead like those of a weak and clumsy lost child. Because he lacked strength, he couldn't even trust his own fingers; he instinctively used his whole hand when grabbing things, as if that was the only way he could get a firm grip.

"Don't...don't call..." The pudgy boy squeezed the words out from his viscera. "I'm scared."

"What are you scared of?" Fei Du didn't turn a hair. Seeing Zhang Yifan immediately look away after inadvertently meeting his gaze, he keenly asked, "Are you scared of me, or some person who's a lot like me?"

"Zhang Yifan," Luo Wenzhou continued in a low voice, "what was it you wanted to tell me yesterday at the City Bureau?"

Zhang Yifan was sobbing so hard he could barely sit still. He twitched all over, failing again and again to spit out clear speech.

Fei Du looked him over. The boy wasn't tall. He had small features, a pleasant and fortuitous appearance.

Because he'd run away, he wasn't wearing his school uniform. His t-shirt was pulled tight over his body, a somewhat round little belly sticking out. Over the little belly was Superman, flexing his biceps. On the back of the shirt was a huge fist. Looking only at the "packaging," you would have thought that this cloth covered a body full of strength, that of a great and powerful man of ample proportions.

Zhang Yifan's bedroom was visible from the living room couch. The bedroom door wasn't closed; behind the door hung a decorative sandbag and a pair of boxing gloves. There were superhero movie posters stuck to the wall. A corner of the bed was visible, too; it had a roaring mountain lion printed on it, looking out from the bed with incomparable disdain.

Zhang Yifan's living space was so uniform that even the little posters displayed his parents' inexpressible expectations for him. They would have loved to turn into a knife blade, pare the fat off his body by any means necessary, pare him down into a Mike Tyson, into a Wolverine, into an indomitable real man with skin of copper and bones of iron.

But things turned out contrary to their wishes; the child was still a trembling crybaby.

"Do you like Superman?" Fei Du suddenly asked. "You can nod or shake your head."

Zhang Yifan looked at him evasively, gave a forceful whimper, and shook his head.

"Oh, I get it. Your mom and dad like to buy you clothes with Superman on them, right? There's always some discrepancy between your way of thinking and your parents'. When I was little, I also often ran counter to my father's expectations." At this point, Fei Du paused slightly. Luo Wenzhou subconsciously looked at him, saw that his voice was gentle, and there was a smile at the corners of his mouth, as if talking about a childhood experience in which warmth and contradiction coexisted; there was no sign that he was making anything up.

Fei Du continued, "At those times, we'd often have to come to terms. You have to be brought up by someone, right? But I also had my own means of rebelling."

Zhang Yifan, weeping, stared abjectly at him.

Fei Du smiled at him. "I'll tell you about it in a while.—Did you go to Yufen for junior middle, too?"

Zhang Yifan nodded.

"Junior middle school belongs to the nine years of compulsory education. Public schools ordinarily don't charge fees for it, but your school does, and they're expensive, right? I hear that there's a special Western restaurant in your school cafeteria?"

Fei Du asked the boy some questions as though making idle chat, all questions that could be answered with a nod or a shake of the head.

Zhang Yifan's rapid breathing gradually calmed. Fei Du considered his expression, reckoning that he was about ready to speak normally. Thereupon he scooped up some sugar cubes from the odds and ends basket under the coffee table and put them into Zhang Yifan's cup, picked up the tea pot next to him, and poured some hot water for him, waiting patiently for him to drink most of it before he tossed out the next question.

Fei Du said, "Do you like school?"

Zhang Yifan paused, then shook his head hard.

Fei Du leaned forward slightly, leaning his elbows on his knees, bringing his line of sight even with Zhang Yifan's. He slowed his voice. "Have you been bullied at school?"

This time, Zhang Yifan was silent for a longer time, then he shook his head very firmly.

As if weighing something, Fei Du folded a sugar cube wrapper over and over, considering the pudgy boy's expression—Zhang Yifan had

more or less calmed down; there'd been no fluctuation in his emotions during his silence just now. Judging by his body language, he seemed to have just been recalling. When he'd shaken his head, his movements hadn't been at all forced.

Either it was true, or he believed he hadn't been bullied.

Fei Du said, "Then have Feng Bin, Xia Xiaonan, and the others been bullied?"

At first Zhang Yifan nodded. Then he hesitated for a moment and shook his head, quietly saying, "...Feng Bin wasn't bullied, he was with them, but he...he wasn't the same, he was pretty nice."

Fei Du's fingers, tapping on the wrapper, paused.

Feng Bin had been with "them"; he'd belonged to the faction of bullies.

"They...they got their eyes on Xia Xiaonan," Zhang Yifan said without introduction or conclusion. "We had to run. That was what Feng... Feng Bin said."

His words were disconnected, but Luo Wenzhou somehow heard something ghastly behind them. He followed up, "Who got their eyes on Xia Xiaonan?"

"Them... The masters."

Luo Wenzhou nearly suspected his own ears had gone on the fritz. "Who? The masters? Then what on earth are you? A slave?"

"I'm not a slave, I'm an ordinary person, a 'commoner,'" Zhang Yifan said quietly. "Wang Xiao and the others are the slaves."

Aside from Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan, there were four other students who'd run away. Wang Xiao was the one girl among them—Xiao Haiyang and his colleague had been turned away at the door by the girl's parents because she'd had a fever, and they hadn't seen her.

“Wang Xiao was the girl who was with you guys?” Seeing Zhang Yifan nod, Luo Wenzhou asked, “You said ‘Wang Xiao and the others.’ Who are the ‘others’? The other two boys?”

Zhang Yifan nodded again.

“‘Masters,’ ‘commoners,’ and ‘slaves,’” Luo Wenzhou repeated the appellations he'd heard come out of Zhang Yifan's mouth, feeling an aura of middle school hit him in the face. It was simply rather absurd; these brats seemed to be earnestly playing a large-scale real life version of a board game, but there was a chill unceasingly surging upwards from his feet. “You mean that Feng Bin belonged with the ‘masters,’ Wang Xiao and those others belong with the ‘slaves,’ and only you are a ‘commoner.’ I've got that right, haven't I?—So what is Xia Xiaonan?”

“Xia Xiaonan is...the ‘deer.’” Zhang Yifan squeezed the words out of his throat, his not yet fully developed voice thin as a thread, seeming about to collapse any time. “Every year at Christmas, after the Christmas party organized by the English teachers, the students have their own activity. The school doesn't close for Christmas or New Years, and the dormitories aren't locked up. We can play all night. Starting from junior middle, each year, there'd be...”

Luo Wenzhou had a feeling that the “activity” wasn't gathering together to play Fight the Landlord. He asked at once, “Play all night? Play what?”

“Play a hunting game, like the kind in *Surviving the Game*.” Zhang Yifan involuntarily lowered his voice. “Every year they have a lottery before Christmas and pick five people out of the ‘commoners’ who

can participate in the hunting game, and if you win you can join them.”

“Join them? You mean you can stop being an ordinary person and become one of the group of ‘masters?’ What are the benefits of joining? You can bully whoever you want?”

“If you join, you’ll be safe,” the pudgy boy said pitifully to Luo Wenzhou. “As long as you don’t get into a disagreement with the other ‘masters,’ then you won’t be bullied at random, won’t become a ‘slave,’ and you won’t somehow become ‘prey.’ You can go to the cafeteria right away after class and don’t have to avoid the ‘masters.’ You can have the keys to your dormitory and the dormitory building and not have to be afraid of getting locked out, you can...you can go to school in peace.”

Unable to resist, you could only strive to join them in order to receive the treatment due to an ordinary student.

“Even during Yuan Shikai’s restoration, he didn’t dare to restore the Mongol dynasty system. Your school’s students are really something,” Luo Wenzhou said slowly. “You were picked by the lottery this year?”

Zhang Yifan looked at him, silently acknowledging it.

Luo Wenzhou said, “How do you play this hunting game of yours?”

Zhang Yifan clenched his fists. The big clock in the in the living room went forward a step at a time, the ticking second hand moving with a metallic sound, going step by step towards the endless future. When it had made a long trek, Zhang Yifan finally got up enough courage to open his mouth—

“After it starts, everyone participating in the game has to find the ‘deer.’ They’ll only announce who the ‘deer’ is when the game starts. Before that, no one knows who it’s going to be. After they’ve

announced it, the ‘deer’ has five minutes to run and hide, and then the ‘hunters’ have until daybreak to catch them. Whoever catches them wins.”

“Your school is so big, with so many classroom buildings and dormitories. With one person hiding and five people searching, how can they find them?” Luo Wenzhou asked. “And a little girl like Xia Xiaonan, wouldn’t she be able to find any random nook and hide all night?”

“It’s not five people searching,” Fei Du said lightly next to him. “It’s the whole school looking for her.”

Luo Wenzhou froze at once.

But Zhang Yifan nodded.

The clique of bullies at school held the right to speak, and the ordinary students were like common folk under a tyrant’s despotic rule. Like Zhang Yifan, they only wanted to live in peace, only asked not to somehow become the person being bullied. Once they accepted this order, they would instinctively submit, like people who saw their classmates being bullied and felt discontented about it but only dared to look on from the sidelines.

The people who could participate in the game were “candidates.” Each candidate was a stock with the potential to increase in value.

If you gave one of the candidates the critical information about the ‘deer’ that he needed to join the clique, that person would naturally protect you—no, perhaps the more quick-witted would already have joined that certain person’s faction before the start of the game.

The five candidates in the so-called “hunting game” had all been chosen by lottery?

The pudgy boy had obviously lied about this. Looking at his practiced conduct in attempting to bribe a police officer, you could just about deduce how he'd gotten his place.

“When the deer has been caught,” Fei Du asked, “what happens?”

Zhang Yifan's face was ashen.

CHAPTER 106 - Verhovensky XVI

Happy laughter and cheerful voices are everywhere; you can't see any of the tears these people hide behind their laughter. - Demons

The female teacher's surname was Ge. Her name was Ge Ni.

She was around forty, wearing glasses, her makeup light, her speech refined and well-mannered. She was wearing a half-skirted coat. From her hair to her heels, all was dignified.

So dignified she hardly seemed like a middle school teacher.

Being a core class teacher at a middle school, especially a homeroom teacher, meant having the sword of Damocles of university entrance rates hanging over your head. As soon as you opened your eyes, you'd feel you were a mentally and physically exhausted sheep dog corralling a group of blind strayed lambs over a single-plank bridge, frequently drowning in a snow storm of exam papers. Very few people would dress themselves up well enough to be able to take fashion shoots in the high street.

No time, no energy, no proper setting, and no one to see...and no money—those were the normal conditions of a female teacher's bitter life.

Luo Wenzhou calmly looked her over. As Feng Bin's homeroom teacher, Ge Ni had been invited individually to cooperate with the investigation.

This time, the person who received her had changed to the captain of the Criminal Investigation Team.

At first Luo Wenzhou spoke warmly, asking, "How long have you led the class, Teacher Ge?"

Ge Ni answered in a soft voice. “I took it over less than half a year ago.”

“I see.” Luo Wenzhou nodded. “Are you familiar with the female student Wang Xiao?”

Teacher Ge smiled slightly, not showing teeth. “There are thirty-six students altogether in our class. I have each student’s circumstances in mind.—Wang Xiao is a very well-behaved and quiet girl. Her grades really aren’t ideal at the moment, but she’s always been very diligent, especially outstanding in English class.”

“I heard this child only transferred to your school in junior middle Year 3. Her studies weren’t very good, so her family spent a great deal of money to enroll her in your school’s international path.”

Yufen Middle School’s “direct road to study abroad” was one of its tricks for recruiting students. Starting from junior middle, the school had a certain proportion of foreign studies classes, and it had agreements with many foreign schools for studying abroad. Each year during the winter and summer vacations, they organized winter and summer camps to take classes abroad; after senior middle Year 2, they even had a special team to assist in planning for study abroad. Aside from students they had “for show,” like Xia Xiaonan, the majority of those who spent money to study at Yufen were planning to go study abroad right after graduating senior middle.

“All parents have high expectations of their children.” Teacher Ge pushed at her glasses, which had slipped down, very aptly saying, “It’s nothing for the adults have to scrimp and save a little to give her the best education.”

“I don’t think it stopped at ‘scrimping and saving?’ From what I understand, she must have used up all her family’s resources.” Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes slightly. “Your school’s expenses are an

overwhelming burden for us ordinary salaried workers. In Wang Xiao's situation, ninety percent of her parents' income will be going in tribute to the school, and they'll still have to use their family savings. With her grades, it will be difficult to test even into an ordinary undergraduate program. If she can't smoothly go abroad in the future, then won't her family have been ruined for nothing?"

Hearing this bitter argument, Teacher Ge agreed, "That risk really is an objective reality, but..."

Luo Wenzhou didn't wait for her to finish talking. "So the child is tantamount to carrying her whole family's hopes on her shoulders. No matter what, she can't leave school. No matter what, she has to smoothly complete her studies for the next few years, smoothly go abroad—even if she's suffering from all kinds of bullying at school, even if she'd rather be dead, she still can't say a word at home. No matter how large her grievance, she still has to swallow it. Teacher, does that make sense to you?"

Ge Ni's expression altered slightly. Her lips shook. She was only now realizing that today's questioning wasn't routine.

"Suffering from all kinds of bullying?" She paused, then raised her long, shapely eyebrows very high, displaying excessive innocence and blankness. "That's... Captain Luo, what are you talking about? Our class..."

"Is all very friendly, one big happy family," Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly finished her sentence. He leaned forward slightly and very oppressively said, "Teacher Ge, do you know that the students organize their own activity after the Christmas party every year?"

Ge Ni pushed at her glasses for the second time within a very short span. "Yes, I know—our school strongly emphasizes study abroad programs. To help the students adjust to cultural differences in the

future, we encourage them to organize activities for Western holidays like Halloween and Christmas. It's tradition to let them stay out all night without locking up. They can arrange their own time and exchange sentiments with their classmates..."

Luo Wenzhou interrupted her again. "Exchange sentiments using the means of a 'hunting game?'"

"Hunting game?" Ge Ni very quickly blinked her eyes a few times, then smiled. "Who told you about that? I don't know what their game is called. Ah, children these days, they all like to play games that sound frightening, all about 'killing,' 'killing werewolves,' or 'werewolves killing,' and really they're just playing cards."

Luo Wenzhou's gaze displayed a faint chill. "I'm afraid the students in your class aren't only playing cards. Someone told me they play a game where one person hides and everyone 'hunts them down to kill them.' That must make a lot of noise. And the school doesn't know about it at all?"

Ge Ni gave an "Ah!" Her smile didn't move a hair.

"But isn't that just hide-and-seek?" she said lightly.

Hide-and-seek.

The games big children played often had similarities to the games of little children—only they were more complicated, trickier.

Yesterday evening, going back and forth, Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du had pried open pudgy little Zhang Yifan's mouth.

Zhang Yifan had said that last Christmas, the 'deer' had been Wang Xiao, who'd just transferred to Yufen. She'd had no idea what was going on then. She hid in the dormitory's public bathroom. Before

hiding, without any vigilance, she'd spoken to another girl from her dorm.

In the end, not ten minutes later, a girl taking part in the game rushed in and dragged her out by the hair.

Wang Xiao hadn't known then that her nightmare had begun.

The person who was appointed the "deer" wasn't only responsible for hiding so people could catch her during the hunting game; it also meant that she would be excluded and despised by the school's "mainstream." For a time she would become the person everyone in school could bully.

When you had disputes with other classmates, there were always worries—was this a person you could thoroughly "offend?" Would they be as easy to bully as they ordinarily seemed? What was their family background? Whose side would the teachers and others stand on? Did they belong to some clique, did they have any friends you couldn't afford to offend? Therefore, you couldn't cheerfully turn hostile; even if you would have loved nothing better than to hack them to pieces, you still had to preserve appearances on the surface.

But the "deer" was different, a "government-sanctioned" waste of space, certainly very useless and loathsome. Dealing with this kind of person complied with "public opinion" and "justice." Everyone would be on your side, gasp in admiration at your sharp and bitter "talent." You could find this person when you had nothing else to do to vent your frustrations, even relieve stress, as well as contributing to promoting your friendliness with the others, accomplishing many things at once.

"Who didn't play hide-and-seek when they were little?" Luo Wenzhou crossed his arms in front of his chest, leaning back in his chair, looking loftily down on the delicate and pretty teacher across from him. "Though the usual rules are that whoever gets caught has to do

the catching in the next round. Perhaps it's my own inexperience, but I've never heard of rules that say the person who gets caught has to drink from the toilet."

Ge Ni said, "What?"

"Last Christmas, in this so-called... 'hide-and-peek' of yours, some of her female classmates pulled Wang Xiao out of the bathroom by her hair. They'd been forcing her to drink water from the toilet. When Wang Xiao refused, your students, with their 'fraternal unity, like one big happy family,' stripped all her clothes off in the lobby of the girls' dormitory and let everyone watch."

Luo Wenzhou tossed a folder in front of Ge Ni. The corners of some photographs stuck out. Ge Ni instantly clutched the handbag on her knees.

"These are the photographs that were circulated among the students then. Would you like to take a look, Teacher Ge?"

Ge Ni opened the folder, took one look, and instantly reached out to close it. The calm and composure on her face at last vanished altogether. "That's...that's too... I'm sorry, I didn't know about this, I wasn't their homeroom teacher then... I'll have to..."

"In the first half of senior middle Year 1, Wang Xiao was caught outside the dormitory by a patrolling teacher a dozen times because she was locked out at lights out and went roaming around. Because she didn't mend her ways, the school took disciplinary action against her." Luo Wenzhou looked into the teacher's eyes. "As homeroom teacher, you may not know the rest, but you must be aware of this?"

Ge Ni said, "That... About that, I..."

"I think it's strange, Teacher Ge. This girl was punished for constantly not returning to her dormitory. Why did you just tell me that she was

‘well-behaved and quiet?’”

Ge Ni forced a smile and gave a pale and powerless defense. “I...I was afraid that if I spoke irresponsibly in front of the police, it would make the child look bad...”

“Then you truly are sincere and responsible, a credit to China.—Do you know why Wang Xiao went on purpose to take walks after lights out? Because when lights out was about to be called, people would throw her bedding and clean clothes out the window. If she went out to pick them up, the girl who had the keys would lock the doors to the dormitory and their floor.

“Why would the child rather be punished than tell a teacher or her parents? Because she knew whose territory the school was, and she knew the teachers’s disposition. When she was being beat up, a teacher would walk by and pretend not to see her!” Luo Wenzhou gave Ge Ni absolutely no opportunity to speak, his cold gaze shooting towards her neatly made-up face. “Teacher Ge, how do you think this degenerate fellow professional of yours should be dealt with?”

Ge Ni said, “I...I...”

Watching on the surveillance feed, Tao Ran looked at Fei Du in shock. “What on earth is this? Is this true, or is Lao Luo fooling her?”

Fei Du was reading through the roster for Yufen Middle School’s entire senior middle Year 1 grade. Without looking up, he said, “It’s true.—If they didn’t want to be bullied by everyone, they had to attach themselves to some fellow student with ‘power’ and become a ‘slave.’ Otherwise they might be chosen as the ‘deer’ the following year. The majority of the children chosen have weak natures, come from unremarkable families. You know, in ordinary surroundings, children like these will also be somewhat ostracized—if you sacrifice these few people who won’t resist, the remaining vast majority will attain a certain level of internal satisfaction...”

The tone of Tao Ran's voice altered. "Internal satisfaction?"

Fei Du looked up at him, seeing that the pure and kind-hearted Deputy-Captain Tao's features were about to fly off his face. He couldn't help smiling. But then, restraining his smile, he said, "Internal satisfaction.—Some children are followers. They think, 'I fit in, I'm united with everyone against a common enemy. Since everyone despises her, the problem must be with her. She deserves it.' There are also some children who are cleverer, more clear-headed. They'll think, 'I have control, I'm not at the lowest level at school. Bullying her and ostracizing her will improve my social standing.'—With a target like Wang Xiao, the social order in the school will be very stable, and it'll really be more unified. The child who set this up to begin with really is a genius."

Tao Ran's shocked face clearly expressed, *Do you know what you're saying?*

Fei Du knew he'd made a slip of the tongue. Calmly, he backtracked, adding, "In the sarcastic sense.—The child who revealed this to us yesterday said that the 'target' chosen this year was Xia Xiaonan. Xia Xiaonan is more fortunate than Wang Xiao, because she isn't an ordinary little girl. She's rather pretty."

Tao Ran was fobbed off. Frowning, he pondering for a moment. He said, "You mean that because Feng Bin had a crush on Xia Xiaonan, he betrayed the group he belonged to."

"Wang Xiao and the other two boys were 'slaves' who were pushed to the limits of their endurance. Zhang Yifan also liked the beautiful young girl. Having just spent money to attain the qualifications to join the group, he learned of this news and got a serious shock and simply ran away with them before Christmas."

Tao Ran said, "What were they trying to do?"

“Didn’t Feng Bin leave that letter before they left? I guess they wanted to expose this business,” Fei Du said. “First use running away to attract the notice of society, and then, at a suitable time, go through the media to expose what was happening at Yufen Middle School. They never expected that Feng Bin would be murdered.”

“No... Wait a minute.” Tao Ran made a slightly panicked pausing gesture at him. “Just wait. You mean that they wanted to expose this business, so Feng Bin died, and now no one dares to open their mouth—in other words, Feng Bin’s death is connected to his fellow students? One of his fellow students, a middle school brat, already knows how to kill people to silence them?”

Fei Du turned his gaze towards the surveillance feed.

Ge Ni had been pushed to collapse by Luo Wenzhou’s questioning. Tears and snivel were coming down in full force, and her impregnable dignity had vanished. “I’m just a salary-earning common person. Many of the students come from wealthy and respectable families. Sometimes there’s really nothing we can do about them. We can only turn a blind eye. Captain Luo...have pity on us... I really didn’t know...”

“Bullshit,” said Luo Wenzhou.

Ge Ni was a civilized person. She was scared silent as a cicada in winter by the great scoundrel Luo Wenzhou’s outburst.

“We now suspect that one of your scumbag students hired an assassin,” Luo Wenzhou said. “The brats may not understand what degree of offense that is, but are you fucking telling me you don’t understand, either? Ge Ni, you’d better give me an explanation, or I’ll have reason to suspect you’re involved in this!”

Panic-stricken, Ge Ni desperately shook her head. “I didn’t know, this is unjust treatment, I beg of you, don’t ask me, I really...”

Fei Du drew closer to the security camera feed, carefully considering the female teacher’s expression. “She clearly knew what was going on... Wow, to have the homeroom teacher protect them like this, this person’s family truly must be highly positioned, and possibly they have close connections to the school, a trustee or someone who donated a great deal of money...”

Tao Ran turned his head towards the report his colleagues had handed over and asked Fei Du, “Is there anything else?”

“There’s... Tao Ran-ge, I’ve been thinking, why did they choose Xia Xiaonan?” Fei Du’s index fingers tapped lightly on the table.

Tao Ran thought about it. “Because she only transferred in for senior middle school, her family is poor, and there’s no one to look after her or support her?”

“No. A pretty girl with excellent grades isn’t a very good choice. Think about the girl you had a crush on in senior middle. Plenty of boys would like a girl like Xia Xiaonan. Rashly attacking her could attract needless trouble... So why?”

Hit out of nowhere in his weak point, Tao Ran’s train of thought broke off momentarily, and his speech faltered.

But Fei Du didn’t take notice of his unusual condition. “Excellent grades... Excellent grades?”

He suddenly paused, then went through the student records. After transferring to Yufen’s senior middle school, Xia Xiaonan’s first semester test scores were the highest in her grade.

Fei Du looked up at once. “Who’s second?”

CHAPTER 107 - Verhovensky XVII

“Feng Bin is dead!”

“What? How did he die? Heavens!”

“Could it be because of... Shh!”

The news online had spread at the speed of electromagnetic waves, instantly covering a great swath of cell phone screens. First thing in the morning, Ge Ni’s English class was taken over by a substitute teacher. The empty seats of the absent were unusually striking to the eye. Between classes, the atmosphere in the school was extremely strange.

Yufen Middle School’s classroom building was luxuriously fitted up, bright and clean, the marble floor as bright as a mirror. On each floor was a school custodian wearing a standard uniform, ready to sweep at any time. The smell of orchid-scented cleaning liquid spread through every corner.

The female student was wearing a sweater and a short skirt with her school uniform casually draped over her, pretending to comply with the school’s dress code. She stepped on the floor the school custodian had just gone over, her foot covered in mud picked up from who knew where, leaving a trail of muddy footprints. The school custodian couldn’t scold her to her face and could only sigh in complaint.

Hearing this, the girl’s steps paused. Then she spit a mouthful of gum covered in clear lip gloss onto the clean floor and stepped on it, striding away without a look back.

She showed herself at the door of each class, not saying a word, not calling anyone, but at each class, someone came out in tacit

understanding. There seemed to be some bizarre silent agreement among these boys and girls; they exchanged silent looks and went together to senior middle Year 1's Class 2.

Year 1, Class 2's classroom had the most empty seats. The main characters of this running away business that had kicked up such a fuss were all in their class. The male class monitor was standing at the whiteboard holding a marker. He was tall, thin, and upright, with one hand stuck casually in his pocket, writing on the whiteboard a notice that the Christmas activity had been suspended. He had a particularly calm and composed elegant bearing.

The girl in the short skirt waited a while, saw that he didn't turn his head, then stuck her head inside and yelled, "Wei Wenchuan!"

All the students lying on their desks making up sleep were jolted by her yell, but seeing who it was, no one dared to say anything.

The class monitor heard; the tip of the marker paused. But he took no notice, unhurriedly writing out the last few careful words. Then he turned around and looked expressionlessly at the students gathered at the classroom door. He dropped the marker onto the desk of a classmate sitting in the front row, then strolled out of the classroom.

The somewhat fretful group seemed to find their backbone at once, spontaneously surrounding the boy named Wei Wenchuan. Wei Wenchuan pushed away gum that one of them passed him and nodded briefly to the crowd. "This isn't a good place to talk. Come with me."

The girl wearing the short skirt had reddened eye rims; the arrogance with which she'd spat out her gum had gone away. She went along, aggrieved.

Wei Wenchuan took them right upstairs to the locked "multifunctional classroom." He took a ring of keys from his pocket

and, as familiarly as though he were coming home, opened the door and led the group inside, ordering, “Close the door.”

The lock clicked shut. The girl in the short skirt couldn’t hold out any longer. “Feng Bin is dead. What’s going on here? Why did Feng Bin die?”

The others looked at each other, at last turning their gazes on Wei Wenchuan, none of them making a sound.

“All right, so he’d dead,” Wei Wenchuan said indifferently. “What does it have to do with you?”

“But I heard Ge Ni say that Xia Xiaonan is at the public security bureau now. Is she going to blab to the police?” another male student said with a gloomy expression. “I said before that we shouldn’t have chosen Xia Xiaonan, but Liang Youjing just had to have her. Isn’t it all because she’s rather good-looking and did better than you on the mid-term exams?”

“I just don’t like her, what about it?” the girl in the short skirt screeched. “She played simple and stupid all day and had all you blockheads running after her. Feng Bin was doing it, and so were you! You’re outraged on her behalf now, so why didn’t you run away with them!?”

“Who was running after her? I...”

Wei Wenchuan reached out a hand, inserting it between the two of them, crisply snapping his fingers. The boy who was about to retort immediately came to a halt and shut his mouth, enduring his residual anger.

“If you’re noisy again, you can beat it.” Wei Wenchuan looked coolly at the girl, then calmly said, “Feng Bin left school on his own and was unluckily murdered out there. So what? And so what if Ge Ni and Xia

Xiaonan are at a public security bureau? One is a good-for-nothing who doesn't dare to raise her head when the principal walks by, and the other is a nothing of a girl who wouldn't dare to complain if you slapped her. Would they really dare to say anything?"

The boy who'd just shut his mouth endured for a while, but he couldn't hold back. "What if the others..."

"If there really is someone who can't hold their tongue and reveals something—" Wei Wenchuan slowly walked to the window and pulled open the multifunctional classroom's thick UV-protection curtains. A big slice of sunlight poured in; countless dust particles floated in the light. He narrowed his eyes idly. "Isn't it enough if you guys don't admit it? Do the police have evidence? Even if they do have evidence, can they arrest the whole school? Don't worry, the police are under so much strain, they have no time to pay attention to the private disputes of a bunch of middle school students like you. If they have the energy, they're better off chasing after the murderous wanted criminal."

While the news of Feng Bin's murder had appeared in the newspapers and online, the police couldn't have revealed all the details of an unsolved case. At present, the news only said that the student who had left a letter upon running away had unexpectedly been killed by a wrongdoer; the means of Feng Bin's death and the identity of the suspect hadn't been made public. And, of course, no one knew that the killer was a criminal who had escaped during the National Road 327 case fifteen years ago.

When the students heard his words, they froze. The girl in the short skirt hesitantly asked, "The one who killed Feng Bin...was a wanted criminal?"

"Of course someone who committed a murder is going to be wanted." Wei Wenchuan looked at her, not turning a hair. "What's the problem?"

For no reason, the girl felt a chill. She firmly shut her mouth.

Just then, the bell rang, calling them to class, interrupting the ad hoc meeting. Wei Wenchuan waved a hand. The teenage girls and boys didn't dare to pester him any longer; they scattered at his sign. He went last, closing the door of the multifunctional classroom behind him, planning to lock it again.

The boy who'd had a spat with the girl in the short skirt stayed a few steps behind the others. He walked up hesitantly in front of Wei Wenchuan.

Seeing his companions turn towards the stairs, he lowered his voice and quickly said to Wei Wenchuan, "Wenchuan, when Liang Youjing brought up Xia Xiaonan, why didn't you resist? Da-Bin was in a panic, then—you should have resisted! If..."

"Why should I have listened to Feng Bin? In his heart, Feng Bin hadn't been with us for a long time. Don't tell me you hadn't noticed. I have no objection to Xia Xiaonan as a girl, but don't you think it's convenient how she can expose the traitors among us?" At this point, Wei Wenchuan suddenly laughed and patted the boy on the shoulder. "You're very clever, but sometimes your thoughts go all over the place. You're better off thinking of how to deal with the police. Traitors will always have retribution visited upon them, if not now, then in the future.—Who knows? Everyone can take this as a warning, not follow in his footsteps."

The boy understood his implication. Looking at Wei Wenchuan's particularly meaningful smile, he faintly guessed something. Disgust and fear instantly flooded him, as if his shoulder had been licked by a poisonous snake.

At the same time, the City Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team was also holding a meeting—

“This student is named Liang Youjing.” Tao Ran put a photograph up onto the projection screen. “She does a lot of extracurricular activities, and she’s good at forming cliques. She’s the ‘Queen Bee’ among the female students. But her grades have always been very good. She’s always been called ‘clever’ and ‘a genius.’ No matter what she did, it didn’t impact her grades. She prides herself on her talents and appearance. Because Xia Xiaonan took the first spot from her, her parents thought her grades had gone down and ran to the school as though facing a great foe. They didn’t accept her explanation, feeling that she’d shamed them tremendously, so she’s been harboring resentment towards Xia Xiaonan—that’s what Ge Ni told us. She was likely the one who directed the strike against Xia Xiaonan.”

“Phone her guardians and call her in for questioning.” Luo Wenzhou turned to Lang Qiao. “Is Xia Xiaonan still not saying anything?”

Lang Qiao spread her hands helplessly.

Xiao Haiyang suddenly put in a word. “I don’t think there’s any use in going at it from this angle. As long as the business at the school doesn’t produce grave consequences, what can you do about things like stripping people’s clothes off and beating them when so many people took part? At most it’ll be a round of collective critical education—and they didn’t do any serious damage. If you call in the students, there’ll be a crowd of parents and lawyers behind them. I guarantee you won’t get anything.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “What do you mean?”

Xiao Haiyang said, “My recommendation is that we work from Lu Guosheng.”

“Lu Guosheng murdered Feng Bin. There’s no need to question that point. If we could find Lu Guosheng, we wouldn’t need to match ourselves against a group of brats—but right now we can’t find Lu

Guosheng,” Tao Ran said. “After he finished the murder at the Drum Tower, he swaggered off, and there was clearly someone there to receive him. Is a wanted criminal who’s lived comfortably for fifteen years going to be easy to catch? If we hadn’t found out there was a problem with Xia Xiaonan, we wouldn’t even have the lead with the students. We might be looking for a needle in the ocean.”

Luo Wenzhou declined to comment, moving directly to handing out assignments. “Tao Ran, you take some people to the school to find out what’s going on. Xiao Lang, notify Liang Youjing’s parents and get the girl over here for questioning.—Fei Du, if you’re not in a hurry to get back to school, could you say a few words to Xia Xiaonan for...”

Before he’d finished, Xiao Haiyang suddenly interrupted him. “Lu Guosheng couldn’t have been lying low for fifteen years.”

Normally, when everyone was fooling around together, they’d exploit Luo Wenzhou, eating the breakfast he bought and giving their loyalty to others. But while they were working—especially when he was handing out assignments—no one would interrupt him. At Xiao Haiyang’s words, absolute silence fell over the conference room. Everyone’s gazes fell on him.

Fei Du, sitting in a corner, looked up from his phone’s screen. On the screen was Gu Zhao’s brief and mysterious CV.

Xiao Haiyang involuntarily pushed at his glasses. “Lu Guosheng has been wanted for fifteen years. Evidently he’s only been hiding, not had plastic surgery, and he hasn’t scrubbed off his fingerprints. That shows someone’s been protecting him.—I investigated Lu Guosheng last night. His only close relative was his older brother, who was arrested and brought to justice in the 327 case. After that he only had distant relatives left who couldn’t say enough to distance themselves from him, he didn’t have any friends, and he didn’t have any female partner he was close to before the warrant was issued for his arrest.

He's an anti-social element, a bane to others' existence. Who would have that much power and dare to run the risk of harboring him?"

Fei Du took up his words. "A person who wanted to use him for something."

"Right." Xiao Haiyang stood up. "Captain Luo, I recommend that you search through all the cases that have occurred within the last fifteen years for cases with suspicious points, with suspects whose physical appearance is similar to Lu Guosheng, even his fingerprints..."

"Haiyang, that's much too heavy a work load. To go through fifteen years, you'd have to search through the whole file room," Lang Qiao said from beside him. "Anyway, aren't these all just your guesses? Even if your guesses are correct, perhaps this person who was keeping Lu Guosheng was saving him for a special occasion and hasn't used him before? Why would we set aside the lead in front of us to advance by a circuitous route?"

Xiao Haiyang had been with the City Bureau half a year, and he didn't fit in any more than he had at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau. He was normally taciturn and never took part in after hours activities with his colleagues. While his work was energetic and conscientious, his thought processes were sometimes totally different from ordinary people's. His mental circuit looked like a convoluted labyrinth.

Lang Qiao's questions rendered him speechless. He stood awkwardly where he was, tightly pursing his lips.

Luo Wenzhou closed his notebook. From some meters away, his searchlight-like gaze fell on Xiao Haiyang's face. "As far as I know, there hasn't been a case involving dismemberment and digging out eyes in this city in the last fifteen years. Are you really planning to expand the scope of this investigation to the whole country? Xiao Haiyang, we can't muster such a large force based on your guesses. Do you have any other reliable evidence?"

Xiao Haiyang couldn't get any words out.

Luo Wenzhou waited for him for three seconds. "Okay, everyone move.—There are many people outside scouting out the details of this case. Until the case has been solved, mind your mouths. Meeting adjourned!"

Everyone filed out of the conference room, each hurriedly setting out on their own assignment. Xiao Haiyang stood alone where he was, clutching his phone. After a good while, as if he'd come to a decision, he noiselessly went into the men's bathroom at the end of the hall.

There were many men on the Criminal Investigation Team, so when the place had originally been fitted up, an extra men's bathroom had been specially added in the little compartment where the cleaning supplies were kept—anyway, normally when there was clean-up to be done, they couldn't stand to order the rare policewomen to mop up—but because this bathroom was far from the office, and the space was rather small, it wasn't normally used much.

Xiao Haiyang opened the door and went in, cautiously determining that there really was no one inside, even opening every stall to have a look like a weirdo. Then he closed the door, got out his phone, and quickly dialed a number.

"It's me, Xiao Haiyang," he said in a quiet but urgent voice. "You gave me a business card last time..."

The person on the phone said something excitedly.

"Oh," Xiao Haiyang said, keeping watch in case anyone came, "we have discipline here. I shouldn't be letting out information that the bureau hasn't determined to publicize, but since an old school fellow is involved, I'll do it just this once—"

“Concerning this case that’s being so hotly debated online, the facts are more complicated than you imagine. The person who murdered the runaway middle school student wasn’t some delinquent mugger with a knife, it was one of the killers who committed serial robbery and murder on National Road 327 fifteen years ago. The security cameras caught him, and we’ve found his fingerprint. He’s been on the run after a wanted notice was put out for him fifteen years ago. No one knows how he’s been hiding. We suspect that the killer specifically went after the murdered boy... That’s all, I can’t tell you the rest, you can look up the 327 case yourself.”

Being unexpectedly inundated with information, it could be imagined that the ear of the person on the phone was filled to bursting. A string of questions came out, shaking Officer Xiao’s none too durable locally-produced knockoff cell phone so it squeaked. But Xiao Haiyang expressionlessly hung up the phone and noiselessly opened the bathroom door, glancing out at the already empty hall, then quickly walking out.

A moment later, there was a creak in the empty bathroom as the door of the cupboard where the cleaning supplies were kept opened. Fei Du casually flicked dirt off his sleeve and walked out. When he put his hand on the door handle, Fei Du heard Luo Wenzhou’s voice saying outside the door, “You’ve been in the bathroom so long. Diarrhea?”

Fei Du paused slightly. Then he quickly realized these words weren’t addressed to him.

Xiao Haiyang’s somewhat panicked voice came from slightly far off. “A...a little.”

Through the door, Luo Wenzhou’s footsteps passed in front of Fei Du, at first near, then growing distant. Then they stopped.

“I searched through your records,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Your family background is very simple. At first glance, there’s nothing unusual to see—later I went home and thought it over carefully and found something. You have a younger half-brother, taking his university entrance examinations this year—with such a grown-up little brother, you may not even have started school when your parents divorced. The materials say that your mother was regularly employed, had a source of income, and didn’t have any negative record, and your father re-married. Reasonably speaking, I think your mother must have had custody of you until she died from illness. Only then did you go to live with your father. So I found a buddy who deals with household registries to investigate, and that’s how it was.”

Xiao Haiyang said, “What about it?”

“You lived with your mother for four years. She was busy at work. It’s hard bringing up a child on your own. When she didn’t come home in the evening, she’d send you to be taken care of by a neighbor—and that person just happened to be one of the Criminal Investigation Team’s elders.” Luo Wenzhou paused. “His name was Gu Zhao.”

CHAPTER 108 - Verhovensky XVIII

Fei Du gently let go of the door handle, standing silently behind the thin door. He heard deathly silence in the corridor after the name “Gu Zhao,” as if the people outside had left.

After a long time, the silent dumbshow was finally interrupted. In a cold, hard voice, Xiao Haiyang repeated, one word at a time, “What—about—it?”

From the other side of the door you could hear his teeth grinding.

Before Luo Wenzhou could speak, Xiao Haiyang aggressively launched a continuous attack towards him. “So the City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team doesn’t only screen you and your relatives, it even has to dig down into your next-door neighbors? Captain Luo, during the Great Qing Dynasty, when the emperor handed out punishment indiscriminately, I think it still didn’t reach this point?”

Luo Wenzhou listened, not getting angry at him. His voice sounded smooth, and Fei Du guessed that his expression also hadn’t moved a hair.

“Xiao Haiyang,” he said, drawing his voice out, “I’ve provoked you and made you angry. Let’s judge matters where they stand. Can we talk sensibly?”

Fei Du oddly rather wanted to smile, the corners of his lips turning up slightly.

Then he heard Luo Wenzhou continue, “I don’t care very much about the personalities of the people around me, and I don’t require everyone to play a happy family every day. You can get along well, and you can be eccentric and unsociable. It’s for the best if you’re

willing to integrate with everyone, but if you're unwilling to have close relations with comparative strangers, then you can do as you like. Never mind you, our President Fei's bad habits are bigger than he is, and I don't say anything about it to him."

Fei Du: "..."

Hearing this, he knew the fact that he was eavesdropping had been discovered. Fei Du didn't feel like keeping up the cover-up, so he simply opened the door and walked out.

Xiao Haiyang wasn't very canny; taking one look at the suddenly appearing living human, he couldn't hide his shock. He backed up a step on the spot.

But Luo Wenzhou's expression as he looked at Xiao Haiyang became stern. "But I need you to remember where this is. Xiao Haiyang, I need you to concentrate completely, to be able to work for the benefit of all at least during working hours, to handle the cases you're working responsibly, to set aside some of your selfish motives—I don't care what your reasons are, and I don't care what private difficulties you have. The cases that come here are all matters of life and death, with blood and tears behind them. Are you telling me only your private difficulties are worth money, while the injustices and sufferings of others can be casually brushed aside?"

Luo Wenzhou was too skilled at flapping his lips. Xiao Haiyang was left gasping by his speech, his expression unsteady.

"Political Commissar Luo, I must interrupt your ideological work for a moment," Fei Du said, leaning against the wall. "Officer Xiao, to whom did you just reveal the information that Lu Guosheng was the killer?"

Luo Wenzhou hadn't heard the phone call Xiao Haiyang had made in the bathroom. Hearing this, his expression altered. "Xiao Haiyang!"

Since Luo Wenzhou had said the name “Gu Zhao,” Xiao Haiyang had been like a string, constantly drawn taught by each sentence Luo Wenzhou spoke. When Fei Du revealed his maneuver, the string finally snapped. He looked up at once, the vacillating expression left by Luo Wenzhou’s words turning cold and hard.

“Is your head full of water?” Luo Wenzhou stepped forward and grabbed his collar. “A whole world of criminals are sharpening their brains trying to hunt down information about the course of police investigations, trying to know the enemy in order to know themselves. Are you their man on the inside? Do you know that randomly releasing information before the details of a case have been clarified will spread false rumors among the public, even produce panic? What do you do if new circumstances turn up in the follow-up investigation? Correct your statement? Even the weather report doesn’t dare to talk so confidently now. What are you going to do with the City Bureau’s credibility?”

Xiao Haiyang struggled with all his force, but his skills were sloppy. He couldn’t shake off Luo Wenzhou’s hand, so he had to let off a verbal assault. “What credibility do you police have?!”

“We police? Does your fucking salary get blown in by the wind?” Luo Wenzhou frisked him for his phone, putting the lockscreen in front of Xiao Haiyang’s face. “Do you want to unlock it yourself, or do you want to put on handcuffs and make me ask a technician to unlock it?”

Like a pitiful rat, Xiao Haiyang was nearly one-handedly lifted by Luo Wenzhou, looking increasingly like his head was too big for his thin neck. His stiff uniform shirt dug into his neck, and he couldn’t quite catch his breath, but he continued his impertinent remarks unimpeded. “Go...*huff*...go ahead, ask whoever you want, as long as I have...time to...”

Before he'd finished, Fei Du reached out and patted the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand, where the veins were standing out. He recited a string of numbers. "That's the password.—Captain Luo, why are your means of resolving problems always so barbarous?"

Xiao Haiyang's expression changed instantly. He reached out to snatch back his phone. Luo Wenzhou passed the phone to Fei Du and uncompromisingly restrained Xiao Haiyang's resistance.

As if it was his own phone, Fei Du nimbly unlocked Xiao Haiyang's phone and opened the call log.

"Go through his call record," Luo Wenzhou said coldly. "See who he contacted, and have Lang Qiao and the others trace the number. If it's the press, have someone go bring their superior in for a talk..."

Before he'd finished, Fei Du, not taking orders, called back the recently dialed number. "Hello, is this Editor Wang? ... I'm not Haiyang, he can't come to the phone right now. Could you please tell me which company you belong to?... Oh, Yan City Mass Media, what a coincidence... No, no other questions. Thank you."

When he was finished speaking, Fei Du hung up, got out his own phone, and sent Assistant Miao a voice message. "Miaomiao, say hello to Yan City Mass Media, tell them not to talk any nonsense. I'm talking about that business of the murdered middle schoolers. Take care of it as fast as possible."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Xiao Haiyang: "..."

Assistant Miao's response was quick. She immediately replied, "Got it." Fei Du urbanely returned Xiao Haiyang's phone to him. "I just received a portion of new media stocks and haven't had a chance to

restructure yet. It's an emerging industry, and the management is rather messy. You'll have to pardon me."

Xiao Haiyang spent all day living in his own world. Ordinarily, he didn't have any contact at all with Fei Du and thought he was only an idle rich kid. He stared blankly for a good while, then came around, instantly becoming indignant at this corruption. He found the strength somewhere to push Luo Wenzhou away. "You guys have clout, you're powerful, you can do what you want? That's how it was back then, and that's how it is now. As long as you have the power and the ability, you can smooth over a miscarriage of justice as big as the heavens and no one will be able to comment, isn't that right?!"

One of their colleagues from the Criminal Investigation Team came upstairs on some business and got this shout full in the face, at once standing uncomprehendingly stuck in place; passing by would be wrong, but so would not passing by.

Luo Wenzhou waved a hand at him and looked heavily at Xiao Haiyang. "Let's talk somewhere else. Don't make so much noise in a public place."

Xiao Haiyang thought he was going to be taken to an interrogation room; his phone call just now had in fact been pure impulse—it was Luo Wenzhou's "mind your mouths" before he'd ended the meeting that had given him the inspiration.

Xiao Haiyang couldn't describe what his feelings had been when he'd gotten Tao Ran's phone call on the way to work early on the morning that Feng Bin's murder had been discovered and heard the description of the body with its limbs cut off and its eyes dug out—it was that person, the one he'd thought about for a decade and more, who'd vanished without a trace for a decade and more.

Xiao Haiyang simply couldn't control himself. While the whole main Criminal Investigation Team circled a crowd of brats, he would have

loved nothing better than to search the whole city, grab Lu Guosheng, excavate that long-unrighted wrong—

“Go on, who’s wronged you?” Luo Wenzhou turned to ask him. “Whose injustice has been smoothed over?”

Xiao Haiyang only then came around and discovered that Luo Wenzhou had taken him to a discreet stairwell. The surveillance camera in the corner was turned all the way around as though it had been made to face the wall and examine its conscience, looking very comical.

“Don’t mind it,” Luo Wenzhou said without looking up when he saw him looking at the camera. “We broke that camera when the bureau was enforcing a smoking ban two years ago, and no one’s fixed it yet. You can say anything you like. There won’t be a record.”

“Lu Guosheng in fact made an appearance a year after the warrant had been issued for his arrest, in a case where a death occurred during a brawl. Forensics found one of Lu Guosheng’s fingerprints. This was in Yan City.” After a good long silence, Xiao Haiyang came out with this earth-shattering speech.

“Impossible.” Luo Wenzhou frowned. “Since Lu Guosheng turned up on the security camera footage in this case, we’ve gone through all the materials related to him. Such an obvious lead couldn’t have been left out!”

Xiao Haiyang sneered. “That’s because it was a scandal!”

Luo Wenzhou remembered the disciplinary resolution concerning Gu Zhao on the intranet. He froze.

“The lead very quickly came into the hands of the criminal policeman who’d dealt with the case. There were two people principally

responsible for the 327 case. One I think was surnamed Yang; he was on holiday at the time. The other...the other one was him, Gu Zhao.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at the anguish he could barely conceal, and his voice softened. “Who is Gu Zhao to you?”

These words were like a slender needle, nimbly piercing through his flesh, directly entering Xiao Haiyang’s heart. He took a deep breath, looked up at the wall yellowed by second-hand smoke and the camera facing the wall, his congealed memories beginning to flow. Hundreds of thousand of words came to his lips and he blurted them out, though they were still dry. “My parents started having relationship problems early. They were constantly fighting. As far back as I remember, my father hardly ever came home. He had someone on the outside... The first person who I felt was like a father to me was Uncle Gu.”

His mother had worked as a nurse in a hospital, one of those big hospitals where the whole world wanted nothing better than to crowd in to snatch up appointments with specialists, overcrowded year-round. Xiao Haiyang always remembered her looking exhausted after working the night shift. When his mom wasn’t home, she’d leave food for him, locking her small son inside the house.

Once she’d left in a hurry and forgotten to put the food in a small bowl. The five-year-old boy had had to move over a little bench and pour the food for himself, wielding an enormous ladle. His hindbrain was perhaps naturally imperfect; he’d accidentally fallen over along with the pot and sat on the ground bawling.

At that time, the doors and walls of old apartments were all thin. The neighbor, who’d come home from work, heard the heartrending cries inside the room, got no answer when he knocked on the door, and thought there had been some accident; he pried open the door and charged in.

For Xiao Haiyang, Gu Zhao, coming in to investigate with the light of the setting sun around him, was like a hero come to rescue him.

“Uncle Gu took care of me for four years, from kindergarten to third grade. Composition topics for students in the lower grades are deficient, it’s always something like ‘my mom and dad’ or ‘my dream.’ When I wrote about ‘dad,’ it was always Uncle Gu, and my dream was always to grow up and be a police officer.”

Officer Gu was young and promising. He’d just become deputy to the captain of the Criminal Investigation Team. He had busy periods and idle periods, and he was on duty often. Maybe he’d lived alone too long; he loved playing with the child. When Xiao Haiyang’s mother wasn’t home, he’d go over to Uncle Gu’s house with his little backpack on his back to hear him tell stories about arresting bad guys.

After he started elementary school, the children in his class were jealous that he was always first in test scores. Somehow they’d heard that his parents were divorced and had banded together, using some scarcely understood insults picked up from TV, mocking him for having a mother but no father, calling him the child of a “loose woman.”

Xiao Haiyang had been inarticulate since he was little. He didn’t know how to talk back, so he could only fight...but sadly he had no natural gift for fighting, either. Often he’d be the first to raise a hand and end up held down and beaten by a bunch of brats.

On the way home from school one day, the bad kids had his head pressed to the ground, jeering that he and his mom had been abandoned. Gu Zhao was just riding by on his bike. He sturdily got off his bike, wearing his imposing uniform. He lined up the children bullying Xiao Haiyang and lectured them for ten minutes, warning them, “If you bully my son again, I’ll arrest you all and take you to the public security bureau.”

“I always fantasized about him marrying my mom and even tried matchmaking them. Two grown-ups, and I made it very embarrassing for them. Later he told me that there are all kinds of people in this world, and he was the kind that would never marry, so he wouldn’t have children, either. So I was his son, and I had to study hard, grow up, and make money to be able to support a father.”

At this point, Xiao Haiyang noticed that Luo Wenzhou’s face was a little blurry. He subconsciously wiped his face and found that he had unknowingly started crying. He was extremely ashamed and resentful. He lowered his head and took off his glasses, fiercely wiping them on his sleeve.

“During the National Road 327 case, I was already in second grade. I had his house keys and came every day to water his plants and read the newspaper he subscribed to. He was unusually busy then, not coming home for ten days or more. Later I saw a report about the 327 case in the newspaper and curiously asked him about it for a very long time.” Xiao Haiyang paused. “Things went wrong a year later. One night I was staying at his house. I woke up in the middle of the night and found that the lights were on in the living room. I wanted to get up and get water to drink when I heard him talking quietly on the phone to someone, saying, ‘I know this is unthinkable, but Lu Guosheng isn’t the only one there.’”

Luo Wenzhou remembered Lao Yang’s testament and his heart gave a heavy thump. “What does that mean?”

An eight- or nine-year-old boy’s curiosity was at its most exuberant and his imagination at its most abundant, but adults would often overlook his eyes and ears. Xiao Haiyang had been on summer vacation and had had nothing to do and very little homework; he’d started his own furtive little investigation.

“He seemed tired and fretful during that time. At the time, all policemen carried note pads with them. Once Uncle Gu fell asleep, and the corner of his notebook was sticking out of his uniform pocket. I couldn’t resist my curiosity and stealthily took it and read through it. I saw that on a day a few months earlier he’d written, ‘There was a large-scale drunken brawl at a certain song-and-dance hall in the Flower Market District, suspected to be caused by jealousy among brothel clients, leading to the death of one person. To identify the culprit, forensics collected the fingerprints of everyone involved and the weapons used in the fight. On one beer bottle, they found an unusual fingerprints, which belonged to the wanted criminal Lu Guosheng.’”

Luo Wenzhou said, “You remember everything from so long ago?”

“I have an eidetic memory,” Xiao Haiyang said expressionlessly. “What’s more, I’ve repeated this in my mind over and over for years. I review it every day.”

Fei Du, who had been standing beside them in silence this whole time, suddenly put in a word. “Gu Zhao said ‘Lu Guosheng isn’t the only one there.’ Where did he mean?”

Xiao Haiyang said, “A large-scale high-quality entertainment center called The Right Bank of the Seine, also called The Louvre.”

“The Louvre was once the most luxurious place of entertainment in the city, but there was a great fire there,” Fei Du said. “It was said to be a problem with the fire safety. They were fined afterwards and forced to close down. Afterwards it disappeared without a trace.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at one and then the other, thinking that neither of them seemed like young men in their early twenties—talking about events that happened over a decade ago, they both sounded like they were enumerating their family treasures.

CHAPTER 109 - Verhovensky XIX

Xiao Haiyang took two steps back, leaned against the wall of the stairwell, and slowly slid down a little.

“That’s right,” he said as though raving. “The fire started in an office in the building’s basement and set fire to some liquor storerooms in the basement. None of the employees on that floor had a chance to escape, and the ones who did escape were all horribly mutilated. When the fire spread, quite a few customers were drawn in, too. There were countless dead and wounded. It was...a huge disaster.”

At this point, Luo Wenzhou thought it was sounding familiar—fourteen years earlier, the great Captain China had been in his own little world, slacking his way through middle school, but even he’d still had some attention to spare to hear some news about this business. Clearly this fire had been a bigger deal even than “911⁵.”

“Quite a few people were implicated, right?” Luo Wenzhou frowned. “I seem to remember there was someone from our system...”

“Because the fire wasn’t just the fault of poor fire safety precautions,” Xiao Haiyang said. “Supposedly, a survivor who escaped from the fire made a statement, saying that ‘some higher-up from the City Bureau’ had made an unsuccessful attempt to extort a bribe and had a dispute with the head waiter. While they were pushing and shoving, he slipped up and knocked the head waiter’s head against the corner of a table, and the man died on the spot. The killer wanted to burn the corpse to destroy the evidence and didn’t expect that the fire safety installations of a such a high-quality entertainment center would be merely for show. The liquor storerooms were also unreasonably arranged. So he accidentally burned himself up along with the rest.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute.” Luo Wenzhou had had enough of Xiao Haiyang’s style of talking, which was both incoherent and as fast

as popping beans. He felt that the wandering he'd done in his youth owing to his family circumstances was still expressed in his speech and couldn't be healed. He hurriedly waved a hand to interrupt. "Fei Du, keep your mouth shut, don't set him running again.—What do you mean? Who is 'some higher-up from the City Bureau' supposed to be? Gu Zhao? What was that about extorting a bribe? How do you know? Also, weren't we just talking about Lu Guosheng? How did we get here?"

"I don't know concrete details. This is what I put together later from eavesdropping on the people who came to investigate him.—I only know that Uncle Gu really was investigating the whereabouts of the chief culprit in the 327 case, and his investigation took him to The Louvre. As for the details, he wouldn't have told an elementary school student about them. But somehow, this business turned into, 'On the pretext of tracking down a wanted criminal, Gu Zhao repeatedly extorted enormous bribes from businesses, then lost control and killed someone.' There were witnesses and material evidence..." Xiao Haiyang's voice rolled around in his throat. It was hoarse. His tone became sorrowful. "If he'd been extorting bribes, would he have been living in our...our lousy estate where no one even collected the trash? Up to his death, the most expensive electronic device in his house was the color TV—which he bought specially so I could hook up a game console to it!"

Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du, one leaning against the stairwell's door, one standing in a corner, had Xiao Haiyang pressed between them. Luo Wenzhou was hearing this inside information for the first time. Struggling to cover up his shock under an unflappable expression, he silently exchanged a look with Fei Du—these methods were too similar in style to the orderly deaths of the participants in the Zhou Clan case. A case that in the end came to perfect resolution, with all the "chief culprits" properly dead, not leaving a scrap behind.

The City Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team was the elite within the system. The young and promising deputy-captain doing such a

demented thing naturally meant that those with leadership responsibility would get in trouble—no wonder Yang Zhengfeng, who'd already been a full captain then, had lagged behind Director Zhang and Director Lu, his contemporaries; it turned out that the story that Lao Yang had been demoted following a disciplinary action hadn't just been empty rumor—and this heinous crime had then unexpectedly led to a fire, drawing in countless innocents, bringing about an outcome that could be called a calamity...so the leadership responsibility wouldn't only have fallen on a mere Criminal Investigation Team captain; even the city government would have been in trouble.

No wonder the Gu Zhao business had been so severely covered up.

Fortunately the frightening internet hadn't yet taken root and sprouted within their borders at the time, and the dissemination of information hadn't been so quick; that was why the personnel who had been drawn in for no reason on all sides had been able to hide this in complete secrecy, suppressing the whole sequence of events underground so that to this day not a trace could be found of what happened then.

Filled up with a pile of moldy old news, Luo Wenzhou frowned, chewing it over for a good while, then said, "So what were you planning? Tell everyone, say that someone's been hiding the escaped criminal Lu Guosheng, take the opportunity to disclose events from over a decade ago, force the City Bureau to investigate the matter of Gu Zhao anew? Since you knew about this inside story, why didn't you tell me before?"

Xiao Haiyang straightened his neck and sneered at him, not backing down at all. "Because I knew you wouldn't dare to investigate—with good luck, you blind cats might have caught a dead mouse, arrested Lu Guosheng, at best just solving this case. With bad luck, Lu Guosheng would get away with it again, you'd send a report of 'conclusive evidence' to your superiors, put out another wanted

notice, and count it as a solved case, too. What about the injustices of others? That sounds nice! Aren't you more concerned with avoiding blame than winning praise? There were so many suspicious aspects of Gu Zhao's case, but who investigated them?!"

Luo Wenzhou crossed his arms in front of his chest. Hearing these lines, he couldn't help sighing over the passage of time—never mind a long time ago, if someone had been standing in front of him asking for a beating like this three or four years ago, he'd definitely have rolled up his sleeves and satisfied their desire.

"Don't say you're different. Wang Hongliang kept everyone in the dark at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau for so many years, those girls dying under persecution and those drug users being ruined by their addictions, and did anyone care? Did the City Bureau care? Because Wang Hongliang wasn't stupid. He understood that this is a law-abiding society, and 'law-abiding society' protects respectable people. So he picked poor people without any family or connections to target, the transient workers, who no one saw when they were alive and no one cared about when they were dead! If it hadn't come out right when there was a conference being held, if Huang Jinglian hadn't been muddle-headed enough to touch you, Young Lord Luo, the sub-bureau's crowd of scumbags could have endured in peace until the end of the world! And where would all you emissaries of righteousness have been?!"

Luo Wenzhou still didn't respond, but Fei Du frowned slightly.

"That's right, the murdered Feng Bin had parents and friends to come voice their grievances, to come cry and wail. He attended a private school, his family had money and position, of course you'd have to attach value to that, of course you'd have to make a strong appearance of investigating and solving the case, add some brilliance to your resumes for the future. But what about Gu Zhao? He was a bachelor, his only family was his old mother, who fell ill and never recovered after his death. She died not long after. Who's going to

demand the truth on his behalf? Who's going to take up the thankless task of remembering the injustice done to him? Who still remembers him!?"

Luo Wenzhou said powerlessly, "You..."

Then Fei Du calmly interrupted him, putting in a word as coolly as an outsider. "Your wish to expose this makes a certain amount of sense.

"But first of all, you picked the wrong media for exposing it. Yan City Mass Media's main product is online media. I don't mind telling you, up to the present moment, they haven't broken through yet. That's why they want to make some big news to get eyes on them. They don't seem to be able to truly guide public opinion. And there's so much fresh news. Celebrities having affairs is more fun to read about than a murder case. Even if you could attract discussion, it wouldn't last longer than a week at most, and then it would be forgotten. And since the accusation that Gu Zhao lied about a lead in tracking down a wanted criminal and further solicited bribes on that basis is already so final, that page would still exist. You can't control this with just a few words of idle rumor online."

Xiao Haiyang stared, looking at him through his tear-blurred eyes, not understanding why Fei Du was suddenly on his side.

Fei Du's tone changed. "The rest, you evidently understand, too. Someone hid Lu Guosheng. To be a little unfeeling, Feng Bin's death, while in fact very tragic, is also an opportunity for us to get at the person behind the scenes—as long as you don't alert the enemy. If you prick old sores at an uncertain time like this, startle the crafty rabbit behind it all, what's going to happen?"

All of Xiao Haiyang's rebukes just now had come out entirely out of impulse. By now he'd more or less finished giving vent to his feelings and some of his reason was gradually returning; he listened to Fei Du's calm and objective speech.

“If I were the person behind the scenes who was hiding Lu Guosheng and heard that this business had made such a fuss, I’d just find some reason to kill Lu Guosheng and deliver his body to the City Bureau so they could close the case—I believe that for the person behind the scenes, this wouldn’t even count as making a brave sacrifice; at most it would count as taking off a pair of muddy socks.” Fei Du looked gently at Xiao Haiyang. “Officer Xiao, your unconventional gambit may very well be useful. Perhaps it’ll help everyone achieve a weekend where they don’t need to work overtime.”

With each sentence Fei Du spoke, Xiao Haiyang’s face turned whiter.

“As for that Feng Bin, a little senior middle school student who couldn’t sleep at night and slipped out to run around blindly, his death is his own doing, but since his family has money, they still insist on wasting public resources and police time to investigate the crime over and over, while the real victim of injustice is buried deep in the earth without anyone to inquire about him—just thinking about it makes you feel it’s very unfair, isn’t that right?” Fei Du looked at Xiao Haiyang with a smile that wasn’t quite a smile, opening the door of the stairwell. “If Officer Gu is conscious in the underworld, his resentment must be great. It’s truly a pity.”

Xiao Haiyang said, “You...you’re talking nonsense!”

“What, he has no resentment? Then he truly was a holy man.—Since that’s the way it is, for whose sake are you making a scene for here?” Fei Du raised his long, slim eyebrows, displaying grandiose astonishment. He tilted his head and looked at him. “Oh, I get it. You think you’ve abandoned so many things for the sake of washing away the injustice done to him, borne so many secrets, and your grievance is on your own behalf.”

Xiao Haiyang’s speechlessness was somewhat frightened and alarmed.

“There’s no need for the grievance to go on. Officer Gu didn’t ask you to reverse the verdict on his behalf. If you don’t succeed in reversing it and his death leaves you with a lifetime of reproach, it’ll be truly pitiful. Why is this necessary?” Fei Du’s painted-on smile evaporated. He coldly looked askance at Xiao Haiyang, then walked off.

Luo Wenzhou only then sniffed out the faint anger in Fei Du’s tone. It mixed with the leftover note of the Mu Xiang he was wearing, resulting in an explosive reaction; it drove itself into Luo Wenzhou’s chest, setting off fireworks in his heart—another person had scolded him, and the person whose face never displayed his emotions had actually gotten angry!

“For my sake,” he thought.

Luo Wenzhou pulled himself together and used a great deal of effort to hold himself back from smiling idiotically on the spot. Facing Xiao Haiyang again, Luo Wenzhou didn’t feel a trace of anger. He very genially reached out a hand towards Xiao Haiyang. “Hand over your work ID and tools. I’m temporarily suspending you from duty. No objections?”

All of Xiao Haiyang’s rage had been doused to ashes by the ice water Fei Du had splashed on him. His wrath cooled, but his remorse showed its head. The silly deer had involuntarily been set running again by Fei Du. He thought in panic, “Do I resent Uncle Gu?”

He seemed to be face to face with his own base soul. He stared emptily for a moment, then without saying a word fished out his work ID and handcuffs, handed them over to Luo Wenzhou, and floated off like a morning frost.

Fei Du went straight to see Xia Xiaonan. Passing the office door, he saw Lang Qiao hang up the phone and walk out.

Fei Du said, “Have you notified Liang Youjing’s parents?”

Lang Qiao nodded, then looked up at him, feeling a small intuition like a wild beast, sensing that Fei Du was wrapped in a layer of icy shards.

“I want to go have a word with Xia Xiaonan,” Fei Du said to her, gentle and refined. “Do you want to come with me? Going with a beautiful young woman may alleviate her anxiety.”

Lang Qiao, bewildered, kept pace with Fei Du, tentatively saying, “President Fei, it’s gotten cold. Is the royal clan about to go bankrupt?”

Fei Du didn’t understand her talk and turned his head to ask, “What royal clan?”

Lang Qiao held the corners of her eyes with her fingers and gave him a smile full of world peace.

Xia Xiaonan was startled by their arrival and quickly raised her head to see who’d come in, then bowed her head deeply again.

“Your classmate told us everything.” Fei Du didn’t make any superfluous opening remarks on coming in but went right to the point. “Concerning the hunting game on Christmas.”

Xia Xiaonan was taken unawares. She shuddered and looked at Fei Du in panic.

“Tell me what you’re afraid of.” Fei Du looked into her eyes, clearly seeing the girl’s pupils contract from nervousness as she struggled, trying to avoid his line of sight. “Xia Xiaonan, look at me and speak. Feng Bin is dead, and you could say it was for your sake. Your other classmate could have stayed out of it but revealed this business to us, also for your sake. Your grandfather left home and rushed to the City

Bureau in his wheelchair and is still waiting outside for news, not eating or drinking. Do you want to spend your whole life being a beautiful lantern hanging on a wall? Can you act like a person, speak openly for yourself and for others?”

Xia Xiaonan, who before had only screamed or sat in silence, stared into space for a moment, then without any warning began to cry.

Fei Du waited for her to finish crying without making a sound. It took over ten minutes. When the girl only had the strength left to gasp, he kept going. “Specially enrolled students ordinarily have to sign an agreement with the school. You can’t transfer schools, you have to take your university entrance exams at Yufen, or else you’d have to return your scholarship money to the school, is that right?”

Xia Xiaonan nodded breathlessly.

“So at first you were only trying to survive at school,” Fei Du said. “Ordinarily, the person who gets chosen for teasing at Christmas doesn’t know before it’s publicly announced—but this time someone told you in advance. Aside from Feng Bin, there was also another person, right? Just nod or shake your head.”

Xia Xiaonan hesitated, then nodded again.

“This person has more power at school than Feng Bin. He asked you to sell out the person who’d warned you out of good will, or else he wouldn’t only make it so you couldn’t stay at school, he’d also make you return the scholarship. But you took that money home long ago to pay for your grandfather’s treatment and cover household expenses. You couldn’t return it. You could only yield.”

Xia Xiaonan clutched at her own clothing.

“Then, Feng Bin told you his plans. He wanted to take you and the others and leave, reveal the unusual order at school—it seems that he

was planning for a very long time. You became an enemy agent among these people.”

“He...he only said he wanted to find someone to take care of Feng Bin...” Xia Xiaonan at last spoke, in a voice as thin as a mosquito’s whine. “I thought they only wanted to get someone to beat him up outside school, or have the school come get him and discipline him or something...”

“Feng Bin was comfortably off, and his parents are both people of means. Even if he’d been brought back to school, someone would have found a way to keep a disciplinary action off the record—right?” Fei Du said quietly. “But little girl, did you think about it? Even if you’d left school, you still wouldn’t have been at the end of your rope. Good and bad fortune comes in waves. In another two or three years, anything could have happened. But you may never again in your life meet another boy who cares for you so much.”

Xia Xiaonan was once again crying so hard she couldn’t speak. Lang Qiao felt that even she was about to cry listening to Fei Du. She quickly passed over a tissue.

Xia Xiaonan rolled the tissue into a ball and held it tight in her hand. “He... He put...tracking software on my phone...”

Fei Du said, “Who is he?”

Xia Xiaonan dug fiercely into her own hand, hard enough to cut the flesh. She didn’t speak.

Lang Qiao automatically followed up, “You don’t need to be afraid. This is a public security bureau. No one is going to do anything do you. Who is he?”

Xia Xiaonan was crying so hard she seemed about to pass out. She shook her head.

Lang Qiao looked at Fei Du and saw him suddenly stand up, take off his jacket, and throw it over the surveillance camera; then he walked over to Xia Xiaonan, took a business card out of his pocket, put it in front of her, leaned down, and said something into her ear.

Xia Xiaonan raised her head and looked at him in shock.

Lang Qiao: "..."

Hey, handsome, taking off your clothes and seducing a minor is against regulations!

Fei Du gave the girl an unassailable smile and stood up straight. "Try me."

Xia Xiaonan, hiccuping, held her breath. After a long time, she spat out a name. "It's...Wei Wenchuan!"

CHAPTER 110 - Verhovensky XX

Fei Du paused rather ambiguously. “Wei?”

Xia Xiaonan, choked with sobs, nodded.

Perhaps it was Lang Qiao’s mistake; she thought that in the instant when Fei Du looked up, a cold light flashed through his eyes. She therefore swallowed back the reminder that “covering a surveillance camera is against regulations.” Anyway, there was more than one surveillance camera in the room; covering one didn’t impact anything.

Fei Du rolled his sleeves up slightly and sat down. “What kind of person is this Wei Wenchuan?”

In a somewhat murky voice, Xia Xiaonan quietly said, “He’s our class monitor.”

Lang Qiao had been acting as notetaker; hearing this, the tip of her pen suddenly paused. “How many class monitors does your class have?”

“One... Just him.”

This Wei Wenchuan had come to the City Bureau.

The day of Feng Bin’s murder, when the City Bureau had taken over and sent people to seek out the runaway students, they’d called in Feng Bin’s homeroom teacher Ge Ni for questioning, there had been an unusually eye-catching teenage boy by her side who’d introduced himself as the class monitor. When something happened to a student, a public security bureau would call in the teacher and school administrators, but they wouldn’t call in an underaged student

without notifying his parents. In other words, Wei Wenchuan had come himself!

So if this business really did have to do with him, when he'd seen the bustling police bureau, the grief-stricken parents, the group of shivering students, what had he felt?

Had he been afraid? Anxious?

Worried that the schoolyard bullying would come out and he would be implicated?

No... Lang Qiao thought back carefully. She remembered that the boy's bearing had been very easy, the ease of looking on from the sidelines at something that had nothing to do with him. He'd been poised and polite, smiling slightly whenever he saw anyone—if he'd been disturbed, they definitely would have noticed.

It seemed more like he'd come to inspect the outcome of his plans. No wonder the four students who'd been brought back hadn't dared to say a word in a public security bureau!

A chill went up Lang Qiao's back.

Next to her, in a hypnotically soft voice, Fei Du said to Xia Xiaonan, "Could you tell me concretely what happened?"

Xia Xiaonan had her head down, her tears falling one after another, quickly soaking the business card Fei Du had given her. She was clutching it tightly, as if the little piece of paper was her last hope.

"At the beginning of December, I was feeling unwell one day, so I asked to take off and didn't go to PE. I was reading alone in a classroom. Suddenly Feng Bin came back to class and told me that I was this year's...this year's...."

“Deer,” Fei Du finished for her. “I heard you only transferred to Yufen for senior middle. It seems you already know what their so-called ‘deer’ is, right?”

Xia Xiaonan’s shoulders drew in. “...I saw them messing with Wang Xiao.”

Fei Du very gently took on a posture of listening attentively.

“They... The girls in Wang Xiao’s dorm and the ones from the dorm next door, one day, for some reason, they threw her bedding out the window, and they pushed her, hit her, called her a lot of ugly-sounding words. I was just passing by the dormitory building then, and the quilt falling down startled me. I didn’t know what was going on. A girl next to me told me that Wang Xiao was the ‘deer,’ that each year everyone chose the most loathsome person. She was dirty and cheap, and anyone who lived in the same dorm as her was unfortunate. Then someone came from the boys’ dormitory across the way. He laughed and said, ‘This is my slave, how come you’re hitting her again?’ And he gave the girls hitting her a few hundred yuan.”

“...” Lang Qiao recalled how she had had to save up for a whole semester to go to one concert during her middle school days and felt that she was listening to a fantasy story. “A few hundred?”

“It must have been five-hundred.” Xia Xiaonan thought she was asking for a definite amount and answered accordingly. “Because I remember that the girl who took the money counted it and said, ‘Why is it five-hundred now? A hundred less. Wang Xiao’s price goes down every day.’ ...That sort of thing.

“Wang Xiao didn’t make a sound. She picked up her fallen stuff on her own. The girls wouldn’t let her go into the dormitory building, saying that they’d ‘sold’ her and telling her to go with the buyer. Then the boy waved a hand at her, and she...she...went into the boys’ dormitory...”

“What?” Hearing this, Lang Qiao nearly jumped to her feet. For a good while she was stupefied. Stammering somewhat, she said, “That’s just... That’s appalling. Aren’t there teachers in your dormitories? Didn’t they do something?”

“There are teachers,” Xia Xiaonan said quietly. “But they don’t do anything about it... They don’t dare to do anything.”

Fei Du poured two glasses of water and put one each in front of Lang Qiao and Xia Xiaonan. Then he said to Xia Xiaonan, “So you were very afraid of receiving the same treatment.”

Xia Xiaonan almost inaudibly squeezed words out of her throat. “I was standing there that day, watching her picking up her things. She’d pick them up but couldn’t hold them. She’d pick up one and drop another. I...really wanted to help her...but...”

Probably only someone who’d fallen on the ground and had no one to help them up would regret that they hadn’t helped another from the first.

Fei Du smiled faintly, not taking up her words. He only asked, “Feng Bin told you that he had a way, right? Did he tell you in detail what he was planning to do after running away from school?”

Xia Xiaonan said, “He said he had a friend outside of school who had a lot of connections. He’d already contacted this person and was going to reveal this business. He’d had enough of the school.”

Fei Du said, “Who was this friend?”

“I don’t know his real name, only his pen name or maybe his online handle... I think it was ‘go ask shatov’. He promised us he’d make all the hideous things at school public.”

Fei Du silently looked towards a corner—there was another unobtrusive surveillance camera in the corner; he seemed to be exchanging a look with the person watching. “Have you seen this friend?”

Xia Xiaonan shook her head numbly. “No, Feng Bin said this person was out of town for a little while, though he’d arranged to come back for Christmas. We’d stay at the hotel and wait for him for a few days... But...but we...didn’t have time.”

“Since you’d already determined to leave with Feng Bin, why did you repent later?”

“Because...the day before we were going to leave, Wei Wenchuan came to see me. He said he knew everything, including how and when we were planning to leave, where we were going, everyone who was going... He told me to think carefully, because no one would care about these trifles going on at school, at most a few students would issue apologies, and afterwards it would get even worse... And as for the media, the school... They all have family connections... Outside society is the same as school, divided by social position, with people who can have the final say. He had means of finding out our plans ahead of time, and he also had means of making it so we couldn’t attend school again... If I didn’t believe him... If I didn’t believe him, I was welcome to try.”

Fei Du sighed, because he knew that these words really weren’t purely a threat—they were a threat of the truth as it was. “So you surrendered.”

“I... Wei Wenchuan told me that actually it had been Liang Youjing’s idea to chose me to be the deer, because I stole her thunder on the exams and made her lose face in front of her parents—her mother is one of the school trustees, even if she killed someone at school it could be settled. No one dared to offend her. Unless he personally went to speak to Liang Youjing...”

“What did he want you to do?”

“He gave me a phone with tracking and eavesdropping functions... And he promised me that after this one thing was over, I'd be able to calmly finish senior middle and graduate. No one would bother me.”

“Did you know what he wanted to do, then?”

“I didn't know.” Xia Xiaonan shook her head desperately. “I really didn't know... When we went to the Drum Tower and suddenly ran into...ran into that person, I was scared out of my wits. When Feng Bin pushed me and told me to run, I didn't even realize what was going on. It was so dark, I thought someone had just hit him from behind... I didn't know that person...that person...”

Didn't know that person was holding a knife, didn't know that when Feng Bin, voice full of terror, told her to run, his back had been cut up.

Because it had been too dark; the sudden surprise attack had left her with no time to react.

He must only have been hit from behind? Wei Wenchuan must have found a group of delinquents to teach Feng Bin a lesson?

She'd been comforting herself like this, and her senses had had to obligingly collaborate to trick her and themselves.

“So up to the last you didn't throw the phone away?” Lang Qiao at last couldn't resist saying this.

All the blood drained out of Xia Xiaonan's face.

No wonder the killer had been in no hurry and known exactly what to do.

Fei Du said, “In the end, you accidentally ran into a dead end alley... Child, relax a bit, all right? The more detailed the information you give us, the better we’ll be able to catch the person who killed Feng Bin.”

Xia Xiaonan curled up into a ball, her eyes looking in panic at Fei Du, like a fawn’s.

Fei Du tried softening his voice and slowly leading her on. “The circumstances were very urgent then. Feng Bin saw that there was a dead end ahead, but it was already too late to turn back, so he had you hide in the garbage bin. It was very late in the day. The person-high garbage bin was full of a pungent, reeking sour smell. There was a lid over your head. It was black all around. You couldn’t see anything. You could only hear the sounds coming from outside... What did you hear?”

“...cries for help,” Xia Xiaonan whispered after a long silence. “At first he cried for help, and no one answered. Then he babbled, trying to talk to the killer, asking who he was, promising to give him all his money. The killer...didn’t say anything. Not long after, I heard frantic steps, some noise... and a scream...then...then there wasn’t any sound.

“Then after a while, I heard a laugh, and also...also the sound of heavy objects falling on the ground one after another...”

It hadn’t been heavy objects falling; it had been the thudding of Feng Bin’s limbs hitting the ground as Lu Guosheng chopped them off.

“Then that person came towards me. He...he knew where I was hiding. I was terrified. He was singing a song...” Xia Xiaonan remembered a couple of lines. “Little rabbit be good, open up as you should’...”

Gooseflesh instantly rose on Lang Qiao's arms.

“Then he pulled me out of the garbage bin! I was scared to death. I even forgot to breathe. And he...he reached out towards me, took my backpack, found my phone and my wallet... I thought I was dead meat, but...but he only smiled at me, waved my phone around, and left without saying anything. I...I finally saw Feng Bin...Feng Bin...”

Xia Xiaonan seemed to have returned to a nightmare. Her eyes lost focus, and she gasped for breath.

Fei Du leaned forward and took her hand. The trace of warmth on his palm scalded the girl's frozen hand, instantly pulling her back into the present. Staring, she hung onto Fei Du's hand as if it were a lifeline. “I'm sorry, I was scared...”

While a human lifetime might contain hundreds of thousands of regrets of all kinds, in the main, most of them came down to these words.

I'm sorry, I was scared.

Luo Wenzhou, watching this dialogue from the observation room, turned away, his face grave. He called Tao Ran. “Have you contacted the students involved in the case and their parents? What did they say?”

It was very noisy where Tao Ran was. “It's a bit of a mess, the school is giving me the runaround. In the last five minutes I've gotten calls from seven or eight lawyers. These children of wealthy families...”

“Bring them all back, including the teachers who watch the dormitories and the school's management,” Luo Wenzhou said coldly. “Yufen Middle School's students are under suspicion of abuse and group sexual assault.”

“What?” At first Tao Ran was shocked. After a pause, he said at once, “I’m on it!”

Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone and stood at the door of the observation room, letting out a long breath. Then he remembered something and opened the audiobook software he’d recently downloaded.

This week, the topic submitted by The Reciter was “*Demons pace through the empty night—Demons*, by Dostoevsky.”

“Shatov” was a character in the book who’d been murdered for being a “whistleblower,” delicately coinciding with Feng Bin’s experience.

And the person who’d contacted Feng Bin and promised to expose the filthy events at Yufen Middle School... Why would he so coincidentally be called ‘go ask shatov’?

Had a certain person...or a certain power, knowing beforehand about Feng Bin’s decision to take Xia Xiaonan away, predicted this bloody incident?

Had they been plotters or promoters?

Why had they declared themselves so brazenly this time?

Luo Wenzhou stood in the long and narrow corridor and smoked two cigarettes in a row. He looked up at the murky sky outside the window; it was overcast and getting ready to snow. He remembered the mysterious patrolman he and Fei Du had bumped into that day at the Drum Tower, feeling that he’d put his hand into still waters and felt the surging undercurrent beneath.

The City Bureau’s powerful intervention was like a sharp lever, prying open corners sheltering evil.

That afternoon, all classes at Yufen Middle School were suspended. The police simply commandeered the school's offices and interviewed all the students separately, and took all the implicated teachers and school staff back to the City Bureau. The students who had been kept under high pressure and were once more seeing the light of day at last couldn't contain themselves. They revealed the true state of affairs, and the situation became irretrievable—

That evening, pudgy little Zhang Yifan, like the superhero and the raised fist on his clothing, was the first to stand up and use his real name, writing a long, clumsily-written article and posting it online. After a brief silence, the silent lambs at last stopped their dazed steps and let out weak cries...that gradually gathered into a roar.

The shocked parents swarmed around, nearly coming to blows at the City Bureau's gates.

The chaotic work of investigating and gathering evidence continued until ten o'clock at night before stopping out of consideration for the health and mental well-being of the minors. The unfortunate Tao Ran's crow's mouth had uttered a prediction—they would indeed have to work overtime this weekend.

On the way home, Fei Du hardly said a word.

Luo Wenzhou turned his head to look at him and saw him sitting in the passenger's seat, actually sleeping while maintaining his upright posture. Luo Wenzhou turned the heating up as high as it would go and drove all the way home as evenly as he could. Only when they were entering the estate did he take Fei Du's hand and shake it gently. "Wake up, time to get out of the car. Don't get chilled."

Fei Du's back had gone somewhat stiff from sitting. He agreed reluctantly without entirely waking up. He stared blankly up ahead until Luo Wenzhou pulled into his parking spot and stopped the car.

“What are you looking at?” Luo Wenzhou touched his head, then felt his warm neck and tightened his scarf. “We’re nearly home.”

“Why...” Fei Du’s voice was somewhat hoarse. He pointed. “Why are the lights on in your house?”

CHAPTER 111 - Verhovensky XXI

The lights in Luo Wenzhou's house were not only on, they were on rather aggressively, pouring out of the living room onto the balcony.

Luo Wenzhou stared, got out of the car and looked around, and not far away found a very familiar car. "Strange, today isn't Friday."

"Today *is* Friday," Fei Du said helplessly.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

So-called Friday was like a beauty set off by family background and splendid attire; remove the meaning of its name, and the thing itself was worthless. For someone who had to work on festivals and holidays and had gotten the days of the week confused, it would instead become a source of increased grief and indignation.

Luo Wenzhou sighed. As he urged Fei Du to hurry up and not dawdle outside, he casually said, "It's fine. It's because there aren't many parking spaces. The neighbors leave to spend the weekend in the countryside on Friday and Saturday evenings, so we can get by using one of their spots for a while—my parents sometimes come over on Friday evenings to bring me some stuff, though they may not have time to come more than once every few months. Then they come sit for a while and leave."

Fei Du's steps suddenly stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

The corridor's sound-operated lights hadn't been working very smoothly lately; you had to stamp hard to awaken them. Now they were still.

Fei Du was standing half inside and half outside, the glow of the streetlights surrounding his shoulders in a pale halo.

What would his parents think, coming over and suddenly seeing a strange man living here?

Fei Du hesitated, not knowing how he should introduce himself.

A colleague? A friend? A roommate? Or... In a flash, Fei Du remembered seeing Mu Xiaoqing at the hospital that day; what had her last meaningful words meant? Had Luo Wenzhou officially come out of the closet to his parents? Or had that lady just been relying on a mother's instincts and sounding him out?

This was Luo Wenzhou's private business. Fei Du had never asked about it, and he had nothing to judge from.

Exchanges between physical bodies were after all only a brief expression of desire. Fei Du thought that the relationship between him and Luo Wenzhou was a tangle of unclear ambiguity; it became more confused with each step. He was accustomed to carefully analyzing and arranging everything about himself. He only now realized with a start that in this, he didn't even have a sense of boundaries or any plans; he'd just let things develop as they would. It was as though he were going downstream in a little boat, not caring about the direction, not caring about the hidden reefs; if he encountered a whirlpool and was swallowed by it, he wasn't planning on struggling⁶.

Luo Wenzhou looked back, looking right into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Luo Wenzhou's expression was so matter-of-fact that it seemed he hadn't noticed at all that there was anything inappropriate in this scene.

Fei Du paused, then tactfully tried, “With your parents here, won’t I be a little in the way?”

The tips of Luo Wenzhou’s eyebrows moved slightly. Perhaps it was because it was too dark all around and Fei Du couldn’t see his subtle expression clearly, or perhaps it was because Luo Wenzhou was accustomed to not showing his emotions on his face, and the more genuine feelings he had, the more unmoved he looked... At any rate, Fei Du actually couldn’t tell for a time what his meaning was.

Then, as though nothing were the matter, Luo Wenzhou said, “It’s fine. They know you’re here. The two of them came to look at you when you were in the hospital, though you weren’t entirely conscious then. And my mom came to bring you food afterwards, you must remember?”

Fei Du gave a brief affirmative and relaxed, thinking he’d understood Luo Wenzhou’s implication—it seemed that to Luo Wenzhou’s parents, he would be a friend who had saved their son’s life, “friendless and uncared for,” with no one to mind him, and since they were both single young men, he was staying here as a rent-reducing roommate until his wounds were completely healed. Probably the couple had heard that he’d gotten out of the hospital and come over especially to have a look at him out of gratitude and politeness.

Having determined his own position, Fei Du’s faltering state of mind immediately settled, and he became easy again, once more becoming the President Fei who could talk to anyone in their own language.

He didn’t see the hand hanging at Luo Wenzhou’s side tighten.

In previous days, when the door had opened, it had been Luo Yiguo coming out to welcome them. Now circumstances had changed, and Mu Xiaoqing herself came out. As soon as she saw Luo Wenzhou, she quickly began to grumble. “Why so late? I was just about to call you.”

Before Fei Du could speak, Mu Xiaoqing was very familiarly pulling him inside, comfortably rebuking him, “It’s freezing cold outside and you’re going out dressed like that without anyone to mind, hurry in and get warm.—Have you two eaten?”

“We ate.” Luo Wenzhou looked around. “My goodness, have you two come to aid the poor or to visit a prisoner in jail? There’s no place to stand. What’s this about?”

His entrance hall was nearly stacked full of all kinds of big and small boxes. There wasn’t even anywhere to change shoes. Luo Wenzhou looked through them. He found that there were mushrooms, prepared foods, tea leaves, fruit, snacks...and a pile of wantonly extravagant cans of cat food.

In all honestly, Luo Yiguo weighed nearly fifteen jin!

“Why is there so much milk, I don’t drink the stuff... Oh, and there’s a set of cat toys, wonderful. You picked your son up off the ground, but the cat is your own flesh and blood.”

“We didn’t buy the milk for you, don’t flatter yourself,” Mu Xiaoqing said. “What could there be at your dining hall that’s good to eat, it’s all oily and salty. It’s fine if a crude and robust specimen like you eats slop two meals a day, but how could you wrong an injured person by making him eat it along with you?”

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes towards Fei Du—as if he would let himself be wronged. He not only ordered take-out for himself, he also had to drag the whole Criminal Investigation Team into corruption along with him; it was rather vicious. But in the end, after restraining himself for a moment, he snorted and silently swallowed down this singular injustice throughout the ages, angrily shouldering the stack of things in the entrance hall and putting them away without complaint.

From the moment the two of them had walked through the door, the mother and son had been going seamlessly back and forth, like a comic crosstalk. An outsider couldn't get a word in at all. Only when Luo Wenzhou left carrying the stuff did Fei Du have an opportunity to calmly stick out his hand and say to Mu Xiaoqing, "If I had known earlier that you were going to come over, I would have gone ahead to pick you up. After all, I'm only learning on the job. I can't help out at all at the City Bureau."

Mu Xiaoqing loved listening to his mouthful of entirely unreserved graceful talk. Because she felt that this young man was cut from same cloth as her son, she had no sense of guilt that the pig she'd raised had ruined a cabbage and happily took him into the living room.

Fei Du immediately saw Luo Cheng sitting on the living room couch. Unlike Mu Xiaoqing, you could see this gentleman's blood relationship to Luo Wenzhou from his features.

There was gray at Luo Cheng's temples. Unlike ordinary middle-aged men, he hadn't put on weight and grown a belly. His back was straight, and there was a sober crease between his brows. He had an unfathomable sense of presence just sitting there on the couch, the sort of character that would be given the seat at the head of the table as soon as he walked into a private room at a restaurant...only the atmosphere was somewhat spoiled by the fact that he was holding a cat in his arms.

Luo Cheng and Fei Du exchanged a look; in a very short space of time, these two sophisticates from two different generations examined each other. Fei Du overlooked the fact that the venerable fellow was playing a paw-catching game with the cat and greeted him very suitably. "Hello, uncle. Sorry to disturb you."

Luo Cheng nodded. Then, in an unprecedented event, this "retired emperor," who would matter-of-factly make his own lamed son give

up his seat for him, stood up and quite amiably said to Fei Du, "You're looking better. Come and sit down, quickly."

Luo Yiguo yowled, rolling in the retired emperor's arms, aggressively climbing up onto his shoulder and licking its paws in this lofty position.

"We've wanted to come see you for a long time, but that blockhead Luo Wenzhou kept saying we'd disturb your rest," Mu Xiaoqing said very warmly. "Are you comfortable living here? If you need anything, just order him around. It won't kill him."

Fei Du choked, because he faintly felt that Mu Xiaoqing's tone was too intimate. Then he very cautiously said, "Shixiong takes pretty good care of me."

Hearing this form of address, Mu Xiaoqing didn't say anything, but the corners of her eyes were full of a meaningful smile.

When Luo Wenzhou had finished ungrudgingly clearing the entrance hall and somewhat worriedly stuck in his head to have a look, he found that their high-maintenance Master Fei and even more high-maintenance elderly gentleman were already chatting.

Fei Du had pulled out a "youthful talent" face; he was very well-acquainted with dealing with this sort of middle-aged man. He'd entirely restrained his air of an idle son of the wealthy, leaving not a shred behind. He and the old man each occupied one corner of the couch, looking just like an investing businessman and a government representative preparing to collaborate on developing the city center.

Fei Du had said something that was making Luo Cheng nod repeatedly; there was a hefty cat sitting on his head, his brow was for once smoothed out, and he was earnestly remarking, "That's a very good idea of yours, I'll flesh it out carefully when I leave and write a detailed report and send it to..."

Mu Xiaoqing hurriedly gave a dry cough and stuck a tangerine segment in his mouth, interrupting her old man's inopportune babble.

It really was late. Hearing that tomorrow would be another day of catastrophic overtime at the City Bureau, Luo Cheng and Mu Xiaoqing didn't stay long. They sat for a while, then stood up and got ready to leave. Fei Du's etiquette was complete; of course he wanted to see them out. He was pushed back by Mu Xiaoqing.

"Stay inside," Mu Xiaoqing said. Then she turned to Luo Wenzhou and ordered, "You're a few years older than he is, you should take some more responsibility and restrain your spoiled temper at home, do you hear me?"

This speech was so domestic as to make it suspect. Luo Wenzhou agreed indolently, but Fei Du froze.

Then Luo Cheng spoke, saying to Fei Du, "I hear your parents are both not around. If you encounter anything in the future that you really can't deal with, you can come to us."

Fei Du was surprised and bewildered. Meeting those eyes that resembled Luo Wenzhou's, he saw that Luo Cheng was actually smiling faintly at him, the expression on his imposing face almost kindly.

Mu Xiaoqing waved at him and stuck her hand into Luo Cheng's pocket to keep warm. Beaming, she said, "Our son has been heartless since he was little. It's been years since I saw him cry..."

Not waiting for her to finish, Luo Wenzhou yowled and cried out, "See you!" then closed the door, shutting out the rest of Mu Xiaoqing's words.

With Mu Xiaoqing and Luo Cheng gone, the tumultuous living room at once quieted down. Luo Wenzhou knew that the old things hadn't been able to contain themselves and had run over to see Fei Du. At first it had been all right, but in the end they'd sounded like they'd been enjoining a daughter-in-law. Fei Du had a monster-revealing mirror in his heart; he could see clearly through a conspiracy with only the slightest clue, never mind such an obvious demonstration.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't let them come all this time because he'd been afraid they would rashly pierce through the window paper, but now that it had come to this, in spite of himself he was rather expectantly awaiting Fei Du's reaction—never mind whether it was a good reaction or a bad reaction; at least it would resolve the anxiety of hesitating in place.

In contradictory fashion, he didn't dare to look at Fei Du's expression. He only seemingly indifferently complained, "They came without even calling ahead. They really know how to make trouble. I'll go heat up some milk."

Fei Du's gaze, which seemed to have physical presence, bored heavily into his back, watching him tear open a box of milk, pour a bit into a saucer for Luo Yiguo, then pour the rest into a cup, mix in a spoonful of honey, and stick it into the microwave.

Luo Wenzhou knew that Fei Du was watching him, but he couldn't determine the meaning of that gaze. His tongue moved; he thought over and over of bringing the subject up, breaking the awkward silence, but searching his guts and belly he still couldn't think of what he wanted to say. A thin layer of sweat broke out on his back. In the whole kitchen, the only sound remaining in the silence was the whirring of the microwave.

Then the microwave beeped. Luo Wenzhou pulled himself together and reached out to open the door. Suddenly, a hand reached over from behind him, catching his wrist.

Luo Wenzhou gave a start. He'd been lost in thought just now and hadn't noticed Fei Du approaching.

“What did you tell your parents?” Fei Du asked, teasing, carefully stroked his wrist. “I think there's been a big misunderstanding.”

Luo Wenzhou's throat moved slightly.

Fei Du laughed quietly, pecking at the most sensitive place at the base of his ear, his other hand untucking Luo Wenzhou's shirt. “I just got a scare. Shouldn't you make it up to me, shixiong? My technique really is very good. Just try it, I guarantee...”

Luo Wenzhou held down his groping paw.

Fei Du was planning to cover this awkwardness up. Luo Wenzhou was perfectly well aware of the situation and knew what was tactful; of course he understood. If he only went along with this, he could enjoy a bit of unburdened sex before the miserable weekend of overtime, then everyone could cheerfully carry on with the previous ambiguity, happily going on...

Until at long last the conditions were right...or the two of them parted ways.

“Too rash,” Luo Wenzhou told himself.

Then he peeled Fei Du's hand off of himself, turned, and said to him a word at a time, “My parents have always been fairly permissive towards me, especially after I became an adult. As long as my general direction was all right, they wouldn't come to interfere—as for who I hung out with, whether I had boyfriends or girlfriends, how I did my job, that was all my business. They wouldn't ask about it.”

Fei Du faintly sensed what he was going to say and stared dumbly at him.

“There’s nothing to misunderstand.” Luo Wenzhou’s hand tightened involuntarily, encircling Fei Du’s wrist hard enough to hurt a little. “They came over on purpose to see you today and behaved that way because I formally told them...”

Fei Du was inexplicably somewhat panicked and tried subconsciously to interrupt him. “Shixiong.”

“...that you’re the person I’m planning to spend a lifetime with.”

CHAPTER 112 - Verhovensky XXII

Fei Du's expression seemed to have been frozen by the five-degrees-below-zero temperature outside. He was still for a long time. But Luo Yiguo had finished lapping up the bit of milk in the saucer and went over waving its big tail to brush against his pant leg. He only then started as if waking from a dream. Luo Wenzhou's hand, clenched like an iron hoop, seemed to have some mechanism; it instantly loosened, letting him pull his wrist back.

Fei Du lowered his head and exchanged a look with the hefty Luo Yiguo. Then he laughed. "Seriously? You scared me to death."

The blood flowing like magma at Luo Wenzhou's heart cooled slightly, stopping its uncontrollable rushing, gradually falling to earth and becoming a thick pile of volcanic ash.

He realized he'd chosen the wrong time.

Ever since he'd brought Fei Du here, he seemed to have been impatient, unable to control his emotions; the slow and steady tempo he'd initially planned out had turned into a runaway wild dog—he hadn't been able to resist touching him, hadn't been able to resist feelings that were like a breached dike, hadn't been able to resist saying superfluous words...and not just a few.

Only a few days had passed, and his original tentative plan had been unable to keep up with the changes; it had sprung a hundred holes, becoming a rag that couldn't fill a crack.

And then his wretched parents had come to get their son into more trouble.

The so-called "skill and ease" assigned to age and experience were likely only a false front; much of the time, skill and ease were only

the results of having seen it all before and being cold and fed up, unmoved.

Unfortunately, having come this far, it was impossible to turn back, however much he wanted to.

Luo Wenzhou felt he really had scared Fei Du, so he softened his voice slightly. "Is that all you want to say to me?"

Fei Du considered, backed up a few steps, pulled out a chair in the dining room and sat down, his elbows propped on the dining table, his fingers to his forehead, now and then pressing on his temples. Eyes half-closed, he said, "I thought you rather understood me."

Luo Wenzhou said, "Rather understood you in what respect?"

"Of course I don't mean that respect," Fei Du joked. Seeing that Luo Wenzhou wasn't about to applaud, he restrained his teasing smile, the weariness slowly coming up on his face. Fei Du was silent for a while. "I remember you warned me more than once to behave better so I wouldn't one day experience the inside of your prison transports."

"If I recall correctly, on the day we hunted down Zhao Haochang, under the Skyscreen, I apologized for that." Luo Wenzhou took out the warmed milk and pushed it across the table. The cup stopped precisely in front of Fei Du, not spilling a drop. "Do you have any other grudges?"

Fei Du temporarily closed his mouth, because there was a multitude of threads in his heart, flashing around dazzlingly; however glib-tongued he was, he still didn't know where to start.

After a good while, he raised his head.

“No, in fact there was no need for you to apologize. You weren’t wrong. I didn’t commit patricide because my abilities were limited. I couldn’t manage it. When you were investigating Fei Chengyu, the other group of people you found following him really were my people. I went through some not very legal channels to employ them. Later, when you retreated, all those people disappeared in one night. They worked shady jobs, so no one reported it to the police, leaving their whereabouts unknown.—That was Fei Chengyu warning me that my wings weren’t strong enough. I couldn’t shake him. That’s the only reason I stopped, not because of any moral or legal restraint.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart began to sink. “So what?”

“Captain Luo, you’ve been working as a frontline criminal policeman for so many years. You’ve seen eight hundred if not a thousand psychopaths. You ought to trust your own first instincts. I really am that kind of person—the kind with a naturally flawed brain, a sense of morals and responsibility below ordinary levels, abnormal dopamine and phenethylamine secretions, the kind that can’t feel ordinary human emotions or build stable long-term relationships... perhaps even incapable of feeling so-called ‘love.’”

Luo Wenzhou was leaning against the wall next to the dining table, the wall clock hanging over his head constantly ticking forward—this thing had been broken for a long time; it had never been accurate. It was Fei Du who had taken it apart and fixed it.

At this point, he said coldly, “If you aren’t interested in me like that, if you don’t care for me, then you can say so clearly.”

Fei Du opened his mouth for a moment, wanting to explain something, but he quickly forced himself to hold back.

Luo Wenzhou’s heavy “spend a lifetime” was pressing down on him so hard he could hardly catch his breath. His most instinctive reaction

was to lose his head and flee. Only using all his strength could he maintain his refined bearing.

He was like a vagabond trekking over thin ice through an endless night, having no idea which abyss or icy pool this so-called “lifetime” indicated.

Fei Du was silent for a while, then at last only said, “I’m sorry.”

“Then why did you provoke me once and again, time after time?” Luo Wenzhou’s voice was extremely quiet, as if his chest was piled full of rocks and that voice had to be forced from the fissures between the rocks, each syllable creaking. “I warned you, refused you so many times. Why did you still—“

Expression apathetic, Fei Du avoided his line of sight.

Luo Wenzhou stopped talking, suddenly feeling that this was pointless. He stood in silence where he was for a moment, heavily let out a breath, then strode towards the study and slammed the door.

Luo Yiguo was startled by this world-shaking slam. It howled and bristled, straightening its neck and looking over, not knowing what the litter box attendant’s problem was. Its fur bristled for a while; seeing that no one paid attention to it, it ran over to Fei Du in confusion, leaping lightly onto the dining table, exchanging a helpless look with Fei Du.

Fei Du seemed to be entirely motionless. He looked back at it for a moment, the chaotic multitude of threads in his heart quieting once more. His chest was hollow and empty, without thought or voice.

After a good while, out of nowhere, he remembered what he’d said during the day in the City Bureau interrogation room to get Xia Xiaonan to talk—“You may never again in your life meet another boy who cares for you so much.”

What Feng Bin had been for Xia Xiaonan was like what Luo Wenzhou was for him, a piece of accidental luck; probably a person could only ask for one such outrageous accident in a lifetime.

And later, in the life he couldn't see the end of, it would already be precious to have a memory. Even if the memory was rather short.

But that didn't matter. All the memories in the world were short.

Fei Du slowly reached out a hand towards Luo Yiguo. Luo Yiguo at first instinctively dodged away. Then it hesitantly drew close, tentatively sniffing Fei Du's hand hanging in midair, sniffing all around it in a circle. Then it finally lowered its defenses, put its head down, and rubbed it against the palm of his hand.

Fei Du's hand at last carefully came down, fitting snugly against Luo Yiguo's sleek back, stroking a few times from its head, following the direction of the fur.

So this was what a cat was like. Fine fur, very soft, different from a stuffed toy—the roots of the fine hairs were warm; with your hand on it, you could feel the lingering breathing and the gently struggling heartbeat.

A carefree little life.

Luo Yiguo narrowed its eyes, making a gurgle in its throat, now and then waving its fluffy tail, letting out a very tender purr.

Fei Du coexisted with it almost tranquilly for a moment. Master Cat had been satisfied by this treatment and thereupon curled itself into a ball. It slowly closed its narrowed eyes and went to sleep.

Fei Du silently drew back his hand, put away his phone, and went to the study door. He knocked three times. "Thank you for taking care of

me these last few days.”

Luo Wenzhou ignored him.

Fei Du didn't linger long. He turned away and got his coat and scarf down from the clothes rack in the entrance hall, preparing to go out and find a hotel nearby to make do with for one night. Tomorrow he'd think of getting someone to clean his long-unoccupied little apartment and then move back in.

Leaving a warm house to walk into a bone-chilling cold winter night truly did require a bit of courage. Fei Du sighed, feeling that just thinking about it made his hands and feet turn cold reflexively.

But when he'd just draped on his coat and hadn't yet put his arms in the sleeves, the closed study door was suddenly thrown open heavily from inside.

The unfortunate Luo Yiguo had just closed its eyes when it was startled awake again by a fierce wind sweeping over it. It didn't know who it had offended. It cried out indignantly and charged into Luo Wenzhou's lately vacant second bedroom like a streak of smoke and wouldn't come out again.

Before Fei Du could turn his head, he was suddenly seized from behind. Caught unawares, he stumbled half a step. The coat loosely draped over him fell to the floor.

Luo Wenzhou grabbed his scarf. In order not to become a hanged ghost on Christmas Eve, he had to back up following the direction of the pull. Luo Wenzhou pressed him against the wall of the narrow entrance hall.

“I'll ask you two things,” Luo Wenzhou said heavily. “First, if you don't care for me, why did you have to get in front of me when the bomb went off on Zheng Kaifeng's truck?”

Fei Du said, “I...”

Luo Wenzhou wasn't listening to him at all. “Second, since you're a superficial psychopath who doesn't know love or hate, then why are there emetics and electric shock equipment in your basement? I've been a frontline criminal policeman for so many years, the number of psychopaths I've seen is eight hundred if it isn't a thousand, and I've never heard that any one of them turned themselves in because he was hankering after torment!”

Fei Du's pupils contracted fiercely. Then he instinctively struggled.

Holding him down wasn't any more difficult than holding down Xiao Haiyang. Luo Wenzhou twisted his hands behind his back, pulling the loose scarf off his neck and efficiently wrapping it three times around his hands and tying a firm knot. He laughed coldly. “President Fei, you don't get enough exercise.”

Luo Wenzhou dragged Fei Du into the living room and nearly threw him onto the couch. His long legs hit the coffee table, and the bowl of tangerines prepared for Luo Cheng and Mu Xiaoqing rolled all over the floor. No one picked them up.

Luo Wenzhou pulled open Fei Du's shirt, which needed to be carefully handled at the dry cleaner's. The torn buttons brushed his chin as they went flying. Luo Wenzhou pressed his hand to Fei Du's chest—this body was young, after all; its ability to recover and its metabolism were both strong. Only faint traces remained of the years of old scars. Some hint of them could only be seen under a strong light.

“You used the tattoo to cover up the electric shock wounds. Weren't you afraid of burning your internal organs? Weren't you afraid of accidentally dying quietly in your empty basement?” Luo Wenzhou

looked down on him from on high. “When we left Heng’ai Hospital that day, if I hadn’t dragged you out, what were you planning to do?”

Fei Du had hung around with a crowd of rich kids since he was young. His sense of shame was very limited; sex and streaking were nothing remarkable. But it seemed that what Luo Wenzhou had torn open wasn’t only a shirt, but the sack of skin containing his flesh and bones. For the first time in his life, Fei Du felt an indescribable panic; trying to flee by any means possible, he pulled up his knees and hit him. “Let go—”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t dodge. He bore it, the hard knees hitting him and making a painful-sounding dull thump. Fei Du froze, losing the opportunity to counterattack, letting Luo Wenzhou hold down his knees and force them apart. Joints cracked. Fei Du subconsciously closed his eyes.

But while the two of them were locked for a long time in this posture that seemed to forebode violence, Luo Wenzhou didn’t touch a hair on his head.

“I’d really love nothing better than to...” After a good while, Luo Wenzhou sighed, lowered his head, and gently kissed his dry lips, quietly saying, “Dig out your evil heart and rotten lungs and have a look.”

Saying so, he relaxed his restraint, picked up a blanket from a rocking chair next to the couch, and dropped it over Fei Du. He rubbed the center of his brow somewhat wearily. “It’s late. You should go wash up and sleep. I’ll go back...go back to my own room...”

“That basement used to be Fei Chengyu’s.” Fei Du didn’t move a muscle. He suddenly spoke very quietly. “Fei Chengyu was a sadist. If my mother violated any of his ‘rules,’ he’d drag her down into the basement to punish her.”

Luo Wenzhou was at once seized with terror. His heart beat frantically, and he subconsciously held his breath. He secretly took two deep breaths and managed to keep his voice controlled, gently asking, “What rules?”

“Lots, I couldn’t tell you clearly. For example not being allowed to talk to outsiders—including the housekeeper and the cleaners. She wasn’t allowed to make eye contact with others, not allowed to touch books and TV shows outside of the ones he permitted... Her daily regimen was fixed. Get out of bed at seven, sit down at the dining table at eight, start taking care of the vases in the house at eight-thirty, swapping in new floral arrangements. If she missed by more than one minute, he’d drag her into the basement—electric shock is nothing, it’s a very light method.” Fei Du quietly said, “Fei Chengyu thought this was his way of showing love. You not only had to have a person’s body, you also needed to have her mind, pack her into a glass vase and make each one of her branches grow according to your wishes. Only then would she belong to you. He didn’t avoid me when he did these things. There was even a child’s desk in his basement.”

Luo Wenzhou suddenly found it hard to breathe. “Did he...did he...”

“Abuse me?” Fei Du paused slightly, then, his expression unchanging, he said, “No, I was his heir. Fei Chengyu even thought I represented a part of himself. He wouldn’t have done anything to me.”

Luo Wenzhou relaxed slightly, letting out a breath. He walked over softly and sat next to Fei Du.

“Ever since I was aware of things, I wanted to break free of him, but it was only wanting. I didn’t do anything—until her suicide,” Fei Du said quietly. “She was trapped in a demon’s cage, with only me, aloof and unconcerned, beside her. After the long-term abuse, her psyche was abnormal. Apart from depression, she had a deep paranoia, thinking that the air was full of probes watching her. Even when she was alone with me, she didn’t dare to say anything that was ‘against

the rules.’ Fei Chengyu requested that she read to me for an hour before bed every night, and she spent two years mixing what she wanted to say into the reading topics, trying over and over to inculcate me with the idea of ‘freedom’... My reaction must have been too indifferent? When she finished reading the last book, she finally demonstrated for me that if you couldn’t be free, it was better to die.

“I’m sorry,” Fei Du murmured lightly, “I actually knew from the start that she had killed herself. The reason that I persisted in disagreeing with the conclusion of suicide, not letting you off, forcing you to investigate again and again, was that I wanted to use you to make trouble for Fei Chengyu and them.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “...them?”

“Do you know what a parasitic relationship is?” Fei Du said. “I supply you with nutrients and carbohydrates, and you supply me with protection and micro-elements... There was a parasitic beast behind Fei Chengyu.”

CHAPTER 113 - Verhovensky XXIII

On the night that they were pursuing Zheng Kaifeng, Fei Du had vaguely mentioned some power behind the Zhou Clan to Luo Wenzhou—and some secret and horrifying connection to the case of three generations of the Su family trafficking and murdering female children.

The Zhou Clan case, the death fleet, the kept wanted criminals...

There was also the Zhou Clan's Yang Bo; Yang Bo had been valued by Zheng Kaifeng for no reason, clearly a good-for-nothing covered in fake gold leaf, but he'd been Zhou Junmao's personal secretary. And Yang Bo's father had also died in an unusual car crash, supposedly hitting and killing a team working on a project, and the greatest beneficiary had been an invisible shareholder called the Guangyao Fund, which just happened to be the owner of the usage rights to the patch of seaside land where Xu Wenchao had disposed of the little girls' bodies.

Luo Wenzhou had remembered this afterwards and in fact had made a simple investigation along those lines, but there had been too many things going on then and the investigation had only been half-hearted; he hadn't gone in depth.

And there was also Fei Chengyu's unusual car crash, delicately coinciding with the old criminal policeman Yang Zhengfeng's time of death. Tao Ran had once guessed that when it came to the enormous undercurrents and countless links behind all this, Fei Du must be the one who knew the most.

Now, like a thousand-year-old clam spirit, he'd finally opened up a crack and revealed a corner of that dark world; it was already enough to make you tremble with fear.

Luo Wenzhou asked, “This parasitic beast you’re talking about, is that the Guangyao Fund?”

“The company is only a shell, one leg of a centipede, one ring of a spider’s web. It has no value. Rather, if you touch it rashly, it could easily warn the enemy in advance, and the people behind it could easily make a cunning escape,” Fei Du said quietly. “Keeping wanted criminals, assassinations, even building a colossal network of social connections, all of it requires a great sum of money—Fei Chengyu made donations to them at fixed intervals and used his connections for them, supported them, and these people committed all manner of crimes to help him clear away obstructions.”

Luo Wenzhou had had contact with Fei Chengyu in the early years, when he’d been investigating Fei Du’s mother’s suicide. His impression had been of a cold and refined man of elegant carriage; regarding his wife’s death, however, aside from the initial shock, his reminiscences and sadness had been insipid. He’d seemed rather unattached.

But Luo Wenzhou remembered that the old criminal policeman who’d come in to assist had advised him that under these circumstances, Fei Chengyu’s sort of reaction was in fact the normal one, because a perpetually distraught woman would bring lengthy torment and suffering upon her family. When there were no blood ties or other yokes between a husband and wife, they were like two birds in a forest that would scatter each in their own direction when disaster hit. That Fei Chengyu, with his vast property, hadn’t abandoned his wife and child but had only stayed away from home, throwing himself into his business, was already rare good conduct. Hearing that his wife was dead, it was human nature to feel he’d been freed—if he’d instead displayed excessive grief, that would have been rather worthy of suspicion.

Now it seemed that Fei Chengyu’s each and every move had been precisely planned; he had even pulled the wool over the eyes of an

elder who'd been on the job over twenty years!

The room was as warm as spring, but Luo Wenzhou's back was covered in a layer of cold sweat. "How do you know these things? Fei Chengyu didn't hide them from you, either?"

Fei Du struggled free of the scarf binding his hands and sat up rather wretchedly on the couch. He didn't pay any mind to his shirt, which Luo Wenzhou had pulled open. He casually smoothed his messy hair. His expression was so calm that his eyes were like two pieces of glass inlaid in his eye sockets, clear, ice-cold, as if the turbulent emotions just now had all been an illusion, not leaving behind a single trace.

Then he simply stood up, opened a cabinet door, and looked inside.

Luo Wenzhou's breath was suspended, because making Fei Du speak was too difficult; perhaps under his coercion he would reveal a few inklings, then come around and retreat once more. Whether he said anything, how much he said, would depend entirely on luck. Luo Wenzhou was afraid that if he breathed too loudly, he'd blow the luck away.

He was inwardly anxious, but he didn't dare to say anything to hurry him, only lightly asked, "What are you looking for?"

Fei Du frowned. "Is there wine?"

Of course there was wine. During the New Year and other holidays, no one could avoid making visits to family and friends and exchanging some gifts of bottles of red wine, but Luo Wenzhou, looking at Fei Du's reeling figure, really didn't especially want to give him anything to drink. He fumbled around for a while, then pulled out a bottle of wine that was supposed to have the highest sugar content and lowest alcohol content. He poured a glass and gave it to him.

The warm alcohol quickly flowed through Fei Du's blood and spread to his limbs and bones, slightly dispersing the indescribable chill, while his brain, seemingly mired in ice cold mud, cleared a little.

Fei Du held onto the empty glass, but he didn't ask for a second one—he naturally knew when to stop.

“I'm sorry, I've never told anyone these things. It's rather complicated. I couldn't get the main threads straight for a moment.” Fei Du paused, then followed his train of thought to a very remote beginning. “I had a maternal grandfather who I never met, the first person to ‘go into the sea.’ He'd accumulated some family property. At first he was very opposed to my mother marrying Fei Chengyu, but he couldn't dissuade his daughter from her infatuation. After the wedding, he didn't have any contact with them.”

Luo Wenzhou didn't know why the main character of the story had changed, a family drama cutting into the plot of a criminal case, but he wasn't in a hurry to ask. He tried to put in a word following his subject. “Because the old man was keen-sighted and saw that there was something wrong with your...with Fei Chengyu?”

“If Fei Chengyu had wanted, he could have disguised himself as any sort of person in the world. It wouldn't have been so easy for him to slip up.” Fei Du smiled, but his smile was fleeting. He said, “A sadist first has to use subtle means to break off his target's social connections—for example her parents, relatives, friends...render her alone and unsupported, while at the same time blackening her image to outsiders, so that even if she asked for help, no one would believe her. That's the first step. Only then can you constantly force down her self-respect without scruple, wreck her dignity, firmly control your target.”

Luo Wenzhou faintly felt that this was wrong, because he thought that while Fei Du said this, he sounded like a true expert on criminal

psychology, academic and impartial—as though what he was saying wasn't the subject of acute pain.

“It's easy to make ordinary friends misunderstand and stop contacting her by sowing discord a few times. The same principle applies to people a little closer; it only takes some more time. My mother's relatives were scattered during the old society's war years. There were few who still stayed in contact. She didn't have a host of distant relatives, so that made things easier—but you know, apart from that, there are some connections that even if you break the bone, there will still be a ligament remaining. My grandfather was widowed young and only had one daughter. Angry as he was, he never changed his heir. I couldn't understand how Fei Chengyu had broken that connection and also obtained my grandfather's family legacy.” Fei Du said, “So I asked Fei Chengyu.”

Relying on the formidable psychological quality he had used for many years to scam people in the interrogation room, Luo Wenzhou forced himself to maintain his expression. He bit his stiffened tongue, calming his voice with difficulty. “You're saying that you went to question your father, to ask him about the particulars of how he abused and controlled your mom.”

This was too...

“Is it very hard to understand? Sadism often comes along with an inexpressible self-satisfaction, and Fei Chengyu was especially narcissistic. He thought that these were all his abilities and works. He was happy to show them off to me, and took it as an opportunity to teach by example,” Fei Du said lightly. “If I didn't understand anything, I only had to ask.”

If he didn't have any questions when he finished listening, it would be taken to mean that he hadn't thought it over, that his attitude was incorrect. The young Fei Du hadn't especially wanted to know the outcome of an “incorrect attitude.”

An indescribable anger leapt up in Luo Wenzhou's heart. He would have loved nothing better than to drag Fei Chengyu out of his cozy vegetative state, kick him into prison, and make him eat lead.

He took a deep breath. A good while later, he pressed down his undulating emotions and asked in a grave voice, "And then what?"

"Fei Chengyu told me that severing that kind of connection was very easy, because a dead person couldn't form a connection with anyone—my grandfather died in a car accident. He'd unexpectedly heard the news that my mother was pregnant and finally couldn't resist going to see her. Before this, my mom had been misled by Fei Chengyu and thought that my grandfather had already broken off relations with her. When she received her father's olive branch, she was wild with joy...but on the day they had arranged to meet, a drunk driver hit my grandfather."

Arranging yourself a tidy assassination and as a matter of course inheriting the victim's property... This story sounded very familiar.

"Isn't it very much like a duplicate of the Zhou Clan's wealthy family drama?" Fei Du displayed a none-too-clear smile. "I asked Fei Chengyu then, what if the traffic police had thought that this car crash had some points that merited consideration? For example, if they'd tracked the driver's whereabouts before his death and found something unusual, or there was some problem with his background. As soon as the police suspected this wasn't an accident but a deliberate murder, then as the beneficiary of his legacy, Fei Chengyu would be extremely suspect."

Luo Wenzhou truly didn't know whether he ought to praise him for being so meticulous about major crimes from such a young age.

"Fei Chengyu casually told me, 'There are professionals to take care of these things. They won't slip up.'" Fei Du said, "That was the first

time I heard about their existence from him. Fei Chengyu said to me once that there was a precious sword in his hand, and in the future he could give it to me, provided I could hold it.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart stopped, but at this point, Fei Du raised his head and met Luo Wenzhou’s suddenly anxious gaze. He smiled at once. “No need to worry. That sword never came to me.”

In a somewhat hoarse voice, Luo Wenzhou said, “You’ve known me and Tao Ran for so many years and never revealed a word of this. Was it that you didn’t trust us?”

Fei Du was silent for a while. He didn’t answer directly, only said, “You know the old Picture Album Project?”

Luo Wenzhou stared.

“Do you still remember when I told you that I saw a paper written by Fan Siyuan, the head of the Picture Album Project, in his basement? It wasn’t only a paper. He had exhaustive materials about the Picture Album Project, including about the people taking part and their relatives—you said your shifu was called Yang Zhengfeng, right? He had a daughter named Yang Xin who was in elementary school then, in the city’s Twelfth Elementary School. On Mondays through Thursdays she got taken to school and picked up by a classmate’s parents who lived nearby, but on Friday evenings she would wait an extra hour at school for her mother, right?”

Luo Wenzhou’s blood ran cold. Even he hadn’t known most of these details.

How much power did this invisible net have?

Also, why had the Picture Album Project been established back then? Had it really been merely to compile academic materials? Aside from the experts at Yan Security Uni, wouldn’t it have been enough to send

a student to make contact and find someone in charge of records to cooperate? Why had so many frontline police officers taken part, and why had the level of confidentiality been so high?

And while the level of confidentiality had been that high, there had still been a leak. That could only mean...could only mean...

“As for what this sword really is, who it is, where it is, how great its power is, I don’t know any of that. When Fei Chengyu became incompetent after the car crash, I spent a few years thoroughly taking over his business, digging up some traces. I found that the associated donations and use of social connections had stopped years ago. If I hadn’t dug deep into the property management records, I wouldn’t have been able to discover that there had ever been such a secret connection between Fei Chengyu and them. Then I started to suspect that his car crash hadn’t been so simple.”

True—if Fei Chengyu had only gotten into an accident, then these people linked to him by “ties of blood” couldn’t have refrained even from showing their faces; moreover, they couldn’t have refrained from interfering at all with the company’s transfer of rights, disappearing so silently.

Fei Du was evidently Fei Chengyu’s only heir. Whether he fit the criteria of an heir or not, these people should have contacted him; they wouldn’t have abandoned a former financial backer like this.

Luo Wenzhou said, “They’d broken it off.”

Fei Du spat out a breath. “Right, they’d broken it off, and Fei Chengyu suffered from the backlash of the demon sword that he’d kept.”

Luo Wenzhou no longer had any attention to spare for his rejected confession, and no time to go into raptures about Fei Du’s rare openness.

He pulled over a chair and sat down and, frowning, pondered for a long time, trying to smooth out his thoughts. “Why?”

Fei Du said, “I remember I gave you an analysis of where Xu Wenchao could have disposed of the bodies.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded—private property that no one would ever dig up, or a particular region where even if someone did find a body they wouldn’t report it to the police.

The Binhai district didn’t satisfy either requirement; it was far outside of expectations. But the bodies really had been buried there, and they really hadn’t been discovered for many years. It could only be summed up as “a lucky break.” After all, China was so large; there were countless wild places no one went to for decades. This kind of luck wasn’t all that unusual.

“When Fei Chengyu was in charge, the Guangyao Fund once gave him a plan for a collaborative development of a Binhai project. The board of directors refused on the grounds of an ‘unclear profit model’—oh, by the board of directors, I mean Fei Chengyu himself.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He was feeling that tonight, his own ears weren’t good enough!

“In other words, Xu Wenchao disposed of the bodies there not because he thought the scenery was beautiful,” Luo Wenzhou said, “but because he knew that it was a safe ‘graveyard’? He was in contact with those people, perhaps even paid rent to use that graveyard!”

Given that Xu Wenchao was the kind of person who would use a box of ashes as a hiding place, he’d be capable of that—if that place had been bought for that purpose, then wasn’t it an even bigger “storage locker” for ashes and bodies?

Fei Du said, “It was the Su family case that gave me a guess about what had happened to Fei Chengyu—“

Luo Wenzhou was attempting to look at this thing from the point of view of an ordinary person. “In other words, your dad didn’t like this pedophilia business, refused to provide funds to participate, and so parted company with those people?”

Fei Du laughed silently. “How could that be? That would be too honorable.”

CHAPTER 114 - Verhovensky XXIV

Luo Wenzhou looked at him in amazement.

“Given my understanding of Fei Chengyu, I think his reason was very clear—a problem of profits.” Fei Du held down the glass with one finger and spun it on the table. “The real estate market was rising then, land prices were going up. How many novelty-seeking psychopaths would have needed to pay how much rent to cover the costs and future losses? Of course, those were far from the only funds Fei Chengyu had paid out under the guise of ‘donations.’ He could very well have put that piece of land down to a donation. But the ‘project’ itself made him uneasy.”

At this point, Luo Wenzhou had already adjusted his train of thought.

Fei Chengyu had been a sadist, extremely controlling and extremely narcissistic. As his ambitions and his wealth increased apace, he must have been constantly puffing himself up; he absolutely wouldn't have allowed anything in his hands to get out of control.

Given his acuteness, he definitely would have realized that *those people's* conduct of staking a claim and establishing a “graveyard” was an omen that they were no longer satisfied with being “killers” and “hired thugs”; they were constructing an even more colossal, even more dreadful-sounding “industrial chain,” wanting to use the rental graveyard to draw in a large net, bring in all the blood-drinking and flesh-eating monsters from the shadows, get dirt on them, and thus build their own kingdom and order—

“At the start, Fei Chengyu thought that he was rearing this ‘parasitic beast.’ He didn't expect that when he'd brought it up, it would want to establish its own business and downgrade President Fei to an ordinary collaborator,” Luo Wenzhou slowly said. “That's what you

mean? But while Fei Chengyu refused to give them the money, they still got that piece of land.”

This time, without waiting for Fei Du to speak, Luo Wenzhou answered himself in accordance with logic. “Because they had more than one backer! The Zhou Clan—Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng were among them, right?”

“Do you remember Zhou Huaijin’s statement in the interrogation room?”

“What?”

“Zhou Huaijin said that twenty-one years ago he overheard Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng’s dialogue in the Zhou residence. The Zhou Clan’s advance into the domestic market was blocked at the time. The two of them were having a secret discussion about an assassination pretending to be a car accident. If Zhou Huaijin didn’t lie, then it shows that those people had more than one financial backer from the start, were controlled by more than one power. Fei Chengyu’s problem of making too much of himself may not have changed even in death.” Fei Du gave a derisive laugh, his smile like a small cut in a thin paper, pale and incisive. “Though these are all my guesses. They may not be correct.—But there’s something you ought to have noticed.”

Luo Wenzhou looked up. “You mean Feng Bin’s murder? An assassination, a mysteriously vanished wanted criminal as the killer. That really is the same method as in their elimination of Dong Xiaoqing and Zheng Kaifeng.”

“Not only that. Today, that little girl told me that the person who installed the tracking software on her phone is called Wei Wenchuan.’ When you were all busy with interrogations this afternoon, I did a little investigating—this Wei Wenchuan is in the same class as Feng Bin, the class monitor. He can rally a multitude with a single cry at

Yufen. It's likely he's the head of the bullying clique... Although none of that is important. What's important is that his father is Wei Zhanhong."

"I know, we called and summoned him... I heard Er-Lang say that he seems to be a very famous developer?" Luo Wenzhou gave Fei Du a doubtful look. "But I think he doesn't have any negative press apart from being especially rich?"

"Wei Zhanhong is low-key, doesn't lightly show his face in public, and doesn't talk much. But I've heard a story about this person," Fei Du said quietly. "A few years ago, he's supposed to have gotten a piece of land in a development zone in D City. Of course he was very thick with the local government when he got the land. The city government said that the plan for the development zone was already complete, and in the future this piece of land would be the only land used for residential purposes in the whole commercial district, with businesses all around. They wouldn't have any competitors—but this was an unwritten agreement to transfer land, with only a verbal promise. You understand, right?"

A verbal promise was the same as no promise at all.

"Later, maybe because of road repairs or for some other reason, the progress of the project was delayed a little. By the time their project was finally completed and they could start to sell, in the same commercial district, in a better location, a large swath of residences had already been built, and they'd had about half a year to snatch away sales. Many buyers had moved in. D City isn't one of the frontline cities. There isn't a large transient population. The local market is only so large. Two residential areas in similar locations that were about the same in every respect were life-and-death competitors. The side that got permission to sell first would squeeze the other out of existence."

Luo Wenzhou wasn't an expert on the business aspect of things, but Fei Du was giving a careful explanation; he roughly understood and nodded. "So this fell through for Wei Zhanhong. And then what?"

"Then something happened at the competitor's estate. A murderer who'd been wanted for two years somehow scurried over to D City and stabbed six people in a row in the garden at the center of the estate. When the police came, he resisted arrest and grabbed a student right in front of them and was attempting murder when he was shot dead. The story goes that the blood dyed the lotus pond in the garden red. The whole estate became an unlucky abode because of this. Many owners sold off their property at low prices. But Wei Zhanhong's project came back from the dead. All the houses were sold within a few years."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

It turned out that when humans had broken through the moral bottom line, they could also sometimes demonstrate stupefying ingenuity.

"Though I didn't verify it. It's all gossip. Because this Mr. Wei became well-known through this 'pure coincidence,' many people say he's a lucky star." Fei Du shook his head. "I can't say for sure whether he's lucky, but his darling son is definitely connected to Feng Bin's murder."

Luo Wenzhou rubbed his forehead. The two of them fell silent at the same time, each digesting numerous and jumbled pieces of information in the small hours of the morning.

Because the two of them weren't at all sleepy and very wide-awake now, they couldn't help digesting this sequence of cause and effect. It wasn't long before the high-speed movement of their brains slowly decelerated, while the surging blood rushed to the heart.

The emotions and desires, knocked out by the huge secret, appeared like the truth coming to light.

Fei Du's lips had taken on a trace of color from the glass of red wine. It looked almost bright and fresh on his pale face. He looked in faint longing at the bottle of wine, feeling his hands and feet growing cold again, and wanted to have another glass, but Luo Wenzhou blocked his hand midway.

"Are you finished confessing?" Luo Wenzhou said.

Fei Du's throat moved.

Luo Wenzhou cleared his throat. "Then shouldn't it be my turn?"

Fei Du was clearly leaning on one side of the table with his shirt in a state of disrepair. Hearing this, his fingers, hanging curled at his sides, tightened, and his excessively focused gaze fell on Luo Wenzhou. He was clearly "expressionless," "hardly moving a muscle," but his whole body language changed subtly, giving the impression that he had sat upright and straightened his clothes.

"I..."

Luo Wenzhou had only said one word when Fei Du interrupted him. "Captain Luo, wait a minute, don't you wonder why Lu Guosheng would let Xia Xiaonan go? Wasn't it the same as telling the police that there was a problem with the girl, making you question her?"

Luo Wenzhou sighed and somewhat helplessly said, "Yes, I do wonder."

Fei Du said, "And in the case of kidnapping and selling girls, who was it that told Su Luozhan the details of the old case? Why would she suddenly copy Su Xiaolan's methods? And..."

Luo Wenzhou suddenly interrupted him. “And I also wonder how, when there was a problem at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau, that report somehow managed to break through through Wang Hongliang’s observation and come to the City Bureau. I wonder if that mysterious text message Zhao Haochang brought up really was sent by someone else, or whether it was all his own performance. I wonder who had such a hard time holding their tongue that they had to notify Dong Xiaoqing of the truth about her father’s death and make her commit an irreparable blunder... And I wonder very much which work-obsessed god we’ve offended this year to get knocked dizzy by a string of major cases so we don’t even have time to take our annual leave—“

“There’s a very good explanation.” Fei Du, staring into his eyes, asked, “Do you want to hear it?”

Luo Wenzhou paused, then expressionlessly said, “Not really.”

But Fei Du seemed not to have heard. He kept talking. “Someone’s been pushing these cases in front of your eyes, leading you to investigate them, so that *those people* would be panicked and nearly reveal themselves over and over, forcing them to break off a body part each time, throwing out their ‘backers’ with immediate motives as shields. The number of backers can’t be that high, because there aren’t so many true psychopaths, and those with the financial resources to support them are as rare as unicorn horns and phoenix feathers. When those people had cut themselves down to a pitiful bare stalk out of self-preservation, they’d have to find another investor, for example...”

Luo Wenzhou coldly said, “Fei Du, shut up.”

“For example, me.” Fei Du turned a deaf ear on him. “For example, Fei Chengyu’s heir—me. I fit all the criteria. I should have been one of them before. It was only sheer chance, the fact that Fei Chengyu broke it off with them, that meant I didn’t receive that ‘sword.’ I

thought of killing Fei Chengyu over and over. I definitely wouldn't care about any 'enmity for the killing of your father.' And I succeeded in working my way into the City Bureau, using my position to investigate the truth about the old Picture Album Project, deceiving..."

Luo Wenzhou hit the table, but he couldn't interrupt Fei Du's speech.

"In fact, they've already made veiled attempts to contact me. I've ignored them because I didn't want to seem to know too much of the inside story, but if Wei Zhanhong gets in trouble this time, too, then they'll likely be under attack from all quarters, urgently needing new funds. They'll have to kneel and beg me for alms. I'll have a chance to snap their wings, turn the parasitic beast into my personal watchdog. That's what Fei Chengyu wanted to do but couldn't accomplish..."

This time Luo Wenzhou was thoroughly frightened. He immediately stood up. "They've contacted you? When did this happen? Why didn't you say anything?"

Fei Du's level brows rose gently. "...maybe I wasn't ready to give myself up yet?"

"Bull..." The curse came to Luo Wenzhou's lips, and he forced it back. He lowered his head and looked at Fei Du, leaning against the table, and suddenly realized that if today's "unexpected incident" hadn't occurred, Fei Du may have concealed this forever. If those people had come to see him, he would have gone along with it, gone into the abyss without help or connections.

Fei Du pretended to be an idle son of the wealthy, pretended to lead a life of luxury and dissipation, pretended to have a powerful desire for control. He'd sniped at the Zhou Clan first thing after Zhou Junmao's death, heartlessly wallowing in the feast of money—he also wore a "beast in human clothing" disguise. The beast in human clothing naturally had to be a gentleman, had to be urbane, had to be

extremely patient, elegant and graceful. He'd made himself seem callous and powerful, up to anything.

But in the end, a beast in human clothing was only a beast. However much skill there was, it was still only on the surface. Any sudden change would require deliberation. Which beast would be as unassailable as he was, able to carry the human disguise to the point of keeping company with the babbling village woman Wang Xiujuan and the ignorant little girl Chechen?

Luo Wenzhou remembered the night of Zhou Junmao's car crash. He thought that rather than making enormous profits short selling Zhou Clan stock, Fei Du in fact would have liked to go home and sleep.

He was clearly a person who could be perfectly satisfied with a bowl of lean pork congee and a plate of salted vegetables on a winter's night. Give him a cup of coffee and some trivial documents to arrange, and he could tranquilly while away a whole day in the corner of the office—where was his desire to go into the abyss and contend with fierce beasts for power and money?

Luo Wenzhou had suddenly turned silent; faint unease instantly rose in Fei Du's heart.

“Because this crowd exists, all these years, you've felt that you couldn't escape Fei Chengyu, right?” Luo Wenzhou spoke very calmly. “So you'd rather throw yourself in, become one of them, control them, tear them up by the roots.—If you failed, you might die without an intact corpse like Zheng Kaifeng. If you succeeded, it wasn't as though you were a planted agent. When the time came, you would go to prison along with them. Have you thought about that?”

Fei Du forced a smile. “I...”

“You aren't stupid, of course you've thought it through clearly,” Luo Wenzhou said. “But whether you died or spent the rest of your life in

prison, you thought that would be pretty good, right? At least you'd be free, unencumbered. There'd be nothing to worry about."

Because if you couldn't be free, it was better to die.

Luo Wenzhou propped his hand on the edge of the table behind him. "Why are you willing to reveal everything to me now, letting your plans fall through on the verge of success? Is your conscience pricking you?"

Fei Du involuntarily backed up.

"Bah, you don't have any such thing as a conscience," Luo Wenzhou said. "You looked at me and thought, 'Fuck, such a handsome man is confessing his love to me, crying and wailing about wanting to be with me, what am I doing still thinking of dying or going to prison?' Besides, you have to get a regulation haircut if you go to prison, do you know—"

Fei Du was speechless.

"Since you were even willing to lay out your evil heart and rotten lungs for me, it means you were asking me to pull you out. I pulled, and you dodged and struggled again." Luo Wenzhou hit Fei Du's forehead with his palm. "What's your problem? Are you testing my strength?"

Fei Du seemed like Luo Yiguo leaping onto the dining table and being knocked off with a chopstick; somewhat dazed, he let Luo Wenzhou smack him.

"You always used to make me mad. Whenever I was in a bad mood then, you were always the person I imagined—imagined taking a burlap sack and taking you to a little alley for a beating. But there was a time later when the whole crowd of us went to play around at Tao Ran's house and accidentally knocked a crack in a brick in the

wall. Tao Ran was renting, and the landlord was a problem. If he saw it, he'd definitely make a fuss. Only Tao Ran didn't say anything at the time, and we didn't take notice, not expecting that you, a half-grown child, would run around the building materials markets, find a brick that was exactly the same, get a set of tools from who knows where, and spend half a day taking out the old brick and swapping in the new one. I went to have a look afterwards, and the job was pretty well done. I thought then that while you perennially needed a spanking, you could also sometimes be pretty lovable, and if you ever went wrong, it really would be regrettable."

Luo Wenzhou's voice was getting quieter and quieter. In the end it was almost a whisper. "So I was always very severe towards you. There was no one else I got so exasperated being around... But that day at the City Bureau, you'd obviously come with that crowd of drinking buddies to make trouble, but in the end you stayed to accompany He Zhongyi's mother. And I suddenly thought that, actually, even if I wasn't minding you, wasn't criticizing you every day, you still wouldn't go wrong. I never thought that if I gave our interactions a drop of color, you'd run away and set up a dying vat with it, start pestering me all day with no thought for the consequences. Never mind fooling me into giving you my body, you even dared to fool me into giving you my feelings.

"You asshole." Luo Wenzhou repeatedly jabbed Fei Du's chest with one finger. "You actually do care for me, you didn't have any other ideas before, and now you want to stay with me. Do you dare to admit it?"

Fei Du froze under his attentive gaze for three seconds. Then he snatched his jabbing paw and instantly pressed Luo Wenzhou against the little dining table, stopping his mouth with biting force.

CHAPTER 115 - Verhovensky XXV

The dining table was rattled by having Luo Wenzhou descend upon it out of nowhere; the tall, slender wine bottle suffered an unexpected calamity. It shook a couple of times, then fell and violently shattered to pieces.

The thickly sweet-smelling alcohol dispatched its scent in full force, filling the whole dining room with it. The lust-addled people had to temporarily resume their intellects and clean up the mess on the floor.

“Where are your shoes?” Luo Wenzhou asked at first. Then he remembered—Fei Du’s slippers seemed to have fallen off when he’d dragged him back to the living room from the entrance hall. He felt rather embarrassed, gave a dry cough, and waved a hand. As he cleaned up the pieces of broken glass, he grumbled, “You’re not wearing shoes, stay back... And you won’t say anything clearly, you just start nibbling. You won’t make anything official, you’re just taking advantage of me. You hoodlum.”

Fei Du retreated into a corner, his gaze sweeping over Luo Wenzhou’s back, pulled taught because he was bent over. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not a hoodlum, I’m a sadist’s son. Later, if the disease takes me, I may not let you talk to other people, not let you be alone with your friends, put tracking and listening devices on your phone and your car. If that doesn’t do, I may even lock you in the basement and not let other people see you, wishing I could eat you up. Are you scared?”

Luo Wenzhou gathered the broken glass into a bag, then wrapped it with tape, making it into a soft and harmless ball. Hearing these brave and proud words, he gave a carefree laugh. “Who, you? Stop showing off—get me a rag.”

Fei Du gazed fixedly at him for a moment, went around the pool of red wine, and picked up a floor-wiping rag. He felt that his chest, which he'd just personally gouged out, was uncommonly empty, as if an enormous stone had cracked open with a bang, and countless secret, repressed, twisted thoughts, like little worms living hidden under the stone, had all fled in an uproar, their darkness revealed in the light.

Fei Du passed the rag to Luo Wenzhou but didn't let go when he reached out to take it.

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him and saw the lamplight refracted in Fei Du's glasslike eyes. There seemed to be a faint human warmth floating there.

Then Fei Du, tugging on a rag made out of old long underwear, at last nodded and acknowledged, "Yes, I care for you."

The flashy mountain bike blown sky-high, the old game machine that had accompanied him as he'd grown up, the drawer that had once hidden a little cat, the skewers with too much chili on them, the flowers left in the cemetery once a year, the countless mutually ridiculing quarrels... Today it seemed that all those past events were strung together on a golden thread, showing a faint outline in the thick black mist of his memories, lighting his past and future.

Luo Wenzhou felt that he seemed to have been waiting all his life to hear these words. The corners of his mouth pursed slightly in an almost smile. Then, without making a sound, he suddenly pulled away the rag, tossed it on the ground, dipped his hands in the wash basin, and, without even drying them off, put his arms around Fei Du's waist and dragged him off.

Not wearing shoes was fine; it spared kicking them off again.

As for the dining room floor covered in wine... At any rate, the glass had been cleaned up. There was no need to worry Luo Yiguo would step on any. The rest would probably be fine.

Luo Yiguo was occupied with a myriad of state affairs each day. Each night it got up three or four times to patrol its territory and have a midnight snack; its itinerary was very busy. After today's first short sleep was over, Master Cat leapt out of the second bedroom and saw that the master bedroom's door was half-open, and a light was on inside.

Its pricked up ears moved slightly, and it trotted over, intending to go over and investigate what was happening in its territory, but midway it was attracted by the peculiar smell in the dining room. Luo Yiguo circled cautiously around the red liquid on the floor, sniffing. It was unable to resist licking its sticky paws. Ordinary cats and dogs have a keen sense of smell and dislike tobacco and alcohol, but Comrade Luo Yiguo was innately different; it was a drunkard among cats. After one lick, it discovered that the taste suited its liking, so it put its head down to experience it.

Suddenly, it heard someone give a brief, insistent "Ah!" Master Cat only then remembered its mission and raised its neck with difficulty. It was just about to follow the sound, not expecting that as soon as it raised its leg, its steps would turn. It wavered left and tottered right for a few steps, bumped its head into the side of the couch, and lay down on its stomach, not moving.

Christmas Eve came once a year. Like an old candle-wick, it didn't last long enough.

The water vapor on the window quietly solidified, turning into snow-white rime.

Some fragment of a soul was haunting Fei Du's subconscious, reality blending with illusion. It woke him in the midst of the dimness of

sleep. His consciousness startled, rising and falling, then settled back into position. But when he opened his eyes he found that the bedside light was still on—Luo Wenzhou was beside him, watching him.

Seeing that Fei Du wasn't sleeping soundly, Luo Wenzhou at last reluctantly turned off the weak light and gently kissed the top of his head. "Sleep. I'm going back to work overtime tomorrow. You rest. There's no need to get up as early as me."

"You say that as if you *can* get up early," Fei Du thought, but before he could express this taunt, the returning drowsiness had warmly enfolded him.

He seemed to hear distant piano music. There seemed to be a slightly thin woman with her back to him, sitting next to a bright window, sunlight falling on her as if it wanted to melt her silhouette. She was carelessly pressing on the piano's keys, somewhat rustily playing a tune.

The next day, the great Captain Luo didn't fall short of expectations. Extreme joy turned to sorrow: he once again got up late—because the alarm on his phone had been turned off, and the human one had been up to his tricks and hadn't woken him.

Fei Du had already moved the hungover Luo Yiguo into its cat bed, taken some wet wipes and cleaned up the wine-stained floor and cat's paws, and gotten neatly dressed. As he scrolled through the news on his phone, he repeated back last night's words in great "astonishment": "Didn't I tell you to rest and not get up as early as me? I couldn't bear to wake you."

Luo Wenzhou, toothbrush in his mouth, stuck up his middle finger at him.

Fei Du cheerfully watched how the shameless braggart took getting hit in the face with his own words, then ungrudgingly drove him to

work.

“Oh, right.” Luo Wenzhou, sitting in the passenger’s seat, swallowed down his last bite of egg roll and got out a napkin to wipe his hands. “I just remembered. When the last Picture Album Project was set up, it was thirteen years ago, the year after Gu Zhao’s death. Could the Picture Album Project have something to do with him?”

“If Xiao Haiyang told the truth, if Gu Zhao really did get in trouble investigating Lu Guosheng, then it’s very likely,” Fei Du said. “Lu Guosheng isn’t the only one there.’ It looks to me that it’s likely he had found Lu Guosheng’s tracks, and he’d discovered other wanted criminals where he was hidden. That Louvre was likely one of their hideouts.”

“Wow.” Luo Wenzhou paused. After a good while, he said, “There’s one thing I’m wondering about.”

“Yes?”

“Ordinarily, outside of very special circumstances, when we go to investigate and collect evidence, we bring at least one colleague along. Tracking down an escaped criminal’s whereabouts doesn’t relate to internal personnel, and it doesn’t concern matters of security. There’s nothing that can’t be openly investigated. If Gu Zhao was framed, then why would he be framed all on his own?”

Had he not told anyone before going to The Louvre?

Or had he in fact notified a certain person, and that person had sold him out?

Cloudiness flashed over Luo Wenzhou’s brow. Then he changed the subject, saying, “I haven’t asked yet, how did you corner Xiao Haiyang yesterday?”

“I didn’t corner him. There’s a keychain hanging on his waist; he sounds different from other people when he walks. I was about to leave when I heard him coming. When your short meeting started, I saw Xiao Haiyang come in shaking water droplets off his hands. It had been less than ten minutes. He wouldn’t have a problem with frequent urination at such a young age, would he? There was no one there, I thought something was off, so I hid where the cleaning supplies are kept.”

“Where the cleaning supplies are kept?” Luo Wenzhou stared—no wonder Xiao Haiyang had been clueless. “Then how did you know his phone’s passcode?”

“I guessed. Once someone borrowed his work computer, and that was the password he gave them,” Fei Du said absently. “Xiao Haiyang has a strong sense of purpose, and he’s obsessed. That kind of person will normally use some number with a special meaning for his password, and it’s usually the same for everything.—For someone like Tao Ran, it would be fairly simple. I guess his password would be a combination of a birthday, a name, a phone number, something like that. Xiao Qiao has a very strong work-life balance, so her work password and private password would definitely be different. I figure her office computer account’s password is the office’s room number or her badge number, or a combination of the two.”

Luo Wenzhou curiously asked, “Then what do you guess my salary card’s PIN is... What are you laughing at?”

Fei Du looked at him. “Why would I want to guess the PIN to a bookmark?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He oddly felt that he’d woken up and found his treatment reverted to “the days before the liberation”! The scoundrel who’d constantly mocked him, calling him “elderly,” “better off selling youtiao,” and

“old uncle” had been out of sight for a long time, and now he’d silently struck again!

As expected, all those honeyed words and considerate behavior had only been put on to coax him, all out of covetousness for his body!

The streets were filled with the atmosphere of the approaching new year. Merchants vied with each other to launch sales promotions; poinsettias and banners reading “Happy New Year” filled the cheerful city center. In the shops, the happy sounds of “Jingle Bells” and “Happy New Year” mixed together, making no distinction between one’s own things and another’s, rising and falling as if in a round. The thin layer of ice on the roads had already been shoveled away by the early-rising sanitation workers. It was a very light and breezy drive—even though working overtime on Saturday was a bitter anguish.

Both the content of the overtime, and the overtime itself.

Luo Wenzhou bickered with Fei Du the whole way. His smile hadn’t cooled yet when he saw a middle-aged husband and wife at the office door. Judging from their faces and outfits, they weren’t at all well-off. The woman’s face was freckled, and her voice was sharp. The guy was a little fat, with somewhat slouched shoulders and a gloomy expression. There was a dull gray briefcase tucked under his arm.

“No, our child already said, none of it happened. The kids in that class don’t understand anything, they’re just spreading falsehoods and making up rumors, making so much noise that the school can’t handle it. There’s nothing wrong with our child, she’s never told any lies.” The woman was speaking very rapidly, constantly making gestures of refusal with her sharp hands. “Comrade Police Officer, don’t believe everything you hear and casually call people in for questioning. It’ll make a bad impression for us at work. If you didn’t know better, you’d think we’d done something wrong!”

Tao Ran hastily followed-up, “Could you have the child come herself and talk a little...”

“It’s not enough to come to a public security bureau once? We have to come twice?” The woman’s voice suddenly grew louder, echoing in the corridor. “She’s a fifteen-year-old girl, not a pickpocket or a robber. She’s still sick with fear. If something happens to her, will the government compensate us? What is all this! Where’s your superior?”

Tao Ran opened his mouth, feeling that he couldn’t very well say what came next. Lang Qiao understood and hastily came up to take over. “Dajie, don’t you think you ought to take her to the hospital for an examination...”

“What examination? Why should she be examined?” Her words seemed to infuriate the woman. She put her hands on her waist and stretched out her neck, seeming ready to grow a hard beak and peck a hole in Lang Qiao’s skull. “What do you mean? You’re a young lady yourself, how can you make such an unfounded attack? But of course it won’t be you taking the heat if this gets out...”

The gloomy-faced man tugged at her. “She said it didn’t happen, so it didn’t happen. Don’t waste time talking to them. We’re busy. Let’s go.”

As they spoke, the middle-aged husband and wife were already sweeping out like the wind.

Tao Ran rubbed his face, walked over and helplessly spread his hands at Luo Wenzhou. “Did you see that? That’s how it is. Aside from the insignificant bystanders, the others have either sent lawyers to come haggle with you, or they’re behaving like that.”

“Those wouldn’t be the bullying ringleader Liang Youjing’s parents. That didn’t look like a school trustee. Is it someone else in their gang?”

Tao Ran sighed. “Those were Wang Xiao’s parents.”

Luo Wenzhou was somewhat taken aback. Then he frowned—why were the victim’s parents more anxious to plead innocence than the rapists’?

“We called Wang Xiao. The girl won’t show her face, and the parents deny she was interfered with at school. They came over first thing in the morning to kick up a fuss. Lao Luo, if it’s true, it’ll be hard to prove.”

If Yufen Middle School had insisted on maintaining that all was well, they could have said that this was all a small dispute among students. If it hadn’t been for Xia Xiaonan telling them about Wang Xiao being dragged into the boys’ dormitory, the City Bureau’s intervention would have been comparatively powerless—no one had been badly injured, and even if they had been, it was too late to appraise the condition of the injuries now.

Insults to people’s character were hard to prove. Even if there was hard evidence, you still couldn’t do anything to a crowd of half-grown children. At most there would be a critical education, and then the students would be sent back where they came from. Perhaps those involved had experienced persecution and fear as though living in a world without justice; but seen with a lawyer’s staff gauge, it was only a casually-mentioned “little matter.”

In the group sexual assault matter, the perpetrators had all determined to keep their mouths shut under their lawyers’ advice, while the victim’s lips were sealed; she was determined not to admit what she had suffered.

CHAPTER 116 - Verhovensky XXVI

“Boss, how about we...how about we just forget it?”

Lang Qiao spoke suddenly. They all turned their heads at once to look at her.

When Lang Qiao was making an appearance as a soft-hearted policewoman, it was always an exaggerated performance, but she was excellent at glaring and threatening. She was never afraid when it came to a fight. Aside from starvation and cilantro, there seemed to be nothing she feared. The words “forget it” didn’t seem to be in her dictionary.

“Wang Xiao isn’t willing to show herself, so let her be.” Lang Qiao paused, then continued, “Isn’t the important point for us Feng Bin’s murder? We have other lines of inquiry—after all, Xia Xiaonan told us that it was Wei Wenchuan who put the tracking device on her phone. If this Wei Wenchuan really is connected to Lu Guosheng, then he couldn’t have plotted this on his own. However bad he is, he’s still a student, he still has to go to school and live there. He can’t possess such vast resources. Why don’t we focus our investigation on his parents?”

“That line of thought makes sense.” Tao Ran frowned. “But while a homicide is one case, the other things are also criminal cases. We can’t pick and choose among cases by severity, can we? I don’t remember criminal law having a principle of catching the big and letting the little go.”

Lang Qiao opened her mouth, then swallowed down her words.

Luo Wenzhou said, “What’s wrong?”

“I know we have to investigate things when we encounter them, but...” Lang Qiao hesitated, pausing. “Never mind a child, even an adult encountering this kind of thing wouldn’t necessarily let others know. It’s already bad enough for her. I feel like going to compel her like this is rather...rather hard-hearted.”

Because a victim always seems to have done something wrong; it’s always a matter of “there must be something to hate about a pitiful person.”

As soon as one audacious rapist came along and marked her as “weak and easily bullied,” hundreds of thousands of rapists would begin to stir; even if they didn’t dare to put the theory into practice, they’d mentally flock around to have a look, peeling off her clothes and stamping on her ten thousand times.

Luo Wenzhou was about to speak when a colorless voice from behind interrupted him. “Captain Luo.”

Xiao Haiyang walked over stiffly, tightly holding a kraft-paper folder. Without making a sound, he held it out to Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him, not reaching out to take it. “What’s this?”

“The self-examination I wrote,” Xiao Haiyang said dully. “I request to return to the team.”

Tao Ran was bewildered. “What’s Xiao Xiao writing a self-examination for?”

Xiao Haiyang looked at him blankly. In the ways of the world, Little Glasses was as sluggish as an inert gas; he didn’t realize why Tao Ran didn’t know.

Luo Wenzhou deftly opened the folder and skimmed his masterwork. Though Xiao Haiyang ordinarily didn't especially like talking to people, his writing style was something else; it was simply ceaseless chatter. This thing was nearly ten thousand characters long, all written by hand, a thick stack of writing paper.

Having skimmed through it once, Luo Wenzhou laughed coldly and smacked the epistle against Xiao Haiyang's chest. "Who told you I'd let you return to the team if you wrote a self-examination? Are we playing house? Go away and cool your heels."

Xiao Haiyang, like a helpless, near-sighted jiangshi, stood where he was with his whole body tense, his face turning red; he was a freshly boiled jiangshi, too.

Fei Du shook his head, went around him, and was about to go into the office to pour a cup of coffee and warm up when someone called him to a halt. "Is that...President Fei?"

Fei Du's brow furrowed. But in the time it took to turn his head, realistic happy surprise appeared on his face. "Oh, President Wei!"

Luo Wenzhou looked in the same direction as him and saw a middle-aged man who could have been called lean. He was immaculately dressed, with slightly sunken cheeks and long, narrow brows. His upper eyelids looked very unusual; they seemed to have been carved by a hatchet and hardly curved at all; they were only sharp horizontal lines. When he smiled, even his smile was weighed down by those peculiar eyelids, making him look like a jackal who'd just finished drinking blood.

So this was Wei Zhanhong.

Wei Zhanhong looked at Fei Du in faint astonishment. "What are you doing at a public security bureau first thing in the morning, President Fei?"

While Fei Du hadn't widely publicized what an uncommon school he'd ended up studying at, he hadn't purposefully concealed it, either. If you took a bit of time to inquire, you would be able to find out. These sons of the wealthy wasted time and money all day and went to play in any pigsty; there wasn't anything surprising here.

But seeking novelty was one thing; it wasn't a very good idea to let people know he meddled in cases.

Fei Du felt rather regretful—with Wei Zhanhong and his son here, he couldn't hang around the City Bureau.

“Came to drop someone off.” Saying so, Fei Du gathered up his collar, which was hanging loose. Lowering his voice, he gave Wei Zhanhong a very meaningful expression. “Isn't that a good way to ask forgiveness for making a person unhappy last night?”

Wei Zhanhong gave a dry cough, his gaze sweeping over the criminal police officers not far off, feeling that these shameless rich kids really were outrageously bold in their lust and would dare to hit on any sort of person. “You young people...”

“There are lots of benefits.” Fei Du drew close and spoke into his ear, saying in a low voice, “It feels different, and bodies that exercise constantly are very good. But most importantly...there's quite a few things you can accidentally find out in advance.”

Wei Zhanhong's expression changed slightly, remembering how after Zhou Junmao's death, the Fei Clan had been the first to react.

Fei Du took half a step back, brushing his thumb against his lips, displaying a faintly visible coquettish smile.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He was quietly watching a certain person's performance.

Fei Du, seeming very concerned, asked, "Though what are you doing coming here during the weekend?"

A faint wry smile appeared on Wei Zhanhong's face. He reached over and pushed the teenage boy standing behind him to the front. The boy had the same thin lips and sharp chin as Wei Zhanhong, but he was much better looking than his father, like a student chairman in an idol drama. He wasn't at all shy in front of strangers, smiling before he spoke, greeting Fei Du with perfect courtesy.

"Children are all debts." Wei Zhanhong sighed. Perhaps he was answering Fei Du, and perhaps he was saying it for the police to hear. He was deliberately raising his voice. "It's this disappointing brat who's been stirring up trouble at school and bullying other children so badly they couldn't stand it and ran away—I ask you, what is he up to? It's because he hasn't been brought up properly. I'm ashamed. I brought him here to cooperate with the investigation."

The young Wei Wenchuan was unmoved, his expression calm. He only fittingly lowered his head a little.

Wei Zhanhong slapped his back. "What did I teach you at home? A fly won't sting a seamless egg. This is happening because you've done something wrong. If you hadn't been bullying your schoolmates, where would these rumors have come from? Where would this trouble be coming from?"

The tips of Fei Du's eyebrows moved. He put in a word. "Rumors?"

"There's a girl at their school," Wei Zhanhong said in the tone of one saying something too embarrassing to mention, frowning at Fei Du. "Because of this business, there are some rather unpleasant rumors going around... We're all right, but if this all gets out, it'll look bad

for the girl, won't it? I ran into the girl's parents at the door when I was on my way in. They said there's nothing in any of these rumors."

How would a big boss like Wei Zhanhong, daily occupied with a myriad of state affairs, know ordinary city folk like Wang Xiao's parents?

"Bullying other children," "cooperate with the investigation," "rumors"... On the surface he was an old-style father with high expectations, but actually he was hinting to the City Bureau's criminal police officers that the so-called "group sexual assault," whether it had taken place or not, could only be a "rumor"; no matter what the truth was, that would be the outcome.

Wei Wenchuan was young, after all. His subtlety wasn't profound enough. Hearing these words, he couldn't keep from showing some satisfaction on his face.

Lang Qiao's expression turned grim. Luo Wenzhou lifted an arm to block her.

"Tao Ran, take them inside," Luo Wenzhou ordered. Not looking at Xiao Haiyang, he walked up in front of Fei Du, took something from his pocket, and gave it to him. "Here are the car keys. Don't hang around getting in the way of public business. Beat it."

Fei Du took the thing and smiled, glancing at Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang, who were subdued by Luo Wenzhou's public acknowledgment. Then he kissed his fingertips and pressed them to Luo Wenzhou's lips. Before Luo Wenzhou could knock his hand away, he quickly retreated, floating off.

Luo Wenzhou said, "What are you looking at! Get to work!"

Ten minutes later, the dejected Xiao Haiyang, turning his head three times for each step he took, walked away from the City Bureau's busy

Criminal Investigation Team. He was as thin as a bamboo pole and looked like a stray dog, almost seeming lonely as he walked through the rather desolate-seeming weekend morning street. He'd known that he might be fired over this, but he hadn't given up hope, trying to rescue himself...but he seemed to be going about the rescue in the wrong way. He felt that Luo Wenzhou had become even angrier when he'd seen him.

But if he couldn't be a police officer, what would he do?

Xiao Haiyang's steps stopped on the pedestrian crossing, noticing that he didn't seem to be feeling the earth-shattering pain of being discharged from public employment—Fei Du had been right. This job and Gu Zhao had been a heavy yoke weighing on him all these years; when he once put it down, before he could feel lost, he first felt faintly freed.

“Am I this kind of person?” he thought silently.

Suddenly, a car on the cross street honked at him. Xiao Haiyang at first thought that he was blocking the way and, hastening his steps, walked over the pedestrian crossing. Then he looked again and saw that that seemed to be Captain Luo's car. The car window rolled down—anyone who came along could have seen Fei Du, just shooed away by Luo Wenzhou, showing his face.

“Get in,” Fei Du said.

“No need, my house isn't far,” Xiao Haiyang said. Then he remembered something and stiffly added, “Thank you.”

“I don't want to take you home.” Fei Du laughed. “I'm getting ready to go to that girl Wang Xiao's house, and I don't remember her recorded address clearly. Do you remember it?”

Xiao Haiyang stared. By the time he'd pulled himself together, he was already sitting in Fei Du's car.

CHAPTER 117 - Verhovensky XXVII

Fei Du perhaps bore the burden of being an unknown urban legend—his child abduction skills were consummate; with a few words, he'd duped Xiao Haiyang into his car, and on the way he even unhurriedly got out and bought incense to hang in the car, sticking the dreadful solid air freshener into a roadside trash can.

Starting from when he got out of the car, Xiao Haiyang was thinking, "Haven't I told him the address? Can't he use the GPS? Why do I need to act as his human GPS device like this?"

When Fei Du finished his finicky "urgent business," Little Glasses still hadn't worked out what was going on; he hadn't even unbuckled his seatbelt.

"This is much better, right?" The scent of berries dispersed from the white porcelain-wrapped incense like a refreshing wind, washing the air inside the car clean. Fei Du sighed. "I've been driving his car for a few days, and the smell was about to give me a concussion."

Xiao Haiyang wasn't in the mood to discuss these trifling matters of taste with him. He quickly pushed at his glasses and hesitantly put a hand on the door. "You...you should know how to get there now. Could you put me down at the nearest subway entrance?"

Fei Du looked at him in astonishment. "Don't you want to come with me?"

Xiao Haiyang's voice was somewhat dry. "I've been suspended from duty."

"Isn't that just perfect?" Fei Du smiled. "You've been suspended from duty, and I'm not on duty at all. The two of us are both ordinary

citizens, privately going to pay a visit to a little girl. It isn't an official police questioning, and we don't need to notify her guardians."

Xiao Haiyang didn't make a sound.

Fei Du shrugged and indeed pulled the car over, stopping at a subway entrance, very carelessly saying, "All right, if you don't want to come, then get out of the car. Sorry to bother you."

People came and went at the subway entrance. A tiny news stand was lying on its back, propping up a stall. A pot of rice for sale was cooking next to it. Xiao Haiyang opened the door a crack, and the winter wind at once sealed his glasses with white mist. Fei Du didn't urge him to stay. He turned on the car radio. The crisp-voiced presenter was just focusing on hot social topics.

"So, right now, 'schoolyard bullying' has once again become a popular subject. I don't know whether any of you experienced unknown grief at school? A friend whose phone number ends in 0039 says, 'This was when I was attending elementary school forty years ago. Once some kids in my class stopped me, called me a son-of-a-bitch, and threw me into the river. There was a thin layer of frost on the river. It was bone-chillingly cold. My leg hasn't been right ever since.'—Wow, it seems that this warmly-felt letter comes from a rather aged friend. His schoolmates really went overboard. Forty years later and he still can't let it go..."

Xiao Haiyang drew back the foot he'd put outside and silently closed the car door. Pulling a long face, he sat upright and attentive in the passenger's seat.

Fei Du observed him and noticed something rather interesting—Xiao Haiyang's center of gravity was always placed forward, his shoulders and back were always tensed, and the gaze behind his lenses was full of vigilance, as though he was prepared to charge out any time and blow up a pillbox or something.

A trace of a smile came into the corners of Fei Du's eyes. He put the car back in gear and stepped on the gas pedal.

“You may not have heard yesterday that Xia Xiaonan gave up some details about the schoolyard bullying.” Fei Du didn't seem at all concerned about divulging confidences to him. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Xiao Haiyang, who was very focused, not daring to let a single word slip by. He continued, “We now suspect that there was sexual assault occurring at Yufen Middle School, but the people involved—both the rapists and the victim—won't acknowledge it.”

Xiao Haiyang's eyes widened slightly.

But Fei Du didn't go on. He changed the subject. “If not for that, Wang Xiao would only be an ordinary student who took part in running away. You only dropped by her house once, and yet you can instantly repeat her address accurately. You really do have an eidetic memory.”

In fact, even a person with a true eidetic memory, suddenly asked for a completely unimportant minor detail, would still need some time to recall and react. To be able to blurt it out, he not only needed to have a good memory; it also had to be something he was very familiar with.

This was Xiao Haiyang's habit. Each time he received a new case, he'd spend time putting the jumble of information in order, regardless of importance, then thinking it over repeatedly; only then could he fulfill the function of a point-and-speak device, answering whenever someone else asked.

Now, however, Xiao Haiyang only lowered his head somewhat uncomfortably. He didn't explain.

“Truthfully, the average person, if he didn’t want to go, would at most have told me the address. He wouldn’t have gotten into the car as soon as I said to. So in your heart, you did want to go, isn’t that right? You keep saying unpleasant things, but actually you’re still concerned about this case, or else you wouldn’t have come running the day after being suspended to hand in a self-examination—did you stay up all night writing?”

There were huge dark circles under Xiao Haiyang’s eyes. He spoke at last: “Writing the self-examination may not have done any good.”

His attempt to leak information had been unsuccessful. This matter could be big or small; it could all come to nothing, or he could be discharged from public employment. It would all depend on how the person responsible handled it. Xiao Haiyang spat out a breath, looking at the steamed-up window, and grinned in self-mockery—even if Luo Wenzhou had originally planned to deal gently with him after the initial harshness, Xiao Haiyang’s unpleasant words had probably rendered him beside himself with rage.

Fei Du suddenly asked, “What kind of person was Officer Gu?”

Xiao Haiyang hadn’t expected this question from him. He hesitated a moment, racking his brains, but all that came out his mouth was a dry sentence: “...He was a good person, a very good person.”

Fei Du didn’t interrupt him.

“I don’t know what he was after. He was quite grown-up, and he didn’t look worse than anyone else, but he didn’t have a family. He only lived by himself in a run-down little apartment, and he didn’t have any desire to move up. When he got his wages or a bonus, he’d send some to his mother, then scatter the rest to subsidize all kinds of people who had nothing to do with him. He hardly spent any money himself. Sometimes I saw his friends come to visit, tell him off for letting all kinds of informers come over all the time and sponge off

him. And he looked after them, too, as though he could cover all of Yan City... but in fact he had nothing himself. He had to ride a bicycle to work.”

Books said that great knights worked for the country and the people. But what kind of knight was Gu Zhao?

A poor knight? A scholarly knight? A bachelor knight? Or a knight on a clanking bicycle?

Xiao Haiyang suddenly stopped talking; at the end of his endurance, he covered half his face with his hand. “I wasn’t doing it at anyone, I just felt...”

“Felt that you couldn’t do anything,” Fei Du unhurriedly finished for him. “When you needed him, he boldly stood up, but when he needed you, you were powerless.”

These words somehow forced their way into Xiao Haiyang’s heart. His shoulders curled up, and the “grown-up” shell he’d rigidly maintained for years suddenly collapsed, revealing the little boy who’d peeked through a crack in the door fourteen years ago.

“I’m sorry...”

“What are you apologizing for?” Fei Du didn’t respond to his fluctuating emotions. His cool words knocked Xiao Haiyang back into the present. “Do you really not know what it means that Captain Luo covered up what you did?”

Xiao Haiyang first looked at him blankly. A moment later, he suddenly came around and nearly leapt out of his seat. “He... Oh... Well...”

Fei Du’s eyes curved. He parked the car steadily. “We’re here. Wang Xiao’s home must be here?”

Wang Xiao's home was in an old neighborhood. The building had been a workplace dormitory before; apparently the property rights hadn't been handed over to this day. At the gates was a paralyzed old lady, sunning herself in a wheelchair. The domestic waste, not cleared away in a timely manner, was piled up high beside her.

Anyone with any means, even if it required a loan, had moved away; those remaining were all the frail and elderly. The building and the people both gave off a feeling of deathly constraint. There was a long corridor leading into the small, dormitory-like building. It was poorly lit, dimming people's eyes as soon as they came in. Both sides were lined with little cage-like apartments, with twenty or more to a floor, so densely crowded they made you think of a grid of chicken coops.

Fei Du carefully avoided a puddle of unknown liquid. "I don't think the family can be so badly off that they'd need to live here?"

Xiao Haiyang answered reflexively. "Wang Xiao's parents both have regular work. They work at a public transportation company, and their income is actually all right. They're not idle after work, either. They have part-time jobs to earn some extra spending money. But in order for her to be able to study abroad in the future, they haven't spent any money in all these years."

Fei Du carelessly asked, "Why does she absolutely have to go abroad?"

"Apparently she wasn't keeping up very well in junior middle, and the teachers advised her parents to let her abandon an ordinary senior middle school and go to a vocational college to learn a trade. The parents couldn't stand hearing this. They couldn't accept that their child would follow in their footsteps. They insisted madly that she get higher education. They made a fuss with the teachers. Then they heard about Yufen's international program somewhere and spent the money they'd been accumulating for a down payment on a house to enroll her in it."

Fei Du looked at him.

Xiao Haiyang uneasily avoided his line of sight. “Background investigation I did before we interrogated that female teacher from Yufen.—204. Wang Xiao lives here.”

As Xiao Haiyang had said, Wang Xiao’s parents were unwilling to waste any time. After leaving the City Bureau, they had probably each gone to their respective part-time job. Her parents were like two donkeys, struggling forward daily with their heads down, regardless of day and night, while the child was like a marionette tied to the donkeys’ tails, indifferently dragged along by them towards great expectations.

Fei Du knocked on the door.

After a while, the peephole in the door darkened; there must have been someone standing at the door, carefully looking out, but there was no movement.

“Wang Xiao?” Fei Du spoke very naturally, as though what he was facing wasn’t a door but a living girl. “We’ve come from the City Bureau. You must remember Officer Xiao here?”

There was absolutely no movement inside, but there was still a shadow at the peephole. The girl must still have been standing there.

“We’d like to talk to you for a bit. Is that all right?” Fei Du said.

Wang Xiao still didn’t make a sound.

Xiao Haiyang really didn’t know how to handle these situations. He looked at Fei Du rather anxiously.

But Fei Du wasn't at all taken aback. "I know there's something you want to say."

They waited a while and heard the door creak open.

But when the door was only open a crack, Fei Du grabbed the handle from the outside and closed the door again, dumbfounding Xiao Haiyang.

"Don't open the door." As he spoke, Fei Du got a pen out of his coat pocket and plucked off an advertising leaflet stuck onto the door. He wrote his phone number on it and put it through the crack under the door. "Haven't the adults taught you not to open the door to strangers when you're alone? It's not safe.—That's my number. Officer Xiao and I are going to your building's backyard to wait. You'll be able to see us out the window. If you want to talk, you can call that number. All right?"

Half of the leaflet with the phone number written on it was stuck under the door, and half was sticking out. After a moment, the paper was slowly pulled inside.

Then Fei Du gave Xiao Haiyang a look and walked out. Xiao Haiyang followed blankly. When they were outside, Xiao Haiyang couldn't resist quietly asking, "Why didn't you let her open the door?"

"When two men who are basically strangers knock on the door, the most generous little girl will hesitate to open up, never mind a girl like Wang Xiao. She would never have let us in. There must have been a chain on the door." The winter wind outside the building swept over Fei Du, and he shivered at once. He took the scarf hanging loosely around his neck and wrapped it around several times. "I figured she wanted to send us away through the crack in the door."

Xiao Haiyang still didn't understand—what was the difference between talking through the door crack and talking over the phone

while looking through the window? At least it was warmer in the corridor.

“Sound carries in the hallway, and the neighbors are so closely packed. Who knows how many ears there are on the other side of the wall? Under that kind of nervous strain, Wang Xiao wouldn’t say anything. If I give her my number, the initiative is hers.—Also, houses like hers usually have burglar-proof windows. Looking out of the apartment will add to her sense of security. The door people walk through every day doesn’t have the same influence.”

Xiao Haiyang nodded his head like an earnest elementary school student at Fei Du’s every full stop. He’d entirely forgotten that when Fei Du had kept down the information he’d leaked with a single phone call, he’d inwardly cursed him for his shamelessness.

The two of them came to the empty backyard. When they were still approximately thirty or forty meters from the building, Fei Du stood still, not coming any closer. Sure enough, not long after he’d stopped, Fei Du’s phone began to ring.

Fei Du looked up. There was a curtain over the back window of 204. There were some unnatural folds at one corner of the thick curtain; evidently there was someone hiding behind it, pulling the curtain aside a bit to peek out. He split the phone’s earbuds with Xiao Haiyang and picked up.

“Hello...” The girl’s somewhat hoarse voice came over the headphones. Though she was still tense, at any rate she was speaking voluntarily. “My parents already went to the City Bureau this morning.”

“We saw them,” Fei Du said, “but I still hoped we could speak to you a little.”

“I...I don’t have anything to say,” Wang Xiao said quietly. “I’ve answered everything I should have. I don’t know about anything else. If there’s nothing else, you can leave.”

Fei Du had said that the phone could relieve Wang Xiao’s anxiety, but it was adding to Xiao Haiyang’s. He was nearly forced into a phobia of the telephone, thinking that if he breathed wrong, she would hang up the phone, and he wouldn’t even have a chance to be rebuked for it.

But Fei Du didn’t directly ask her the main question. He only said, “You knew that Xia Xiaonan was chosen as this year’s ‘deer,’ and that if she didn’t run, she’d be bullied for a period of time in the future?”

“...I know. Feng Bin said so.”

Fei Du said, “Were you on good terms with Feng Bin and Xia Xiaonan? Were you friends?”

“No,” Wang Xiao said after a silence. “I’d just said a few words to Xia Xiaonan. We were acquaintances. I wasn’t familiar with Feng Bin. I’m very unsociable at school. I’m not likable. I don’t have friends.”

Fei Du raised his head slightly, smiling towards the closed window of 204. “Since you were only acquaintances, why were you willing to run away with them? If Xia Xiaonan took your place, the people bullying you would have shifted their attention to her, and you’d have been doing much better. Why didn’t you tell anyone when you found out they were running away?”

Wang Xiao was silent, but, contrary to Xiao Haiyang’s expectations, she didn’t hang up.

Fei Du breathed out white steam and slowly said, “Sometimes, a person’s thoughts aren’t free, because external forces are constantly trying to mold you. They force you to accept mainstream tastes, force

you to listen to whoever has the loudest voice—even if it doesn't accord with your logic or your character, even if it's entirely against your interests.”

Wang Xiao quietly sucked in a breath. She seemed to be crying.

“But as long as the real you still has one last gasp left in her, she'll always be trying to make a weak noise.” Fei Du kept his eyes fixed on the curtain of 204, as though that was the girl's face. “Before, she told you to go with Feng Bin and the others, to try to rebel, to try to protect a schoolmate you actually didn't have any particularly good relationship with. And now? Doesn't she want to make the bad guys pay?”

“Wang Xiao,” Fei Du said quietly, “when those girls locked you out of the dormitory, were you forced to go to the boys' dormitory? Did someone hurt you?”

Xiao Haiyang's heart came up to his throat.

After a long time, the girl on the phone spoke weakly.

She said, “...no.”

Xiao Haiyang's heart crashed down so hard it hurt, along with his lungs. Fei Du sighed soundlessly and lowered his eyes.

“I... I...” Wang Xiao was sobbing, unable to catch her breath. “No, but I did hear about that person...”

Fei Du froze at once, then he hastily followed up, “Which person?”

“The person who killed Feng Bin. That...murderer.”

CHAPTRE 118 - Verhovensky XXVIII

Xiao Haiyang gave a start. “What did you say?”

Fei Du held him back. “You heard? Who did you hear from? I don’t remember us making the murderer’s identity public.”

“It’s... At the public security bureau, there was a lady who asked me if while we were outside I’d seen a man around forty years old. She said he looked very strange, with a very long chin, as though it had been padded, with his eyes kind of crooked, very fierce-looking.”

That had been a routine inquiry. To determine whether the children who’d run away had seen Lu Guosheng, they had described his facial features to them without telling them who he was; if he’d seemed familiar, they had given them a photograph and a sketch.

Evidently, this young lady had her own guesses.

“I didn’t leave the hotel when we were outside, and I didn’t see that person.” Wang Xiao hesitated somewhat. “But... I’m not sure.”

“No problem.” Fei Du softened his voice. “Go ahead and tell us. Even if there’s a misunderstanding, it’s not serious.”

“We have every Sunday off and can go home. My parents don’t rest on the weekend, and they’re afraid of wasting my time, so they don’t let me come home. That day, the other students had either gone home or gone out together to have fun. I was studying by myself in the classroom. I went to the bathroom midway, and when I was about to leave, I heard some people come in. It was Liang Youjing and those other girls.” Wang Xiao paused. “I...I was afraid there’d be trouble if I ran into them, so I hid in the stall until they left.”

“They thought there was no one there and talked a little. I heard Liang Youjing say, ‘What does that friend of Wei Wenchuan’s do? He’s so weird. He came and sat for five minutes and didn’t even drink water. He wouldn’t even take off his gloves.’”

Xiao Haiyang’s eyelids twitched—not drinking on a public occasion and not taking off your gloves likely meant you were worried about leaving behind fingerprints and DNA.

Wang Xiao continued, “Another girl said, ‘I don’t think he can be anyone important. He looks ferocious, and he’s wall-eyed. He’s pretty scary.’”

Fei Du gravely asked, “Do you remember when this happened?”

“I do. It was the beginning of November,” Wang Xiao said. “It would have been the first weekend of November. It was Wei Wenchuan’s birthday, and he invited some people. All the people he hangs out with went.”

“Was Feng Bin there, too?” Fei Du said.

“He was. They used to be on pretty good terms.”

Lu Guosheng, who had disappeared fifteen years ago, had turned up at a middle school birthday party; no matter how you thought about it, it sounded inconceivable. In the 327 case, the other two suspects had been in it for the money; only Lu Guosheng had been in it for the pleasure of killing and playing with the bodies. An out-and-out psychopath like that wouldn’t have given Wei Wenchuan a second look even if he’d been his own son.

Wang Xiao said he’d been wearing gloves and wouldn’t drink anything, so what had he been there for? It sounded like he’d gone to recognize an assassination target!

The mysterious individual 'go ask shatov' had already been in contact with Feng Bin at the time, and the daring boy had started planning a sensational rebellion and revelation, not knowing that he was already being watched.

"Where was this?" Fei Du said. "Do you know?"

"I don't know, they didn't say."

Xiao Haiyang frowned.

But then, Wang Xiao thought about it and added, "I heard a girl say something like, 'That restaurant's Buddha Jumps Over the Wall⁷ wasn't a traditional one. There was baby bok choy in it. It was hilarious.' Liang Youjing has always liked Wei Wenchuan a lot. She got angry when she heard this and told her not to talk blindly about things she didn't understand, and she said that they'd made a modified dish that was adjusted to be better for your health or something..."

"Got it, Beiyuan's Longyun Center." On hearing the words "baby bok choy," Fei Du already understood. "Thank you, you've been a great help."

The curtain of 204 was pulled open, and a hand wiped away the fog on the window. The girl's white, haggard face appeared and looked out at them through the cage-like anti-burglary grid. Her features could be called pretty and delicate, but the look in her eyes was gloomy, and her expression was somewhat cowering. Living in perpetual constraint and suffering had left a layer of ash over the girl; it wasn't at all pleasing to the eye.

There was stillness over the phone. The girl was silent for a good while, but she didn't seem about to end the call, as though she had something else to say.

Xiao Haiyang was at first burning with impatience, wishing to take wing, fly back to the City Bureau, and turn this Longyun Center upside down. But perhaps he was influenced by Fei Du's patience; he looked up at Wang Xiao, and his roiling emotions slowly calmed down. His mind wandered, and he remember many things.

He remembered fourteen years ago, all the malicious gossip the neighbors had talked when they'd pointed to Gu Zhao's empty apartment, remembered his young self picking up half a brick to fight them over it...though he didn't have the makings of a hero, and every time he'd tried to fight back, he'd been knocked over to the ground and trampled by a foot on his back.

The two men stood in the winter wind that could freeze a person in place, each wearing one earbud, waiting for the imprisoned Rapunzel to let down her hair.

"I...I'm not pretty, I'm not good at school, and I don't get along with people," Wang Xiao said suddenly. "I'm a burden on my parents, making them run around in circles each day. They say that we still live in this place for my sake. They tell me every day to making a good showing. But I can't do it. I've spent so much of my family's money, and now I don't know even know whether I can continue attending school... Wouldn't it be better for someone like me to die?"

Fei Du said, "You..."

He'd only said one word when Xiao Haiyang interrupted him.

"My disposition was very strange when I was little," Xiao Haiyang said stiffly. He found Fei Du looking at him and grinned rather self-mockingly. "My disposition is still very strange now. Maybe it's innate. Others don't like hanging out with me, and I don't especially get along with my colleagues. When my parents got divorced, my dad pointed to me and said to my mom, 'You take this burden. I'll give

you some more money...’ I’ve always been useless. Look, I’m a police officer, and once on the way home I ran into a pickpocket and wanted to chase him. The upshot was that the pickpocket knocked me over, and I watched him make his getaway. But I still want to keep trying. The days ahead are so long. Perhaps one day it’ll get better... Well, what if?”

Wang Xiao leaned against the window and cried.

“If one day you decide to make some people pay, no need to call 110. Call this number, and I’ll come straight away to take you to the City Bureau.” After exhorting her, Fei Du pushed Xiao Haiyang. “Come on.”

Xiao Haiyang followed him quietly. When the car’s heating had warmed his hands and feet, he finally worked up the courage to speak. “What...what should I do in my situation to be able to rejoin the team?”

Fei Du seemed to have his whole attention focused on the traffic situation up ahead.

Xiao Haiyang at once added nervously, “You said before that Captain Luo didn’t tell people that I was suspended, so...so... You’re so good at talking, could you...look at that self-examination for me and see what I did wrong?”

Fei Du smiled. “Does your boss normally like reading other people’s self-examinations to amuse himself?”

Xiao Haiyang’s face was blank.

The car drove through an intersection. Fei Du shook his head, took a work ID out of his pocket, and tossed it at the dumbfounded Xiao Haiyang.

Meanwhile, Luo Wenzhou was in front of the surveillance feed, watching Wei Wenchuan.

Perhaps he looked this way naturally or something; there was always a trace of an indescribable smile hanging on Wei Wenchuan's lips. Only fifteen or sixteen years old, and that seemingly painted-on smile didn't waver a bit when he was faced with two police officers questioning him by turns.

"Wei Wenchuan, someone gave evidence saying that you're the leader of a group at school and frequently incite others to bully their schoolmates, bringing about personal insults and bodily harm. Do you acknowledge it?"

Wei Wenchuan shrugged and raised his neat brows, spreading his hands. "What does a group mean? Jiejie, aren't there some colleagues you normally hang out with? If frequently spending time with my schoolmates is called being in a group, then aren't you in a clique with those colleagues you're on good terms with?"

Lang Qiao's face darkened. "You're being questioned here. Shut up. Talk nonsense again, and we'll detain you."

Her words, good for scaring small children, didn't touch Wei Wenchuan at all. The teenage boy smiled again. "Police officer-jiejie, you can't detain me without any reason, can you? As for 'personal insults' and 'bodily harm'—who did I insult? Who did I harm? Is there video and audio evidence showing that I insulted someone? Shouldn't there be a doctor's report for the condition of an injury?"

Tao Ran frowned, looking at Wei Wenchuan, who wasn't falling for any of this. "Wei Wenchuan, I hope you can correct your attitude. We have hard evidence to show that you're connected to a case of group sexual assault. Your family circumstances are excellent, your grades are also good, and your future prospects are great. I suppose you don't want to get a criminal record and go to prison for a few years?"

“Sexually assaulted who? Wang Xiao?” Wei Wenchuan covered his eyes. He was silent for a while, then, sneering, said, “Don’t joke, officer. Please, take a look at me. Now look at Wang Xiao.—The way she is, if I touched a hair on her head, wouldn’t I be the one getting the worst of it? Could you tell me what your so-called ‘hard evidence’ is? Did Wang Xiao herself say so? Heavens, ugly people really will do anything for attention.”

“Don’t put on your act here! What explanation do you have for installing a tracking device on your female schoolmate’s cellphone?”

This time, Wei Wenchuan at last temporarily froze, disbelieving anger instantly rising on his face, as though he didn’t dare to believe that Xia Xiaonan had had the guts to sell him out. Then he quickly calmed once again.

He leaned back, lowering his eyelids. “You mean Xia Xiaonan? Yeah, I did that. Xia Xiaonan looks all right, I thought she’d do, so I had a bit of fun with her—anyway, I didn’t violate her privacy. I wasn’t spying on her. I installed the tracking device right in front of her face. If she didn’t like it, she could have removed it herself. Even if she was a mental deficient, she could have just not used that phone, right? Are mutually consenting things also crimes?”

“Since you installed a tracking device on Xia Xiaonan’s phone, why didn’t you provide a lead when the teachers and the police were searching for them?”

“No one asked me,” Wei Wenchuan said confidently, knowing he had justice on his side. “Anyway, what did it have to do with me?”

“But when Feng Bin was murdered, the murderer used the tracking device on her phone to follow them,” Tao Ran said gravely. “What do you have to say about that?”

Wei Wenchuan's gaze didn't dodge away at all. He looked openly back at Tao Ran, a false smile emerging at the corners of his mouth. "First, have you caught the killer? Did the killer himself acknowledge that he used that tracking device to find Feng Bin? Second, even if he did, that tracking device is very crude. Anyone could have gone through the software to find her. Why are you saying it has to do with me? Third—you're saying that when Feng Bin died, Xia Xiaonan was with him? Then why did the murderer kill Feng Bin but not kill her? Doesn't that show there's a problem with her? Anyway, what does it have to do with me?"

Luo Wenzhou was at the end of his endurance and was just about to personally enter battle and take care of this little asshole when his phone rang.

"...Beiyuan's Longyun Center." His steps paused at once, his voice hardly leaving his throat. "Are you sure? No... Keep this a secret, don't come over here, and keep an eye on that dumbass Xiao Haiyang. We'll talk when I get home."

Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone. Standing in place, he could feel his heart thumping wildly. Alone, he paced two circles in the observation room and drank half a cup of tea in one gulp. By the time he picked up his walkie-talkie again, he had his expression under control.

"If he won't acknowledge it, hold him for a day. Some upbringing he's had." In a faintly angry voice, he said, "Find some guys to keep questioning him in turns. I still don't believe a little whelp would be up to this."

Half an hour later, Luo Wenzhou had called each of the Criminal Investigation Team's associated direct superiors to report on the work. He strolled into the corridor, and, seemingly aimlessly, raised his head and looked at a security camera in a corner. As though in provocation, he lit a cigarette towards it and slowly walked out.

“There are people there who have changed.”—These were the most shocking words in Lao Yang’s testament.

When they’d gone to arrest Zheng Kaifeng, because there had been a leak, Zheng Kaifeng had received word ahead of time and run away, and afterwards the person behind the scenes had had the opportunity to murder and silence. This time they absolutely couldn’t alert the enemy.

Luo Wenzhou went outside, expressionlessly tapped his cigarette into a trash can, and turned his head to look back at the office building bearing the national emblem.

He had a sudden premonition that they were very close to the truth.

Xiao Haiyang sat cautiously in Luo Wenzhou’s living room, exchanging a helpless look with Luo Yiguo.

Having woken from its drunken stupor, Luo Yiguo was bristling, circling around Xiao Haiyang in displeasure. Its big, fluffy tail touched Xiao Haiyang’s pant leg. Master Cat majestically displayed its fangs, hissing at him.

Xiao Haiyang silently pulled his leg back, his posture becoming even more cautious. Luo Yiguo had verified its judgement that this was an easily-bullied human. It put on a look of arrogant disdain, jumped onto the coffee table, and sat up in a lump, throwing out its chest, maintaining an impenetrable watch on Xiao Haiyang.

Fei Du poured Xiao Haiyang a cup of tea. Taking advantage of Luo Wenzhou not being home, he also sneakily got into the liquor cabinet he’d scouted out yesterday, picking and choosing among the reasonably priced red wines. Finding one “general” sticking out among the ranks, he poured himself a glass.

Luo Yiguo smelled the wine, and its mood immediately changed. It trotted over to his feet, purring as it rubbed against his pant legs. Seeing that Fei Du wasn't intending to pay attention to it, Luo Yiguo couldn't resist reaching out its paws and attempting to grab his pant leg and climb up like it usually did to Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du sipped some wine and looked down at the cat.

Luo Yiguo's half-outstretched paw froze in midair for a moment. Then it drew it back and obediently rolled itself into a furry ball, not daring to act rashly.

Xiao Haiyang was watching him. "Your cat is pretty well-behaved."

"It's Luo Wenzhou's," Fei Du said, pretending this was nothing out of the ordinary. "Though I've been feeding it lately."

Hearing this, the average person would have wondered why he'd been feeding Luo Wenzhou's cat, and asked in astonishment, "Are you living in Captain Luo's house?"

But Comrade Xiao Haiyang wasn't the average person. His mind was filled with Lu Guosheng; all his tossing and turning was about the wanted criminal, and he had no attention to spare for anything else. Fei Du had kidnapped him and brought him here, and he had no idea that he was currently sitting on the couch in Luo Wenzhou's house. He gave an "oh," disregarded Fei Du's veiled boast, and said in deadly earnest, "I've just been thinking. If the person Wang Xiao heard about was in fact Lu Guosheng, then why, when he normally takes care not to leave any traces of himself, would he leave his fingerprint the day he killed Feng Bin?"

Fei Du: "..."

Were all the police officers the City Bureau recruited this slow?

CHAPTER 119 - Verhovensky XXIX

Xiao Haiyang's face was full of sincere gravity; Fei Du had to expressionlessly swallow down his words along with a mouthful of wine.

He slowly strolled over and sat down on the other end of the couch, smoothly stretching out his long legs. "There are security cameras around scenic areas. Lu Guosheng's physical characteristics haven't changed much over the last several years. He knew before he acted that he would be filmed, so whether he wore gloves or not didn't make much difference. I think that after hiding for fifteen years, a person may yearn for freedom. Normally he has to wear gloves, has to be careful, because as soon as he's exposed, the public security system will have its eye on him. But the day he committed the murder was different. He knew there would be someone to come to his rescue. He could enjoy the killing, then slip away."

For a wanted criminal like Lu Guosheng, shouldering the burden of quite a few lives, it was a matter of indifference to add one more, as long as the police didn't catch him.

"A wanted criminal with a bad reputation and a clear identity showing up on the surveillance network is undoubtedly a very good shield for the employer behind him."

Faced with proper business, Xiao Haiyang's brain moved fairly quickly. He nodded at once. "I understand that... But there's another contradictory point. He killed the boy and found the girl's phone, but he left her. Why is that? Could he possibly not have known that the police would question Xia Xiaonan? As soon as that happened, wouldn't the employer he'd worked so hard to shield be revealed?"

Fei Du didn't answer at once. While he was quiet, Luo Yiguo cuddled up to him and put its head in his lap. Having found a heat source, it

soon fell asleep on him.

There were many possible reasons for Lu Guosheng not killing Xia Xiaonan—it may have been at his employer’s request. Perhaps Xia Xiaonan, having betrayed Feng Bin, had been taken by the killer behind the scenes for one of his own people; perhaps, because she was pretty, he’d wanted to preserve her as a “spoil of war” and was unwilling to kill her; perhaps the young and frivolous “employer” had innocently thought that if he only threatened her enough, the girl would keep her mouth shut and the police wouldn’t get anything out of her.

It may also have been a reason of Lu Guosheng’s. After all, in the heavy debt of blood he carried, not one of his victims had been female. Some psychopathic killers had mental states that were hard to appraise using normal logic. Amidst their cold-bloodedness, owing to some deep-seated psychological reason, they would be tender-hearted towards people possessing certain characteristics. Until they’d taken Lu Guosheng alive, this was all unknown.

The only thing they could be sure of was that if Xia Xiaonan had died in that garbage bin, the bodies of the boy and the girl would have been found together, and with the girl’s phone taken away, no one would have known that one of the victims had also been a participant. It would only have looked like a misfortune; at most, the police, unable to catch the wanted criminal, would have been hauled out for a round of condemnation—now, however, all kinds of coincidences had turned this assassination, which should have been watertight, into a bungled performance...not long after the Zhou Clan case.

If it had been so easy for *those people* to slip up, they would all have been scooped up long ago; they couldn’t have survived up to this point.

Luo Wenzhou only came home at twilight, bringing Tao Ran along. They'd taken a taxi and carried in big and small bags of hotpot ingredients, as though they were planning to hold a weekend party in an interval between working overtime.

Staring as Luo Wenzhou got out his keys and opened the door, then familiarly stepped out of his shoes and kicked them towards the shoe cabinet, Xiao Haiyang was at last belatedly confused. Entirely at a loss, he thought, "Whose house is this, anyway?"

Tao Ran, beaming, passed Fei Du an opaque cloth bag. "I see Xiao Xiao is also here to scrounge a meal."

Xiao Haiyang: "..."

He'd wanted to leave a few times that afternoon, but Fei Du had told him to "wait a while longer." Xiao Haiyang had been waiting expectantly for someone to come and arrange some secret investigative work; he hadn't thought that he was waiting for hotpot!

Xiao Haiyang said, "Well...I came to..."

Fei Du opened the cloth bag Tao Ran had given him and looked inside, seeing a small, pitch black instrument—an anti-reconnaissance device!

"He came to hand in his self-examination," Fei Du said knowingly, casually interrupting Xiao Haiyang's words. "And he was planning to apologize to you and say he shouldn't have spoken rudely and contradicted his superior in a public place yesterday. By way of apology, he bought two bags of imported cat food. Isn't that right, little fellow?"

Xiao Haiyang: "..."

Fei Du had bought the cat food at a supermarket outside. Xiao Haiyang was all at sea right now, but due to the blind faith he'd built up towards Fei Du during the day, he shut his mouth and said nothing.

“Imported?” Luo Wenzhou looked at Xiao Haiyang. “Ours is a native Chinese cat. It doesn't eat imported food. If you feed it the wrong thing, look out for it turning over its bowl...”

Before he could finish speaking, he looked up and saw Luo Yiguo, its butt sticking up, waving its tail as it chewed with its head down. Judging from its body language, its mood was rather cheerful; it had no intention of knocking over pots and throwing around dishes.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

The ungrateful little beast!

The hotpot ingredients were all ready-made and didn't require any effort to handle. Even a novice like Fei Du could deal with them.

Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang set up the hotpot to boil the base and sat down beside it to chat and keep Luo Yiguo away. Fei Du meanwhile went into the kitchen to help wash vegetables.

As soon as he set one foot in the kitchen, Luo Wenzhou sniffed gently. “Have you been drinking?”

“...” Fei Du was taken unawares by this question, because he hadn't thought that a man who spent his time in company with a solid air freshener could have such a sensitive sense of smell. He denied it on the spot. “No, it was grape juice.”

Luo Wenzhou dodged left and right, checking on Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang's positions in the dining room. Then, without warning, he

pressed Fei Du into a corner out of their line of sight and personally tasted his mouth.

The kitchen door was half open; if they'd only stuck out their heads, Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang would have seen. Fei Du could even hear their low voices. Luo Wenzhou's sudden surprise attack of a kiss was unusually turbulent, almost fretful, entirely at odds with the "relaxed and cheerful" atmosphere of the weekend hotpot gathering.

Likely anyone faced with a knife to the back would have found it difficult to maintain true calm.

The winter air was dry, and lips were delicate. Fei Du hissed and hurriedly turned his head away slightly, grabbing Luo Wenzhou's hand, almost inaudibly saying into his ear, "Darling, if you bite through and I bleed, you'll have to carry me out of here on your back."

Luo Wenzhou already had the results of his analysis and smacked him indignantly. "I'll carry you out over my shoulder—you weren't drinking? Do you ever tell the truth?"

Fei Du turned his head to cover up his entirely unrepentant smile and gently licked Luo Wenzhou's earlobe. When he gave a start, Fei Du took the opportunity to firmly pick up the washed mushrooms and float out.

The powerful, invasive scent of hotpot was bubbling over out of the pot. All kinds of meat, vegetables, and seafood were laid out on the spacious dining table, looking very sumptuous. Luo Yiguo followed the smell over and cried out urgently, turning around and around under the table. The four people, however, wore grave expressions.

"Who says you aren't sociable? Isn't eating hotpot with us after work sociable? Xiao Xiao, don't resist. All it takes for people to get familiar is eating a couple of meals together. Tomorrow we have to go back to

work. Let's eat well today, substituting tea for wine—cheers.” Tao Ran's voice seemed to hold a smile, but there was no sign of it on his face. He rather solemnly accepted the anti-reconnaissance device and made a “ready” hand gesture at Luo Wenzhou.

Xiao Haiyang expressionlessly raised two cups and clinked them together.

Bubbles rose from the hotpot. An indicator light blinked faintly, letting out an invisible scanning signal.

Luo Wenzhou took the detector of the anti-reconnaissance device and stood up. “We'll call this business over. Xiao Haiyang, there are all kinds of bosses. After this, pay attention to how you speak when you're outside. Not everyone would put up with you like I do.—I'll go see if the noodles have softened up.”

Saying so, he went around the room with the detector, even carefully probing the pairs of shoes next to the shoe cabinet at the door.

“Fei Du, don't play on your phone, all right? How much money do you need to make that you don't even have time to eat a meal properly?”

Tao Ran heard his implication and immediately picked it up. “Everyone turn off your phones—we'll take a tip from the internet and put all the phones together. No one's allowed to touch them. Anyone who can't hold out will cover the cost of today's food.”

Fei Du got out a signal-blocking paper bag, collected everyone's phones, and tossed them into the bag.

When Luo Wenzhou was approaching the entrance hall, the red light suddenly lit up.

Luo Wenzhou's expression instantly altered. At once, Tao Ran turned the sound up on the TV, and they all looked at the indicator light on the anti-reconnaissance device—it flashed unsteadily as Luo Wenzhou moved around. After a moment, Luo Wenzhou took Tao Ran's worn-out briefcase down from the clothes rack. Against the background of the deafening music from the TV, he went through Tao Ran's bag—stuck in an inside pocket was a listening device.

The four of them silently concentrated their gazes on this little thing. Only Luo Yiguo's attention was still on the food. Seeing no one was paying attention to it, it let out a displeased howl.

Luo Wenzhou's gaze moved. He walked over, carrying the bag, and picked Luo Yiguo up with one hand. Luo Yiguo's legs dangled in the air; it didn't know what the litter box attendant's problem was and gave a thin cry.

Against the background of the cat's cry, Luo Wenzhou scooped out a cup of boiling water and poured it over the listening device. There was a crackling sound, and the old leather of the briefcase let out a strange smell. The flickering red light on the anti-reconnaissance device calmed.

No one spoke for a good while. Luo Wenzhou released the scapegoated knight Luo Yiguo and spoke first to break the silence. "Taotao, you've been carrying this crappy bag for ten years. There's two gaps in one zipper. It must be about time to change it. I have some new ones here, you can go and pick out whichever one you like later."

Tao Ran forced a smile. "Fine. Give me the most expensive one."

Xiao Haiyang said, "Who is it?"

Tao Ran had calmed down from his initial shock. He drank a mouthful of herbal tea. "It could be anyone. There's nothing in my

bag that's worth any money. I don't normally pay attention to it, just toss it somewhere.—When it's crowded on the subway, any place you hand your bag in to be checked, all the acquaintances I've seen recently, informers, witnesses I've gone to see, victims... Anyone could have had an opportunity. It doesn't necessarily have to be one of our people.”

“Sure.” Fei Du unhurriedly put a few pieces of meat into the hotpot. “If it had been me, I'd have put a listening device on Lao Luo. At least one for each of the two of you.”

Luo Wenzhou's office was basically a public space, and his things were thrown casually around the City Bureau. Any colleague who was short on spending money to buy cigarettes could give a shout and just take the money from his bag.

If it was someone from the Criminal Investigation Team, the difficulty involved in planting something on either of them was about the same—there weren't any obstacles.

Luo Wenzhou let out a long breath, his voice so low it was almost drowned among the steam. “Lao Yang's testament mentioned the 327 case and Gu Zhao, so this person must be a contemporary of theirs... or even older. It's likely to be some old leader of good standing and reputation. Perhaps that's the reason why they established their headquarters here.”

Xiao Haiyang stared stupidly at one and then another. “Wh-which Lao Yang? What are you all talking about?”

Tao Ran gave Luo Wenzhou a questioning look.

Luo Wenzhou patted Xiao Haiyang on the shoulder and briefly explained, “This dumbass was raised by Gu Zhao. He counts as a relative of an elder and a victim.”

Fei Du shrugged. “And I’m a relative of a criminal who betrayed the ‘organization’ and a victim.”

“Tao Ran and I have been investigating the truth behind Lao Yang’s death three years ago,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Recently, shiniang gave us Lao Yang’s testament.—We all have different information now. Let’s get each other up to date as we eat.”

They were like a group of people groping around in the darkness who, whether from private motives or public duty, had by coincidence set foot on the path to seek the same abyss and had staggered along, moving forward with their eyes closed for this long. Now all their roads with their different starting places and different endings had finally met at the same point. There was a fragmentary flame flickering in the mists, faintly revealing the shape of the abyss.

“We can temporarily detain Wei Wenchuan and his father,” Luo Wenzhou said, “but we can’t hold them for long, because we don’t have any evidence, and Wei Wenchuan is a minor. The two of them know it, so they feel very secure. Time is tight. What should our next step be? It’s not very convenient to simply investigate this Beiyuan’s Longyun Center of yours. I looked it up. That building was built by Wei Zhanhong, it’s their own property. We could obtain the security camera records from around there, but investigating surveillance footage requires an application and proper grounds. I can’t just make it happen by saying so. There are many eyes on the team. Even if the bug in Tao Ran’s bag wasn’t put there by one of our people, it’ll still make it hard to keep a secret. Until we can make a definitive strike, we can’t disclose this information.”

Tao Ran said, “What about informers?”

“Can informers be trusted?” Xiao Haiyang asked. “They come from all over the place, and you don’t know what kind of people they normally come into contact with or who they get favors from. I

always suspected that what happened to Uncle Gu was related to a mole among his informers.”

Just then, Fei Du, who hadn't spoken all this time, suddenly said, “We can use my people.”

CHAPTER 120 - Verhovensky XXX

Beiyuan's Longyun Center was a multi-story building occupying a well-situated position with excellent fengshui. The whole building was made up of over thirty floors, with a hotel above, a commercial area below, and a revolving restaurant stuck between them. When the light was just right, it would go through the clear glass floor-to-ceiling windows and paint a glittering rainbow on the buildings next to it.

Though right now, the sun hadn't risen yet.

The revolving restaurant wasn't a single unit. The four corners were divided into a self-service restaurant, a Western restaurant, a South-East Asian restaurant, and a restaurant that served modified home cooking—that was the one that put baby bok choy into its Buddha Jumps Over the Wall.

Among them, the self-service restaurant in the south-east corner was the one that delivered 24-hour meal service to the hotel's guests and opened a breakfast room every morning at six.

At four in the morning, a few bustling young girls were already changing the flowers on the restaurant's dining tables to prepare for another day of welcoming guests. They'd just worked the night shift, when they'd been on call at all times, and were about to swap shifts at a quarter past four. Cleaning the bathrooms and arranging the dining room were their last tasks.

The service workers here were all ordinarily around twenty years old. Some had come from out of town to find work, and some were university students working part time. They were all young and fresh and at any rate could look pleasing to the eye once they were cleaned up. The shift leader was a girl with her hair in a ponytail; her hands were defter at changing flowers than anyone else's, not spilling a

drop of water from the vases. When she'd changed them, she'd move them around a little into a suitable simple arrangement.

“Come quick, Weiwei-jie, the first round of dim sum is ready!”

The shift leader with the ponytail gave an affirmative, gave the dining hall a last close look, then followed the girls into the back kitchen.

The morning's first round of dim sum was often to warm up the kitchen implements. The cooks wanted to get a sense for the freshness of new ingredients and taste the new seasonings; the head cook would also sometimes take this opportunity to instruct the apprentices. Anything made during this time was an experiment and wouldn't be given to the guests to eat. Ordinarily it was a benefit for the night shift service workers; if they couldn't finish eating, they could take it away with them.

After being on shift all night, the girls's stomachs were rumbling with hunger. They followed the aroma, chirping, swarming around.

The shift leader called Weiwei wasn't in a rush. She waited for everyone to leave, then unhurriedly went over and used a one-time-use sanitary bag to gather up the remaining little pastries.

“Are you giving that to those losers again?” A girl looked at her as she fixed her makeup and curled her lip, saying, “Let me tell you, Weiwei-jie, it's easy for those bumpkins to flatter themselves when you're so nice to them. Also, are they worthy of eating this? They can't even tell imitation shark fin from the real stuff. They normally put any kind of pig slop or dog food into their mouths. Their tongues are pretty much there for decoration. To my way of thinking, they're only worthy of buying some buns filled with toilet paper on the street.”

Weiwei smiled, not arguing with her.

The girls at a high-ranking restaurant were all trained in posture and etiquette, wore clean and tidy uniforms every day, and had to wear makeup to work. Among these surroundings, as time went on, they began to get the mistaken impression that they were also high-ranking people and rather looked down on the security guards downstairs, who were working the night shift along with them.

Weiwei was kind and well-intentioned. Whenever she worked the night shift, she'd take some of the dim sum she couldn't finish eating and on her way off work deliver it to the security guards. They were all people unable to sleep through the long night who could only take pity on each other. The other girls and the cooks had seen this all before. Maybe they thought she was silly; she didn't fawn on the guests but was always making friends with useless people.

Weiwei stuck her earbuds in her ears and quietly hummed along to the lively tune playing over them. Perhaps because she was about to get off work, her steps were a little brisk. She went downstairs by the employee passage, dividing up the wrapped-up dim sum among all the security guards on duty and on patrol. She went all the way from the revolving restaurant on the tenth floor to the surveillance center in the basement.

There were normally two people on duty in the surveillance center. One was a newly-hired boy, only eighteen or nineteen years old and dumpy. He shared his shift with a sly old bully who slept soundly in the break room next door, making the boy prop up his eyelids and watch the cameras himself.

Past four in the morning was when people were the most tired. Having a pretty girl come to visit was undoubtedly refreshing, but sadly the young security guard couldn't quite enjoy it.

Weiwei had brought a type of bun today with an especially strange flavor; apparently the filling contained some Thai spice. The young security guard didn't have the stomach to digest Thai plants; when

he'd eaten two, his belly began to ache as though there was a storm inside it. He bore it for a while in front of the girl, but his belly only made an ever larger disturbance. He really couldn't hold back anymore. He made a pained expression. "Weiwei-jie, could you help me out? I...I have to go to the bathroom. The guy who works this shift with me is mad when he wakes up, I don't dare to wake him."

Weiwei agreed without argument. The young security guard sighed in relief and hastily ran off, holding up his pants.

Hearing the rash footsteps recede, the girl's dazzling smile gradually vanished. She somewhat nervously took a deep breath, counted twenty in her mind, focused, and took a very small specially designed flash drive out of her pocket. She turned her head and looked at the surveillance camera screens behind her.

"Around noon on the sixth of November," she recited internally. "The surveillance camera records from the revolving restaurant, the lobby downstairs, the front and back doors, and the parking garage, the more detailed the better."

There was an untold number of security cameras in the Longyun Center. She swiftly determined each camera's sequence number and quickly pulled up the records from November sixth for those cameras.

A wind blew down the corridor, lightly moving the door of the camera room, as though someone was passing. Weiwei turned her head to investigate twice, her palms breaking out in sweat. She nervously watched the progress bar; each second seemed to be endless.

Suddenly, a cough came from the break room next door!

Weiwei was scared into a shudder, instantly growing cold from head to foot, reflexively reaching out a hand and getting ready to pull out the flash drive. There was a rustling sound in the break room; the

lazy security guard who was sleeping on the job had woken up. The progress bar was almost at the end. Weiwei clenched her teeth lightly. Someone shouted from the break room in a sleepy, blurred voice: “Xiao Meng? Xiao Meng?”

The camera room had insufficient heating; the people on duty usually had to wrap up in jackets and coats. But there was hot sweat at the corners of Weiwei’s forehead.

The door of the break room creaked open. The man put a foot out.

“Xiao Meng went to the bathroom. It’s me, Uncle Wang.” In a moment of desperation, the girl suddenly spoke. In a very sweet voice, she said, “Since you guys have been working so hard, I brought you something to eat.”

“Oh, Weiwei!” Warm from his bedding, the old security guard had wanted to come out wearing only his thermal underwear. As soon as he heard the girl’s voice, he felt uncomfortable and hastily retreated to the break room to get dressed. Through the door, he said, “Ah, thank you. There aren’t many young girls as nice as you now.”

Weiwei, not turning a hair, lowered her head and let out a breath, her chest feeling unpleasantly choked. “I’m only offering you someone else’s gifts, Uncle Wang. You’re too polite.”

When the old security guard had gotten dressed, fixed his appearance, and come out, he saw the girl idly leaning against the table playing on her phone. He hastily said, “That joker Xiao Meng. He’s a disgrace. I’ll give him a telling off when he gets back.—You should hurry home. It’s nearly light out.”

Weiwei smiled at him, pulled her jacket tightly around herself as though nothing were the matter, and, as the old security guard counseled her to be careful on her way, she gently squeezed the flash drive in her pocket.

Before daybreak, Beiyuan's Longyun Center's security camera footage had passed through a few people and ended up in Fei Du's hands.

“This is the security camera footage from some important locations in the Longyun Center Building from the day Wei Wenchuan invited his guests.” Fei Du turned on a laptop and, without raising his eyelids, said to the circle of police officers watching him, “Don't worry, my people were absolutely unnoticed. This won't alert the enemy.”

Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang had been put up for the night in Luo Wenzhou's guest room and study. Because they didn't have experience, they hadn't locked the doors at night, and each had been stepped on a good number of times by Luo Yiguo, who knew how to open doors.

Tao Ran felt that he'd just fallen soundly asleep when he was startled awake by a mysterious knock on the door. He rubbed his haggard face and forced himself to concentrate, asking Fei Du, “Who was that who came to give you the stuff just now? What channels did you get the security camera footage through? Are they legal?”

“Some friends I helped out a little once.” Fei Du opened a video and played it on fast-forward, casually dodging the question. After a while, he thought of something and couldn't resist looking up at Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't made a sound. He had a cigarette in his mouth but hadn't lit it; he was only tasting it to satisfy his craving. He'd had his eyes focused on Fei Du the whole time, and his gaze bumped against Fei Du's when it floated over.

Fei Du paused, then gave the laptop to Xiao Haiyang. He took off his protective glasses and slowly wiped them a few times. “All right, actually, I...I imitated ‘them.’—Do you remember He Zhongyi's mom Wang Xiujian? She nearly jumped off the Trade Building, and later

the building's boss took advantage of the commotion to stir up an Elderly Bereaved Villagers Foundation to show his sense of corporate social responsibility? That fund's daily operations were handed over to a specialized public welfare organization. Apart from Wang Xiujuan, it's also responsible for taking care of all kinds of other people who have lost their means of earning a living due to wicked acts.—The real backer behind that public welfare organization is me. I found people to hold onto the stock ownership for me. It's about the same line of thought as the Guangyao Fund.”

Luo Wenzhou quietly asked, “Wicked acts?”

“The young man who just delivered these things, his parents died in a burglary committed by a gambling addict. The security camera records from the Longyun Center, a girl who works there thought of a way to get them. If I recall correctly, she's not local. She ran away from home because she couldn't take her step-father's molestation.” Fei Du said, “Though it's rather profit-minded to say it, everyone may encounter unjust things, but if they have powerful material support behind them when it happens, whatever circumstances they end up in, they still won't be in too dire straits—thanks to Fei Chengyu's legacy.”

Luo Wenzhou suddenly asked, “What does Wang Xiujuan do now?”

“She's mostly having her illness treated. She hasn't gone back to her hometown. When her health is good, she does hourly work for a cleaning company. The cleaning company has a long-term service agreement with Wei Zhanhong's headquarters.” Fei Du explained what had become of this woman whom everyone had forgotten long ago without missing a beat. “I probably wouldn't have used her. She's too old, and she's not quick-witted enough. It would be easy for her to get into danger. I just had her occupy the position. When there was a need, I'd have found someone to take her place.”

“She’d lost her son and had nothing to live on. She had no hope,” Luo Wenzhou said slowly. “I asked you once what would happen to people like Wang Xiujian—it seems that you’ve turned them into reserves for a vigilante police force.”

If he hadn’t forced him to come clean, what would he have used these people to do?

Where would he have gone with them in the end?

Imagining it slightly, Luo Wenzhou broke out in a cold sweat. Looking back the way he’d come, he simply didn’t know how he’d crossed that tight-rope called Fei Du.

Fei Du avoided his gaze. He was completely absorbed in wiping his glasses; who knew how many hundreds of years of dust had accumulated on them. He wiped them endlessly.

Just then, Xiao Haiyang, with no sense of atmosphere, spoke: “Wait a minute. Look, guys, is that Lu Guosheng?”

His call knocked apart all the feelings floating in the air, forcing everyone’s gazes to move to the security camera footage.

Xiao Haiyang hadn’t noticed at all what the people next to him had been saying. He turned the screen excitedly—this was a recording from the revolving restaurant on the day Wei Wenchuan had invited his guest, from a camera at the door of that home cooking restaurant.

Around noon, Wei Wenchuan took a phone call as he walked out of the restaurant. He stood waiting at the door. After a moment, the elevator opened, and a man with his hat brim pulled very low walked out. His hands were stuck in his pockets. He looked all around, then indifferently nodded to Wei Wenchuan, who’d come up to receive him. He patted the teenage boy on the back and went into the restaurant with him.

The man's figure was tall and robust. He was wearing gloves. His posture as he walked was exactly the same as Lu Guosheng's when he'd been filmed that night at the Drum Tower.

Likely because he was well aware there were cameras around, even though he knew whose territory Longyun Center was, he still cautiously kept his head down. The camera couldn't catch his face head-on.

"Not having a face shot is nothing to worry about. We can get technicians to run comparisons on his height, weight, figure, and habitual movements. That can also be evidence that he's Lu Guosheng." As soon as he got excited, Xiao Haiyang's speech once again became quick. "Wei Wenchuan had contact with the murderer a long time ago, and he brought the murderer in on purpose to have a look at his target. They can't deny this. We can detain them!"

"Wait a minute." Luo Wenzhou held him down. "Don't rush. Leave this segment for now. We'll talk when we've caught Lu Guosheng alive. It won't be over if we only catch Wei Wenchuan."

There were "eyes" at the City Bureau. As soon as they alerted the enemy, Wei Zhanhong and his son were likely to end up becoming shields like Zheng Kaifeng; the critical point was to track *those people* down to their den.

Xiao Haiyang remembered the listening device in Tao Ran's bag. His expression was shaken. He didn't make a sound.

"Let's see which way he left."

Less than five minutes after Lu Guosheng followed Wei Wenchuan inside, he'd recognized his target and left. While the service workers weren't paying attention, he quickly went around the back to the

employee passage, got a card out from somewhere, swiped open the door to the passage, and left.

The employee passage was different from the ordinary passages used by guests. It opened onto a small door at the back of the building. The girl who'd copied the recordings had done it thoroughly; she hadn't left out this door. Three minutes later, Lu Guosheng appeared in range of the camera at the back door. He pulled his hat brim even lower and also put on a face mask; he was nearly fully protected.

Suddenly, Lu Guosheng lifted his head and looked in the direction of the camera. He was thoughtful for a moment, then called someone. In a small intersection on the corner, a black sedan that had started to show its head backed up into the camera's blind spot.

Lu Guosheng strode over. Then the car flashed past the camera; the camera filmed an ordinary black Buick. There was no license plate.

The people who'd been watching the video, their attention fixed and their breath suspended, simultaneously breathed out.

Luo Wenzhou had chewed the cigarette until shreds of tobacco were coming out. Tao Ran rubbed at his face. "That joker Lu Guosheng is too careful."

"You can understand it." Fei Du still hadn't raised his head. "After hiding for fifteen years, a person would be forced into some overcautious paranoia."

"The question is, what do we do now?" Tao Ran frowned, thinking. "It's been nearly two months. Even if we canvas everyone in the area, the likelihood of finding a witness isn't high."

Luo Wenzhou frowned, chewing tobacco shreds. He was silent for a while. Then he suddenly asked, "Xiao Haiyang, what are you looking at?"

“Is this a high-definition camera?” Xiao Haiyang suddenly asked, pointing at a corner of the screen. “There’s a convex reflector there.”

CHAPTER 121 - Verhovensky XXXI

The black Buick really had been positioned in the camera's blindspot; if it had gone forward a little, the camera would in fact have caught the front license plate. Lu Guosheng had evidently noticed this and immediately notified his accomplice to back up before the car could show itself, shielding the front plate. This would have been a very timely action—if there hadn't been a convex reflector at the corner.

Convex reflectors were ordinarily placed at intersections and comparatively complicated turnings to give drivers a view of cars and pedestrians turning from other directions.

The convex reflector at the corner mainly faced the intersection; in other words, the camera was aimed at a large portion of the back of its "head"; both were facing the same direction. Reasonably speaking, the camera wouldn't have caught what was reflected in the mirror, so Lu Guosheng had overlooked it.

Unfortunately, while he'd taken a thousand precautions, one had slipped through. An open window was reflecting half of the convex reflector; furthermore, the Lungyun Center's installations were all luxurious. Its surveillance system used the most expensive high-definition cameras.

When they'd enlarged that section, they could vaguely distinguish the last three digits of the license plate number.

Xiao Haiyang pushed at his glasses, wanting nothing better than to dive into the screen. "3...3, 6... I can't see what's in front of it, maybe it's 3, or maybe 8. Wait, I'll carefully analyze the recording again."

"Don't worry. A trace is enough." Luo Wenzhou fixed his gaze on Lu Guosheng in the screenshot, then stood up, picked up his phone, and dialed a number.

“Hello, Lao Qiu. Yeah, it’s me, I have a favor to ask... A little while ago some bastard scraped my significant other’s car and wasn’t caught at the time... Oh, no injuries, the car was empty at the time, otherwise wouldn’t we have known who it was? It’s actually not a big deal, the important thing is that the car’s paint is pretty expensive, it’s half a year of our wages to get it repainted... Yes, fine, please look into it for me. Don’t tell anyone else, I’d rather this little private business not get out, after all it violates discipline... A black Buick, looks pretty well-maintained, around noon on November sixth, in Beiyuan—near Beiyuan’s Longyun Center. A security camera nearby caught a flash of the end of its license plate number, 336. I have a feeling it’s likely to be a local car... All right, thank you, sorry, you’re really helping me out, I’ll bring you some packs of good cigarettes in a bit.”

He put down the phone and saw Xiao Haiyang staring at him, his glasses having slipped down again.

“What are you looking at?” Luo Wenzhou pushed at his head. “Is it heroic to fool around on your own trying to do everything instead of asking someone? Our country is the most richly endowed with population. Don’t be so confident, idiot.—When it gets light, Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang, go to the City Bureau and do what you need to. Wait to hear from me. I’m going to the main traffic police team. Fei Du, you wait for word from me, too, don’t do anything rash... Enough, stop wiping, you’re going to wear a hole in the lens.”

“I’m thinking about something,” Fei Du suddenly said in a low voice. “Lu Guosheng has been running away all these years. There isn’t much information about him, and no one did a psychological profile of him back then. So we’ve been acting on preconceptions, thinking he’s a cruel, ruthless, extremely audacious person.”

“Yes, what else would he be?” Tao Ran said.

“Fourteen years ago, Lu Guosheng revealed himself once in the police force’s line of sight—though it later came to nothing. This time, however, after killing Feng Bin, he even more carelessly let Xia Xiaonan go, and dared to openly appear in a public venue.” Fei Du put his spotless glasses back onto his nose. “Comprehensively, this person gives me the feeling of being careless, arrogant, and disdainful. It’s likely he has dissociative and manic episodes. While his IQ isn’t low, when he commits crimes, there’s an element of venting. He’s unruly, very unsettled. Simply speaking, he’s somewhat crazy. I’ve always thought he’s remained at liberty so long because someone’s been protecting him—Lu Guosheng shouldn’t be like this. He shouldn’t be this cautious, nor have such a strong sense of measures to counteract police surveillance.”

Beiyuan’s Longyun Center was Wei Zhanhong’s territory, but Wei Zhanhong truly may not have known at first what his darling son was up to. However bad Wei Senior was, he was still bad in a sensible way. His goals were clear, and he knew how to avoid risks. His methods were rather concealed. Taking out a hit on a classmate for the sake of a school “power struggle”...really was too puerile, too inconsiderate of the consequences. An adult wouldn’t have made such a ridiculous blunder. Wei Wenchuan had simply landed his father in a hole with this.

Lu Guosheng must have clearly understood this, so he evidently hadn’t treated the Longyun Center as his own territory. He’d taken precautions against everyone, including his idiotic youthful employer.

But the contradiction was, since he’d been this uneasy, why had he personally shown his face on November sixth?

Whether he’d wanted to look at the assassination target or the employer, there really was no need for Lu Guosheng to personally show himself—couldn’t he have made Wei Wenchuan give him a recording, even the surveillance footage from the restaurant’s private room?

“What do you mean?” Xiao Haiyang asked quickly. “Are you saying that may not be Lu Guosheng? No, not only is his body language exactly the same as in the video from the Drum Tower, you could also see his uneven eyes when he looked up at the camera. Such unusual eyes would be hard to mistake.”

“No...I mean, I made something of an error earlier. He may not have gone to look at Feng Bin that day. Who else was in that private room? I need a list of names.” Fei Du paused. “Especially the girls.”

“Why the girls?”

Fei Du slowly looked up. “I want to know whether he didn’t kill Xia Xiaonan because of transference.”

“Tao Ran can think of a roundabout way to get it when he goes back to the City Bureau,” Luo Wenzhou said quickly. “Though right now the most important business is to find where Lu Guosheng is hiding. As long as we catch him, we can observe him or interrogate him however we want.—This is all coming together after a long delay. We have to strike fast. Everyone listen up. First, be quick. Second, maintain secrecy. Third, look after yourselves. Fourth, be careful of your communications devices. If you can’t be certain you aren’t being overheard, take care when you speak.—Comrade Xiao Haiyang, please control your magic ‘machine gun mouth’ a little. Don’t just spit things out.”

Xiao Haiyang didn’t realize that he was making fun of him for rambling. Hearing this, he calmly explained himself. “Captain Luo, while I only scraped by in my physical stamina test, I’m not a mental deficient.”

Luo Wenzhou exhaled weakly and waved a hand. “Yeah, I’m the mental deficient. Come on!”

However large a room was, four grown men milling around in it together would make it seem crowded. But they scattered in the blink of an eye, and the room instantly became peaceful.

From the moment he'd opened his eyes in the morning, Fei Du had been tense. They'd been busy ever since. It wasn't yet light. The room was a mess. Last night's hotpot hadn't been scrubbed yet, only put to soak in the sink along with a stack of plates and bowls. Fei Du opened a window to air out the room. He wanted to clean up a little, but he didn't know where to start. He had to play his stock trick, calling someone to come over.

At this critical juncture, he really couldn't call an outsider. Fei Du had to call his own person.

This was a kindly-faced old lady surnamed Sang. Her miserable life experiences didn't show on her features. Her hometown was D City. Her husband had died young, and she'd worked hard to raise her son, had seen him grow up, get married, and have a child. There was a next generation. She'd just happily moved into a new home and was planning to enjoy old age and play with her grandchild.

But the blessings of ordinary people are frail. She happened to live in the estate belonging to Wei Zhanhong's unfortunate competitor. When the attack took place, Old Lady Sang was walking around outside pushing the baby's stroller. Her grandson, less than a year old, had been lifted by the killer and fatally thrown to the ground. Her daughter-in-law had had no one to blame and could only vent her grievance on the old lady. Her grievance had led her to get a divorce. The old lady's son couldn't stand the shock. He'd gone driving drunk and hit a roadside railing, dying as well. The price of the new home that had represented happiness had been nearly halved, but there were no discounts on home loans. The whole weight of the enormous loan had fallen on the white-haired, unsupported old lady. The bank had been afraid she would die

halfway through repaying and had requested to shorten the repayment period.

Fei Du said, “Matters aren’t pressing here. It just needs a bit of cleaning. If you have anything else to do, do it first and tell me when you’re through. Take a taxi over when you’re ready, I’ll cover your travel expenses. There’s no need to crowd onto public transportation.”

“You rarely have any use for me, President Fei,” a woman’s warm voice said over the phone. Then Old Lady Sang stammered a bit and said, “This morning, Weiwei had something for you, and it passed through my hands... I know I shouldn’t say much and ask you, but... Could I ask, are we going to catch the bad guys soon?”

Fei Du faced the open window, looking towards the distant horizon. Clear air was coming in from outside, pouring into his lungs.

“Yes,” Fei Du said gently. “We may be very close this time.”

Old Lady Sang was suddenly choked with emotion. “Fine... Fine, fine, if you need me to do anything, President Fei, have someone send word to me. You don’t need to come yourself. It’ll keep you from being implicated. I... As old as I am, I’m not afraid of anything, I’d be all right strapping on a bomb and going to die along with them...”

“That won’t happen.” Fei Du lowered his eyes. “We haven’t reached that step.”

We may...never reach that step now.

Just then, the front door suddenly opened. Luo Wenzhou had remembered something and returned, wrapped in cold. Without saying a word, he charged into the kitchen and locked the liquor cabinet—a person keeping a cat had to make sure to put leftovers in

the fridge, and a person keeping President Fei had to make sure to lock the liquor cabinet at the proper moment.

Fei Du: "..."

Not bad at all.

Luo Wenzhou put away his keys, looked at Fei Du, then suddenly, not making a sound, went over and hugged him, fiercely pressing him into his arms. Smelling his own body wash on Fei Du, a piece of his heart finally came crashing back down into his chest, and he sighed heavily in relief.

Fei Du stared blankly, hesitated a moment, then slowly raised his arms and put them on his back. "I..."

Luo Wenzhou raised a hand, interrupting him. "You're my person. If you so much as gasp for breath, you'll hear about it from me. Bear that in mind."

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him deeply, then once again ran out like the wind.

An hour later, another round of contests of strength began at the City Bureau. The parents and lawyers of the students involved all talked over each other, presenting the facts and reasoning things out, calling the police force's evidence-gathering methods into question, wanting nothing better than to turn the word "slander" into a nail and throw it into their faces, all but putting up a banner at the City Bureau's gates reading "Abuse of Public Authority, A Singular Injustice Throughout the Ages."

One of the students' parents had managed to indirectly acquire Director Lu's phone number through some connections and had

called to complain at once.

Of course Director Lu couldn't be working overtime at the City Bureau over the weekend. He was annoyed beyond his endurance and had to call Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou got out his phone, took a look, then turned off the ringtone and vibration, ignoring the incoming call from his superior.

“Though the car you described is a common model, adding in the location, the last digits of the license plate number, and requirements like being a local car and well-maintained, there's only one car that matches all of it.” Lao Qiu of the main traffic police team hadn't noticed Luo Wenzhou's movements and showed him a screenshot from footage shot by the surveillance network. “Have a look, is it this one?”

Luo Wenzhou came close and had a look. In the passenger's seat, he dimly saw a man wearing a hat with the brim pulled low and a face mask, entirely protected. He gave an involuntarily shudder on the spot. “Yeah, where did it go afterwards?”

Lao Qiu opened a map and drew a circle at a certain point. “Around this district.”

“It wouldn't be here.” Fei Du, arriving at the indicated location, issued his conclusion without even getting out of the car, only sticking his head out and taking a look.

It was already nearly noon. Luo Wenzhou had picked Fei Du up, and they'd gone together to the address Lao Qiu had found for him.

It was almost a landmark building. Its exterior was a very peculiar geometric figure; photographed from above, it looked like a honeycomb. Therefore, it was called the Beehive.

The Beehive advertised “high-end consumption.” It contained all kinds of entertainment facilities and luxury goods shops, as well as a large-scale food hall. Behind it was a golf course with a high fence protecting it. A flag with a golf ball drawn on it fluttered in the wind.

“Too showy.” Fei Du shook his head. “High-end consumption locations have all been severely investigated these last few years. The whole industry has withered up a great deal. Keeping wanted criminals in as vulnerable a place as this would really be asking for it.”

“Hiding in plain sight, perhaps?” Luo Wenzhou rolled down the window, signaling for him to look at the golf course gates, where a crowd of black Buicks was parked. “The golf course provides pick-up and drop-off service. The cars they use are exactly the same as the one that picked up Lu Guosheng.”

As he spoke, he got out a small telescope and opened up the screenshot Lao Qiu had given him.

“The one with the license plate Yan X53336 must be here.” Luo Wenzhou passed the telescope to Fei Du. “The one in the eastern corner—think of a way to get in touch with the drivers who provide the pick-up and drop-off service.”

Before Fei Du could answer, Luo Wenzhou’s phone rang again.

“Tao Ran.” Luo Wenzhou took a look, then shut off the screen, not picking up.

“Why aren’t you picking up?” Fei Du said.

“Lao Lu is making him call me,” Luo Wenzhou said. “I told him to wait to hear from me, so Tao Ran won’t just call me for no reason. I have a dozen missed calls from Lao Lu. I figure that he couldn’t get me, so he went to find Tao Ran.”

Fei Du was silent for a moment. “You suspect Director Lu?”

Luo Wenzhou paused. He didn’t answer directly. “Director Lu has been working longer than you’ve been alive. He and my shifu were friends who went through life and death together. He carries countless scars. I don’t know how many prisoners serving out life sentences or waiting for execution dream of killing him. When I’d just come to the City Bureau, I personally took part in an arrest—a recently released robber had gone to his house in the middle of the night for revenge, though luckily there was an informer who gave a warning about it ahead of time...

“Speaking of informers.” Luo Wenzhou smiled wryly. “Of the informers we have on hand, a minority have special reasons, while a majority are doing it for the payments. People who get into this profession because of special reasons and special emotions often don’t last long, while the ones who do it for money can do it for a comparatively long time. There are gambling addicts among them, alcoholics, drug takers, and those shouldering high-interest loans. They’re all pitiful people. But sometimes you still have to take precautions against them.—When Gu Zhao fell at The Louvre, I suspect it was likely at the hands of his own informers... Money’s a vulgar thing, but it gets in at every opportunity, wrecking your faith in others until there’s hardly anything left.”

Fei Du made no comment, and in five minutes made him feel the power of capital.

The Beehive’s golf course suddenly received a pick-up request. Apparently it was a parvenu from out of town showing off his wealth by inviting some guests. The customer’s requests were rude and unreasonable. He insisted on booking a driver to come pick the guests up right away. Having hit upon some divinity, the parvenu had actually borrowed a Beehive Platinum Card.

A super-VIP customer couldn't be offended. The whole fleet of black sedans at the golf course's gates was compelled to set out in full force.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

"Come on, let's eat first." Fei Du stepped on the gas pedal, driving in the direction of the Beehive's entertainment center, showing a faint smile. "All this time, and I haven't asked you out for a good meal yet."

CHAPTER 122 - Verhovensky XXXII

The man in the backseat weighed most of two-hundred jin. He took up a whole row and was speaking in a mixture of dialects that came from who knew where, wildly chatting on the phone with someone.

There were people who ordinarily didn't speak loudly but started shouting as soon as they got on the phone, always suspecting that the cell phone signal couldn't promptly transmit their voice. This fat man had plenty of breath, and his voice was clear and resonant, nearly raising the roof of the car. When he finally finished howling, the driver's ears were ringing somewhat. He couldn't resist looking at the fat customer in the rearview mirror, meeting his gaze.

The driver hastily offered a rather professional smile. "What business do you do, sir?"

"I had a mine back home before, but business has been bad these last couple years, and we shut down, but some friends of mine called me over here to get into something else." The fat man shifted around somewhat uncomfortably on the seat. He spoke Mandarin with a bit of a lisp. "This car of yours won't do. Can you drive a better one next time? Last time, we took one in, where was it...some country where they all have big, bushy beards, their hotel sent a Rolls-Royce—sitting in this one, I feel like I can't really stretch my legs out."

The driver pretended not to have understood his complaint and said deprecatingly, "The cars are all the same, company standard."

"Oh, a company car." The man's lip curled. "Not like us. When we do your kind of business, you use your own car working for the company, doing any business the company needs, and you can get private jobs, be financially responsible. You pay insurance monthly, and if you get hit, you're responsible for it."

The driver smiled politely and didn't respond.

But the customer in the back seat seemed not to be able to read people's expressions. He wouldn't let him off, sticking his head out and asking, "If you guys scrape someone's car while you're out driving, who's responsible? Do you take the loss?"

"The company pays," said the driver, cherishing words like gold.

The earthy tycoon in the backseat slapped his thigh and leaned back hard. The seat let out a creak at the burden. "Aren't they gambling with their lives, then? If it was me, if I came to a patch of broken road, I wouldn't go around, just drive right through. What's it to me if I get a flat? Normally I'd go out and get some private work, then say a customer had made an appointment. I could even get reimbursed for gas. Pure profit!"

Hearing these lines, the driver felt appreciation for the nature of domestically produced tycoons and finally couldn't resist smiling. "The company has a management system. We all drive fixed cars when we go out and get centralized repairs at fixed times. If the gas and repair expenses are too high, it'd be visible at a glance. We'd be called to account."

The man in the back seat gave an "oh." Probably he didn't sincerely want to know about a hired car's management system. He quickly started rambling pleasantly about something else, pulling idle judgements about Yan City's city planning from thin air. He'd just reached an impassioned point when, suddenly, he clutched his belly. "Oh, no. Driver, how far to the golf course?"

"About fifteen minutes."

The fat customer sucked in a breath and turned left and right. As though he were nine months pregnant with a frog, his belly gave a series of croaks, then produced an indescribable gas. The fat man

cried, “Ouch!” as he looked fretfully around. “Won’t do, I can’t take it. What did I eat... Stop the car by the road at once.”

The customer didn’t know what he’d eaten, but the driver could already smell the contents of his intestines. The corners of his forehead twitched. Not breathing, he said, “Sir, this is an overpass.”

The customer used the resonant voice he’d used on the phone to howl, “I know it’s an overpass, but you have to find a way to let me out!”

He not only said this, his belly also gurgled in agreement. The driver involuntarily held his breath. Unable to bear it any longer, he found a place to force his way off the bridge. When he’d just stopped the car by the road, the fat man in the backseat, like a biological weapon about to go off, impatiently shot out.

Fresh air flowed in through the open door. The driver felt that his lungs were about to explode. He got out of the car soon after and lit a cigarette by the road, opening the car windows to vent the air inside.

The unfortunate customer hadn’t come back yet when he finished smoking the cigarette. The driver was feeling somewhat cold and was about to turn around and get back into the car when suddenly someone patted his shoulder from behind.

Before the driver could turn his head, there was a heavy thump on his neck, and his eyes went dark. He didn’t know anything more.

When his consciousness returned, he found that he’d been blindfolded. Before he’d fully awakened, an extremely pitiable scream came out of nowhere, passing through his ears. The driver gave a start and felt that all his limbs were tightly bound and his mouth was taped shut. He couldn’t resist starting to struggle.

Someone stepped on his back. “Settle down!”

The driver sucked in a breath. This person perhaps had practice; he stuck a foot into the hollow of the driver's lower back, and it hurt so badly that half his body went numb. His face rubbed against the ice-cold ground. He didn't know where he was now; the tip of his nose moved slightly, and he smelled a scent of blood that was difficult to ignore. A layer of cold sweat rose on his back.

But soon after, following his initial panic, the driver calmed down, struggling to curl himself into a ball and adjust his breathing—he knew there was a GPS chip on him. He was “old staff,” having worked at the place for two or three years. The company couldn't simply abandon him...

He picked people up and drove them back each day. He knew too much.

Then he heard another man's voice. This voice sounded very pleasant, with a trace of careless indolence. There seemed to be a smile in it. He unhurriedly instructed, “This person is only an underling. Beating him to death won't be any use. Don't hit him anymore.—See if there are any other devices on him.”

“There was one in the pocket of his uniform, one on the bottom of his left shoe, one each on his phone and walkie-talkie, and one on his belt buckle. While we used a blocking device driving over, we still dealt with them all for the sake of security.” This was a familiar voice. It was the fat man who'd pretended to be a customer!

This time, there was no trace of an accent in his voice. He was entirely a Yan City native!

With all the hidden tracking devices located, the driver's heart sank.

Someone roughly tore away the tape over his mouth. The fat man said, “On the sixth of November, the car you were driving today

picked someone up in Beiyuan. You said that you're responsible for your particular cars, so the driver that day must have been you?"

"No-November?" the driver stuttered, then deprecatingly said, "It's been nearly two months, who'd...who'd still remember that? Dage, don't you think there's been some misunderstanding here?"

A hand deftly snatched up the nameplate on his shirt. The pleasant-sounding voice read out his name: "Sun Xin."

"Yeah, that's...that's me." The driver struggled to raise his head in the direction of the voice, showing a fawning smile. "Tell me your instructions."

"I know your wife works as a caddy at the Beehive's golf course. She's pretty good-looking. We have nothing against her. We're not planning to do anything to a young lady. But you have to cooperate."

"Try me, I'll cooperate, I'll cooperate with anything!"

"Midday on November sixth, you drove today's car to Beiyuan's Longyun Center and picked someone up. This person was around forty, male, hiding his face and wearing gloves, cross-eyed—"

"Uh, well..." All kinds of thoughts went through the driver's mind, but he dragged out his voice, seeming slow to react. "I...I'm thinking about it, cross-eyed..."

But the other side wasn't having this. The pleasant-sounding voice said, "I see he isn't very well-behaved. Dislocate his shoulder."

"Wait..."

The driver had just spat out one word when the rest suddenly turned into a scream. His shoulder had been neatly dislocated and hurt so much he nearly passed out. His other arm was grabbed, too.

“Wait...a minute...”

“Wait a minute,” said the person whose words had just proved deadly. “Lao Lu, who told you to actually dislocate it?”

The driver’s whole body was covered in cold sweat. He trembled involuntarily, lying on the ground gasping for breath, feeling he was about to lose control of his bladder. Then he heard the person go on in a leisurely way: “You can still put it back when it’s dislocated. It’s a pain. Look, just chop off the other arm, it’ll make sure he knows to be afraid.”

“That was one of the company’s employees!” the driver cried out, unable to endure this.

Everything went quiet. Even the constant screams stopped.

“He’s...he’s with our company, he said he had business at the Longyun Center, and asked, asked me whether I could take him.” The driver swallowed hard, his eyes rolling constantly under the blindfold.

The fat man’s hand was still on his shoulder. The tip of a knife was under his chin. “One of your company’s employees? What’s his name? What does he do?”

“He’s called Lu Lin,” the driver said in a trembling voice. “He’s, he’s an electrician... What do you guys want him for? Do...do you have some kind of grudge against him?”

These people’s style was too barbaric. They didn’t seem like the police.

As long as they weren’t police, he could say anything.

His dislocated shoulder hurt so much he was half-dead, but the driver relaxed slightly.

He knew that there were dangerous individuals among the people he came into contact with regularly. It was normal that they would have enemies, and that if they weren't careful going out, one of their enemies would get eyes on them. When they encountered these things, the higher-ups asked them to be tight-lipped, but if their lives were truly in danger and they couldn't cover up anymore, they could give up whoever it was whose business had stirred up the problem, only they shouldn't say too much.

The person who'd said he wanted to cut off his arm seemed to lean forward slightly. Almost in a whisper, he said, "Lu Lin—did you know that his real name is Lu Guosheng? He's killed before, more than once. Do you hang out with that kind of person?"

"I...I didn't know. Brothers...no, bosses, no matter what he did before, it has nothing to do with me. We're, we're just ordinary coworkers, I don't even know where he comes from originally, how could I know what he'd done before?" The small knife travelled over his neck, passing by his face. The driver felt his nose itch and knew that the blade was too sharp; it had scraped off a bit of his skin and eyebrow. He didn't dare to move a muscle. "I...I have his phone number. How, how about I help you arrange to meet him? Don't, don't kill me..."

"You don't know his true identity." This time, another voice put in a word. It seemed to be the person who'd kicked him at the very beginning. "Does he know your true identity?"

First the driver was surprised. Then he froze.

"Your papers say you're called Sun Xin, but in fact it's a false name and false papers. Your real name is Sun Jiaying, from G Province. You have a criminal record for committing fraud. You have an old mother

at home, and a wife and child. The whole family thinks you're in Yan City working hard to earn money, doing your best. They don't know what business you do, and they don't know that you've hooked up with a little girl around twenty and tell people that she's your wife. Right?"

This time, the driver's face at last altered. His ashen lips shook ceaselessly. Fingers snapped at his ear. An ice-cold phone pressed close. A hesitant childish voice came over it: "Papa?"

Hearing that voice, the driver struggled wildly, but a hand covered in a handkerchief covered his mouth.

The child's breathing remained on the speaker, and there also seemed to be an accented woman's voice, calling "Jiaying."

The child said, "Why isn't Papa talking? I miss Papa..."

The phone was suddenly taken away. The person whose voice had always been low and soft gave someone an order: "Small children have delicate skin. Try letting out a little blood."

Faced with a coffin, the driver at last shed tears, wetting the blindfold over his eyes. The hand holding him had loosened at some point. As he cried, he crawled towards the source of the voice like a worm. The top of his head knocked against something. He didn't care, following the voice to rub against the pant leg of the person in charge, scraping the ground with his head. "Don't...don't..."

A soft-soled leather shoe gently pushed his head aside and stepped on his face, rubbing it against the ground. "Don't what, Mr. Sun? I hear the darling isn't in very good health? A congenital heart disease, isn't it? A true pity for a parent's heart. Listen to me, this child won't grow to adulthood. Give up now. Letting him go on ahead and reincarnate is also a kind of merit."

Sun Jiaxing hopelessly lay on the floor—he'd only been tricked into evil ways in the first place because he'd wanted to make some more money to pay for the child's treatment.

Unfortunately, his luck had been bad. Before he could make the money, his den had been raided by the police. It had all been frost on top of snow. If he was locked up, even if it wasn't for long, it would be hard for him to find proper work when he got out. And meanwhile the child needed surgery at once, and no matter what, he couldn't get enough money for the life-saving operation. But just then, someone had gone through his lawyer to tell him that they'd sent the money to his home. As long as after he got out he did some work for them that required being tight-lipped, they'd give him a new identity, and no one would know he had a record.

He clearly knew that pie didn't drop out of the sky and that these people definitely had bad intentions, but his family's safety was in their hands. He didn't dare to be disloyal. He knew he was running a risk and might be dragged into something one day.

In order to deceive outsiders, he'd found a fake wife to use as a shield, so even if he was dragged in, it wouldn't fall on his true family... They'd even sworn up and down to him that his fake identity was rock solid; unless the police came to investigate, no one would be able to find a weak point.

But why...why...

“I'll tell you, I'll tell you everything.—Lu Lin...Lu Guosheng booked my car a day in advance. He said he wanted to go to the Longyun Center to see a client. When those people want to go anywhere, they have to set it up with the company first, so the company can make arrangements for them to be dropped off and picked up, but he...he didn't go through the higher-ups, he contacted me privately.”

“He used your car privately?”

“Yeah. Officially he’s an ‘electrician’ at the company. He has an employee card, that’s how he’s described to outsiders. Whenever he goes out, he first has to go to the Beehive. When he wants to use a car, he has to apply for it, and he has to pass through the Beehive on the way back... This way, if someone gets their eye on him outside, or if he stirs up some trouble and someone follows him, at most they’ll only get to the Beehive. They won’t find where he lives... He comes and goes often, we get on pretty well, and we gradually struck up a friendship. He often asks me to privately drive him places...to, to get some air or something.”

In other words, the Beehive was a firewall.

The Louvre had likely been one of the dens where *they* had kept the wanted criminals, but there’d been a leak, and they’d nearly been tracked down by Gu Zhao. Perhaps their memory was long; they later used the Beehive, a place very like The Louvre, as a front. If someone else investigated, they’d only be able to find this layer. If there was anything stirring, there’d be enough time for them to move!

“Where does Lu Guosheng live?”

“I don’t know.” The driver noticed that the questioner didn’t seem satisfied with this answer and made to walk away. He quickly used his body to block the person, desperately saying, “I really don’t know, it’s a secret, we don’t dare to ask about these things. I beg you, don’t touch my wife and child...”

Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du exchanged a look in the dark, ice-cold basement. Fei Du patted the fat man on the shoulder, and the two of them went out one after the other.

“It’s lucky we didn’t rashly charge into the Beehive.” Luo Wenzhou let out a heavy breath. The location of the interrogation had been Fei Du’s terrifying basement. Even the air inside it was oppressive. He

paused, then said, “I’ve violated more than one regulation this time. If we can’t catch them, this won’t end with one or two self-examinations. If I really can’t continue in my career, I may end up having to rely on selling my body for a living. What do you think, lord? Will my looks do?”

Fei Du very cooperatively looked him up and down. That look was like the tongue of a large feline, licking over the clothes on his body with a layer of barbs, turning them to garlic skin. Luo Wenzhou couldn’t quite take it and raised a hand to block his gaze. “Hey, I’m not selling yet, behave yourself.”

Fei Du laughed and was about to say something when his phone suddenly rang. He picked up, listened to only two sentences, and his expression altered.

“President Fei, the management at the Beehive is too strict. They’re always tracking their drivers’ locations. They seem to have noticed when the tracking devices on that person we caught suddenly lost contact.”

Fei Du said gravely, “Got it. Be careful. You guys leave.”

After noon, the City Bureau was more bustling than a produce market.

Director Lu’s few remaining hairs became increasingly scarce. He called Tao Ran into his office. Smacking his desk, he howled at him, “Not one of you pays attention to organization or discipline. Tao Ran, tell me the truth... What is that joker Luo Wenzhou up to? Why won’t he pick up his phone?”

Tao Ran’s hair was a bird’s nest from rolling around on the narrow bed in the study. His face was full of innocent blankness. “I don’t know. He’s not picking up my calls, either.”

“Making such a big shambles and then losing contact...” Before Director Lu had finished speaking, a tearful shout came from outside.

“Why are you holding my son? Who gave you the right? I’m reporting you for violating a citizen’s personal rights!”

“What did my daughter do? Do you have an explanation now? Listen, even if something happened to that girl, it must have been a boy who did it, right? What does it have to do with us?”

“Where’s your superior? I want to talk to your superior. What are you supposed to be? Do you know who I am...”

Director Lu took a deep breath, glaring fiercely at Tao Ran. He strode over and went out, kicked open the door of the little conference room that had temporarily been given over to the parents to make their disturbance. He smacked the door heavily. “This is a public security bureau. We called you in to be investigated. What are you shouting about?!”

The conference room went quiet.

The expression of the man who had just been yelling the loudest relaxed. Observing Director Lu’s body language and expression, he could just about guess his identity. He immediately became polite. “And you would be...”

Director Lu looked him over. He could hear that this had been the individual shouting, “What are you supposed to be?” He directly ignored him, grabbed Tao Ran’s shoulder, and tossed him like a chick into the crowd of parents glaring like tigers. “This is the deputy-captain of our Criminal Investigation Team. He’s responsible. If there are any problems, take it up with him. Anyone who makes a scene again, you’ll all be dealt with as jeopardizing public safety!”

Tao Ran: “...”

Just then, the security camera in the corner of the conference room, covered in dust for ten thousand years, suddenly moved slightly, circling the room full of babbling people, at last falling on Wei Zhanhong in the corner.

The phone in Wei Zhanhong's pocket vibrated. Without turning a hair, he got it out to take a look. Then his expression changed slightly, and he pressed a few times to answer—

CHAPTER 123 - Verhovensky XXXIII

Fei Du stood in the basement's narrow stairwell. This place made him feel rather unhappy, but it was still within the bounds of endurance, so he didn't disclose it. He only frowned, pondering for a moment. "That driver just said that Lu Guosheng often used his car privately. So was going to the Longyun Center before also a private operation? Minor figures like them, while they have tracking devices on them, wouldn't normally be looked after very strictly. After all, they're the ones with nowhere else to go. They're the ones who need the 'organization' to shelter them.—But why did they react so promptly when he was only delayed slightly today? Do *those people* know that we're on Lu Guosheng's tracks?"

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a long time, his heart starting to sink, suspecting that this time they would receive another corpse, leaving them without any evidence.

Just then, his phone made a sound, receiving a message from Xiao Haiyang—

Xiao Haiyang was sitting in a corner of the conference room at the City Bureau, euphemistically as "police force reception personnel," actually as a voice machine repeating "we have rules" every three sentences, listening to neither the good nor the bad, getting a crowd of irate parents so angry their faces turned red and their necks swelled. If they hadn't had scruples about this being the City Bureau, they would have come to blows long ago.

But in fact Little Glasses only had one true assignment: keeping a close watch on Wei Zhanhong.

In the instant Wei Zhanhong picked up his phone and his expression suddenly changed, Xiao Haiyang instinctively felt something was wrong. He didn't think about it carefully. He came to a rapid decision,

putting his hand in the desk and turning on a miniature signal blocking device.

The instant Wei Zhanhong pressed “send”, his phone signal was suddenly interrupted, and the message got stuck, anxiously looped around, then displayed that it had failed to send.

Wei Zhanhong’s expression grew grave. He subconsciously looked all around, but there was nothing unusual in any direction. There were only impatient parents surrounding the hard-pressed young person in charge.—Oh, there was also a four-eyed little police officer in the corner.—Wei Zhanhong looked at Xiao Haiyang, not taking him seriously.

Like a kid who’d mistakenly put on a grown-up’s clothes and had just shown up to buy soy sauce, Little Glasses was sitting there cautiously holding his notebook, giving off an air of inept schoolboy clumsiness.

Wei Zhanhong felt he was being paranoid. It was normal for the signal to be bad inside a building. He took a deep breath, focused, and calmly went out the door of the conference room.

Upon seeing this, the duty officer at the door blocked him. “Where are you going, sir? Could we help...”

“I’m just going to the bathroom,” Wei Zhanhong interrupted him with a fake smile. “What, are you worried I’ll run? You’re holding my son here, where am I going to go? Or are you saying that now we’re here, we even need someone to accompany us to the toilet? Then I advise you to simply get out your handcuffs and arrest us.”

He deliberately raised his voice for the last sentence. Many of the surrounding parents heard it and at once became even more enraged.

While the duty officer stared, Wei Zhanhong drew back his fake smile, coldly looked askance at him, and strode over to the bathroom

at the other end of the hall.

The City Bureau's corridor was narrow, and the windows were hard to open. It had an oppressive look. Wei Zhanhong felt that the sealed doors and windows kept both the light and the signal outside. With a grave expression, he walked into the bathroom holding his phone, looking all around. Only when he approached a window did a weak signal appear.

Wei Zhanhong hastily pressed close to the window and was about to try sending again when, suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark figure reflected in the glass. Wei Zhanhong was startled and swiftly twisted his head. Unexpectedly, someone heavily chopped at the other side of his neck with the side of their hand—

Xiao Haiyang, holding a garbage can over his head: "..."

Lang Qiao, who'd just knocked Wei Zhanhong unconscious with one chop: "..."

Lang Qiao came around first, opening her already large cow's eyes wide and lowering her voice, asking, "Xiao Haiyang, what are you doing?"

The signal blocking device was one of the toys Luo Wenzhou had given him before leaving. When Xiao Haiyang had turned it on, it had just been subconscious behavior. Then, watching Wei Zhanhong hastily leave the conference room, purposefully going somewhere with no people around, he'd determined that perhaps he really did want to contact his accomplices.

Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du weren't there, and Tao Ran was tied up. Xiao Haiyang was alone and unsupported. He'd panicked and lost track of consequences—seeing that Wei Zhanhong seemed to have found a signal, Xiao Haiyang had picked up a metal trash can, wanting to knock him out on the spot.

But before he'd had time to determine the right place to strike and a suitable angle, Lang Qiao had popped out of nowhere and knocked Wei Zhanhong down.

"What are you doing?" Xiao Haiyang blurted out in response. "This is a men's bathroom!"

Lang Qiao: "..."

Lang Qiao, in accordance with Tao Ran's request, had just questioned some of the students from Wei Wenchuan's class to find out who had gone to Wei Wenchuan's birthday party. She'd been about to report to Tao Ran when she saw Xiao Haiyang going into the bathroom.

Xiao Haiyang's movements had been too tense and overbearing, as though he were about to carry out a vendetta against someone. Lang Qiao had thought it was very strange and couldn't resist running the risk of taking a needle to the eye, peeking in as she passed by. She'd glimpsed the scene of him raising the trash can, about to bring it down on someone's head.

The two of them looked at each other helplessly for a moment, then looked down together at the unconscious Wei Zhanhong.

Lang Qiao whispered, "Isn't this that little bastard's father?"

Xiao Haiyang had no attention to spare for her. Before the screen could lock, he hastily picked up Wei Zhanhong's phone.

He saw a message from an unlisted number: "There was a rat at the young master's birthday party. When and where was it?"

The message Wei Zhanhong had failed to send at the critical moment was: "11/6, Longyun Center."

Xiao Haiyang's thoughts instantly whirled, his brain almost overloading—

Judging from Wei Zhanhong's response, "the young master" must mean Wei Wenchuan, but what did "there was a rat" mean?

Was Lu Guosheng the rat?

If so, then from this manner of speaking, however you thought about it... Wei Zhanhong and the others hadn't known before about Lu Guosheng and Wei Wenchuan meeting privately at the Longyun Center!

Yes, he thought, that made sense.

When Lu Guosheng had taken care to cover up his tracks that day and told his accomplice to avoid the security camera, he hadn't been worried about the police—the cameras at the Longyun Center weren't part of the surveillance network. It was Wei Zhanhong's territory. How could Wei Zhanhong obediently hand the footage over to the police? He would be much more likely to erase it right away.

If he'd been worried about the police, he could have contacted Wei Zhanhong to cover up for him. So it was likely that, for some reason, Lu Guosheng had gone out privately to see some person and hadn't wanted the organization to know. He'd found an accomplice to pick him up. Wei Zhanhong would have recognized the accomplice's car. While Wei wouldn't have gone around looking through security camera footage for fun, for the sake of caution, Lu Guosheng still hadn't left behind the license plate number.

What "measures to counteract police surveillance"?—After all this time, it turned out they'd just been flattering themselves.

But...

The beginning of November hadn't been just yesterday, and they hadn't known up to now that Lu Guosheng had had private contact with Wei Wenchuan. So why did they know now, at this critical juncture?

Xiao Haiyang subconsciously bit his lip until it bled.

The wanted criminal Lu Guosheng's photograph and identity hadn't been made public. The police had only, at the very outset of investigating Feng Bin's murder, given the children who'd run away with Feng Bin a photograph to look at.

But apart from the victim Feng Bin, the other children like Wang Xiao and Zhang Yifan hadn't qualified to receive Wei Wenchuan's invitation, so they hadn't been at the Longyun Center that day. Now, however, those who had gone to the Longyun Center before the crime had occurred were basically all at the City Bureau waiting to be interrogated, and the police force's focus was on the schoolyard bullying; they hadn't asked them about Lu Guosheng.

In other words, unless Wei Wenchuan had gone blabbing to the whole world that he was acquainted with a wanted criminal who was guilty of heinous crimes, the only person who, by coincidence, could connect that birthday party to Feng Bin's murder was Wang Xiao.

Fei Du and Xiao Haiyang had only accidentally hit on this piece of information yesterday afternoon. From yesterday to today, if no one had been overheard or accidentally revealed the secret, then only the four of them should know.

So where had the slip-up been?

Did the other side already know everything? Then would they toss out Lu Guosheng's body like a gecko's tail, once again breaking off a limb to save themselves, leaving them without any evidence?

For a time Xiao Haiyang's mind was in a tangle; the more anxious he got, the less he could smooth out his thoughts.

Just then, Lang Qiao looked over at the page on the cell phone. "Birthday party? Wei Wenchuan's birthday party? So that's where it was."

Xiao Haiyang turned and looked at her in astonishment.

"Tao Ran just sent me to deal with that crowd of troubled young people and ask them who'd gone to Wei Wenchuan's birthday party," Lang Qiao said. "I just finished asking them and was going over to tell him."

Xiao Haiyang stared. After a moment, he thought of something, and his pupils contracted. "Where did you ask them? How did you ask?"

"An interrogation room, Room 203," Lang Qiao said. "I just...casually brought it up when I was finishing up questioning each one.—Deputy Tao didn't tell me why he wanted to know."

"You asked each of them?" Xiao Haiyang asked urgently. "Did you mention the time and place? Did the students who answered you mention them?"

"I asked all of them except Wei Wenchuan." Lang Qiao stuck her chin out towards the contents of the message on the phone's screen. "No one mentioned the time and place. I just saw that here.—What is going on?"

Xiao Haiyang sucked in a breath. So that was where the slip-up was!

If one among the four of them had slipped up, or if, a little more definitely, yesterday evening, someone had come along after he and Fei Du had left, gone to Wang Xiao's house, and learned this information from her, then the time and place, as well as the fact of

Lu Guosheng's appearance, would have been obvious; they wouldn't need to ask Wei Zhanhong!

So it was Lang Qiao's brainless question that had attracted suspicion; someone had been listening in on her interrogation!

Xiao Haiyang's heart beat wildly; his mind was blank for three seconds. Then he bit down fiercely on his tongue and pulled himself together—no, it wasn't time to panic. The other side had only heard Lang Qiao asking about an irrelevant birthday party and gotten suspicious. They didn't seem to know the truth about Lu Guosheng and Wei Wenchuan's private contact; the words "there was a rat" may have been used in general to mean "there was a leak," or "there was something unusual."

He mentally recited "calm down" at himself three times. Then, holding up Wei Zhanhong's phone, he carefully deleted the words "Longyun Center," hesitated, and changed the address to "Fengqi Center."

The Fengqi Center was in Nancheng. It was also Wei Zhanhong's property. It and the Longyun Center⁸, one in the north and one in the south, drew a large diagonal line between them, representing the dragon and the phoenix bringing prosperity. Xiao Haiyang hadn't been able to sleep the night before and had searched online for information about Wei Zhanhong; these were some details he remembered.

At this time, Xiao Haiyang didn't know that the sudden disappearance of the Beehive's driver had touched a tense nerve on the other side. He just wanted to get out some false information, since it was better than nothing. Though the other side could find out by investigating that Wei Wenchuan hadn't gone to the Fengqi Center, at least it could mislead them for a while.

At any rate, they could only hope that Luo Wenzhou would act fast enough.

Seeing the message display as successfully sent, Xiao Haiyang sighed. Then he got out his own phone and sent Luo Wenzhou a message: “On 11/6, Wei Wenchuan invited some schoolmates to the Fengqi Center to eat.”

If Luo Wenzhou received this message, he should be able to deduce a great deal information from it. If his phone had been bugged, the other side wouldn't see anything the matter with this.

Lang Qiao was bewildered. “Are you in contact with the boss? What's going on there? Where did the boss go today?”

Xiao Haiyang looked at her and didn't answer. After he'd sent the message, he put away Wei Zhanhong's phone and was planning to push him into a stall. But while Wei looked bony, he wasn't actually light. Tossed around by Xiao Haiyang like this, he seemed to be waking up; fortunately, Lang Qiao came up and gave him another blow.

Xiao Haiyang looked at her with a complicated expression. “You don't know anything. Why are you helping me?”

“If I didn't help you,” Lang Qiao said, “could you manage it?”

Xiao Haiyang: “...”

Lang Qiao rolled her eyes at him, snorted, and thought, “Good-for-nothing.”

Then she bent down and grabbed Wei Zhanhong's legs, carried him into a stall along with Xiao Haiyang, then tied him up.

“If you don’t want to tell me about it, then forget it.” This wasn’t Lang Qiao’s first day at work. She knew that some investigations may have to be kept secret for a certain period of time and within a certain scope, though she was very unhappy to have been left out. She pointed to Xiao Haiyang. “Of course I trust a colleague I’ve worked with before more than I trust a suspect. But if you’ve made me trust the wrong person, then you’d better watch out. I’ll kill you.”

Then she walked out of the men’s bathroom, looked around at the door, determined that no one was watching her, and was planning to slip away.

“Hey,” Xiao Haiyang suddenly called to stop her. “Room 203... I think that last time when Captain Luo questioned Zhou Huaijin, it was in there. Speak carefully when you use that room.”

The scene where the driver Sun Jiaying had been abducted had been cleaned up. Fei Du’s people opened all the car’s doors and abandoned it under the overpass. The driver’s uniform, and the tracking devices that had been on him, were all neatly arranged inside, and there was also a printed “letter of resignation” lying on them, as though he’d run away himself.

Not long after they’d retreated, another group of people arrived. A few men got out of a car and carefully examined Sun Jiaying’s black Buick.

Suddenly, one of them held down his earpiece. “The Fengqi Center? Copy.”

Saying so, he quickly opened something on his phone, then shook his head a moment later, saying to the person speaking over the earpiece, “Sun Xin doesn’t seem to have gone to Nancheng recently. There’s a letter of resignation in the car. He may have run off himself. Should we continue investigating his whereabouts? ...OK, got it. Yes, sir. We’ll come back.”

The man wearing the earpiece waved a hand, and the people around him left together in well-trained fashion, driving the cast-off black sedan away with them.

Fei Du looked at Luo Wenzhou's phone, frowning. "What does the good Xiao xiong mean?"

Luo Wenzhou gazed fixedly at the message Xiao Haiyang had sent him for a while. "I don't know. Not enough information, I can't judge... So where is Lu Guosheng hiding? Hurry up. We can try our luck somewhere. At any rate, we have to fight on."

"The place is definitely connected to the Beehive," Fei Du said quickly, "but it can't be nearby. They're so rich, they must have many hideouts. They couldn't be making do with one hole on a mountaintop."

Luo Wenzhou followed his line of thought at once. "So there must be some form of transportation going from the Beehive to the place where Lu Guosheng is hiding."

"But that transportation isn't the cars used for customers," Fei Du said. "If that driver Sun wasn't lying just now, they go to the Beehive from the place they're concealed, then go from the Beehive to other places. There are two threads, and there must be secrecy between them. Otherwise there's no point to the firewall. The drivers of the customer cars don't know where the hiding place is."

Giving each person a car would be too luxurious, and it was unrealistic; it would add a great deal to the possibility of a leak.

And wanted criminals who didn't even dare to leave their fingerprints behind couldn't be spending all day openly riding around on public transportation, so...

“What did the driver say just now? Lu Guosheng’s false name is Lu Lin, and his false identity is an electrician at the Beehive—right?” Fei Du suddenly stood up straight. “An employee... Could it be an employee bus?”

Luo Wenzhou stared.

Fei Du didn’t wait for him to answer. He got out his phone and dialed a number. “It’s me. Are there any of you guys still left in the Beehive... There, I knew you wouldn’t listen to me and obediently withdraw.—Then could you please do me a favor and sneak in to get the routes of the Beehive’s employee buses?”

At the same time, at Nencheng’s Fengqi Center, some stern-faced people barged into the security camera room. Seeing people from the head office, the manager didn’t dare to ask for an explanation, only stood to one side, silent as a cicada in winter.

“We want the security camera footage for November sixth.—Which private room was Wei Wenchuan using then?”

“Wei, Wei Wenchuan?” As he hastily got people to help investigate the footage, the manager sent someone to look into the expense records for the private rooms.

“Hurry!”

A confused secretary, forehead covered in sweat, charged over. “Manager, Young Mr. Wei hasn’t been here recently.”

The manager said angrily, “I didn’t tell you to search recently, I told you to search last month...”

“November sixth,” the secretary said quietly. “I searched from October sixth to December. He wasn’t here.”

The manager's eyes sparked. He was about to say something, but the man who'd come to search through the security camera footage looked concerned and strode out.

A complete map of the routes of the employee buses arrived on Fei Du's phone. "I've got it. Leave—"

CHAPTER 124 - Verhovensky XXXIV

“There are four employee bus routes altogether. They must have been planned by a professional organization, taking into account efficiency, cost, and the times of day when the employees change shifts, very reasonably, all the stops on the way located in comparatively densely-peopled areas. You know our country’s ‘neighborhood culture’—it would be hard to hide in places like these. But there are three ring routes here, and one that goes one way.” Fei Du paused slightly. “The ring routes can pick up and drop off people at any stop along the way. Only the one-way route has a terminus.”

Luo Wenzhou fixe his gaze on him. “So?”

“This one-way route runs east to west. It drops off night-shift workers in the morning, going from the Beehive to the science park. It leaves at ten and arrives at the science park at twelve. In the afternoon, it sets out at two from the science park and arrives at the Beehive at four. There’s a two-hour interval in between. An employee bus needs a parking lot and a rest stop...”

“I understand what you mean,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted him, “but this is empty speculation.”

“I have a basis. Two bases,” Fei Du said. “First, the back half of this one-way route follows the same direction as the extension to the number 10 subway line planned last year. Their functions will basically overlap. One of the bus stops is less than two-hundred meters from a 10 subway stop. If I were managing this, I’d either get rid of the whole route, or cut off the back half and turn in into a feeder shuttle for employees coming in by subway. A superfluous bus route uses up a lot of management resources and cost.”

“Perhaps the Beehive is especially comfortable with its wealth and doesn’t care about that bit of money. Perhaps the managers are lazy

in doing their jobs and don't react in a timely manner. That's all possible." Luo Wenzhou was accustomed to being a team captain; as soon as it came to business, especially when time was very tight, his manner would be intense. Having said this much in one breath, he remembered that this was Fei Du, not one of his grunts. He hastily softened his voice slightly. "If you could be sure that Lu Guosheng needed to use public transport to get from where he was hiding to the Beehive, then I would agree with your judgement that this route is more suspect than the ring-routes, but the problem is, how can you be sure? Why couldn't it be a delivery truck, or a minibus specially set aside for these people?"

Fei Du became silent. He was a person with "excellent packaging": if you didn't give him a good shake and compel him, it was very hard to tell what was inside. But in this instant, Luo Wenzhou suddenly felt that a heavy shadow seemed to flicker over his eyes.

Luo Wenzhou said, "You..."

"Because I heard something." Saying so, Fei Du looked up at the stairwell's ceiling. The suspended ceiling was of superior make, in the shape of a coiled dragon about to eat someone. After all these years, it was still in perfect condition, its evil menacing. "In this place.

"That day that I found the details of the Picture Album Project in the basement. I was just wondering what it was when I heard Fei Chengyu coming in, talking on the phone." Fei Du's voice was very calm, almost without undulation.

He didn't say that he couldn't enter the basement without Fei Chengyu's permission—even though he'd had a little desk there to observe the punishments. He'd had a colorful marble in his pocket that a schoolmate had given him. He'd dropped it, and it had rolled down the stairs, knocking on the door of the basement. He couldn't let Fei Chengyu see it, so he'd hurriedly chased after and found that the basement door hadn't been closed.

A boy around ten years old has budding self-awareness and exuberant curiosity, and a natural spark of rebellion.

So without getting Fei Chengyu's permission, he'd gone inside and seen something he shouldn't have seen. He'd been about to run out in a panic when he'd heard Fei Chengyu's voice.

“If I recall correctly, what he said then was, ‘Set up some houses for them at the terminus. I didn't give you money to build doghouses, but do we really need to treat a stack of blunt old iron like holy weapons? If they won't live there, tell them to beat it. There are policemen waiting to distinguish themselves by catching them. If someone slips up and reveals his whereabouts again, then the people living with him will be buried with the dead.’”

When Fei Du was relating Fei Chengyu's words, his tone and his body language were both subtly different from normal. Luo Wenzhou almost had the impression that he was involuntarily imitating that man. He faintly felt that something was off—the Picture Album Project had taken place twelve or thirteen years ago; what grade had Fei Du been in then?

How deep of an impression did there have to be, how many times had it had to be recalled, for him to be able to remember these words from his youth so accurately? But wasting even a second would be fatal now. There was no time to make him recall past events.

Luo Wenzhou could only hurriedly say, “The terminus. You're sure you heard right, remembered right?”

“Yes.” Fei Du's gaze looking back at him was confident and tranquil. “I've thought over many times what ‘the terminus’ could mean. When I heard the driver just now, I realized that an employee bus has a terminus.”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for two seconds. Then he came to a rapid decision. “Come on!”

Meanwhile, the enemies’ lines of sight were still trained on Nancheng.

The manager of the Fengqi Center was all at sea. He trotted along after the person investigating the security camera footage. “What is going on here?”

As soon as he spoke, the fretful man in front of him turned and grabbed the manager’s collar. “Go investigate all the food and beverage businesses under your headquarters’ banner!”

The manager was just over a meter seventy, not remotely tall and robust. He was almost lifted off his feet and involuntarily dragged along. “No... Everything under headquarters’ banner... Dage, that has to be requested from headquarters’ big boss, how could I have the seniority to investigate?”

The person clenched his teeth, tossed him aside, and picked up his phone. “Listen to me, things aren’t going well with Wei Zhanhong. I’m afraid he’s under someone’s control. There’s nothing here at the Fengqi Center. Someone’s playing tricks on us.—Starting now, no matter what you have to do, whether it’s a blanket search or going over to the school to investigate, I need to know where he was that day, and what happened!”

Things were not merely not going well with Wei Zhanhong; his dignity had simply been disgraced. Xiao Haiyang, not daring to leave, had feigned having constipation and stayed in the bathroom.

But Lang Qiao, after she’d gone far off, was still contemplating Xiao Haiyang’s words.—She understood what Xiao Haiyang had meant; her words in Interrogation Room 203 had been overheard and leaked out. It was very normal for someone to be listening in on an

interrogation, especially when the people being questioned were critical figures in some case. The person in charge or some other colleague could come into the observation room any time to monitor the progress.

Lang Qiao's steps paused. She grabbed the railing and went up to the third floor observation room.

The observation room was in an innermost room. There was a camera on a window outside that would capture anyone passing through. It was the weekend; compared to the turbulent second floor, this place was peaceful. Lang Qiao subconsciously looked all around, then darted into the observation room and went through the record of the camera on the outside window.

Who would it be?

It was the dead of winter and a Sunday. No one without business would come into work. The officers on duty and the Criminal Investigation Team were all so busy they were falling over; they had no attention to spare... Lang Qiao quickly went through the whole recording and frowned in surprise—no one there.

All afternoon, the third floor had been still. No one had gone by!

Lang Qiao whispered, "What the hell..."

At this time, Fei Du's people arrived at the science park ahead of him.

The driver Sun Jiaying was tied up and left in the basement. Fei Du found a couple of people to keep an eye on him, then went over, bringing along the very resourceful fat man called Lao Lu. On the way, Lao Lu received a phone call. A moment later, he said to Fei Du, "President Fei, the guys have gone through all the places to park a car and fill up on gas within a five-kilometer radius of the neighborhood. About two kilometers from the science park's west gate, there's an

unfinished ecological park that stopped construction halfway through. There's a ready-made parking lot next to it, and a very small privately operated gas station."

"Privately operated gas station?" Luo Wenzhou said.

"Yeah. There are some urban villages around. The villagers ordinarily use some trucks to haul goods. They don't normally go far. A privately operated gas station is cheaper than those other ones," Lao Lu said. He smiled rather overcautiously towards Luo Wenzhou. The overly polite smile didn't manage to look sincere; he seemed to be forcing down his vigilance towards a strange police officer for Fei Du's sake. He was still dressed up like a parvenu, but when he wasn't pretending to be an idiot, his shrewd, reserved, even somewhat violent inner quality was revealed. It gave the gold chains and fur-lined jacket he was wearing more weight. "I had them leave a drone to take aerial photographs to keep an eye on it."

"Luo Wenzhou. I'm from the City Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team." Luo Wenzhou had noticed his faint guardedness and voluntarily opened a conversation. "What should I call you?"

The fat man who'd been so voluble in front of the driver Sun Jiaying nodded civilly and answered, cherishing words like gold, "Pleasure to meet you. I'm Lu Jia.⁹"

Luo Wenzhou observed his expression and body language and didn't say anything else. He went to his phone and stealthily linked up to the intranet, looking up the name "Lu Jia." He suddenly paused—in the 327 case, for the last victim, the one killed most brutally, the name recorded for the person who'd come to identify the body was "Lu Jia." His relationship to the victim was "brother."

Just then, something moved on the aerial image near the gas station and the unfinished ecological park.

It wasn't time for the employee bus to approach. The parking lot was empty, and the gas station was deserted. While construction on the "ecological park" had been abandoned halfway through, the little houses that looked like employee dormitories that had been built against the mountain seemed to be in use year-round. There were clothes hanging at some of the gates, and in a yard some men were playing mahjong in a rather leisurely manner.

A burly man came out of the backyard, holding a box of food. As he passed by, the people playing mahjong in the yard tensed, turning silent as cicadas in winter.

The man carrying the box of food didn't so much as look at them. He went straight towards the east face. The drone hurriedly changed its angle to follow, zooming in. A little door opened. It was black inside. There was a basement!

The camera lens wasn't quite clear enough, but it caught the man's profile; you could faintly see a fearsome scar on his face, running through half of it. One of his eyes was blind.

Luo Wenzhou's back went ramrod straight.

"What's wrong?" said Lu Jia.

Luo Wenzhou said, "That person looks like a burglar who was put on the wanted list a few years ago. He's blind in one eye because the male owner of one of the houses he invaded fought back and injured him with a vegetable knife. There were eyewitnesses, physical evidence, and security camera footage, but he evaporated off the face of the earth. There was a big fuss about it. If I recall correctly, the head of the sub-bureau in the district where the work of the investigation was concentrated was relieved of duty. They gave him a nickname, called him One-Eye. He's delivering food. Who's being held in the basement?"

Lu Jia clenched his teeth gently, speaking deliberately: “Lu Guosheng.”

Lu Guosheng had lost his mind and privately killed someone for a half-grown child—and it was one thing to kill someone; he’d also slipped up.

Now everyone was paying close attention to the police force’s movements. As soon as the police investigation got too close, they could immediately kill Lu Guosheng in an appropriate manner and give the body to the police to close the case with.

Lu Jia’s phone vibrated. He picked up and listened for a moment. “President Fei, Weiwei at the Longyun Center says she saw the manager take a few people charging into the security camera room.”

“Tell Weiwei to leave at once.” Fei Du stepped on the gas pedal. The car accelerated to 180 kilometers per hour. The little gas station was visible up ahead. “Send someone to pick her up.”

Lu Jia said, “President Fei, do we act?”

Luo Wenzhou said, “No, wait.”

“We can’t wait,” Lu Jia said heavily. “Officer Luo, are you planning to call for backup? Are you sure it’s backup you’ll be calling, and not someone who’s going to report to the other side?”

Luo Wenzhou held down the fat man’s shoulder. Without him appearing to move, Lu Jia’s phone appeared in his hand.

Lu Jia said, “You...”

Luo Wenzhou held him back with one hand and quickly dialed a number on his phone. “Hey, Dad, it’s me—”

In the Longyun Center, the calm-faced girl leaned against the wall in a corner, listening to the noisy steps nearby. She took a few deep breaths. After they'd gone past, she cautiously darted into the employee passage and quickly slipped out by the back door. The Longyun Center's manager trotted along, puffing as he said, "Young Master Wei really was here that day. He invited a bunch of kids, and they partied until afternoon. They used the Hidden Dragon in the Sky private room."

"I want to know who was in the room that day."

The manager personally went up and quickly searched through the security camera records for that day. He started fast-forwarding when Wei Wenchuan and his assembled friends arrived and continued until all the students had gone away together and the service workers delivering dishes had also left. Occasionally one of the half-grown children left to go to the bathroom; no one else went near the private room.

There was a breath caught in the manager's chest. He only knew that these people came from headquarters. He didn't know what they wanted. He asked hesitantly, "Did President Wei send you to investigate? Does he suspect the young master has picked up some bad friends? These...these all look like kids. Many of them are wearing school uniforms. I don't think there's anything here?"

The person investigating the security camera footage ignored him, frowning heavily.

Nothing?

If there was nothing there, why had the police asked about it? Why would they purposefully mislead them?

“Don’t fast-forward. Once again from the top. You guys—search the footage from the other cameras.”

At this time, Tao Ran had finally escaped from the crazed parents and was receiving a lecture in Director Lu’s office. His phone suddenly rang. It was Luo Wenzhou, once more contacting him after vanishing for half the day.

Tao Ran let out a long breath. “Hey, Captain Luo... Yes, I’m with Director Lu.”

As soon as he said “Captain Luo”, Lu Youliang raised his head.

He saw Tao Ran’s expression suddenly alter. His pitch even went up. “What? You’re sure?”

The sub-bureau nearest to the west science park swiftly received orders. The criminal police officers on duty requested additional weapons and hurried towards the scene. At the same time, several police cars charged out of the City Bureau’s back gate.

Meanwhile, the “investigator” wrangling over security camera footage in the Longyun Center received a mysterious phone call. He only heard two sentences, and his expression changed. He squeezed a few words out from between his teeth. “Impossible... It’s—not—possible! How could they have found it? There’s been nothing unusual at the... Beehive...”

At this point, he suddenly remembered the Beehive’s driver who’d mysterious disappeared at this critical juncture. His pupils contracted.

Just then, his subordinate said, “Wait a minute, something’s wrong. Ten minutes have been cut out between 12:05 and 12:15. It doesn’t link up.”

“Fuck!”

CHAPTER 125 - Verhovensky XXXV

Tao Ran was excellent at implementation, and very amiable; he got along well with friends and colleagues; he'd always rather take a hit himself to make sure everyone else was comfortable. He could work hard and run around himself, even risk his own life when necessary, but as soon as his responsibilities exceeded what he believed himself capable of shouldering—for example, if some decision of his could impact many people—he'd be unusually hesitant from not knowing how to balance the considerations.

He could take charge on his own, but he couldn't take charge when many people were involved, because in critical circumstances, his first reaction was always to solicit other people's views.

Lu Youliang had some understanding of this junior whom he'd watched grow up; only he hadn't expected that after being Luo Wenzhou's deputy this long, Tao Ran wouldn't have made any progress in this respect—when Luo Wenzhou wasn't here, Tao Ran turned his gaze on Director Lu.

Director Lu at once found the public security sub-bureau in the science park's development zone and had them go on ahead. Then he put down the phone and looked up to ask Tao Ran, "Where is Luo Wenzhou? What's he been up to today? And what's going on now?"

Tao Ran stood there like a wooden post, looking at him in blank helplessness for a moment; then, as though waking from a dream, he got out his phone. "Oh, wait, please. I'll ask him."

Though Lu Youliang was normally rather lenient towards his juniors, he still angry enough to start steaming at the ears. "Tao Ran! What's with your attitude today? Luo Wenzhou has slinked off, and you're at a complete loss. Do the two of you still want your jobs?!"

Since the crowd of parents, like a conference of ducks, had called Director Lu over in the morning, Tao Ran hadn't ceased to listen to scoldings. Perhaps he was now numb from listening. He lowered his head, like a dead pig that doesn't fear scalding water, and asked, "Director Lu, who should I report to now?"

Lu Youliang: "..."

Reasonably speaking, this work shouldn't fall on Director Lu personally, but Luo Wenzhou's whereabouts were unknown, it was the weekend, and this was an emergency. Others were too far off to help, and Tao Ran couldn't be depended on. He looked all around, found that there was no one he could use, and had to grab his jacket and drape it over himself, waving a hand towards Tao Ran. "Come with me."

In the instant Lu Youliang turned his back, the vacant confusion on Tao Ran's face receded like the tide. He squeezed his eyes shut, didn't argue, and strode out to follow Lu Youliang.

In the Longyun Center, everyone watched the man who'd come to investigate, silent with fear. The man's expression was twisted with rage; then, in the blink of an eye, he regained his calm and directed a look at the bodyguard-looking people behind him.

His subordinates understood at once. They cleared the security camera room of the manager and the security guards.

With a grave face, the mysterious investigator, whose title at Wei Zhanhong's company was "special consultant," picked up his phone and dialed a number. The dial tones stretched out like the cuts of a lingchi¹⁰. After three full rings, the phone was picked up. Perhaps it was his mistaken impression, but the other side's voice seemed to sound unusually gloomy and hoarse.

“Hello, Science Ecological Park Management, who are you looking for?”

“One-Eye.” The investigator let out a long breath and said quietly, “The Beehive has been ‘blown away’ by the wind. You’re going to have a ‘change of weather’ soon. Clean up all the ‘garbage,’ and find a place to hide.”

One-Eye gently sucked in a breath, seeming scared by the sudden news. He paused, then, lowering his voice, said, “What...should I do with the ‘garbage?’”

“‘Clean up,’ don’t you understand? Cut it, chop it, set it on fire—whatever you like.”

One-Eye was silent for two seconds. “Then what about us?”

The investigator paused, then quickly said, “We’ve already arranged for someone to pick you guys up. When you’ve finished doing what you need to do, contact the ‘sheepdog.’ He’ll arrange it. Relax, don’t run around.”

The person on the phone gave an affirmative and hung up. The investigator immediately dialed another number. Before the other side could answer, he directly ordered, “Base 13 has been exposed. Destroy it as soon as you hear the signal.”

At 2:00 pm, to the west of the western science park, there was a sudden enormous sound in the abandoned unfinished ecological park. The whole row of quite carefully constructed dormitory buildings and their yards rose to the heavens. The commotion was so large that it disturbed the villagers in the natural village three kilometers away.

Only now did the penetrating sounds of police sirens arise. The first wave of police from the sub-bureau was just arriving!

The head of the sub-bureau's Criminal Investigation Team had personally gone out to lead his people after getting the order, nearly turning the police car into a rocket. But even if they'd been on a multi-stage rocket that had reached escape velocity, they still couldn't have outrun a powerful electromagnetic signal.

Even if the science park's sub-bureau had been next door to the scene, how could they have travelled faster than information over the phone?

At the moment they'd received the order, it had already been too late.

The flames rose to the sky; the late-coming police officers looked at each other in blank dismay. Their leader tasted bitterness. He turned swiftly and roared, "What are you all staring for?! Get someone to put it out!"

Less than a kilometer away from them, at the little gas station that acted as a reception area, a man dressed like an ordinary worker put away a miniature telescope. He didn't approach. He wrapped a simple and unadorned down jacket over his uniform and very casually left the gas station, mixing into the crowd of villagers who had heard the sound and come to mill around; he very earnestly whispered along with everyone else for a while, then left.—Each "base" where the wanted criminals were kept had a "sheepdog," who ordinarily looked after the criminals's needs and made sure they didn't stir up trouble. As soon as something went wrong, he would turn into a dog that would kill a sick sheep.

The words "clean-up completed" left his fingertips, sorrowfully rose from the smoke and dust, and passed through the great net that had nearly been exposed to the bright light of day by the hurricane, scattering and reaching the ears of all those concerned.

In the security camera room of the Longyun Center, the investigator received word, put down his phone, and sighed gently, his gaze falling on his subordinates investigating the security camera records. “What have you found at the other locations?”

“Look, sir, this is camera number 26—filming the back door of the employee passage.”

The investigator went over and saw Lu Guosheng calling the black sedan that had come to pick him up, making it back up out of the camera’s range. That black sedan was one of the Beehive’s customer cars.

The investigator frowned, rather uncomprehending. “Lu Guosheng? Why? What was he doing here?”

A wanted criminal who had hidden himself for fifteen years had suddenly turned up at some brat’s birthday part, and even left behind security camera footage of himself?

Was this something a primate of ordinary intelligence would do?

The investigator’s brow furrowed tightly for a moment. Then a bloody smile crossed his lips—so that was it. The cops were magical enough to follow this bit of a lead all the way to the Beehive.

But while this was dangerous, luckily their information had come fast enough; they’d been prepared.

Until the cut footage could be restored, there was for the moment no way to judge what was on it. But even if it had caught Lu Guosheng dancing cheek-to-cheek with that whelp Wei Wenchuan, what did it matter? He was dead now, leaving no evidence behind. And even if the small child had for some reason come into contact with him, how could he know that he was a wanted criminal? The kid probably hadn’t even been born when Lu Guosheng had committed his crimes.

The investigator waved a hand. His subordinates took away the security camera footage waiting to be restored and followed him in well-trained fashion, calmly walking out. But as soon as they arrived in the lobby, they were stopped by a crowd of police charging in.

“There have been mass reports that the Longyun Center high-grade consumption facility has been involved in pornography and drugs. Without exception, all relevant personnel must remain here and await investigation. Search!”

At the same time, the “sheepdog” from the gas station went along a desolate and poorly-maintained road for about a kilometer. Then, as he expected, he saw an accomplice’s car waiting to receive him. He pulled open the passenger’s side door and sat down inside, saying to the driver, “Let’s go.”

The driver didn’t move. He sat there like a jiangshi, staring straight ahead, his teeth chattering slightly.

The “sheepdog” froze, then instinctively went on the alert, the hair on the back of his neck bristling. He immediately went to open the door—but the door was already locked. The muzzle of a handgun slowly rose and lightly pressed against his temple. He heard an almost sloppy-sounding man say, “Where are you going?”

The “sheepdog” looked up and, in the rearview mirror, saw the person in the backseat. There was some unshaven stubble on his chin. He dangled a set of handcuffs in one hand with a light clank. Then he blew a whistle. “Hello, sheepdog. I’m a police dog. We’re both working dogs. If you behave, I won’t bite you. How about we drive down to the public security bureau together in peace and harmony?”

Half an hour earlier—

While all the Longyun Center's security camera footage from November sixth was being reviewed on fast-forward, Fei Du detoured around the gas station at the last moment and approached the ecological park from the other direction. At the same time, Luo Wenzhou sent someone a screenshot showing One-Eye and quietly said to the person on the line, "That's the one. I saw them preparing explosive materials and suspect that someone is using this abandoned ecological park for 'terrorist' activities."

Dumbstruck, Lu Jia accepted the phone Luo Wenzhou returned to him. "Explosives? Terrorist activities?"

"Explosives are possible," Fei Du said. "As soon as they're exposed, they'll move if they can, and if they can't move, they need a mechanism for dealing with things urgently. Comparatively speaking, a bomb can be controlled remotely to a certain extent. It's a good choice."

"Really? Thank you for your good wishes. I hope you're right, because I've gone through my dad to cheat the armed police into coming over, and if there isn't anything here but a few rats, the old man will skin me." Luo Wenzhou laughed heartlessly. Then he became serious again. "They've already gotten to the Longyun Center. As soon as they see Lu Guosheng's traces, they'll likely kill him to make sure he doesn't talk. I'm not waiting for backup to get here. I'm going in."

Lu Jia said at once, "I'm going, too!"

This time, Luo Wenzhou didn't request, in his capacity as a police officer, that unconcerned personnel to keep out of it. He only said, "If Lu Guosheng is alive, he can go to court. That's the only way the injustice done to your brother has a chance of being righted. Otherwise, at most you'll be one more person sitting in jail, which will be completely useless. Do you understand?"

With his identity unexpectedly revealed, Lu Jia froze.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him deeply. “We sneak into the village. No guns.—President Fei, could I trouble you to provide external support?”

“My performance fee is very high.” Fei Du gave each of them a specially made wireless communication device and knocked on the steering wheel, half-jokingly saying, “If one day there’s no one to pay my fee, then I’ll have no choice but to go out and be a ‘street cleaner’ myself.”

Luo Wenzhou clicked his tongue, very unsatisfied with his roundabout means of expression. Taking no care whatsoever to evade the onlooker, he reached into the front seat, brushed Fei Du’s chin, and pinched his earlobe. “Got it. You love me. I’ll be careful.”

One-Eye went into the basement carrying the box of food. In the damp, dark little room, there was a man chained up in a corner. It was Lu Guosheng, who in these few days had already lost so much weight that he was looking skeletal.

“Eat.” One-Eye tossed the box of food at Lu Guosheng’s feet as though feeding a dog. The box opened as it fell, some unfortunate-looking vegetable leaves spilling out. One-Eye looked at him mockingly with his single eye. “You’re like a stray dog. Hurry up and eat. This may be your last meal.”

Lu Guosheng gave him a gloomy look and didn’t move.

“The food isn’t poisoned,” One-Eye said. “I heard that idiot last time died of poisoning. If you die of poisoning, too, it’ll be too much of a coincidence. I figure they’ll deal with you some other way—though I haven’t received the notice yet, so you can relax for now.”

Lu Guosheng hesitated a moment. Then he was convinced by this logic and shifted over with a clank, picking up the box of food.

“The way I see it,” One-Eye continued sarcastically, “if you really had nothing better to do—it’s one thing to get involved in another major case, but you’ve messed around all this time and cooked up this ridiculous business.—How much money did that little whelp give you that you were willing to work for him? Even I think it’s beneath your dignity, simply...”

Before he could finish, the lights in the basement suddenly flickered and went out.

One-Eye stopped, then heard Lu Guosheng speak for the first time out of the darkness: “Power’s been cut.”

Ever since the organization had found out through secret channels that the police force’s investigation into Feng Bin’s death was concerned with Lu Guosheng, the rotten apple Lu Guosheng had been shut up in here. He hadn’t seen the light of day for quite a few days. His voice was as hoarse as glass scraping over rusted metal; it made you break out in gooseflesh to hear it.

One-Eye gave a fierce start. “Shut up!”

He hastily got his phone out of his pocket—it was an old-model dumb phone, a kind that had been off the market for a long time.

There wasn’t a single bar of service!

Lu Guosheng began to laugh quietly.

The laughter was about to make One-Eye piss himself. He went towards the sound and kicked him, then ran quickly out of the basement, looking all around... The hastily swung door bounced off a small rock that had rolled over and didn’t close shut.

With the power and the signal cut off in the ecological park, a disturbance arose among the initially peaceful houses. Quite a few people came out to investigate; there were over twenty of them!

Lu Jia glanced all around, sweating as he watched Luo Wenzhou, with the boldness that comes of skillful execution, charge directly into the little dark room through the remaining crack in the door. A moment later, he heard Luo Wenzhou's voice over the specially made communication device, which wasn't affected by the signal blocker. "I've found Lu Guosheng. The fucker's still alive!"

Lu Jia had no time to celebrate; he heard footsteps approaching. One-Eye had reacted!

In the basement, by the faint light, Luo Wenzhou displayed the burglary techniques he'd practiced for over a decade, deftly prying open the shackles on Lu Guosheng's hands and feet, lifting Lu Guosheng, whom he'd knocked out, and carrying him out over his shoulder.

At the same time, the returning One-Eye saw that the door of the basement hadn't shut firmly. He instantly tensed. He quietly turned and approached the door, raising his hand to get out the switchblade at his waist.

The next instant, a very faint sound of someone walking came from the basement. One-Eye's face was savage. As the footsteps approached the door, he raised the knife—

CHAPTER 126 - Verhovensky XXXVI

One-Eye's forceful knife had yet to flash out when he was suddenly hooked around the neck by an unexpected arm. One-Eye turned his hand and stabbed in great alarm; as the person behind him was forced to turn to avoid it, he waved a stick and hit the side of his neck. At the same time, his arm, not moving aside, met the criminal's knife. The blade let out a faint clang as it swept over the fat arm—there was a metal shield buckled onto it!

Having no time to sigh about how base his opponent was, One-Eye lost his opportunity to resist; the stick, which was the thickness of a wrist, chopped accurately at his artery; the next instant, his hand went weak, and he knew nothing more.

Luo Wenzhou had just come out of the little dark room carrying someone over his shoulder and hadn't yet had time to adjust to the change in light when he saw a flash of cold light, and a switchblade fell onto the dirt. He looked up in astonishment and met Lu Jia's dark gaze. The fat man threw the unconscious One-Eye aside.

“He's not dead.” Lu Jia fixed his gaze on Lu Guosheng for a moment, then with difficulty tore his bloody gaze away from the murderer. “I understand human speech.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “...your skills aren't bad.”

“My dream when I was little was to join the special forces.” Lu Jia looked down at the quivering fat on his body and, smiling wryly, said, “Long story.”

Just then, Fei Du's voice came out of their earpieces, somewhat blurred from the effect of the jammer. He said, “I'll take you two out for drinks tonight, and you can talk about childhood dreams then. Right now, take note of the yard gate at your right side front, two

doors down, about fifty meters away. They're assembling to go on patrol."

Luo Wenzhou swore quietly, indicating with an expression for Lu Jia to pick up One-Eye. "Shouldn't they first go check the power distribution or the master valve at a time like this?"

"Oh, they may not be as well-behaved as you.—It's not dark yet, not the period when electricity use is highest. These rats who have been stewing in the sewers for I don't know how many years will first react by becoming psychologically stressed... My aerial photographs are on a bit of a delay. I see they're already doing a headcount, so they'll notice that one-eyed gentleman's absence soon." No matter what, Fei Du's voice always sounded somewhat careless. He paused slightly, then asked, "What time counts as setting a record for the adult fifty-meter dash?"

Carrying a rather tall and robust Lu Guosheng over his shoulder actually didn't impact Luo Wenzhou's movements at all. With a few steps to run up, he propped himself with one hand and jumped over a low wall. Lu Jia followed close behind, not lagging at all; he really was a battle-ready, nimble fat man, rather in the style of *Kung-Fu Panda's* "Dragon Warrior."

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and gave him a look, found that he didn't need to look after this joker, and immediately ran on ahead, casually joking with Fei Du. "Anyway, a contestant like you, who'd need a minute to climb over, isn't setting any records."

Lu Jia: "..."

He was feeling as though he didn't exist.

The two of them rushed on. When they'd charged out of the little enclosure, some people forced their way into the yard with the dark little room. Seeing the door to the dungeon open, they swept a

flashlight over it like a search lantern and immediately found that Lu Guosheng was gone. A number of men with good reflexes exchanged looks, then crossed the low wall one by one, quickly carrying out a search of the little yards. Just then, by unlucky coincidence, One-Eye woke up!

The murdering thief didn't act rashly; he kept still, hanging there like a dead dog, pretending to be unconscious. Then he calmly began struggling out of the bindings on his hands—Lu Jia hadn't tied them at all firmly in his hurry. A moment later, he managed to struggle free. One-Eye carefully cooperated with the jostling of Lu Jia's movements, keeping his hands behind his back and pulling them into his sleeves. The blade hidden in a pocket inside his cuff slid into his palm. Then he began to fight, fiercely slashing the blade at Lu Jia's neck.

The instant he gained momentum, Lu Jia noticed something was wrong and instinctively tossed aside the person on his shoulder.

One-Eye fell to the ground. Before he was standing firmly, he threw himself right at Lu Jia, the small weapon slashing through the air, making a weak, sharp noise. Lu Jia stuck out the stick at his waist, blocking the blade with a clang.

One-Eye shook out his aching hand. Gritting his teeth, he said, "You aren't the police. Who are you guys? What are you... Shit!"

Before he could finish delivering his lines, someone suddenly kicked him in the back.

One-Eye felt all his organs shake for a moment, groaning from the breath caught in his chest, knocking his head against Lu Jia's short stick. Lu Jia took the opportunity to catch his neck with the stick, squeezing and pulling him aside.

One-Eye struggled briefly before ceasing all activities once again. Before he lost consciousness, he heard the person who'd attacked him from behind saying shamelessly, "Sorry, I am the police."

But with this delay, the fastest pursuers had already gone around the enclosing wall and seen them.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Can you carry two people?"

Lu Jia could fight and run; carrying two people's weight naturally wasn't worth thinking about. But hearing these words, he paused slightly. "You..."

"If you can't carry them, then drag them as you run. It won't kill these two." Saying so, Luo Wenzhou tossed Lu Guosheng to Lu Jia. "Remember, sir, if he dies, everything we've done goes down the drain."

Lu Jia subconsciously reached out to catch the unconscious Lu Guosheng. All the muscles hidden under his fat tensed. He felt like a stone about to split open.

He stared fixedly at Luo Wenzhou with his eyes that were crowded almost to the point of being invisible. "You aren't worried I'll embezzle the goods?"

"Don't dawdle!" said Luo Wenzhou.

Not saying a word, Lu Jia ran off, dragging the two of them.

He'd dreamed of joining the special forces since he was little; he'd been obsessed with military matters, collected every issue of Small Arms for five years. But his older brother had thought that being a soldier was bitter, tiring, and dangerous, with no future in it. He'd wanted him to study more. His brother had been thirteen years older than him. Their parents had been ill when he was little, and later

they'd both died. As far back as he remembered, he'd been raised by his big brother.

His brother had started driving trucks very young in order to make a living. He'd had a fairly high income by the standards of the time, but he'd remained a bachelor, because he'd wanted to make more money so Lu Jia could attend a good school without any worries and get into a good career.

But his young little brother couldn't understand his earnest intentions. Compromising, he'd tested into a middling, ordinary university, and spent all day at a boxing hall near the school, unwilling to study seriously. Boxing halls weren't popular then, and they weren't regularly managed. The place had just been renovated with very crude materials. He'd breathed in poisonous gas during strenuous exercise and fallen seriously ill, left school and spent two years in the hospital, becoming a heavy burden on his big brother.

His treatment had used a great quantity of medicine containing hormones; while blowing him up like a balloon, it had also consumed all the family resources. For his sake, his brother had had to desperately scrape for money; he'd never complained.

But fifteen years ago, he'd been left behind forever on National Road 327, dying without an intact corpse.

And the murderer he dreamed of hacking to pieces was now entirely unconscious, being dragged by him.

Lu Jia felt his mind go blank. He could only run, following Fei Du's directions over his earpiece. Each time he remembered that he was holding Lu Guosheng, he felt as though he were stepping on the blade of a knife. At some point he'd started crying, his cheeks streaming with tears. Worried that that gang's accomplices would be around, he didn't dare to give vent loudly. He could only open his

mouth wide, letting out a silent cry, all his veins standing out as he endured a wrenching desire to kill.

Luo Wenzhou, covering the retreat, looked rather grave. There were quite a few familiar faces among the crowd of people charging towards him. Whether they'd killed someone or stolen money before, after over a decade of hiding, they'd all become the same kind of person—desperate criminals.

Luo Wenzhou touched his phone. Fei Du's heart seemed to beat in unison with his—he said at once, “The whole ecological park is within range of the aerial photography. At present there aren't any unrelated people approaching.”

“Got it,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “I'm a practiced hand at brawls, but I'm not very excited about bombs. If I really do turn into popcorn, what will you do?”

“Pour on some butter and eat you while watching the next American blockbuster,” Fei Du said heartlessly. But where Luo Wenzhou couldn't see, he drove the car into a very concealed spot where he could see that gas station—sheltering a group of wanted criminals here, there'd have to be someone to watch them. Since the person watching them wasn't in the ecological park, he had to be at the gas station. This place was a certain distance from the ecological park. Cutting off the signal was the same as temporarily cutting off their link.

Fei Du looked out from a miniature telescope, looking over the few idle workers at the gas station. He quietly said, “Don't worry, I'm keeping an eye out. If anyone acts suspiciously, I'd rather kill the wrong one than let them go.—Should I get someone to assist you?”

“No, backup will be here soon, I can handle this for a while.” Luo Wenzhou heard the danger in his tone and hastily said, “Tell your people not to show themselves. You, too!”

He'd just spoken when the two people in the lead came up. Luo Wenzhou knocked one over empty-handed. The other one had a big stick that he brought down on him from directly overhead. Luo Wenzhou crouched, pulled out a set of handcuffs, and used them like nunchucks, smashing them over the hand holding the weapon.

“P-police! He’s police!”

“Fuck, where’d a cop come from?”

“Hurry... Damn it, how come there’s still no signal?”

These people dreaded the sight of the police like mice feared cats. It was instinct to be terrified at the sound of a cat’s cry, but it didn’t mean that the mice couldn’t tear a cat apart if there were enough of them.

“What are you shouting for? Is seeing a police officer novel enough to get so excited about? Bumpkins.” Luo Wenzhou took a breath and stroked his chin with the paw holding the handcuffs. He smiled. “I really don’t understand. How is shutting yourself up here all day any different from sitting in prison? If you’re sitting in prison, at least there are people to protect your legal rights. What are you doing here? Waiting to get paid to die for someone?”

His words were sensible and sincere, but his attitude wasn’t very endearing. It very quickly drew an enraged attack from all sides.

Interestingly, Luo Wenzhou found that while he was worried about alerting their accomplices, they also seemed to be restraining themselves to avoid attracting his accomplices—after all, when the police went out, they rarely fought alone. The wanted criminals wanted to kill him to silent him and escape as quickly as possible, while Luo Wenzhou wanted to delay them. With the tacit understanding that they would remain silent, the two sides began to fight.

Fei Du ignored Luo Wenzhou's bragging. He picked up another communications system. "It's me. Approach the northwest corner of the ecological park. Thirty meters from the dormitory buildings are Lao Lu and my friend. Someone go assist..."

Before he'd finished, he heard Luo Wenzhou curse in exasperation. Fei Du looked up at once. "What's the matter?"

Luo Wenzhou blocked a spade with his shoulder, stumbling. He instantly felt a sense of crisis and subconsciously rolled away; a layer of dirt was blown off the ground.

"Fuck. Someone's sniping with a silencer," Luo Wenzhou said quickly. "I didn't see clearly whether it was an airgun or..."

Before he'd finished, there was a whizzing sound behind him. Luo Wenzhou didn't have time for careful observation. He threw himself forward rather desperately, ducking behind a little cart carrying mud, pushing the cart forward to block an oncoming flying axehead.

Fei Du's gaze cooled. Turning to his own people on the other channel, he said unyieldingly, "Move faster. Apart from Lu Guosheng, it doesn't matter whether the rest are dead or alive."

Luo Wenzhou said in great alarm, "Fei Du, you prick, no!"

Just then, Lu Jia's panting voice suddenly cut in. "President Fei, someone's coming!"

Fei Du twisted his earpiece at once.

They didn't come with very great fanfare, moving extremely fast and noiselessly, coming over from the great wilderness at the ecological park's back gate, extremely covert. The aerial photography couldn't cover everything, and it was on a slight delay. By the time Lu Jia

found them, it was too late to hide. He ran out of the ecological park and met them head on. On his earpiece, everything was silent aside from the banging of Luo Wenzhou's fight. A few gun muzzles raised as though in precaution, locking on him.

Lu Jia looked them over for a moment, slowly let go of Lu Guosheng and One-Eye, and raised his hands. "I'm the one who reported the case. My friend is inside."

The armed police had arrived at last.

Because Luo Wenzhou had advised them beforehand that there might be explosives in the ecological park and that the other side might have eyes in the area, the armed police had approached the ecological park from the west. That area was wild and deserted, with only one security camera in an orchard, already spoiled by the suddenly cut power. Within a minute, they had the scene under control.

With backup arriving, Luo Wenzhou withdrew immediately, exercising his recently wounded flesh. He spat out an overworked breath and, leaning against a wall, slid down to the ground and lit a cigarette.—He really was physically exhausted, and even more mentally exhausted.

With the armed police arriving on time, Fei Du's "hand," holding the fatal knife, had already silently retreated into the shadows. Luo Wenzhou's communication device was silent for a time. Before he'd finished smoking his cigarette, the armed police had already gathered up the twenty-some-odd wanted criminals like a bolt of lightning. At the same time, coming and going like the wind, they silently searched through their settlement.

"You must be our comrade from Public Security?" An armed policeman came over to say hello. "There really is a bomb down there. You said they may have accomplices. Are there concrete leads?"

Will it be dangerous to simply remove the bomb now?—Right, have you notified your superiors? When are your people coming over?”

Luo Wenzhou paused faintly.

Reasonably speaking, those people had already locked on the Longyun Center. They should have been able to find the segment showing Lu Guosheng meeting Wei Wenchuan in the revolving restaurant’s main hall at once. It would only have been proper for them to have reacted immediately. Even though they’d blocked the whole district’s cell phone signal, temporarily removing the danger of a bomb being remote-activated by a phone, the other side should have done something in response; why had there been no movement?

Was it taking them so long to investigate the security camera records?

Just then, Fei Du, who hadn’t spoken in a long time, said, “I don’t know. I didn’t have anyone tamper with the security camera records at the Longyun Center. It would have been too dangerous compared to simply taking them.—But...do you remember that mysterious radio program?”

Thoughts quickly turned through Luo Wenzhou’s mind. He leapt off the ground. “Everyone withdraw. Let’s hide. I have an idea—”

When the armed police had arrived, Fei Du had quietly removed the block on the signal in the area. Luo Wenzhou used his own phone to call Tao Ran, in the end deliberately ordering, “This is too urgent. I don’t know how to deal with it. Go inform the old leadership.”

He bit down heavily on the word “old.” Tao Ran had read Lao Yang’s testament over and over; he immediately understood his implication. And just after the police received the news, One-Eye’s phone, unreasonably but not unexpectedly, rang. One-Eye, was startled awake by a half a bottle of water being poured over him, then,

trembling, took one call and made another under the eyes of a circle of armed police. While the aftermath of the explosion was still going on, the “sheepdog” was caught red-handed, preparing to make a clean break.

At this point, the slippery stronghold had finally been entirely pulled up by the roots, while the fact that there was a mole in the City Bureau had been indisputably brought into public view.

Luo Wenzhou, escorting the “sheepdog,” appeared in front of a crowd of confused colleagues from the sub-bureau. Bearing a bruise on his cheekbone, he smiled at the bewildered criminal policemen. “There’s a gang of guys from the ‘pornography eradication’ department at the Longyun Center in Beiyuan who just stopped a crowd of suspicious individuals suspected of being connected to this case. Could I trouble you to help me deal with them?”

CHAPTER 127 - Verhovensky XXXVII

It was quite a way to go from the City Bureau to the science development zone in the western suburbs; if they'd met up with weekend city traffic on the shopping holiday of Christmas and New Year's, Tao Ran, already filled with an indescribable flame of impatience, would have been filled with a nuclear fusion process of impatience.

When news of the explosion arrived, Tao Ran nearly crushed his phone; his colleague driving the car jerked the steering wheel, nearly ramming into the innocent curb.

Hearing this, Director Lu's eyebrows nearly flew off his face. "What's going on?"

Tao Ran had no attention to spare to answer, because in a moment, countless wild questions crowded onto his phone and radio like a wasps' nest. His mind buzzed in chaos.

Had they failed again?

After Gu Zhao and Yang Zhengfeng, after Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao, was there another group of bodies waiting for them?

But before he could straighten out the threads of his thoughts, word came again from the sub-bureau's personnel who had arrived on the scene ahead of them.

"What? You've caught them?" This time Tao Ran was genuinely bewildered, without any exaggeration; the water in his left brain fixed with the flour in his right brain, turning into paste. Deputy-Captain Tao felt that while he could still be said to be in his prime, he was already in danger of early balding. His tongue tied itself into

knots, and he almost started talking nonsense. “You’ve caught who? Didn’t... Are they arrested, or are they blown up?”

As all the City Bureau’s personnel experienced more emotional ups and downs than if they were playing the stock market, Lu Guosheng and all his co-conspirators were rounded up, and the Beehive and all the businesses under the Wei family banner were seized.

Luo Wenzhou returned to the City Bureau, handed over the complete security camera records, and very conscientiously retrieved two stacks of draft paper, ready to give one each to himself and to Xiao Haiyang, who had locked up Wei Zhanhong in a bathroom without permission, so they could write self-examinations.—While he was dividing up the paper, he discovered that he didn’t have enough, because Lang Qiao had also been involved in knocking out Wei Zhanhong. Numerous male compatriots expressed deep unease about her conduct of charging into a men’s bathroom without so much as a by-your-leave and strongly requested that she examine her conscience concerning this.

Because of the dishonest means of gathering the evidence, all the technicians had to return, shivering, to their posts on this day in the dead of winter to work overtime, trying to restore the altered security camera footage.

At the same time, it was confirmed that the suspicious individual arrested at the Longyun Center was a specially-contracted “consultant” with Wei Zhanhong’s company; he had a seven-figure yearly salary but no concrete duties in the company; his position was in name only. In short, Wei Zhanhong and his son, the mysterious consultant, the senior management of the Wei Clan, the legal representative of the Beehive entity and its senior management, and so on, were all detained.

Because the armed police had been dispatched, the severity of the whole business had risen steeply, changing in a flash from a

disproportionately emphasized social hot topic of virtue and ethics into a grave question of public safety.

The whole City Bureau was lit up. The bulletin being prepared for public distribution went through fourteen drafts without being released; the gates were piled high with media waiting to receive first-hand material.

Feng Bin had likely never thought that his desire to expose the bullying going on at school would in the end have fermented into such a storm.

The bruise on Luo Wenzhou's face had mostly subsided in swelling after a while, only leaving a faint mark. Lang Qiao circled him a few times with hateful envy. "Boss, when you were young, you must have been one of those beasts of burden who never got scars from pimples, right?"

"You're the beast of burden. I'm still in the spring of..." Luo Wenzhou glanced at a nearby mirror and found that he had a slovenly, unshaven look, a head of messy hair to rival Tao Ran, and a cut at the corner of his mouth. Even with a face as thick as the Great Wall, he couldn't bring himself to apply the words "the spring of youth" to this distinguished countenance and could only wave irascibly at Lang Qiao. "Beat it, scram."

Lang Qiao didn't scam. As usual, she drew close to Luo Wenzhou's ear as though playing around and planning to quietly mock him. But what she said was, "I was overheard while questioning the students in Interrogation Room 203. There was no one in the observation room at the time. I checked with logistics and found out that the installations in 203 were repaired the year before last...and the ones in 206 and the little conference room were overhauled at the same time."

The corner of Luo Wenzhou's eye twitched. He looked up and met Lang Qiao's gaze.

Lang Qiao stiffened her face and forced a smile at him, but there was uncontrollable panic showing in her big eyes—this was the City Bureau. If they weren't even safe at "home," then where could they go?

"Why don't you go write your self-examination? You're not even the size of a bean, and yet you have so many worries." Saying so, Luo Wenzhou nodded absently towards the colleague waiting to speak to him at the door. He stood, rolled up the draft paper, and knocked on Lang Qiao's head with it. "If the sky falls, there's still your imperial father to hold it up. I'm going to have a meeting with Lu Guosheng. Do you want to see what a criminal who's been wanted for fifteen years looks like? Come on!"

To give him his due, if not for his crooked eyes, Lu Guosheng would not only not have looked horrifying, he would have been a man of rather striking appearance—tall, broad-shouldered, with sharp-cut features and a sitting posture that had presence, unlike some other loafing criminals.

Seeing Luo Wenzhou enter, Lu Guosheng looked up and rather calmly met his eye.

The clerk was rather nervous, because he knew that many people were listening in on this interrogation, and he was afraid that some unrefined movement of his would catch a superior's eye; he stood very cautiously. "Captain Luo."

Luo Wenzhou patted him on the shoulder, pulled up a chair, and sat.

"Captain Luo," Lu Guosheng repeated after the clerk, gaze sweeping over the cut at the corner of Luo Wenzhou's mouth. "You're the one who held off a couple dozen rabid dogs and rescued me? Thank you."

“Don’t flatter yourself. I arrested you.” Luo Wenzhou evenly corrected his wording, went through the file on the table, and said in a businesslike way, “Lu Guosheng, male, thirty-nine years old, place of birth Lotus Town in Yan City’s Lotus Township, studied at Yan City North Engineering University, close relatives all deceased. You had a brother named Lu Guoxin. He was sentenced to death fifteen years ago, and the sentence was carried out.—Correct?”

Lu Guosheng smiled, understanding that this was a formality, and didn’t respond.

Luo Wenzhou looked into his eyes. Likely because he was cross-eyed, Lu Guosheng’s gaze always looked somewhat unfocused.

“Lu Guosheng, fifteen years ago, three successive cases of robbery and murder aimed especially at short-haul truck drivers took place on National Road 327. Was that your doing?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

The observation room was crowded full of people—the City Bureau’s leaders, people from the city government and the armed police, some frontline criminal police officers, and so on; for a moment, all of them held their breaths and concentrated on the man on the surveillance feed.

“Yeah,” Lu Guosheng acknowledged casually as soon as the question was asked, his body language frank and relaxed, “that was me. It was my idea. Find a place without any people and wait. When a target approached, throw a cat or dog towards his wheels. Some people are a little stupider, without any experience. They could be tricked into getting out very easily. Though an old driver with experience normally wouldn’t. Even if he knew he’d run over an animal, he still usually wouldn’t get out of his truck to investigate. But either way, when he’d run something over, he’d still have to decelerate somewhat—and then we’d send the woman out.”

He might not stop when he'd run over an animal, but he couldn't drive right towards a person.

"As long as he stopped, my brother and I could get him out." Lu Guosheng paused, then reached out a hand towards Luo Wenzhou. "Could I get a cigarette?"

Luo Wenzhou lit a cigarette and passed it to him.

Lu Guosheng took two deep drags, and, after a while, breathed out two mouthfuls of smoke. Wreathed in mist, he narrowed his eyes slightly and whispered, "I always knew this day would come."

Luo Wenzhou said, "Why did you kill them?"

"What motive could there be for killing and theft?" Lu Guosheng snorted. "For the money. My brother lazed around all day and couldn't find any proper work, and he was infatuated with that woman. He gave her anything she wanted. Of course there wasn't enough money. He'd get drunk late at night and come crying to me, begging me to think of a way he could get money quickly. I just happened to have a grievance against a truck driver, so I told him that they have money on them, why don't we go rob them, we'll give it a try if you have the guts... The first driver was delivering electronics. We happened to need a fridge at home, so we simply took one from his truck. The two of us killed him together. We had no experience. We stabbed blindly a dozen times without killing him, getting covered in blood. We only dared to go back to town in the middle of the night. Though the second time we had more experience. I looked up where you could kill with one strike and tried it out a few times on animals to practice. And it turned out to work on humans, too."

Luo Wenzhou followed up, "And the third one?"

Lu Guosheng's voice paused. Then, without turning a hair, he said, "It's been too long. I don't recall clearly."

"The third victim. You gouged out his eyes and chopped off his limbs. Murder and dismemberment," Luo Wenzhou said slowly. "The sort that comes from deep-seated resentment. You remember the first two perfectly, but you say you've forgotten this one?"

Lu Guosheng's expression didn't change. He pondered for a moment, then said, "Oh, I think I remember he had too little money. We went to all that trouble and found that there was only one or two hundred yuan on him and no items worth any money. I got depressed and did that... Gouging out the eyes was my big brother's doing. He'd heard somewhere that the dead had 'mirrors' in their eyes that could reflect the last person they'd seen."

Luo Wenzhou gave an "oh" and lifted the file, lightly leaning back in his seat, slowly saying, "In his confession, your brother Lu Guoxin said that the last victim had tens of thousands on him, and he begged you guys to let him go, saying that the money was to buy medicine for a relative. Lu Guoxin was very pleased, took the money, even didn't want to kill him, but you didn't agree—did that take place?"

Lu Guosheng was silent.

Luo Wenzhou coldly asked, "What, it's been fifteen years, and you two brothers can't get your stories straight?"

At this time, there were people whispering amongst themselves as they observed the interrogation on the surveillance feed. One person quietly asked, "Why hasn't he asked about Feng Bin yet? And the explosion and the hiding place... What's he doing going on about this old business?"

The people next to him hastened to shush him and use their eyes to indicate Director Lu, standing nearby with his hands behind his back,

immovable as a mountain—the leader wasn't saying anything, so listen carefully.

“Captain Luo,” Lu Guosheng said, lightly licking his lips, “I thought you were going to ask me how much money I got for killing that kid.”

“I know you didn't get money, or else people would have known about it. There's no bomb under the City Bureau. We have time. You can tell me about it slowly.” Luo Wenzhou's expression didn't flicker as he looked blandly at Lu Guosheng. “I know that the third victim was named Lu Yu. He never had any form of contact with you when he was alive. He was in his thirties, very even-tempered, a good man of few words, who'd never clashed with anyone.—Why would you have so much hatred towards him?”

Lu Guosheng's eyes dimmed.

“I asked a specialist about it a little, and he told me it's likely you were venting your anger out of transference,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Why would you vent your anger on him? What happened between the second victim and the third victim?”

Fei Du noiselessly opened the door of the observation room, but he didn't go in. Instead, he turned aside like a respectful junior, waiting for the person behind him to go on ahead. A middle-aged man slowly walked in. He had a sober, square face and wore glasses, but the lenses couldn't shield his gaze, which was like the point of a knife.

The younger ones were all at sea, but the older ones had already recognized him. “Teacher...Pan?”

Lu Youliang turned his head and slowly met Pan Yunteng's eyes from a few steps away. Then, without saying a word, he turned back, not questioning Pan Yunteng's presence here and not minding whether it accorded with regulations or not.

Lu Guosheng's cuffed hands quivered slightly under the table. The smile on his face seemed to have grown there; he kept his mouth tightly shut, not saying a word.

Luo Wenzhou pulled a list of names from the file. "I figure those accomplices of yours must be as curious as we are to know why you'd run the risk of appearing at the Longyun Center on November sixth. So we asked for a list of names of people who attended that day. I'll read it out for you.—Wang Yilin, Zhou Shu, Huang Minmin, Liang Youjing..."

Lu Guosheng's expression altered.

"Liang Youjing." Luo Wenzhou interlaced his fingers and rubbed his chin. "What, do you know her?"

"No," Lu Guosheng said, tersely and dryly.

"The daughter of one of Yufen Middle School's trustees." Luo Wenzhou smiled. "A rather well-known and bossy young lady. We have her here in the bureau now, under suspicion of taking part in schoolyard bullying, of personal insults and bodily harm committed against her schoolmates.—What an upbringing. She really doesn't sound like a girl from a nice family..."

Lu Guosheng looked up at once, glaring fiercely at him.

Without lifting his eyelids, Luo Wenzhou snapped his fingers towards the security camera. "Bring that little girl over for questioning. Let's find out where she's seen Lu Guosheng. Take her fingerprints and a DNA sample. I think she may be involved in this, too..."

"She's not involved," Lu Guosheng said suddenly, squeezing the words out from between his teeth.

Luo Wenzhou looked back at him expressionlessly.

“She’s...she’s not involved.” Lu Guosheng’s broad shoulders suddenly fell. After a long time, he raised his head. “You police must have confidentiality rules. Even if this is reported, a minor’s name will still be blurred out. Right? Whatever I say here won’t...won’t fall into the ears of people who have nothing to do with this...”

Luo Wenzhou snorted. “What, a demented asshole like you expects the police to give him free publicity?”

“Fifteen...well, it must be sixteen years ago, I didn’t get my diploma and had to stoop to working as a clerk at a transportation company. It was very dull and aimless, but then I met a woman.”

“A woman?” Luo Wenzhou couldn’t resist asking. “Your colleagues and relatives all said you were antisocial and didn’t have any close partner of the opposite sex.”

Lu Guosheng paused. “Because I couldn’t talk about it.”

Luo Wenzhou instantly understood. “Whose wife was she?”

“The boss’s,” Lu Guosheng said quietly. “He was called Liang Zhixing.”

Luo Wenzhou lightly flipped through the materials he had on hand. The person who had signed as Liang Youjing’s guardian was Liang Zhixing.—It seemed he’d made his fortune in the transport business and was now a successful figure in society.

“Liang Zhixing was an old man who’d married a young woman. He couldn’t satisfy her,” Lu Guosheng said. “We were together for over two months. Then we were found out by one of the company’s drivers. The bastard took the opportunity to blackmail us. I wanted to kill him, but the woman was timid... Heh, she disdained the old man,

but she couldn't give up the old man's money, couldn't give up the position of a fine lady."

"You had a clash with that driver because of this?"

"Yeah. She paid up to keep the peace, and wanted to send me away to cover it up—she gave me money and told me that when she'd thoroughly resolved this business, I could come back. I didn't take the money. I knew she just wanted to get an annoyance like me farther away from her." Lu Guosheng sneered. "But I compromised, because she showed me her physical exam report... She said the child was actually mine."

In the observation room, Tao Ran quickly ordered a colleague next to him, "Go compare Liang Youjing and Lu Guosheng's DNA."

Luo Wenzhou said, "And then what?"

"I went back home. My mood was unstable, and I hadn't saved any money, so I did that stuff—the robbery," Lu Guosheng said quietly. "After we'd done it twice without getting caught by the police, I got bolder and got my blood up. Once I got drunk and called that bastard who was blackmailing me and said I'd kill him one day, and then...a few days later, I received a letter."

"What was in it?"

"Some photographs. Photographs of a miscarried little child. A bloody ball like a rat, with places you could tell it was human, its eyes closed, its limbs...all arranged to one side with their little broken bones, placed on a..." Lu Guosheng gestured. "A tray."

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath. "That's why you vented your anger on the third victim, chopping off his limbs, turning his body into a bloody mess? Because the unlucky devil was also a truck driver, and

the King of Hell had called him up that day and made him pass through the section of road where your ambush was.”

Lu Guosheng raised his eyebrows. “Ah, yes. When I thought about it later, I thought I’d wronged the fellow. He actually had nothing to do with it. But we’d have had to kill him, anyway, so how we killed him didn’t make much of a difference. Let’s say he was unlucky.”

In the observation room, Fei Du sighed and turned his head, his gaze seeming to pass through the walls to fall on Lu Jia, waiting outside.

Why was it necessary to know the truth? There were some absurd truths it would be more comfortable to spend a lifetime in the dark about.

“But actually the child didn’t die. That was something the driver arranged deliberately to make you angry after he got your harassing phone call.”

“When the police came to our door, I’d gone into the city,” Lu Guosheng said. “I wanted to butcher that woman, then go chop up that bastard. The upshot was that I saw her happily walking out of the hospital with her belly sticking out, with the old asshole accompanying her, not knowing he’d been cuckolded. But I got a lucky break.”

As he spoke, Lu Guosheng’s somewhat crooked mouth opened in a smile. “From that, I think I have the luck of a wife and child.”

Luo Wenzhou was simply speechless.

“I hid in the city for a while. My wanted poster was stuck up everywhere. Once I was staying at a little hotel and got recognized by the receptionist. They didn’t say anything, waited until I’d gone into my room, then called the police.” Lu Guosheng let out a long breath. “But...before the police got there, some people came to see me...”

Their leader was the ‘sheepdog’ from the gas station at the ecological park. He was the one who basically managed our base there.”

Everyone listening in on the interrogation in the observation room was absolutely still. They heard Lu Guosheng casually say, “He took me away before the police got there, got me a fake identity. At the time, we were living in a nightclub called The Louvre, crooks mixed in with honest folk. But the day my daughter was born, I really couldn’t take it. I snuck out to look. On the way back, I was feeling upset, so I found somewhere to get a drink. How was I to know that two groups of people would kick up a fuss and have a fight that led to a death? And I’d gotten a little drunk and accidentally left my fingerprint behind.

“A police officer nearly found The Louvre because of that.” The cross-eyed killer shook his head as though recounting a thrilling anecdote. “Luckily they reacted quickly. They lit a fire and burned the place and blamed it on that idiot police officer. That’s how we got away.”

CHAPTER 128 - Verhovensky XXXVIII

Luo Wenzhou got out his pack of cigarettes and looked down, finding that he'd just given Lu Guosheng the last one. There was only a withered, empty box left in his hand.

He sat in the interrogation room that everyone's gazes were fixed on, the too-hot heating burning his back, but he seemed to be situated in a burial mound in the wilderness, digging up a rotting old coffin with his own hands.

It was a ghastly sight. He could hardly sit still without letting out a long breath.

Luo Wenzhou picked up a teacup and drank the cool water in it in one gulp.

"You say you burned The Louvre yourselves," Luo Wenzhou said heavily after clearing his throat, "then blamed it on a police officer? What was the police officer's name? When did this happen?"

"Must be over a decade ago... Fourteen, nearly fifteen years." Lu Guosheng scratched his forehead with a finger, lightly curling his lips. "You're asking me what the police officer's name was? How could I know?"

Luo Wenzhou slowly twisted the empty cigarette pack into a ball, rolled it around in his palm a few times, then turned his head and looked into the security camera, seeming to meet the eyes of the dumbstruck listeners through the small device. Then he expressionlessly restrained his slovenly posture and slowly pushed open the rotting lid of the "coffin."

"Fourteen years ago, there was a criminal police officer at the City Bureau named Gu Zhao. He was one of the main people in charge of

the 327 case. He was always troubled by the fact that they hadn't been able to catch you. One day, he unwittingly found out that a print matching your fingerprints in the database had been found at the scene of a mass brawl. He began to follow this trail, and in the end his gaze locked on The Louvre."

The observation room was filled with chaos. Someone blurted out, "What is this? Lao Lu, did this happen?"

"Wait a minute, Gu Zhao... I remember he seems to have..."

"What's going on?"

"How does he know?"

Lu Youliang didn't say a word. He was like a stocky statue.

Luo Wenzhou said, "But while his investigation reached that point, it later came to nothing. Gu Zhao died in the fire at The Louvre, suspected of murder, extortion, and receiving bribes. The so-called 'wanted criminal's fingerprint' was only a prop for his extortion, all made up. This turned into a huge scandal that's been covered up to this day."

Lu Guosheng recalled for a moment, then nodded in agreement. "Just about. It went something like that."

"So you did once use The Louvre as a stronghold, and Gu Zhao suffered an unredressed injustice," Luo Wenzhou said. "How did you do it?"

Lu Guosheng rather ruminatively repeated the words "unredressed injustice" twice, then shrugged at him. "Captain Luo, I'm only a little person. You're asking me, but who can I go ask? If that police officer hadn't been there to use as a shield, we'd have been through. I'm still frightened."

Xiao Haiyang was occupying a small corner of the observation room. He seemed to have had a bowl of boiling hot white paint poured into his head; his mind was empty, his consciousness burning away.

All the people around him, their voices, and the whole world, rolled together into a pot of porridge. When he came around after a while, he found that Fei Du was firmly pressing him into the corner.

Fei Du was holding his shoulder with one hand and covering his mouth with the other; there seemed to be a layer of icy frost between his brows.

Looking at his eyes, very close by, Xiao Haiyang felt that they were like two indifferent pieces of glass, reflecting the light; Xiao Haiyang saw his own desperate and twisted face in them.

For a moment he couldn't remember where he was, couldn't remember whether he should be glad or angry. The switch on his intellect seemed to have temporarily tripped; there was only confusion.

A burning and anxious confusion.

A long time passed before Fei Du released his hold on him. The lights in the observation room were dim, and everyone was shaken by Lu Guosheng's words, wanting nothing better than to put his mouth on fast-forward. No one noticed the grief and hatred, sufficient to drown a person, flooding the little corner.

The string that had been pulled tight in Xiao Haiyang's mind without warning snapped, and the turbulent memories and anguish came surging up, making him want to gasp for breath, want to cry and wail.

But he couldn't.

The moment was wrong, the occasion was wrong, everything was wrong.

In front of him, Fei Du seemed to be a human-shaped seal, dragging back his tottering intellect, returning his soul, which was about to escape, to its shell.

Xiao Haiyang seemed to hear the sound of his skin tearing bit by bit; he felt it was too painful.

This made him glare ruthlessly at Fei Du; there was a moment where he almost began to hate him.

But Fei Du's eyes didn't flicker; like two inescapable nails, ignoring all Xiao Haiyang's emotions, they firmly nailed him in place, confining him.

Fei Du silently stuck up an index finger and gently shook his head towards Xiao Haiyang. He moved his lips, mouthing the words, "Endure it."

Luo Wenzhou, not batting an eyelash, let out a heavy breath and continued the questioning. "Sun Jiaying—the swindler who changed his name to Sun Xin when he got out of prison and who works at the Beehive driving customer cars—he explained in his confession that you frequently used his car in private?"

"Yeah." Lu Guosheng nodded. "He's timid, and he's a good talker. He knew who I was and was rather scared of me at first. Then one time he mentioned that he had a sick child at home, and that's why he was in this profession. We're both fathers, so I talked to him about children a few times, and we gradually got friendly. He needed money, and I gave him quite a bit of it and made him drive for me privately. I went to look at my daughter. I left when I'd seen her. I didn't let her know."

Luo Wenzhou asked, “Where does your money come from?”

Lu Guosheng unhurriedly tapped out his cigarette ash. “I’m an ‘electrician’ at the Beehive. They pay me monthly. Not too much. I figure it’s about the same as your income with the police. Although I didn’t have anywhere to spend it, so there was also no need to save.”

“The Beehive was paying you to do nothing?”

“Not to do nothing,” Lu Guosheng said. “We’re different from those pilfering little bandits. We handle urgent business. We’re their real moneymakers.”

“What urgent business? Who do you make money off of?”

“The true customers. There’s usually two types of work. One type is a living assignment, the other type is a death assignment. You normally don’t come back from the death assignments. Only people who have reached the end of the line will take them, the sort of thing like those suicide attacks that get on the news—although the kind where you strap bombs onto yourself is to make everyone know about it, while our work is done so no one knows. For example, man-made car crashes. The person who hits and the person who gets hit don’t know each other, both of them die, and it looks like an accident. It goes to the traffic police and gets resolved. No one will investigate.

“The living assignments are a little more complicated. First off, the person who takes the job has to be well-known. A nameless nobody won’t do.—Take me, for example. Going back ten years, there were hardly any locals who didn’t know about National Road 327.” Having said this much, Lu Guosheng displayed some indescribable self-satisfaction. “Next, when you do the job, you have to deliberately expose yourself, make it so the police know it was you as soon as they show up. You get it, right?”

“Why?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“To protect the commissioner,” Lu Guosheng said. “When someone dies, you police will look into the interested parties right away. When we’re through, the next day the newspapers will say something like, ‘A certain escaped criminal is on the run in the area and committed a murder for money.’ Of course the customer won’t have trouble, and you guys won’t catch us, anyway. This type of work has to be done smoothly. Before we act, someone plans it out specially. If the police begin to suspect the customer, then we’re useless. We have to be sent out to act as scapegoat. No matter how much money you have, you can’t spend it. That’s called life and death being ruled by fate. Pretty stimulating, don’t you think?”

Hitting Zhou Junmao must have been Zheng Kaifeng’s “death assignment,” while Lu Guosheng killing Feng Bin must have been a “living assignment”—provided that Wei Wenchuan followed “proper procedure” when hiring him for the murder.

Luo Wenzhou asked heavily, “Who are these so-called customers?”

Lu Guosheng shook his head. “I don’t know. They’re all big bosses. They wouldn’t have direct contact with people like us.”

Apparently when Fei Chengyu had been in power, while he’d clearly been a shrewd person with a sinister gaze, he’d joined in quite a few businesses “without steady earnings,” as though he’d been hoodwinked. In addition, there had been the contributions, the use of his position in the name of a collaboration, the false contracts, the enormous overseas money-laundering operations... They’d used these means to support the monsters hibernating in the darkness, not touching upon the surface-level flow of funds, countless times more secret than low-grade assassins.

“Then I’ll ask something you do know about.” Luo Wenzhou knocked on the table, signaling to the clerk next to him, who’d gone blank

from listening, to concentrate his energies. “Lu Guosheng, the day that the teenage boy Feng Bin was killed in the Drum Tower Scenic Area, the security cameras on the scene caught your face. The body was dealt with exactly the same as that of Lu Yu, the third victim in the 327 case. Your fingerprint was also found at the scene. Do you have anything to say?”

“No,” Lu Guosheng answered without any hesitation, “I did it.”

“Did you know Feng Bin?”

“No.”

“Then why would you kill him? Who made you do it?”

“Since I’ve been arrested by you and I’m already here like this, there’s nothing to conceal,” Lu Guosheng said. “It was a rich kid named Wei Wenchuan. His family has some shares in the Beehive. He’d been to the Beehive and gotten his eye on me when I was taking a car there... That kid’s a piece of work. He recognized me.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression flickered. “Wei Wenchuan recognized you?”

“He stopped me in the employee passage one day and said to me, ‘I know what you did. That day you were following my schoolmate around near the school, I recognized the Beehive’s car.’”

Luo Wenzhou frowned—this was too much of a coincidence.

“My first instinct was to kill him.” Lu Guosheng’s lip curled. “But he got out his phone and said that he’d sent a recording and my photograph to some place... I don’t understand these kids’ new toys.—He said it was his dad’s money paying for our upkeep and told me not to act rashly, or else everyone would immediately know my secret.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “What did he want you to do?”

“At first he didn’t make me do anything, just pestered me occasionally to tell him about the people I’d killed and ask probing questions, ask how I felt when I killed them. He said he thought it was very interesting... These idle little whelps. I was trying to think of a way to get free of him, but one day, the kid brought a paternity test result and said to me, ‘So Liang Youjing isn’t Trustee Liang’s biological daughter. She’s your spawn.’” Lu Guosheng had been weary and calm all along. Only at this point was there a stirring in his gaze.

“I couldn’t let anyone know about this. Not even Sun Xin knew. He thought I had a grievance against Liang and was stalking his daughter because I was planning to retaliate,” Lu Guosheng said. “These people aren’t supporting us for nothing. Your wife and children, anyone with any connection to you is in their line of sight. Never mind us, even little bandits like Sun Xin are the same.—I couldn’t let them get their eyes on her. I don’t mind telling you, it’s not that I haven’t found other women these last few years, trying to get them to give me a child, but the sort of women who have one-night stands are all demons. They all take drugs or something. They aren’t willing to give birth to children for you. But if you tried to keep a girlfriend, before she got pregnant they’d get their eyes on her. There’s no one left in our Lu family. This is the family’s true motive. Without her, won’t our family line end?”

However worldly and experienced Luo Wenzhou was, he was still struck dumb in spite of himself.

This person had killed and robbed. He was cruel and ruthless. He made no distinction between a human life and a dog’s life—they were both a joke to him.

Towards parents or siblings, relatives or friends, he was without exception unfeeling, without exception indifferent. He only cared

about Liang Youjing, this daughter he'd never met—because in his eyes, she wasn't a person; she was a "family line," a family treasure of the sort that was very precious, even if you didn't know what use it had.

This thought was so deep-rooted, Lu Guosheng was so firmly convinced of it, that it was the same way he was firmly convinced about the eyes of the dead preserving the last image they saw.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Wei Wenchuan coerced you into killing someone for him."

Lu Guosheng nodded. "He said someone wanted to hurt him, and he got out a recording of some gossip to show me—I didn't really understand it. These little whelps can really stir things up while they're at school. It was all kids' stuff. Though that kid said that if I did this for him, he'd help me privately get to know my daughter."

Luo Wenzhou didn't quite understand. "It's been so many years and you haven't thought of a way to get to know her, so why would you risk your life for the sake of getting to know her now and take a private job to kill someone? Weren't you afraid that your 'company' would find out, and you and your daughter would both die without intact corpses?"

Lu Guosheng stared blankly at this question, looking helplessly back at Luo Wenzhou, his skewed eyes a bit confused.

Luo Wenzhou instantly understood something. "So you didn't take the job privately—"

"Take the job privately? Are you crazy?" Lu Guosheng said. "The kid had the Beehive's 'black card.'—The Beehive's normal VIP cards are gold, silver, and diamond. Only our true customers have the black card. There's no money on them. The points are an accounting of their transactions with the company. They come to the Beehive with

the black card, get someone to help them plan, then get us to carry it out for them. He came to me with a black card and a planning agent. It was a living assignment, and I'd get a large sum of money for doing it, and I could get to know my daughter. Why wouldn't I do it?"

Luo Wenzhou faintly grasped a lead. "So the time, place, and route you took there and back when you killed Feng Bin were all told to you by the planner? He was the one who told you to kill Feng Bin and leave Xia Xiaonan?"

"Xia Xiaonan?" Lu Guosheng looked slightly dubious. Then he came around. "You mean the little girl with the locator on her phone? The planner said she was one of ours. I don't know where they found her. She seemed pretty inexperienced. She was petrified. I was worried she'd slip up, so I took the tracking device on her away with me."

Luo Wenzhou immediately followed up, "Who was the planner?"

"Serial number A13," Lu Guosheng said. "I don't know his name."

Luo Wenzhou gestured at the security camera. In the observation room, Tao Ran immediately said to his colleagues, "Who did we bring back from the Beehive? Go arrange some materials and have them say which one is A13!"

Xiao Haiyang really couldn't stick it out any longer in the observation room. He took the order without saying a word, turned, and left.

"Why did you go to Bei Yuan's Longyun Center on November sixth? To see Liang Youjing?"

"The planner said that when the business was done, they'd send me away to avoid the investigation. When we move, we may not come back for the next few years, so I went behind his back to deal privately with Wei Wenchuan, to see whether I could make him fulfill

his promise beforehand. He agreed and had me come see her, not say anything to her, and wait for him to slowly explain things.”

Luo Wenzhou quietly said, “The Longyun Center—weren’t you afraid someone would recognize you, or that you’d be caught on the security cameras?”

“It’s been fifteen years. Who would still recognize me?” Lu Guosheng smiled. “Wei Wenchuan is the Longyun Center’s young master. He wouldn’t leave behind evidence of our meeting at his own doorstep. The kid’s crafty. He deleted the video long ago. Though I figure he was only concerned with the cameras inside the Longyun Center, the ones that have to do with him. He wouldn’t necessarily have paid attention to the ones at the main doors and in the surroundings, so I was careful—what, was there a slip-up?”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression didn’t falter, but his mind was full of terrifying waves—if Wei Wenchuan had deleted the video of Lu Guosheng showing up at the revolving restaurant long ago, then why had Fei Du’s people been able to get a complete recording?

So when those people had searched the Longyun Center’s security camera records but didn’t react at once, had it been because what was in front of them was the version initially abridged by Wei Wenchuan?

So the security camera records in the Longyun Center had been quietly changed twice!

Luo Wenzhou instantly stood up.

“Hey, Captain Luo,” Lu Guosheng called him to a halt, “I’ll probably be executed by firing squad, right?”

Luo Wenzhou paused.

Lu Guosheng spread his hands. “So that’s my lifetime over with. Though my daughter hasn’t broken the law—she should know whose child she is, whether she can accept it or not. Since we’ve reached this stage, you could have her come see me when she has time.”

Luo Wenzhou was disinclined to attend to him. He turned and left.

The solar year was coming to an end. The citizens of Yan City, wrapped in a flurry of snow, were following the instincts of village tribes, beginning to have no mood for work. Students prepared to go on winter break, and adults prepared to change their solar calendars. Each and every profession languidly looked forward to year-end bonuses, but two big matters were keeping the city government and the public security system so busy they didn’t even have time to write year-end reports.

The business of the well-known entrepreneur Wei Zhanhong and his son hiring assassins, using the Beehive and other entertainment institutions as fronts to support wanted criminals in hiding, was like an urban legend; it rolled over the front pages of all the mass media, giving the common folk in the streets something to revel about over their cups of tea.

Luo Wenzhou lived in the duty room for fully four days and four nights, losing all track of night and day.

When Tao Ran woke him, he’d just been asleep for five minutes, wrapped in someone’s greatcoat.

“We’ve questioned all the people from the Beehive,” Tao Ran said. “The A13 Lu Guosheng told you about isn’t there.”

Luo Wenzhou got a bottle of water out from under the camp bed, drank half of it, and poured the rest onto his face, waking up with a start.

“Wei Wenchuan confessed. He stole the black card from his dad,” Tao Ran said. “A13 received him. He thought at the time that A13 could tell he’d stolen the card, but not only did he not say anything, he helped him with the business—isn’t that strange? There’s stranger. A few years ago, when he was specially discussing how to kill people on a forum for novelty-seekers, he made an online friend whose handle is ‘go ask shatov’.”

The corner of Luo Wenzhou’s eye twitched.

“That so-called ‘system’ he set up at the school, half of it was stuff he’d learned from books and movies, and half of it was stuff he’d discussed with this person. This person gave him detailed materials about the 327 case, including the information that Lu Guosheng was hiding at the Beehive,” Tao Ran said. “We tracked this person’s location through his IP, but they’d already vacated the premises.”

Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes. “What about the employees in the Longyun Center’s security camera room?”

“I was just going to tell you,” Tao Ran said. “One of them, a middle-aged man named Wang Jian, mysteriously disappeared after this happened. He worked at the Longyun Center for five years, and no one noticed that his ID was fake.”

Luo Wenzhou heavily let out a breath and waved a hand at Tao Ran, mournfully calling out, “Go away. You don’t have any good news.”

“I do have good news.” Tao Ran’s eyes were bloodshot, but they glittered frighteningly. “The results of the DNA comparison on Liang Youjing and Lu Guosheng have come out. There’s no relationship between them. Lu Guosheng’s sperm count is very low. It would be very difficult for him to have descendants. And Wei Wenchuan confessed that the so-called ‘paternity report’ was a hoax he cooked up to accord with Lu Guosheng’s delusion. There was no question of a father-daughter reunion. He didn’t say anything to Liang Youjing,

and A13 privately promised him that after he'd killed Feng Bin, Lu Guosheng would 'die a natural death' and be given to the police to close the case. Of these three people, each pair had a private agreement. Isn't that funny?—We're planning to draw lots to see who gets to tell Lu Guosheng the news. Do you want to try?"

After a pause, Luo Wenzhou was entertained. He waved a hand. "Settle down, let Xiao Haiyang go. Don't haggle over it with him."

"The second thing is that today our leaders went to have a meeting with the higher-ups. After the New Year, they'll formally reopen Gu Zhao's case." Tao Ran showed an uncontrollable smile.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Really?"

"Hurry up and get home to rest." Tao Ran pulled him up. "The third good thing is that your so-and-so is outside waiting to pick you up. An old bachelor like me can't stand the sight of you two. You've spent all these years using me as a pretext for your bickering, and then in the blink of an eye you've ended up together—what the hell, hurry up and take him away!"

Luo Wenzhou didn't say another word. He jumped up as though he'd been fully restored to life, taking a punch from Tao Ran without complaint.

"Hey, leave the public property behind, that coat is a duty room treasure, don't play dumb and leave wearing it!" As if he were joking, Tao Ran tugged at his clothing.

"Go on, I've just warmed up..." Luo Wenzhou hastily gathered up his collar. "Scoundrel! Taking liberties!"

Under the cover of playing around, Tao Ran quickly said something into his ear. Luo Wenzhou froze, and Tao Ran took the opportunity to pull off the decrepit coat, bundle it into his arms, and run.

Luo Wenzhou roared, “Tao Ran, are you staging a rebellion?!”

Tao Ran took to his heels. “Happy New Year to you, too!”

¹ There's a reference here to 聊斋志异/*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, a collection of stories including many loves stories between humans and fox spirits or ghosts.

² Unit of measure equal to .5 kg, or a little over a pound.

³ An extended *Journey to the West* metaphor - Sun Wukong AKA the Monkey King was imprisoned under the Five Elements Mountain until he was released to protect the monk Tripitaka, a reincarnated follower of the Buddha.

⁴ Mythological home of the Queen Mother of the West.

⁵ Local edition of Rescue 911, an emergency services documentary series, the backbone watching experience of many a 90s child.

⁶ Useful note: The second character of Luo Wenzhou's given name (舟) means "boat"; the same character is used in the paragraph above. Fei Du's given name (渡) means "ferrying across."

⁷ 佛跳墙 - a highly non-vegetation dish supposed to tempt Buddhists out of their dietary restrictions.

⁸ Longyun (龙韵) is Dragon's Charm, Fengqi (凤栖) is Phoenix's Perch. Nancheng (南城) literally means "the south of the city," but it's being used as a neighborhood name here. Beiyuan (北苑) similarly is "north park."

⁹ For the sake of clarity I'd like to pause here to say that there are two different last names written out as Lu at play here: 陆 (lù, fourth tone, means "land" or "continent"), which is Lu Youliang and Lu Jia's surname, and 卢 (lú, second tone, can mean "black" but is mostly a surname or used in phonetic spellings of loan words), which is Lu Guosheng and his late unlamented brother's surname.

¹⁰ Death of a thousand cuts.



默读

4

Silent Reading / Priest