

默

读



5

Silent Reading / Priest

# 默读/*Silent Reading* by Priest - Book 5

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## CHAPTER 129 - Reading Aloud (4)

The City Bureau was a very interesting place. One street away was the city center's old commercial district, the façades of high-quality hotels and a number of large established shopping malls; with these "façades" to gather public interest, shopping streets of all different grades of quality had arisen as well. If you walked out of the City Bureau and crossed the street, right across from the gates was a parking lot surrounded by all kinds of little food stalls. The further it got into the dead of winter, the more frenzied the buying was. For some reason, business was especially prosperous—maybe it was because the current generation of police comrades was unusually gluttonous.

There was a luxury sports car parked in the open-air parking lot that was entirely out of tune with the surroundings. Near it was a cart selling takoyaki. The line stretched out for a dozen meters like a dragon, truly an awe-inspiring sight.

Fei Du stuck out his head to take a look and gave it up, putting the car window back up, chatting to Lu Jia next to him. "After the year-end bonuses have been paid out is a peak period for handing in resignations. What plans do you have for next year? Are you going to keep working for me, or are you planning to experience a different kind of life?"

These last few days, Luo Wenzhou had been working overtime at the City Bureau, so it had been more convenient for him to drive his own car in and out. Fei Du had driven over in his own. For Lu Jia, the sports car's driver's seat was slightly cramped. He didn't quite have space for his belly. Hearing the question, he looked up and leaned back. "President Fei, do you not want to support me anymore because I eat too much and my engine capacity is too high?"

“Of course not.” Fei Du swept an eye towards the City Bureau. “I’m living off a mistress myself.”

Lu Jia laughed silently for a while. The evening lights passed through the crack in the car window that hadn’t been fully closed, falling into his long, narrow eyes, leaving a pinpoint of light at their corners.

Then his smile became dimmer and dimmer, and he was silent for a while. Lu Jia said, “I’ve heard someone say that those people who take drugs have the physiological structure of their brains changed by the drugs—that sounds pretty horrifying. Think about it. If experience, character, upbringing, and so on are all the body’s removable software, then the brain must be the hardware. If your brain changes, the equivalent of changing from an Ultrabook to a Xiao Bawang<sup>1</sup>, it’s like another soul has been reincarnated in your body. Even though you have the same memories, you’re not the same person as before.”

Fei Du didn’t interrupt, listening very patiently.

“But actually I sometimes think that trauma is something similar.” Lu Jia’s tone changed. He unbuckled his seatbelt and stretched in the confined space. “Trauma can also change a person beyond recognition. Sometimes you look at other people, then look in the mirror, and you feel hollow inside. You think, how did I become like this? I don’t even recognize myself.

“Ordinary people pursue things, nothing but houses, cars, careers, love, position, dreams. They’re busy every day, each one of them holding a bellyful of worries and happiness. Their worries are genuine feelings, and their happiness is sincere. They don’t know what ‘inconstancy’ is. They think that today is the same as yesterday is the same as tomorrow. They won’t think, ‘I’m only an ant sitting on a dead leaf floating in the river that can overturn any time.’”

Fei Du didn't pass comment. With his chin propped on his hand, he made a noise and waited for him to continue speaking.

“But you're different. You can't spend your days like that. You're like a hen that's had its feathers scared off by a firework and can't lay eggs anymore.—You look at other people and think that all the things they're pursuing are illusions. You can't treat them as real. They can vanish just like that. You have nightmares every day. Your head is full of vain hopes. You're irritable, worried, anxious for absolutely no reason... When someone gives you a second look, you think maybe he has bad intentions. When someone stops you in the street to ask for directions, you think he may be plotting something. Sometimes you'll even see someone feeling around in his bag too long and suspect he's got a hidden weapon on him.”

Lu Jia's voice grew quieter and quieter.

Noisy, raucous voices came in through the crack in the window, their babble mixing with the man's voice, making him seem increasingly out of place, increasingly lonely.

“Trust in society and your environment is a cornerstone of a sense of security,” Fei Du said. “Without that, you can only drift in a state of constant psychological stress. In fact, it's very painful. Even if the trauma passes...”

“It doesn't pass. These things never pass. Even though they've caught the killer, it's still the same. ‘If you gaze into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.’ I don't know whether you've had that feeling.” Lu Jia shook his head. “Sometimes I feel like I have a mental disorder and living is pointless.”

Fei Du silently reached over and patted his thick, broad shoulder.

Lu Jia waved a hand. “I love talking to you, even though you sit there the whole time and only say a few words.”

“According to social etiquette, I should say something to console you. For example, something like, ‘Everything passes. Time will one day make you lose your memories and intellect, so of course it will also heal your wounds.’” At this point, Fei Du heard a car horn honk twice, briefly. He didn’t look out the window, simply picked up his jacket and put it over himself. “But that’s all nonsense. Even if you wanted hear it, I wouldn’t be inclined to say it.”

Lu Jia laughed in spite of himself. “President Fei, I think you’re simply discriminating based on attractiveness? With me you aren’t inclined to say a single extra word, only the great truth, but if there were a pretty young woman sitting here, then wouldn’t you carefully adhere to societal norms?”

“Then it’s good fortune to be plainer looking. It’s not easy to hear the great truth from me,” Fei Du said with a great show of earnestness. Then he suddenly turned to Lu Jia. “Lao Lu, I’m not inclined to say it to you, but I talked to a pretty little girl recently and have some words ready-to-hand. Will you listen?”

Having suffered discrimination, Lu Jia helplessly took on a posture of being all ears.

“Each person can be molded by external things. Environment, luck, the people they like, the people they hate...even a person like Lu Guosheng, who makes you want to peel off his skin and rip out his tendons. Murderers use trauma to mold a part of your flesh and blood. That’s a fact, whether you’re willing or not.”

Lu Jia stared at him.

“If it were me, do you know what I’d do? I’d cut off that piece of flesh, let out that bowl of blood, then take an axe to the deformed bones underneath and smash them. I’m not the person gazing into the abyss. I am the abyss.” Fei Du gave him a slightly bloody smile.

But before the smile could fully develop, the mood was ruined by another horn blast. Fei Du shook his head helplessly and turned to open the car door and get out. “What’s the rush?—Drive this car away for me. My parking situation’s tight over there. If you like it, then drive it around to your heart’s content. Happy New Year.”

Lu Jia’s lips moved as he watched Fei Du open the door of the car temporarily parked next to them without even checking the license plate. Luo Wenzhou lazily got out of the car and switched to the passenger’s seat, waving a hand at Lu Jia. The two of them quickly left, without a second thought for those left behind.

This wasn’t Luo Wenzhou’s first time living in the duty room for several days in a row. Before it hadn’t been a big deal. Apart from finding someone to feed the cat, there’d been nothing else to worry about. None of those times had been like this one. He felt like he’d been sleeping in the duty room for half a lifetime. The first time he’d honked, he’d seen Fei Du respond by starting to put on his jacket, so he’d known he’d heard. But Luo Wenzhou had watched him take a full minute to put on that jacket and dawdle, talking to Lu Jia, and he’d finally been unable to resist basely honking again.

Not seeing each other for a day was like being apart for three years—according to this reckoning, when Fei Du had dawdled for a minute, it was as though he’d dawdled for 18.25 hours; who could endure that?!

As soon as the door closed, Luo Wenzhou was itching with impatience to assault the driver, but considering that the environment was too noisy and there was an indiscreet fat guy behind them watching them go, he resisted the impulse and, very unsatisfied, grumbled, “Were you two plotting to overthrow the authority of the Milky Way? What was that meeting about that you had to spend so long talking?”

Fei Du sighed, steadily turning the steering wheel, maintaining an even speed as he got onto the main road. Then he freed up some time to pull out Luo Wenzhou's groping hand, which was feeling around under his clothes. "I'm going to crash into the guardrail by the road."

While it wasn't visible on Fei Du's face, he was in fact rather at a loss, because the last words Luo Wenzhou had said to him had been, "Fei Du, you prick," truly not at all sweet. These last few days it had been big things followed by little things, and there'd been no time for anyone to pay attention to how anyone else was doing. Now that there was temporarily a free moment, he felt like he was coming back requesting a reconciliation after a couple of days of cold war.

Fei Du had reached his present age having played with his life and played with fire, but he'd never played a "reconciliation after cold war" game with anyone. The earlier "I am the abyss" aura had long ago blown away along with the exhaust. He racked his brains for a moment. "You..."

He hadn't gotten out anything to follow the "you" when he saw Luo Wenzhou slowly withdraw his scrounging hand, bring it close to his nose and sniff it, then lick his fingers.

Fei Du: "..."

"Drive faster," Luo Wenzhou said meaningfully. "I'm starving."

This wasn't the right context for either apologies or explanations. Fei Du tactfully closed his mouth and stepped on the gas pedal, skirting the speed limit.

But maybe his driving was too steady or something; having finished his harassment maneuver, the sleep god Luo Wenzhou turned his head and fell asleep. In a journey only ten minutes long, he efficiently took a nap. When Fei Du shook him awake, Luo Wenzhou blearily stretched in a manner stolen from Luo Yiguo, incidentally grabbing



Fei Du's arm and sweeping him into his embrace, vaguely saying, "I'm so sleepy."

"Wake up," Fei Du said. "We're home."

"I don't want to move." Luo Wenzhou lay on him, playing dead for a while. Then, struck by some brainwave, he whined, "Honey, why don't you carry me up on your back?"

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Wenzhou saw him freeze and say nothing for quite some time. Thinking that the worldly President Fei had been stunned by his shamelessness, he shook with laughter.

Then Fei Du suddenly buttoned up his jacket, got out of the car, and went to the other side. Under Luo Wenzhou's dumbstruck gaze, he opened the car door, turned, and half knelt down. "Come on."

## CHAPTER 130 - Edmond Dantès I

Luo Wenzhou stared for a long time. “Are...are you serious?”

Fei Du turned his head and glanced at him. There was a natural curve at the corner of his eye. Swept by the cold wind, there was a trace of red spreading there.

Luo Wenzhou woke up and met his gaze, but he was still somewhat at a loss, as if he'd been bewitched. Following Fei Du's movements, he stepped out of the car and reached from Fei Du's left shoulder to his right shoulder as carefully as though he were testing for landmines. He seemed to feel flesh and bone through the thick jacket. He didn't dare to use any force, only lightly laying an arm over Fei Du's shoulders, half hugging him and thinking, half a beat late, “What am I playing at?”

Then a cold winter breeze blew, and Luo Wenzhou's head cleared with a start. He pulled himself together and thought, “Isn't it nonsense telling him to carry me?”

Luo Wenzhou gave a dry laugh and was about to awkwardly draw back his arm when Fei Du grabbed his wrist and lifted him from the car.

Luo Wenzhou was frightened out of his wits and scrambled to hook his arms around Fei Du's shoulders—especially since the youngster had evidently underestimated his weight, trembling somewhat as he stood up, stumbling.

Luo Wenzhou's tongue tied itself into a knot with his teeth. “W-wait, wait a minute, put, put me down, I-I, what do you call it, I have low-grade acrophobia.”

Fei Du got his footing and laughed. “Lock the car. The keys are in my pocket.”

Luo Wenzhou scrambled to fish them out. “Darling, if there’s anything to say, let’s say it, you don’t need to be such a hero... Put me down... Hey, don’t rush! No ‘hold tight’ warning and you’re already moving! Slow down, slow down!”

There were only a few steps from the parking space to the door, and Luo Wenzhou lived on the first floor. It was only a little way. However weak Fei Du was, he still wasn’t so weak he couldn’t carry him, but Luo Wenzhou was an expert at frightening himself. He was scared witless the whole way, feeling his legs were hanging in midair, and he was lying on an antique vase; the vase was normally kept under glass, and he still thought that wasn’t safe enough, and now he was pressing down on it, shaking, not even daring to breathe deeply, afraid that if he took a big breath he’d scrape off a piece of that precious vase’s glaze.

He could feel Fei Du’s somewhat rapid breathing as he exhaled a trace of warmth. The ends of his hair were hidden inside his scarf, only one lock hanging out, softly falling on his collar. Fei Du’s hard bones were pressing into his chest, stabbing, making him feel rather tender.

With that bit of tenderness, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t resist behaving badly. He drew close and gently rubbed his nose against Fei Du’s hair, drawing in a deep breath at his collar. Then he quietly said into Fei Du’s ear, “I’ve thought of an expression.”

“Oh?” Fei Du said.

“An ancient road.” Luo Wenzhou freed up a hand to point at the opening of the stairs, then put it to his ear to feel the winter wind coming from Siberia. “A west wind...”

Then he poked Fei Du's shoulder. "A skinny horse<sup>2</sup>... Hey, hey, don't, don't, I'm sorry, I was wrong. My old bones can't take a fall, take it easy!"

"It may be genuine leather, but you're still too skinny. My ribs hurt." After a while, Luo Wenzhou had to show off, grumbling, "I bet you've been eating badly while I wasn't home. After this, you're going to exercise with me every day."

Fei Du was a little out of breath and was annoyed into a laugh. "Yes, I've inconvenienced Her Majesty the princess by not piling up twelve layers of mattresses.—How about we get up to exercise at six in the morning?"

Jabbed in his vulnerable spot, Luo Wenzhou hooked an arm around Fei Du's neck. "Little whelp."

Hooking like this, he touched Fei Du's chin. He couldn't resist stroking that somewhat sharp-cut chin. "Say, last time when we ate at Tao Ran's, you wouldn't even take a little coffeemaker up the stairs. How come you're so nice today?—Have you done something to let me down these last few days? Huh?"

Fei Du thought about it. "One thing."

Luo Wenzhou froze.

Fei Du took a slight break, then raised a foot onto the step. "I've adored you without permission. Sorry."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He was silent a moment, then suddenly reached out to catch the banister, forcing Fei Du to halt his steps. Then without a word he struggled free and grabbed Fei Du's scarf.

Fei Du went up the last two steps pushed and pulled by him.

Luo Wenzhou carelessly got out his keys and unlocked the door without even looking, relying on instinct. Then he pushed Fei Du into the entrance hall and pinned him against the door.

Luo Yiguo heard the door, came out to have a look as usual, and unfortunately got its tail stepped on by the oblivious Luo Wenzhou. Master Cat shrieked and leapt fully two chi off the ground, bumping its head against the clothes rack.

The rather artistic tall and narrow clothes rack was unsteadily balanced and couldn't withstand the sudden attack of a fifteen-jin fat cat. It toppled over, sweeping between the two of them, separating the lovebirds like the river dividing Chu and Han. Then, the curved long hook scraped over the little wall lamp in the entrance hall. As the cat shrieked, the lightbulb and the lampshade both fell to the ground in a household disaster.

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

The two of them looked at each other helplessly for a moment. Then Luo Wenzhou squeezed a sentence out from between his teeth: "Today I'll definitely stew that furry bastard."

Hearing these words, Luo Yiguo's rage became even more towering. It launched an attack from atop the shoe cabinet, delivering a series of murderous paw swipes to Luo Wenzhou, unfeelingly tearing up the seam of the sleeve of his jacket. Then it angrily stomped over the ground covered in splinters, leapt up to the top of its cat tree, and sat up on high, seething.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Luo Yiguo, it's a fight to the death between us!"

Fei Du laughed out loud.

Luo Wenzhou glared at him for a while. He moved away his toe, which had been struck dead on by the clothes rack. He couldn't gather up a drop of temper.

He felt like he was the irresponsible emperor in a cautionary tale. Hearing this calamitous demon's rare laugh, even the total ruin of his country meant nothing, never mind a sleeve torn up by a cat.

"So you've cheered up now that you've watched the cat pull down the house?" Luo Wenzhou whispered irritably. "You didn't say a word all the way here, and you agreed to everything I said. My mind is a mess. I keep thinking you're holding back some big plot again."

Fei Du stared, his smile receding.

"I was just thinking, if you came out again with some bullshit like, 'We're not suited for each other, let's break up,' I'd kill you. You wouldn't be able to get out of bed next year." Luo Wenzhou stuck his hand into Fei Du's hair and viciously rumbled it. "Why? Is it...because of what happened that day at the ecological park?"

Fei Du paused. "I thought you were going to think..."

"Think that you really weren't any good?" Luo Wenzhou sighed. He leaned across the wreck on the floor and pulled Fei Du by the collar, lips flitting over the tip of his nose. "You really were kind of scary that day. You know what I thought?"

"What?" Fei Du said.

"It's lucky that I'm here to keep an eye on you... Ah, as a man using his beauty to save the world, the Nobel Committee really ought to issue me a Peace Prize."

Fei Du: "..."

"I'm just teasing." Luo Wenzhou let him go and bent down to pick up the clothes rack lying wearily on the ground. "If I weren't here, at your age, you'd still know what to do, isn't that right?"

Fei Du was looking at him without blinking, as if he wanted to use his gaze to make an imprint of his outline and hide it in the deepest, darkest part of his heart, not letting anyone see.

"What are you looking at?" Even with his invincible face, Luo Wenzhou still felt somewhat awkward being watched by him like this—and he'd thought that he'd removed the word "awkward" from his lexicon. "You won't help clean up, all you can do is stand there watching. You have no sense of the situation. Who else but me would want you?"

On this last night of the year, the first thing the two of them did after coming home was to clean up the trashed entrance hall.

Luo Wenzhou gathered up the shards of the glass lampshade and the lightbulb while Fei Du began to torment the ruined corpse of the wall lamp left hanging on the wall.

He changed the lightbulb and got some iron wire from somewhere and bent it a few times with needle-nosed pliers, turning it into a small frame to go over the lightbulb. Then he ran into the basement and dug up a dilapidated bicycle basket.

When Luo Wenzhou had finished arranging the food and was using a small pot to stew some red braised pork, he found that Fei Du had given the old basket a trim and propped it on the iron frame over the lightbulb. The basket at once became a very suitable makeshift lampshade, complimenting the "offending" narrow clothes rack next to it, as though the two of them had come from the same set.

The water in the pot boiled and the smell floated out. On account of the meat, Luo Yiguo condescended to forgive the litter box attendant, jumping down and turning circles at Luo Wenzhou's feet.

Luo Wenzhou leaned against the wall, calculating the cooking time and watching Fei Du with his back to him, cleaning up the tools he'd just used as well as the cut off iron wire.

For a time, the demented suspects, the victims shouting themselves hoarse, the complex old case, the unknown enemy agent...at once all of them calmly left his world on their own.

His mind was as peaceful as soup simmering over a low flame, slowly sending up steam, once in a long while sending up a bubble. Each bubble was a full production, nothing hasty, only popping when it was overflowing, the aroma assaulting the senses.

It was the aroma of home, which made a person feel a sense of perfect satisfaction when he smelled it, desiring nothing, as if his whole life could settle into place like this.

Luo Wenzhou crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head up, lightly closing his eyes.

This time, he felt that the opportunity was finally ripe. The hastily-spoken words came up to his lips in the fullness of time, and he called to Fei Du, "Hey, Feishir<sup>3</sup>."

"..." Fei Du said, "What is it, grandpa?"

Luo Wenzhou looked at the ceiling. Then he looked at the floor. He bent down and picked up the generously-proportioned Luo Yiguo. Squeezing the cat's paws, he asked, "When are you planning to make things official with me?"



Fei Du paused. Then, without saying a word, he looked down and searched around among the iron wire he'd cut off earlier, cut off a piece of the appropriate length, and very nimbly used the needle-nosed pliers to twist it into a spiral ring with three circles. He blew off the filings, brought it to his lips and kissed it, then turned and knelt down.

Luo Wenzhou and Luo Yiguo were both startled, backing up at the same time. Luo Yiguo bumped into Luo Wenzhou's shoulder, and Luo Wenzhou bumped into the wall.

Fei Du said, "The size is definitely just right. Will you put it on?"

That day, Luo Wenzhou personally demonstrated to him that the appellation "grandpa" was mere provocation; in fact, President Fei didn't get out of bed until next year.

Luo Yiguo was once again locked out of the master bedroom. However, the feline majesty had attained a bowl of unseasoned red braised pork, so it magnanimously set aside the master bedroom portion of its domain for the two humans, temporarily holding back from investigating the matter.

One year ended, and another year began.

Xiao Haiyang left the interrogation room to the sound of Lu Guosheng's snarls. The hysterical curses seemed to hold some magic power, releasing light and heat, protecting against wind and cold, making him feel light as a swallow. He rushed out onto the street in the howling cold wind, passing the crowds of young people keeping the night watch in the squares and shopping streets, then jumped onto a bus bound for the outskirts. He sat on it for over an hour until it reached the last stop, then indefatigably walked for most of an hour, arriving at a remote little graveyard.

Naturally the graveyard was already closed. Xiao Haiyang deployed his “agility,” which could be compared to that of a black bear, and hopped the wall, getting inside the graveyard and finding a simple and crude stone tablet.

Light from a nearby streetlight slanted down. Xiao Haiyang could clearly see Gu Zhao in black-and-white on the gravestone. His appearance was what it had been in his prime, only his expression was somewhat unnatural, because he’d been somewhat camera shy, getting nervous as soon as a photograph was being taken. None of his pictures were as good-looking as he had been himself.

Xiao Haiyang suddenly felt very aggrieved, like when he’d been very small and someone had bullied him and he’d come all the way home forcing himself to keep up appearances, until he’d seen this man and finally broken down, the grievance he’d endured backfiring even more strongly, making him unable resist running to that person’s arms and bawling.

His glasses were blurred, steam evaporating from his nose and mouth and from the rims of his eyes, the vapor rising into a ball as though he were a human-shaped steamer. The steamer slowly walked a few steps, then bent down and hugged the ice-cold stone tablet, wanting to unburden himself like he had so long ago.

Suddenly, a faint fragrance entered his somewhat slow to react nose.

Xiao Haiyang froze. Then he realized that the fragrance was coming from the gravestone, like the smell of some cleaning solution. Xiao Haiyang hastily rubbed at his blurred eyes, turned on a flashlight, and found that the gravestone had been very carefully cleaned. There wasn’t a speck of dirt, even in the nooks and crannies. There was a bouquet of fresh flowers under the gravestone.

Xiao Haiyang slowly frowned, saying to himself, “Uncle Gu, who was just here?”

Because his death hadn't been at all honorable, Gu Zhao's sick mother had dragged herself to receive his body on her own. The unyielding old lady hadn't told anyone. Coldly turning down Gu Zhao's colleagues who'd wanted to help in private, she'd quietly used her savings to buy a cheap and remote plot of land in a graveyard, settling him here.

Relying on the fact that he was a child, Xiao Haiyang had shamelessly followed the old lady. The old lady, seeing that he couldn't be chased away, had let him follow as he pleased. Xiao Haiyang remembered it clearly. Gu Zhao hadn't had a funeral; his friends and relatives hadn't been notified; the day he'd been buried, only his mother and Xiao Haiyang had been present.

Then who had scrubbed the gravestone and arranged the flowers?

Today wasn't the anniversary of Gu Zhao's death, and there was no local custom of sweeping graves at the beginning of the solar year.

Had the mysterious visitor just learned that Gu Zhao's case would be reopened?

But it hadn't yet been publicly announced...and even internally, only the personnel concerned with Lu Guosheng's case had heard anything about it.

Who could it be?

## CHAPTER 131 - Edmond Dantès II

“The police have formally entered the headquarters of the Wei Clan. Concrete information will have to wait until the investigation has advanced a step.—From this reporter’s understanding, the Wei Clan spans thirty years and two generations. It established itself in the catering business and gradually became its own food and drink conglomerate. In recent years it switched to real estate and rose in reputation, becoming one of this city’s well-known enterprises. Last year it was nominated as a candidate for the city’s leading enterprise. The head of the enterprise, Mr. Wei Zhanhong, has always been very low-key, rarely showing his face in public spaces, but frequently described as public-spirited. His public image was rather healthy. Now what causes would have...”

On the TV, the female reporter’s lips flapped as though there were springs installed in them, her speech as rapid as popping beans; the focus was on the news of Wei Zhanhong being investigated.

At the same time, the word “assassination,” after temporarily enjoying the internet famous treatment, had been classified as a prohibited word by all the major web portals and turned into different sorts of mosaic.

Tao Ran was at the City Bureau working overtime. Xiao Haiyang, with huge dark circles under his eyes, was sitting on the couch in Luo Wenzhou’s house, holding a cup in his hands. His eyes were turned emptily toward the TV. He didn’t even notice Luo Yiguo sneaking a drink from his cup.

“Uncle Gu didn’t have any other relatives,” Xiao Haiyang finally said without beginning or end during the commercials. “I’m sure of it. So who would sweep his grave?”

Luo Wenzhou slapped Luo Yiguo's butt, sending it running, then took Xiao Haiyang's cup, which was full of floating cat hair, and took it to the kitchen to wash it and refill it with water for him. "Did you know his colleagues, informers, friends back then?"

Xiao Haiyang hesitated a moment, then slowly shook his head. "When the old lady was arranging his affairs, there really were some people who came to the door one by one to see her, but they were all turned down at the door. They came once or twice at most, like a revolving horse lantern. I don't remember any of them."

Over a decade ago, he had after all been too little. Even though Xiao Haiyang's memory was outstanding and he could perhaps remember everything that had happened when he was a child, it was still too hard to recognize someone he'd only seen once. As for what Gu Zhao's social network and informer network had been like, he wouldn't have talked about that to an eight- or nine-year-old child.

Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself for a moment. "Since it was a legally purchased cemetery plot, there would have been a record left behind. If someone in the system had wanted to go looking, it wouldn't have been hard to find..."

"No, Captain Luo," Xiao Haiyang said somewhat tensely. "That graveyard is pretty well-run, under sealed management. It's quite strict. Visitors coming to sweep graves all have to sign in. During high-traffic times like Qing Ming, you have to make an appointment. But I went over to investigate the visitor record first thing this morning and found that there hadn't been any visitors apart from me these last few days. So the person could only have gotten in by going over the wall in the middle of the night, like I did last night. If it was one of our people, why would he need to do that?"

Luo Wenzhou frowned.—Indeed, whether Gu Zhao had suffered an injustice or had truly committed a crime when he'd been alive, a person's death was like the extinguishing of a lamp. The good and

bad, right and wrong of his life all came to nothing. If his former colleagues and friends had gone to see him out of old affection, there would have been nothing to criticize them for. There really was no need to sneak around like this...especially at this critical juncture, when the old case was about to be investigated anew.

“The planner A13 who Lu Guosheng described, the mysterious security guard who vanished from the Longyun Center, and Wei Wenchuan and Feng Bin’s online friend—up to the present, we have no traces of these people.” Xiao Haiyang pursed his lips, which were so dry they were peeling, and drank half the cup of water like a donkey at a water trough. Then he went on speaking with difficulty. “The whole thing gives me a feeling as though...as though...someone was luring us into investigating the old case anew. I feel like...”

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him.

“Feel like they were doing it to avenge Gu Zhao.” Fei Du silently walked over to Xiao Haiyang, startling the Little Glasses.

Fei Du’s face was rather pale, but for some reason his lips had more color in them than usual. He frowned gently when he sat. His eyes never seemed to open fully. He nearly sank into the soft couch cushion. “First they targeted Wei Wenchuan, quietly getting close to him using an investigation of his mental state and the appropriate guidance.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Including instructing him on how to lord it over that garbage school Yufen?”

“Oh, Wei Wenchuan would have done that even without guidance.” Saying so, Fei Du reached for the cans of beer arranged on the table to entertain guests; Luo Wenzhou tapped on the back of his hand with a pen. Fei Du gave an “oh,” and even the preoccupied Xiao Haiyang looked over.

Fei Du: "..."

Then, pretending that nothing had happened, he turned and picked the detailed materials about Wei Wenchuan up off the table, very properly pushing at his glasses. "Lu Guosheng confessed that Wei Wenchuan ran across him at the Beehive, so he must have been going with his father Wei Zhanhong to that money squandering establishment since he was little. Likely Wei Zhanhong didn't hide what he was doing from his only son. If you look closely, you'll find that Wei Wenchuan's body language is very like Wei Zhanhong's. He'll imitate his father in every aspect, including the way he conducts himself in society—though it's likely he learned the means from this mysterious 'go ask shatov'. This sort of systematic malice, backed up by theory, seems more like the handiwork of an adult."

"But..." Xiao Haiyang hesitated. "How could he be sure that Wei Wenchuan would follow his lead to the point of killing someone?"

"To an ordinary person, assassination is a serious crime that there's no coming back from. They absolutely won't make that kind of choice unless they have no way out. But to Wei Wenchuan, it's an advanced strategy reserved for adults only, his father's prerogative. Adolescents have an intense desire and curiosity towards the adult world. He'd do it if you only gave him two things—the puffed up feeling of being grown up, and the ability to obtain the 'tool.'" Fei Du's fingertip drew a line over Wei Wenchuan's photograph. "Single-handedly establishing the order at school gave him that puffed up feeling, and having him conveniently run into Lu Guosheng gave him the tool. He was like a child holding kindling. Sooner or later, he wouldn't be able to hold himself back."

Luo Wenzhou paused and couldn't resist letting his mind wander a little. He thought that what Fei Du said made sense, and that was why it made him feel something was off.—At the age when a small child was like a blank piece of paper, he didn't know the difference between good and evil and would imitate his parents. His views

towards some things would already be taking rudimentary form while he was learning to talk; it would be very difficult for later education to change them. So there was nothing remarkable about Wei Wenchuan growing up like this.

But thinking about it carefully, Fei Du had grown up in almost exactly the same environment as Wei Wenchuan. What had made him resist Fei Chengyu so fiercely?

It was hard for Luo Wenzhou to imagine that it was merely because of his mother.

The reason that the majority of people thought of “mama” as a warm and sacred form of address was that when they’d learned to pronounce it, they’d linked it to the parent who raised and taught them; because they were filled with affection towards this person, they invested this word with a special meaning. But from the few words that Fei Du had let slip, it seemed that his earliest acquaintance with the word “mama” had been attached to a hysterical madwoman, punished every day for doing the wrong thing, mentally unwell, her position not even as high as a housekeeper’s.

Would the sort of woman who left that impression really have been able to use her life to overturn the brand left by Fei Chengyu?

Luo Wenzhou couldn’t help remembering the day they’d been investigating Lu Guosheng’s whereabouts, when Fei Du had made that strange and accurate inference about the employee bus. He hadn’t had time to think carefully about it then, but now his misgivings floated up again.

He must have been staring at Fei Du too long. Fei Du gave him a slightly dubious look, and Luo Wenzhou suddenly discovered that the redness floating at the corners of his eyes still hadn’t receded fully. His rigorously calculating line of thought staggered in its steps, nearly



slipping into the abyss flowing below. He hastily withdrew his gaze, coughed dryly, and sat up properly.

“When Feng Bin ran away with the others, he left a letter that was posted online and somehow attracted interest,” Fei Du continued. “The school system and teenagers’ mental health are always popular topics, so no one questioned it at the time. But thinking about it now, that wave of enthusiasm was very unusual. It must have carried the trace of someone’s manipulation.—And when people were about to forget this business, Feng Bin died. The schoolyard bullying at Yufen immediately fermented, discussions of schoolyard bullying were everywhere, the level of social interest was extremely high. And the killer was a criminal who had been wanted for fifteen years, causing this murder plot, which should have been mentioned a few times and then passed, to shift over to the City Bureau, becoming the focus of everyone’s attention.”

“Wait a minute.” Luo Wenzhou suddenly remembered something. “The day before Feng Bin died, the business of the middle school students running away was inexplicably pushed over to me—in other words, it’s likely that wasn’t coincidence!”

Fei Du shrugged. “When we accidentally alerted the enemy, even you thought we wouldn’t be able to take Lu Guosheng alive—though actually, even if Lu Guosheng had died, the existence of the ecological park would still undoubtedly have been revealed. The video record of Wei Wenchuan meeting Lu Guosheng at the Longyun Center would have been sufficient basis for the police to investigate the Wei family. Investigating following that thread, you may still have been able to catch those people.”

“But someone ran the risk of changing the Longyun Center’s security camera records a second time to delay Wei Zhanhong’s people,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “I suspect that even if we’d been particularly unimpressive, not come in time even with green lights the whole way,

that mysteriously vanished A13 would likely have personally rescued Lu Guosheng.”

Xiao Haiyang said, “Wait...wait a minute, why?”

“Because only with Lu Guosheng living could he confirm in his own words in full public view that the wanted criminal’s fingerprint fourteen years ago wasn’t made up at all, that it wasn’t concocted by Gu Zhao in order to solicit a bribe, that there was an injustice involved in the fire at The Louvre.” Fei Du knocked on the table. “I’ll get people to sift through all the aerial footage from that day. That A13 must have been near the ecological park that day.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded, then said to Xiao Haiyang, “With investigating the case of Wei Wenchuan plotting to kill his schoolmate as your reason, go to the police station that first received the report and ask around. I want to know who pushed that case over to me.”

Xiao Haiyang pursed his lips, wanting to speak but stopping himself.

“The City Bureau’s forensics department personally performed the autopsy on Officer Gu. With the eyes of so many colleagues and experts watching, the medical examiners couldn’t have misidentified the deceased. The report concerning the autopsy is in the file.” Luo Wenzhou seemed to have understood what he was thinking and very confidently said, “Xiao Xiao, I don’t believe in stories about souls coming back to possess others’ bodies.”

Xiao Haiyang looked at him with a complicated expression and sighed, in disappointment or gladness. “Yes, I know.”

“As for who this A13 actually is, whether he secretly helped us, and what his final goal is, that’s what we need to investigate next. But there is one thing.” Luo Wenzhou raised a finger and said sternly, “He’s one of the suspects in Feng Bin’s murder. You understand?”

Xiao Haiyang said, “Yes, sir!”

“Then get to work,” Luo Wenzhou said. “With a public security bureau about to be turned into a sieve by all these snitches, there really aren’t many people we can trust. I’m going to see...”

He’d only gotten halfway through his words when his phone suddenly vibrated. There was a group message on it. He looked down and saw that the sender was Yang Xin—Lao Yang’s little daughter.

Yang Xin said: “My mom had her surgery today. The doctor says it didn’t go well. She’s still in the ICU. My thanks for the concern of all our relatives and friends. There have been too many inquiries, so I’m replying all at once. I’ll do my best to take care of her. Growing old and falling ill is normal. Everyone take care of yourselves.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart lurched. He stared emptily for a long time. “I...I have something to do. We’ll see each other in the afternoon.”

He hastily said goodbye and hurried to the hospital.

Luo Wenzhou was tactful, but his temper really was considerable, and he had some of the bad habits of a young master in his bones. His affection for their shifu wasn’t any weaker than Tao Ran’s; he’d always send something home with Yang Xin during the holidays. If the Yang family had needed anything, Yang Xin could have summoned him to be pierced with knives from both sides with one text message. But knowing that their shiniang Fu Jiahui didn’t like him, he wouldn’t be like Tao Ran, enduring humiliation to go see her. Thinking of it, since shifu’s death, he hadn’t had any contact with this shiniang.

He hadn’t thought that when he saw her again, there would be the hateful door of an ICU ward between them.

When Luo Wenzhou reached the hospital, he first went to comfort Yang Xin, then went to chat with the doctor. When he left, he saw from afar Yang Xin talking to a familiar person. He paused, then went over to say hello. “Director Lu.”

Lu Youliang nodded towards him, then said warmly to Yang Xin, “It’s all right, girl, your uncles are all here. If you need people or money, we have both. Don’t be afraid. I’ll have your auntie stay with you for a few days. If you’re busy at school, don’t keep coming over here. We’ll help you keep watch.”

Red-eyed, Yang Xin nodded.

Lu Youliang pointed at Luo Wenzhou and said, “Perfect. You can have your dage drive you back. I’m hitching a ride today, too.”

Luo Wenzhou’s brow twitched. He said nothing. When he’d taken Yang Xin back to school, he looked at Lu Youliang in the rearview mirror. There was deep weariness in Lu Youliang’s face. He had his eyes closed, rubbing the center of his brow.

Luo Wenzhou remembered that when they’d parted yesterday evening, Tao Ran, pretending to be playing around, had said something into his ear—he’d said, “I followed Director Lu the whole time that day. I don’t think it was him.”

“Wenzhou,” Lu Youliang suddenly called to him.

“Yes? Should I take you to work or home?”

Lu Youliang said, “Just drive around. I have something to say to you.”

## CHAPTER 132 - Edmond Dantès III

Lu Youliang released a trailer, then kept mum, sinking into his memories. Luo Wenzhou didn't hurry him. He slowly shuffled along the inner ring, which the traffic had turned into a pot of porridge. He rolled down the window and passed Director Lu a cigarette.

Never mind the rest, Luo Wenzhou felt that Comrade Fei Du could take a large part of the credit for his ability to have so much patience right now.

The car shuffled through the most stopped up part of the road at a speed of ten kilometers per hour. When Luo Wenzhou could finally shift his foot a little off the brake, Lu Youliang sighed. "You've been working hard lately. The load you're carrying on your shoulders must be too heavy?"

If it were someone else, no matter what, he'd have said, "All in the service of the people." But Luo Wenzhou wasn't at all modest. Hearing these words, his eyes glittered. "Oh, yes, sir, and since you've noticed, you could hurry up and raise my year-end bonus. It's hard being a man. Supporting a family is so stressful!"

"Jerk." Lu Youliang's heart, filled with grave matters, rebounded off of Luo Wenzhou's shamelessness, and for a time all his thoughts were gone. He unfeelingly said, "It's what you ought to do in the service of the people."

"I could have relied on my talent to eat, but the organization is forcing me to rely on my looks." Luo Wenzhou shook his head, deeply grieved by his fate, like a beautiful woman coming to an unhappy end. Then, when Director Lu was planning to slap him, he voluntarily returned to the main subject. "Did you want to talk to me about Senior Gu?"

“Gu Zhao...Gu Zhao.” Lu Youliang repeated the familiar but strange name a few times, then leaned back in his seat, tilting his face up, hesitating for a moment as though not knowing where to start. “Your shifu was my shixiong. He was a class ahead of me. He was an influential figure at school, too. Did he talk to you about that?”

“Are you kidding?” Luo Wenzhou picked up very naturally. “Lao Yang was always bragging, saying there were quite a few girls who liked him at school. I said that was impossible, Yan Security Uni doesn’t even have ‘quite a few girls.’ He threw me out of his office.”

Luo Wenzhou seemed to be innately without reserve, whether he was speaking to his elders or his superiors. A transient smile flickered over Lu Youliang’s face. “It wasn’t like it is now for us back then. It was very hard to transfer into the City Bureau. While you had to be young, you couldn’t be too young, and you had to have enough low-level experience to qualify to participate in the exam. We all sharpened our brains, relying on our grades, relying on our experiences. That year, for some reason, the City Bureau had an especially high quota. Gu Zhao, Lao Zhang, Lao Pan and I all came in that year—oh, Lao Pan you may not know, he hasn’t been on the front lines in a long time. He teaches at Yan Security Uni now. He’s the head of the Picture Album Project at the school this time around. He gives himself airs and hasn’t come back to look in on us.”

Luo Wenzhou raised the car window. From Director Lu’s brief words, he seemed to have picked up that old photograph arranged on the director-general’s desk.

“Gu Zhao and I were classmates. Lao Pan transferred from out of town. Lao Zhang was a little older than us; he’d rendered a meritorious service and was named to come to the City Bureau. There were many experts and elders on the Criminal Investigation Team then. Newly arrived young people all did odd jobs. When the four of us first came, we were basically running errands, taking notes, carrying tea. Everyone called us the ‘four great maidservants.’”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Oh, the lively culture of a police team.

“Plus there was Lao Yang—Lao Yang was the ‘steward’ in charge of us ‘maidservants.’ He’d just transferred back from Lotus Mountain a few months ago then.” Faint laughter lines gathered at the corners of Director Lu’s eyes. “The five of us were all about the same age, and we’d all started working at about the same time. We spent all day together, using every moment we could get to follow the elders around learning from them, running errands together, sorting records and files together... Aside from Lao Yang, who’d ‘betrayed the organization’ early, we were all bachelors. Sometimes when one person was on duty and the others had nothing to do, they’d bring food and come over to keep him company.

“Lao Yang had the greatest wealth of experience. He was bold but cautious and had the highest level of professional skills. Lao Zhang’s family was in business. He had the greatest means. When we went out to eat he’d volunteer to foot the bill. He got along best with people. He was our old big brother. Lao Pan was the most disgraceful, and his temper was the foulest. He and I didn’t get along at all. We’d argue almost every day, but we never held grudges. As soon as we were finished arguing, we’d be all right after a while, and then in another while we might turn on each other again.

“Gu Zhao was the youngest. We called him ‘Number Five.’ He didn’t speak much, and he was very good at taking care of people. He was clearly so poor he rattled, but if anyone so much as told him they were having financial hardships, he’d be ready to help the needy for justice. And he was very diligent, took the most careful notes, always had a book in his hand. Seven or eight years after he graduated, he went back to the alma mater at his own expense to get a graduate degree in his free time.”

Amiable, diligent, considerate, nervous when taking pictures... Lu Youliang's words gradually colored in the image of Gu Zhao. The "bicycle knight" lit by the setting sun that Xiao Haiyang had described became flesh and blood, standing up out of the shallow and chilly CV on the intranet.

"Later, a group of elders stepped back from the front line, and Number Five was promoted to deputy-captain. We were all very satisfied, because really no one was as hard-working as him. When you were with him, whether working or hanging out, you'd feel very peaceful. Looking into his eyes, you'd feel you were too restless yourself and involuntarily calm your mind." Lu Youliang paused. "The 327 case was the first major case Gu Zhao handled after becoming deputy-captain. It caused a sensation, and it was settled very tidily. The only fly in the ointment was that Lu Guosheng had gotten away.

"You can imagine that because this wanted criminal was on the loose, the people around National Road 327 were in a state of anxiety. As soon as it got dark, no one would dare to go on that road. There was a nationwide wanted notice issued in order to catch him, and the reward in the end went up to 100,000—and this was fifteen years ago. 100,000 really wasn't a small sum. At the time, an informer who'd gone into mortal danger to lure out drug traffickers would only get three or five thousand when it was over, and sometimes their expenses wouldn't even be paid promptly. When they heard about this business, the informers all went crazy. For a while there were always people staking out Lu Guosheng's old address. But he never turned up again. It was as though he'd vanished off the face of the earth. We couldn't find him no matter what."

To make the government cough up 100,000 yuan, the people in charge would have had to call in all their connections and talk themselves blue in the face. But for people like Wei Zhanhong and Zheng Kaifeng, what did it amount to? They wouldn't even bother to bend down to pick it up if they dropped it on the ground.



Unfortunately, no one had known at the time whom they'd been up against.

“A year later, Lu Guosheng got himself drunk and accidentally left behind his fingerprint.” Luo Wenzhou broke the silence. “Director Lu, could you tell me in detail how it all happened back then?”

“The fingerprint was turned up by the forensics people below us, responsible for handling the brawl at the bar. The special investigation team had already broken up then. When we found out that Lu Guosheng was still in the area, we were all excited and immediately obtained the bar's security camera records, interviewed the witnesses and informers without rest. Lao Yang's little child was sick, and the situation wasn't very good, so he'd asked for his annual leave and was absent from work. Gu Zhao was in charge of the business,” Lu Youliang said. “The bar was irregularly managed. The security cameras were only for show. We staked out the area for over a week, caught a couple of gangs selling ecstasy while we were at it, but we didn't see a trace of Lu Guosheng. We had to leave.—We guessed at the time that after accidentally getting involved in the brawl and alerting the police, Lu Guosheng had been afraid and had perhaps already left Yan City.”

“Not necessarily,” Luo Wenzhou said. “If he'd been going to run, he'd already have run. If he was still around over a year after 327, there had to be something he was concerned about keeping him in Yan City. The fact that he dared to go out drinking showed that he had a fixed source of income and a place to hide, and his means were perhaps rather ample.—Didn't you go investigate at the transport company where he'd worked before?”

“Your surmises are exactly the same as Gu Zhao's. If he were still alive, I figure you two would...” Laugh lines flickered at the corners of Lu Youliang's mouth. Then he fell silent again. “We investigated the transport company, but Lu Guosheng's affair with the boss's wife was very covert. If he hadn't personally confessed it, we wouldn't

have known. Even his own brother, who'd killed people with him, didn't know."

"And the driver who'd threatened him?"

"He'd run off. I figure he'd heard of the 327 case, knew the police hadn't caught Lu Guosheng, and was afraid of his vengeance," Lu Youliang said. "We didn't know there was anything else there at the time. We didn't investigate carefully."

Lu Guosheng's fingerprint was like a stone that had raised a thousand-layer wave, but it had only been a fleeting glimpse. Soon after, all trace of him vanished; the trail broke off.

"We thought of every trick we could think of and tried them all, but it was like looking for a needle in the ocean. You know it's in the water, but you can't find it. We trawled for a long time, but it wasn't like we didn't have other things on hand, and which of the cases that come to the City Bureau aren't important? We really were at our wits' ends. We had to move on. Only Gu Zhao privately never abandoned it. I saw that he was very hard-up then. He wouldn't tell you anything if you asked about it. Other people thought he was carrying on a romance... Now that I think about it, maybe he was privately paying his informers extra."

Luo Wenzhou didn't interrupt. He knew he was about to come to the critical part.

"I remember that day was the first time I went to visit my father-in-law. I had some drinks with the old man. It was nearly ten at night when I left. I was a little drunk. I took a shortcut alone to take a bus. On the way, I got a phone call from Lao Yang. He said something had happened. I didn't understand precisely what it was. I just had some kind of dim feeling, gave a start, and instantly sobered up.

“When I hurried over, I saw Lao Yang holding someone by the collar, the veins in his neck all standing out. He looked like he was going to hit him. A crowd of guys was desperately pulling at him.—We all knew the person he was holding. His codename was ‘Old Cinder.’ He was a professional informer. He’d been in the profession four or five years. He was on record at the City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team, and he’d accompanied us on quite a few actions, gone through fire and water with us. He was halfway to one of our own brothers.”

Luo Wenzhou considered his diction, then said, “I heard that there was a witness who escaped the fire at The Louvre and accused Gu Zhao of being the chief culprit behind the fire—was that this Old Cinder?”

“Yes. Lao Yang was holding Old Cinder up with one hand, and he was howling and crying, saying Gu Zhao was normally good to him, he couldn’t be like this, couldn’t say it.” Lu Youliang quietly said, “As soon as I heard that and looked at Lao Yang’s face, my heart went cold.

“Later, when we questioned him carefully a few times, Old Cinder finally admitted that Gu Zhao had solicited bribes more than once, all under the guise of investigating. He’d made some of the informers he was familiar with take molds of Lu Guosheng’s fingerprints, fix on a target, figure out the environment, then place the fingerprint in the store. Gu Zhao would pretend to have received an informer’s report and come over to search. He’d simply present a bill, and if you didn’t shell out, he’d say that the place was harboring wanted criminals, that there were fingerprints and ‘witnesses,’ and you wouldn’t be able to continue your business.”

“The dead can’t testify. You only had a one-sided account,” Luo Wenzhou said. “What was the other evidence?”

“First there were the results of medical examiner’s autopsies. Gu Zhao really had had a physical altercation with the manager at The Louvre

before he died. All the details matched with the witness's account.

“Second, we found an identical fingerprint mold in Gu Zhao's locker in the duty room.

“Third were the witnesses. With only Old Cinder saying it, we and Lao Yang didn't believe it. But we found a notebook that hadn't burned all the way among the wreckage at the scene of the fire, the one Gu Zhao normally carried with him. Half of it had burned away. You could faintly distinguish some names of places and people on it. The people's names were all codenames of informers, and the place names must have been businesses Gu Zhao had gone to investigate recently.—We called all those people in for questioning. There was only one business owner who was maybe afraid of stirring up trouble and wouldn't answer any questions, wouldn't give evidence. Aside from him, everyone else agreed.”

Luo Wenzhou's heart sank. “The witnesses were all professional informers on the record?”

There were many types of informers. There were the ones doing it for the reward, there were the ones who hung around “doing odd jobs,” there were the ones atoning for their crimes with good deeds, and then there were the professional informers. These people had records with the police, had cooperated with the police more than once. Sometimes they nearly seemed like planted agents. They were highly trusted and had very close relations with the police.

The evidence hadn't been invulnerable, but he'd already been dead, and the witnesses had been of this kind...

“Gu Zhao was loyal when he was alive. His good relations with his informers were well known,” Lu Youliang said. “We had to take their statements seriously, whether we liked it or not. The security cameras in the bar where Lu Guosheng's fingerprint had first appeared hadn't filmed him. The bar's employees didn't have any memory of Lu

Guosheng, but there was a bartender who identified Old Cinder, and Old Cinder later admitted that he'd faked Lu Guosheng's fingerprint.—In other words, the fact of this criminal who had been on the run for a year appearing in Yan City had been entirely fabricated and had no foundation.”

Thinking about it, the fact that a wanted criminal who'd brought about a sensational case would be able to hide himself for a year without being found, and would openly go out drinking, in itself filled you with misgivings. Adding in Gu Zhao's unusual enthusiasm and dedication to this work, as well as his solitary actions and even shifty conduct... Luo Wenzhou felt that looking at it from an outsider's perspective, he would have nearly been convinced of the conclusion.

“But since they said he'd solicited bribes, where was the money from the bribes? Where was it stored? What was it used for?”

“The money was in his house, cash, found under the bed, over five million altogether, more or less matching what the informers had said.—His mother had cancer. The old lady herself didn't know. There were medical reports stacked on top of the money. Gu Zhao's family background was unremarkable. His parents were farmers, his father died early, and the family wasn't thriving. His mother worked at a department store in their town. It was temporary work, and the company was improperly managed. No one was conscious of needing insurance then. With an illness like that, that money still wouldn't have been enough.”

The motive was obvious, the evidence was clear, the unshakeable witnesses spoke with certainty.

Never mind that Gu Zhao had been dead; even if he'd still been living, it wasn't clear what would have happened.

“Societal circumstances weren’t as relaxed then as they are now, and the internet hadn’t been developed. With such a big scandal coming out of the City Bureau and the person involved dead, the leaders reacted by covering it up, forbidding it to be mentioned again. If you went to the database to search now, you wouldn’t find it... Fourteen years.”

Fourteen years. The truth had come too late.

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a good while, then suddenly said, “Director Lu, there’s something I think is very strange.”

Lu Youliang looked up, meeting Luo Wenzhou’s gaze reflected in the rearview mirror.

“Our rate of solving cases isn’t a hundred percent. There are always some cases that go unresolved. As long as police manpower is limited, some things have to temporarily be put aside according to their severity and urgency. But while the special investigation group had broken up, the case was still there. As long as it didn’t violate discipline and didn’t interfere with his other work, there would have been nothing wrong with the person in charge of the case continuing to investigate.” Luo Wenzhou said, “Why did Gu Zhao have to act alone?”

Even if he hadn’t wanted to add to his colleagues’ burdens and had chosen to investigate alone, when he’d made some progress or had some new ideas, he must have wanted to find a colleague to accompany him—because according to regulations, evidence gathered by a police officer without notifying anyone else was non-compliant; if he brought it back, it could only be used for reference; it had no value.

Lu Youliang was temporarily silent.

Luo Wenzhou slowly stopped the car by the side of the road. The front of the car was aimed at the City Bureau's front gate. The enormous national emblem over the public security logo reflected the afternoon light.

"Uncle Lu," Luo Wenzhou said quietly, "it's just you and me here. Whatever you say, it won't reach any third person's ears."

Lu Youliang lowered his eyes and at last spoke almost inaudibly. "Yeah. If Gu Zhao suffered an injustice, there's only one possibility. Our team is dirty."

Inside the car, there was only the hum of the air-conditioning and the sound of Lu Youliang tapping his own knee from time to time.

Lu Youliang said, "When we unexpectedly found Lu Guosheng's fingerprint, we added another fifty thousand to the original reward. After it was made known, we received phone calls making reports over and over, saying they'd seen a person like that somewhere. However fast we got there, we came up empty-handed.—Later this also became another confirmation that this business wasn't real."

"The materials of informers on record are all kept strictly secret. Only our own people know their identities," Luo Wenzhou said. "A petty thief couldn't come into a public security bureau to pilfer. If Gu Zhao was framed, then only our own people could have put things into his locker in the duty room.—Gu Zhao suspected that there was a rat in the City Bureau, so he chose to investigate on his own. But he also knew the rules, so when he found The Louvre in the end, to be rigorous about collecting evidence, he must have chosen a partner among the people he trusted. And that person killed him."

Lu Youliang seemed to age ten years in an instant.

Luo Wenzhou turned his head to look at him. "Uncle Lu, is there anything else you want to tell me?"

He had a feeling that there had to be something Lu Youliang wanted to say. But he waited a long time, and Director Lu at last avoided his line of sight. “No. This is all that I know. All of us old farts are suspects. This has to rely on you youngsters.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at him deeply, then drove into the City Bureau’s yard, considerately taking Lu Youliang up to the office building.

When he’d seen him drive off, Lu Youliang sighed gently and reached into his coat pocket—inside it was a miniature listening device that had run out of batteries.



## CHAPTER 133 - Edmond Dantès IV

*Blood washes away dishonor.*—The Count of Monte-Cristo

Half a month later—

Lang Qiao wrote down the date January sixth in the work journal, absent-mindedly examined it for incorrectly written characters, then changed the incorrectly written year—during the first quarter of each year, it was easy to write the previous year without paying attention. By the time you'd managed to accept this year's Gregorian calendar date, you had to once again start getting used to the next year.

A colleague next to her poked her and quietly said, “Xiao Qiao, do you think the Spring Festival's been suspended this year? Ah, and I'd wanted to go back to my hometown.”

“What's the point?” Lang Qiao said without even raising her head. “It's for the best if you don't have vacation, saves you having to bleed out your wallet for all your distant relatives' brats. And anyway...”

Before she could finish, the office door opened.

Everyone went quiet at once. In the corner, Xiao Haiyang's back straightened too stiff; he seemed to become one with the white wall behind him. Lang Qiao gave a start and instantly closed her mouth.

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran walked in one after the other.

There was a rarely seen gravity on Luo Wenzhou's face. He put the stack of materials in his hands on Lang Qiao's desk and motioned for her to hand them out, then spoke very formalistically.

“In order to attain illegal goals, Wei Zhanhong used the Beehive and other high-end consumption locations to harbor wanted criminals

and illegally forged a great quantity of identity information. He is suspected of multiple murders, illegal business transactions, possession of firearms, organizing and leading an underground association, and other criminal charges. A series of related suspects have now been formally placed under arrest. After further investigation, this case will be submitted to the procuratorate for trial.” Luo Wenzhou paused, his gaze passing over everyone’s faces. It stopped on Xiao Haiyang for a moment. Then he said, “One of the suspects, Lu Guosheng, also one of the chief culprits in the National Road 327 case, confessed to the crimes of framing, fabricating a charge against, and murdering the criminal policeman Gu Zhao in order to escape punishment.”

Xiao Haiyang exhaled a long breath, tasting blood in his mouth.

“There is finally a new lead in this unsettled case. Therefore, the bureau has determined to formally reopen the investigation into the fire at The Louvre that took place fourteen years ago. Our Criminal Investigation Team will take the lead, with the full cooperation of our colleagues in other departments. I’ve requested the records for the old case over the last few days, but as you can all see, we presently only hold this thin stack of information. We may have to investigate afresh for more.”

A quiet buzz of discussion started up in the office. Investigating an old case, retrying an old case, were two things that caused the most headaches. It was like returning half-cooked rice to the pot—time had passed, and it didn’t taste right.

“I know,” Luo Wenzhou said, knocking on the table to indicate for everyone to be quiet, “that over a decade has passed. The material evidence has long been destroyed. The person involved and the witnesses have all died or left. It will be difficult to investigate. In the future you may have to spend a long time traveling, and perhaps it will be dangerous. If it doesn’t go well, we’ll spend this Spring Festival in the duty room. It’s the dead of winter, the days are short

and cold, everyone wants to bundle up and watch skits online. Ordinarily no one is willing to drink the northwest wind and go to work—in this respect, as an ‘Emperor of Sleep’ who has suffered from laziness disease for many years, I’m rather qualified to speak for everyone.”

Luo Wenzhou was rather good at giving himself up. He dared to stick a square meter of gold over his own face, and he was also happy to make fun of himself. With a sentence he’d cheered everyone up, but he himself didn’t smile. “The person involved has been dead many years. No one knows who Gu Zhao is if you mention him. He doesn’t have any direct relatives surviving him, and no one will come block the City Bureau’s gates waiting for us to give him justice. Investigating this case, there’s no pressure, no impetus. When we’ve exerted our efforts and finished investigating, there may be no reward apart from some overtime pay for working during the holidays. No one is as indifferent to reputation as the dead. For a person already buried in the earth, whether his position is criminal or martyr shouldn’t impact the quality of his sleep—“

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze swept heavily through the brightly sunlit office. “But, everyone, The Louvre burned, and Gu Zhao died, but we still have to live here. What kind of place do we live in? If right and wrong are mixed and no one cares, if black and white get turned upside down and no one helps, would you enjoy sleeping through the holiday?”

“Tao Ran, report. Get ready to start work!”

Everyone returned silently to their posts. For a time, the only sound in the office was of pages being flipped.

Tao Ran waited for everyone to finish digesting the limited information, then spoke: “The Louvre, also called The Right Bank of the Seine, was a large-scale entertainment center, a collaborative project between domestic and foreign investors. The majority

shareholder came from abroad and is difficult to investigate. The domestic shareholder, however, was a company called Shitong Investments, written off long ago. It had no business at the time and was basically a dummy corporation. By coincidence, the legal representative of this company that no longer exists just happened to be the Wei Clan's so-called 'consultant'—the person we arrested at the Longyun Center. Up to now, however, Wei Zhanhong has refused to acknowledge that The Louvre was once his property.

“In the fire at The Louvre, twenty-six people in all lost their lives, and there were scores of wounded. The damage was tremendous. One eyewitness escaped and accused Gu Zhao of losing control and mistakenly killing the supervisor, becoming the chief culprit behind the fire. This witness was the informer who had received orders to take Gu Zhao into The Louvre that night. His codename was Old Cinder. His real name is Yin Chao. Male, Han ethnicity, fifty-six years old this year, born locally. After the fire at the The Louvre, he broke off contact with us and left Yan City many years ago.

“Apart from Old Cinder, there were six other witnesses in all. Three were professional informers, and the other three were those professing to be businessmen Gu Zhao had extorted money from.—Without exception, all of them have vanished off the face of the earth. I searched the intranet. Some of them died, and some went out of the country.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Old Cinder was born locally?”

“Yeah,” Tao Ran said, “in one of the county towns under the city's administration. He's from South Bend Town in South Bend County.”

“I've already invited over some of Gu Zhao's former colleagues from the City Bureau. Prepare to question them as they arrive. Apart from that, Tao Ran, get in touch with the South Bend police station and find out whether Old Cinder still has any relatives in the area. If he's still living, he must be found. That's critical.—Also, don't put all your

hopes on one person. We have to try to find the ones who left the country as soon as possible.”

The whole Criminal Investigation Team reacted very quickly, beginning to act separately at once.

Xiao Haiyang said, “Captain Luo, I’ll go to South Bend to investigate this Old Cinder.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at him and found that there were faintly discernible veins standing up on his neck. If he hadn’t been wearing a human skin, he would have been showing his fangs, ready to rip Old Cinder to shreds.

“No,” Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly, “let Tao Ran go. Your communication effectiveness is too low.”

Tao Ran understandingly picked up his phone at once and contacted the South Bend police station.

“Captain Luo,” Xiao Haiyang said urgently, “I...”

Luo Wenzhou raised a hand to interrupt him and went into his office dragging Xiao Haiyang by the collar. He quietly asked, “Have you found out who pushed the business of the Yufen Middle School students running away to the City Bureau?”

Xiao Haiyang forced himself to focus. “Yes... I went to talk to the person in charge. The one who sent the report was a civil policeman who’d started working not long ago. He didn’t have any answers. I investigated his background and didn’t find anything wrong.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded. “I see.”

“Captain Luo,” Xiao Haiyang said, “let me...”

“Call over Lang Qiao and investigate another very important matter for me,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted him. Almost inaudibly, he said into his ear, “Go check through the last few years of maintenance records for the security cameras. See which of our leaders approved the repairs, which organization performed them, who the repairmen were, and who was in charge.”

Xiao Haiyang froze.

“In your Uncle Gu’s case, who was behind framing him and which of his informers sold him out aren’t the crucial questions. Do you understand?” Luo Wenzhou said a word at a time. “Hurry up.”

Xiao Haiyang clenched his teeth, quickly nodded, then turned and left.

Tao Ran was just getting ready to say goodbye to Luo Wenzhou and go to South Bend when he ran into someone familiarly walking into the office.

Tao Ran stared. “Fei Du? What are you doing here today?”

“My academic advisor came to cooperate with the investigation.” Fei Du looked him up and down, grabbing a warm drink from the coffee machine and passing it on to him. “Tao Ran-ge, it’s only been a few days since I saw you. How come you’re looking so weary? That won’t do.”

Before Tao Ran could speak, he heard a very elaborate dry cough come out of Luo Wenzhou’s never closed office. Someone seemed to be a little unsatisfied with President Fei’s sequence of paying respects.

Tao Ran: “...”

These days were the peak time for booking tickets to go home for the Spring Festival. Tao Ran had just politely declined Chang Ning’s

invitation to help him book tickets so they could go back to their hometown together. Not only was he physically weary, he was mentally weary, as well. He really couldn't stand looking at the two of them. He waved a hand feebly. "Get away and stop showing off in front of me. I'm doing fine."

Despite meeting with a rebuff, Fei Du didn't find it at all uncongenial. He smile and strolled into Luo Wenzhou's office.

Luo Wenzhou's ears had been pricked up long ago, but he was playing the big-tailed wolf. Hearing footsteps approach, he didn't raise his head, seeming very busy.

Fei Du familiarly picked up his cup, his fingers gently tracing the rim, then stopping on the place where there was a trace of liquid. Looking at Luo Wenzhou with a smile that wasn't quite a smile, he tasted some of the tea under Luo Wenzhou's gaze and pronounced, "It's been steeped too long."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He needed an Incantation of the Golden Hoop to keep down a demon!

Captain Luo changed his sitting position a little unnaturally and, pretending to be in deadly earnest, said, "What is it?"

"I found a trace of that person you asked me to look for." Fei Du glanced out of the corner of his eye at the office behind him, from which they were entirely unshielded, then pulled out a folder stuck under his arm.

There were a few screenshots in the folder that must have come from the aerial footage taken of the ecological park the day they'd caught Lu Guosheng.

They were of a middle-aged man of unremarkable appearance. His height was unimpressive, he had a crewcut, his eyes were long and narrow, and he was a little dark. Both his clothes and his features attracted absolutely no attention mixed among the crowd of villagers doing heavy labor. “You can show the photographs to Lu Guosheng and see whether this is A13.”

Luo Wenzhou hastily forsook his base “ego,” equipping the industrious and hardworking “superego,” entering into a truly earnest mode.

Fei Du went around his desk, using his back to block the gazes coming in through the wide-open door.

“I went to that natural village to ask around. The people who were on the scene that day told me that there was a village family that was just renovating their house. This person claimed to be a new delivery person from the building materials market. He came with a truck full of roof tiles and made himself at home,” Fei Du said. “Under the pretext of going to play mahjong with some villagers near the gas station, he mixed in with them and kept an eye on the ‘sheepdog’s’ movements. The security installation at the ‘sheepdog’s’ door had been hacked, and there was a listening device under the windowsill. If we’d been a step too slow then, he could have eliminated the ‘sheepdog’ right away.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned. “He was keeping an eye on the sheepdog and could have prevented against him taking desperate action and blowing up the ecological park, but I don’t think he could have guaranteed that Lu Guosheng wouldn’t die. Everyone living in that ecological park was a wanted criminal. Each of them had killed more than once. A long-range order could have had them dispose of Lu Guosheng.”

Fei Du didn’t speak, looking at him with a smile at the corners of his mouth. Luo Wenzhou stared, then immediately came around. “You



mean that they also had someone inside the ecological park!”

Fei Du said, “I think it was the person Lu Guosheng had the most contact with. What do you think?”

Luo Wenzhou stood up at once. “Bring One-Eye in for questioning.”

Luo Wenzhou left energetically. A moment later, he turned his head and remembered something, returning to the office. He took Fei Du’s arm. “Wait.”

They were facing at least two forces. One batch was Wei Zhanhong’s crowd, and the other batch was hiding in the midst of things, possessing unknown powers. They seemed to want to excavate old cases, to settle scores with *those people*; their goals seemed to be identical to those of the police.

But Luo Wenzhou couldn’t help tying together the major cases he’d gone through over the last year—in the case of the Su family abducting and selling female children, who, after all, had revealed Su Xiaolan’s method and “personal signature” to Su Luozhan, enticing her into copying them? In Zhou Junmao’s case, who had revealed to Dong Xiaoqing the true reason behind the responsible driver Dong Qian causing the collision? Then there was the mysterious ‘go ask shatov’ in the case of Feng Bin’s murder...and The Reciter, secretly forecasting murders on that reading program.

When you thought about it, each case seemed to contain a trace of the mysterious force, and that trace was shrouded in unspeakable gloom and blood.

They had twice switched the security camera records at the Longyun Center; while completely fooling Wei Zhanhong, they had also showed that they’d already noticed Fei Du’s little maneuvers.

Fei Du turned his head. “Yes?”

“You wait for me here,” Luo Wenzhou said properly. “Starting now, it’s not permitted to act alone. No matter where you’re going, no matter what you’re going to do, you have to let me know.”

Fei Du thought about it, then drew close to his ear.

Just as Luo Wenzhou was thinking that he had something pressing to say to him in private and was preparing to listen with open ears, he felt a touch on his face—Fei Du had used this ambiguous position to kiss his cheek.

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

If he didn’t have the circumstances, this person could create the circumstances to take advantage of him!

Fei Du watched Luo Wenzhou charge out, the words “just you wait” on his face. His smile hadn’t faded yet when his phone suddenly vibrated. Someone had sent him a text message: “You said that if I wanted to make some people pay, I could call this number.”

Fei Du’s brow moved—Wang Xiao?

## CHAPTER 134 - Edmond Dantès V

Fei Du called her back. The girl's timid voice came over the phone: "Hello..."

"It's me." Fei Du sat down next to the window. "You've decided to talk to me?"

Wang Xiao hesitated for quite a while, then with some difficulty quietly said, "What happened at school, I...I have evidence."

Fei Du leaned against the window sill with the office's heating pressing against his back. He didn't speak to ask what the evidence was. He made no sound, even keeping his breathing very low, quietly waiting for the girl to say it herself.

Like a dried-up tube of toothpaste, Wang Xiao had to squeeze her entire body between metal sheets, use all her strength to force out some words. "It's...clothes. Some clothes...from then. I didn't wash them..."

Fei Du sighed silently. "Where are you? I'll send someone to pick you up."

Wang Xiao answered in a voice like a mosquito's. "I'm waiting at home."

"Wang Xiao," Fei Du said warmly but firmly before she hung up the phone, "can you tell me why you suddenly came to this decision?"

Wang Xiao was silent for a while. "I'm going abroad."

One-Eye had known from the day he'd been brought in that there was no escape for him now. Even if he kept his mouth shut, the crimes

he'd committed before were enough to get him an indefinite sentence at best, and there was no ceiling on the worst.

So he was fairly cooperative. There was no need to waste words to get him to talk to Luo Wenzhou.

"I didn't want to kill Lu Guosheng," One-Eye said. "Officer, you saw, I was bringing him food. We have rules there. If one person exposes the base, the people living in the same unit as him all get it in the neck. That's why they all hated Lu Guosheng. When they heard that he may have exposed us, without waiting to hear from above, they took it upon themselves to tie him up and were waiting to push him out to take the blame. But I'm different. I'm loyal. Am I that fucking type of person..."

"Then what type are you? The Virgin Mary?" Luo Wenzhou interrupted him coldly. "Don't give me that. If you talk crap again, I'll send you to eat lead."

One-Eye curled his lip. His shoulders fell. He hemmed and hawed, then frankly confessed, "...They promised they'd send me away."

Luo Wenzhou looked up. "Who are 'they?' Send you away where?"

"Get me out of the base." One-Eye sighed and quietly said, "Out of the country, or to some place no one would recognize me.—From what A13 said, I know there are lots of their people in the company. Don't ask me who their boss is. I didn't even know who my boss was until I got brought in. All these fucking 'important personages' are like mice. They hide themselves away. I'd had enough of living like that, anyway. Sometimes I thought that it wasn't any different from being brought in by you guys and sitting in jail. There was no telling when you'd have to go out and be someone's scapegoat."

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou was temporarily bewildered—this wasn't much like his earlier guesses.

This mysterious third-party force was unscrupulous, even though judging from their aims of catching Lu Gousheng and revealing the base, it seemed that their goals were the same as those of the police. He'd thought they played a role of the "vigilante police" or "avenger" sort, and Xiao Haiyang had even brought up the suspicion that they had something to do with Gu Zhao, but from how it sounded now... they seemed more like they'd belonged to Wei Zhanhong's group, only later they'd had some internal strife.

Was it getting popular among crime syndicates now to use the police in their internal strife?

Luo Wenzhou followed up, "How did you arrange it?"

"They asked that if someone notified me to take care of Lu Guosheng, I had to do everything I could to preserve his life. As long as he had breath left in him, it was enough. It didn't matter whether he was crippled or seriously injured. When the time came, someone would come pick us up and take us to a safe place."

Luo Wenzhou immediately followed up, "Where was the safe place?"

Hearing this, One-Eye laughed. "Officer, when you take money to do something, whether you get the money first or you do it first depends on who's asking a favor from who. I was asking the favor here, and I had to do what they were asking me to be able to get the 'harvest.' Before that, they couldn't have trusted me, and they couldn't have told me where they were going to take me... Anyway, before I had time to do anything, you caught me. I even thought A13 was a police agent planted to mislead me.—Haha, now that I'm here, you could call this a safe place. At least I can sleep well here without guarding against being stabbed in the middle of the night."

When he'd finished questioning One-Eye and walked out, pondering deeply, Luo Wenzhou saw Fei Du waiting for him at the door.

“Wang Xiao is coming,” Fei Du told him briefly.

Luo Wenzhou hadn’t yet come around from the information One-Eye had revealed. He froze.

“I just called her parents and found a female police officer to accompany her,” Fei Du said seriously. “But there’s something very wrong here. When I left Wang Xiao my number in the first place, it was actually just to comfort her. Your experiences growing up and your family background mold your character. It’s very hard to be impacted by a few words from an outsider, and even if you change, it’s still a slow process. For a time you can’t escape the shackles of your instinctive notions. A girl like Wang Xiao, lacking close relationships from the time she was little, accustomed to being overlooked, is very sensitive to other people’s gazes. She’s not the type to dare to step forward bravely in her own defense, especially when she hasn’t healed from her trauma.”

“So what’s the reason?”

Fei Du frowned. “Wang Xiao told me that she’s preparing to go abroad.”

As soon as he frowned, Luo Wenzhou subconsciously frowned along with him. When he noticed this, Luo Wenzhou pressed a finger to the center of Fei Du’s brow, forcing his pinched-together brows to separate. He asked, “Where did her family get the money? Could it be the school or the parents of the students involved wanting to use money to keep the peace?”

Fei Du tipped his head back slightly from the push, a little helplessly, but his expression softened. “First take their hush money, then go to a public safety bureau to report them?”

“If it were me, that’s what I’d do. Trick the asshole out of his money, then make him call me dad.” Luo Wenzhou sloppily put an arm over Fei Du’s shoulders and pushed him forward. “It’s normal for Wang Xiao to want to change schools under the circumstances. The only problem is the money.—What about this makes you think there’s something wrong?”

Fei Du lowered his voice and said into his ear, “I’d planned to cover the expense of going abroad to study for her. I’d already notified the foundation’s people, but they didn’t have time to get in contact with her.”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes and turned his head to look at Fei Du.

“Someone got there first—someone was closely watching this case and doing the same things that I was,” Fei Du said almost inaudibly. “When you consider it, don’t you think that the fundamental reason we were able to catch Lu Guosheng was that Wang Xiao mentioned that Lu Guosheng had met Wei Wenchuan at the Longyun Center on November sixth?”

If not for that important clue, Wei Wenchuan and Wei Zhanhong may have argued their way out.

If not for that clue, the police wouldn’t even have found the Beehive, never mind tracing back from it to their base at the ecological park. By the time they’d slowly tracked down the clues, the maggots on Lu Guosheng’s corpse would have turned into flies.

Of the students who had been at Wei Wenchuan’s birthday feast that day, not one had known the details of Feng Bin’s murder.

And the people who had been shown Lu Guosheng’s picture and questioned because they’d run away with Feng Bin wouldn’t have been invited to Wei Wenchuan’s private gathering—these should have

been two completely unrelated parallel lines, which had been tied together because of the words Wang Xiao had overheard in the bathroom, a probability like that of a comet hitting the earth.

Luo Wenzhou's steps paused. "Come on."

An hour later, Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du arrived at Yufen Middle School and went through a teacher to find the girls Wang Xiao had mentioned and question them.

Because of the earth-shaking scandal, the school had been forced to take a month-long vacation to be investigated and had only recently started up again. Quite a few students had changed schools, and their parents had collectively requested the school fees be returned. The formerly ostentatious and domineering Queen Bee Liang Youjing seemed to have become a different person. Her lips were dry and cracked, and she was wrapped in an ill-fitting uniform jacket, looking like an awkward country girl who'd put on a sack. The girl with the wind at her feet, doing her makeup as she walked through the corridor, seemed to have been only an illusion.

Luo Wenzhou didn't waste words. "On the day Wei Wenchuan invited you for lunch on his birthday, do you still remember what time you got back to school?"

The girls looked back at him in bewilderment. One of them got up her courage and said, "I don't think we did go back to school."

"Didn't we go to karaoke after?"

"Yeah, they brought wine, we got drunk and got rooms at the karaoke place."

The expression of the teacher next to them looked absolutely dreadful—their students had gone out to a place of entertainment,



gotten drunk, and hadn't come back to school overnight, and the school hadn't done anything about it.

“The likelihood that Wang Xiao lied isn't great. It's not very realistic to make an ordinary little girl go fool the police. She may have been found out, but much more likely she would have exposed herself.” After sending the dejected students away, Luo Wenzhou turned and said to the stiff-faced teacher on duty, “Could you contact the security room for me and see if the security camera records for the classroom building from November are still there?”

Normally the school's security camera records were preserved for fifty days; but since so much had happened lately, no one had dared to touch the backups that originally ought to have been deleted, keeping them for future reference. That day's records came to them very quickly. It had been a day off, and the whole classroom building had been empty. It was very quiet.

On camera, Wang Xiao came out of the classroom alone and went to the bathroom in the classroom building.

“Wait a minute,” Fei Du suddenly said. “There's someone there.”

The teacher on duty who was accompanying them was nearly broke into gooseflesh all over at these words. She fixed her eyes on the footage and saw an out-of-the-way staircase entrance in the corner where a middle-aged woman with the look of a school custodian.

The teacher blurted out, “That...that doesn't look like one of the school's people!”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Are you sure?”

As though disclaiming responsibility, the teacher hastily said, “She really isn't one of ours. I patrol the classroom building daily and know all the staff. She's not one of them!”

They saw the middle-aged woman follow Wang Xiao to the bathroom. First she looked all around and saw that there was no one around; then she stuck her head into the bathroom and took a look, likely determining whether Wang Xiao was in one of the stalls. Then she took something out of her pocket and walked inside.

After about the time it would take to say a few sentences, the middle-aged woman came out of the bathroom, lowered the brim of her hat, and quickly left.

A good while later, Wang Xiao somewhat nervously came out of the bathroom, walking hesitatingly towards the classroom. She hung by the back door of the classroom, looking inside. When she'd determined there was no one there, she seemed to breath a sigh of relief, then opened the door and went inside.

“Wang Xiao didn't lie.” Fei Du paused the video at the moment she was pressed to the glass looking into the classroom. “She really did hear the voices of the girls who had bullied her. Look here, she was worried about running into them in the classroom. That's why she did that.—It must have been a rather high-quality recording and broadcasting device.”

Luo Wenzhou took out his phone and sent a picture of the middle-aged woman to his colleagues. “Investigate this person's identity.”

At this time, Tao Ran had already very efficiently taken someone to go to South Bend County.

South Bend was clearly a later-developing area in Yan City's environs. There were still many low shacks and shantytowns. It was just in the process of changing its face, and everything had been torn down into a mess. The roads were full of potholes. A civil policeman from the South Bend police station came out to greet them, very enthusiastically leading the way. “This Yin Chao's family still lives

here, though he moved away long ago. I just asked around for a general picture. He didn't even come back when their own house was demolished. His little brother Yin Ping brought in his letter of authorization to collect the money."

Tao Ran hadn't expected to find a trace of Old Cinder so easily. He hurriedly asked, "So has he always been in contact with his brother?"

"No," the civil policeman said. "Sir, just you figure, I got your phone call this morning and went to ask them. This Yin Ping was vague and evasive, and I thought something was off. I pushed him some more, and found out that the letter of authorization was a forgery, so he could keep the money from the demolition of the house all to himself! Hey, drive slower up ahead, the road's being repaired... It used to be that if they tore down your house, a whole family could pass their days happily based on their crappy house, but now—well, parents aren't parents, children aren't children, brothers and sisters are the same, scuffling every day over a bit of fucking money. Lately when we've been dispatched it hasn't been for anything else, it's all conflicts produced by this... It's right up ahead."

Yin Ping's family had just moved out of their old home and were living in a temporary rental apartment. The three members of the family lived together. The lighting in the home was poor, and it seemed there wasn't even any heat. It felt like a chilly and damp ice house. Yin Ping was Old Cinder Yin Chao's identical twin brother. He was also fifty-six years old and worked tending a boiler. His thin face was drawn out long, and there was an extra decade of creases on it. He had an unspeakable air of gloominess.

As soon as Tao Ran saw him, he froze—the records of Old Cinder left behind in the City Bureau were from over a decade ago, but Tao Ran could still see the similarities between his features and those of the old man in front of him; they really were identical twins. Having a shameful deed on his conscience, Yin Ping cowered when he opened

the door and saw the police. He hurried to order his wife, as gloomy as him, to bring tea.

“Now you’ve been found out, you know you’re in trouble? How come you didn’t think of that when you forged your brother’s signature?” The civil policeman’s face was harsh. “You broke the law, do you understand?”

Yin Ping’s head drooped. He didn’t dare to make a sound. There was a pair of filthy wool gloves on his hands, which lay on his knees, uneasily twisting the fabric of his pants.

“We haven’t come here primarily to investigate that question.” Tao Ran softened his voice and put his work ID on the table.

Yin Ping’s gaze passed over his ID, and even his movements twisting his pants stopped. He went stiff all over, for some reason afraid.

“Your brother Yin Chao was an important witness in one of our cases,” Tao Ran said. “We’re looking for him. Do you have his contact information?”

Yin Ping’s chin was nearly touching his chest. He gently shook his head.

The South Bend police officer said, “Do you not have it, or do you not dare to get it out? You have the guts to hog family property, but you don’t have the guts to talk to your brother, isn’t that right? Your type of...”

Tao Ran waved a hand to interrupt him. “Yin Ping, when was the last time you contacted Yin Chao?”

Yin Ping raised his eyelids and looked at him. Then he quickly dodged Tao Ran’s gaze. He stammered for a long time. “About ten years ago... My brother said he’d offended someone in Yan City and

had to leave. At first my old mother was alive, and he sent money back often. About eight or nine...ten years ago, my old mother died, and we couldn't contact him. So I...I went to the last place he'd sent money from to look for him."

"Where was this?"

"T Province," Yin Ping said. "I asked around everywhere and searched for half a month before I found him. He looked like he had some money and was comfortable. He wasn't willing to come back, saying his enemy was too powerful and they'd kill him if he returned to Yan City. I...I didn't know where this enemy of his had come from, anyway. I lost my temper, said, 'If you don't come back, it's as though my old mother never gave birth to you! You're an unfilial scoundrel who's forgotten his roots! Sooner or later you'll meet retribution!'"

At the beginning, Yin Ping had been careful. By the time he came to the last sentence, he must have stirred up his anger. The veins at the corners of his forehead stood out, and he began to shout hoarsely.

Tao Ran paused. Without true feeling, it really wouldn't be possible to put on such a lifelike performance. "So you didn't contact him again afterwards?"

"Why should I contact him? He didn't belong to our family anymore. What qualifications did he have to take a share in our family's things?" With his neck straight, Yin Ping raised his head and looked at the civil policeman who had spoken before. "I didn't break the law, I didn't do anything wrong!"

## CHAPTER 135 - Edmond Dantès VI

Yin Ping's eyes were full of blood, but his face was white. His dry lips trembled incessantly, and his cheeks twitched unnaturally.

Tao Ran suddenly interrupted Yin Ping's dispute with the civil policeman. His eyes sweeping over Yin Ping's gloved hands, he asked, "Why are you wearing gloves at home?"

Yin Ping seemed to be in a condition of psychological stress. Hearing this, he immediately looked vigilantly towards Tao Ran, and quickly said in a quiet voice, "I scalded them while tending the boiler."

Saying this, as though he was afraid Tao Ran wouldn't believe him, he carefully pulled off his gloves a bit, laying the twisted burn scars on his palms bare in front of the police. Then he quickly withdrew his hands and lowered his head, seeming to feel a sense of inferiority about his hideous hands. He said haltingly, "Anyway...he was no good. I don't feel guilty."

Tao Ran frowned faintly. Then his gaze calmly swept around the shabby rental apartment—the family was poor, but the home didn't lack living energy. There was a full set of cookware, and crochet covers spread over the table and the old TV, light-colored and very clean. It was clear that the mistress of the house had exhausted all her capabilities to make life a little better for her family.

Quite a few old photographs were hanging on the living room wall directly across from the front door. There were individual shots, and there were family portraits. All of them were clustered around an old-style certificate. On the certificate was written: "Student Yin Xiaolong has been chosen as a triple A student in the first semester of sixth grade." In one corner was a photograph of a little boy who looked about seven or eight years old, holding a toy machine gun, smiling

widely towards the camera. This must have been Student Yin Xiaolong himself.

“Is that your son?” Tao Ran asked, pointing to the certificate and the photograph on the wall.

Yin Ping hadn’t expected him to ask this. He stared, then nodded dully. “Yes.”

Tao Ran approached and looked over the elementary school certificate. Judging from the date that the certificate’s recipient had attended sixth grade, the boy Yin Xiaolong must have been around thirty now.

“He got a certificate. His grades must have been pretty good?”

“No, they weren’t, that’s the only certificate he’s ever received. We couldn’t bear to throw it away when we moved.” Yin Ping’s wife, who’d seemed to be only set dressing, spoke. Seeing everyone’s gazes fall on her, she very uncomfortably lowered her head, picking at the chilblains on her fingers.

“He’s called Yin Xiaolong, I see? Is he married?” Tao Ran asked idly. “What does he do now?”

“Oh, he doesn’t have a significant other yet. His educational record is bad, we don’t have any resources, and he’s clumsy and bad at talking. The girls don’t like him,” the woman said quietly. “He works at a 4S store doing manual work...”

“He was just being polite,” Yin Ping roughly interrupted her, “why are you talking so much?”

The woman cowered and faltered, not daring to speak.

Tao Ran smiled at her. When he smiled, it was like a cleansing spring breeze sweeping over you, bringing its own endless supply of approachability. “And what work do you do?”

“We work for the same employer.” Indeed, the woman relaxed slightly in front of him, saying quietly, “He tends the boiler, and I wash up a bit in the dining hall.”

“Oh, you’re colleagues.” Tao Ran thought about it, then said, “Did the two of you meet at work? How many years have you been married?”

“Over thirty years... Nearly thirty-two.” The woman smiled somewhat awkwardly. “It was our boss who introduced us.—A few years back we were a ‘working couple,’ which sounds pretty prosperous, but these last few years our employer hasn’t been doing very well, and we’ve had to make do... So...Comrade Police Officer, my brother-in-law isn’t coming back. When the old lady was alive, she said herself that she wanted to break off relations with him. So if the relationship is broken off, and you can’t find him, then the house...the house has nothing to do with him, so you couldn’t say we broke the law, right?”

“Enough,” Yin Ping scolded her. “Stupid womenfolk who don’t understand anything shouldn’t interrupt. Go boil some water!”

The woman agreed meekly, shut her mouth, wiped her hands on her apron, picked up the teapot, and went into the kitchen. Clearly she was accustomed to submitting to mistreatment and taking orders.

A poor and lowly husband and wife, one ready to beat, the other ready to be beaten, living and working together for over thirty years, with a son already grown up and living with them. Even though their employer was declining rapidly, the old couple still had no intention of resigning.

Conservative, steady, weak, content with the status quo—it was a typical, rather old-fashioned household, simply living on another



planet from Old Cinder, an informer who wandered in the gray areas. It seemed that no matter what there could be no connection between them.

Tao Ran exhaled silently. When he'd first come through the door and suddenly encountered Yin Ping, who looked too similar to Old Cinder, a pile of vague doubts had arisen in his mind. He'd nearly suspected that Old Cinder Yin Chao's flight had failed, and he had blended in under his brother's name.

Now it seemed that he'd been overthinking things.

If it had been like that, it wouldn't have been enough for these twins to look alike; there would also have had to be a telepathic link and transplanted memories between them for one to be able to seamlessly take the other's place at a position he'd worked at for over thirty years.

Yin Ping kept glancing at him. "What else do you want to ask?"

"All right, it's like this, could I trouble you to help me out?—Do you have anything left over from when Yin Chao sent the money? If there's an envelope with an address, that's enough. Please let me refer to it." Tao Ran thought about it, then very tactfully said, "Also, he may have contacted you, but you were at work or busy and didn't pick up his phone call or something. Just in case, as a formality, we'd like to screen your most recent e-mails and communications records..."

Wooden-faced, Yin Ping said stiffly, "He hasn't contacted us."

Tao Ran didn't get angry at being interrupted, only looked at him with a faint smile.

Yin Ping sat stiffly for a moment. Then, seeming to have finally accumulated enough force to stand up and walk, he went wordlessly

into the bedroom and searched through something. After a moment, he brought a plastic-covered little notebook out of the bedroom, probably used for keeping accounts, written full of all the necessities life demanded. There were many things crammed into the covers of the notebook—IC call cards, souvenir postcards...and a train ticket stub.

“This is all I have.” Yin Ping gave Tao Ran the train ticket and said, “This is the stub left over from when I took the slow train to T Province to find him. The things he sent back... I didn’t keep any of them. He doesn’t belong to our family anymore, what’s the use of his hypocrisy?”

A brother who’d cut off relations long ago, unwilling even to come back to attend his mother’s funeral when she passed away—it did sound like any mutual affection was out of the question. If Yin Ping had kept stubs from the bribe money Old Cinder had sent, that would have been a little suspicious; but now...

Tao Ran and the civil police officer interrogated Yin Ping concerning his brother Old Cinder’s whereabouts out of town. Yin Ping talked as he remembered; there was no knowing whether he was accurate. It sounded as though this Old Cinder had wandered around over half of China, never having a permanent residence. Getting no results here was within expectations. While Tao Ran was disappointed, he could still accept this outcome. Seeing there really was nothing he could get, they could only say goodbye to Yin Ping and leave to carefully investigate all the Yin family’s communications records. If there really was nothing there, they’d go to T Province and try their luck.

Before leaving, Tao Ran waved a hand to indicate there was no need for the couple to show them out. “If you remember anything concerning Yin Chao, please contact us any time.”

Yin Ping said coldly, “I don’t usually think about him.”

Before Tao Ran could speak, he continued, “He didn’t live like a normal person. He wasn’t a normal person. Him being born into this family was a burden from a past life. He only brought us misfortune, never good luck. At his age, he didn’t have a wife or child. He only went out to fool around, terrifying everyone around him. He’s been... been gone so many years, and he’s still bringing us trouble.”

Tao Ran stared. As Yin Ping spoke, hatred sparked uncontrollably, like a ghost fire, in his clouded, expressionless eyes. The tone of his voice changed when he pronounced the word “gone.”

Right in front of him, Yin Ping shut the door and coldly said, “Don’t come again!”

The bad-tempered civil policeman from the South Bend police station leapt up and began to curse, but Tao Ran frowned slightly.

It was only a household dispute. Not coming home when his mother died really would make people nurse a grievance; anyone who had such a relative likely wouldn’t have anything good to say about him. But why was Yin Ping’s hatred for Old Cinder so deep? It was almost overflowing.

Tao Ran even felt that if Old Cinder had been standing in front of him, Yin Ping may have simply attacked him.

He drove the civil policeman back to the South Bend police station, listening to his continuing moral indignation. “Did you see that? That’s the sort.—Let me tell you, that was the expression of someone with a guilty conscience!”

Tao Ran froze, looking in the rearview mirror at the civil policeman full to bursting with a sense of justice.

The civil policeman said, “I’ve seen lots of that type of person. He’s clearly done some things to wrong the other person, so he has to

jump higher than anyone else, make more noise than anyone else—but actually there’s a mirror in his heart. He knows he’s no good. The guiltier he feels, the more he acts like that, as though he can crush his conscience by shouting. Heh, in the end, wasn’t it all for the sake of hogging the family property?”

Tao Ran’s heart moved.

Just then, the colleague he’d brought with him to go pay a visit to Yin Ping said, “It’s finally arrived. The internet is too slow.—Deputy Tao, they’ve consulted Old Cinder’s statement from back then. It’s scanned, the signal was poor, so I just opened it... Ah, this person encountered quite a bit of crime. Who’d have expected him to break faith and commit perjury? The City Bureau and the elders treated him so well.”

Tao Ran absently said, “Oh?”

“During the fire at The Louvre, Old Cinder was there and nearly didn’t escape,” his colleague said as he scrolled through the scan of the old file. “He was fairly clever. He didn’t get a disfiguring burn scar, but he put his hands on a metal railing while he was escaping and burned off his skin. They couldn’t even take his fingerprints then.”

Tao Ran slammed the brakes.

Meanwhile, Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du had returned to the City Bureau.

“Captain Luo, we’ve found that woman you just sent over.”

Luo Wenzhou was somewhat taken aback. “So fast?”

The middle-aged woman who’d followed Wang Xiao into the bathroom had been wearing a hat, her features not very discernible,

and there had only been a screenshot from a video. She would have been hard to find even for the police, unless...

“She has a criminal record,” his colleague said.

“Zhu Feng, female, forty-two years old. Fourteen years ago, her newly-wedded husband went out to buy groceries, had a dispute with someone, and that person suddenly pulled out a melon knife and stabbed him eight times in the chest and abdomen. He died at the hospital. It was later confirmed that the killer was mentally disabled. His family members said they took their eyes off him for a while and he got away. It says that when the case was being tried, the killer saw the deceased’s relation Zhu Feng in court and cheekily pulled a face at her. Later the killer was taken to a mental hospital. Zhu Feng always thought that he was faking his mental disability. Half a year after the killing, she took a knife and tried to break into the mental hospital to get revenge, but she failed. The hospital caught her and called the police.”

“Mental disability?” Hearing about this case, Luo Wenzhou felt that it sounded familiar.

“One of the cases transferred for research for the first Picture Album Project,” Fei Du said. “Apart from this one, the rest were all unsolved, remember? The mentally disabled killer later died under unclear circumstances along with the other suspects whose crimes there wasn’t evidence for.”

Luo Wenzhou’s pupils contracted.

Just then, his phone suddenly trembled.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Tao Ran, what is it?”

“I suspect something.” Tao Ran was driving terribly. Passing over a large hole, he simply stepped on the gas and drove right over. The

police car was nearly leaping and hopping along the rugged little county road. “Wenzhou, I suspect that the informer who sold out Gu Zhao wasn’t Old Cinder!”

Luo Wenzhou said, “If it wasn’t Old Cinder, who was it?”

“Yin Ping, Old Cinder’s identical twin brother.” As he spoke, Tao Ran had already hit the brakes, stopping by Yin Ping’s house. “I don’t have evidence. It’s instinct, I can’t clearly say.—Yin Ping seriously resents his brother’s position as an informer. He’s not afraid of the police, but when he saw my work ID, his manner was very fearful. My guess is that it’s because he saw that I was from the City Bureau. While we spoke, he was very careful to prevent his wife from revealing their household circumstances. Also, his wife inadvertently said, ‘My brother-in-law isn’t coming back.’ Yin Ping also said that his brother sent money home in the early years, but the places he described were too scattered, and they covered a few years—even if Old Cinder had been hiding from someone, could he really not have found anywhere to hide over the course of a few years? That’s not how it normally goes...”

“A wily hare has three burrows,” but he still needs “burrows.” Changing to a completely strange place every few days couldn’t have given the overcautious old informer a sense of security.

It sounded as though one person had been playing two characters, and he hadn’t been doing it well at all. It had ceased abruptly when the old lady died—it seemed that it had just been to fool the old woman.

Old Cinder had lived on the edge; his relationships had been weak and shallow. If he’d disappeared, it wouldn’t have impacted anyone. Likely the only person in the world who would sincerely worry about him was his own mother.

Tao Ran rushed up the stairs two steps at a time. “And there’s the fingerprints—after coming out of The Louvre, Old Cinder went right to the hospital. His hands had been seriously burned, and his fingerprints weren’t recorded. You know that identical twins share the same DNA. The only thing he couldn’t fake would be the fingerprints. I just saw Yin Ping wearing gloves, and his hands have burn wounds on them!”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Then where’s the real Old Cinder?”

Tao Ran raised his head.

“Police, open up!”

“Yin Ping, we’d like you to come back to the City Bureau with us to cooperate with our investigation!”

Yin Ping’s wife timidly opened the dilapidated wooden door a little crack. “He...he just went out...”

“Went where?”

“He said there was something at work. He got on his bike and left...”

Tao Ran turned and ran. “Notify the police station, the district sub-bureau, and the traffic department to search for a red electric bike—”

## CHAPTER 136 - Edmond Dantès VII

South Bend County Town was like a face that had been cut with a knife, before the swelling had subsided and the stitches had been removed. It was dying to change its face in one night, in such a hurry it was in rather dire straits.

Everywhere you looked was the turned earth and smoke of construction sites. The roads familiar to the old inhabitants were separated and merged one by one; once you could have used your feet to measure the land, but today you couldn't even clearly roll over it with wheels.

This era was a bulldozer wrecking everything. All the secrets that miserable people thought they had "buried deep" were in fact only covered in a layer of surface soil. A light blow, and their unconcealed ugly shapes would be exposed.

At the moment that this vast and mighty process of tearing down houses had begun to disturb the peaceful life of the little town, Yin Ping had known that there would come a day like this.

The dirt he had used fourteen years ago to cover up wouldn't be enough to do the job; in the end, it was paper couldn't contain a fire.

The red electric bike with the motley paint job speeded along the iced ground. It rolled, scraping the side mirror of a sedan parked by the road. The side mirror fell and shattered, and the electric bike flew up.

Yin Ping climbed to his feet, limping. Without even taking the time to pat the mud off himself, he picked up the handlebars of the fallen electric bike, mounted it, and fled. His torn gloves revealed an expanse of burn scars. The owner of the car with the scraped-off side mirror came out of a little supermarket by the road just then and chased a few steps after him. Seeing the responsible driver leave him



in the dust, he hopped and cursed, then took out his phone and called the police.

News of this call propagated throughout the mighty internet; Yin Ping and his red electric bike became a virus whose location had been fixed.

“We’ve located him,” Tao Ran quickly reported to Luo Wenzhou over the phone. “I’m going over there right now.”

Luo Wenzhou seemed to want to say something, but Tao Ran interrupted him in a hurry. “Yin Ping is very important, I know, don’t worry, I’ll definitely bring him back.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Wait, listen to me, call for...”

The word “backup” hadn’t gone out over the signal when it was stopped by the phone being hung up.

If Yin Ping was the person who had sold out Gu Zhao back then, then he might be the only break they could find. He was too important; no one had expected him to turn up without warning like this.

Yin Ping could almost hear the sounds of police sirens carried by the northwest wind. He felt like a bug struggling in a spider’s web. The winter wind brought tears to his dry eyes. They rolled down and mixed with snot. He remembered a night fourteen years ago, as bone-piercing as this—

Yin Chao and Yin Ping<sup>4</sup> were identical twins, like people made in the same mold.

But since they were little, their parents had played favorites. When they talked about them to others, they always said that the one who

was good in school was the big brother, and the one who was obedient was the little brother.

“Obedient” was an apt judgement; a dog was also obedient.

When they grew up, their father passed away, and the two of them became the big brother who went out into the world to seek success and the useless little brother who took on his father’s job.

They were clearly exactly the same, but it seemed that one of them had stolen the other’s luck and talent—even when it came to girlfriends. Yin Chao’s seemed to be of a much “higher grade” than his.

But luckily, Yin Chao’s marriage later had fallen through, because during the engagement, the girl had been killed on her way home from work. All the luck Yin Chao had “stolen” from him seemed to backfire against him. From then on, the eldest son became a different person. He left his job, didn’t take the world by storm; he was idle all day, doing who knew what, and then simply broke off contact with his family.

At holidays, his mother always burned incense, asking for blessings from the gods and praying to the Buddha, waiting for his big brother Yin Chao to drop out of the heavens like a prize.

When things had gone wrong for his big brother, though Yin Ping hadn’t said it, he’d felt some satisfaction at his misfortune. His years of suppressed resentment were like grass roots in the wilderness; a spring wind blew over them, and in one night they grew beyond control. Each time he saw his old mother’s desolate face, he wanted to asked her in satisfaction—aren’t you always talking about Yin Chao? Don’t you say every day that he has talent, has courage? His courage is so great he won’t even come home. In the end, aren’t I, the “useless” one, looking after you in old age, you old fart?

But very soon Yin Ping discovered that it didn't matter what his shadowy big brother became; he was still dear to his old mother. It didn't matter that Yin Ping conscientiously went to work every day to support the family. In the eyes of their biased old mother, he was still only an inessential extra child.

Then some freak had taken Yin Chao, and he'd moved back from the city to South Bend Town and rented a house not far from home. On Yin Xiaolong's birthday, in an unprecedented occurrence, he appeared at their dining table; he'd bought a cake and cleaned himself up unusually well.

Yin Chao said that he'd made some money recently and remembered that his mother had once saved an advertisement for a luxury cruise ship. He hadn't shown filial piety towards her in so many years, and at last he had the ability to realize a dream for her. His little nephew was just on winter vacation, so he'd made reservations for his old mother and his brother's whole family to go together.

Winter was the boiler room's busiest period; Yin Ping thought that if he asked for vacation at a time like this, his superior wouldn't think it was justified. But Yin Chao, being deliberately off-handed, said that if he really didn't have the time, there was still nothing he could do; the money had already been spent, 20,000 a person, and there was no getting it back.

The stupid old woman had flown into a rage after hearing the price—his big brother had laid most of a hundred thousand yuan on the table. Was it fitting for a brother not to even be able to get a week's vacation? It was a scandal.

By this point, Yin Ping had already determined that his brother had bad intentions, that he wanted to harm Yin Ping. But while he was enraged, he also thought something was off. At the time, 20,000 yuan really was a great deal for an ordinary person. Would Yin Chao find it

worthwhile to spend so much money in order to make him lose his job?

For him to spend so much money could only mean he had designs on Yin Ping's life.

So that night, full of misgivings, Yin Ping had stealthily followed his big brother Yin Chao all the way back to the rental house in town where he was staying.

Yin Chao was frighteningly alert and careful. Yin Ping was nearly discovered over and over. But luckily he was very familiar with South Bend Town.

Then, with his own eyes, he saw some people corner Yin Chao in the yard of the rental house.

Yin Ping didn't even dare to take a deep breath, wishing he could get into the mouse hole in the wall. He didn't know himself what he was afraid of; he only instinctively sensed danger.

Yin Ping heard one of the people say, "Old Cinder, what's this you've bought for your family? A cruise? You want to hide, do you? Let me tell you, even if it was an aircraft carrier, it would still go down. There's not much time, let's be frank. We'll give you the night to think it over—do you want five million in cash, or do you want your mother, your brother, and your nephew's heads?"

Yin Ping didn't understand much of this, but it was still as though he'd fallen through a hole in the ice. He'd always appraised his big brother with the greatest possible malice, but he hadn't expected his big brother to surpass his imagination!

Yin Ping hid for a long time, nearly freezing into a human icicle in the cold deep winter night. When those people had gone far away and a

dim light came on in the little house, he came out like a walking corpse.

Yin Chao looked grave and seemed about to go out. He opened the door halfway and saw Yin Ping standing at the gate. He was stunned.

Yin Ping stopped Yin Chao and using both hard and soft tactics forced him to answer that he was acting as an informer for a police officer, that “Old Cinder” was his codename. Yin Chao said that they were investigating a very dangerous case and had alerted the enemy. There was someone within the police force revealing secrets to the suspects, and now they’d somehow found out that Yin Chao was also mixed up with this and had come to him with threats and bribes.

Yin Chao didn’t tell him concretely what the case was or which police officer was involved, but from these few words, Yin Ping was already scared out of his mind. He didn’t care about anything else. Ignoring right and wrong, he knelt down, begging his big brother to take the money, take the money at once. Yin Chao was terribly upset by his cowardly little brother and told him, “I’d wanted to send you all away temporarily on the cruise. I didn’t expect they’d find out about it. Don’t panic, I’ll think of another way... Stay here for now. I’ll go find my partner to talk it over, see if we can find someone trustworthy to protect you.”

Yin Ping scrambled to hold him back. “Ge, this is the criminal underworld, isn’t it? You can’t offend the criminal underworld. The police come and go, but these people linger. If just one fish slips through the net, your family won’t live in peace! Mom is nearly seventy, and there’s Xiaolong... Xiaolong is still little! You can’t—”

Yin Chao hastily threw him off. “Don’t make trouble. I’ll fix it.”

Seeing that he’d thrown him off and was about to leave, Yin Ping panicked. He snatched up an ashtray next to him and brought it down fiercely on the back of his brother Yin Chao’s head—

He would never forget that scene. It was as though his soul had left his body, and also as though he'd practiced this movement thousands of times. Seeing Yin Chao fall without making a sound, Yin Ping, in his fright, also felt an unspeakable excitement.

It was as though he'd been possessed. He'd stared blankly for a moment. Then, his limbs not following his instructions, he'd heavily hit his own brother on the head a few times, until Yin Chao had entirely stopped breathing...

Then, taking advantage of the dark night and the high wind, he'd dug a hole at the base of the big tree in the little back yard—the tree in the back yard was hundreds of years old, surrounded by a metal railing. It was a protected old tree. There was a local policy that even if houses were being torn down and roads were being repaired, no one would casually touch the tree. It was a natural sheltering umbrella.

Yin Ping was frighteningly calm. He systematically cleaned up the bloodstains and the weapon, then threw the nightmare of his life into the hole. Before he could relax and cover it up with dirt, a phone ringtone suddenly came from Yin Chao's pocket.

Yin Ping was so scared his hands and feet went cold. There was a moment where he thought that the ringing of the phone was calling Yin Chao's soul.

The first time, the phone stopped ringing before he could answer it. It was silent for half a minute, and then it quickly rang a second time.

Moved by mysterious forces, Yin Ping jumped into the hole and took the old cell phone from the dead man's hand. "...hello?"

"Old Cinder!"

“...it’s me.”

The man on the phone said, “The Louvre, seven-twenty in the evening the day after tomorrow. I have everything ready. Nothing’s changed with you, right?”

Yin Ping felt as if something was blocking his windpipe. With difficulty, he squeezed out the word, “...right.”

He sat all night in Yin Chao’s rental house, staring emptily into space. His hands and feet went numb. He seemed to have been frozen in a nightmare, and this all really did seem like a bad dream.

When he heard the crows crying outside the window, a weak hope rose in Yin Ping’s heart, thinking he was about to wake. But suddenly, the sound of motorcycle engines came through the quiet dawn.

Yin Ping gave a start. Right, those people had said that he only had one night.

Did he want the money, or did he want his and his family’s lives? The answer couldn’t have been simpler.

Dawn hadn’t broken yet, and perhaps the people who’d come to find him hadn’t been well-acquainted with Yin Chao. They couldn’t see the slight differences between the identical twins. When Yin Ping told them the time and location he’d heard over the phone, the person he was talking to smiled, got out a phone, and gave it to him.

There was a smile in the words of the man on the phone. “Actually, I knew the time and place you’d arranged. I just had my subordinates test whether you were telling the truth.—Old brother, you’re in good faith, and so am I. How about it, you must know who I am by now? The two of us are in the same boat.”

Yin Ping absolutely didn't understand anything he was saying. He could only agree dully. The other person presumably hadn't expected his subordinates to get the wrong person. For a time he didn't suspect his identity at all. He casually told him, "Don't be nervous. I'll tell you what to do, step by step. You can't get it wrong."

How could a well-behaved boiler operator have so much nerve?

Fourteen years afterwards, Yin Ping himself didn't understand it. He wore a human skin, but there seemed to be a monster born from nothing in his heart. It had bitten his own brother to death. For the sake of his life, he could only strengthen his nerve and continue on, carrying the departed spirit beneath the big scholar tree.

The next day, Yin Ping asked for a vacation from work and fobbed off his family with "work is busy, I can't go." After tricking both sides, giving as his reason that free was free, they may as well give it to someone else out of human feeling, and that person could help take care of the family, he found someone to carry his ID, make up the number, give the false appearance that the whole family of four had gone on the cruise, while he himself stealthily went to Yin Chao's house, put on Yin Chao's clothes, and picked up his props. Having dressed himself up like this, he became "Old Cinder."

The huge crisis forced out all of his wit and wisdom. During the fire, Yin Ping even remembered reading in some tabloid the idea that identical twins had different fingerprints and allowed his hands to be burned.

Afterwards, like the person on the phone had said, this business wasn't investigated on a major scale. He was only furtively called in for questioning a few times. The last time he went to the police bureau, he ran into a police officer, and that person smiled meaningfully at him, greeting him, "You're here?"



These words had scared Yin Ping into a cold sweat, and he finally knew what Yin Chao had meant when he'd said that there was someone inside the police revealing secrets—this police officer was the person who'd called him!

Yin Ping had always been greedy for money, but this time he managed to be clever. He didn't covet the five million these people had promised. That night, without anyone knowing, he'd shaved his head and become an ordinary and unremarkable boiler operator, taking Yin Chao's things into the wilderness and burning them, making Old Cinder disappear entirely from the world.

He'd burned his hands again on the boiler, gotten himself covered in soot every day, kept his head down and his shoulders slumped, thoroughly hiding in the identity of a blindly obedient boiler operator.

For fourteen years, he'd fooled the whole world, passed his days perfunctorily, living a flat and impoverished life.

The old died, children grew up, the big scholar tree weathered the elements, thickening by another ring. No one knew there was a body buried at the roots of that tree. As time passed, even Yin Ping himself forgot about it, as though that terrifying interval had been only a delusion. He'd never had a brother he envied and hated; he'd never known that night when it had seemed it would never be light—

But why couldn't fate let him go in the end? Why, after so many years of calm, had renovations and investigations come to South Bend like a demon? Why had the police even come to the door looking for Yin Chao?

Why, when that person had already rotted to mud at the base of the big scholar tree, did his soul still linger?!

Yin Ping's little electric bike, nearly falling apart after the fall, hummed, each soldering point trembling at the unbearable high

speed. He passed crowds crying out in fear, ran right over little stalls laid to air out by peddlers, turning a deaf ear to the screams and curses, desperately heading for that place—there was still a row of antiquated houses there, now with the words “to be torn down” written everywhere. Only the old scholar tree that had already been standing there during the Qing Dynasty was calm, looking pityingly upon the people as they came and went.

The sounds of approaching police sirens broke over the horizon. Someone called his name over a loudspeaker. But all that Yin Ping saw was that tree.

There was a moment where he thought that he saw a human figure at the iron railing, the back of its head bashed in, eyes gloomily and hatefully fixed on him—

Tao Ran had seen Yin Ping’s back. For some reason, he was on constant alert. He floored the gas pedal, bringing all his ten years of driving experience into play, passing through the twisting little streets. The civil policeman riding a motorcycle next to him waved to him, indicating that he’d go on ahead. Just then, everything changed.

Two pickup trucks suddenly appeared, one on each side of Yin Ping!

Tao Ran didn’t have time to think carefully. He swiftly turned the steering wheel, forcing his colleague on the motorcycle behind him, going on himself.

The police car drove between the two pickup trucks. A side mirror scraped against the handlebar of Yin Ping’s bike. Then a sharp sound of braking sounded in the little alley. The police car floated in, nearly overturning, quickly throwing Yin Ping’s little electric bike into the air. At the same time, the three cars unavoidably collided. Broken glass crashed like a storm. There was a huge sound—

## CHAPTER 137 - Edmond Dantès VIII

An evil wind suddenly blew in brazenly through a join in the window; the window, opened a crack for ventilation, trembled, and a pen container on the windowsill fell, scattering over the ground with a clatter. Fei Du, startled, raised his head, and at the same time, a phone rang sharply, like a thunderclap—

Luo Wenzhou, just coming in, didn't even catch a breath. He grabbed the landline phone's handset. "Hello?"

Fei Du's chest tightened for no clear reason. Then, he heard Luo Wenzhou's voice suddenly change. "What? Say that again!"

"...there were inflammable and explosive materials in the two responsible pickup trucks, a fire started when Deputy-Captain Tao's car crashed into them. One of the responsible drivers died on the scene, the other was severely burned and died halfway to the hospital. Boss, it was deliberate..."

All the orderly threads in Luo Wenzhou's head snapped midway. His head rang. "Wh-where? What hospital?"

Five minutes later, the whole City Bureau had been alerted. All the Criminal Investigation Team's people, whether they were inside the bureau or out in the field, put down what they were doing and flew to Yan City's Second Hospital.

The car air-conditioning was very smooth. Warm, dry air constantly blew out towards the occupants, but it seemed to float on their skin, not entering their pores.

When Luo Wenzhou had driven half the way, he grabbed Fei Du's hand.

Fei Du's hand seemed to have just come out of an icebox. It was so cold it hardly seemed alive. He hadn't made a sound since they'd received the news. Now, sitting in the car, he wasn't moving a muscle. Once in a while he would blink. It was as if he'd become a human-shaped ornament. Startled by Luo Wenzhou's little movement, Fei Du squeezed his hand gently in consolation.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him. When he wasn't afraid of Fei Du making trouble, he was afraid of him not talking.—He held Fei Du's hand tightly in his, and, forcing his soul, which had turned upside down, to return its proper position, he dialed a number. "It's me, I'll be there in five minutes, where are you at the hospital? What's the situation?"

The criminal policeman who'd gone with Tao Ran to Yin Ping's house to investigate Old Cinder's whereabouts was hoarse, his voice tearful. He struggled to hold himself back as he spoke to Luo Wenzhou. First he explained in a few words where to go at the hospital. Then he really couldn't resist beginning to sob. "We were going to go back today, but Deputy-Captain Tao said something was wrong with Yin Ping, and when we went back to find him, Yin Ping had already run off on his electric bike. Then Yin Ping got into an accident on the road and ran away, the victim called the police, so we fixed Yin Ping's approximate location. I don't know why Deputy-Captain Tao was in such a rush, he didn't wait for backup to arrive..."

Fei Du's gaze fell on Luo Wenzhou's phone, which was on speaker.—As soon as Yin Ping had run, if they'd wanted to catch him, they needed to make a report, needed to follow procedure; at least as long as they had absolutely no leads as to where Yin Ping was going, they had to seek the help of a colossal number of cameras—they needed assistance and couldn't avoid alerting many people.

As soon as the report about the "responsible driver on a red electric bike" had gone out, it had gone into someone's ear. Tao Ran had perfectly understood the risk of information getting out, so he'd had

to plan for the worst; he hadn't waited for anyone; he'd had to get in and snatch Yin Ping away before the other side could react.

If the informer who had taken Gu Zhao into The Louvre truly had been Yin Ping under a false name, then it was likely he was the last witness in this old case. Even if he wasn't worth a penny, he was still valuable enough to merit being put into a safe now.

Tao Ran's handling had been very decisive, but why had the other side's reaction been so quick?

That shouldn't have happened.

"We caught up to Yin Ping in a half torn-down urban village in the north of Sound Bend County. It's hard to drive there, there was a colleague from the police station who was riding a motorcycle and wanted to go on ahead, but while they were going past an intersection, two pickups suddenly appeared and Deputy-Captain Tao pushed him aside and went on ahead himself..."

Fei Du's other hand, curled up at his side, suddenly tightened.

"The road was too narrow, the three cars crashed at the intersection and we couldn't get through. Luckily that colleague saw the pickup trucks catch fire, felt something was off, and went over to break open the door. He'd just pulled Deputy-Captain Tao out when it all exploded, if not for him..."

If not for him, they wouldn't have needed to rush to the hospital now.

Fei Du suddenly put in a word, asking, "What about Yin Ping? Is he still alive?"

The criminal police officer on the phone was too worked up. He didn't hear that someone else was speaking, and immediately replied in the style of making a report. "Deputy-Captain Tao threw Yin Ping

aside, and he may have fallen not too gently when he was thrown. His lower leg was fractured by the electric bike. He may have been impacted by the explosion. He's been unconscious this whole time. He's also at the Second Hospital."

Fei Du was frighteningly calm, his expression not moving a hair, as lifeless as his hand.

He looked up and could already see the hospital building not far off. Luo Wenzhou charged over the speed bumps at the parking lot, the car trembling violently.

Fei Du grabbed the door handle, but his speech didn't shake at all. "Find some trustworthy people to keep an eye on Yin Ping, whether he's in the inpatient department or in the emergency room—twenty-four hours, don't relax for a minute. Yin Ping didn't die, so the person who wants to silence him will come again."

"Yes, sir!"

Luo Wenzhou had wanted to add something, but after he thought about it for a moment, he decided there was really nothing to add, so he hung up without saying anything and stopped the car.

"A cornered dog will jump over a wall. It seems that not only was Tao Ran's suspicion that Yin Ping was passing himself off as Old Cinder back then on the right track, the fake Old Cinder may have come into direct contact with the key figure," Fei Du said unhurriedly. "Since the other side wasn't this nervous when Wei Wenchuan and Wei Zhanhong were called in to the City Bureau and then arrested, it shows that Wei Zhanhong's disavowals all along may not have been disavowals—he really did only hold a part of the shares in the Beehive. He's been using their 'resources' all these years, but he doesn't know who the boss he's been working with behind the scenes is."

Luo Wenzhou didn't make a sound. He lowered his head and looked at Fei Du's hand that he was holding.

Fei Du's pulse was very quick, so quick it was almost uneven, but the roiling blood was constantly removing the warmth from his limbs. There was only a thin layer of cold sweat in the palm of his hand.

Without feeling the physiological reaction of this hand, Luo Wenzhou nearly would have gotten the mistaken impression that to Fei Du, Tao Ran was a stranger of no importance, the same as the other people involved in cases, just another detail in a complicated case, not worth too large an investment of mental effort and feeling. His logic never came to a standstill; he was always objectively analyzing.

But...physiological reactions didn't lie.

Fei Du's body and emotions, even what he said, what he thought, all seemed to be out of alignment. It was as if he ought to have been a unified precision instrument but had been disassembled and reassembled too many times, and the gears, not interlocking well, wouldn't turn smoothly. As soon as there was an overload, there would be a subtle disharmony.

A few police cars, also hurrying, charged in. The people in them hardly waited for the cars to come to a full stop before jumping out. They ran in too much of a hurry, not noticing that Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du were in the parking lot.

Luo Wenzhou suddenly said, "Aren't you in a hurry to go in and see Tao Ran?"

"I wouldn't be able to see him even if I went in," Fei Du said, his expression not changing. "You can't just wander into the emergency room. And even if I could see him, it wouldn't be any use. I'm not a doctor. There's no difference between waiting in the hospital and waiting in the car."

Luo Wenzhou was silent.

“At first, the people who framed Gu Zhao were in the same position as the victim, not knowing that Old Cinder had been replaced by a cowardly old man who looked the same but had a completely different temperament. Otherwise, it would have been too easy to kill Yin Ping. They couldn’t have waited until now to act.” Fei Du unhurriedly unbuckled his seatbelt. He continued, “And supposing that they only realized it after they were alerted by the crucial information of Tao Ran requesting pursuit of Yin Ping, where did they get the two pickups to silence him?”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Unless they just happened to have two pickups equipped with explosives waiting in South Bend, which a bird wouldn’t shit on, they shouldn’t have been able to react faster than the police, and they especially shouldn’t have been faster than Tao Ran, who rushed on ahead of everyone.”

“So the point in time when they received the news must have been a little earlier,” Fei Du said. “Tao Ran had a partner from the City Bureau with him at the time, and a civil policeman from the South Bend police station leading the way. Also...”

“Also, he called me,” Luo Wenzhou said grimly. “Since we found the listening device in Tao Ran’s bag, we’ve been very cautious. He called my personal phone. I can guarantee it with most of a decade of professional experience, there 100% isn’t a problem with my phone.”

“Then the problem can only be with those two people and the car,” Fei Du said slowly. “The car was a service car. There must be a record of stops and use.—Doesn’t that sound like a much smaller scope of investigation?”

Luo Wenzhou’s teeth were tightly clenched. He got out his phone and called Xiao Haiyang.



Xiao Haiyang picked up after less than half a ring. He said somewhat incoherently, “I’ll be at the hospital at once, Cap-captain Luo, I...”

“Don’t come here yet,” Luo Wenzhou said grimly. “There’s no lack of people standing watch in the hospital’s corridors. I want you to go investigate the most recent whereabouts of two people. I’ll send you their names and badge numbers. Also, the use record of the service car Tao Ran drove today. I want to know where it’s been, which people have touched it—including the staff who clean it and perform maintenance. Remember—everyone.”

Fei Du said, “If there’s something you can’t easily investigate, I’ll get Lu Jia and the others to send someone to cooperate with you.”

Xiao Haiyang paused, blew his nose heavily, then hung up without even saying “yes.”

The two of them sat in mutual silence in the already turned off car for a moment. Having made all the arrangements, Luo Wenzhou tilted up his face, closed his eyes, and leaned back in his seat.

He hadn’t been able to think closely about what was happening with Tao Ran now, how the rescue was going. He’d had to use all his willpower to ignore his anger and worry, take care of the things he needed to take care of.

Fei Du hesitated a moment, then encircled his shoulders, turning to hug him, his lips gently touching his hair. He quietly said, “It’s all right if you’re upset and need to get it off your chest. There’s no one here but me, anyway.”

“Back at school...there was a female schoolmate who managed to work up her courage to ask him out, and he looked at her eyeshadow and said, ‘I see you’ve got dark circles around your eyes from staying up late. You should hurry home and rest. I heard the movie’s no good.

It's only rated 50% online.' ...That's the sort he is. For a while I thought he was gay like me," Luo Wenzhou said almost inaudibly. "Then I saw him get a girlfriend and found out that he wasn't gay, he was just an idiot. He had absolutely no game. He was totally earnest. The girl thought he was cute at first, but later, when we were about to graduate, she found that in this mortal world, a man needs to be more than cute. When they broke up, he slunk around furtively being depressed for over half a month, even willingly shouldered the responsibility of helping the girl move and carrying her luggage for her. When he was through, he took me drinking and spat it all out in a muddle... I said, 'It's all right, brother, there's fragrant grass at all the world's ends, you'll marry someone a hundred times better than her, and I'll be your best man.' He said that his hometown is particular about best men being unmarried, and that someone like me might abandon the association any day. I couldn't resist. I came out of the closet to him, said, 'I'm not going to get married, the marriage laws don't allow it.'

"The upshot was, the fool's reflex arc is about ten thousand li long, and he actually didn't understand at the time. About half a month later he finally worked it out and ran over to see me in a fright, worried that my dad was going to beat me to death." The rims of Luo Wenzhou's eyes were a little red. "If Tao Ran...if..."

Fei Du's arms tightened around him.

"If Tao Ran..." The thought flashed through Fei Du's mind, following Luo Wenzhou's words. He immediately nipped it off, along with all the memories associated with Tao Ran, like many years ago, when he'd walked up the stairs following the music and seen the woman who'd hanged herself behind the door.

This was what Fei Chengyu had taught him—always remain aloof; if he couldn't, then he would have to try a little harder to learn. If there were any gaps, Fei Chengyu would repeatedly teach him over and over, until he'd "learned"; this had nearly become a reflex carved into

his bones. Every time he encountered something he couldn't face, it would automatically switch on, guaranteeing that he would make the most reasonable choices.

"I know," he said, using just the right amount of warmth to pat Luo Wenzhou's back. "I know.—Let's go."

Tao Ran got on well with people. There weren't enough benches in the hospital waiting room, and quite a few people were sitting on the floor. Even Yang Xin, who'd been accompanying shiniang in the hospital, had hurried over when she'd heard. As soon as they saw Luo Wenzhou, everyone stood up.

By the time Luo Wenzhou came in, he'd already quickly adjusted his emotions. He waved a hand at the crowd. He was just about to say something when a door suddenly opened inside, and a somewhat grave-faced nurse came out and pulled down her mask. She didn't seem like she was coming like normal to notify the patient's family and friends to come help push the hospital bed. Her gaze swept over the crowd of people ardently watching her. "You must all be from the public security bureau? Well... My apologies, our doctor really did everything he could..."

Luo Wenzhou's head buzzed. Fei Du put an arm around his shoulders.

The nurse braced herself and went on: "...the patient Kong Weichen's neck was pierced by a fragment during the explosion. Because of excessive blood loss before he was brought in..."

Kong Weichen was the civil policeman from the South Bend police station who had accompanied Tao Ran. Luo Wenzhou had just sent that name to Xiao Haiyang; he was one of the suspects.

After a good while, someone finally came around and asked with bated breath, "So...the other one..."

“The other one most importantly suffered fractures and internal bleeding during the collision. He was blocked by his colleague during the explosion. He’ll need critical observation overnight. If his condition stabilizes, then there shouldn’t be danger to his life.”

The whole waiting room was perfectly silent.

When Tao Ran had found that those two cars had come with ill intent, his first reaction had been to push aside the motorcycle, making his colleague, who was wearing a helmet, retreat. And that colleague, realizing that an explosion might occur, had rushed over without thinking and pulled him out...

After a long time, someone who’d come over from the South Bend police station let out a suppressed sob.

Before those from the City Bureau had even had time to sigh in relief, the sound of that man’s sobs provoked a feeling of sympathy for someone in a similar position.

“Captain Luo?”

“Have this...ahem.” Luo Wenzhou’s voice was somewhat strained. He cleared his throat, then picked up what he was saying. “Have this colleague’s relatives been notified? Go...”

His words were again interrupted by some medical personnel quickly running over.

“Yin Ping—the one called Yin Ping was also brought in by you?”

Luo Wenzhou turned his head at once.

“He must not have had a physical examination in years. His blood pressure is high, didn’t he know it himself? His diastolic pressure is

nearly 130. He had a stroke when he was hit. We need to operate at once. Can anyone sign?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

The ancients said that there were gods above you, and if you committed a shameful deed, sooner or later there would be retribution.

But Yin Ping’s retribution had come too coincidentally!

Just then, Luo Wenzhou’s phone vibrated again. In the midst of the mess, he lowered his head and looked. He saw a message from “Retired Emperor.” The “retired emperor” Comrade Luo Cheng never used punctuation marks when he texted. It was always one string —“investigation team into gu zhao case established focused on investigating old people your lao lu has been called in look out”.

## CHAPTER 138 - Edmond Dantès IX

“Hou Shufen, female, fifty-three years old, Han ethnicity.—What is your relationship to Yin Ping?”

“He...he’s my old man.”

“I see. You and Yin Ping are husband and wife. Are you acquainted with Yin Ping’s older brother Yin Chao?”

The woman nodded silently.

“Do you know that Yin Chao may be dead, and the murderer may be your husband Yin Ping?”

The woman lifted her head in terror, looking at the criminal policeman questioning her. Her eyes, pressed down by eyelids so limp only a crack remained, looked muddled and perplexed, but there was no shock.

The police officer gazed fixedly at her, repeated the question, then raised his voice slightly. “Hou Shufen, you’re being questioned.”

The woman’s hands were twisted together, carelessly digging at her chilblains. She said falteringly, “He never told me anything.”

“I didn’t ask you whether he told you anything.” The criminal policeman questioning her had seen everything. He could hear that she was avoiding the question. “I asked you whether you knew that your husband may have killed someone. Think about it, then answer. This is a public security bureau.”

The woman shook with fear, avoiding the criminal policeman’s gaze, lowering her eyes and staring at her own stained cloth shoes. She shifted around from side to side for a moment, unable to sit still. “...

there was a time when he had a lot of nightmares. He'd always wake up screaming in the night, yelling out nonsense..."

"Yelling what?"

"Yelling things like, 'Don't pester me,' and, 'Yin Chao, you lingering spirit.' We used to live in a house and had our own little yard. There were two big scholar trees by the gate, nearly grown to full size. Like a madman, he insisted on cutting them down. And cutting them down wasn't enough. He found someone to dig up the roots, then sold off the wood for a trifle. No one could talk him out of it... He said those trees were inauspicious, that they were constraining him. I felt something was a little off then."

"You only felt it was off?" the police officer asked in disbelief.

The woman's chin touched her chest. Only the whorl at the top of her head showed. Her hair was sparse and her scalp was deathly pale. There was ugly dandruff on the hairs. After a long silence, she vaguely repeated, "He never told me anything."

On the bench in the hospital corridor, Luo Wenzhou finished watching the record of the questioning of Yin Ping's wife. He expressionlessly closed the laptop on his knees. "He never told me anything, so I'm not an accomplice, and I'm not responsible. I only closed my eyes, stopped my ears, didn't think of anything, steadfastly passed my days. Was I sharing my bed with a murderer? Let him be whatever he likes. As long as he doesn't get arrested, as long as he can still go to work and earn his wages and carry on as usual, none of it matters."

How plain and stupid.

Lang Qiao stood next to him. She bent down and said quietly, "The area Yin Ping was speeding towards has a few big scholar trees in it. We investigated each of them and found a corpse at the foot of one of

the trees. The medical examiners on the scene had a rough look. They believe the deceased is male, in his forties, around a meter seventy-five tall. The back of his head was struck several times with a blunt object before his death. Concrete information will have to wait for detailed materials from the medical examiners, but judging from the information we currently have, we all think that the person buried under the tree is most likely Yin Chao.

The skeleton that had been buried deep under the tree had finally floated up to the surface and once more seen the light of day along with the old case.

Lang Qiao looked at the low door of the hospital room and, suddenly lowering her voice, said to Luo Wenzhou, “Boss, Director Lu...and some other deputy directors haven’t come to work for the last few days. There’s a lot of pressing material that needs to be endorsed for the end of the year. There’s only Director Ceng left, and he doesn’t know what to do now, I...”

Luo Wenzhou gently interrupted her. “I told you to investigate the City Bureau’s surveillance system. Did you do it?”

“I was just about to tell you,” Lang Qiao said quietly. “While I was cleaning up, I broke the camera in 203, and when I reported it and requested that it be repaired, two unfamiliar people came with the director. The director told me to do what I needed to do, and I couldn’t stay on. While I was shuffling over to the door, I turned back and saw the maintenance worker saying something to the unfamiliar people. The whole atmosphere was wrong... And now the whole City Bureau is being overhauled...”

It seemed that not only was there a problem, the problem was very big.

Luo Wenzhou raised his head and looked at her.



Lang Qiao's palms were sweating. She wiped them on the hem of her clothes. "Boss, what's going on with Director Lu and the others? This can't be happening because I was too rash?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with you." Luo Wenzhou shook his head. "Tell me what you've determined."

"All the repair records are there," Lang Qiao said quickly. "Aside from the emergency situation the year before last, the rest is all the factory coming over for regular maintenance... The purchasing and installation were all according to procedure, and I can't investigate procedure for no good reason. I slipped in and had a look while the director of administration was out. There's a complete record of documents from the meeting concerned. The factory is a proper factory, it's not only the City Bureau that uses it. There were no problems on the surface, so the problem could only be in the repairs during the emergency situation the year before last—I investigated it. There's a register of the maintenance worker's credentials from back then, with his work ID number and full name, but when I went to the factory to ask about him, they said that he had resigned not long ago."

Lang Qiao's throat tightened somewhat. "The date he resigned was the very day we arrested Lu Guosheng. I went to his recorded address and searched in the area. The house was rented out to someone else two years ago. The address is a fake."

When Lang Qiao had questioned the students in 203 that day, the contents had been leaked, and Wei Zhanhong had received the information at once and then had been contained, it had amounted to a revelation of the informer inside the City Bureau.

"Don't search anymore. I figure you won't find anything," Luo Wenzhou said. "Was there a problem with the report and request for repairs? Did anyone who shouldn't have asked ask?"

“Not likely,” Lang Qiao said. “The request for repairs was made because 203 was just being used to interrogate the boss of a looting gang. The colleagues in the observation room suddenly found that they couldn’t use the cameras, and a lot of people reported it together.”

Luo Wenzhou rubbed the center of his brow.

“Boss, we always used to be very peaceful, but ever since Director Zhang got in trouble over Wang Hongliang and got transferred out, things keep going wrong one after another. First it was Zheng Kaifeng getting advance information and running on the day he got blown up, and now this...” Lang Qiao’s voice was growing quieter and quieter. At the end she was nearly mouthing the words. “...they’re all saying it’s Director Lu.”

Before Luo Wenzhou could answer, Lang Qiao put both hands on her knees and took a deep breath and said shakily, “It can’t be Director Lu.”

“Xiao Qiao...” said Luo Wenzhou.

“It can’t be Director Lu, really, believe me.—When I was in elementary school, some drug addicts gathered in a little park by my school, got high and went crazy. A crowd of maniacs with knives charged into the school and injured a security guard. The school locked down the classroom building, but my class was outside at PE. A lot of people were crying from fear. The maniacs were screaming and shouting, like they were acting as monsters in a cartoon. The police came very quickly. I remember it all very clearly. Director Lu was leading them. He had a scar on his forehead, but he didn’t look scary at all. He caught all the bad guys very quickly. I snuck off and ran after them. I wanted to give him a bottle of fruit juice. But he must have misunderstood. He took it and opened it for me, then gave it back and quietly said, ‘Hurry and run back now, I won’t tell your teacher.’ ...Because of this, of the thirty-six people in our class, four

went into the public security system afterwards, and six are in related professions. That's a third of the class following in his footsteps just like me.... It can't be him.

“Are they going to wrongly accuse him?” Lang Qiao's eyes were open very wide. Her eyelashes trembled slightly, and her tears ran down. “Officer Gu was wrongly accused, what if...”

Luo Wenzhou quietly swallowed down the words “people change.” He got up and pressed the laptop into Lang Qiao's arms. “There's no what if. If there is, what are you getting paid for? Are you still that elementary school student who can't even open a bottle of juice?”

Lang Qiao subconsciously took the computer and looked at him in amazement.

“You're in the City Bureau. You're qualified to wear a uniform. You can request a sidearm, can carry handcuffs and a truncheon. So if you want to know something, go investigate it yourself. If you think someone's being wrongly accused, then go arrest someone who isn't wrongly accused.—You were pretty slick taking down Wei Zhanhong in the men's bathroom. How come you're going backwards the older you get?”

Lang Qiao was frozen.

Luo Wenzhou pulled a stern face and glared at her. “Get to work. No vacation this year.”

Lang Qiao forgot about getting wrinkles from pulling at your eyelids. She rubbed heavily at her eyes with her sleeve. “Yes, sir!”

Just then, the sound of footsteps came from the other end of the hall. It was the unique sound of Fei Du's footsteps, always walking to some rhythm. It seemed as though even if the sky fell and the earth cracked, it still wouldn't make him use his legs to run a few steps.

Unfortunately, he wasn't bringing any good news this time.

Fei Du first looked towards Tao Ran's hospital room. Tao Ran, wrapped up like a mummy, was still sleeping. Chang Ning, who'd come over when she'd heard the news, was watching at his bedside. She must have been somewhat worn out. She had her forehead propped on one hand, napping in her chair. Fei Du put a coat over her and put a warm cup of tea by her hand, then withdrew, quietly closing the door. "Yin Ping's surgery didn't go well."

"What do you mean?" said Luo Wenzhou.

"Since murdering his brother, Yin Ping hasn't been doing very well. He's had long-term insomnia, and a drinking habit. His income is limited, so he's been drinking cheap goods with who knows what mixed in. His heart, liver, and kidneys all have different degrees of chronic illness. The risk of a blood clot was very high. Even without this car crash, he may have fallen over dead any day," Fei Du said quickly. "The doctor said that even though the surgery is finished, they don't know when he'll wake up, and when he does, there will definitely be after-effects. The more optimistic outlook is that he'll be half-paralyzed and have trouble speaking. It's also possible he simply won't be able to recover an ordinary level of cognitive function."

"What?" said Lang Qiao.

Luo Wenzhou sighed heavily. "He'll lose his mind."

"Why does he get to lose his mind?!" Lang Qiao bristled as soon as she heard this, then noticed that her voice had been too loud and hurriedly forced it lower. "If he loses his mind, I'll deal him another one and send him right to the other side to apologize for his crime!"

The City Bureau's people were in a state of anxiety; they were a host of dragons without a head, Tao Ran was lying in the hospital, his

colleagues didn't know who could be trusted...and the only witness was dead to the world.

They were besieged from all sides.

Luo Wenzhou paced a few steps in the oppressive corridor. He very much wanted to laugh bitterly.—Since time immemorial, acting like a prick brought down a bolt of lightning. He'd just poured some chicken soup into Lang Qiao, and now in the blink of any eye she'd rallied, just like that.

Just then, a call came from Xiao Haiyang.

Luo Wenzhou's finger paused over his phone. Then he swiped to pick up. "Little Glasses, if you don't have good news, either, I'll fire you."

## CHAPTER 139 - Edmond Dantès X

Suddenly meeting with a direct shot, Xiao Haiyang was perplexed. He didn't notice his superior's unhappy mood at all, very earnestly trying to get to the bottom of this. "Why? Did I violate discipline again?"

"..." His diversion knocked all the temper out of Luo Wenzhou. He choked for a moment, then irritably said, "What do you want?"

Xiao Haiyang's tone was rather grave. "Captain Luo, are you all still at the hospital? Don't leave, I'll be there at once. I have to say this face-to-face."

This Little Glasses had some sense of time; he'd said "at once," and five minutes later he charged into the hospital, wrapped in a cold draft.

There were too many people and too much talk in the inpatient department. In search of quiet, they went into the little garden out back and found a stone table. The little garden was for patients staying at the hospital to use for taking walks. Now that it was the dead of winter, so cold that water froze as it dripped, never mind patients taking walks, there wasn't even a single crow bringing its own down jacket.

Xiao Haiyang put two CVs and a printed out form on the stone table and sniffed hard. "Captain Luo had me investigate the two people who were with Deputy-Captain Tao that day, and the use record of the car. It's all here, along with two CVs.—Of those who accompanied Deputy-Captain Tao to visit Yin Ping's home, one was our team's Wu-ge, and one was Civil Policeman Kong Weichen from the South Bend police station..."

"I know Xiao Wu. He's been under my nose since he graduated. If my shifu hadn't died, he'd have become my little shidi." Luo Wenzhou

waved a hand. “There’s no need to talk about Kong Weichen yet, either, the important point is...”

“No, there’s an important point to say about Kong Weichen.” With his frozen fingers, Xiao Haiyang none too nimbly pulled out Kong Weichen’s CV. “Captain Luo, I suppose you know that a few years ago the city had a ‘National Enterprises Alleviate Poverty’ program?”

Luo Wenzhou raised his eyebrows doubtfully. “Yes?”

This sort of activity was ordinarily larger in outer appearance than it was in substantive content. Everyone basically got out some lunch money according to their rank, donated some funds, then took a few pictures and finished it up by being written up in a news story. It didn’t mean anything. The organization hadn’t done it these last few years.

“Last time, South Bend’s Hongzhi School partnered with the City Bureau. Some officials from the City Bureau went to Hongzhi School to look around. Each of them got out two-thousand yuan, each pair subsidizing a student with fairly good grades. Kong Weichen was one of them,” Xiao Haiyang said, with the three other people surrounding the stone table looking back at him helplessly.

Luo Wenzhou had a sort of inauspicious premonition, feeling that nothing good would come out of Xiao Haiyang’s mouth. “So?”

“I went to investigate the school’s files. One of the people written down as subsidizing Kong Weichen was Zhang Chunjiu.—Oh, that’s old Director Zhang, who transferred out of the City Bureau half a year ago. Before Kong Weichen took Deputy-Captain Tao to Yin Ping’s house, he called Zhang Chunjiu.”

Lang Qiao’s expression was lost, overloaded with information.

Fei Du, however, frowned gently.

Luo Wenzhou at once looked grave. “Xiao Haiyang, do you know what you’re saying?”

“I do.—I printed out the communications records.” Xiao Haiyang wiped his nose, absently met Luo Wenzhou’s eyes, then pulled out a slip of paper. “I also verified with Wu-ge. Wu-ge said that before they set out, he really did see Officer Kong make a phone call. He even asked about it in passing, and Kong Weichen said, ‘My superior is rather concerned with this business. I was reporting to him.’ Wu-ge thought that it was a superior at the station and didn’t think much of it. I also found out that Officer Kong was first assigned to Qingyuan County, and he was only transferred back to his hometown of South Bend when Director Zhang put in a word.”

A cluster of thick clouds was involuntarily blown together by the wind, covering the sun. The only heat source disappeared, and the surroundings at once became shady.

For a good while, no one spoke in the little stone pavilion. Lang Qiao suddenly felt that her own fragile body heat wasn’t up to its current task; she hadn’t been able to warm the stone bench by sitting on it all this time. The chill was still passing through her clothes into her muscles, making her tremble from within.

After a long time, Lang Qiao at last slowly came around, and some indescribable rage exploded like a tsunami. She was like a believer who’d seen someone splashing sewage on an image of her god. She stood up swiftly. “Xiao Haiyang, are you crazy? Are trifles like getting a subsidy and transferring work worth rooting around for? What are you, an NBIS special agent?<sup>5</sup> When we’re all sitting around playing cards and bragging, do you memorize everything we’re saying and go investigate it for secret codes? It’s really a waste of your talents that you weren’t born during the Qing Dynasty’s literary inquisition!”



Xiao Haiyang never watched people's faces. His tone didn't change at all. "When Director Zhang was at his post, you could just about say that the county town police stations in the area fit into his jurisdiction. Now that he's been transferred away, South Bend doesn't have any connection to him at all. Can you explain why Kong Weichen would contact him at such a time? I know he's a hero, and I know that if the people from South Bend heard this, they'd give me a beating—you also want to give me a beating. But whether you emotionally believe it or not, these are the results of my investigation. These are the facts."

"Nonsense!" Lang Qiao burst out. "If it was you, would you harm someone, then save his life? Even throw yourself in to save him? Director Zhang has stepped back from the front lines, and you still drag him in..."

Xiao Haiyang put his hands together and unwaveringly said, "Of course I wouldn't, but each person's logic is different. I don't know how other people think."

Lang Qiao seized his collar. Xiao Haiyang was pulled forward by her, ribs bumping against the stone table, the arms of his glasses slipping down below his cheekbones.

"Hey..." said Luo Wenzhou.

"Wait, hear me out." Fei Du gently put his hand on Lang Qiao's wrist. His hand had been in his pocket all this time and still had some residual warmth from his coat. There was only a trace of color in fingertips, and the cuff of a cream-colored sweater showed at his wrist. The back of Lang Qiao's hand, green and white with veins and bone standing out, relaxed involuntarily.

"First, there isn't necessarily a causal relationship between Officer Kong calling Director Zhang beforehand and him revealing information, unless you have a complete communications record that

has conclusive evidence showing that Officer Kong somehow sent word when Tao Ran and the others returned to Yin Ping's house for the second time." Fei Du paused slightly. "Second, even if the information really did come from him, he still didn't necessarily do it with intent—"

Xiao Haiyang opened his mouth.

Fei Du plucked Lang Qiao's hand from Xiao Haiyang's collar, separating the two of them. "I'll make an unsuitable comparison. Haiyang, don't be angry when you've heard it.—If Officer Gu was still alive, was your elder and superior, and asked you to do something you couldn't understand in order to secretly investigate something, would you comply unconditionally?"

For some reason, there were some words that it was always easier for Xiao Haiyang to hear coming from Fei Du's mouth.

He was silent for a moment. "You're right."

"What about the other police officer and the car?" Fei Du asked. "Did you investigate them?"

"Yes. The City Bureau is a mess today. I took the opportunity to snatch Xiao Wu's personnel file. He's local, hasn't been working long. His CV and personal background are fairly simple. For the moment I haven't seen any suspicious points. I'll investigate further." Xiao Haiyang expressionlessly fixed his crooked collar and glasses. "As for the police car, it was very seriously damaged. It's being analyzed now, the results haven't come out yet. It hasn't been serviced recently, but it's been used rather frequently. It hasn't been idle since Lu Guosheng and the others were arrested. Basically all field personnel have touched it.—If the problem is with the car, then everyone on our team is suspect."

Xiao Haiyang once again succeeded in using his words to silence everyone.

No matter when, investigating your own people was always the most painful thing. Probably only an ass like Xiao Haiyang, who didn't have any worldly wisdom, could undertake this assignment so cold-bloodedly.

Xiao Haiyang's gaze passed over their faces. Seeing that no one chimed in, he went on himself. "I think that now..."

Luo Wenzhou was simply almost afraid of him. He hastily interrupted, "Ancestor, could I ask you to shut your mouth and give it a rest?"

"I'm not finished speaking yet." Xiao Haiyang pushed at his glasses. His lips kept flapping on their own, whether others wanted to hear or not. "I think that now, as soon as possible, we should investigate Director Zhang's motive for paying close attention to this business, as well as whether those two pickup trucks are connected to him."

Lang Qiao said, "Earlier this year, Director Zhang..."

"Earlier this year, Director Zhang transferred out, so now the investigation team hasn't even come to him. But don't forget, when the security cameras in 203 were repaired, he was still the head of the City Bureau." Xiao Haiyang raised his voice slightly. "How long was he at this post of command? Even though he's transferred out, his influence is still there. Do you know how many people would reveal things to him, intentionally or not? Also, the system we use for field work now was set up by him. When you caught Zheng Kaifeng, why did Yang Bo get a field personnel roster that even our own people wouldn't necessarily have known about clearly?"

Lang Qiao's lips weren't as nimble as his. She was speechless for a time, unable to resist wanting to come to blows again.

“Evidence.—Xiao Haiyang, the person you’re accusing is the City Bureau’s former director-general.” Luo Wenzhou spoke to interrupt their drawn swords and bent bows. “If you find evidence, I’ll send it up for you. Otherwise, we can pretend we didn’t hear what you said today. But when Officer Kong is buried, you’ll have to kowtow three times in apology to him, or else Tao Ran won’t let you off.”

Hearing Tao Ran’s name, Xiao Haiyang at last stopped, pursing his lips somewhat nervously.

Luo Wenzhou somewhat wearily waved a hand at him. “Go away.”

But Xiao Haiyang didn’t go. He stood where he was for a moment. His hands, so frozen they were all red, hung by his sides, tightening and relaxing.

This Little Glasses had an unusual disposition. It seemed that whether he was among a crowd or standing on his own, he always looked solitary, full of solitary doubts, full of mistrust even towards the air flowing past his mouth and nose.

Except for...Tao Ran.

Tao Ran was kind, gentle, and patient. He seemed sloppy, his manner of living somewhat crude, but he always looked after everyone who came into his line of sight. While his appearance and temperament were entirely different, he still always made Xiao Haiyang think of Gu Zhao. Starting from the time he’d still been at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau and had cooperated with the City Bureau for the first time to investigate He Zhongyi’s murder, he’d had a natural feeling of closeness towards Tao Ran.

These sudden murder plots had nearly made time run backwards for him. He’d nearly turned into a nervous hedgehog, all the spines on his body indignantly sticking up.

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

Somewhat hesitantly, Xiao Haiyang said in a quiet voice, "I...I want to go see Deputy-Captain Tao, can I?"

Luo Wenzhou looked at him deeply, then nodded slightly. Xiao Haiyang quickly ran off.

After Xiao Haiyang left, Lang Qiao's rage was gradually blown away by the winter wind. She subconsciously pondered, following what Xiao Haiyang had said, and found to her horror that she'd actually been convinced by him. "Captain Luo, when the surveillance equipment was repaired the year before last, I, I think it really was..."

*"Lao Zhang was a little older than us; he'd rendered a meritorious service and was named to come to the City Bureau."*

*"He got along best with people. He was our old big brother."*

*"Lao Zhang's family was in business..."*

*"Gu Zhao suspected that there was a rat in the City Bureau, so he chose to investigate on his own. But he also knew the rules, so when he found The Louvre in the end, to be rigorous about collecting evidence, he must have chosen a partner among the people he trusted."*

Why, when those people's "business" extended all over the world, when they had the power to launder money and commit crimes across borders, was their final major stronghold in Yan City?

After what had happened to Gu Zhao, Yang Zhengfeng, as captain, had borne the responsibility of being his direct superior. He'd been disciplined and had handed the City Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team over to Zhang Chunjiu, who'd had similar qualifications and was steadier. In his hands, the Criminal Investigation Team had become increasingly splendid; public order had been impossibly good

during those years, as though all the city's criminals had collectively gone on vacation. During the period he'd held the position, both the crime rate and the rate of solved cases had looked good. That was how he'd risen step by step to a high position.

Was it that his management had been proper, or had it been...

Lang Qiao was right. Nearly everything had broken out after Director Zhang had been transferred away. This year's workload at the City Bureau was nearly equal to that of the previous ten years. Was it after all because when the stabilizing force of Director Zhang had left, all the forces of evil had come out to wreak havoc?

Or take it in the opposite direction—with the all-encompassing protective umbrella gone, had the demons and monsters under it been unable to hide any longer?

"Xiao Lang," Luo Wenzhou said, "stay in the hospital, keep a close eye on Yin Ping. Whether he's an idiot or a vegetable, no matter what, nothing can be allowed to happen to him."

Lang Qiao nodded in a flurry. "Right."

"Don't go empty-handed," Luo Wenzhou said, lowering his voice. "Go request a sidearm."

A thin layer of gooseflesh rose on Lang Qiao's neck. Looking at Luo Wenzhou's expression, she didn't dare to waste any more words. She stood up and ran off.

Luo Wenzhou let out a long breath, grabbed Fei Du's wrist, and rubbed the projecting bone over and over. If the mole was a contemporary of Gu Zhao's, then he had to be an elder of good standing and reputation; Luo Wenzhou had known that perfectly well all along. But now that it had come to this, his mind was still a blank.

It was too hard.

To accept it, to suspect, to investigate, to use the manner he employed for dealing with the most crafty, the most reprehensible criminals... It was too hard.

“There’s no evidence,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly. “Whether the investigation team takes Director Lu or Director Zhang.—Xiao Haiyang does everything relying on imagination and instinct. It’s all bullshit. Even Wei Zhanhong doesn’t know the mole’s identity. Unless Yin Ping wakes up and accuses someone... Even if Yin Ping accuses someone, given his moral character, if there’s nothing to back up his word...”

## CHAPTER 140 - Edmond Dantès XI

As Luo Wenzhou spoke, his voice failed. He bent over, resting his elbows on his knees, squeezing Fei Du's hand from time to time.— There was nowhere for him to report to, no one he could ask for instructions. Everyone in the City Bureau was in a state of anxiety, coming and going with single-minded focus. No one could decide for him what his next step should be.

He also had nowhere to vent his grievances. Tao Ran was down, and Lang Qiao was inexperienced; if she wasn't panicking, she was making trouble, and all along watching for his expression.

Luo Wenzhou was silent too long. Fei Du lifted his chin and looked him over for a moment. "What's wrong?"

Luo Wenzhou looked up at him and let his mind wander a little, thinking that Fei Du was unlike any other person he knew.

The young and artless were like clear plastic bottles; you could see at a glance whether there was juice or coke inside. The older ones with deeper thoughts meanwhile were like frosted glass bottles, most with dark liquid in them; without opening them up and smelling, it was hard to determine whether it was soy sauce or vinegar.

But Fei Du was neither. He was more like a kaleidoscope with a thousand linked-together little pieces of glass inside it, all placed at different angles; the light going through was refracted countless times. There was no way to trace it.

Even though he was squeezing this person's hand, could touch every bit of his body without restraint, he still often didn't know what Fei Du was thinking.



In all of Luo Wenzhou's life, of all the individuals he had met who gave him headaches, Fei Du came out on top—both during the time they'd been mutually displeasing to each other, fighting as soon as they met, and now, when he wished he could hold him in his mouth, carry him over his head.

If a year ago someone had said to him that at the end of this year, he'd be this isolated and cut off from help in a world of ice and snow, only finding temporary comfort in holding Fei Du's wrist, he definitely would have thought that a fuse had burned out in that person's brain.

"It's nothing." Luo Wenzhou shook his head and smiled wryly. "Just feeling the grimness of an early midlife crisis."

Fei Du blinked, then suddenly drew close to his ear with an evil smile. "What, shixiong, do you feel your abilities are unequal to your ambitions? Why didn't you say so earlier? I'll look after you."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Then he pulled himself together and squeezed Fei Du's waist. "Are you looking for trouble again? I haven't settled the account with you yet after you were just playing around touching people's hands."

Fei Du's eyes wouldn't open fully. His gaze came languidly from between his eyelashes. He licked the corner of his mouth. "Oh? How do you want to settle this account?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Darling, Dad's already very sick at heart. Don't do your little bit to help me on my way to my heart attack."

Hearing that he could talk back, Fei Du slowly sat up straight and returned to the main subject. "What are you worried about?"

Luo Wenzhou let out a breath, his smile dimming. “Do you know what feeling this gives me?”

“Yes. Kong Weichen’s connection to Director Zhang and him calling him beforehand are both too easy to investigate and too obvious, like someone’s arranged the evidence,” Fei Du answered without so much as looking up. “Your own people suspecting each other, the critical witness dead without giving evidence, pieces of evidence appearing one after another in sequence—you’re thinking that this is too much like the miscarriage of justice fourteen years ago, just as though history were repeating.”

Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly, “I was just asking. What are you answering so completely for?—You’re going to make me lose my sense of security like this, you know that?”

Fei Du had a mind to humor him. Feigning astonishment, he said, “You’re with me, and you still have a sense of security? Captain Luo, are you too confident, or is my charm decreasing?”

Luo Wenzhou slapped the back of his hand. “Speak properly.”

“All right, getting back to business,” Fei Du said, “if I recall correctly, back in May, during the He Zhongyi case, when I went to your office to be interrogated—“

Luo Wenzhou laughed dryly. “To cooperate with the investigation. What interrogation? How come you’re making it sound so bad?”

“All right, to cooperate with the investigation,” Fei Du changed his wording obligingly. “I warned you then that the case was attracting an unusual amount of attention. That there was someone playing you.

“Starting from He Zhongyi’s case, someone called The Reciter has been frequently making contributions to that radio program Tao Ran

listens to. Following that thread,” Fei Du put his hand into Luo Wenzhou’s coat, fishing a small notebook out of an inner pocket, “you can say from the beginning what traces there are. I’ll help you remember.”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a while, slowly pulling over the scarf hanging purely for decoration around Fei Du’s neck and winding it around a few times, nearly wrapping it up to his chin. “Has there ever been a time when you were very scared?”

Fei Du paused, thinking about what he’d said, some fragmentary memories flashing through his mind like light, the blurred door of the basement and the sound of footsteps slowly drawing near flying over his mind, touching down lightly, then at once disappearing without a trace.

He shrugged. Using the most apt lover’s tone, he said, “Yes, when I was afraid you were going to leave me.”

Luo Wenzhou was so stirred up by his lines coming one after another that he really had no ideas, feeling that if in his whole life he could settle one Fei Du, it meant he must have some skill and dumb luck. Thinking this, he felt quite a bit easier in spite of himself.

“The reason that the City Bureau got involved in the case of He Zhongyi’s murder in the first place was that we received a report at the same time, sent up by the murdered girl Chen Yuan’s brother Chen Zhen.—You understand what I mean? It wasn’t sent to the City Bureau. It was reported to the higher authorities, and the higher authorities ordered the City Bureau to make a thorough investigation. We had to investigate, whether we wanted to or not.

“Chen Zhen had no regular work. He was a black cab driver. He was full of mistrust towards me when we first met. I thought at the beginning that it was strange that he’d reported Wang Hongliang himself, so why wasn’t he cooperating when someone came to

investigate? Thinking about it now, under the first impulse of rage, Chen Zhen must have tried reporting Wang Hongliang more than once, but all the reports sank like stones into the sea. As time went on, he didn't believe anyone would come investigate."

Fei Du nodded. "With no evidence that would stand up for such a sensational thing as a sub-bureau taking part in drug trafficking, it would look at first like the ravings of a lunatic. All kinds of reports come in every day like snowflakes, and Chen Zhen had neither status nor position. No one would pay attention to deliberate provocation like that."

"Right. When Director Zhang sent me to investigate this business, what he originally said was, the things this report said definitely weren't true, but it wouldn't have come out of nowhere if there was nothing wrong. Wang Hongliang was holding his position without doing a bit of work, and it was likely there were other problems with his style. It was no wonder people were messing with him. It's easy to offend someone while investigating a sub-bureau official, and it would be a delicate matter how to give an account to the person who'd made the report when the investigation was over, so he wanted me to go personally. Only..."

"Only he didn't expect that the report's contents would turn out to be true," Fei Du picked up. "But reasonably speaking, Wang Hongliang knew you. If he was clever enough, when he saw you and Tao Ran come, he should have understood more or less what you had come for. The Flower Market District had been kept under wraps for so many years; why was he revealed so easily?"

"It's not that I'm especially great, it's that someone was deliberately pushing this thing outwards," Luo Wenzhou said. "The killer Zhao Haochang dumped the body and inexplicably attracted notice, and the place where he dumped it just happened to be their weak spot. That was the first thing."

“The average criminal couldn’t have guessed at that psychopath Zhao Haochang’s line of thought. At the time, if Wang Hongliang’s logic had been normal, he should have energetically cooperated with the City Bureau in investigating He Zhongyi’s murder, calmly gone to find evidence that the Golden Triangle Lot wasn’t the initial scene of He Zhongyi’s death, as quickly as possible directing your line of sight away from their drug trafficking location.—In fact, that evidence wasn’t hard to find. Tao Ran and I both found evidence that the deceased had gone to the Chengguang Mansion the night before.” Fei Du drew a line in Luo Wenzhou’s notebook and wrote the name “Ma Xiaowei.” “But before that, something else unexpected happened.”

“Ma Xiaowei’s testimony was incoherent and seemed mentally handicapped, and it succeeded in turning him into a suspect in He Zhongyi’s murder. At the same time, he was also like a piece of double-sided tape, sticking our focus firmly to the place where there’d been a drug transaction.” Luo Wenzhou recalled with some difficulty for a moment. “Right, now you say it, I’ve remembered, the fuse for that was the dispute between Ma Xiaowei and the natives, igniting the two sides’ accumulated grievances, and that’s why they started fighting and all got brought in.”

“You’re saying that that mass brawl that attracted police notice wasn’t necessarily an accident.” Fei Du paused, tilting his head slightly. “While Wang Hongliang was in an awkward position then, he still had a chance, because Ma Xiaowei’s urine test showed that he really had taken drugs, and it’s very normal for drug users to have confused intellects and talk nonsense. Or he could have simply arrested a crowd of scapegoats, said that Ma Xiaowei had been buying drugs from them that night, rendered meritorious service, and given you an accounting. It wouldn’t have taken any particular effort to get themselves out of it. It would only have involved silencing a few mouths.”

But just then, Chen Zhen, who hadn’t trusted the police, had acted precipitously and gotten trapped in the Great Fortune Building. When

Luo Wenzhou got word and rushed over, he bumped into Huang Jinglian and the others murdering Chen Zhen. Then Huang Jinglian, cornered and desperate, had even tried to kill Luo Wenzhou as well... It had been demented, but it had been hard evidence, pulling the whole Flower Market District Sub-Bureau underwater.

The only problem in all of that was that Huang Jinglian had neither planned nor needed to kill Chen Zhen so hastily.

“Actually, there was also a suspicious point then.” Luo Wenzhou thought about it and said, “When I charged into the Great Fortune Building, the girl at the front desk passed me a warning note, and purposefully arranged a room for me with a hidden window, so if anything went wrong, I could jump out the window and run right away—we were total strangers, briefly meeting for the first time, and that girl risked herself to help me... Let’s say the world is kind to attractive people, but it still seems like she knew ahead of time that Huang Jinglian and the others would try to kill me. I went to investigate later, and that receptionist had vanished without a trace.

“If Chen Zhen hadn’t died, Huang Jinglian wouldn’t necessarily have been so bold. But if Chen Zhen wasn’t killed by Huang Jinglian, then who killed him?” After Luo Wenzhou had watched Fei Du write “Chen Zhen” in the notebook, he went on, “The third critical figure is a mysterious individual, the one who sent the text message to He Zhongyi’s phone. We thought at the time that it was Zhao Haochang putting it on himself. But what if it really wasn’t Zhao Haochang? If Zhao Haochang dumped the body in the West Flower Market District because this mysterious individual showed him the way?—Those are the three crucial points in solving the case, and, for Wang Hongliang, fatal coincidences.”

There were too many coincidences; it didn’t sound true.

And because Zhang Donglai had unexpectedly been drawn in and Director Zhang, as a close relative, had had to step back to avoid

suspicion, he hadn't had time to react throughout the whole process.

“The first step was to make the crucial individual step down from the crucial sphere. The train of thought is extremely clear from beginning to end.” Fei Du added a circle around what he'd just written down. “The next time we heard a submission from The Reciter, it was in the case of the female children being trafficked. Apart from being horrifying, that case wasn't especially complicated. The critical point was Su Luozhan copying Su Xiaolan's signature, revealing all of them, as well as the place where they disposed of the bodies. Su Luozhan is a natural sadist. If she found out what Su Xiaolan had done to the victims' families before, then there was no doubt that she would copy it and would even escalate. The question is, who was the person who revealed the details of the old case to her?”

“After that was the Zhou Clan. Zheng Kaifeng used Dong Qian to kill Zhou Junmao. The strange thing was the package sent in Dong Qian's name to Dong Xiaoqing. Because of that package, Dong Xiaoqing stabbed Zhou Huaixin, and they were forced to kill her to silence her, at the same time revealing the fact that someone had deliberately plotted the fake car accident to commit murder. Someone hijacked Dong Xiaoqing's phone number that day and sent a message to Xiao Haiyang, luring the police into coming over, and they also set Dong Xiaoqing's house on fire.” Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Finally, there was Wei Wenchuan hiring an assassin. According to Wei Wenchuan's confession, he's been in contact with this mysterious online friend for a few years. This person used a lengthy plan and setup to lead us step by step from the place in Binhai where the bodies were dumped, to the den of wanted criminals, until we caught Lu Guosheng alive and found where he was hidden—”

After blowing away the confounding dust, the initially bewildering sequence was beginning to be revealed; laid out in the old notebook, it seemed especially shocking.

“There are a few possibilities. First, like One-Eye said, there was internal strife in the criminal organization, some powerful force doing what Fei Chengyu wanted to do but couldn’t accomplish—squeezing out the other backers, controlling the whole gang himself. Or they’re aiming at one particular person inside the City Bureau, and this is all for the sake of digging up Gu Zhao’s case.” Fei Du bent his frozen fingers and picked up his phone. “Like The Reciter’s submission this week—revenge. Which do you incline towards?”

Just then, a phone call came from an unknown number, popping up over the reading software. Fei Du looked at Luo Wenzhou and picked up. “Hello?”

“It’s me, Zhou Huaijin.” The man on the phone spoke in a low voice. “I’m in the country now. Could you come see me?”

Fei Du put down the phone and turned to say to Luo Wenzhou, “Shixiong, there’s a strange man who wants to meet me. Do you approve? You won’t make me kneel in penitence when we get home, will you?”



## CHAPTER 141 - Edmond Dantès XII

This was a rather tasteful Japanese restaurant. You had to take your shoes off at the door, and there was no main dining hall; inside was one miniature private room after another. Fei Du went in alone to answer the invitation. When he opened the door, he nearly didn't recognize Zhou Huaijin.

This genuine heir to the Zhou Clan was wearing what could be called a simple stone-colored coat. There was none of the pomade he'd used before in his hair. There was a giant piece of luggage standing against the wall to one side, looking weatherbeaten. His face still counted as good-looking, but he'd lost weight and looked somewhat skeletal. There was white at the temples of his very trimly cut hair, giving him somewhat the appearance of old age.

If before Zhou Huaijin had looked like the young master of a powerful family, now, with his hair white, wearing different clothes, he'd nearly become a tossed-about, down and out middle-aged man. Clearly the youthful, graceful skin of the wealthy truly was as thin as a cicada's wing.

"I went gray young. Barely past twenty, and my head was grizzled. I always dyed it before, but I haven't been in the mood to fuss with it lately. You must think it's funny, President Fei." Zhou Huaijin smiled at Fei Du. "Please sit. A friend and I privately opened this restaurant many years ago. Even my family didn't know. It's safe to talk here."

Fei Du's gaze swept over an oil painting on the wall. It was a painting of a sunset, a rather common subject, and the painting also conformed to social norms; there was nothing visibly outstanding about it. The colors were rich and warm. While it didn't have any artistic value, it was still very much in accord with common aesthetic sensibilities.

Fei Du politely said a word of praise. “Very tasteful.”

“Huaixin painted it. I told him to paint a few landscapes I could hang in a living room or bedroom, and he said he wasn’t a decorator... But in the end he held his nose and painted me a few... Unfortunately he didn’t have time to come here.” Zhou Huaijin looked in the same direction as him, his eyes dimming. “Will you have tea? Or some sake?”

“Tea is fine. They don’t let me drink alcohol at home.”

Zhou Huaijin wiped his hands and poured tea for Fei Du. “Here.— Back then, I only wanted to leave myself a fallback for when I left the Zhou family one day. It was a great plan, opening a little eatery in a deep alley that only admitted a few tables of customers each day. The customers would be refined and few, the inside of the restaurant would be peaceful and quiet. But it was only a dream. Can a livelihood be that easy? From the time this restaurant opened, up to now, it hasn’t made a penny. I have to put up hundreds of thousands each year to prop it up.”

Fei Du smiled, not answering. While Zhou Huaijin was an unloved “poor little boy” with no family, he was still a “poor little boy” dressed in gold and silver; the mushrooms in the corners of the Zhou family villa were bigger than the umbrellas in other people’s houses.

“All these years, I’ve hated the Zhou family, but I couldn’t give up the wealth and position and kept dithering uselessly.—Such a large family property. President Fei, if it were you, could you stand to give it up?”

“Zhou-xiong,” Fei Du said, looking at him, “go ahead and say what you have to say. If you weren’t ready, you wouldn’t have called me.”

Zhou Huaijin met his gaze, soundlessly looking into Fei Du’s eyes for a moment. He nodded and rather desolately said, “Wealth and rank

are like floating clouds. If I could have put them aside like you, Huaixin wouldn't have died so young. I took the liberty of arranging to meet you because I investigated some things after I left. Though the Zhou family has been discredited domestically, it can still struggle to support itself abroad. But when I've said what I have to say today, I'll have to start from nothing afterwards."

"I'm all ears," Fei Du said.

"I suppose you remember the package of expired medicine left in the safety deposit box when my mother passed away? You're the one who told me to pay close attention to it."

Fei Du nodded—Zhou Huaijin's mother was the same Mrs. Zhou who had killed her husband and changed to another one who was also a scumbag. From Zhou Huaijin's description, the best-by date on her second marriage hadn't been as long as that of soy milk you had to drink as soon as you opened it.

But while a husband and wife could leave each other any time, an alliance that had conspired to kill and rob didn't dare to act so willfully. Therefore, aside from shared stock ownership, Mrs. Zhou must have possessed something else that could deter Zhou Junmao. But when she'd passed away and Zhou Huaijin had opened the safety deposit box she'd kept locked all her life, he'd found that inside it was only a package of expired heart medicine.

"When I went back, I examined that package of medicine over and over for a long time. I really couldn't think what it was good for. I indulged in wild fantasies, thinking that it might be evidence of Zhou Junmao killing Zhou Yahou, even asked someone to determine whether there were bloodstains and DNA on it. But there was nothing there."

"Even if there had been, it still couldn't have been used as evidence. Anyone could have smeared blood on the package of medicine at any

time. If it had been evidence collected by the police at the time, it might have had some research value, but now that Zhou Yahan's bones are cold, using that as evidence would be too lax."

"Yes, I even suspected that my mom had kept this thing purely to scare Zhou Junmao—until I inadvertently looked at the barcode on the box of medicine." Zhou Huaijin picked up his phone and opened a picture, showing Fei Du the mysterious package of medicine. "This is it.

"I don't know whether you memorized things like classical poetry or the digits of pi or other things children don't understand when you were little to improve your rote memorization skills. When I was little, my mother made me memorize barcodes. I know that usually goods use EAN barcodes. The first three digits indicate the country it belongs to. President Fei, look, this package of medicine was produced in the US, but the first three digits on the barcode are 480."

"480 isn't the code for the US?"

"It's for the Philippines."

Fei Du enlarged the photograph and examined it closely for a moment. "But this barcode isn't thirteen digits, and there are small spaces printed between the numbers, so I guess it wasn't torn off of some product from the Philippines."

"It wasn't," Zhou Huaijin said. "There are four numbers after the 480, and then a little space—what does a four-digit number make you think of?"

Fei Du frowned. "Anything that can be numbered... How many numbers are in their postal codes?"

"You're right, postal codes in the Philippines have four digits." Zhou Huaijin involuntarily lowered his voice. "The numbers after that don't

correspond to any latitude and longitude in the Philippines, so I guessed that they could refer to a street and house number in that postcode—in other words, it wasn't a product bar code, it was an address.

“I went to find that address—it wasn't easy. After all, it had been decades. Some streets had been torn down, some had changed. I changed guides three times. I really spent a lot of time on it, then finally found out where the person who'd lived at that address before had moved to. My mother had probably imagined that as soon as she passed away, Zhou Junmao would treat me unfavorably, and I could take what she had left for me. But she didn't expect that Zhou Junmao wouldn't have tried to harm me, and I'd still be passing my days in the Zhou Clan, making no contribution at all, full of crooked means, not having looked carefully at what she'd left behind.” Zhou Huaijin sighed. “But this time you could say my luck was good. The old woman is over seventy, but she's still alive, and her mind is clear. She remembers what happened back then.”

Fei Du immediately followed up, “Who did you find when you investigated that address?”

“Her.” Zhou Huaijin opened his phone's album and showed Fei Du a picture of himself with an old lady. “This old lady. I had a vague memory of her. When I was very little, she helped with the housekeeping at home. Then one day she suddenly disappeared without a trace. When I found her, I learned that my mom had sent her away.”

“What does she have?”

“When Zhou Yahou had his heart attack, a cassette player in the house was playing music. He accidentally pressed the record key in his struggle and recorded the dialogue between Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng, who came after. My mom secretly took the tape and

entrusted it to this old lady. The original is in my bag. You can listen to the audio first.”

As he spoke, he pulled up the recorded audio on his phone.

First there were disordered cries on the recording; you could hear how fiercely the person in the recording was struggling, listening to the voice. It was indistinct and extremely disturbing, only stilling after a long time.—Zhou Yahou must already have been dead. After a while there came the sound of footsteps. A man’s voice said, “Relax, he’s dead.”

“That’s Zheng Kaifeng,” said Zhou Huaijin.

On the recording, Zheng Kaifeng laughed from thirty-eight years ago. “President Zhou, you recoil at the crucial moment. Now that this bastard Zhou Yahou is dead, won’t the property and the beauty all be yours? What are you looking so grave for?”

Another man’s voice spoke somewhat hesitantly. “I’m thinking whether we’ve left anything out. If this attracts suspicion and the police are called to investigate, it’ll go badly.”

“What is there to leave out? Your sister-in-law’s gone to watch a movie, the housekeepers are on vacation, and as for the two of us—we went fishing together this afternoon, did you forget? Clean it up, and we’ll go!” Zheng Kaifeng gave a deranged laugh. “When I think that all of this will be mine afterwards, I... Ha! This is my fate... Hey, Zhou-ge, I don’t care about the rest, but you’ll have to give me the little villa.”

The footsteps in the recording walked off.

Fei Du tilted his head. “The little villa? What’s the implication there?”

“Zhou Yahou had a secret private villa.” Zhou Huaijin put down his phone. “I spent over a week wheedling her and finally got her to talk and tell the truth about Zhou Yahou’s extramarital activities that my mother couldn’t accept.”

Fei Du gently raised his eyebrows. “It sounds like this truth won’t be anything pleasant to hear.”

“Zhou Yahou liked underaged young girls.” Zhou Huaijin lowered his voice and spoke with difficulty. “Especially...especially Eastern girls around thirteen or fourteen. Zhou Yahou had a villa specifically for keeping these...these...”

Fei Du asked, “Where did the girls come from?”

Zhou Huaijin was silent for a while. “From orphanages. Zhou Yahou was very ‘benevolent’ when he was alive. He funded a number of orphanages throughout East Asia, including in this country. He used them as a pretext so he could pick out the girls he liked.”

“Is there evidence?”

“Yes.” Zhou Huaijin opened the piece of luggage next to him, pulling out a kraft-paper envelope from inside. There was a stack of old photographs in the envelope.

The old photographs were spread out on the clean, simple table. An unusual floral arrangement hung out of a vase, the swirling shadows of the flowers falling along with Fei Du’s gaze on these distorted old photographs.—These were four or five above-the-waist photographs of young girls. They were all very pretty, and they all had some of the fragility of malnutrition. They were dressed up in old-fashioned sexy clothing that would have looked somewhat kitschy to the aesthetic sensibilities of the time. They wore makeup and looked indescribably strange.

“You can give them to the police if you want. Everyone involved is dead, anyway.—The girls’ information is on the backs of the photographs. These are Chinese. There are also Korean and Japanese ones. They’re all in the trunk. The old lady’s job back then was taking care of the girls at Zhou Yahou’s villa. He kept the girls until they were around sixteen and had grown to about the height of an adult, and then he’d lose interest and cast them aside, send them to underground human trafficking markets. Generally...generally they died very soon...”

Zhou Huaijin couldn’t quite finish speaking. He averted his gaze, covering his mouth with one hand and only going on after a long time. “Sorry... I used to think that Zhou Yahou was my biological father. When it was very hard for me, I took him as my idol... Ahem, it’s rather sickening.”

“There was no internet forty years ago. There’s certainly no way to trace the population files and materials now, and these girls were orphans in the first place. It’s very hard...” Fei Du spoke casually as he flipped through the pictures. Suddenly, he saw something; he sat up straight at once and picked up one of the photographs.

On the back of this photograph was written: “Su Hui, Heng’an Orphanage, fifteen years old.”

The date was thirty-eight years ago.

Fei Du quickly turned the photograph over and looked closely at the girl’s face. He could faintly see something familiar in the outlines of the features. He picked up his phone at once and took a picture.

Luo Wenzhou wasn’t far from the little restaurant where they were meeting. He’d stopped the car by the road. He’d just lit a cigarette when he received the photograph Fei Du sent him. When he saw it, he froze, then sent it to a colleague at once. The efficiency of his



colleague on the Criminal Investigation Team was very high; he replied ten minutes later.

“Captain Luo, where did you find this photograph? Right, this must be *that* Su Hui—the grandmother of the suspect Su Luozhan in the case of trafficking young girls. The work all three generations of the Su family did started with her. Su Hui’s file shows that she really was an orphan, though the orphanage she stayed at when she was little broke up long ago, and after so many years, just about everyone involved is dead. It’s hard to investigate precisely which orphanage it was. There is a record of her going abroad, though she returned a year later. The facial features match, though there’s a bit of difference with the age. The age indicated on her ID is two years older. We can’t eliminate the possibility that someone lied about her age.”

In the restaurant, Fei Du held down Su Hui’s photograph and asked Zhou Huaijin, “Can you tell me about this girl?”

“Yes, this girl is very crucial.” Zhou Huaijin pointed at the date on the back of the photograph. “This was the last girl. Look, the date marked here is April, and Zhou Yahou died in June of that year. The old lady remembered that this girl stayed at the villa afterwards with Zheng Kaifeng.”

Fei Du’s brow furrowed. “In the literal sense?”

“In the literal sense,” Zhou Huaijin said heavily. “Later my mother found out. She thought it was very sickening and forced Zheng Kaifeng to send the girl back here, and she brought the old lady back to work at the main residence.”

Fei Du for some reason wanted to sigh—later this orphaned and helpless victim had grown into an adult and at last fulfilled her heart’s desire of rising to the top of that evil “industrial chain,” becoming the victimizer.

She was like a girl embraced by a vampire in Western legend; forgetting the killer, she'd become the killer.

“Last time when we parted you said to me that all our family's tragedy came from the question of who my father was. Concerning this, the old lady said that the rumor that I might be Zhou Yahou's child was spread among the domestic staff after Su Hui was sent away. This may sound like a conspiracy theory, but given my understanding of Zheng Kaifeng, he was vicious, greedy, and petty. He'd do anything.”

“You mean that because Mrs. Zhou sent Su Hui away, Zheng Kaifeng bore her a grudge and created the malicious rumor that you weren't Zhou Junmao's biological child.” Fei Du asked, “Is there any basis for that?”

“There is. You know this field advanced earlier abroad. If Zhou Junmao had doubts about my lineage, why didn't he have a paternity test done later? It's very childish to rely entirely on guesswork.”

Fei Du slowly said, “It really is out of keeping with normal practice.”

Zhou Huaijin quietly said, “Zhou Junmao left a will abroad before he died. In the appendix concerning the distribution of his property, there was a paternity report, explaining why I wasn't his heir. The results of that paternity test from over twenty years ago are exactly opposed to the one you police ran.”

Fei Du said, “You mean that over twenty years ago, when you were a teenager, Zhou Junmao entrusted someone to do a paternity test, but the results were falsified?”

“Sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's exactly the same as my method with Yang Bo.” Zhou Huaijin smiled bitterly. “It's truly ridiculous. I went through a lot of twists and turns to find people from the company

who performed the paternity test back then. Zhou Junmao entrusted it to Zheng Kaifeng.”

This wasn't any kind of glorious business, and the tabloids were always looking to report scandals about wealthy families. Of course Zhou Junmao wouldn't have investigated out in the open. If he'd wanted to perform a paternity test, he would have had to privately ask an intimate confidant.

This intimate confidant had been Zheng Kaifeng, who had killed someone with him. Though evidently the intimacy between him and Zheng Kaifeng had been somewhat one-sided.

“I told you last time that there was a period when I was very afraid and thought that Zhou Junmao wanted to kill me. I only dared to close my eyes and sleep every day by taking Huaixin to my room. I always thought it was because my mom was fading and Zhou Junmao had had enough—until I saw the date on that paternity report. It was just that time.”

This would have been twenty-one years ago. Zhou Huaixin had been little, Zhou Huaijin had been in a constant state of anxiety, and at the same time, it was when the Zhou Clan had been making domestic inroads on a large scale.

To pave the way for himself, Zheng Kaifeng had created a car crash, killing their competitor...

Fei Du's fingers tapped from time to time on the rim of the teacup.

Zhou Junmao had returned to the country very rarely; domestic affairs had mostly been handled by Zheng Kaifeng. As soon as Zheng Kaifeng had returned here, he'd ganged up with *those people*... Had that been when Zheng Kaifeng, a wolf who bit the hand that fed him pretending to be docile, had started planning to bag the Zhou Clan for his own?

Fei Du had in fact wondered before how a company like the Zhou Clan, with basically all of its bankrollers located outside of the country, would have ended up in those people's boat.

Now it seemed that there had been a layer of connection with Su Hui.

Su Hui had used her daughter Su Xiaolan to abduct young girls, sold them, then killed them and disposed of their bodies; who had helped this single mother and her daughter take care of the bodies?

Before the dumping ground at Binhai had been established, had she already been working with those people?

When Zheng Kaifeng had returned to the country many years later and found the already old and faded Su Hui, had he turned around and become one of her "customers," thus meeting the people who dealt with the bodies?

The hidden threads passed through time, tying scattered events together, faintly revealing their shapes.

But there was still a piece missing here. Fei Du could dimly sense that it was a very crucial piece.

"What about Yang Bo?" he asked suddenly. "Have you looked into Zheng Kaifeng and Yang Bo's relationship?"

"I have. Yang Bo's father died thirteen years ago. He was the responsible driver in a car crash..."

Before Zhou Huaijin could finish, Fei Du's phone suddenly began to shake uneasily.

Fei Du picked up at once. "Hello?"

“The hospital,” Luo Wenzhou said quickly. “Something’s happened to Yin Ping!”

## CHAPTER 142 - Edmond Dantès XIII

The Second Hospital, half an hour earlier—

Tao Ran was all wrapped up in splints and bandages, lying on his back and fixed in bed, a tuft of hair still obstinately sticking up on his head; the image was somewhat funny. When Xiao Haiyang came over to see him, the hospital room was very lively. Yang Zhengfeng's little daughter Yang Xin and Chang Ning were both there.

Tao Ran had been in the hospital for a few days and could already manage to speak a few words, but he stuttered—at first the doctor in charge had been very nervous, suspecting that this was a symptom of an injury to his brain, and had sent him for a round of examination. Later he'd found that the problem wasn't with his brain, it was with the young lady. If Chang Ning wasn't there, he could speak pretty fluently.

With Chang Ning there, even Xiao Haiyang somehow felt it wouldn't be appropriate to stay long. He sat for a few minutes, determined that Tao Ran wasn't in any danger, then left along with Yang Xin.

“Xiao dage,” Yang Xin called to him. Because of Yang Zhengfeng, Yang Xin automatically felt familiar with anyone wearing a uniform; they were all big brothers.

Xiao Haiyang, who wasn't used to this, responded somewhat uncomfortably.

Yang Xin shook her phone. “I ordered a few boxes of fruit and drinks to be delivered to the hospital door. Can you help me move them? I want to deliver them to the nurses' stations, here where Tao-dage is, and over there where my mom is.”

While Xiao Haiyang was rather weak and unaccustomed to manual labor, he couldn't easily refuse a little girl's request. He could only silently follow Yang Xin to act as porter.

Drinks and fruit were both weighty things. After the few steps it took to get from the hospital's front door to the inpatient department, Xiao Haiyang felt that his pitifully scant muscles were about to snap. All the veins in his neck stood out as he gasped for breath; on this midwinter day, he was covered in hot sweat.

Watching this display, Yang Xin truly felt apologetic and helped him relieve some of the weight. "Let's cheat and take a shortcut.—Ah, Xiao dage, how can you catch bad guys like this?"

Xiao Haiyang couldn't spare attention to answer; he was so exhausted he couldn't catch his breath.

Yang Xin familiarly led Xiao Haiyang through turn after turn of the inpatient department. Hearing him nearly breathe out a mushroom cloud midway, she found somewhere that wasn't in the way and indicated for Xiao Haiyang to put the stuff down and rest a while. "It's right up ahead. Past this door, turn once, and you'll be there. Go to my mom's floor and say, 'This was sent by Fu Jiahui's relatives.' Go to Tao-dage's floor and say, 'This was sent by Tao Ran's relatives.' People keep track of which patient's relatives send things, and they'll be even more devoted to taking care of them.—That's what the elders taught me when my mom first got into the hospital."

The girl was just over twenty, and her father had already passed away. She and her mother depended on each other for survival, and her mother was also not long for the world.

While attending school, Yang Xin also had to come to the hospital and learn to handle everything. Xiao Haiyang had heard of her father Yang Zhengfeng. Looking at her now, he felt somewhat saddened. He

searched his guts and belly for a while, then very stiffly said, “I know about your father. He was a hero.”

“Whether he was a hero or not, he doesn’t know about it himself, anyway.” Yang Xin lowered her head, then displayed a somewhat bitter smile. “Thinking about it, heroes and villains sometimes come to the same end. They both die, and when they’re dead they’re both piles of rotting bones. Comparatively speaking, when they’re alive, villains have it a little better, living in defiance of the laws.”

Xiao Haiyang didn’t know how he should respond. Her few words had stirred up his emotions. The two of them fell into awkward silence.

There was a stairwell door behind them, but very few people used it normally, and it was locked. As Xiao Haiyang exercised his stiff wrists, he zoned out staring at the glass on the stairwell door. Suddenly, he saw a person wearing the uniform of a nurse’s aide hurry past.

The stairwells on this floor were locked; Xiao Haiyang hadn’t expected someone would come up that way, and he couldn’t resist taking another look—when he looked, he noticed that the nurse’s aide was a man even taller than he was. There were very few men among the nurses and nurse’s aides; when you occasionally met one or two, most of them were elderly men; you almost never saw one in his prime.

But this man had wide shoulders and a strong build. His steps were quick and he seemed to walk with the wind at his heels. From his physique, he certainly wasn’t over forty.

He wore the standard uniform of a nurse’s aide at the Second Hospital, and his face was firmly covered up with a mask, leaving only his eyes visible. He briefly met Xiao Haiyang’s eyes, then quickly averted his gaze, nodded slightly, and hurried away.



Xiao Haiyang frowned. It may have been his mistake, but he thought that this person's gaze had been somewhat shifty.

Before Xiao Haiyang could think carefully about it, Yang Xin suddenly tugged gently at his clothes.

Xiao Haiyang gave a start. "...Yes? What did you say?"

"I was just asking," Yang Xin said, raising her chin, "isn't that suspect who hurt Tao-dage and is in the hospital now going to get out of the ICU soon? How long are you going to keep him in the hospital? Hospital fees aren't cheap."

Xiao Haiyang's expression was blank for a moment. "Yin Ping is getting out of the ICU soon? Who did you hear that from?"

Luo Wenzhou and the others had just gotten word that Yin Ping's surgery hadn't gone well and he may lose his reason...

"I heard someone commenting on it when I went to the dining hall to order food for my mom this afternoon... Hey, wait a minute!" Yang Xin was sitting on a box of beverages. She seemed to realize something. Suddenly somewhat nervous, she lowered her voice and asked, "Xiao dage, you aren't keeping it a secret, are you?"

Xiao Haiyang stared at her for two seconds, then suddenly took to his heels and ran.

Yang Xin leapt up. "Xiao dage!"

Xiao Haiyang turned his head and yelled to her, "Wait here, don't run around!"

Where had the news that Yin Ping was going to get out of the ICU come from?

Who was spreading rumors?

Why?

There were plainclothes officers patrolling around outside the ICU, and further away Fei Du's people were hanging around. Because of Yin Ping's special position, the hospital had arranged for a criminal policeman to be on duty watching in the hospital room where non-medical personnel weren't normally permitted outside of visiting hours; they wore protective clothing and took shifts around the clock.

There was still another half hour to go until the shift changed. The criminal policeman watching inside had already been on his own for three and a half hours; he couldn't avoid feeling somewhat demoralized.

This was very painful work; there was absolutely no chance of chatting or playing on your phone. You wore protective clothing and a face mask; never mind not being able to catch your breath, you also had to make sure you were quiet, pretending as much as possible that you were a wallflower, not hindering the work of the medical personnel. The third time the criminal police officer looked at his watch, he was very short on oxygen. It was inconvenient to yawn while wearing a face mask. He felt his eyelids could hardly withstand the force of gravity, nearly falling to the ground.

Someone walked in. The policeman who could hardly keep his eyes open looked up, then lowered his head in disappointment—the person who'd come in was a nurse's aide, not his colleague coming to change shifts.

The nurses on duty in the ICU came over every fifteen minutes or so to check on the patient's condition. A little nurse had recently left after making an inspection. Perhaps this nurse's aide who'd just come in hadn't seen her; he walked right over to the policeman.

When he approached, the policeman discovered that this nurse's aide was male. His face was under a mask; his eyes were curved into two ingratiating smiles.

He came over and patted the policeman's shoulder. It seemed that since the nurse wasn't there, he needed his help with something. He reached out to point behind himself.

The policeman on duty subconsciously looked the way he was pointing, and suddenly felt a chill at the bit of skin on his neck left exposed by the protective clothing. This person had stuck a syringe into him! He was horrified, but there was no time to struggle. This person was very strong; he covered his mouth with one hand and firmly held his arms. The liquid in the syringe quickly got into his veins, and the policeman's struggles became weaker and weaker. After a moment, he fell silently.

The male "nurse's aide" expressionlessly helped him into a chair he'd pulled over, then turned to Yin Ping's hospital bed.

Just then, the nurse who'd wandered away came back. Seeing a nurse's aide standing by the head of the hospital bed, she stared, looking suspicious—the work schedules of the nurse's aides were fixed; they had to be arranged together by the nurses on duty. This clearly wasn't the time for him to be here.

The nurse's steps paused slightly. Amid the din of medical equipment, she said, "Hey, you..."

The male nurse's aide ignored her sudden cry, pressing another syringe to the neck of the unconscious Yin Ping.

The nurse on duty had already instinctively felt that something was wrong. She rushed a few steps forward, saw what he was doing, and gave a start. She had no time to call anyone; her first reaction was to throw herself forward. "What are you doing!"

Xiao Haiyang's useless legs were purely for keeping his balance when he sat, but now he brought them into play, surpassing their usual level, running in a gale to the ICU.

He startled a whole circle of stalking plainclothesmen. Xiao Haiyang had run so hard his vision was going dark; he leaned against the wall, gasping for breath. "Has, has any outsider gone in?"

"You have to swipe a card to go inside. Aside from our people, only the hospital's have been in." Lang Qiao still felt somewhat angry at the sight of him, and her tone was very stiff. Then she remembered something, and her tone changed. "Right, there was just a nurse's aide..."

Xiao Haiyang's pupils contracted instantly, remembering the strange male nurse's aide who'd come up by the locked stairwell.

A doctor making the rounds was passing by. Xiao Haiyang rushed at him, grabbing the doctor's card.

"Hey, what are you doing!" The patrolling doctor stared blankly. "You can't go in there! Wait a minute!"

Brooking no argument, Xiao Haiyang charged into the ICU room.

The sound of the door bursting open mixed with the little nurse's scream.

The nurse had thrown herself at the man's hand holding the syringe; he roughly threw her off. She stumbled, her hands still uncompromisingly pulling at the man's arm. Seeing someone had come, she hurriedly shouted, "Help! He doesn't work here..."

Before the nurse could finish, she was pulled over, an arm hooking tightly around her neck, a small knife pressing against her artery.

“Don’t move!”

Xiao Haiyang’s steps stopped instantly. For a time the two sides were deadlocked.

When Fei Du received Luo Wenzhou’s call, he raised a hand to interrupt Zhou Huaijin. Zhou Huaijin watched in bewilderment as his expression became graver and graver and couldn’t resist asking, “What’s happened?”

“A bit of a mishap,” said Fei Du.

Zhou Huaijin raised a hand at him. “I’ve just about finished telling you the important things. If you have something pressing to do, then go ahead, we’ll meet another...”

“Zhou-xiong,” Fei Du interrupted him suddenly, “are you willing to come with us as a witness?”

Zhou Huaijin paused.

“I know that the Zhou Clan has a small number of shareholders apart from you, and there’s also your whole family,” Fei Du said slowly. “It was already hard for you to privately investigate up to this step and to share the information with me. I understand that you don’t want to get more deeply involved.”

Zhou Huaijin’s lips moved, uneasily meeting his gaze in the clean, narrow private room.

“You’re very innocent, and Huaixin was also very innocent,” Fei Du said grimly. “But your surname is Zhou. Starting from when Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng hired an assassin—starting from when they murdered Zhou Yahou, you were automatically involved. Zhou-xiong, at this stage, it’s impossible to think only of yourself.”

The corners of Zhou Huaijin's eyes trembled nervily. After a good while, he whispered, "You're right. Some things are predestined."

Such as him coming into the world at a very delicate moment, so even the person who bore him couldn't clearly say who his flesh and blood belonged to.

Fei Du said, "I have an intuition that the question of Yang Bo is very important."

Zhou Huaijin sucked in a breath, his fingers nearly pressing into his teacup.

Under the guise of "tourism," he'd gone alone, following the barcode Mrs. Zhou had left behind to the Philippines, then quietly returning to the country. He hadn't wanted to alert anyone. What he'd found was horrifying, the origins of a whole series of scandals about the Zhou Clan, but it had still only been to give himself an accounting; it had no other value—everyone in the story, whether pitiful or hateful, was dead.—Zhou Huaijin had sought out Fei Du rather intending to pour out his heart, so he'd arranged to meet him alone. He'd even booked a ticket to leave, planning to go to the place where Zhou Huaixin had learned to paint and live in seclusion.

"You already know the previous generation's secrets, but there's still a question that hasn't been thoroughly answered," Fei Du said. "Zheng Kaifeng arranged for Dong Qian to kill Zhou Junmao, so why did Dong Xiaoqing ignore Zheng Kaifeng at his hotel and go to the hospital to stab you?"

Zhou Huaijin stared. "Didn't you say that when Zheng Kaifeng hired him, he did it under my name to deceive..."

"The killers Zheng Kaifeng worked with have a strictly controlled membership. Not just anyone can order them around.—Zhou-xiong, are you a member of the murder club?"

“What?” Zhou Huaijin cried automatically.

“If you aren’t, it’s impossible for Zheng Kaifeng to have used your name,” Fei Du said a word at a time. “Especially since Zheng Kaifeng’s original plan was for Zhou Junmao to die in a car crash without anyone being the wiser, making everything seem like an accident. This wasn’t his first time doing this kind of shady business. He’d never slipped up before, so why would he have prepared for his assassination to be discovered this time?”

Zhou Huaijin’s head was full of paste. His train of thought simply couldn’t follow Fei Du’s words. He felt that the things he’d thought he’d understood after running around all these months had once again become so confusing he couldn’t make heads or tails of them.

Fei Du looked deeply at him, then got up to go.

“Wait!”

Two minutes later, Zhou Huaijin had canceled his trip and was sitting in a car speeding towards the Second Hospital.

“I...I looked into Yang Bo’s father’s death thirteen years ago,” Zhou Huaijin said. “He hit a seven-seat business car. Riding in the car was a certain company’s work team heading to compete for a land bid. They’d had it in the bag originally.”

“And it was treated as an accident?” Luo Wenzhou asked him as he drove rapidly. “It’s not easy to kill everyone in a car with one hit, and for it to happen at just that time—weren’t there any conspiracy theorists who thought it wasn’t natural?”

“No,” Zhou Huaijin said. “In fact, when this business was being dealt with, they knew it was murder. But the media wasn’t well-developed then, and it was covered up. I was only able to get to the bottom of it

by going through a few business partners. Yang Bo's father was called Yang Zhi. When he hit the car, there was a protest slogan against forced evictions written in red on his clothes—the target land was suspected of having been subject to forced eviction, and the Yang family were among the victims. The company bidding on the land had sent a car to inspect it more than once before this. Common people don't have any idea that tearing down and resettlement aren't the same thing as development. Yang Zhi must have mistaken the developer's car for that of the chief culprit of the forced eviction. This was later resolved by private indemnification, and it was announced as an accident.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

“But the delicate part is that after Yang Bo's father died, his mother took the compensation money and moved away to Yan City. She lived in a high-quality estate with very high rent that reasonably speaking surpassed her spending capacity. And then she sent Yang Bo abroad to enter an education program sponsored by the Zhou Clan.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Yang Zhi's car crash wasn't in service to the Zhou Clan. Zhou Junmao and the others didn't need to pay additional compensation. Why?”

“A hostage,” Fei Du said gently.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Used to threaten who?”

“A young man of ordinary abilities could probably only be used to threaten his parents.” Fei Du whispered, “She moved to Yan City... What could Zheng Kaifeng use her for? Thirteen years ago...”

Suddenly Fei Du thought of something, and his eyes, always half-opened, suddenly opened wide.



## CHAPTER 143 - Edmond Dantès XIV

Luo Wenzhou's ears seemed to be moonlighting as eyes; without needing to turn his head, he noticed something was off about Fei Du's expression. "What's wrong?"

"Thirteen years ago." Fei Du's voice was so faint it seemed to disappear as soon as it reached his lips. He whispered, "The first Picture Album Project was also thirteen years ago..."

Zhou Huaijin and Luo Wenzhou, one not knowing what he was talking about, and the other, while he did know, not understanding, questioned him simultaneously.

The always well-disposed Fei Du, with an answer for every question, for once ignored them. With his hands propping his chin, he was silently lost in thought for a long time, as though sinking into some remote memory.

Meanwhile, at the Second Hospital—

Xiao Haiyang blocked the door, watching the nurse's aide squeezing the nurse's neck as though he were lifting a chick.

"You can't get away." Little Glasses' lungs, nearly exploding, expelled breath very unsteadily, but his tone was firm. "Our people have this place surrounded. Even if you take a hostage and manage to get out of here, you still can't get away."

The male nurse's aide's gaze spun around very unsteadily. There was sweat on his forehead. "Go get me a car!"

"The Second Hospital isn't far from the city center. The streets are full of surveillance cameras. What's the point of a car? You won't make it

out of the city before you're stopped." As Xiao Haiyang spoke, he got up his courage and went forward a step.

"Get away, or I'll kill her!"

Lang Qiao came over and saw that Xiao Haiyang's legs were still shaking. She hastily grabbed the back of his jacket and pulled him behind her.

Lang Qiao said, "If you kill her, you still won't get away. Use your brain and think—if you behave and get out here right now, your crime is only an attempt. There'll be room to deliberate. But if you dare to touch her, you'll be a carved-in-stone murderer. Think about it!"

As she spoke, she glanced at her colleague behind her. At the same time, she very skillfully plastered herself to the foot of the wall and went into the hospital room, heading directly towards the criminal.

The male "nurse's aide" subconsciously adjusted his position according to her movements, violently yelling to her, "Stop! If you come any closer I'll..."

"You've seen what state Yin Ping is in," Xiao Haiyang interrupted him from the doorway. "Even if I don't tell you, you have eyes of your own. You can see it. His surgery wasn't very successful. They don't know whether he'll live, and if he does, he may become a vegetable. And even if his luck is unusually good and he does wake up in the end, he still won't escape dementia and paralysis. Do you think he'll be able to accuse anyone? For the rest of his life, his mouth won't be good for anything but drooling—if he even has a rest of his life."

The criminal's attention was drawn to him in spite of himself.

Lang Qiao said, "Put down the knife."

Xiao Haiyang said, “Heavens, do you still not understand? Who told you that Yin Ping was going to make a full recovery soon? Clearly they lied to you.”

Lang Qiao only learned of this detail when she heard Xiao Haiyang’s words. She broke out in a cold sweat of fright. “Is that true?”

“It is.” Xiao Haiyang’s gaze didn’t leave the criminal. “Would a living corpse be worth taking the risk otherwise?”

The two of them stood one on each side, their words tightly joined; sometimes what they said was completely unrelated, and sometimes it was a dialogue; it produced the effect of a babble of voices, leaving the criminal forming the third corner of the triangle hesitating about which to defend against first; his gaze vacillated back and forth, his attention dodging left and right. “Shut up! Shut up!”

Xiao Haiyang quickly took another step forward. At the same time, a few colleagues who’d come over as soon as they’d heard the news came in after him, pressing in on the “nurse’s aide” with their momentum.

In his panic, the criminal instinctively turned in the direction where there were the most people and retreated, holding onto the nurse. He howled, “Get out!”

“No,” Xiao Haiyang said, looking at his hand holding the knife. With his eyes fixed on that fiercely shaking hand, he said, “It’s clear now that someone tricked you into throwing yourself into the net. This business is so simple. Won’t you give up the liar and drag him under? Are you still planning to kidnap and kill for him?”

The criminal’s hand shook more and more fiercely—he’d listened to what had been said, acknowledged that what Xiao Haiyang had said was the truth.

Xiao Haiyang looked into his eyes with a naturally played sneer. “Are you mentally handicapped?”

The “nurse’s aide” stiffened. Just then, the little nurse he was holding, who perhaps had experience dealing with aggrieved patients and relatives, took advantage of his divided attention, biting the webbing between his fingers with the boldness of consummate skill; she had chosen the most opportune moment.

Faced on one side with Yin Ping, whose condition didn’t agree with rumor, and on the other with Xiao Haiyang’s continuous verbal attack, the criminal’s mind was in turmoil; encountering a skilled bite without warning, he cried out loudly and instinctively shook her off.

The little nurse stamped on his instep. Lang Qiao called to her, “Duck!”

The nurse bent her knees in response; almost at the same time, a tray crashed down from above, knocking away the nurse’s aide’s knife. The nurse was scared into a scream by the loud noise passing over her head. A few criminal policemen came up together—

Fei Du’s unusual-looking deep thoughtfulness was interrupted by the phone ringing. Luo Wenzhou picked up the phone on the car. Over a very unsteady signal, Lang Qiao briefly and succinctly reported how the suspect had already been taken into custody. “I’m sorry, boss. It was my slip-up. Yin Ping’s condition is very unstable, they’re doing rescue work again for some reason. The doctors are all saying the outlook isn’t good. There are lots of people going in and out, like they’re fighting for his life, we didn’t...”

“Didn’t I say that Yin Ping was an important witness? As soon as I slink off, you all cook this up for me.” Luo Wenzhou ground his teeth when he’d heard. “Just fucking great. I guess you aren’t even thinking of your bonuses anymore? How come you’re all so good at saving the state money?”

Lang Qiao didn't dare to defend herself. She obediently closed her mouth and took the lecture.

“Bring him in,” Luo Wenzhou said coldly. “Don't think that I can't keep an eye on you while the old men are away. I see that all of you haven't written enough self-examinations!”

When he'd said this, Luo Wenzhou hung up uncompromisingly and spun the steering wheel, irritably shifting to the turn lane.

Fei Du didn't respond. He untied his scarf, his fingers subconsciously rubbing back and forth over his neck, his frown deepening.

As one of the important witnesses, Zhou Huaijin of course needed someone to receive him. At the City Bureau, Luo Wenzhou first found someone to lead him in, then familiarly returned the car to its parking space. When he'd cut the engine, he didn't rush to get out of the car. In the remaining warmth, he turned and pulled away Fei Du's hand, which was about to break the skin. “Tell me what you're thinking.”

“I'm the key figure who framed Gu Zhao fourteen years ago,” Fei Du opened in a frightening manner. “First, with Gu Zhao entirely unwary, I grasped which way his investigation was trending, then started in on his informers. Informers live in the grey areas on the edges and are doomed not to stay there long; they have their own plans. Whether they were threatened or enticed, they could all be put to good use—but the risk in this process was great. What if among them was one idiot who didn't know what was good for him and told Gu Zhao about this? As soon as Gu Zhao heard, he'd know who I was.”

Luo Wenzhou gave a “wow.”

“So what should I do?” Fei Du asked quietly. His fingers flitted over his upper lip. While there was no expression on his face, there

seemed to be a smile in the tail-end of his words, as though he really was that monster hiding in the shadows, turning everyone over in the palm of his hand. “I need to make my target betray Gu Zhao before I reveal myself.”

Luo Wenzhou thought about it. “For example, something like making the target informer think that you were a villain from The Louvre and Gu Zhao’s investigation had alerted the enemy, then forcing the informer to reveal Gu Zhao’s plans?”

“Yes. I’m Gu Zhao’s secret partner. Of course I know Gu Zhao’s plans. It would be very easy to know whether they were telling the truth, and very easy to screen for traitors,” Fei Du said gently. “As a police officer, of course I’m familiar with the informers closely related to the City Bureau. While Yin Chao and Yin Ping are identical twins, they’re far apart in disposition, so...if Yin Ping was impersonating Old Cinder, why didn’t I notice?”

“Because he likely didn’t have direct contact with Yin Ping at first, and his subordinates wouldn’t necessarily be familiar with Old Cinder.” Luo Wenzhou’s eyes turned, and he quickly said, “As for afterwards, because ‘Old Cinder’ became his partner in perjury and framing, even if the mole noticed that his performance was peculiar, he wouldn’t think much of it.”

“Afterwards, to make this thing seamless, I’d quietly take care of the witnesses, send them to other countries to lie low or simply kill them on the way... It’s all possible. Only the fake Old Cinder was the fish who slipped out of the net. In other words, it’s likely that Yin Ping realized the danger. When he had done the business, he wasn’t greedy. He immediately broke contact, faked Yin Chao’s disappearance, and went back to being a sooty-faced boiler attendant himself.” Fei Du looked up. “So the question arises, why would I allow Yin Chao to ‘disappear’ without going to investigate his family?”

Luo Wenzhou froze. “You mean to say it’s likely that the chief culprit behind framing Gu Zhao may have thought that Old Cinder didn’t have any material evidence pointing to him!”

“It’s likely that Yin Ping hid himself because he sensed something, but if you want to say that he had some material evidence, I’ve just been thinking about the whole process carefully, and I think it would be very hard.” Fei Du had switched over which person he was speaking in and had also returned to his ordinary tone of voice. “Then why is the person behind the scenes in such a rush to eliminate Yin Ping? First he exposed his contact, and then he sent another one of his people to the hospital to be caught by the police.”

Luo Wenzhou’s temples began to ache.

Fei Du slowly said, “If I haven’t guessed wrong, then it’s likely you’ll be able to reach an important suspect today. This person is undoubtedly in a high, powerful position. As soon as something happens, it’ll create a major scandal impacting the system’s ability to win public trust.”

Fei Du’s words were a prophecy—

At this delicate moment when the gaze of the investigation team was firmly fixed on the City Bureau, the “nurse’s aide” who had snuck into the hospital confessed.

“I did used to be a nurse’s aide... I worked at the Second Hospital, so I was very familiar with it. I needed money desperately, there was really no other way... I was...I was possessed. At first they made me sneak into the Second Hospital to keep an eye on that Yin Ping... So today I heard someone remark that he was going to wake up, and they said he may have killed someone, so as soon as his condition stabilized a little the police would take him away. When I found out, I thought of a way to notify my employers, and they told me to...told me to...”

“For money?” Lang Qiao closed her notebook, looking at the man with a disbelieving expression. “Do you know what kind of crime murder is?”

The man lowered his head, stammering.

Xiao Haiyang said, “Who told you to keep an eye on Yin Ping? Who ordered you to kill him? Did you see this person?”

“Two guys came to my house with money. They said it was their boss. I...I saw a car stopped outside.”

An investigator watching the interrogation over the security camera feed turned to Luo Wenzhou. “Captain Luo, please coordinate this as soon as possible. We want the security camera footage from around the suspect’s house transferred over.”

With matters at this stage, Luo Wenzhou could only follow instructions.—They turned up five million in cash at the “hospital killers”’s residence, and, at the same time, a surveillance camera nearby that had caught a luxury sedan appearing around the time and location the criminal had told them; with the criminal’s identification, they determined that it was the car that had stopped outside his building then.

The high-definition surveillance camera had caught the driver turning his head to speak to someone sitting in the backseat. This person was leaning forward slightly, and his features were clearly distinguishable—it was the City Bureau’s former director-general Zhang Chunjiu, who had transferred to an advisory post at the beginning of the year.

And the car he was sitting in, worth six million on the market, was a business vehicle registered in the name of his older brother Zhang Chunling’s conglomerate.



Zhang Chunjiu and Gu Zhao had started work at the City Bureau at the same time. The two of them had always been very friendly. Zhang Chunjiu had been the backbone of the City Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team when Gu Zhao had come to grief; he would have had every opportunity to place the fingerprint mold and the cash without anyone being the wiser. After Gu Zhao died, Yang Zhengfeng had borne the principal responsibility as his superior and had been disciplined, and Zhang Chunjiu had taken over Yang Zhengfeng's position; he'd been the ultimate beneficiary of Gu Zhao's death. And the field work system that was suspected of having been leaked and the tampered-with security camera equipment had all been put in place during his term of office.

Most importantly, when they investigated his record, they found that the reason that an exception had been made to transfer Zhang Chunjiu to the City Bureau was that he had rendered a tremendous meritorious service in the jurisdiction he'd originally belonged to—he'd arrested a gang of robbers and murderers who'd fled through twenty provinces. The above-mentioned gang was very crafty; they'd been wanted throughout the country for half a year, and each time they'd slipped away. But by some coincidence, they'd fallen into the hands of Zhang Chunjiu, at that time a young nobody!

Had he really been so perceptive, his professional abilities so unsurpassed?

If he'd been so awesome when he was young, then why had he become more confused the older he got? During the period he was in office managing the City Bureau, the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau had nearly become a drug den, and he'd had no idea.

All of it could be explained; the investigation team was extremely excited. They sent two people to personally go with Luo Wenzhou and his people to "invite" old Director Zhang from his residence. And while you wouldn't know without looking, once you'd seen, you'd be astonished—old Director Zhang was living in a Yan City estate

famous for its mansions. The two cars parked outside were worth over ten million. Even the teacups in the house were from some luxury brand, and there was a whole row of leather goods costing over a hundred thousand a piece in a cabinet. It was poles apart from the low-key and plain lifestyle he'd modeled at the City Bureau in former days.

What was all this “only wearing his uniform,” “carrying his own water,” “his private phone wasn't even a smartphone”... All of it now simply seemed like an over-the-top pompous joke.

## CHAPTER 144 - Edmond Dantès XV

“Your family really does have means, Director Zhang. What’s the cost per square meter in that estate you live in? I’ve heard that you can’t even get in to see the houses if you don’t have assets of a hundred million.”

“The house belongs to my older brother. My job transferred this year, and the place I go to work at is a little further away. My older brother is getting on in years and was planning to move to a more peaceful place, so he’s temporarily letting me use his residence in the city for two years. I’ll be retiring soon, anyway.”

“Your older brother? There’s so much affection between the two of you?”

“My older brother is ten years older than me. He practically raised me. If you said he was like my father, it wouldn’t be overstating it. I’m really on rather familiar terms with him. He went out to work young, to do business and save up some resources... To my shame, I haven’t given this business very careful thought. I only looked to what was convenient. Perhaps I’ve made a somewhat bad impression—but I can guarantee that my brother’s business hasn’t come into the slightest contact with my professional duties, and I’ve never used my position to do him any favors. If the organization thinks that my private life is too extravagant and violates discipline, I’ll accept that and reflect on returning to my home as soon as possible...but apart from that, my conscience is clear in others respects.”

The investigator smiled. “All right, we’ll verify that.—I suppose you know why you’ve been asked here?”

“I’m aware.”

“So, what would you like to say?”

Zhang Chunjiu sat upright in his chair. As before, he was lean; the leanness of middle age had its own sense of severity. The outlines of his forehead were rather deep. Over time, a long wrinkle had been pressed into it. In all ways, this severe face was hard to connect to the generous, open, good-tempered old big brother in the memories of Director Lu and the others. Looking at him, you couldn't resist having misgivings—how much could a person change over twenty years?

What had changed him?

“I haven't been able to get Lao Lu on the phone these last few days, and I thought it wasn't right, so I tried calling a few other old friends and found that none of them could pick up. Even Lao Pan, who's gone to school, is the same. So I've been thinking that it would be my turn soon.” Zhang Chunjiu picked up a teacup and drank a mouthful. His expression didn't change. “I don't know what I should tell you. Why don't you go ahead and ask?”

“Then we won't stand on ceremony.” The investigator's smile was a needle in silk floss. “It sounds like since you transferred away, you've remained in regular contact with your former colleagues?”

“Not regular, but this period of time has been rather special. For one thing, there's Gu Zhao's case being investigated anew, and for another, Lao Yang's wife—widow—is sick and staying in the hospital, so we old men have been calling each other rather industriously.”

“Oh, yes, Gu Zhao's case.” The investigator pushed at his glasses, overlooking the other part. “Do you still remember the details clearly? It was fourteen years ago.”

Zhang Chunjiu was silent for a while. “Gu Zhao... Gu Zhao's case was a thorn in all our hearts. No one believed it then, but the evidence was conclusive. It wasn't up to us to believe it or not. To tell you the truth, I didn't believe that Gu Zhao could do that sort of thing and

went to talk to my superiors many times, without daring to disclose it—my brothers were demoralized, and the leaders were pressed on all sides. I was caught between them.”

At this point, an expression between weariness and indignation showed on his face. “It was hard... I never expected that after so many years, it would be investigated anew one day. If Lao Yang knew...”

The investigator seamlessly interrupted him. “Director Zhang, if Gu Zhao didn’t solicit bribes and commit a violent act back then, then who do you think is responsible for him being wronged all those years ago?”

“I can’t judge my elders’ actions behind their backs, but Gu Zhao’s informers collectively perjured themselves, so the other side must have known what he was doing inside and out... That shows it’s likely someone was disclosing secrets here, setting him up...” The fold between Zhang Chunjiu’s brows deepened. He was silent for a long time, then said, “I don’t know who it was, and I’m not willing to suspect anyone. You can go ahead and suspect me—but if you want me to say that any of my brothers from back then could have been a traitor, it’s the same as wanting me to believe it’s true that Gu Zhao killed someone and solicited bribes. I can’t do it.”

The investigator wasn’t at all moved by this “deep affection between brothers.” He unfeelingly pulled out the main subject. “Director Zhang, do you remember an informer from back then whose codename was Old Cinder, real name Yin Chao?”

Zhang Chunjiu nodded. “Yes, wasn’t he the one who took Gu Zhao into The Louvre? I remember it clearly. Not long after it happened, he disappeared. I always thought something was off about him. Some years ago I had a young colleague who was transferred to South Bend for work. I knew that Yin Chao still had relatives there and asked this

colleague to keep an eye on him for me, and in case Yin Chao returned home to visit his relatives, to arrest him at once.”

The investigator at up a little straighter and followed up, “What’s the name of your young colleague?”

“Kong Weichen.”

“When this Kong Weichen took a few criminal policemen from the City Bureau to investigate Yin Ping, he called you. What did he say?”

“He told me about Yin Ping forging Yin Chao’s signature to get the money from their house being torn down, and that they were just going to investigate. He also said that if they got news about Yin Chao, he would definitely notify me. But afterwards I’ve been unable to contact him.” Zhang Chunjiu seemed to realize something was wrong. “What is it? What’s happened to Kong Weichen?”

“We have reason to believe that the ‘Old Cinder’ who went into The Louvre with Gu Zhao was in fact Yin Ping, and also that he held evidence about Gu Zhao’s case. But when they went to find him, Yin Ping fled to avoid punishment. In the course of the pursuit, the Criminal Investigation Team’s whereabouts were revealed, and two pickups loaded with explosive materials suddenly charged out, wanting to silence—”

Zhang Chunjiu said, “What!”

The investigator revealed the dagger inside the map, suddenly restraining the genial smile on his face. “The other side acted faster than the police force. We have reason to suspect that they received their information before Criminal Police Officer Tao Ran reported to his superior. And among the people present at the time who knew the circumstances, only Kong Weichen had made contact with the outside, and the person he contacted was you. Director Zhang, would you like to explain?”

“You suspect that I...” At this point, Zhang Chunjiu suddenly bit his tongue, forcing down the startled fury on his face. As calmly and evenly as possible, he said, “When Kong Weichen called me, he only said that they were going to Yin Ping’s house. He didn’t mention that Yin Ping was...that Yin Ping...”

Repeating this name twice, Zhang Chunjiu in the end couldn’t restrain himself. His expression showed a trace of disbelief. “How could Yin Ping have become Old Cinder? When did he begin impersonating him? Didn't anyone notice at the time? Who told you this? Is there a basis?”

The investigator met his eyes expressionlessly for a moment, trying to read something in his face. “Director Zhang, did you really not know? Are you acquainted with this person?”

Saying so, he pulled out a photograph and placed it in front of Zhang Chunjiu.

Zhang Chunjiu seemed to still be immersed in the bizarre information he had just heard. He quickly looked down and glanced at the photograph. “No.”

“No? Take a closer look.” The investigator leaned forward. “Yin Ping suffered a stroke because of a collision. He was taken to the hospital for life-saving measures and still isn’t out of danger. Yesterday afternoon, this person infiltrated Yin Ping’s hospital room disguised as a nurse’s aide and attempted once again to kill him in order to silence him. He failed, and we arrested him—the killer identified you as the one who incited him to do this.”

Zhang Chunjiu was stupefied. After a moment, seeming caught between laughter and tears, he pointed to himself. “Me?”

“We found five million in cash in this killer’s residence. It was the money that paid for Yin Ping’s life.”

Zhang Chunjiu’s gaze suddenly sharpened. “How much?”

“Five million.”

An indescribable expression suddenly flashed over Zhang Chunjiu’s face. After a moment, he gave a bitter laugh and let out a long breath, his upright posture crumbling. He leaned heavily back in his chair. “The evidence we found under Gu Zhao’s bed back then was five million in cash... It’s been fourteen years. What, is it still the same number?”

The investigator carefully weighed his expression. “Where were you on the eleventh?”

“I’m not sure.” Zhang Chunjiu rubbed the center of his brow, rubbing a third fold into his eyelids. The weariness in his face deepened. “Could I have a hint?”

“Around two o’clock in the afternoon on the eleventh, you were seen riding in a private car near the Among the Poplars Estate. Is that right?”

“Among the Poplars Estate? I don’t know it.” Zhang Chunjiu’s face was suspicious. “The eleventh...last Monday? My car was under the restriction that day, I borrowed a car from home. I passed by Lu’an Bridge. I think there were some residential communities around, but I didn’t notice what they were called.”

“Where were you going?”

“First I was going to the Second Hospital to see Lao Yang’s family. On the way I remembered that I hadn’t bought anything, and that wasn’t suitable, so I had the driver get off the highway at Lu’an Bridge.



There's a rather big shopping center there," Zhang Chunjiu said. "I threw the receipt somewhere, but you should be able to investigate the security cameras near the checkout at the mall. When I'd bought what I needed, I went to the hospital. Lao Yang's widow Fu Jiahui and his daughter Yang Xin can confirm it. You can go ask them."

The corner of the investigator's eye twitched slightly—the estate the hospital killer lived in was called Among the Poplars, and it really was near the Lu'an Bridge, but it was very small, and the house were old-fashioned. The signs on the buildings were mottled and unclear, and there weren't even any walls around the estate.

The investigator had asked the question this way on purpose, because ordinarily if a person had just been passing by, it would have been hard for him to notice what a common six-story building was called. If Zhang Chunjiu had directly answered, "I was just passing by," then that would have been very suspicious, but...

Was Zhang Chunjiu pretending? Then he was too cautious, and his deliberations too comprehensive; it was frightful.

Having come to Director Zhang, the investigation wouldn't be left to the Criminal Investigation Team. This questioning was being carried on in secret. Only Luo Wenzhou had been specially approved to come listen in. The investigator asked all the questions four or five times, full of countless pitfalls; it took over three hours in all. Both the questioner and the one being questioned were unbearably exhausted, and even Luo Wenzhou, listening from the sidelines, couldn't resist lighting a cigarette when he walked out the door.

Heavily weighed down, he focused and pondered amidst a cloud of smoke. Then he crossed the street—waiting there was an SUV so tall it had no friends.

As soon as Luo Wenzhou pulled open the door, before he could get into the passenger's seat, Xiao Haiyang leaned forward impatiently

from the back seat. “Captain Luo, I now think that this matter is questionable. Director Zhang may have been framed!”

Luo Wenzhou glanced at him, brought his frozen hands close to the car air-conditioning’s warm breeze, and slowly said, “Earlier, you were the one wishing you could push Director Zhang up onto the guillotine, and now you’re the one saying he’s been unjustly accused... Little Glasses, it’s fortunate you’re a commoner in the modern era. If you transmigrated into a prince in a feudal society, how many wrongfully murdered spirits would there be on your hands?”

Xiao Haiyang took no notice of what Luo Wenzhou was saying to him. He lowered his head and pulled a folder out of his bag. Pointing to two photographs inside it, he said, “Look, this is the cash found in that killer’s house, and the other photograph is the five million found in Uncle Gu’s house. I found it in the sealed old case file.—Large sums of money are usually piled up in stacks of ten thousand to make it easier to check. Banks tie them in paper strips. But the cash found in the killer’s house is all stacked together, exactly the same as the material evidence from fourteen years ago!”

Lang Qiao, next to him, said, “Yeah, I asked the hospital killer about it, and he said the money was like that when it came, and he spent ages counting it to be sure.”

Luo Wenzhou took the photographs, frowning deeply.

Out of nowhere, Xiao Haiyang suddenly said, “Captain Luo, I’m sorry, I was wrong.”

When he spoke, even Fei Du turned around from the driver’s seat. The six eyes of the three people in the car all fell on Xiao Haiyang, as though marveling at the once-in-a-thousand-years spectacle of an iron tree blossoming.

Xiao Haiyang nervily pushed at his glasses, lips pursing into a line. Whether nervous or uneasy, he seemed to be shaking slightly all over. He opened his mouth and let loose a barrage. “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have acted subjectively and rashly, reaching a conclusion after only getting a bit of surface-level evidence, casually accusing a hero. And I shouldn’t have...”

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him. “Did you write that just now?”

Xiao Haiyang blurted out an answer: “Last night.”

When he’d said it, he realized at once that he’d done something stupid and immediately shut his mouth. Lang Qiao snickered next to him. Xiao Haiyang, ill at ease, picked at the seam of his pants, seeming ready to evaporate off the face of the earth.

“Our team doesn’t have a custom of reciting entire personal reflections from memory. When this is over, just remember to invite some people to a meal.” Luo Wenzhou thought about it, then added, “You have to cook it yourself. We’ll see based on what you’ve cooked whether you’re sincere or not.”

Xiao Haiyang’s face was a blank. He seemed to want to season himself and jump right into the steamer.

“I listened to Director Zhang’s statement. Though the evidence is very unfavorable to him, all his explanations basically make sense.” Luo Wenzhou became stern. “Either he’s in a very high class, or he’s been set up.—Anyway, if he really is so powerful, he shouldn’t have left behind so many gaps in two unsuccessful attempts to kill Yin Ping.”

Lang Qiao asked, “So you’re saying someone set him up, and it’s the same method that was used to set up Gu Zhao? Why? Who has he offended?”

Luo Wenzhou shook his head, indicating for Fei Du to drive home.

The file for Gu Zhao's case had only recently been declassified when the investigation had been reopened. Who would know the detail about the arrangement of the cash? And after Director Zhang was investigated, the last person involved in the case would have been brought in. The investigation team wouldn't publicize how they were dealing with this, and it would be hard for them to interfere...

This increasingly bewildering old case had reached an impasse.

Just then, Fei Du suddenly spoke. "The first Picture Album Project started about a year after Gu Zhao's case. The people in the Picture Album group had the right to request case files—did those include Gu Zhao's case?"

Luo Wenzhou said, "You're saying..."

"The mysterious head of the project," Fei Du said. "Did he really die?"

Luo Wenzhou looked at him deeply. Hindered by Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang's presence, he only perfunctorily said, "It's been too long. We'll have to ask when Director Lu and the others get back."

But faint misgivings rose in his mind.—On the surface, the Picture Album Project seemed to be entirely separate from Gu Zhao's case. Why did Fei Du keep mentioning it? Why was he unable to let it go? Why had he even set aside his enormous family business to take part in the second Picture Album Project?

## CHAPTER 145 - Edmond Dantès XVI

“Boss,” Lang Qiao asked, “now that the investigation team has taken him, what do we do?”

In fact, Luo Wenzhou was also at a loss, but he couldn’t show it in front of his youthful subordinates. He muttered to himself for a moment, then said, “That moronic hospital killer is still in our hands. Keep interrogating him. Didn’t he say two men came to bring him the money? We haven’t found a hair from either of their heads. Who knows whether he was making it up?”

Lang Qiao hurriedly got out a small notebook—it was the bad habit trained into her by examination-oriented education; when she felt helpless, she’d passionately take notes, creating the false impression that she was working hard, as though if she sat and waited it would spontaneously become the truth.

“Also, find some guys to follow that driver of Director Zhang’s, plant some eavesdropping devices on him,” Luo Wenzhou said as he arranged his thoughts. “Xiao Haiyang, keep waiting for results from the material evidence. If it was Kong Weichen who leaked information when Tao Ran and the others were pursuing Yin Ping, he wouldn’t have obviously called Director Zhang. They’re both our own people. Of course they would know what we’d do if anything happened. They wouldn’t have left such obvious evidence—so there must be some other plot involved in Yin Ping’s car crash.”

This time, Xiao Haiyang at last had no dissenting views. He nodded affirmatively.

“Also, find an opportunity to go to the rehab center,” Luo Wenzhou added. “If you can, have a chat with Ma Xiaowei.”

Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang were very confused by this request, looking back at him helplessly.

Luo Wenzhou said, “The time when Ma Xiaowei appeared and the secrets he ‘inadvertently’ disclosed to us currently don’t look too likely to have all been coincidence. These major cases have all happened since Director Zhang was transferred. If there’s premeditation involved here, it’s likely it started then, and Ma Xiaowei was definitely a participant.”

Xiao Haiyang was as impatient as a fire. He quickly said, “I’ll go now!”

“Where are you going? Visiting hours are over. Go tomorrow.—Have you thought about how you’re going to question him? What’s the rush? Don’t you know that sharpening the axe won’t interfere with cutting firewood?”

The criminal policemen who’d been prepared to work throughout the Spring Festival idly got off work on time. Fei Du dropped Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao off at their respective homes, then went to the hospital to bring the injured Tao Ran something to eat, dictating a few lines he could use to appeal to girls; he was dragged home midway by Luo Wenzhou, who couldn’t stand to listen to it.

Then, as though nothing were the matter, he undertook part-time work as a supermarket cart pusher, porter, and wallet-carrier, accompanying Luo Wenzhou to the supermarket to buy ingredients and cat food. His manner was calm and natural, just as usual.

Especially when it was time to go to sleep. There was for once no need for Luo Wenzhou to coax and plead—he said it twice, and Fei Du turned off his computer.

Fei Du had rather bad living habits. He didn’t sleep at night and would also get up early in the morning, citing the work schedules of

people from Chicken Soup for the Soul such as “Buffett” and “Jobs” and “Kobe.”

When he'd just gotten out of the hospital and didn't have much energy it had been a little better; he'd lie down after a little torment. But after some meticulous nursing by Luo Wenzhou, it seemed there was another vigorous Luo Yiguo in the house—unless Luo Wenzhou suddenly woke in the middle of the night, when he reached out on waking, eight or nine out of ten times he'd come up empty. Fortunately, President Fei had a better disposition than President Guo and could get himself up; he didn't harm others by acting as an alarm clock.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him in surprise. “What's wrong with you today? Are you feeling unwell? Did you catch a cold? Or did you eat something that disagreed with you?”

“If I don't listen to you, you resort to force.” Fei Du touched his face helplessly. “If I do listen to you, you suspect that I'm sick... Beloved concubine, you're too capricious.”

A trace of a smile floated at the corners of Luo Wenzhou's eyes. Then he grabbed Fei Du's wrist and spoke with a double meaning: “Am I capricious, or is your lordship's heart hard to fathom?”

Fei Du stared. Luo Wenzhou looked at him with a slightly grave gaze. “Your mood hasn't been right these last couple of days. What is it?”

With a smile that wasn't quite a smile, Fei Du avoided replying. “My mood's not right? I'm always ‘in the mood’ when I see you.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

A certain person was using lines on him that he'd just gotten through teaching Tao Ran, not even changing a punctuation mark. Did he think he was so deaf he hadn't heard?

Seeing that Fei Du once again refused to speak properly, Luo Wenzhou suddenly raised his arms and grabbed him around the waist, lifting his feet off the ground.

“Shoes!” Fei Du said. “Wait, my shoes!”

Hearing movement, Luo Yiguo saw an opportunity and leapt over, picking up Fei Du’s dropped slipper in its mouth like a rare toy, letting itself go happily tearing and biting at it.

Luo Wenzhou uncompromisingly closed the bedroom door, pressing him against the door in midair. “Your shixiong isn’t so old yet he’d make you dirty your feet walking on the ground. What do you want shoes for?”

President Fei’s amorous history didn’t include any direct practical experience with this position. He was a little flustered. While he knew that if he fell it wouldn’t kill him, he still very insecurely reached out to support himself against the doorknob, forcing a smile. “Could I ask you to switch to something not so stimulating? I’m afraid it’ll be tiring for...”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes at him. Fei Du was good at reading expressions; he wisely swallowed back the word “you.” His throat moved. Displaying adaptability, he abandoned a man’s self-respect and corrected himself: “...me.”

Luo Wenzhou looked up and met his eyes for a moment, then slowly drew near, gently rubbing the tip of Fei Du’s nose.

Fei Du lowered his head to kiss him, but Luo Wenzhou dodged back, unfeelingly saying, “Let go of the doorknob. You can’t put your hands anywhere but on me. Who told you to demonstrate chin-ups?”

Fei Du: “...”



Luo Wenzhou said, “Or do you want the handcuffs?”

Fei Du was normally very indulgent towards him. He didn’t have the heart to spoil his fun. Choosing the lesser of two evils, he made the position as secure as possible, holding Luo Wenzhou’s shoulders and clamping his legs around his waist.

Luo Wenzhou slowly used the tips of his teeth to pull open the bathrobe hanging loosely in front of his chest. “What am I to you?”

Fei Du feigned astonishment. “Are you disappointed I didn’t formally buy you a diamond? How about I go order a pigeon egg now?”

Luo Wenzhou said, “You can’t get full eating a pigeon egg. I want chicken eggs, two of them.”

Fei Du: “...”

He really was a true man who only wanted to eat and sleep his fill.

“Since I’m worth two chicken eggs—” Luo Wenzhou’s gaze roved around Fei Du’s chest. He was young, after all; some time had passed, and the electric shock scars were hardly visible. Without the messy scrawl of a stuck-on tattoo to cover it, his chest was thin and fair, with almost an alluring trace of youthfulness.

Such a thin chest; such a heavy heart.

When Luo Wenzhou had looked enough, he finished his long drawn-out sentence: “—can you trust me?”

This question was a softball. Fei Du answered without thinking: “How could I not... *hss*.”

Luo Wenzhou had a premonition that the conversation might not go smoothly; consequently he ground his teeth against him.

“Think carefully, Fei Du. I’ll give you another chance.”

The activities of his lower body normally didn’t rise above Fei Du’s neck. His brain was very clear; he immediately realized that Luo Wenzhou was implying something, and thoughts spun through his mind. Looking down from on high, he freed up one hand to raise Luo Wenzhou’s chin. “What, do you feel uneasy because I haven’t been speaking so much lately and forcing a stack of ideas into your ears?”

The tips of Luo Wenzhou’s eyebrows moved. “I feel like you’re hiding something from me.”

This sort of phrase is usually an omen of domestic crisis. Fei Du earnestly recalled for a moment. “When I’ve assigned tasks to Lu Jia and the others lately, it’s all been right in front of you. I haven’t secretly plotted against anyone’s life, and I haven’t wanted to go pull out Fei Chengyu’s breathing tube. I’ve observed the law and discipline, haven’t touched a drop of alcohol, oh, and I’ve acceded to your every plea. I don’t think there’s anything I’ve been hiding?”

Luo Wenzhou held him with one hand, the other hand very improperly reaching under his bathrobe. He touched somewhere that made Fei Du stiffen all over. Suspended in midair, feeling neither here nor there, he was nervous and impatient. “Shixiong, are you... planning to use torture to extort a confession?”

“That’s right,” Luo Wenzhou said slowly. “When Zhou Huaijin mentioned ‘thirteen years ago,’ you said, ‘the Picture Album Project.’ Today in the car when we were discussing whether Director Zhang was framed, you mentioned the Picture Album Project again. Even when you were getting close to me from ulterior motives, your ostensible motive was restarting the Picture Album Project.”

Fei Du laughed. “When I was getting close to you from ulterior motives, my motive was your good looks.”

“...” Luo Wenzhou choked. “Are you stealing my lines? You pick up bad influences quickly.”

“The Picture Album Project planned to establish a record of criminals. Though it was led by the school, if you pay attention to the list of participants, you’ll find that they were nearly all frontline police officers who took part in Gu Zhao’s case—that is, they were suspects.” Fei Du gasped; at the end of his endurance, he grabbed Luo Wenzhou’s groping hand. “...Darling, if you keep doing that, I won’t be able to keep talking.”

“But you didn’t come because of Gu Zhao’s case.”

“I remember I told you...”

“I remember, too,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted him. “The first time, you told me that you had an intuition that your mom’s death was connected to Fei Chengyu, and you wanted to know why you’d have that intuition, so you wanted to trace back your memories from when you were little. The second time, you told me that actually you knew your mom had killed herself, and you knew why she’d done it, and that you faintly suspected Fei Chengyu was involved in some shady business. The third time, when we went after Lu Guosheng, in the basement of your house, you repeated to me what Fei Chengyu had said. You remembered what had happened thirteen years ago with perfect clarity. You didn’t need to trace anything back.”

Fei Du stared blankly. He hadn’t expected Luo Wenzhou to remember every word of nonsense he’d said with perfect clarity.

Luo Wenzhou struggled free of his hand, clutching the tender flesh between Fei Du’s legs, grinding back forth. Gritting his teeth slightly,

he asked, "Can you tell me now what the truth is among your self-contradictory words?"

Fei Du was a silent for a good while. Then he suddenly grabbed the back of Luo Wenzhou's head, lowered his head, and kissed him. He seemed to naturally know how to stir up emotion; the kiss wasn't intense, but it made a person have the feeling of being deeply loved by him.

It was an unhurried, precise, and perfect deep feeling.

But just as a succession of coincidences couldn't be accidental, this always perfectly precise expression couldn't be a natural revelation. Luo Wenzhou suddenly flared up a little, tearing away the loose clothing hanging on Fei Du's body, changing zero distance to negative distance. Only when he felt Fei Du's pulse change sharply did he have some sense that he was truly holding him in his arms.

Fei Du seemed about to fall asleep when he carried him to bed and laid him down. Luo Wenzhou kissed the center of his brow. His intellect returned, and he thought, "I still haven't gotten an answer."

Just then, Fei Du suddenly spoke. "Not everything I told you those three times was made up."

His voice was a little hoarse, gently rubbing the eardrums. Luo Wenzhou paused, made a sound, and stretched his legs out onto the little armchair next to the bed.

"I really am investigating the Picture Album to trace back to things from when I was little. I don't remember completely what happened in the basement, and I have an intuition that the part left out is very important."

Luo Wenzhou said, "I thought your memory wasn't any worse than Xiao Haiyang's."

“I don’t have an eidetic memory.” Fei Du smiled quickly. “Actually, I went into Fei Chengyu’s basement without permission twice. The first time it was entirely by chance. I dropped something and went to get it, and he hadn’t locked the door. That time I got in and saw the Picture Album Project roster. While I was flipping through it, Fei Chengyu returned. I hid in the little cabinet under his bookcase, and luckily he didn’t find me.”

Luo Wenzhou for some reason felt there was something wrong with these words, but before he could think closely, Fei Du continued, “Little boys naturally seek stimulus, are curious and rebellious. Having gotten in once, I wanted to do it a second time, so I tried by any means possible to get the code to the basement.—It wasn’t easy. Fei Chengyu was very careful. So it was half a year later that I succeeded in getting into that secret basement a second time. I saw the research paper concerning the victims of vicious crimes arranged on his desk.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “The paper written by Fan Siyuan, the head of the first Picture Album Project?”

“Yes.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.—The first Picture Album Project had gone wrong midway. It hadn’t been long after Gu Zhao’s case. The City Bureau really couldn’t have taken another scandal. As soon as they’d found something was wrong, they’d urgently called it to a halt, and all the personnel who’d participated had been investigated. It had been handled very quickly—

“I think that it was less than half a year from the time the first Picture Album Project launched to the time it was called to a halt,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Why did Fei Chengyu’s interest last so long?”

“I turned on his computer. The code was the same as for the door. I saw a file on the desktop called ‘Picture Album,’ but I couldn’t open it, because the door code didn’t work.”

“You mean that the Picture Album project is connected to Fei Chengyu?” Luo Wenzhou asked. “And then what?”

“Then I don’t recall very clearly, but...” Fei Du suddenly felt his throat tighten. He turned his head away and coughed twice. “But...ahem...”

At first Luo Wenzhou thought that he’d choked while speaking, but he very quickly noticed something was wrong—Fei Du couldn’t stop coughing.

He quickly went to hold Fei Du up, patting his back. “What’s the matter? Did you catch a chill? What did I tell you!”

Fei Du was coughing so hard he couldn’t catch his breath, the veins nearly standing out at the corners of his forehead. It only calmed after a long time. Luo Wenzhou brought over a glass of warm water. “Drink a little. Don’t be in a hurry to take medicine for a cold. It may work to wait it out. We’ll see if it gets worse.”

“I only roughly remember that Fei Chengyu suddenly returned home for some reason and found that I was in his basement. I think he was very angry. After a huge explosion, he emptied the basement,” Fei Du said with some effort. “But...when I think about it, it seems that that’s when I started to have a concrete idea of what he was doing. I must have accidentally seen something very important in the basement that day.”

## CHAPTER 146 - Edmond Dantès XVII

It was normal for an adult not to remember things that had happened before he was ten years old. For example, Luo Wenzhou persisted in believing that silly things like him seizing a coal heap while wielding a toy gun when he was little were fabricated by Comrade Mu Xiaoqing to slander him. But the unusual thing was that Fei Du remembered everything that had happened before and after clearly, including Fei Chengyu's tone of voice. Why would he only have forgotten this segment?

But Fei Du's condition was obviously unsuited for further questioning. Luo Wenzhou could only temporarily lay down his arms, checking his temperature, suspecting it was him going too far fooling around earlier that had made Fei Du catch a chill. Though the current temperature display showed that the temperature in the room was nearly 27°; you wouldn't feel cool wearing short sleeves. Luo Wenzhou couldn't come up with an answer after thinking it over and in the end had to sum it up in one cause—Fei Du, perhaps belonging to the category of tropical fish, was weak.

But when his body was tired after excessive activity, Fei Du's mind was never willing to behave and rest inside his motionless outer form. It wandered around at random while he slept.

First he dreamed that he'd taken out a can of cat food but had forgotten to open it for Luo Yiguo. Then he dreamed that Luo Wenzhou was displeased for some reason, not paying attention to him no matter how he coaxed. Finally, he seemed to return to the day Tao Ran had been brought to the hospital—the strange thing was that in the real world, when Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou had arrived, Tao Ran had already been in the emergency room, and they'd only gotten a quick look at him when his condition had stabilized and he'd been taken to an ordinary hospital room.

But in his disordered dream, Fei Du thought he saw Tao Ran covered all over in blood, bones with torn flesh on them bursting from his body. Tao Ran's face was flushed purple, and his eyes were protruding. It was a horrifying appearance of death.

Fei Du instantly opened his eyes, waking with a start.

His eyelids felt heavy, but in the instant it took for him to open his eyes, his wild thoughts were instantly forced back into place through thorough training. Frowning, Fei Du remembered the dream he'd just had, feeling it was a little wrong, because Tao Ran had been injured in a car crash. So why had his dream given him the appearance of being suffocated?

It didn't seem very logical.

But probably even Stephen Hawking couldn't have asked for all his dreams to be logical. The doubt flashed through Fei Du's mind, and then he felt somewhat unwell, something like the ache of being in the same position for too long. Fei Du gently pulled away Luo Wenzhou's arms, which were clinging a little tightly. He turned over, but the usually soft and comfortable mattress seemed to have turned into a cement floor. However he turned over, he felt that it was pressing against his bones. Covered only in a light-weight quilt, he felt it was pressing down on him so he couldn't quite catch his breath. No matter what, he couldn't find a comfortable position.

When Fei Du was very carefully turning over for the third time, Luo Wenzhou, who normally couldn't be shaken even by thunder, suddenly turned on the bedside lamp. "What's wrong?"

Fei Du didn't feel like talking. He buried most of his face against the pillow, avoiding the lamplight, shaking his head.

Luo Wenzhou reached out a hand to feel, then sat up with a start. "You're burning up like a radiator, and you're still shaking your head!"



Fei Du half opened his eyes somewhat vaguely, seeing Luo Wenzhou rush out to find fever-reducing medicine.

When Luo Wenzhou had lived alone, he'd mostly used things like safflower oil and Yunnan white medicinal powder<sup>6</sup>. He had a hoard of band-aids and iodine, but the rest was basically all expired medication. He rifled boxes and turned over drawers, working up a sweat. Next to him, Luo Yiguo was unwilling to be tranquil, dragging over an unopened can from somewhere, clawing and biting at it on the floor, the can making banging noises as it fell.

Luo Wenzhou shushed it, quietly reprimanding, "If you keep making a fuss, I'll lock you out on the balcony!"

Luo Yiguo pushed the can with its feet, raising its head and glaring indomitably at him, evidently meaning to fight him to the end.

Luo Wenzhou wasn't in the mood to pay attention to it. He finally found a box of fever-reducing medicine, scanned the directions and manufacturing date, discovered that it actually hadn't expired, and quickly took it to Fei Du.

As he gave Fei Du the medicine from his hand, he couldn't resist wanting to sigh. "President Fei, let's talk it over. Can we exercise a little starting tomorrow, set up a routine?"

Fei Du didn't have the energy to joke with him. He only vaguely said, "Tomorrow's fine."

He forced himself to drink half a glass of water, unsteadily pushed the glass away, and patted the back of Luo Wenzhou's hand twice in thanks, then curled up and didn't move. Fei Du was usually adept at making trouble, but after belatedly realizing that he was sick, he behaved himself, seeming to take orderly stock of his limited forces

and intelligently lower all his life functions as much as possible, allocating all his strength to his immune system.

Luo Wenzhou watched him very uneasily for a while and found that this patient could entirely take care of himself; he didn't have the bad habit of throwing off covers and tossing around. Suddenly he rather tenderly touched his hair. "Who took care of you before when you got sick?"

Fei Du wanted to say, "Minor illnesses were nothing to worry about, for big ones I went to the hospital," but in reality his lips moved and he said nothing. The soporific effect of the fever-reducing medication bore down. The sound of Luo Wenzhou walking around seemed to come through a layer of something, further and further. Soon it had turned into a haze. Fei Du, holding on to the unsaid answer, was forced into sleep by the medicine. The unsettled question escaped his consciousness and seeped into his dreams.

In his dream, he saw his bedroom when he was little—the whole villa was decorated according to Fei Chengyu's preferences, including the woman and the child's rooms. The richly-colored pieces of furniture had their own atmosphere, pressing down on the youthful inhabitant's personality until not a sliver remained. Everything was cold...only fortunately the window faced south, and the light was good.

Fei Du vaguely remembered one time he'd leaned at the head of the bed, the sun falling on his body, restricted to bed because of a sudden cold and fever.

While Fei Chengyu wasn't home, he'd secretly taken out a strip of paper from his pencil case.

There were three strings of digits on the strip. Secretly entering a forbidden place was the sort of thing you had to do a second time. Fei Du had spent nearly half a year quietly watching Fei Chengyu's every

move, secretly collecting all the other codes Fei Chengyu used in his daily life, making a simple summary and count of the encoding rules, producing a few principles from this analysis, trying to determine the code to the basement.

He had no chance to make a wrong attempt, because entering the wrong code would raise the alarm. No matter where Fei Chengyu was, he would receive a notification at once. Fei Du had finally fixed on three possible combinations Fei Chengyu may have used, but he really couldn't determine which one of the three it was.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. Fei Du had just stuck the "treasonous and heretical" slip of paper back into the pencil case in a flurry when his mom came in carrying cold medicine mixed with water.

She gently changed the soaked and scalding towel on his forehead, then used a towel soaked in cool water to wipe him down. Throughout the process, she was like a robot, doing everything attentively and methodically, but unwilling to make any eye contact with him, as though any extraneous contact would bring calamity down upon them.

Fei Du wanted to call out "mom," but when the word came to his throat, it stuck. He only opened his mouth.

When the woman had finished cleaning him, she seemed less gloomy than before. There was even a bit of briskness in her step. Little Fei Du wanted to say something to her, but he didn't know where to start. Seeing she was about to leave, he hastily reached out an arm to catch her. The unzipped pencil case on his knee fell, and the strip of paper with the codes written on it slipped out.

The air seemed to solidify.

After a good while, the woman bent down and picked up the pencil case and the little slip of paper. Fei Du subconsciously held his breath. The woman at last looked up and met his eyes. Her gaze was so complicated and hard to read that the boy couldn't tell what she meant. He nervously clutched the quilt.

Would she tell Fei Chengyu? Would she suddenly go mad?

As his apprehension increased, the woman, as if she hadn't understood, put the slip of paper back into the pencil case and gently put it back in his lap, kissed the top of his head, then turned and left.

After he'd heard the door, Fei Du hesitantly pulled out the strip of paper he'd written the codes on. He saw that there was a fingernail mark under one of the codes.

Three days later, when he learned that Fei Chengyu had gone out of town, he used that code to open the basement's thick door. The basement was like a forbidden area. The stairs were narrow and winding; you couldn't see the end from the top. Dim lights flickered in the gloomy wall lamps, lighting up the malevolent dragons on the wallpaper. There seemed to be a monster hidden inside, darkly opening its mouth wide.

In the dream, Fei Du thought that as he walked down step by step, his mom was watching from the second floor. When he opened the door, there seemed to be a faint black mist screening the desk and the cupboards on all four sides. He hesitantly approached the desk and saw a stack of printed treatises.

Then the dream turned into chaos. The characters printed on the paper suddenly grew, spreading on the paper like bloodstains. The space around him heaved as though it was about to crumble. The floor and ceiling shattered. There were the mixed sounds of shattering glass, the terrible footsteps, and a woman's screams. The feeling of suffocation suddenly attacked, making him unable to catch

a breath. At the same time, he seemed to hear a man saying by his ear, “My Picture Album Project can also launch...”

Fei Du was covered in cold sweat. He suddenly sat up. Then, feeling the world spinning around him, he fell back and was embraced by Luo Wenzhou.

“Don’t throw off the covers yet.” Luo Wenzhou pulled him back and wiped the sweat at the corners of his forehead. He was very gratified to feel that his temperature had fallen and softly kissed his temple. “Did you have a nightmare? It’s easy to have nightmares when you’ve taken fever-reducing medicine. I’ve been waiting here all night for you to throw yourself into my arms. Come here and let me comfort you.”

The fierce ringing in Fei Du’s ears subsided. He hesitated, then said, “It wasn’t really a nightmare. It was only a very fantastic plot.”

“...A fantastic plot?” Luo Wenzhou said. “Like riding a train into the sky?”

Clowning around with a sick person first thing in the morning really was low. Speechless, Fei Du poked him with his elbow.

“Like how when I worked out Fei Chengyu’s code on my first try, it was actually because my mom gave me a hint,” Fei Du said. “Also...I think Fei Chengyu said something to me about ‘my Picture Album Project...’”

Luo Wenzhou paused. “You don’t remember how you opened that door?”

“I do, I remember I worked out a few possibilities, then went to try, and very luckily the first code I tried worked...” Fei Du’s words suddenly paused. He’d noticed something off. Looking at his childhood mental state from an outsider’s point of view, he thought

that no matter what he wouldn't have run the risk of making Fei Chengyu angry by hastily going to try out some codes he was entirely unsure of.

So had his mom really given him a hint?

Why didn't he remember anything about it?

Luo Wenzhou covered his eyes. "Go back to sleep. We can talk about sad things when you're better."

When he'd gotten Fei Du settled down, Luo Wenzhou quietly got up, heated up breakfast, and put it in a heat-preserving container. Then he left a note and went alone to the records room. Asking for a transfer of files required going through formal procedures, especially sealed records, but this was a very particular time; if he'd gone through the formalities, he still wouldn't have found anyone who could sign for him. The person in charge of the records room had smoked countless packs of his cigarettes, so he turned a blind eye and let him in.

Luo Wenzhou searched around; as expected, he couldn't find anything of value. There was only a thin book on the Picture Album Project with some very surface-level introductory words in it. There were also a few superficial treatises that all looked like they'd been copied and pasted from all over. The head of the Picture Album Project had been Yan Security Uni's professor Fan Siyuan, but among the papers included in the end, his signature didn't appear on any of them as either author or academic advisor.

The contents of Fan Siyuan's personal file were also pitifully scant. Only his work experience and publication history were collected; they came to an abrupt halt thirteen years ago, but his recorded death, very strangely, was ten years ago.—Lao Yang had vaguely mentioned him, saying that he'd died. He'd always thought that it was something like killing himself to avoid punishment after the Picture Album

Project had been exposed or a mishap while being apprehended. He hadn't expected to find it was nothing like that.

It was first thing in the morning. The person in charge called to Luo Wenzhou and went to the bathroom. Luo Wenzhou took the opportunity to quickly copy all the collected files that had been used in the first Picture Album Project, proficiently taking a turn as a thief.

Before leaving, his gaze fell momentarily on Fan Siyuan's work record, and a divine light suddenly flashed through his mind—

Yes, Director Lu had said that after starting work, Gu Zhao had gone to Yan Security Uni to do a postgraduate program!

Meanwhile, Xiao Haiyang had gone to the rehab center first thing in the morning. A rehab center wasn't like a public park where you could just show up. He sat waiting uneasily for an age before finally seeing Ma Xiaowei. Xiao Haiyang secretly sighed in relief—so many things had gone wrong lately, he'd been afraid that when he'd just found a bit of a lead he would be informed that Ma Xiaowei had also been silenced.

Ma Xiaowei had gained some weight and no longer had the look of a drug addict, but his mental state was rather listless. The listlessness vanished as soon as he saw Xiao Haiyang. He tensed all over.

## CHAPTER 147 - Edmond Dantès XVIII

Xiao Haiyang wanted to smile at him to ease the tense atmosphere, but when the corners of his mouth pulled up, it looked like an unsuccessful forced smile; the effect was unusual. Anyway, when Ma Xiaowei saw it, his face turned even greener.

Xiao Haiyang: "..."

He had to abandon the amiable route. In a businesslike manner, he flashed a frosty look like a shop sign. "Do you remember me?"

Ma Xiaowei nodded cautiously. "Hello, Officer Xiao."

"I've been transferred to the City Bureau," Xiao Haiyang said. "I came here today to ask you about a few things."

Ma Xiaowei laced his hands together. Sitting uneasily, he lowered his head, looking as though he'd been dragged in for interrogation again.

Xiao Haiyang watched him closely for a moment. "You've worked with us. We saved your life and helped clear you of suspicion of murder. I'm not saying you should be delighted to see me, but at least you shouldn't be so nervous.—Ma Xiaowei, you actually know what I want to ask, right?"

The veins on the backs of Ma Xiaowei's hands tensed.

Xiao Haiyang said, "On the night of May twentieth of this year, you took He Zhongyi's cell phone and sold it to drug dealers. Then He Zhongyi was murdered, and his body was dumped at the sight of the drug transaction. The next morning, a passerby discovered He Zhongyi's corpse. And while the police were making visits and investigating this case all over, you had a dispute with the local residents and were taken with them to the Flower Market District



Sub-Bureau. You made a slip of the tongue that let us know that you were on the scene around when the murder was committed, and that something else had happened, which you couldn't talk about at the sub-bureau."

Ma Xiaowei said falteringly, "Yes...I told you all of that before."

"I know." Xiao Haiyang's gaze watched intently from behind lenses like the bottoms of bottles. "What I want to ask you is whether you made a slip of the tongue yourself, or did someone instruct you on what to say?"

Ma Xiaowei trembled.

"You're timid, cowardly, and a liar," Xiao Haiyang said, hitting the nail on the head. Seeing Ma Xiaowei open his mouth as though planning to defend himself, Xiao Haiyang interrupted him. "You don't need to deny it. Stealing and lying are typical characteristics of drug users.— Didn't you confess yourself at the time that you'd stolen He Zhongyi's phone and then lied to him?"

"So here's what I don't understand." Xiao Haiyang leaned back lightly. "You aren't some kind of honest person who doesn't know how to lie. Why did you slip up when the police casually asked you a few questions? Is it very hard to say 'I don't know' to everything? You clearly knew that Wang Hongliang's people had been there that night. Deliberately being ambiguous like that, weren't you afraid they'd silence you?"

Ma Xiaowei had nothing to say.

"Did the person who instructed you give you a guarantee that Wang Hongliang and the rest would soon reap the consequences of their evil, so you didn't need to worry?"

Ma Xiaowei's eyes widened slightly. He was after all an underage child. His momentary astonished expression immediately gave him away.

When Xiao Haiyang had gotten home last night, he'd considered all night how he should ask. The hard-working are rewarded; seeing Ma Xiaowei's expression, he methodically said the weightiest words: "I'll tell you something. You remember when I took you to the City Bureau? In fact, that night, Wang Hongliang's people had sent a message to their co-conspirator on duty at the sub-bureau, telling him to get rid of you, the eyewitness, as soon as possible. If I hadn't been keeping an eye on them and snatched you away before they could act, you'd be a pile of ashes by now."

All the blood drained out of Ma Xiaowei's face. "That, that can't..."

"In fact, you weren't useful anymore then." Xiao Haiyang pressed on step by step. "The police had already found definite leads and would soon find video evidence of Wang Hongliang's crimes. You dying in the sub-bureau wouldn't make any impact. At most it would be another criminal charge for Wang Hongliang. They didn't care about you at all. They just left you to run your course."

It was as if Ma Xiaowei had been struck by lightning. Xiao Haiyang quickly followed up, "So who instructed you?"

Ma Xiaowei's lips trembled. A good while later, he forced out a few words. "It...it was Zhao...Zhao-ge."

"Which Zhao-ge?" First Xiao Haiyang stared; then he quickly recalled. "You mean the Zhao-ge who lived in the same apartment as you and said he came from the same province as He Zhongyi? Called Zhao Yulong?"

Ma Xiaowei bit his lip and nodded.

Xiao Haiyang frowned.—He remembered how Wang Hongliang had been ready to let Ma Xiaowei carry the can, acting the part of the criminal suspect, hastily giving the City Bureau a solution to the extremely strange case of He Zhongyi. But he'd known there was something fishy about this, so he'd gone with Tao Ran, who'd also had doubts, to privately visit a few of He Zhongyi's acquaintances, Zhao Yulong among them.

He hadn't been a crucial figure at all, because at the time of the crime, he was supposed to have gone to his hometown to attend a funeral. He'd only learned of He Zhongyi's death when Xiao Haiyang had called him, then hastily returned to Yan City. Actually, he hadn't even counted as a witness; you could only say it had been an ordinary visit to understand something of the victim's background.

Apart from him and Tao Ran, it was possible the others didn't know such a person existed.

But thinking about it carefully, the clues this Passerby A-like Zhao Yulong had supplied had been rather key—the origin of He Zhongyi's white cell phone and He Zhongyi's altercation with Zhang Donglai had both come into the police force's line of sight only after talking to him. Most importantly, He Zhongyi had dressed rather formally to go to the Chengguang Mansion to meet Zhao Haochang, and the shoes he'd been wearing had been borrowed from Zhao Yulong, so it was likely that he had grasped what He Zhongyi was doing.

Actually, the first person whose investigation had reached the Chengguang Mansion at the time had been Fei Du, because he'd chanced to encounter He Zhongyi asking the way. But thinking about it, given Zhao Yulong's statement, even without Fei Du's chance encounter the police would very naturally have turned their line of sight towards the Chengguang Mansion, then realized that the "scene of the crime" Ma Xiaowei had been unwilling to talk about in his babbling hadn't in fact been the "scene of the crime," and other secrets were involved.

In an instant, countless thoughts flashed through Xiao Haiyang's mind. He pursed his dry lips slightly. "Didn't you say that this Zhao Yulong had gone to his hometown to attend a funeral on the night of the crime?"

"He said he was going back to his hometown, but the next morning, before it got light, he suddenly came back. Zhongyi hadn't come back, the others weren't there, so I was alone in the apartment," Ma Xiaowei said in a sobbing tone. "He suddenly shook me awake and showed me the photos online that you guys hadn't had time to delete yet, asked me what was going on... As soon as I opened my eyes I saw...saw Zhongyi-ge... I...I..."

As soon as he remembered this, Ma Xiaowei couldn't quite get his words out. He talked babbled for a while, then simply covered his face and began to cry dully.

Xiao Haiyang: "..."

He sat stiffly for a while, maintaining the indifference of an objective onlooker. Then, thinking of something, he suddenly furtively reached out and cautiously patted Ma Xiaowei's shoulder with his fingertips. After a light touch, he drew back again, as though Ma Xiaowei were a human hedgehog and would prick his hand.

"Zhao-ge asked me what was going on, and he said that Zhongyi-ge was downstairs and there were police all over outside. I didn't dare to believe it, pulled open the window and looked out, then I knew that it was true. My mind buzzed, and then I heard Zhao-ge next to me saying, 'It looks like they found Zhongyi in that triangular piece of land.' When I heard that, I was scared to death—that was the place I'd bought the stuff the night before, why would Zhongyi-ge have anything to do with them? He never touched that stuff, I knew that... My first reaction was, Oh no, this definitely happened because I sold that phone."

“You thought that He Zhongyi had seen you sell his precious new phone and had gone up to argue with the drug dealers, trying to take his phone back, and so had gotten killed by them?” Xiao Haiyang asked. “Did you think so yourself, or did someone mislead you?”

Ma Xiaowei looked at him blankly.

“All right,” Xiao Haiyang said helplessly. This silly child had no idea he’d been used. “And then what?”

“Zhongyi-ge was nice to me, if I wasn’t so... I wouldn’t have stolen his stuff! I was scared, so I told Zhao-ge everything and asked him what to do, but Zhao-ge said, ‘If Wang Hongliang and the others killed him, then Zhongyi-ge died for nothing.’”

Xiao Haiyang noticed something and said grimly, “You mean that Zhao Yulong also knew about Wang Hongliang and the others.—Did he take drugs?”

Ma Xiaowei shook his head. “He wasn’t like us. But Zhao-ge had been there a long time, longer than anyone else. He knew everything.”

Xiao Haiyang frowned again—because when they’d spoken to Zhao Yulong, they hadn’t noticed that he was the sort of great person of vast resources who “knew everything.” Not only that, he’d pretended he’d just come from out of town and knew nothing about the cause of He Zhongyi’s death!

Xiao Haiyang’s spine suddenly felt cold. “What did he make you do?”

“Zhao-ge snuck a look outside and said there was a police car he hadn’t seen before and some grunts looking around, and he said he’d seen the head of the police bureau bowing and scraping to someone,” Ma Xiaowei said quietly. “Zhao-ge said this thing had definitely made

a big noise and someone had come from above to investigate, and maybe we had a chance to get justice for Zhongyi-ge.”

“You’re saying Zhao-ge could even tell which police car didn’t come from the sub-bureau?” Xiao Haiyang asked in disbelief. “And he recognized Wang Hongliang?”

Ma Xiaowei nodded matter-of-factly. “Zhao-ge knew lots of people. He could find out all about anything.”

Xiao Haiyang had nothing to say to this. These little boys who came into chaotic contact with the teeming world before they’d grown up had a cult-like superstitious faith in “connections.” For them, there was nothing that couldn’t be explained with “having people above,” and if it couldn’t, then all it took was adding “having brothers on the inside.”

“Zhao-ge said that reasonably speaking the police would come to the place Zhongyi-ge lived to ask questions, but since the people who’d killed him were the same as the ones investigating, their questioning would only be walking past so their bosses would see. If we wanted to redress the injustice, we had to make the people above hear it, had to go to the sub-bureau and make a stink. But the sub-bureau was their territory, it would be the same as informing on them right in front of their faces. Zhao-ge asked whether I dared. If I did, then I’d do what he instructed. He guaranteed it would be all right, at most I’d be locked up for a couple days and then let go, there would definitely be someone above protecting me. And if I didn’t dare, that was all right, after all, Zhongyi-ge wasn’t a relative or a friend, and I hadn’t hurt him on purpose.

“Zhao-ge said a lot of other heartfelt things to me, said he’d seen lots of young people like me, and all of them ended up rotting in the dirt, getting rolled up in a mat and taken out of the city to be burnt. For the luckier ones, their families were notified. Some were handled like vagrants, their parents and relatives didn’t know anything. He said

that if I did what he said, if I could make it count as meritorious service, all the petty pilfering and ‘doing snow’ could be written off. I wouldn’t be arrested, and I could go to rehab for free and be like a normal person when I got out. No one would know I’d gone the wrong way.”

Ma Xiaowei wiped his tears, looking aggrieved. Xiao Haiyang developed some unpracticed compassion, for once biting back the true and unfeeling words, “He just wanted to trick you into being cannon fodder.”

Xiao Haiyang spent over an hour going back and forth with Ma Xiaowei before he felt he understood things, then said goodbye and left. Upon leaving, he suddenly remembered something. Pushing at his glasses, Xiao Haiyang asked, “Though Zhao Yulong told you a pack of lies, he didn’t instruct you to break the law in any way. Why did you seem kind of afraid when I first came in?”

Ma Xiaowei looked up, white-faced—

“Ma Xiaowei said that on the way from the City Bureau to the rehab center, a car was following him, then showed him a message that said he’d done well. The person in the car was wearing dark glasses, and it definitely wasn’t Zhao-ge. This scared him. Ma Xiaowei thought the words were ironic, sort of like, ‘Well, haven’t you done a fine job.’ He thought someone had found out about what he and Zhao Yulong had talked over privately, and that someone from Wang Hongliang’s party had slipped through the net and was threatening him.” Xiao Haiyang was sitting upright on Luo Wenzhou’s couch, formally reporting.

The couch in Luo Wenzhou’s house was very soft. You sank in as soon as you sat down. But Xiao Haiyang was unwilling to go with the flow; it seemed as though he had three hundred more vertebrae than other people, sitting on the couch as though it were a cold bench, making a stark contrast with Fei Du next to him.

Fei Du had his hand propped on the arm of the couch and his head down, sprawling bonelessly, with Luo Yiguo next to him doing the same, leaning on his leg with its neck askew, sleeping like a cat cake, having rubbed fur all over President Fei's fashionable pants.

Fei Du, Xiao Haiyang, Lang Qiao, and Luo Wenzhou were sitting around a little coffee table, temporarily using Luo Wenzhou's living room as their stronghold. The phone on the table was connected to Tao Ran, who was still in the hospital.

"I remember Zhao Yulong," Tao Ran said over the phone. "Never mind Xiao Xiao, even I didn't notice there was anything wrong with him. If it's true, then that's too frightful... Hello? Is the signal bad? Why is there so much static?"

Luo Wenzhou stood up and wordlessly picked up Luo Yiguo, snoring as it leaned against Fei Du, and put it into the cat bed.

"I investigated the identity information the two of us recorded at the time," Xiao Haiyang continued. "A person called Zhao Yulong does exist, and he did come to Yan City, but he went back to his hometown five years ago. His Mandarin is very bad. He's completely different from the person we met. And apparently he lost an ID once."

"The people who live in the little houses there are all poor young workers, newcomers, empty-handed. Though this Zhao Yulong wouldn't stand out in a crowd, looked at on his own, he was actually pretty different from those youngsters. How to put it... He had a sort of tidy dignity," Tao Ran said over the phone. "This is my fault. I didn't inquire deeply at the time because he may have been having a hard time at home."

"So what was this fake Zhao Yulong doing here?" Lang Qiao asked. "Secretly gathering evidence of Wang Hongliang and the others taking part in drug trafficking, volunteering to rid the people of an evil?"



Fei Du said, “From what Ma Xiaowei says, it sounds like this person had already been lying low a long time. If he’d really wanted to rid the people of an evil, then he’d have done something other than...”

“Just being an unused chess piece, watching others’ mortal peril and doing nothing,” Luo Wenzhou picked up, glaring at Fei Du. “Don’t talk when your throat aches, it hurts me to listen to you.”

Lang Qiao: “...”

She felt she’d asked a very wrong question and that there was nowhere for her gaze to rest. She could only turn towards Xiao Haiyang, who was as extraneous as she was. “So who was this fake Zhao Yulong?”

## CHAPTER 148 - Edmond Dantès XIX

Xiao Haiyang hesitated. “I don’t know yet.”

“But I have some idea,” Luo Wenzhou suddenly put in. “That’s another reason I called you in.

“While investigating Wang Hongliang, I went to the Great Fortune Building to try to save Chen Zhen and met a fake front desk receptionist. Then, in the Yufen Middle School case, after Feng Bin was killed at the Drum Tower, Fei Du and I were investigating along the path those kids had taken...”

“Oh?” Lang Qiao acutely seized the key piece of information. “The two of you went to the Lovers’...went, uh, there to—to investigate the case?”

When she’d said this, there was silence all around.—Xiao Haiyang had no idea what she was talking about. Fei Du, head propped on his hand, was looking at her with a not-quite-smile like a demon looking for a chance to suck out a person’s soul, frightening Lang Qiao so she didn’t dare to meet his gaze and silently averted her line of sight.

Luo Wenzhou, however, was more “benevolent.” He only took out an ancient file and whacked Lang Big Eyes on the forehead in a very practiced motion. “Aren’t you clever!”

Lang Qiao said, “...Imperial Father, I’m a fool.”

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes at her and flattened out the old folder, which was about to fall apart. “In the spot where Feng Bin met the killer, we ran into a fake patrolman going under someone else’s name. While we were pursuing Lu Guosheng, the security tapes at Beiyuan’s Longyun Center were swapped, and the security guard ‘Wang Jian’ disappeared afterwards—a fake security guard. Later,

when we investigated Wang Xiao again, we looked through Yufen Middle School's security camera records from November sixth and found that the female schoolfellow mentioned in Wang Xiao's testimony hadn't returned to school, and the person who'd followed her into the bathroom had actually been a janitor.

"A fake janitor." Luo Wenzhou paused. "Add in another fake Zhao Yulong, and it sounds like a pattern, doesn't it?"

"They're all minor figures, their surface identities either solitary out-of-towners or temporary workers in jobs with a high turnover where it's easy to disguise yourself." Xiao Haiyang came around at once and picked up. "And they all seem to have prototypes. For example, there really is a Zhao Yulong. The place of birth, name, age, even part of the work history matches. This way, even if someone investigates, as long as they don't investigate in depth, it would still be hard to find a gap!"

"You've left one out," Fei Du said very lightly. "We also haven't found the fake delivery person Dong Qian had direct contact with before he killed Zhou Junmao. Without considering the motive, I think it's appropriate to classify that case in the same category."

"A service worker, a patrolman, a security guard, a janitor, a delivery person..." Lang Qiao shuddered, finding that she couldn't think too much about this; thinking too much, it would be easy to get paranoid—service workers could easily drug food and drinks, patrolmen and security guards were nearly symbols of safety, janitors were like invisible people in any setting, not raising suspicions anywhere they went, and delivery people could knock on the doors of countless unsuspecting homes.

But the trouble was, these service professions, while being endowed with exceptional faith, were sometimes also the ones with the highest turnover, the most changes in personnel, the least rigorous entrance and exit examinations.

“Taking on a fake identity, being able to stay concealed over a long period of time—it’s likely this is all the same gang.” Luo Wenzhou pulled out a photograph from the file. “Luckily, we’ve found the end of one thread.

“This woman is called Zhu Feng. She’s the fake janitor who snuck into Wang Xiao’s school. We were able to determine her identity because she has a criminal record. Fourteen years ago, Zhu Feng’s newlywed husband was killed. The killer was later judged to be mentally challenged and incompetent, so he was spared from criminal punishment. Zhu Feng didn’t accept this and snuck into the mental hospital and attempted to get revenge. She failed. Later this case was part of the first Picture Album Project.” Luo Wenzhou paused, pulling seven thin case files out of the folder and handing them around. “You may not know that there was a mishap during the first Picture Album Project.”

“What mishap?” Lang Qiao said.

“The first Picture Album Project collected unresolved cases where the suspects couldn’t be apprehended for all sorts of reasons. Those are the ones you’re holding. All old cases, some because of technological limits, some because time had passed and the evidence was insufficient...all kinds of reasons that the suspect hadn’t paid the price—adding in this case of the mentally disabled suspect spared criminal penalty, there were seven cases altogether. I only got these materials by deception. It was against discipline and has to be kept strictly secret. The materials don’t leave this room.—And after being collected in the Picture Album Project, the chief suspects in each case who hadn’t been arrested due to insufficient evidence died unusual deaths one after another.”

“The causes of death were very delicate.” Fei Du scanned the old case files. “For example, in the case of the mentally disabled killer who was shut up in a mental hospital, his death was very similar to that of

the victim he'd killed before being placed in the hospital. They were both stabbed in the chest and abdomen by the same style of knife, and the distribution of wounds was almost identical. On the day this mental patient was killed, the power was suddenly cut in the hospital he was staying at, and a portion of the security cameras stopped working. Someone knocked out the nurse on duty and pried open the lock on the door.—And in the end the weapon he was stabbed with was found in the next room along with bloody clothes. The fingerprints of the patient in the next room were also found on the weapon...but this patient was very seriously ill. He could hardly communicate. They couldn't get anything out of him. Even if he'd really killed this person, there was nothing to be done about it.”

“A mental patient kills someone and then gets killed by another mental patient?” Tao Ran said over the phone. “What do you call that? Karmic retribution?”

“Once is karmic retribution. If it happens this many times in a row, then the ‘retribution’ isn't purely natural.” Fei Du smiled. Then he thought of something, and his smile immediately vanished. His gaze was grave.—Using some means to secretly gather the victims of vile crimes, arranging them like chess pieces, weaving a net with unremarkable minor individuals... If he hadn't been born about a decade too late, Fei Du nearly would have suspected he'd done this himself; he couldn't resist turning his head and coughing a few times.

“Didn't I tell you to talk less?” Luo Wenzhou frowned, pushing a cup of warm water in front of him. “If you interrupt again I'll tape your mouth shut.”

“Is this why the previous Picture Album Project was called to a halt?” Lang Qiao asked. “So who killed these people?”

“The person in charge of the Picture Album Project then was a senior professor at Yan Security Uni, named Fan Siyuan. I looked into it, and Lao Yang, Director Lu, Gu Zhao—all of them studied at Yan Security

Uni and were his students at one point. He later vanished without a trace, and his status was only changed to ‘dead’ two or three years later.”

Hearing the name “Gu Zhao,” Xiao Haiyang’s brain had short-circuited. He asked directly, “What does that mean?”

“That means it’s likely this Fan Siyuan first disappeared, and only ‘died’ a few years after disappearing.” One word at a time, Luo Wenzhou said, “It’s likely he only ‘died’ in the legal sense.”

Xiao Haiyang instantly looked up.

“But why? What’s his motive?” Lang Qiao said. “Boss, I’ll use your catchphrase—on what basis?”

“We won’t know the motive until we catch him, and the basis is up to you to find. What else did I call you here to do?” Luo Wenzhou spread his hands. This was one benefit to being a leader; you could be strict with others and lenient with yourself, reach out and openly ask others for basis, then order your subordinate grunts to go investigate when others asked you for basis. “I’ve given you the theory, comrades, it’s up to you to verify it!”

Lang Qiao: “...”

“Go investigate each case one by one. Go excavate the victims’ close relatives and any people with close relationships. Don’t overlook any lead. If this series of ‘fake people’ really are all connected to the old cases, then the identity of the person behind them goes without saying.—Xiao Haiyang, what is it now?”

Xiao Haiyang’s chest was undulating fiercely. He raised somewhat blank eyes. “Captain Luo, since this Fan Siyuan has obtained so many people’s trust, is it possible...is it possible he was the person in the know fourteen years ago? When Uncle Gu suspected there was a

mole in the City Bureau and couldn't determine who to suspect, would he have sought someone else's help? His teacher's, for example? Isn't it possible that the person who sold out Uncle Gu wasn't from the City Bureau at all?"

Luo Wenzhou froze. Before he could speak, his phone suddenly rang. He gestured at Xiao Haiyang and picked up. "Yes... Yes? What, today? Fine, got it, thank you."

With everyone looking at him, Luo Wenzhou put down the phone. "The investigation team has determined to stop the investigation into Director Lu for now."

Lang Qiao first stared blankly, then beamed with joy. "Director Lu has been cleared of suspicion!"

"No, it's only temporary," Luo Wenzhou said quickly. "The investigation is still ongoing, he can't leave the city for now.—Look, you guys go investigate. Fei Du, don't run around while you're sick, stay home and summarize the information. I'll go see Director Lu, ask him in detail about the Picture Album while I'm at it."

The investigator politely asked Lu Youliang to the door and sent for a car to take him home. "Director Lu, are you going to your post or your home? There's really quite a lot of work that needs to be managed at the City Bureau now."

Director Lu's footsteps paused. He suddenly said, "Can I see Lao Zhang?"

The investigator stared, then said very urbanely, "I'm afraid..."

"Of course I don't mean see him in private. You can send someone to be present," Lu Youliang said. "Lao Zhang and I worked together for many years. Emotionally and reasonably, I won't believe he's done anything wrong. Let me say a few words, maybe we can remember

something that's been overlooked.—Why don't you ask your superiors for guidance?"

The investigator looked deeply at him, then picked up his phone and stepped to one side.

An hour later, Zhang Chunjiu and Lu Youliang were received in a simple visiting room. The two of them faced each other helplessly, both showing wry smiles, feeling that they had been cut off from the world for a long time.—Zhang Chunjiu seemed even thinner. The white hair at Lu Youliang's temples had doubled over the last few days. It was clear they'd both been quite roughly tormented.

"I haven't managed the charge you left me well. Less than a year, and all this has happened. I've even dragged you in," Lu Youliang said.

Zhang Chunjiu put up a hand towards him, somewhat impatiently interrupting his words. "Lao Lu, it wasn't me back then."

Lu Youliang hadn't expected that they would even skip the stage of polite remarks, going right into the main subject. He looked involuntarily at the investigator next to him. The investigator silently pressed a button on a mini-recorder.

"I know it wasn't you," Lu Youliang said, sighing. "We've been brothers so many years. We know each other thoroughly."

"I wasn't in the know about Gu Zhao privately investigating The Louvre. He must have chosen the person he trusted most." Zhang Chunjiu lowered his voice. "You know who the person he trusted most was!"

Lu Youliang stared. Then he came around. "You're saying..."

"Listen to me, while I've been cooperating with the investigation these last few days, they've gone through all the arrangements of my



last few years of work. Among them, one person asked me why I requested for the Picture Album Project to start up a second time,” Zhang Chunjiu said quickly. “I was stupefied at the time, I said, ‘What Picture Album Project?’ They showed me a report I’d submitted.—Lao Lu, I really did submit a report. You know I always wanted to perfect our internal electronic file management. Aside from the smart field work system, I also wanted to classify case files, and add theoretical research results to consult for later cases. I only mentioned those things in the report. I didn’t give the project any code name, and I especially didn’t say it was called the Picture Album Project!”

Lu Youliang instantly opened his eyes wide, subconsciously tightening the hand he was holding in his pocket.

“This project was only passed down after I left my post,” Zhang Chunjiu said. “Lao Lu, who called it the Picture Album Project? Why did they call it that?”

Lu Youliang opened his mouth. After a good while, he said with difficulty, “If it wasn’t you, then it must have been someone at...at Yan Security Uni.”

“Is Fan Siyuan really dead?” Zhang Chunjiu said, one word at a time. “Who wanted to revive this specter? Who wanted to frame me—us? Who’s been hiding in our ranks secretly passing information outward? Lao Lu, make those children under your command go investigate. Only arresting this person can clear my name!”

Lu Youliang was nearly distraught when he got into the car. He knew that while the driver was ostensibly seeing him home, in reality he was secretly watching him. Meanwhile, what Zhang Chunjiu had just said was going back and forth by his ear.—*You know who the person he trusted most was!*

Who had Gu Zhao trusted most?

When Gu Zhao had been doing graduate studies at Yan Security Uni, he really had been on very good terms with his advisor, Fan Siyuan. If he'd thought there was a mole at the City Bureau, that no one was safe, would he have chosen his advisor?

Or... Had that been the person he trusted most?

The City Bureau didn't assign compulsory partners, but in practice, there were people who were in the habit of working together, for example Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran now—and Gu Zhao and Yang Zhengfeng then.

The first time Lu Guosheng's fingerprints had been discovered, Yang Zhengfeng had been away, but what about later? If Gu Zhao had suspected someone had been leaking information, then wouldn't Yang Zhengfeng, who'd been absent at the time, have been cleared of suspicion by being out of it? He and Gu Zhao had been captain and deputy-captain, had worked together the most, were most familiar with each other...

If Yang Zhengfeng hadn't given up his life three years earlier, then now, with Gu Zhao's case reopened, suspicion would definitely have been concentrated on him.

“Director Lu, we've arrived at your home.”

Lu Youliang gave a start, pulled himself together, and forced a smile at the driver. He got out of the car and nearly tripped over the curb.—There was cold sweat covering his back. He quickly went upstairs and, from a secret compartment in his bookcase, pulled out a listening device that had run out of batteries.

Lu Youliang stared at the listening device for a long time, then put it in his pocket. While going out the door, he told his worried wife, “I'm going to the hospital.”

Then, ignoring his wife's repeated questions, he left home in big strides.

At the Second Hospital, Tao Ran had finished attending the telephone meeting filled with explosive information. Before he'd had time to straighten out what he'd just heard, a visitor came to his hospital room—Xiao Wu, the criminal policeman who'd gone with him to investigate Yin Ping, came over carrying various bags of fruit and nourishment, piling the hospital room's windowsill full.

“What are you doing?” Tao Ran said quickly. “Bonuses haven't been distributed yet. Don't you want to live? Have you bought your parents stuff for the Spring Festival? Take that stuff back, use it to pay tribute to your elders.”

Xiao Wu rubbed his hands together and sat down next to him. “Deputy-Captain Tao, let me pay tribute to you first, I was following right behind you that day, if I hadn't been too slow... I... I'm such a... I gave Kong Weichen's family some money, too—not a lot, I don't have much on hand, I just thought that I'd feel a little easier this way.”

Tao Ran examined his expression, thinking his little shidi's face was very weary, the black circles around his eyes nearly hanging down to his chin. He sat uneasily, looking like he wanted to say something. “Xiao Wu, what's wrong?”

“Ge,” Xiao Wu managed to say after stammering for a long time, “there's something I... I don't know how to say it... I really fucking...”

“What?” Tao Ran asked doubtfully.

Xiao Wu's eyes were red. He seemed about to start crying. He looked up at Tao Ran, wrapped up in bandages and casts, then bent over and buried his face in his palms. “When we went to arrest Yin Ping and

they came to silence him before we'd finished coordinating, they're all saying now that it was Kong Weichen calling someone... I don't know the details, I heard from Lao Kong's family that people came a few times to investigate at his house, maybe even a 'martyr' would..."

Tao Ran looked at him, frowning.

"Actually...actually it wasn't him."

"Xiao Wu," Tao Ran said heavily, "what do you mean?"

Xiao Wu slowly took a small evidence bag from his pocket. Inside it was a listening device the size of a button. Tao Ran's pupils instantly contracted.

"I found it in my bag," Xiao Wu said hoarsely. "The day before yesterday my sister's children asked me for New Year's money, so I went through my bag. It's out of battery, I still don't know... I don't... don't know who to talk to about this, I really don't know, ge, it's all my fault...it's all my fault!"

Tao Ran's gaze fell on the miniature listening device—it was exactly the same as the one Luo Wenzhou had found in his bag. Something flashed vaguely through his mind. "Enough, what's the use of crying? Where have you been recently? Who have you met?"

Xiao Wu looked at him blankly. "I...haven't gone anywhere, I was working overtime, I only went back and forth between work and home..."

No, it couldn't have been put there at the City Bureau. After they'd found the listening device on Tao Ran, they'd overtly and secretly screened their internal personnel countless times.—Thoughts spun quickly through Tao Ran's mind. And why hadn't there been a listening device on Luo Wenzhou? Luo Wenzhou's scope of authority was much greater, and his information was much more complete.

Could the person eavesdropping on them really have thought Luo Wenzhou was more perceptive than any of them and would be hard to bug?

“Aside from work, where else did you go?” Tao Ran lifted his half-immobilized body, nearly getting out of his hospital bed. “Xiao Wu, think carefully.”

“I really didn’t... In the days before we investigated Yin Ping, I really...” Xiao Wu’s brow furrowed tightly. “Apart from going to the kindergarten to pick up my nephew once, and going once to the hospital to see shiniang...I haven’t even had time to pay attention to my girlfriend, I... Deputy-Captain Tao!”

Tao Ran had suddenly grabbed him.

## CHAPTER 149 - Edmond Dantès XX

Tao Ran's left arm and right leg hung in a diagonal line. He looked like a salted fish laid out to dry in the sun outside a fisherman's house. When the salted fish suddenly performed such a difficult gesture, the IV in his arm flew right up into the air.

Xiao Wu jumped up in fright. "Ge, what are you doing? Lie—lie down... Lie down quickly, I'll call..."

The edges of Tao Ran's forehead were soaked in cold sweat. His misaligned bones collectively voiced their protests. His soaring heart rate made him gasp for breath, but he had no attention to spare to cry out in pain. Tao Ran gripped Xiao Wu's sleeve firmly with his swollen hand. "When did you...when did you go see shiniang?"

"Shiniang?" Xiao Wu was all at sea, not understanding why he would ask this. "Well, shiniang...shiniang has cancer, doesn't she? So I had to go. When she came here to the Second Hospital for her surgery, I was the one who drove her. I'd wanted to stay to help take care of her after the surgery, but then this happened—what's the matter?"

Tao Ran didn't answer. His heart was like the Arctic Ocean in a storm—perilous, full of snow and ice.

When they had been eating hotpot at Luo Wenzhou's house and had found the listening device in his bag, they'd discussed how it was very possible it hadn't been put there by someone on their team; everyone Tao Ran had seen going out on his own, witnesses, informers...even victims' families, could have placed it.

When he'd lain down that night, he'd tossed and turned, unable to sleep, inwardly reviewing all the people he'd seen alone. There really had been a moment where their shiniang Fu Jiahui had flashed through his mind—shiniang had called him to the Yang house and

handed Lao Yang's testament over to him. And Lao Yang's testament had just happened to mention the then very mysterious-seeming Gu Zhao and the National Road 327 case.

Hardly any time had passed after they'd gotten hold of that top secret testament, with Lao Yang's shocking statement that some people had changed, when before they could digest it, the main character of the National Road 327 case had entered the arena, killing Feng Bin at the Drum Tower.

Had it been a coincidence?

A murderer wasn't a jukebox; how could it be a coincidence?

But it had been shiniang.

While they'd been discussing listening devices, moles, traitors, and other filthy subjects, thinking of her for an instant would have seemed to be profaning her.

Who would dare to suspect her in the least?

And why had she wanted to hand over Lao Yang's...unverified testament to him?

Tao Ran clearly remembered the day he'd gotten shiniang's phone call. He'd quickly picked up a box of cured meat and gone to answer her invitation. Lao Yang's home was in one of those old-fashioned six-story buildings. There was no elevator. The cured meat had been homemade by his relatives back home, and the box was insecurely wrapped, nearly falling apart as soon as you picked it up. He'd had to strain to prop up the bottom of the cardboard box in order to heave the thirty jin plus of stuff up to the sixth floor. His hand had trembled when he'd knocked on the door.

Then, with the distinctive smell of cured meat on his hands, he'd received the grievous news and the truth like a thunderclap.

When Fu Jiahui had seen him out the door and given him the testament, her expression had been very complicated. It had seemed pained, but there had also seemed to be a strange light flashing in her eyes.

Tao Ran remembered her saying, "These things need to be settled."

But he hadn't recovered from the hit yet. When he'd taken the testament, his hands had still been shaking uselessly. He hadn't been able to understand the heavy meaning behind her words.

Lao Yang had said, "There are some people there who have changed."

So...had you changed, too?

"I have to go out," Tao Ran suddenly said directly. "I have to go out and see someone, right now. I must go. Xiao Wu, help me!"

Xiao Wu looked at Deputy-Captain Tao's dried fish appearance, then looked at his expression, and nearly blurted out, "Are you crazy?"

Luo Wenzhou, who'd wanted to pick up Director Lu, was a beat too slow. Learning that Director Lu had already gone home, he really didn't want to wait even a minute. He wanted to find out everything there was about Fan Siyuan at once. So he very annoyingly drove to Director Lu's address, not expecting to come up empty again—

"The hospital?" Luo Wenzhou looked helplessly back at the equally bewildered Mrs. Lu. "Auntie, did Uncle Lu say why he was going to the hospital?"

"No." Mrs. Lu shook her head. "From the moment he walked in the door, he seemed possessed. He charged right to the study without



even taking off his jacket or changing his shoes, stayed less than two minutes, then suddenly ran out again. I don't know what he's up to."

Luo Wenzhou frowned, absently saying goodbye to Mrs. Lu.

Director Lu had just come back from the investigation team. Instead of staying with his alarmed wife or going to the City Bureau to take charge of the general situation, he'd gone to the hospital alone—where was the reasoning in that?

What did he know?

Luo Wenzhou walked slower and slower. He stopped with one hand propped on the roof of his car for a good while. Suddenly he thought of something, opened the car door, and got in, ramming the gas pedal and howling towards the Second Hospital.

Lu Youliang walked into the inpatient building empty-handed, at odds with the visitors carrying bags of all sizes. When he came to Fu Jiahui's door, he stared at the doorplate with a complicated expression for a long time, took a deep breath, then knocked.

The woman in the hospital bed slowly turned her head to look at him. She was emaciated and pale, so white she almost blended with her hospital gown. There was no color in her lips. There was an IV in the back of her almost transparent hand, which was purple from being used as a pincushion by successive IVs. She looked horribly frail.

When Fu Jiahui saw him, she didn't speak or smile. Her face was still unchangingly cold, her gaze haughty and indifferent, paring away the power and position of the middle-aged man in front of her. She only said, "You're here? Sit."

Lu Youliang pulled over a little stool and sat down, curling up his legs. "Is your daughter not here?"

“No need for small talk. You haven’t come to visit the sick,” Fu Jiahui interrupted him without answering. “You don’t come without even a piece of fruit when you’re visiting the sick.”

Lu Youliang only then came to himself and lowered his head somewhat abashedly to look at his empty hands. “I...”

“Say what you have to say,” Fu Jiahui said dully. “I don’t have long to listen, so spare me the extraneous bits.”

Lu Youliang was silent for a good while, fingers lightly tapping on his knee. Using all his deliberation, he spoke: “I only found out about your diagnosis last month. I was startled and afraid that a widowed mother and her daughter wouldn’t be able to deal with all the petty business that comes with treating an illness long-term, and I didn’t know how much money a major illness like this would cost and how much insurance would cover. I was afraid your means would be straightened and rushed over to bring money to your house.”

Fu Jiahui pursed her lips; it might have been a smile. “Director Lu, I thank you for that.”

“But while I was on the balcony smoking, you put the money back into my bag.”

“I’ve been quite well-off these last few years. I have no use for your money,” Fu Jiahui said. “What, was there any missing?”

“There wasn’t.” Lu Youliang looked at her with a sorrowful and bewildered expression, gently saying, “There was something added.”

Fu Jiahui realized something and immediately closed her eyes. The two of them, one sitting and one lying down, were like two not especially aesthetically pleasing human statues, each frozen in the

passage of wearying ages. Then Director Lu gently took out the little listening device and put it at Fu Jiahui's bedside.

"I knew someone had touched my bag, but I wasn't overly suspicious, because I knew at a glance that it had been you secretly putting the money back. I wasn't going to carefully go through it because of that." Lu Youliang's eyes were a little bloodshot. He said, "Sister-in-law, when Lao Yang was alive, when he talked about you, he always said you were bold but cautious, that there was nothing you wouldn't dare to do. We all joked and said he was crazy about his wife. I believe it now."

Fu Jiahui was looking at him expressionlessly. "How restrained, Director Lu."

"I'm an open book. If you're willing to listen, then listen. Anyway, I'm an unprepossessing old man. I'm not afraid of anyone taking advantage of me, and I have nothing to be ashamed or angry about." Lu Youliang looked down, tightly clenching his fists, and took a deep breath. "Sister-in-law, let me ask you something—that day when Luo Wenzhou and the others went to arrest Lu Guosheng and the information nearly got out ahead of them, was that...was that you?"

Luo Wenzhou, standing at the door of the hospital room with his hand raised to knock, froze.

Suddenly he heard the sound of a wheelchair next to him. Luo Wenzhou stiffly turned his head and saw that Chang Ning had gotten a wheelchair from somewhere and was pushing over Tao Ran, who ought to have been in bed. Luo Wenzhou blankly met his eyes, then suddenly felt that he'd returned to the day three years ago when he'd learned of Lao Yang's death. His ears had heard it and delivered it to his central nervous system, and his central nervous system had been unable to handle it, leaving him looking on helplessly at himself.

After a long time, a light laugh came from the hospital room. Fu Jiahui said, “Director Lu, you’re infinitely perceptive. Don’t you know everything?”

Luo Wenzhou shook, clutching the door frame.

“Why?” Lu Youliang had come emotionally prepared, but when he heard these words, his chest ached. He spoke almost a little incoherently. “I don’t understand, it’s... Did someone coerce you? Huh? It must be the child—it must be... You can tell us, I’ll send people to guard her twenty-four hours a day, if we can’t even protect our brother’s wife and child, how the fuck can we have the face to continue in this profession...”

Fu Jiahui interrupted him. “Lao Yang himself didn’t know who killed him, what do we amount to!”

Lu Youliang looked at her in disbelief.

“What, did I say something strange?” Fu Jiahui sneered. “Hey, Director Lu, haven’t you just gotten through being investigated? Don’t you know how Gu Zhao died, how Lao Yang died, too? Lao Yang even wrote a testament, made all his preparations, but as always evil advances faster than good. Could you save him? Were you in time?”

Lu Youliang said, “Lao Yang... Lao Yang also...”

“I’ll be gone soon,” Fu Jiahui continued, completely ignoring him. “I’ll be dead soon... Lao Lu, they didn’t only find this illness at the end of the year—there were signs long ago. When you reach this stage, you know that people can get premonitions of the time they’ll die. So I said to my brothers and sisters, I may not be able to wait.”

“Your... What brothers and sisters?” Lu Youliang felt absolute terror.

“Brothers and sisters with the same fate as me.” Fu Jiahui’s voice lowered. “Those who have met with the greatest injustice in the world. The police have no way to catch the criminal for you, the law has no way to give you justice. You raise a cry, everyone looks at you and accords you a few tears and says you’re pitiable. You think the whole world will support you, but times change, and you find that people forget you as soon as they’re done pitying you, and you have to deal with it yourself. If one person can’t deal with it, then all of you join hands—isn’t it effective? You’ve finally started ferreting out the mole, reopening the old case.

“As for leaking information, I’ll apologize to you for that. All of this was rushed because of my health. Some details weren’t perfectly prepared. Our enemy is sinister and cunning, and very dangerous. During the business of the Zhou family, we already put them on alert, and even more so during the time with Wei Zhanhong. They seized one of our brothers and got our communications record from him, but luckily it didn’t impact the grand scheme.”

Lu Youliang heard something in her few glancing words. His ears hummed. “The Zhou Clan... Wei Zhanhong... Lu Guosheng committing murder, it was led by you people, planned by you? The ‘go ask shatov’ in the Lu Guosheng case was one of your people? You knew ahead of time that that little boy was going to die, and, and you sat there waiting and watching? Sister-in-law, that child was younger than Xinxin, are you...are you crazy? Does Xinxin know about this?”

Fu Jiahui didn’t answer him. She calmly said, “Haven’t you heard? ‘Bad people are carved out of the good’<sup>7</sup>.”

In a flash, Luo Wenzhou remembered—Xiao Haiyang had mentioned that he’d only noticed something was wrong because he’d heard Yang Xin “inadvertently” mention the gossip she’d heard in the dining hall. Had she really inadvertently heard the gossip? Or had she known that someone was putting on a performance of a murder attempt on Yin

Ping and had purposefully prompted an obtuse performer into position?

Yang Xin knew. Not only did she know, she had taken part. Only she was young and her performance was a little stiff. She couldn't be as smooth as an adult... but it had been enough to fool Xiao Haiyang.

This was a little girl he had watched grow up. When she'd been in junior middle school, Luo Wenzhou had taken some people to beat up a delinquent who'd been pestering. In senior middle school, he'd helped her contact teachers for makeup lessons. Every time she'd succeeded on a mock exam before her university entrance exam, Lao Yang had given him an earful about it...

Luo Wenzhou heard Lao Lu ask loudly, "Who are you people? Who's leading you? Who's planning this?"

Fu Jiahui said almost inaudibly, "We are...the people who...bring past stories...one after another, without error...in front of you once again. We are the reciters of the stories. We..."

The hospital room was suddenly silent. Then came Lao Lu's voice, a mixture of anger and shock: "Sister-in-law!"

Luo Wenzhou pushed open the door and saw that the ashen-faced woman in the hospital bed had her eyes closed. There was a trace of a smile at the corners of her mouth. While it was cold, it wasn't mocking. It was almost serene.

Full of the serenity of sleep.

In all these years, Luo Wenzhou had rarely gone in front of her to invite a snub. It had been a long time since he'd had a good look at her. Even since she'd come to the hospital, he'd always hurriedly called in with others. For a moment he nearly thought she was a stranger he didn't recognize.

Director Lu looked up and called to him, “Get a doctor!”

Luo Wenzhou woke as if from a dream. He ran.

When he’d just run out of the hospital room, he saw a human figure flash by in the corridor. It had looked like Yang Xin!

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and hurriedly said to Chang Ning, “Call someone!” Then he took to his heels in pursuit.

Fei Du was ensconced in the couch in Luo Wenzhou’s house, staring at the clock on the white wall going forward bit by bit. He was frowning as he pondered something.

Suddenly, there was a clatter in the kitchen, interrupting Fei Du’s train of thought.

He turned his head in time to witness Luo Yiguo’s “heroic bearing” after falling on its butt from somewhere.

When Luo Wenzhou’s parents had come at the end of the year and bought too many snacks for Luo Yiguo, the cat of their own flesh and blood, they hadn’t all fit into the original place, so Luo Wenzhou had freed up a special cupboard to put President Guo’s cat products into. The cupboard was in the kitchen, up by the ceiling. There was no handle on the door. A human had no trouble opening it, but it was rather difficult for a cat’s paw.

Normally, as long as it wasn’t locked, Luo Yiguo could easily open the door to any room or cupboard; it was rather skilled in the profession of sneaking food. Adding in that it had recently been ordered to watch its weight, its gluttony had become towering, and it couldn’t resist using its own paws to assure it was well fed. First it leapt from the top of the fridge, hitting the cupboard door with matchless precision, attempting to pull the cupboard door open. Not expecting

there to be nowhere to grab hold of on the smooth door, Luo Yiguo smacked itself into a wedge of cat, then slipped down, flailing its claws and baring its fangs.

But it wouldn't admit defeat. It climbed up to try once again.

Fei Du unsympathetically looked on as Luo Yiguo suffered a crushing defeat, his gaze falling on an empty can in the trash, which hadn't been taken out yet.—Right, he really had taken out a can for Luo Yiguo that day and had later been distracted by other things and forgotten about it. He hadn't expected that he would remember it in his dream.

He opened a notepad on his phone and looked at the vague notes he'd left himself that morning—the can of cat food, Luo Wenzhou angry, Tao Ran injured, suffocation, the origin of the code, the woman's scream...



## CHAPTER 150 - Edmond Dantès XXI

Fei Du strolled to a corner of the living room. There was a very elegant little whiteboard standing there. He was the one who'd bought it, not expecting that he'd use it only a couple of times before it became the tool of an individual surnamed Luo.—Before, Luo Wenzhou had simply been long-winded; now, in the midst of his jabbering, he also wanted to sum up all the trifling analyses in that jabbering, hanging them up on the whiteboard, accomplishing an omnidirectional exhortation directed at Fei Du's eyes and ears; it was very deranged.

Fei Du hesitated. Out of consideration for a certain person's toil, he couldn't bear to clean it. He flipped the whiteboard over, picked out a marker, and drew a coordinate plane with the x-axis showing time and the y-axis showing source of stress.

Compared to things that had happened recently, more distant memories were more malleable, with a greater likelihood that the brain would suitably vary and revise them.

And compared to immaterial little matters, the greater an impact a source of stress had on a person, the greater the feeling of indisposition it would create. It was also more likely that they would be distorted when reflected by the unconscious in a dream.

Not opening the can of cat food was a minor event that had just happened to Fei Du that day. It was a very shallow memory. He thought that instead of saying he'd dreamed it, it was better to say that he'd remembered it while half asleep. He drew a slash at the origin of the coordinate plane.

Then there was the circumstance of Luo Wenzhou being angry and himself not being able to coax him out of it.

Luo Wenzhou really had been a little fretful that night, Fei Du had felt it, but it hadn't amounted to anger. But in the end Fei Du hadn't clearly worked out whether he'd really coaxed him out of it. Because of this, perhaps he'd kept thinking it over in his dream, and his dream for some reason had made a big fuss over a minor issue, enlarging this slight concern.

Fei Du was dubious, feeling that he'd recently had less to worry about, so trifling matters could all take up space. He pondered a moment with his head tilted, then went down along the "source of stress" axis and drew a second stroke.

Next was "Tao Ran injured" and "suffocation," two entirely separate things that had been mixed into the same scene.

At this point, Fei Du put down the marker and frowned deeply, pacing a few steps in front of the whiteboard, not quite able to complete his analysis.

People's consciousness and memories hid very complicated projections and very subtle distortions. Surface logic and unconscious logic seemed to use different languages. Although Fei Du considered himself very open towards himself, it was still hard for him to objectively decipher that day's series of dreams, which was stuck like a fishbone in his throat.

Generally speaking, a dream that could startle someone awake must have touched some deep-seated anxiety and fear.

But Fei Du had examined himself, and he believed that he didn't have anxieties; fears were out of the question. For him, "fear" was like a celebrity on TV—he knew such a person existed, could see them every day on the screen, but as for how they looked in reality and what their temper and disposition were like...he had no way to judge.

He hadn't felt that he'd been in any way not calm when he'd heard the news of Tao Ran being taken to the hospital. The car crash had already happened, and only the doctors could remedy that; it had nothing to do with him. Fei Du remembered he had only spent the whole journey considering the sequence of events.

Could it be that "Tao Ran being injured" had been a huge source of stress for him, going so deep that it had touched some deeper and more intense thing in his memories?

In his dream, Tao Ran, who had been hit by a car, had appeared with his face showing signs of asphyxiation. So following that line of reasoning, an asphyxiated face was something else in his memories... but where had he seen it?

Luo Yiguo had tried a few times without being able to open the pestilential cupboard and could only run over with its tail stuck up to beg Fei Du. It fawningly rubbed Fei Du's pant leg with its round head and patted Fei Du's lower leg with its front paws.

Fei Du bent down and lifted it in front of his eyes, holding its front paws. Luo Yiguo was always very docile when it was in search of food. Its tail waved back and forth under it as it tried to force a delicate and charming expression of perfect innocence out of its fierce-looking features. It made a thin, pitiful cry.

Fei Du considered the cat's face for a while, thinking he wouldn't have superimposed the faces of those suffocating, struggling little animals onto a human face; the difference in the structure of the features was too great.

Luo Yiguo thought there was some game and meowed elaborately at him.

"Nope." Fei Du unfeelingly put Luo Yiguo back on the ground and proclaimed, "Luo Wenzhou is the only animal I can't pick up, and

that's enough.”

Luo Yiguo: “...”

All these two-leggers were worthless!

Fei Du considered, wiped away the writing on the whiteboard, and sent a message to Luo Wenzhou that said: “I’m going home to get something,” then put on his jacket and went out.

He’d determined to return to his old house to have a look at the basement. He had passed a lightless childhood there, borne the correction of electric shock and medication countless times, even witnessed his mother’s death. Fei Du truly couldn’t understand why there would be a flaw in his memory of the time he’d snuck into the basement.

Luo Wenzhou had no time to look at his phone. He was chasing after the barely-glimpsed Yang Xin.

When he came to the door of the stairs, Luo Wenzhou encountered a large crowd of family members, presumably some patient’s extended family turning out in full force; there were some elderly ones who’d come leaning on canes. They were firmly blocking the door of the stairs, separating him from Yang Xin.

Luo Wenzhou looked at the trembling old men and women. He really didn’t want to push his way through a crowd of grandpas and grandmas who needed looking after, but Yang Xin had already vanished in the moment he’d been hesitating. Urged by the emergency, Luo Wenzhou bent his head and pushed open a window in the corridor. While a passing nurse’s aide yelled in surprise, he stepped up on the windowsill and climbed down from the third floor, using the second floor’s slightly projecting windowsill as a buffer. Then he leapt right down onto the artificial lawn below, rolled, and ran off before the surrounding crowd could lift their cell phones.

The main hall was overcrowded but could still be called orderly. Luo Wenzhou charged in ferociously, startling all the medical personnel on duty. A hospital guard immediately went over to question him. Luo Wenzhou carelessly shoved his work ID at the guard. “Police. Did you see a girl around twenty coming downstairs just now?”

Before the guard could speak, Luo Wenzhou glimpsed Yang Xin out of the corner of his eye, having just come down the stairs at the other end of the corridor. Yang Xin, taken unawares, met his eye. A complicated expression appeared on her tidy little face, like she was holding back from expressing pain and rage. Then she resolutely ran for the back door.

Luo Wenzhou was so angry his lungs were about to evaporate out of his head. “Stop right there!”

There was a little road at the inpatient department’s back door, across which was the large hospital parking lot. The distance between Luo Wenzhou and Yang Xin was constantly decreasing. Just then, a sedan suddenly drove out of the parking lot and came right at him. Luo Wenzhou looked at the driver’s face—it was the fake patrolman he and Fei Du had run into at the scene of the murder by the Drum Tower!

In a moment of desperation, he leapt up onto the hood of the car and rolled to the other side. Luckily the driver hadn’t planned to run him over; the car window was half rolled down, and there seemed to be a trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He nodded urbanely to Luo Wenzhou, then floored the gas pedal, practically vanishing from the parking lot in a puff of smoke. Meanwhile, Yang Xin had jumped into a car and disappeared without a trace.

Luo Wenzhou’s thighs had been painfully scraped by the collision just now. He couldn’t resist letting loose a curse: “Motherfucker!”

Fu Jiahui had been taken in for emergency treatment. Chang Ning, meanwhile, had very considerately withdrawn, going out to buy them some drinks. Lu Youliang and Tao Ran were waiting in the oppressive hospital corridor in mutual silence. They looked up together when Luo Wenzhou, covered in fury and soil, returned.

Luo Wenzhou found a corner and patted the soil off of himself. “She got away. Two cars, one VW Bora, one Jinbei. I took down the license plate numbers and called for them to be stopped.”

Lu Youliang didn’t answer. He tilted up his head and leaned heavily against the wall.

Tao Ran was silent for a while. “When we were investigating Feng Bin’s death, shiniang called me to come to her house, gave me shifu’s testament, and...and while I was distracted put a listening device in my bag, exactly as the same as the ones on Director Lu and Xiao Wu. When Xiao Wu told me today, I...I actually...”

Tao Ran couldn’t quite finish. He stared wide-eyed at Luo Wenzhou for a while, then continued with difficulty. “When I finished reading shifu’s testament, there was a period where I actually felt a little gratified, thinking that shiniang’s frostiness towards us all these years hadn’t been her own doing. She didn’t hate us, didn’t disdain us, it was only that shifu had told her to distance herself from us.”

But thinking about it now, if it had only been the distance of secret troubles, would they, criminal police officers who relied on their piercing observation skills for their next meal, really have had no idea? If it hadn’t been genuine hatred, could it have kept Luo Wenzhou from coming to her door for three years?

“Xiao Wu? You mean that Yin Ping being hit was also their plan?” Luo Wenzhou’s brain, boiling with fury, gradually cooled, and he sat down a little wearily next to Lu Youliang.

“Was that to frame Lao Zhang, too?” Lu Youliang asked.

“Yes. I suspect shiniang was tricked,” Tao Ran said hoarsely. “The person plotting this behind the scenes was the one who framed Gu Zhao and killed shifu. If Old Cinder really was Yin Ping under a false name, then it’s likely he had an important lead, so they wanted to kill him to silence him. He didn’t die, so they wanted to use him to frame Director Zhang again... It would be easy to explain to shiniang and the others, you’d just have to say that Yin Ping didn’t have any evidence, and even if he got out and testified, his testimony wouldn’t be credible. It was better to use him as a prop.”

Luo Wenzhou had his elbows on his knees and his hands lightly pressed together, propping his chin. “Uncle Lu, I actually came here today to ask you about someone.”

“Do you want to ask about Fan Siyuan?” Lu Youliang said.

Luo Wenzhou stared. “How did you know?”

Lu Youliang was silent for a long time before quietly saying, “I guessed... Her tone talking to me and her diction made me think of him.”

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran both looked at him.

“Fan Siyuan was my teacher, too... He must have taught Lao Yang as well.” Lu Youliang considered, then slowly said, “He was young then, only a few years older than us, but he was very charming. Sometimes you thought that when he looked at you he knew what you were thinking. He was talented, too, widely learned, with a powerful memory. He’d published many articles, and he taught extremely well... It wasn’t the fashion to grade your teachers then, or else he would have been the most highly rated teacher among the students. When there were difficult students that the academic departments or the ideological and political teachers couldn’t handle, they’d call him

in and get a guaranteed result. There was one in our dormitory who got called in for a chat with him for an hour. I don't know what he said, but when he got back, he cried his eyes out, wanting nothing but to start afresh and do right."

"And Gu Zhao came in contact with him, too, right?" Luo Wenzhou said. "I looked at his resume. When Officer Gu did his graduate program, it was under him."

"Yes." Lu Youliang nodded. "Gu Zhao was sincere. He didn't go back to school to get a graduate degree in order to win promotion, he really wanted to learn. He put in a lot of time, took notes on all the books he read, never rested on weekends. If he didn't understand something, he'd keep asking until he got it clear. For a while every time he opened his mouth it was to talk about Teacher Fan. At his graduation he invited some guests, and we all went, along with Fan Siyuan."

"His relationship with Fan Siyuan was very good."

"Very good..." Lu Youliang hesitated, then said, "Oh, very good. Gu Zhao actually wasn't a very lively or outgoing person. He treated close friends and distant acquaintances very differently. You could tell he really got on pretty well with Fan Siyuan. But who knows what that person was thinking?"

"He launched the first Picture Album Project?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "What actually happened? Uncle Lu, is Fan Siyuan really dead?"

A doctor hurriedly went by. Lu Youliang looked uneasily towards the end of the hallway, as though worried some bad news would come from that direction.

"When you read them afterwards, some of the papers he published already had symptoms of extremism," Lu Youliang said. "We just weren't paying attention back then. Psychological profiling was just



getting popular in this country at the time. Fan Siyuan took the lead in requesting this ‘establishing a record of criminals’ psychological profiles’ project, wanting to research old files, reexamine some unsolved cases, find new breakthroughs. He rounded up some frontline criminal policemen at the City Bureau... The research project was a political assignment, outside of daily work, of course whether you participated or not depended on whether you were willing, but we all participated—because the National Road 327 case, where the main culprit hadn’t been brought to justice, was also part of it. It had been less than a year since Gu Zhao’s death then. We still hadn’t been able to take a breath and get past it. I knew many of our brothers were still privately making inquiries.”

“But psychological profiling can’t serve as evidence in court,” Luo Wenzhou said. “All the unsolved cases in the Picture Album Project in fact had suspicious parties without effective evidence against them. Unless they’d made false confessions under torture...”

“That couldn’t have happened.” Director Lu smiled bitterly. “One of the charges against Gu Zhao was abuse of police power. We had people watching every move we made. We all kept our tails between our legs and behaved ourselves, not daring to take a single step out of bounds... I accompanied Fan Siyuan on visits for one of the cases. After we got back, he suddenly said to me, ‘Sometimes when I think about it, I really don’t know who the law is meant to protect. The people restricted are always the ones who observe laws and disciplines. It’s unfair.’ I thought something was off about him then, but I didn’t make too much of it... But then, everything started to go wrong.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “You mean the suspects dying one after another in unusual circumstances?”

“Yes. The means were exactly the same as the deaths of the victims in the corresponding cases, and there were many details about the cases that we hadn’t made public. So the Picture Album Project was

immediately called to a halt, and all the personnel concerned were suspended and submitted to investigation,” Lu Youliang said. “Fan Siyuan vanished when the investigators went to find him. He wasn’t at home or at school...or anywhere. He was under heavy suspicion at the time, but it was only suspicion. There was no evidence. The bureau debated for a long time between setting him down as ‘missing’ or ‘escaped suspect.’ Then, in consideration of the City Bureau’s image, they only announced that he was ‘missing.’ All the cases in the Picture Album Project were either handled or sealed. The search only continued privately.

“Three months later, one of his relatives received a testament. At the same time, the bureau received a report that said Fan Siyuan had appeared in the Binhai District. Binhai was even more desolate then than it is now. We went over following the report and nearly caught him.”

“Nearly?”

“Fan Siyuan jumped into the ocean in the course of the pursuit,” Lu Youliang said. “There were bloodstains on a reef, but his corpse was never dredged up. He remained missing. But from then on, it was as though he’d vanished off the face of the earth, and there weren’t any similar cases... You know that as soon as a serial killer starts killing, it’s very hard to stop. So gradually everyone began to think that he was really dead. A few years later his family had a problem with their house being torn down. For the sake of the property, his relatives came to request a declaration of death. On the record, Fan Siyuan is officially ‘dead.’”

## CHAPTER 151 - Edmond Dantès XXII

Fei Du quickly hailed a taxi outside. With an earbud in one ear, he smiled at the driver and told him the address.

The driver looked at him a good number of times in the rearview mirror and accidentally met Fei Du's eyes. He froze, then displayed a rather fawning smile. "It's all rich people living over there. I can only stop outside. I can't go in."

Taking a break from scrolling through his phone, Fei Du nodded to him. "Fine."

The end of the year had come, and the better part of the population of Yan City, like migrating birds, had flown off; the streets had emptied at once, making a taxi's business more difficult. The driver had probably been driving around on his own for a long time; he didn't notice that his passenger wasn't especially willing to chat. He kept attempting to make conversation. "Do you live over there yourself, or are you visiting friends or family?"

At the same time, a request for instructions came over Fei Du's earbud: "President Fei, there's a car following you. We chased, and it looks like they just noticed. They're trying to shake us."

"Follow the one that came to the door," Fei Du instructed lightly. Then he looked up at the rearview mirror at the front of the taxi.

The driver met his eyes again and inexplicably felt a chill climb up his spine, like a frog with the gaze of a viper fixed on it.

Fei Du looked at him, not quite smiling, and civilly said, "Sorry, I didn't quite hear, what did you just say?"

The driver didn't dare run off at the mouth anymore. He kept quiet as a cicada in winter the whole way, periodically looking in the review mirror, quickly and steadily taking Fei Du near his old house. He pressed a button on the fare meter. "There you are, we've arrived. Would you like a receipt?"

Fei Du sat without moving.

The driver turned his head to look at him. Perhaps the heating was turned up too high; there was some sweat at the corners of his forehead. Sweating, he smiled at Fei Du. "Sir, I can only come this far. This estate you live in doesn't let outside cars drive in at random."

"The estate I live in? Did I say that I live here?" Fei Du had his legs crossed and his elbow propped on the car door in a very relaxed posture, but there was a dangerous light seeping from his eyes. "Do you read people's fortunes in their faces, sir?"

The driver's eyes flashed, and he forced himself to add, "Going by the way you're dressed, you seem to belong to the class of people..."

Fei Du laughed silently, his eyes seeming to stay over the surroundings. The driver subconsciously followed his line of sight and saw a small-scale SUV driving from the other direction, going slower and slower, and then stopping by the side of the street. All the muscles in his body tensed rigidly, and one hand subconsciously went towards his waist.

"I always thought that *they* would be the first to come see me," Fei Du said unhurriedly. "I hadn't expected them to be more composed than I imagined, and much more cautious. To the last they've only dared to take a roundabout path, not meeting me face to face before Wei Zhanhong was ferreted out and my ill intent towards *them* was unfortunately revealed. Now, at the heart of the struggle, I figure *they* would love nothing better than to bury themselves deep underground and not come out. It won't be possible now to make them contact me

voluntarily... But I really didn't expect that you people would be the first to appear in front of me."

Fei Du had his head propped on his long, slender hand, tapping his temple from time to time, the frequency setting off the driver's nervous breathing—each time he took a heavy breath, Fei Du would tap the side of his forehead once, as though pursuing his breaths with a forceful tempo, so the driver at once felt even more panicked and short of air.

"I've been considering it this whole time—what intersection do I have with you? I don't think there is any. Or has the great individual behind you suddenly been inspired to come see me? Oh, yes, what do you call him?"

"We call him Teacher." The feigned oiliness and flattery vanished from the driver's face. In the midst of his tension, there was also some unspeakable grimness in his expression. "Since you've gotten involved in this business, you can't say you have no intersection with us. Besides that—President Fei, I'm only an errand runner, a useless nobody. Even if you capture me, you won't get anything useful out of me. But you're different. No matter how great your resources, right now you're still sitting alone in my car. Won't your people hold back for fear of involving you?"

The finger at Fei Du's temple slipped downward beside his lips. Without batting an eyelash, a joking expression appeared at the corners of his eyes, as though he were restraining a laugh, as though the threat he'd just heard had been adorably childish. The driver was inexplicably drawn in by his not-quite-smile, for a moment nearly suspecting he'd said something idiotic. He tightly clutched the weapon at his waist, the veins climbing up his neck.

Meanwhile, in the hospital, Luo Wenzhou was carefully considering the past events Director Lu had just told him about.

He couldn't help thinking, why was it Binhai again? The members of the Su family had buried the bodies of the kidnapped girls in Binhai, Fan Siyuan had even chosen to jump into the sea in Binhai, and that patch of land in Binhai belonged to the mysterious Guangyao Fund—they'd investigated the Guangyao fund, arranged to talk to the company's representative, but just as Fei Du had said, it was only a frail shell, a tentacle that could be cut off any time.

Perturbed, Luo Wenzhou pulled out his phone to look at the time, and found that there was a notification light flashing, showing there was a missed call or unread message. He opened it and only then saw the message Fei Du had sent.

Ordinarily, Fei Du occasionally went back to the office, and before winter vacation had started, he'd gone to school almost every day. While he no longer went out to fool around with his drinking buddies, he still had some indispensable social engagements. He wasn't always home. But he did things very considerately. No matter where he was going, he'd tell Luo Wenzhou, both when he was leaving and when he was coming back. And once he'd told him, he would take it seriously, punctually keeping to the times he'd said.

“Going home to get something” didn't fall into the category of “running around”; Luo Wenzhou ought to have read that and let it go. But perhaps because the hospital felt oppressive to him, Luo Wenzhou was suddenly uneasy. By the time he pulled himself together, he found he'd already called back.

Luo Wenzhou thought he was being kind of annoying. While he brought the speaker to his ear, he searched for an excuse to cover up his clingy behavior. Then he heard a mechanical female voice come over the phone: “The number you have dialed is busy...”

Luo Wenzhou paused, hung up, absently waited two minutes, then dialed again—it was still busy!

Fei Du wasn't the sort of person who talked endlessly on the phone. Luo Wenzhou knew his habits. Normally when he picked up the phone, he'd exchange a couple of polite remarks at most, then say whatever he had to say. If more than a minute passed and he couldn't say it clearly, he'd arrange to talk in person; he'd very rarely keep talking unimpeded.

Luo Wenzhou stood up. Just then, a nurse came over in haste. "Where are Fu Jiahui's relatives? Who can sign? The patient's condition isn't very good."

Tao Ran's expression altered at once. Lu Youliang leapt up. Luo Wenzhou's phone suddenly rang; he thought it was Fei Du and eagerly picked up without looking, but it was a colleague's voice that came over the line: "Captain Luo, we've found one of the cars, but the person in it ran away!"

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath, hearing the nurse saying to Director Lu, "That won't do, it has to be a relative who signs..."

The colleague on the phone said, "Captain Luo, what do we do now?"

Luo Wenzhou's gaze turned to Director Lu, hastily saying something to the nurse, then went past them to the opaque door of the operating room—he didn't know whether Lao Yang was conscious in the underworld, whether he was watching, or how he would feel when he had seen.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Call for reinforcements, search all the surrounding surveillance cameras, contact the traffic advertisements, the nearby shopping centers, and the subway. Put out a missing person notice. Find Yang Xin and tell her..."

"Tell her what?"

“Tell her her mom’s dying and get the hell back to the hospital to sign!”

When he’d said this, Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone and gently pressed on Tao Ran’s relatively intact shoulder.

“Go on if you have something to take care of,” Tao Ran said quietly. “It’s no use staying here. I think if she gets the chance, she won’t want the last thing she sees to be the two of us... Go on.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t say a word; he turned and left—

The beep of someone trying to call in came over Fei Du’s earbud for the third time. He ignored it. As though humoring a child, he said entirely insincerely to the driver, “All right, your threat is a great deterrent—will that do? Do you think you should tell me why you came?”

“Someone gave me some words to pass onto you, President Fei,” the driver said very tensely. “He said that you’ve seen him before, and he regrets being unable to come in person this time...”

Fei Du frowned faintly. “I’ve seen him before?”

The driver didn’t answer, only relayed the message with dedication: “Some things seem confusing, but it’s because that person is too crafty. But while the net of heaven has large meshes, it lets nothing through. There are no walls in the world that air can’t pass through, and hands that have been stained with blood can never be clean. *He* must already be at his wits’ end—there’s one important clue you ought to know.”

Hearing this bewildering message, Fei Du frowned and asked, “What ought I to know?”



“I don’t know that.—He also said, he hopes that this case can be resolved openly and clearly, in strict accordance with the rules, not leaving any points of suspicion, so in the end there can be an entirely unflawed accounting.” The driver slowly asked, “President Fei, can I leave?”

Fei Du’s gaze swept his tense shoulders. “A knife? A narcotic? A taser? Or...a gun? This is my first time running into someone holding a weapon asking me whether he could leave.”

Then, without waiting for the driver to speak, he laughed, pulled a hundred yuan bill out of his wallet, and threw it on the seat, opening the door and getting out of the car. “I don’t need a receipt, and there’s no need for change.”

Then, hands stuck in his pockets, he crossed the street to the villa estate without a look back.

The driver’s back was covered in cold sweat. He turned his head and saw a furious girl getting out of the SUV parked across the street, angrily brandishing her handbag at the side mirror, hopping and cursing. Then a guy hurriedly jumped out of the driver’s seat. Without even locking the car, he trailed after the girl, explaining something.

The driver let out a heavy breath. He hadn’t expected that the car that had filled him with dread would contain unrelated passersby, a couple of young lovers who had stopped by the side of the road to argue. Fei Du had tricked him!

When he looked again, Fei Du’s figure had already disappeared.

The driver realized he’d been taken in, smacked the steering wheel, and angrily shifted gear. He stepped on the gas pedal, and drove away...not noticing a low-key luxury sports car slipping out of the villa estate behind him, following him at a middle distance.

## CHAPTER 152 - Edmond Dantès XXIII

Heating in the villas was self-supplied, the temperature set by the residents themselves. Since winter had started, Fei Du had returned just once, when they'd interrogated the Beehive's driver in the basement while pursuing Lu Guosheng, so the heating hadn't been turned on.

It was cold outside, and it was also cold inside. Outside was the unobstructed cold of a howling winter wind, inside a silent cold of bone-piercing gloom.

The front door creaked when he went inside. The furnishings inside the room, like specimens that had been disturbed, sent up a thin layer of dust. Fei Du wiped away the dust left on his palm by the doorknob. His still cold gaze swept the "withered" fake flowers in the vestibule. The person who he'd been in contact with the whole time reported over his earbud: "President Fei, I have my eyes on that taxi from just now, don't worry—this car of yours is really good."

"When you're through, you can drive it away," Fei Du said, added a "be careful," and only then hung up the phone.

Each time he came here, his mood was unhappy. He felt that while the things inside the house were inanimate, they still let off a thick, particular smell. Home had the smell of perfume coming from the room of the exquisite lady of the house, the clean smell of sunlight filling the industrious room of the master of the house. Luo Wenzhou's home, meanwhile, had a special aroma of high-quality red wine—though the liquor cabinet that had been locked for thousands of years contained no such thing; it made a person want to fall down drunk there as soon as he came in.

Here, however, there was a foul odor, like those medieval European lords who never bathed. Tons of perfume couldn't cover up its putrid

smell.

Fei Du silently puffed out a cold breath, which quickly produced frost visible to the naked eye. He remembered the string of missed phone calls trying to cut in earlier and carelessly looked down at his phone.

Fei Du took one look and went silent. The President Fei who had scared the stalking villain into wanting to pull a knife twitched the corners of his mouth; his first reaction was to stick his phone back into his jacket pocket, pretending that nothing had happened. But on the other end, Luo Wenzhou seemed to have a gaze that extended thousands of li. While the phone was still warm, he called again.

Fei Du's hand shook. In the chilly villa's living room, a bit of sweat broke out on his back. He took a deep breath, then answered. "Hi..."

There was a brief pause on the other end. Then Luo Wenzhou said heavily, "You were just on the phone for at least twenty-five minutes."

Fei Du said, "I..."

"I suppose you've been calling the lunar probe?"

Fei Du: "..."

Though Fei Du didn't say anything, Luo Wenzhou seemed to be able to tell what had happened through some miraculous instinct. "Where are you?"

Fei Du said, "...At the villa."

"What are you doing there on your own?" Luo Wenzhou made some association that suddenly changed the tone of his voice. "Wait there for me!"

Before Fei Du could answer, Luo Wenzhou hung up in exasperation. Fei Du rubbed the chilled tip of his nose, feeling that the nearly sentient putrid stench inside the room had been blown away by Luo Wenzhou's clamor; it was only that the room hadn't been aired out in a long time and had a somewhat oppressive feeling. He turned on the heating and the air purifier. After warming up a little, he went right into the basement.

The coiled dragon pattern on both sides of the stairs was subtly different from the grim horror in his dream, likely because he was taller and his point of view had changed. Looking closely, these dragons' faces had monolids and auspiciously rounded cheeks, each with two freely floating carp-like mustaches and a pair of short horns on its head; there was something charmingly naive about them.

Fei Du looked helplessly at the charmingly naive coiled dragons, then familiarly walked down to the basement and opened the door.

The code was his own, showing the great shift in the universe. Half the territory was filled up by the electric shock chair and the home theater setup that Luo Wenzhou had thrown sheets over. There were no similarities to the room Fei Chengyu had used.

Fei Du aimlessly paced three circles around the basement without awakening his memories. He could only return to the living room and sit down, pinching the center of his brow from time to time, faintly feeling that he might need a hypnotist to resolve this matter.

Unfortunately, hypnotists weren't all-powerful, because there were some people who couldn't enter a hypnotic state. Fei Du didn't think he could relax in front of others...unless the hypnotist was even more handsome than Luo Wenzhou.

Just then, an evil wind blew in from somewhere. The high window frame shuddered, and a withered tree at the door was bowed by the northwest wind, the dry branches holding dead leaves hitting the

glass of the second floor corridor window. It was like a horde of demons cavorting. Fei Du was startled by the movement and looked up, something suddenly streaking across his mind.

He stood up at once, grabbed a decorative crystal ball from the table, then pulled out a tie and blindfolded his eyes, once again going to the top of the basement stairs.

When the wind blew again, Fei Du gently opened his hand, letting the crystal ball roll down the stairs. The dull sound of the ball rolling mixed with the sound of the tree branches hitting the window frame. It hit the door of the basement with a click. Fei Du, his eyes blindfolded, breathed deeply a few times, then put a hand on the ice-cold wall of the stairwell.

He remembered... The first time he'd snuck into Fei Chengyu's basement, the weather had been like this, the rolling marble echoing the howl of the north wind, and in the air had been a smell of...a smell of what?

Oh, yes, cleaning solution.

That usually meant that Fei Chengyu was home. That was why the simple action of picking up something he'd dropped down the stairs was full of terror. But Fei Chengyu had for some reason walked out then. Fei Du had stood in the stairwell, hesitating for a good while, then couldn't resist going down.

When he took the first step, a strange feeling like a lightning strike suddenly hit him. Fei Du paused, subconsciously turning his head to "look" at a certain place upstairs, feeling that there was someone there watching him. Then he seemed to hear the auditory hallucination of a door opening.

Fei Du pulled down the tie over his eyes and found that he was looking towards the second-floor bedroom—the one that had been

his mother's when she was alive.

Fei Du frowned slowly, thinking, "Was she watching me from there?"

But the silent door of the room couldn't answer him, and Fei Du suddenly found that apart from the portion he couldn't remember at all, all his uncertain memories seemed to be connected to his mom. He kept walking down, picked up the crystal ball he'd dropped, blindfolded his eyes again, and fumbled to push the half-opened door.

The cold crystal rubbed again his palm. Fei Du remembered he had stood for a good while facing this "forbidden area." Then he hadn't resisted the "Bluebeard allure" and had gone in.

When this basement had belonged to Fei Chengyu, the furnishings had been more plentiful, more exquisite, and there had been the smell of cleaning solution everywhere. There'd been a thick carpet covering the floor and a round couch on two sides. There'd been a row of bookcases on the wall that Fei Du used for the home theater screen, and a safe set into the corner, which Fei Chengyu had used a painting to block; supposedly it could have withstood up to an 8 on the Richter scale.

In front of the bookcases, meanwhile, had been a large rosewood desk. Following his memory, Fei Du went in front of the nonexistent "desk" and reached his hands into empty space—he'd seen the particulars of the Picture Album Project on this desk.

Zhang Chunjiu, acting captain, the younger brother of the majority shareholder of the Chunlai Conglomerate; Lu Youliang, Zhang's deputy, whose fiancée worked in the senior middle department of the Ninth Middle School; Pan Yunteng, whose parents lived in a certain business's residential quarters; Yang Zhengfeng, whose daughter was attending elementary school, in grade...

After covering his vision with the tie, his thinking seemed to have become sharper; all the details of the information he'd seen on this table returned to Fei Du's mind, and he had a sudden thought—yes, the list of the participants in the Picture Album Project had been too complete, including everyone's positions and information about their relatives. Only the mole in the City Bureau could have provided this... So, reasonably speaking, the mole himself must have been someone outside of the people in these materials, or else, when he was in collusion with Fei Chengyu, why would he have needed to superfluously add in his own information?

But the list of names encompassed nearly all of the frontline police officers at the City Bureau then. If it had been someone outside of the list, he'd have been too distantly connected; could you call that a mole?

It didn't entirely make sense.

So...

Fei Du suddenly raised his head—there seemed to be only one possibility remaining. The mole who'd killed Gu Zhao was among these people, but Fei Chengyu hadn't known which one it was!

Just then, the sound of rapid footsteps suddenly came from outside. Fei Du, his eyes blindfolded, was still sunk in the Picture Album Project roster and for a time didn't come around. The footsteps coincided with his childhood memory—Fei Du gave a fierce start. Back then, he'd also read halfway through in bewilderment, then had suddenly heard Fei Chengyu's footsteps returning, approaching the basement like now.

He'd been talking on the phone as he walked, his tone cold and brutal.

Thirteen years later, Fei Du's pulse and blood pressure reacted accurately. All of his skin went cold, and his mind was enshrouded in some peculiar emotion. His limbs seemed to be filled with ice. Thin sweat came up on his palms. His breathing speeded up involuntarily.

There was only one door to the basement, one exit. If he'd run out then, he'd have been caught red-handed by Fei Chengyu!

Fei Du remembered he'd had no time to hide. Out of desperation, he'd returned the files he'd gone through to their original places, relying on his memory, then ducked into a little cabinet under the desk, taking advantage of being short.

The footsteps pressed closer and closer, seeming to have already come to the door. Fei Du, with the tie covering his eyes, subconsciously backed up a few steps to the bookcases in his memory, but there were no bookcases now. He bumped right into the little cabinet next to the home theater screen. The cabinet fell to one side, and the emetics and tranquilizers inside it scattered over the ground with a clatter. At the same time, someone kicked open the door he hadn't closed.

For an instant, there seemed to be a string in Fei Du's mind that was heavily plucked. It reverberated, exploding earth-shatteringly by his temples. A fragment of memory passed through the bones of his skull like a bullet—the little cabinet falling coincided with some sound in his memories.

Luo Wenzhou, charging in, took one look at the fallen bottles of medicines rolling at his feet, thought of Fei Du's prior record, and was scared out of his wits.

Luo Wenzhou ran over and hugged Fei Du. "What's wrong? What's wrong? Are you touching those drugs again? Fei Du? Fei Du, talk to me!"



The momentum of Luo Wenzhou charging in had interrupted his memories. At first Fei Du was still at a loss, his pale lips trembling slightly. Then the tie over his eyes was pulled away. As if afraid of losing him, Luo Wenzhou's arms encircled him tightly enough to hurt.

Luo Wenzhou nearly hauled him out of the basement, then pressed him onto the couch where the sunlight was best. Fei Du raised a hand to block the light. The color in his face seemed to have been drained away by that demonic basement. Luo Wenzhou dragged away his wrist and held his chin, turning his face towards him. Expression overcast, he said, "Didn't I tell you not to run around?"

Fei Du stared at him in silence for a moment, then suddenly pulled over Luo Wenzhou's collar, pressed him against the couch, and bent his head to kiss him.

Luo Wenzhou didn't know where this sudden favorable treatment had come from. He paused, then quickly embraced Fei Du, feeling his difficult to express fretfulness as he nearly submerged him inside the couch. Luo Wenzhou held the back of Fei Du's neck with one hand, stroking lightly, then with difficulty turned his head away a little. "I... I can't catch my breath, darling."

Fei Du's movements slowed. Then he gently kissed Luo Wenzhou's earlobe. Luo Wenzhou sucked in a breath, feeling himself go limp at the waist. He raised a hand to pull back Fei Du, who was about to move away from him. "Were you just going to nibble?"

"What do you want?" Fei Du said.

Luo Wenzhou fixed his eyes on him and licked the corner of his mouth.

"Take it." Fei Du waved very magnanimously. "Body and heart, buy one get one free, no need to look for change."

Luo Wenzhou was speechless for a moment, carefully reflecting on these words. The roots of his ears unexpectedly went hot.

The bottled water in the villa was all expired. The two of them had to find a kettle and boil some water. Fei Du found a brick of Pu'er tea somewhere, used an awl to knock off a few pieces, then brewed it.

“I just remembered. The first time I inadvertently got into Fei Chengyu’s basement, he came back midway. I got into a little cabinet at the bottom of the bookcase, but he didn’t actually come in, because when he’d just come to the door, my mom started going crazy upstairs, knocking something over. Fei Chengyu cursed and hurried away.” With practiced movements, Fei Du washed the tea and poured the first brew, the tea quickly sending up a rich scent. He put in a sieve to filter out the tea leaves and poured a cup each for himself and Luo Wenzhou. “And I ran away.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “And your mom?”

Fei Du was silent for a while, fingers circling the scalding teacup. “I don’t know. I hid in my room and didn’t dare to look.—Didn’t you go to pick up Director Lu? How did it go?”

As soon as he mentioned this, Luo Wenzhou felt that it was a long story. He tilted up his head and leaned back. After a good while he feebly explained this worldview-changing day. “It’s not clear what’s happening now. If anything happens, Tao Ran will send word. No news is good news.”

“The Reciter...” Fei Du thoughtfully shook his cup. “So the one who came to find me just now must have been one of their people.”

Luo Wenzhou nearly shot up off the couch. “What?”

Fei Du was pondering his own matters and didn’t notice Luo Wenzhou’s expression. He said somewhat carelessly, “When I went

out, I encountered a taxi driver who must have been waiting for me on purpose...uh...”

Luo Wenzhou grabbed his collar and inspected him from head to foot, finding that there wasn't even a single thread out of place. As he sighed in relief, anger burned up from the arches of Luo Wenzhou's feet to the top of his head. “I told you to be a little more careful, and you fucking treated it like the wind blowing past your ear! Fei Du, I'm telling you, if you...if...”

He was so angry he was incoherent, forgetting how to speak.

Fei Du, stunned, blinked his eyes, then took Luo Wenzhou's hand with the veins standing out on it in both of his hands, brought his palms together, and curved his peach blossom eyes in a roguish manner. “Shixiong, I love you.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Each time it was the same line. He didn't even bother to change the routine!

Then Fei Du became a little more businesslike. “My people were following. That driver told me that I'd seen his ‘Teacher’ before, though.”

“I heard something while I was on the way here to find you,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Director Zhang said that he didn't order the second Picture Album Project. Now the investigation team has turned its attention on Yan Security Uni, and especially...”

“On my bad-tempered advisor?” Fei Du asked.

“Do you remember I told you about Chen Zhen's report?” Luo Wenzhou said. “Someone who could deliver it right upstairs must have had a channel of communication. Teacher Pan used to be a

criminal policeman, and then he became an authority in the field. His contacts are considerable. He has the channel—and he’s shown an unusual interest in some projects left behind by Fan Siyuan, even written teaching materials in them...”

Luo Wenzhou paused slightly and shook his head. “Could the person you’ve met be him?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Fei Du considered. Then, as if he’d come to a decision, he raised his head. “Lao Luo, I may need your help with something.”

## CHAPTER 153 - Edmond Dantès XXIV

Outside of Yan City there was a village that had had the marrow and workforce drained out of it by the big city and hadn't developed a day in twenty years. Xiao Haiyang drove himself. Because his eyesight was poor, he drove into every pothole, jolting himself until he was ghastly pale. And when he got out of the car, he slipped on shards of ice and was sent sprawling. Limping, he was followed through half the village by a very disgraceful big yellow dog until at last he saw the local civil policeman he'd contacted ahead of time.

The civil policeman chased away the big yellow dog studying the cripple's walk. "I remember what happened then. The old Sun family had two sons. The second son had a little girl, and the eldest gave them a precious grandson, the only heir, unbearably spoiled. The rotten kid did it because of the business of the home repairs. Maybe he didn't like that his uncle wouldn't give any money and thought that he was real reason. He thought everything the family had should be his. Anyway, a bunch of relatives partying as they celebrated the New Year also had him pretty unhappy, and not two days passed before the second son's girl fell through a hole in the ice and drowned. She was only three. She didn't even look human when they pulled her out."

The civil policeman led Xiao Haiyang to a little police station. There was no private office for the household register, just a little space portioned off with a sign hung up. Inside, a female police officer was on duty. There was an old man sitting across from her who'd come for some certificate.

The civil policeman said hello and walked right in, getting out an already prepared file. Pointing to a photograph in it, he said, "This is the dead girl's dad, the Sun family's second son, called Sun Jian."

Xiao Haiyang had no attention to spare to wipe his running nose. He breathed in deeply and took a close look, then found a photograph of Bei yuan's Longyun Center's fake security guard "Wang Jian." "Could you look at this for me? Is this the same person?"

The fake security guard "Wang Jian" looked like he'd aged more than a decade or two. The bones of his cheeks had changed shape. Lacking support, the flesh of his face had collapsed. The bridge of his nose meanwhile looked unnaturally high, the protruding cartilage nearly breaking through the skin, making his eye sockets look even deeper, giving him a somewhat sinister appearance.

Xiao Haiyang consulted an expert; this fake security guard's face had likely gone under the knife.

One was a somber middle-aged security guard you could tell at a glance wasn't to be trifled with; the other was a refined and cultured young father. At a glance, no one would connect them.

The civil policeman stared for a long time. "There's some similarity, especially the mole on the chin... Ah, he's changed his appearance too much, I wouldn't dare to say."

"Is there a record of DNA and fingerprints?" Xiao Haiyang said.

"Well, now, we really don't have that." The civil policeman shook his head. "It's been too long. We weren't so advanced then. Though the parents insisted that it had been their nephew who'd done it, no one had seen, and there was no evidence. He himself wouldn't admit it no matter what. There was nothing we could do.—Such a little child who couldn't even walk steadily, reasonably speaking she wouldn't have run out by herself on a frozen day. Her death really was odd, but you still couldn't point to anyone. In the end, after a long investigation, we had to let it go... Oh, yes, he signed a statement then, we should still have it. Do you have a use for that?"

This person's original name was "Sun Jian," and the false name was "Wang Jian." One character between them was identical. Security guards at the Longyun Center had to sign in every day when they were on duty. Xiao Haiyang quivered. "All right, let me see it!"

The civil policeman quickly found the signed document from back then and gave it to him. Relying on his naked eye, Xiao Haiyang judged that the two signatures had probably come from the same pen. "I need to have a graphologist give an expert opinion. Thank you."

The civil policeman saw him to the door very warmly. "You're welcome. If you have any questions, come ask any time."

Just then, the old man getting a certificate suddenly turned his head and looked at Xiao Haiyang, widening his clouded eyes. "That little asshole from the Sun family threw that three-year-old girlie into a hole in the ice and drowned her. You didn't do anything about it and let him go, but what happened next? The joker fell into a frozen river himself and drowned. Retribution! Ha!"

The civil policeman made a face and went to educate the old man on the law, but Xiao Haiyang stared, not knowing how to answer. Just then, his phone rang. He pulled himself together and hastily walked out of the police station.

Lang Qiao spoke quickly over the phone: "How are you doing? I've found a lead on the fake front desk receptionist over here. Her real name must be 'Wang Ruobing.' She had a big sister. Over a decade ago there was a case of a remedial class teacher molesting female students. This business made a pretty big fuss at the time, but none of the victims would stand up. There was insufficient evidence, and he had to be let go. Wang Ruobing's sister was one of the victims. She committed suicide over it."

“I found the fake security guard.” Xiao Haiyang stretched out his frozen hands with difficulty and opened a file. “His original name may be ‘Sun Jian.’ His three-year-old daughter was pushed into a hole in the ice. The location is rather remote, but it was in Yan City’s jurisdiction at the time. The file was transferred to the City Bureau... No need to look for the fake Zhao Yulong. In one of the unsolved cases, the victim’s husband signed when he recognized the body. He must have also had plastic surgery, I found an expert to take a look. Apart from the jawline, nose bridge, and forehead, the other facial characteristics match.”

“For the fake delivery person and the fake patrolman we only have small photographs from their fake IDs. Especially for the fake patrolman; the boss took a picture of the fake ID in night mode, it’s hard to tell anything,” Lang Qiao said. “But I went and looked through the rest of the files for the unsolved cases and found relatives of the victims that seem to match... Ah, Little Glasses, can’t we basically determine now that these people who have been acting as go-betweens and stirring shit up are victims from the unsolved cases recorded in the Picture Album Project?”

Xiao Haiyang’s mind was still full of the memory of that old man’s teeth-gnashing “Retribution!” He gave an absent-minded affirmative.

“What are they playing at?” Lang Qiao asked. “Righting wrongs in accordance with heaven’s decree?”

Xiao Haiyang was silent for a while. “Wait, I’ll contact Captain Luo.”

But Luo Wenzhou couldn’t be contacted. His phone was in his jacket pocket on silent.

Luo Wenzhou stood with his hands crossed over his chest, watching Fei Du writing and drawing on a piece of paper, hesitantly saying, “I hear that getting memories back needs an expert hypnotist. I feel like I may not be any use in this respect. After all, looking at a warm,



lively, beautiful youth like me is more likely to make you treasure the present and look to the future.”

“I don’t need a hypnotist, and I don’t need to have my memories reawakened. I need to deduce the truth,” Fei Du said without looking up. “The brain sometimes automatically constructs fake memories, but the fake memories have confused details, trying to obscure the inherent logic of events. I need you to raise questions from an outsider’s point of view and help me find what’s been obscured by my memory.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned. “Do you believe what that driver said?”

“They call themselves ‘The Reciter.’” Fei Du tossed the pen at his fingertips onto the table and paused. “Honestly, shixiong, don’t you think this Reciter is a lot like me?”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression cooled. Stiffly, he said, “Not at all.”

Fei Du smiled, paying him no mind, and continued: “I always thought that my pattern of gathering together victims and using their disadvantaged material and emotional situations to get things done was imitating *them*, but now I think that my way of doing things is more like The Reciter—if two things, two people, seem to have a connection, then it’s likely they in fact do have some connection.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

“That driver told me that their leader, who they call Teacher, can’t come see me now—there are two possibilities. First, he’s concerned that my people will immediately betray him to the police. Second, it’s in the literal sense that he himself *can’t* come see me. Maybe he isn’t at liberty, or maybe the problem is with his health. In the message the driver passed on, the words he used were that he ‘regrets being unable to come in person,’ so I incline more towards the latter.”

Luo Wenzhou paced two steps. “Teacher Pan is currently the main focus of suspicion. He can’t even return home. He isn’t at liberty. And then there’s...shiniang. She’s at the hospital. That’s a problem with her health. Which of them do you suspect it is?”

“They both have one problem.”

“What?” Luo Wenzhou said.

“Money,” said Fei Du. “Creating fake identities, providing for a group of subordinates, eavesdropping, stalking, purchasing illegal weapons—each of their plans, each of their actions, requires a great deal of capital. It’s not a bit cheaper than taking care of wanted criminals. Either he’s rich himself, or there’s someone financially providing for him. That makes the scope of suspects very narrow. If we’re only talking about within Yan City, you could count them with both hands. I’m one of them.”

“Fei Du, if you have something to say, say it.” Luo Wenzhou turned his head and for once looked at him seriously. “I don’t like this way of speaking.”

Normally, when he was grumbling and swearing, he himself often didn’t take it seriously. Once he was really angry, his expression would become increasingly calm and cold.

Fei Du didn’t answer, avoiding his gaze and continuing, “...Fei Chengyu would also be one, if he weren’t down.”

Luo Wenzhou looked down none too happily at his temple for a moment. “Thinking from a paranoid point of view, if you could bribe a hospital worker, it wouldn’t be unfeasible to pretend to be in a vegetative state.”

Fei Du smiled. “When Fei Chengyu was first in the hospital, I sent people to follow the doctor in charge around the clock. The aides

changed every week. I have all their biographical notes starting from birth. When the hospital told me he had irreversible brain damage, I had him transferred to other hospitals a few times under the guise of seeking other treatment options. Only when they gave the same diagnosis did I move him to the sanatorium. Even so, I still kept him under watch for over a year, until I'd gotten a firm grip on his conglomerate."

Luo Wenzhou said, "...Why didn't you simply pick up a quilt and smother him?"

"I considered it, but then I thought that smothering him wouldn't have any use but revealing myself ahead of time," Fei Du said. "I wanted to seize the shadow behind him. Leaving him one breath would be like leaving a fishbone stuck in that person's throat."

Luo Wenzhou sat down across from him.

"The first time I went into the basement, by a fluke, I wasn't discovered," Fei Du said dully. "Half a year later I snuck in again, but that time my luck wasn't as good, and I was caught. Then Fei Chengyu emptied his basement... That's about how it happened, but my impressions about how I got in and what happened after I was caught have always been very vague."

Luo Wenzhou thought about it, then said, "Let's start with how you got in.—How many possible codes did you have to try from?"

"There were three most likely possible answers," Fei Du said.

"Your basement sounds the alarm if the wrong code is entered once. In other words, your chance of success was a little over thirty percent," Luo Wenzhou said. "If it were me, I may have gone to try, so what if my dad gave me a thrashing—but from my understanding of you, you would have been more cautious."

Even if Fei Du hadn't innately been such a cautious person, the environment he'd grown up in had doomed him. He was much more cautious than other people in minor matters. Being caught by Fei Chengyu, after all, wasn't a question of getting a thrashing or sitting at the door writing a self-reflection.

Fei Du nodded slowly.

"You wouldn't have done it, unless someone had given you a hint. It's not very likely that it would have been Fei Chengyu, and it couldn't have been the housekeepers who passed through your house. As for other outsiders... I think it's likely you wouldn't have easily trusted them. By process of elimination, supposing someone really did give you a hint, it could only have been your mom," Luo Wenzhou said. "That matches what you dreamed that day."

"Yes," said Fei Du.

"Now for the second question. You just said that the first time you got into the basement, you felt that she was watching you, and later she covered your escape. Then the second time, she gave you a hint about the code, so she must have known you were going to sneak into the basement. Why didn't she have time to cover you then?"

Fei Du put his elbows on his knees and propped his chin on his fingertips, frowning involuntarily—his memories became increasingly blurry here. He really couldn't remember.

"All right," Luo Wenzhou said after waiting a moment. "Before you were discovered by Fei Chengyu, what were you doing? What was the last thing you saw?"

"...the computer?" Fei Du pondered for a long time. "It must have been. The computer's code was the same as the basement's."

Luo Wenzhou said, “While you were looking through his computer, Fei Chengyu suddenly came in?”

Fei Du’s brow furrowed more tightly. After a while, treasuring words like gold, he said, “...I don’t think so.”

He didn’t think so—even hearing such a scene described filled him with terror. If it really had happened like that, Fei Du thought he’d have some reaction every time he turned on a laptop of a similar model.

“Definitely not.” Fei Du continued thinking along those lines. “I think I may have heard something before that and hid somewhere.”

Luo Wenzhou wasn’t a specialist, after all. He didn’t know what he should say now. He could only wait for Fei Du to slowly think about it. He suddenly thought that when Fei Du recalled Fei Chengyu, he didn’t seem like a boy who feared his father, didn’t even seem like he was recalling an abusive scumbag. It was simply like he was recalling a monster—a teeth-gnashing, blood-sucking monster in a nightmare.

Why?

Had Fei Chengyu really never done anything to his “heir?”

Luo Wenzhou clutched his teacup. The bottom of the cup scraped against the table, letting out a few gentle sounds.

Fei Du suddenly fixed his eyes on the teacup. “Porcelain... I heard the sound of porcelain clicking together, and Fei Chengyu said...”

What had Fei Chengyu said?

There seemed to be a splinter at Fei Du’s temple. His pulse went faster and faster, about to explode.

“No need,” Fei Du said quietly. “He said... ‘No need, we aren’t having any.’”

“He said ‘we aren’t having any,’” Luo Wenzhou quickly followed up. “In other words, he had a guest with him, and your mom brought them tea? Who was the guest?”

A faint figure appeared in Fei Du’s mind, but he couldn’t remember who that person was, as if he was taking a test and reaching for information he didn’t quite have—he’d clearly seen it, clearly remembered every word and sentence around it, but he couldn’t remember the thing itself.

His chest hurt, and he coughed as though unable to catch his breath.

This reaction again. Luo Wenzhou’s pupils contracted. He asked grimly, “What did Fei Chengyu do to you?”

Fei Du didn’t answer. He waved a hand at him.

Luo Wenzhou grabbed his shoulder. “Fei Du, you’re the expert. You tell me, what is post-traumatic stress disorder, and what symptoms does it have?”

Fei Du took a breath with difficulty. “I don’t have any...”

“Any what?”

“Trauma.” Fei Du noticed that his voice was hoarse and cleared his throat. He said, “Fei Chengyu really didn’t hit me, didn’t cause me any bodily harm. Or else wouldn’t I have had to go to the hospital? If other people had gotten involved, I couldn’t not remember it.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at Fei Du in astonishment. “Since when does ‘trauma’ mean bodily harm? Student Fei Du, tell me the truth, did

you pass your final exams?—It’s all right, I won’t make fun of you if you have to make them up.”

“I don’t have a problem with psychological trauma.” Fei Du leaned back slightly and raised his eyebrows a little. “You must have felt it. My capacity for fellow feeling is very poor. I have practically no empathy or sympathy. I lack a sense of shame, my feeling of fear is slower to react than that of other people, and my autonomic responses concerned with anxiety are weak—if you add in a high level of aggression, it’s basically no different from Fei Chengyu. I didn’t especially want to be like him, so I used electric shock to forcibly correct myself.”

Luo Wenzhou felt he’d finally touched the core of his problem. For a time he stared dumbstruck at this delicate-featured young man. Before this, he’d thought that Fei Du’s occasional vile appraisal of himself was sulking, was nitpicking, was even a means of venting his unhappiness when he was in a bad mood. But he hadn’t thought that for Fei Du, what he said wasn’t a vile appraisal; it was an objective statement, like asserting his name, sex, age, and ethnicity.

“...No,” Luo Wenzhou said somewhat heavily, “I haven’t felt that.”

Fei Du met his eyes. For some reason he suddenly regretted making Luo Wenzhou help him remember. Fei Du abruptly stood up. “If I really can’t remember, then forget it. I’ll go ask whether they’ve caught up to that driver. Since The Reciter has come to the surface, there’ll be traces to follow. We can also use other means...”

Luo Wenzhou pulled him back. At the same time, Fei Du’s phone rang.

Fei Du said, “Wait...”

Luo Wenzhou pulled him, making him stumble, encircling his waist from behind, holding down his hand, which was ready to pick up the

phone. “You said that the first time you got into Fei Chengyu’s basement, your mom distracted him. After you ran away, why didn’t you dare to watch how he treated her?”

Fei Du’s fingers trembled involuntarily.

Luo Wenzhou pressed down on his chest. “You didn’t save her, so were you ashamed? Upset? You’ve been upset all this time, isn’t that right? So you’ve never thought about it, nearly thought you’d forgotten. Fei Du, have you really forgotten?”

Fei Du struggled subconsciously. “I didn’t...”

“Didn’t you say that when Fei Chengyu abused her, he made you watch?” Luo Wenzhou said quietly into his ear. “If you closed the door, you’d still know what would happen to her, right? Tell me—“

The music of Fei Du’s phone’s ringtone seemed out of tune, out of tune the way he’d heard it that weekend when he’d come home from school and seen her cold body. In an instant, he remembered a dream he seemed to have had over and over: a woman with a suffocated face, ashen, lying on the ground, asking him, “Why didn’t you save me?”

Without knowing it, he struggled fiercely, knocking the tea set off the coffee table. The little porcelain cups rolled all over the solid floor, scattering in pieces along with the hot water. The sound of them shattering combined with his memories—

He was dragged out of the little cabinet at the bottom of the bookcase. Then he heard a woman’s scream, and costly porcelain breaking. Fei Chengyu pulled her by the hair across a floor littered with shards. Beside them was a person indifferently watching this farce.



He instinctively used this tall guest as a shield, ducking behind him. The person looked down and smiled at him from on high, even gently stroked his hair. He said, “You can’t just hide, boy.”

Fei Chengyu seemed to notice him. His bloodshot eyes turned to him. Fei Du felt as if his heartbeat had been interrupted.

The familiar feeling of suffocation rushed up. Fei Chengyu had closed that metal ring over his neck.

But this time, on the other end wasn’t a little cat or dog like he usually “trained” with; it was—

## CHAPTER 154 - Edmond Dantès XXV

When the heavy fog of self-deception passed, the dusty truth about that suffocated face at last appeared, unhidden.

Fei Chengyu buckled the other end of the metal ring around the woman's thin neck, crouched down, and very softly asked him, "Darling, who gave you the code?"

The boy's deathly pale face was like a ghostly porcelain doll's. He seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

He'd been so cowardly, so powerless, his limbs merely ornamental. He couldn't grasp his own fate, and neither could he walk out of another's prison.

"What did you hear?" Fei Chengyu's blood-scented hand passed through the boy's hair. "Good children shouldn't eavesdrop on adults talking. I know you didn't do it on purpose.—You didn't do it on purpose, did you?"

Fei Du remembered that stupid boy instinctively shaking his head.

Why had he shaken his head? Fei Du thought that if people could go back in time and face their past selves, the first thing he'd do would be to wring that boy's neck.

Of all the deep negative feelings in the world, hatred for your own cowardice and powerlessness was always the most intense, the most bone-piercing. It was even often unendurable, making it necessary to find a way to turn it around and blame it on other people and things.

Fei Chengyu saw that slight shake of the head and smiled. Pointing at the woman covered in shards of porcelain, he said, "The child didn't

do wrong on purpose. If he did wrong, he must have been lured into it by an ill-meaning adult. Should we punish her, then?”

Fei Du didn't dare to look into her eyes, but he was forced to look. Her gaze was as dim as usual, as numb, like a corpse's. The woman with the brisk step who'd kissed him that day seemed to be only a product of his imagination.

Fei Chengyu beckoned to him, but Fei Du kept retreating, until the man got impatient and closed the metal ring over the boy's neck—two rings buckled on two necks. One end would only loosen a little when the other tightened, and the controls were in little Fei Du's pale, helpless hands.

If he only clenched his fists, he could escape the unbearable feeling of suffocation. And over the course of countless forced trainings, that movement had nearly become instinct.

Why had he forgotten how he'd gotten into the basement?

Why had he blurred out all his memories concerned with his mom?

Why was the woman in his dreams always full of resentment?

Why could that suffocated face, transposed onto any other person, always disturb his sleep?

“Fei Du! Fei Du!”

Fei Du was trembling unnaturally. Luo Wenzhou shook him, and Fei Du suddenly came around. Then there seemed to be someone squeezing his neck. He coughed so hard he couldn't catch his breath.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't expected that his questions would get such a major reaction. For a moment he was so frightened he couldn't move. Hearing that tearing cough, Luo Wenzhou suspected he was about to

cough up his lungs. He couldn't resist touching his throat. But at that light touch, Fei Du gave a start and pushed him away, stumbled a couple of steps, and fell to his knees among the fallen teacups.

There was a moment where Luo Wenzhou thought there was a shadow in those light-colored eyes, like a long-sealed monster seeing blood and emerging.

Luo Wenzhou held his breath and carefully crouched down along with Fei Du, reaching out a hand towards him in terror, shaking it in front of his eyes. "Darling, it's me."

Fei Du's eyelashes were longer at the corners of his eyes. Slightly dampened by cold sweat, they made the corners of his eyes look unusually pitch black and slender, as though they'd been carved with a knife. His gaze also seemed to have been carved by a knife. It fixed on Luo Wenzhou's approaching hand for a moment, and Fei Du's soul seemed to return to its position. He lowered his eyes slowly and allowed Luo Wenzhou to put his hands on his shoulders.

Luo Wenzhou stroked his arms gently, feeling the muscles of those arms he usually didn't bother to raise rigidly tensed. "Talk to me."

Fei Du opened his mouth and tasted blood in his throat. He couldn't make a sound.

"I'll..." Luo Wenzhou felt helpless. Then his gaze fell on Fei Du's bloodless lips, and he blurted out, "I'll kiss you, is that all right?"

When he'd said it, he himself felt that these words sounded pretty disgraceful, but this wasn't the time to take it back. Acting on his own initiative, he simply grabbed Fei Du's arms and pulled him over, stopping when they were extremely close together, looking into Fei Du's eyes. His pupils were slightly enlarged. Then he seemed to recognize him and quickly struggled to calm down.

Luo Wenzhou sighed, roving around his forehead, nose, and lips.

Fei Du closed his eyes and forced his rapid breathing to become extremely quiet, extremely slow. This was his habit. He was always reserved, always controlled; he never minded what he was feeling but judged how he should behave based on others' reactions.

He even tried to smile at Luo Wenzhou. The smile frightened Luo Wenzhou even further.

“Fei...uh, Fei Chengyu came with someone. He headed right for the basement when he got in. He was too fast. My mom tried to stop him, but she failed,” Fei Du said hoarsely. “I heard a movement and quickly put everything back in place and hid in that cabinet. I thought I could get through it again, but I’d overlooked something.”

“What?”

“I’d touched his computer. Fei Chengyu felt it and discovered that the computer was warm.”

Luo Wenzhou thought this sounded like a spy movie. He massaged Fei Du’s wrist and quietly asked, “What did you remember?”

“I was only ten. Fei Chengyu didn’t believe that I could have worked out the code myself, and my mom had tried to stop him outside the basement, so Fei Chengyu thought that she’d urged me to get into the basement, that she was ‘misbehaving.’” Fei Du pressed on his throat. He seemed to want to cough again, but he forced himself to hold back. “His pet had rebelled in front of an outsider. Fei Chengyu was very angry that day. He nearly killed her.”

“In front an outsider...and you?” Luo Wenzhou asked quietly. “And that’s why you forgot this segment of memory?”

Fei Du didn't want to lie to him, but neither did he want to talk about it, so he didn't answer. Forcing the subject away, he said, "The person Fei Chengyu brought home was very tall—Fei Chengyu was over a meter eighty, and this person was nearly half a head taller than him. He was in his thirties or forties, wearing glasses, with a teardrop birthmark at the corner of one eye. I only saw him once."

There were a thousand questions clogging Luo Wenzhou's mind, but hearing this, he could only make them wait in line. "Wearing glasses, a birthmark at the corner of his eye. You're sure?"

Saying so, he hurriedly got out his phone. Not paying attention to the pile of missed calls, he pulled up a file he'd photographed with his phone, enlarging a blurry ID photograph on it. "Was it him?"

Fei Du looked at the characters clearly written on the CV next to the photograph: Fan Siyuan.

"While I was going through the files, I found one with a photograph and secretly took a picture." Luo Wenzhou paused. "Wait—didn't you see a roster and detailed materials about the people taking part in the Picture Album Project? You even knew which school Lao Yang's daughter attended. You didn't see Fan Siyuan's photograph?"

"No." Fei Du slowly shook his head, countless thoughts spinning quickly through his mind. "No—the materials had detailed information about Director Zhang's older brother, Director Lu's fiancée's place of work, even Teacher Pan's parents' address...but there was nothing about Fan Siyuan. I think that name only appeared on the line where the head of the Picture Album Project was introduced."

In other words, the mole who'd given Fei Chengyu the materials had only dispensed with the formalities when it came to Fan Siyuan!

“You said it was winter,” Luo Wenzhou followed up. “You’re sure of the season?”

“I’m sure. I was on winter vacation.” Fei Du looked up. “When did Fan Siyuan ‘jump into the sea?’”

“At the end of the solar year.” Luo Wenzhou sat right down on the floor. “In other words, Fan Siyuan really didn’t die, and he was in contact with Fei Chengyu!”

This organization had collected countless vicious wanted criminals like Lu Guosheng, and at the time Fan Siyuan had been a wanted suspect!

“What did they say in the basement?”

Fei Du closed his eyes.

“If you want total control over them, it won’t be hard,” the man wearing glasses said casually. “You know how you train a hawk? If you want to tame it, you first have to weaken it. You can’t be kind. It’s necessary to starve it appropriately.”

“Starve it?” Fei Chengyu asked.

“If you overfeed it, President Fei, over time, it will become greedy. If a tool doesn’t obey, it has to be honed. What kind of knife honer is afraid of breaking the knife?” The man’s laughter was cold. “You know I have some manpower, but not much. If you want me to help you with this, you’ll have to give me more support.”

Fei Chengyu laughed. “Your manpower... How do I say it? The people you ‘rescued’ while upholding justice?”

“You’re ridiculing me, President Fei.” The man smiled. “But you’re right. They’re useful, and they’re obedient. Hatred and trauma are

excellent resources. They can make people recognize a favor and want to repay it, and you can use them.”

“Fei Chengyu must have found out that ‘they’ had other backers and became unsatisfied. He wanted total control over them,” Fei Du said quietly. “Fan Siyuan was his ‘consultant.’”

Luo Wenzhou’s brain revolved at high speed. “They gathered wanted criminals who had nowhere to go, including Fan Siyuan, a serial killer who was cautious and understood the police. But in fact, Fan Siyuan had been in contact with Fei Chengyu beforehand. He was going to act for Fei Chengyu, get involved, place his people everywhere...”

Fei Du picked up his words. “Establish ‘The Reciter,’ a revenge league, and use them to trap all the financial backers apart from Fei Chengyu, seriously injuring the organization, bringing it to its wits’ end, in the end bringing it under Fei Chengyu’s sole control.”

All of Fei Du’s ideas, even some of his own actions, hadn’t been invented out of nothing. The seeds of these thoughts were deep in his consciousness.

There was also money—carrying out this plan required a large quantity of capital and energy, and now there was a source—only the source hadn’t come now, but over a decade ago. This plan covered a longer period of time than imagined, and The Reciter, an independent third party force, had been carrying out an infiltration of the organization’s interior for over a decade.

The Binhai graveyard, the Zhou Clan, Wei Zhanhong, the Beehive... Like Fei Chengyu had wished, all these lairs and sources of capital had been dug out and cut off one by one. If Fei Chengyu had still been conscious, his wishes would have been fulfilled.

“Wait a minute.” Luo Wenzhou waved a hand. “Wait. Didn’t you tell me that Fei Chengyu has been in a vegetative state for three years? A



vegetable is the one manipulating this from behind the scenes?”

Fei Du was watching him quietly.

Luo Wenzhou instantly seemed to feel what he was going to say. He stood up at once.

One word at a time, Fei Du said, “Fei Chengyu is a vegetable, but I’m still alive.”

Luo Wenzhou flared up. “Shut your mouth!”

“Who told you that Fei Chengyu was in a vegetative state?” Fei Du ignored him, and he was indifferent to the tea soaking the hem of his jacket. “It was me.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Fei Du!”

“I’m in close contact with the police, and I’ve done everything I could to participate in the second Picture Album Project. I can monitor the progress of each case in real time, help you reach the ‘ideal’ resolution to each case,” Fei Du said. “And I have my own people. My train of thought was identical to Fan Siyuan’s.—Perhaps Fei Chengyu is only faking, and I’m his accomplice. Perhaps I simply committed patricide and became his sole heir...”

Luo Wenzhou pulled him up off the floor. “I told you I don’t like it when you...”

“Shixiong.” Fei Du sighed and patted the back of his hand. “I’m only saying what the most reasonable possibility is now. I didn’t say I really did it. Tricking people out of money but not into sex is the quality villain’s basic principle of personal integrity. If I’d had a goal in getting close to you, I wouldn’t have let things develop to this stage between us.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

“That would be too contemptible, and out of keeping with an appreciation for beauty.” Fei Du pulled his collar out of Luo Wenzhou’s hand and straightened the creases in his lapels. Then he picked up his phone. The missed call displayed was from “Binhai Sanatorium.” Fei Du looked at Luo Wenzhou, turned the speaker on in front of him, and dialed back.

As soon as the call connected, the person on the other end hastily picked up. “President Fei! President Fei, I’ve called you three times, and you haven’t picked up! I’ve been so worried.—Your father has disappeared!”

“What does disappeared mean?” Fei Du asked unhurriedly.

“I, I don’t know. The security cameras were cut off. Everything was fine when we checked on the room last night, but first thing this morning he was gone!”

Fei Du hung up. “It seems the script they’ve chosen is rather gentle. They don’t want me to commit ‘patricide.’”

At the Second Hospital, Lu Youliang saw someone and suddenly stood up. It wasn’t easy for Tao Ran to move, and he couldn’t turn around at first. He could only hear a series of hurried footsteps approaching.

Lu Youliang said, “Everyone, this...”

“Director Lu,” said one of the newcomers, “we just learned that the Criminal Investigation Team is currently pursuing two suspicious cars, including one containing a person named Yang Xin, whose mother Fu Jiahui is suspected of taking part in illegal eavesdropping and leaking secrets. We believe she’s a suspect in the murder of Yin Ping.”

Tao Ran, using the one arm he could force to move, finally turned the wheelchair around and saw that a host of investigators had come to the hospital, and Xiao Wu was anxiously following after them, as though he'd done something wrong.

“Deputy-Captain Tao,” Xiao Wu said quietly, “They... These leaders suddenly asked me, and I, I, I didn't, didn't dare to cover up...”

Meanwhile, Lang Qiao, who couldn't get in touch with Luo Wenzhou for the moment, had just returned to the City Bureau. She saw two investigators taking Director Ceng away.

“Director.” Lang Qiao's eyes opened wide. “What's going on?”

Ceng Guangling shook his head at her gravely.

“He's assisting with the investigation.” One of the investigators nodded very warmly to Lang Qiao. “Comrade, please write up a report of the progress of your ongoing investigation and submit it to us. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Hey...” Lang Qiao said.

A colleague tugged at her. When Director Ceng and the others had walked off, he quietly said to Lang Qiao, “I think you know some of our security cameras were bugged?”

Lang Qiao looked at him in bewilderment.

“Because of that, even old Director Zhang, who's stepped back to an advisory position, was taken away to be investigated. But because the installation and repair factory fees were comparatively low, according to regulations, final approval didn't have to come from the superiors. Director Ceng was in charge of administrative work then. It sounds like there were some shenanigans at the factory.”

In the villa, Fei Du had just hung up on the Binhai Sanatorium when a call came from Assistant Miao. Assistant Miao was a little panicked. “President Fei...can you come back to the office right now?”

Not at all surprised, Fei Du asked, “What’s the matter?”

“There are some people who say they’re with the police. They want to investigate one of our past investments—”

## CHAPTER 155 - Edmond Dantès XXVI

“What’s happening now?” A layer of cold sweat suddenly rose on Luo Wenzhou’s back. “Wait—where are you going?”

“To change.” Fei Du turned and went up to the second floor.

Luo Wenzhou was so heavily struck by the information contained in these words that his eyesight dimmed. Before he could follow, his overlooked silent phone began to flash more intensely.

“Wenzhou, it’s me.” The first to get through was Tao Ran. He quickly said, “Shiniang is still undergoing emergency treatment, but the people from the investigation team have come. What *is* going on? What’s happening with Yang Xin? Do you have news?”

“I...” As soon as Luo Wenzhou opened his mouth, his phone notified him of another incoming call. He saw that the caller ID said “Lang Qiao” and had to make an about face and tell Tao Ran, “Wait.—Xiao Qiao?”

“Thank heaven and earth you’ve picked up,” Lang Qiao said shakily. “Little Glasses couldn’t get in touch with you. Boss, some extremely important things.—We can basically determine the identities of all those knock-off people, they’re relatives of the victims in the unsolved cases in the Picture Album Project. Al-also, they just took Director Ceng away, there’s a problem with the factory that did the suspect security cameras, they’re saying he approved it...and they told me to write a report explaining the present stage of our investigation. Boss, what should I write?”

“It’s all right, don’t panic.” Luo Wenzhou slowly let out a breath. “Wait until I get back, I’ll tell you what to...”

Luo Wenzhou's words were interrupted for the second time by a notice of an incoming call. He breathed out and found that this was also a call he couldn't not take and instantly regretted not having packed an extra head. But unfortunately heads and limbs couldn't be taken out on short-term loan!

"Wenzhou." The third phone call came from the investigator who'd taken him in to listen in on the whole course of Director Zhang's interrogation. Because of the relationship with his father, you could just about say he had a bit of personal friendship with Luo Wenzhou; not much, just enough to merit a phone call. "There's something I need to ask you. What is your relationship with that Fei Du?"

Luo Wenzhou looked up at the silent bedroom on the second floor. His throat moved, and he quietly answered, "Just the sort of relationship you know it is."

The investigator seemed not to have expected today's young people to have strayed so far from the right path that they'd casually admit a thing like this without any coverup. He choked for a moment, then sighed. His voice cooling and hardening slightly, he said, "Then I won't say anything extraneous. Prepare to hand over the business you have on hand and step back to avoid suspicion."

Luo Wenzhou forced himself to swallow the words "Don't you want to investigate me, too?" that had come up to his lips—after all, he was no longer that kid who'd cursed out old ladies in the street and thrown away his work ID.

"Of course." He took a deep breath and politely said, "I'll comply with the arrangements. If I can't help, I'll do my best to stay out of your way.—Only...can you give me a little hint so I can get my bearings?"

The investigator hesitated.

“Is this to do with the things that happened fifteen years ago?” Luo Wenzhou kept his tone as soft as possible. “He was only seven or eight fifteen years ago, he didn’t know anything. How can this have anything...”

“I know, we’ve just asked President Fei to come and cooperate with the investigation, resolve a few questions.” The investigator paused slightly, then added, “We now have evidence to show that the same criminal gang is likely behind the Picture Album Project and the secrets leaked from your City Bureau. The Picture Album Project was called to a halt over a decade ago, and now someone has brought it up again. What are his intentions? I can’t tell you in too much detail, but I can say that this person is from Yan Security Uni, closely connected to Fei Du. At the same time, the security system factory suspected of being involved in divulging secrets is also connected to the Fei Clan Conglomerate... Let’s say all of the above is coincidence. He’s still an important connection. I hope you understand.”

Luo Wenzhou quickly extracted two pieces of information from this speech—

Someone at Yan Security Uni closely connected to Fei Du could only be his advisor Pan Yunteng. The investigator was hinting that while on the surface the restarting of the Picture Album Project had been headed by Director Zhang, in fact it had secretly been promoted by Pan Yunteng. Why? Was he also connected with The Reciter?

Second, the information leak from the surveillance system at the City Bureau turned out to be connected by some twists and turns to the Fei family! Was this leftover history that Fei Chengyu hadn’t cleaned up, or was someone putting on a show?

“I have faith in Lao Luo’s moral character and family traditions, but you young people now aren’t like we were then. You have too many trendy new ideas and messy business, and too many enticements from the outside world,” the investigator said very obscurely. “You

called me ‘uncle’ before, so I’ll say a little something extra—Wenzhou, you’re not little anymore, you have to understand how things stand.”

Middle-aged people were for the most part discreet when faced with the younger generation; even when raising a point, they still had to say it in a roundabout, tactful way, not using rude language, maintaining the Eastern model of politeness. But though he’d only said it in such a polite and tactful way, Luo Wenzhou still felt that it grated on his ear, as though his eardrum had been hacked to pieces.

Like a poisonous plant, Fei Du had sunk his root system deep into the bottom his heart. The slightest breath of wind would tear at his flesh and blood. Luo Wenzhou very much wanted to shout into the phone, “Bullshit, who the fuck do you take him for?”

But anger couldn’t solve anything, ditto roars and fists—countless elders had taught him this with their blood and tears, and even their lives.

Luo Wenzhou contained his magma-like rage within his body, said thank you, and hung up. Then he saw Fei Du walk down from the second floor.

The lines of Fei Du’s dark gray coat were neat and harsh, and it faintly reflected the light. He’d exchanged his soft scarf for a steel wristwatch. The rimless glasses were once again obstructing his gaze. He seemed not to have changed out of water damaged clothes but put on a layer of cold, haughty plating.

Fei Du nodded to him. “I’m going to go over there.”

Luo Wenzhou wordlessly grabbed his wrist.

“Don’t be nervous. It’s much better than I anticipated.—There’s only one breath’s difference between Fei Chengyu and a dead person, I’m 120% sure that he couldn’t have run off himself. His disappearance is



a good thing for me, it means someone's protecting me," Fei Du said. "If Fei Chengyu were really incompetent, then I'd be the only suspect now. But with his whereabouts unclear, I'm only going to cooperate with the investigation, not waiting for someone to come arrest me."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him with bloodshot eyes.

"Fei Chengyu and Fan Siyuan teamed up thirteen years ago, bringing about the current situation. Fei Chengyu is down, but Fan Siyuan, for reasons unknown, has been pushing this plan forward on his own. He's forced the organization to abandon first Zheng Kaifeng and then Wei Zhanhong. Zheng Kaifeng and Wei Zhanhong were the two pieces of armor they relied on for existence. The organization has now been brought to the awkward state of running around naked. The next cut will be to its flesh. They have to fight back, and apart from fighting back, they also need one final shield they can slip away behind. That's me."

"I think that the person implicating you now isn't The Reciter," Luo Wenzhou said in a difficult voice. "Fei Chengyu had his accident three years ago, and afterwards Lao Yang also died under suspicious circumstances, so is it possible...is it possible that The Reciter's people hidden inside the organization were exposed?"

"But The Reciter's people had their roots in too deep. It would have been hard to pull them out." Fei Du's gaze passed through the lenses and met his.

With The Reciter making arrangements, the organization couldn't sit around waiting for death. What if the second Picture Album Project and the bugged surveillance system had both been plots started at that time?

The only one who could have done that...

Luo Wenzhou sucked in a breath.

Fei Du fished a cell phone out of his pocket and passed it to him. “I’ll lend you my people to use. You know Lu Jia. If you need anyone to do anything, you can have him pass it on. Even though he won’t say it, he feels very grateful towards you. Say the word, and he won’t shirk.”

“Where is Lu Jia now?”

“With Zhou Huaijin. Zhou Huaijin is crucial. The Zhou family is different from Fei Chengyu and Wei Zhanhong. Their headquarters is abroad. Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao are both dead, but neither *they* nor the police can extend their reach beyond the border. No one knows whether there are disadvantageous traces of *them* inside the Zhou Clan, and Zhou Huaijin is the sole heir. Because of his younger brother’s death, he’ll cooperate with the police unconditionally. So if I were *them*, I’d certainly want him dead,” Fei Du said. “You absolutely, absolutely have to protect him. Nothing can be allowed to happen to him.”

Luo Wenzhou tightly gripped his hand and his phone together.

“That driver said I have an important clue. My guess is this so-called ‘clue’ of his doesn’t refer to Fei Chengyu and Fan Siyuan’s collusion. I’ve been carefully recalling Fan Siyuan and Fei Chengyu’s conversation back then. If I recall correctly, Fei Chengyu said something very suspicious at the time.”

“What?”

“He said to Fan Siyuan, ‘Your six cases of righting injustice were really well done. I have to admire you.’”

Luo Wenzhou forced himself to restrain his irascible temper. “What’s the problem with that?”

“The problem is ‘six,’” Fei Du said. “In those materials you pilfered the other day, Fan Siyuan was suspected of being connected with seven cases in all—do you think it’s more likely Fei Chengyu couldn’t count, or that there’s a problem with one of the seven cases?”

“But there really were seven cases,” Luo Wenzhou said heavily. “I asked Director Lu about that.”

“I was just thinking that there’s one problematic case among those seven,” Fei Du said slowly. “Shixiong, the Picture Album Project’s original intention was to collect existing cases for a deep study of the technique of psychologically profiling criminals, and to seek new lines of thought to make breakthroughs in unsolved cases.—Since that’s the case, why would the case of the mentally disabled killer be included? There was sufficient evidence in that case, and the killer was brought to justice. It wasn’t an unsolved case, and the person responsible was incompetent; there was no universal research value to it. Why would it have been collected in the Picture Album Project?”

Luo Wenzhou stared.

Fei Du shook off his hand. As he headed out, he considered whether he’d omitted anything. Then he said, “Oh, my phone’s lockscreen code is...”

“I know,” Luo Wenzhou said absently. “That date... The day you discovered your mom’s suicide.”

Fei Du’s footsteps paused a few steps away from him. “No.”

Luo Wenzhou looked up in surprise.

Fei Du was watching him. Suddenly, he displayed a somewhat indistinct smile. Because he had his back to the light, it wasn’t clearly visible.

“It’s the day I met you,” he said.

“Director Zhang, these are unusual times. I hope you can make allowances. We need your cooperation in maintaining a clear line of communication. Also, please don’t leave the city in the near future.”

This was all convention. Zhang Chunjiu nodded very understandingly.

Just then, a car stopped at the door. Zhang Chunjiu’s gaze went to it, and he saw a somewhat familiar-looking young man get out. The gaze hidden behind his lenses was unclear. He seemed to glance at Zhang Chunjiu. The young man’s mouth curved into an ambiguous smile as he brushed past him.

“Director Zhang? Director Zhang, please come this way. Do you need us to send a car to see you home?”

“Huh?” Zhang Chunjiu pulled himself together and quickly averted his gaze, politely saying, “Oh, there’s no need. Someone’s come from home to pick me up.”

The investigator who was seeing him out looked up and saw a small sedan standing across the street. Having absorbed the lesson, this car didn’t come up so publicly. There was no chauffeur; an elderly-looking man personally got out of the driver’s seat and waved at the investigator.

This man was in his sixties, white-haired, and looked somewhat familiar. He was rather exquisitely dressed; you could read his wealth and respectability in each of his movements. The smile on his face was so appropriate it was rather false, as though he was waiting to be photographed for a magazine cover.

“That’s my older brother,” said Zhang Chunjiu.

The investigator gave an “oh” and suddenly remembered that this majority shareholder of the Chunlai Conglomerate had in fact been on the covers of all kinds of finance and economics magazines many times. But perhaps because of lighting and makeup, the man himself looked older and more reserved than in his photographs. The two brothers didn’t look at all alike. If not for this event, it would have been difficult for outsiders to connect the thin, wary Director Zhang with this beer-bellied big boss.

Zhang Chunjiu shook hands and bid the investigator farewell with thorough politeness, then swapped with Zhang Chunling, taking the role of driver.

When he’d driven a good way, Zhang Chunjiu looked into the rearview mirror and exchanged a look with his big brother in the backseat.

“It’s all right,” Zhang Chunjiu said. “They only said I can’t leave the area for now, and to stay in contact.—That’s all convention. Normally they won’t investigate again. If they hadn’t determined I hadn’t done anything, they wouldn’t have let me go so politely.”

Treasuring words like gold, Zhang Chunling nodded. “Yes.”

Zhang Chunliu said, “I just saw... That youngster, is he from the Fei family?”

“Fei Chengyu’s son,” said Zhang Chunling.

“I thought you were going to...” Zhang Chunjiu glanced outside and narrowed his eyes somewhat murderously.

“That was my original plan,” Zhang Chunling said, “but the kid is too crafty. My people followed the wrong car leaving the villa. By the time they realized it, he’d already met up with the police. It would have been too obvious to try anything. And Fei Chengyu’s

whereabouts are currently unknown. It's not important whether the whelp lives or dies."

"Fei Chengyu?" Zhang Chunjiu's expression changed abruptly. "Impossible, I made sure he was..."

"So did I," Zhang Chunling interrupted him with a gloomy expression. "But where is he now?"

The heating in the car steamed their faces, so hot it made a person feel restless. Zhang Chunjiu was silent for a moment. "I'm sure I haven't slipped up. I did everything according to plan, step by step. Ge, since Fan Siyuan's people have exposed themselves, he definitely won't get away this time. And if he doesn't get away, Fei Chengyu's days are numbered. Does it matter whether he's really brain dead or faking it?"

Zhang Chunling leaned back. His breathing seemed to be a little labored because of his size. "One last time."

"There was always going to come a day like this," Zhang Chunjiu said quietly. "Ge, this isn't a business you can pass on to the next generation. There's no one to carry it on. You've gotten old, and I'm going to retire soon. It isn't like it was before. Going forward, it'll get harder and harder. Let's not wait to end up like Zhou Junmao. If it hadn't been for Fan, it wouldn't have been easy for us to get away—we ought to be grateful to him. Has everything at home been arranged?"

Zhang Chunling gave an affirmative. "Once this passes, I'll send them out of the country."

"We two brothers have had some luck all these years," Zhang Chunjiu said.

“Luck?” Zhang Chunling laughed silently, teeth showing grimly, like a shark that had just eaten someone. “I was born with nothing. I’ve never known what luck was. But so what? I haven’t gotten where I am today by relying on luck.”

After a pause, Zhang Chunling added, “That incompetent Zhou brat who can only spoil everything has entered the country. Do you know where he’s hiding?”

“I have a good idea,” Zhang Chunjiu said. “He’s shown himself.”

“To be on the safe side, get rid of him.”

Zhang Chunjiu gave an affirmative and drove the car away into the biting cold north wind.

## CHAPTER 156 - Edmond Dantès XXVII

Approaching the end of the year, Luo Cheng got busier rather than the reverse. Mu Xiaoqing had gone out of town to deliver a lecture, leaving him alone, and eating by himself was rather dull, so he simply stayed at work and scrounged food from the dining hall.

When the driver dropped him off at home, it was nearly nine o'clock.

Then he picked up a son at the door.

Luo Wenzhou had been waiting at the door for a while, not minding the cold, clearly relying on his own youth and good health. He'd somehow put his down coat on wrong; it looked like he was hugging a big cushion. He was sitting on the stairs, looking at his phone with his head down. His hair hadn't been cut recently, and it was a bit messy. There was a backpack sticking up at his feet that looked like that of a refugee fleeing a famine.

Hands behind his back, Luo Cheng looked him up and down, felt that this appearance really was unsightly, and thereupon walked up and gently kicked him. "Hey, why don't you go somewhere else? I don't have any food today."

Luo Wenzhou looked up and meowed at him. Luo Cheng broke out in gooseflesh at the meow, then took a closer look and found that the "cushion" in Luo Wenzhou's arms was a living creature.

"How long have you been waiting here?" Luo Cheng asked. "Why didn't you think of calling?"

"I'm fine," Luo Wenzhou said rather indifferently. "Freezing for a while is conducive to appreciating the value of life."



Luo Cheng's gaze inadvertently fell on the phone in his hand and saw how this person had been "appreciating the value of life." There were photographs of himself from every angle. Luo Cheng suddenly felt he had indigestion, thinking that Luo Wenzhou was becoming more and more shameless.

Five minutes later, Luo Cheng had brought the son he'd picked up off the ground and the cat of his own flesh and blood into the house, then personally rolled up his sleeves, put on a pair of reading glasses, and, following the directions, set up a cat tree for Luo Yiguo.

"I didn't bring any cans or snacks. Just give it some dry food to eat. And don't buy it any of that garbage, the fatty needs to go on a diet. It broke the zipper of my jacket with its weight."

Arrived in an unfamiliar place, Luo Yiguo was a little shy. It lay on a slipper Luo Wenzhou had worn, rolling into a big fifteen-jin fur ball, vigilantly looking left and right.

Luo Cheng looked out from behind his reading glasses. "You're not afraid you won't get the cat back if you leave it here with me?"

"Stop boasting, sir. If my mom had agreed, you'd have turned the house into a zoo long ago and wouldn't have to come scrounge pets off my cat."

Luo Cheng: "..."

Luo Wenzhou rudely searched the fridge and pulled out a bowl of leftover fried rice, tossed it into the microwave, took it out, and swallowed it down. He said, "Boarding at a pet shop costs more at the end of the year, and it'd have to fight over territory with other cats, and, critically, this coward couldn't beat them. I thought both my wallet and the cat could easily get hurt."

“Then I’ll watch it for you until the New Year,” said Luo Cheng. “Any longer, and your mom won’t have it.”

Luo Wenzhou paused, feeling the leftover rice he’d just bolted sticking in his chest, refusing to go down no matter what. He picked up a teacup and drank a mouthful of cold tea, coughed, and said, “That’s fine, we’ll come visit you for the New Year and pick it up.”

Hearing this, Luo Cheng didn’t ask why he needed to board the cat; nor did he ask why Fei Du hadn’t come with him. Matter-of-factly, seeming to know everything, he said, “Apart from looking after the cat, do you have anything else to ask of me?”

Luo Wenzhou sat for a moment. In the end he clenched his teeth and didn’t make a sound, standing up and washing the bowl.

Luo Cheng didn’t rush him. The cat tree that had been only a pile of parts quickly took shape. Luo Yiguo couldn’t resist its curiosity and at last carefully abandoned the slipper and strolled over, turning around at the foot of the cat tree, sniffing.

“Dad,” Luo Wenzhou said suddenly, “have you had to put up with a lot of gossip on my account?”

Luo Cheng looked at him strangely. “Have you taken leave of your senses and run over here to repent?”

Luo Wenzhou sat down next to him rather gloomily. “You’ve never said anything to me.”

“If I said something, would you listen?” said Luo Cheng.

Luo Wenzhou thought about it. “...No, I wouldn’t. Anyway, Fei Du is mine.”

Luo Cheng was choked by this for a while. When Luo Wenzhou thought the old man was about to flare up, Luo Cheng smiled. “You didn’t get so big drinking milk. At your age, if you needed my sanction for a trifle like who you’re with, what would be the point in living? Other people can say what they like. Anyway, they don’t dare to say it in front of my face. And it could be that their requirements are unusually high—though I think you...”

Luo Cheng paused, and Luo Wenzhou felt nervous for no reason.

The reading glasses made the old man’s eyes extremely large, spoiling his usual solemnity. Luo Cheng looked at him with a none too solemn gaze and pursed his lips. “I think you’ll do. You’ve managed to grow up into something like a person.”

Starting from adolescence, Luo Wenzhou had always followed a path his elders and the great bulk of the population didn’t approve of. He’d staked everything on it. So while he was reluctant to admit to mistakes, he still felt self-doubt, suspecting he’d bungled things, that he didn’t have the natural endowments and abilities he imagined, suspecting that when he left the protection of his elders, he may end up a total failure.

Where countless elders had fallen over the decades, he now had to bring things to a conclusion; could he make that conclusion a satisfactory one?

When Luo Wenzhou had gone home to get the cat and bring it over here, he’d felt his legs were stuck in mud, ice-cold and sticky, wrapping around his legs and making each step difficult to take. But when this appraisal, which could hardly count as kind words, fell on his ears, it was like a high-speed dryer, instantly breaking up his awkward fright.

Luo Wenzhou stared blankly for a while, then suddenly wiped his nose, stood up, and said, “I’ll be going, then.”

“Wait,” said Luo Cheng, “you really don’t...”

“I don’t.” Luo Wenzhou changed his shoes and bent to tie his shoelaces. “When I first joined the police, didn’t you say that I could climb up the path I’d chosen for myself, and if anything happened afterwards it wouldn’t be your business? So what’s this now? Getting soft in your old age, sir?”

“Beat it, you brat!” Luo Cheng scolded him.

Luo Wenzhou stood up and hopped twice, picked up the phone that had made his dad feel indisposed, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. “I didn’t get so big drinking milk.”

Then he put on the hood of his coat and went out like the wind.

Back then, Lao Yang had thought he couldn’t handle things. Up to his death, he hadn’t given Luo Wenzhou a hint, and he’d even left behind a testament compelling shiniang to hold her tongue.

If he’d been able to become “sensible” a few years earlier, taken the load from his elders’ shoulders a few years earlier, would shiniang have come to this?

But with things as they were, there was no sense in going over these things.

At least he still had Fei Du, still had his brothers, still had the injustices the last generation had been unable to resolve. Since even the old man had said he was “something like a person,” one way or another, he had to act something like a person.

“It’s me,” Luo Wenzhou said, calling Lu Jia. “Your President Fei has entrusted you to me. Where are you right now?”

Lu Jia, bringing Zhou Huaijin along, arrived at a garden estate.

“Here it is.” Zhou Huaijin looked at the address he was holding. “This is where Yang Bo and his mother used to live!”

Lu Jia parked the car and stuck out his head to have a look. The estate’s security guard looked over alertly at once. Then, seeing the car Lu Jia had driven, his expression eased.

Lu Jia smiled and went into a convenience store at the gate, bought some random stuff, and started chatting with the cashier. “What estate is that? It looks pretty good, and very private.”

The cashier looked the way he was pointing. “Oh, the Milky Way Town. Of course it’s very private.—Are you looking to buy an apartment or what? If it’s buying an apartment, I advise you not to buy one there.”

“Why’s that?” said Lu Jia.

“A property right isn’t a residence. You see, they have twenty-four hour security, three layers of guards at the courtyard gates, the building doors, and the hall doors. It’s all expensive cars going in and out. If your car is a little more ordinary, the security guards will stop you and cross-examine you for ages. You get me?” The cashier winked very ambiguously at Lu Jia. “They also call this the ‘Kept Woman’s Tower.’ It’s a bad atmosphere. Though if you don’t want to live there yourself, it would be all right to rent it out.”

“So the rent must be pretty high?” said Lu Jia.

“The property management fees are high. Ten years ago it was five yuan per square meter. Of course the rent is even higher.” The cashier made change and laughed unkindly. “No one without money would be up to tricks like that.”

Lu Jia and Zhou Huaijin exchanged a look. After moving to Yan City, Yang Bo's mother had had no fixed work and had lived a life of retreat. How had she been able to afford to rent an apartment here?

“Apparently she ran a private kitchen restaurant here,” Zhou Huaijin said. “The kind where you cook the food yourself and only book one table at a time. The kind where you have to make an appointment in advance. She wouldn't even necessarily get two tables booked a month. When my little brother's relationship with Yang Bo was at its most fraught, he wanted to come and investigate, but he couldn't manage to get an appointment. She wouldn't receive him. Zheng Kaifeng was nearly a regular visitor, although, hm...”

Zhou Huaijin looked down at a photograph of a woman on his phone. While you couldn't call her appearance ugly, she still had nothing to do with beauty. Young, she would have been a passerby; afterwards, she'd become a middle-aged woman so ordinary it was easy to overlook her sex. Looking at her, even Zhou Huaijin thought she didn't fit Zheng Kaifeng's taste.

“She died of illness, and the time of her death was very delicate.” Lu Jia motioned for Zhou Huaijin to get in the car. “It was right around the time Dong Qian started making contact with the fake delivery person and planning Zhou Junmao's murder... If Yang Bo wasn't Zheng Kaifeng's illegitimate son, then I think there's one possibility.”

“What?” said Zhou Huaijin.

“A contact.” Lu Jia started the car. “Zheng Kaifeng wasn't like Wei Zhanhong. His base wasn't domestic. If it happened the way President Fei guesses and he first got in contact with this domestic gang of full-time murder conspirators through Su Hui, then for maintaining the relationship and passing on assignments afterwards, he would have needed a contact he could rely on. Su Hui ruined herself young. Her health broke down over a decade ago, and she died young, too. So could his contact have been Yang Bo's mother?”

Zhou Huaijin said, “You’re saying that Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Junmao kept her son with them as a hostage to ensure her good behavior!”

“If that’s really how it was and she worked for Zheng Kaifeng for over a decade, then it’s likely she left behind some trick. So even though she was dead, Zhou and Zheng still didn’t dare to be discourteous to Yang Bo, and even tacitly accepted the ‘illegitimate son’ rumor,” Lu Jia said. “This woman must have been very reliable, so it was only when she died that the fake delivery person found an opening to play tricks on Zheng Kaifeng.... But the question is, why use her? What’s so special about...”

Halfway through, Lu Jia suddenly went silent.

Zhou Huaijin waited for an age without there being a follow-up. He couldn’t help looking uncertainly at Lu Jia.

“Mr. Zhou,” Lu Jia said quietly, “did you put on the bulletproof vest I prepared for you before?”

Zhou Huaijin gave a start and looked all around in a flurry. “Wh-what’s wrong? What is it? This is home, would they really dare to...”

“Stop looking around,” Lu Jia interrupted him. “It’s the black sedan following us. They’d dare anything.” He sent his location to his companions and to Luo Wenzhou, then suddenly spun the steering wheel, turning at an intersection without any warning. “If I can’t shake him, I don’t dare to take you to the hotel.—Mr. Zhou, fasten your seatbelt. You don’t get carsick, do you?”

Before Zhou Huaijin could answer, the black sedan following them determined from its target’s reaction that it had been discovered. Not only did it not pull back, it ferociously put on speed and kept after them.

On a night close to the Spring Festival, the main streets of Yan City were as empty as a little Australian village. Not stinting, Lu Jia used the luxury car as though it were an F1. The wheels let out an enormous screech as the car turned. Zhou Huaijin grabbed a handhold, suspecting the car was about to overturn!

Just then, a white SUV driving towards them from opposite direction suddenly turned on its distance lights. Strong light flared up, making it hard to open your eyes. At the same time, without slowing in the least, the white car headed right for them.

Refusing to be distracted, Lu Jia stamped on the gas pedal, screeching as though planning to die along with the other car. Zhou Huaijin subconsciously closed his eyes. He heard a loud noise, then the teeth-aching sound of the side mirror scraping against a wall. Zhou Huaijin found that, in imminent peril, Lu Jia had turned into a very cramped little alley. He'd sent the bicycle at the mouth of the alley flying, forcing a turn at high speed and stuffing the car into the insufficiently wide lane!

The white car that had been coming towards them reacted too late. The driver hit the brakes; there was no time to turn off the distance lights. The black car that had been following Lu Jia and Zhou Huaijin was dazzled, and the two cars hit each other head on, sending up exploding sparks that lit up the night sky!

Zhou Huaijin swiftly turned his head to look at Lu Jia and actually saw a stylish secret agent in a movie in the fat man's physique. "You...you..."

Lu Jia shrugged, lit a cigarette, and put it in his mouth. "It's lucky President Fei is going to pay for the car repairs.—Mr. Zhou, this is only getting started. Can you take it?"



Zhou Huaijin took a few panting breaths and wiped the cold sweat off his forehead. In this dangerous moment, he said, “So that must mean I’m very important? It seems like all these things I’ve found... Su Hui, Zheng Kaifeng, all that miserable business, it’s all an important lead!”

Lu Jia looked at him in astonishment.

He saw the refined heir to the Zhou Clan smile unexpectedly. “That’s a load off my mind!”

## CHAPTER 157 - Edmond Dantès XXVIII

As they spoke, Lu Jia had already driven out of the little alley and ducked into another street.—Rapidly developing cities usually all had this problem: in the early stages of construction, no thought had been given to parking spaces, and parking was very tight in many places. If you couldn't find a spot, you'd leave your contact information and park illegally at the side of the road. On nights and holidays, crowded formations often took shape. It was one of Yan City's major distinguishing features.

There was a car quietly bathing in the dreary light of the streetlamps, a thin frost on its roof. It seemed to have been deeply asleep for a long time.

Zhou Huaijin stuck out his head and looked at the scraped-off side mirror. "We've shaken them off?"

Lu Jia didn't answer. Before Zhou Huaijin could relax, something suddenly came over the fat guy; halfway down a perfectly good street, he took another large turn without any warning. The wheels crunched over ice and the car rolled a little. The trunk hit the pole of an old-fashioned streetlamp. Lu Jia didn't even look. He pressed down the gas pedal so it screamed, forcing the car to slim down, scraping off the other side mirror, too!

Zhou Huaijin was choked painfully by his seatbelt. He turned his head to look and saw the sedan that had been parked by the intersection start up like a risen corpse, only a hair slower than Lu Jia. There was also an ambush here!

Zhou Huaijin was overcome. "How did you know?"

"Instinct." Lu Jia very basely flicked his cigarette butt into a snowbank in a corner. "When you've been attacked enough times, you

know where these people like to set up shop.”

Zhou Huaijin only knew that this was the person Fei Du had sent to look after him. He'd thought he was something of the “assistant” type. Hearing these words, he finally couldn't resist asking, “What do you actually do?”

“Oh, loaf around,” Lu Jia said casually at first. Then he felt this answer was losing face for Fei Du and quickly corrected himself: “No...I guess I'm that, that what's-its-name fund's chief administrative officer...”

Staring blankly, Zhou Huaijin asked, “What fund?”

Lu Jia: “...”

He hadn't looked closely at the business card since it was printed. He couldn't remember.

The two of them remained in mutual silence for a moment. Suddenly, Lu Jia's expression changed. “Shit!”

Past the little alley wasn't the light at the end of the tunnel; it was a heap of even more complex, dizzying little streets. Lu Jia got a little mirror out from somewhere, rolled down the window and hand-crafted a replacement side mirror. Behind them, headlights interlaced malevolently as some motorcycles came down an alley on their left.

Zhou Huaijin only now realized that Lu Jia's curse hadn't been because he couldn't remember his own title. He quickly looked out the passenger's side window. “There's some this way, too!”

“It looks like they had a reason for choosing to act here,” Lu Jia said heavily. “They expected ahead of time that we'd come to investigate Yang Bo. They specially encircled and intercepted us, forcing us in, cutting us off... What are you doing?”

Zhou Huaijin raised his phone. “Hello, 110, there’s a gang of thugs chasing us!”

Lu Jia: “...”

Truly a law-abiding citizen.

Unfortunately, the police didn’t have an Anywhere Door. They couldn’t immediately answer the call and descend from the heavens. Even Lu Jia’s people couldn’t come so quickly.

By the time Zhou Huaijin had managed to clearly explain his position to the operator among the ear-splitting engine sounds and crashes, the two of them were entirely walled up in the middle of a little street.

There were no streetlights around, but the interlocking headlights were dazzling.

Zhou Huaijin had never experienced this kind of combat. He looked wildly left and right. “What do we do? Do we fight? Are there weapons?”

“Under the backseat, there’s...” Lu Jia spoke a few words, then assessed Young Master Zhou’s hardware and software. “Eh, forget about it. Don’t hand yourself over to them. Hide.”

“H-hide?” Zhou Huaijin’s gaze swept over the ferocious ring of encirclement. “No... Can’t we negotiate first?”

Before he’d finished speaking, the group of people encircling them, making the most of their time, had come up to ram the car. Lu Jia fished a helmet out from under the car seat and tossed it to Zhou Huaijin. “Put it on yourself. Look for a chance to run.”

Amid the noise, Zhou Huaijin couldn't hear anything clearly. He bellowed, "What—did—you—say?"

Lu Jia pulled off his jacket. He turned out to only be wearing a skintight t-shirt under it. Then he opened the indented car door, sending one person flying with the force. Holding a metal stick, he swept horizontally; the stick made a startling sound as it met human flesh.

Zhou Huaijin had wanted to help, but now that the moment had come, he had absolutely no idea where to start. He'd just stuffed his delicate, refined head into the helmet when the car window next to him was smashed to pieces. Shards of glass rained down. Time suddenly seemed endlessly stretched out. Zhou Huaijin saw the person who'd hit the car breathe white steam out of his nose, his expression nearly savage, coming towards him like a wild beast. He moved unconsciously, using his arms and legs to scramble desperately into the backseat.

The cold, howling wind poured in, and two choppers stabbed right towards his back from the disorderly car door. Zhou Huaijin suddenly found that he wasn't afraid—he had no attention to spare for it. He only struggled to curl up, wondering, "Can bulletproof vests block knives? Is it the same principle?"

Next, the car shook tremendously, and even more shards of glass came right at his face. A knife sliced Zhou Huaijin's calf. At the same time, the knife-wielding attackers were taken unawares from behind and slammed against the car. An indescribable sour smell filled the air.

Zhou Huaijin stared, seeing that a big garbage can that had originally been standing peacefully at the side of the road had also entered the battle, wielded by the extraordinarily strong Lu Jia. The inadequately managed metal garbage can had stood with its belly half-full of aged garbage throughout the solitary years, a subtle reaction occurring

among its contents; the smell could be compared to a weapon of mass destruction!

In this short span of time, Lu Jia had already gotten covered in blood, whether others' or his own. He grabbed Zhou Huaijin and yanked him out of the car, hooking an arm even sturdier than a leg around his neck. "Run!"

Zhou Huaijin's helmet had been knocked askew, thickly blocking half his field of vision. He felt he'd turned into a heavy-headed mushroom, entirely pulled along by Lu Jia.

Suddenly, something seemed to hit his helmet, like a little stone bouncing off with a bang. The sound was very loud. Zhou Huaijin was totally disoriented. The arm holding his neck suddenly pressed down, forcing him to duck, expelling him into a little alley like an espresso machine.

Zhou Huaijin reached out and felt around randomly, feeling sticky concrete. Lu Jia's breathing was extremely rough. Zhou Huaijin quickly pulled the displaced helmet into its original position, finding that the right side of the helmet was full of prickly cracks, and Lu Jia's arm, laying over his neck, was badly mangled.

Zhou Huaijin suddenly changed color. "How come they have guns?"

Lu Jia didn't answer. There was a painful shaking in his heavy breaths. He reached one hand towards his waist. There was a combat knife hanging from his belt. The cold handle of the knife rubbed against his palm. Blood-scented sweat steamed up from Lu Jia.

But he only touched it. The next instant, he pushed Zhou Huaijin back and once again took up the already bent metal stick—the knife was a good knife, a good weapon; it would be no problem for him to charge out and stab a handful of people with it. He had the skills, and he was enraged enough.

But he couldn't, because he was that...“what's-its-name fund's chief administrative officer.”

Though he couldn't remember the name of the fund, he knew what the money in it was used for—it was for buying bread for those battle-scarred people with nowhere to go. Though it couldn't heal the unending trauma, at least it could keep them from coming to the end of the line materially.

Even though there was an eternal sword in his mind, he couldn't cut people down while representing Fei Du; even more, he couldn't cut people down while representing those miserable people, both the ones he knew and the ones he didn't know.

“Run.” Lu Jia sucked in a breath and said to Zhou Huaijin, “I'll cover for you. Run away and find the police. Find Luo Wenzhou!”

Wasn't this nonsense? Zhou Huaijin thought. Faced with a gang of knife-holding, gun-toting thugs out for their lives, was this Mr. Lu planning to hold off an army wielding a bent metal stick?

“I'm not...”

Lu Jia pushed him, making him stumble, then his stick flashed out, beating away an approaching thug. At the same time, as soon as he showed his head, there was a patter on the wall next to him, bullets wildly hitting the wall, making dust fly. Lu Jia was forced to recoil behind a low wall. Just then, the sound on an engine flared up, and a motorcycle pushed its way towards the place where he was hiding!

To dodge the bullets, Lu Jia was sticking to the corner. There was no place to hide. He was about to be crushed to death by the motorcycle. Suddenly, in the darkness, something flew across the sky, hitting the motorcycle's front wheel. The motorcycle's wheels instantly lost equilibrium. It somersaulted.

Lu Jia raised his head at once and saw that Zhou Huaijin, who'd just run clear, had returned once more, and he'd gotten some bricks from who knew where. Having thrown one, he was still holding a couple!

Lu Jia said, "Didn't I tell you to..."

"I've already told Fei Du what I know," Zhou Huaijin said loudly, holding two bricks close to himself. "Even if I die, they can still keep investigating, and they can guess why they wanted to kill me! Who am I afraid of?"

Zhou Huaijin, golden on the outside, rotten on the inside.

He was cowardly and powerless. He'd spent the first half of his life shivering indecisively in a state of constant anxiety.

"What a failure," he thought. "Who the fuck am I afraid of!"

The expression on Lu Jia's face was indescribable, but there was no time to say anything. A louder engine sound went up, the other motorcycles imitating the first. Zhou Huaijin tried the same old trick again, but unfortunately he wasn't a professional athlete. Two flying bricks in a row missed their targets. He'd come to the end of his resources.

He instinctively raised a hand to block the blinding headlights. Dizzied by a rush of hot blood, he also felt somewhat sad—Lu Jia had originally wanted him to wait obediently at the hotel; he was the one who had been unable to give up the riddle of Yang Bo and his mother, who had overreached himself going out to investigate.

He'd thought that Huaixin's business had still been unfinished; he still hadn't attained a final accounting.

He'd walked right into the trap himself, and involved someone else.



Was Huaixin still in heaven watching him? Zhou Huaijin thought, “If you’re still watching, could you lend your useless big brother a bit of luck?”

He’d never had any other strong points; probably he could only rely on luck to turn the tables.

Just then, the sharp, brief sound of a police siren came out of nowhere. Zhou Huaijin stared blankly, thinking it was a hallucination.

Then, as if it had taken a deep breath, the police siren went on; red and blue lights rose and fell in the night sky, coming right towards their position—

Zhou Huaixin’s paintings hung in his restaurant. Zhou Huaixin’s name was placed in a shrine in his heart. He’d answered his desperate prayer in this hopeless moment.

For his big brother, the picture-painting little skeleton possessed the qualifications to act as “faith.”

But unfortunately, while the police had arrived, police cars couldn’t easily squeeze into narrow gaps like Lu Jia. At first they couldn’t get into this “precious territory.” One of the motorcyclists let out a sharp whistle. His knife fell, quickly dispatching his fallen companions, not leaving a single prisoner to give information. The others fled in disarray down a prearranged alley—their route coming and going had been calculated with great accuracy; if Lu Jia hadn’t been unexpectedly difficult to handle and the police hadn’t come as fast as if they’d been cheating, it would simply have been a perfect and easy assassination!

Lu Jia wavered. Zhou Huaijin wanted to hold him up, but maybe his arm was too weak, or Mr. Lu too heavy; he couldn’t hold him. The two of them, sharing equally in comforts and hardships, sat down on

the ground together. Hurried steps came towards them, and a familiar voice asked, “Are you all right? Where are they?”

“I guessed it was you.” Lu Jia clutched his arm, from which blood was constantly flowing, forcing a smile towards Luo Wenzhou, who’d rushed up. “By the time the operator had notified and dispatched the police, I figure our two corpses would have been cold.”

“Fei Du’s phone has your precise position.” Luo Wenzhou looked carefully at Lu Jia’s wound, frowning. “Enough chatter, go to the hospital.”

“Boss.” Lang Qiao, followed by a few criminal policemen, had turned over all the bodies on the ground. She said, “The ones left behind are all dead.”

“Take them away, check their DNA and fingerprints,” Luo Wenzhou said heavily. Then he thought of something and looked deeply at Lu Jia.

“Legitimate self-defense. I didn’t even raise a knife.” Lu Jia could tell what he was worried about and smiled collectedly. “I was afraid you’d come on your own. I hadn’t expected that a big hero like you, apart from being good at sneak attacks, would also not be so into solitary heroics.—What, with President Fei in trouble, haven’t you been suspended?”

“I’m not stupid.” Luo Wenzhou bent down and picked up Zhou Huaijin. “Suspended is as suspended does, but my people are still my people. My word still holds. Isn’t that right, children?”

Lang Qiao, Xiao Haiyang, Xiao Wu, a whole crowd of the Criminal Investigation Team’s elite, the ones on duty and the ones on vacation, had all been mobilized by him. And then there was Tao Ran, who couldn’t be there in the flesh but was with them over walkie-talkie. Tao Ran said, “After all, we all got this big eating your food.”

“After all, I’m a trusted aide,” Lang Qiao bragged shamelessly.

Xiao Haiyang pulled a long face. “After all, I don’t trust anyone else.”

“You’re going to make me blush.” Luo Wenzhou waved a hand, not batting an eyelash. “First determine the identities of the dead. They may have priors. Then keep chasing. In the City Bureau’s name, request urgent assistance from all the sub-bureaus and police stations. Say a gang of armed robbers are on the loose.—Specs and Er-Lang, wait a bit. Come with me to see the wounded to the hospital. The assassination attempt failed, so I’m worried they’ll have some other scheme planned. Quick!”

As soon as his orders came down, everyone moved methodically, sealing off the scene, calling for assistance.

Fei Du didn’t know about the soul-stirring events outside; he was agreeably “cooperating with the investigation.”

“You don’t know where your father is?”

“I got a call from the sanatorium right before I came here.” Fei Du shrugged carelessly. “I haven’t had time to verify. What, it seems it’s true?”

The investigator looked closely at this Fei Du—he was young, good-looking, tasteful from his hair down to his fingernails. A scent of mingled false cypress, sweet basil leaves, and cedar wafted from his cuffs. He was a perfect embodiment of a profligate son of the wealthy. The investigator couldn’t resist looking down at Fei Du’s information. He was a little too young, still a student. “Aren’t you worried about him at all?”

“Worried about what? That Fei Chengyu has been kidnapped?” Fei Du smiled, but the smile didn’t rise above his cheekbones. “For the last

three years and more, he's been reliant on machinery for his basic needs of existence. There's no possibility his brain will recover. You could say he's a person, or you could say he's a heap of dirt without being wrong. These last few years, when the old people at the company refused to obey me, it was nice to have a living dead 'retired emperor' to keep them in their places. Now Fei Chengyu has no more use. He's a burden. Let them kidnap him. It's best if they kill their hostage."

The investigator stared into his eyes. "You say there's no possibility Fei Chengyu's brain will recover. Who told you that?"

Fei Du raised his eyebrows in bewilderment. "The hospital, of course. Could I have made it up? The Second Hospital, the Fifth Hospital, Beiyuan Neurological—and the Binhai Sanatorium. You can ask each of them... Oh, no, you don't think I did something to him for the sake of the family property?"

The investigator's expression was grave.

Fei Du breathed a laugh, looking like an explanation was beneath him.—However you looked at it, when Fei Chengyu had had his car crash, Fei Du had been only eighteen. An eighteen-year-old only child of a wealthy family committing patricide to snatch the family fortune sounded like a bizarre plot in a novel.

The investigator found that Fei Du didn't seem to have noticed at all that if Fei Chengyu really was brain dead, then he himself was a suspect. He didn't even seem to know why he'd been called here.

This bearing of not knowing anything seemed like inadvertently pleading innocence of any relationship. If he was pretending, then this young person was too shrewd.

The investigator cleared his throat. "A few years ago—not long before your father's car crash—a financial leasing company under your

company's banner had a business contract. Its partner was Tai Hua Digital Technologies, Ltd. Do you know about this business?"

"I don't," Fei Du said after calmly recollecting for a moment. His expression didn't waver. "Before my dad's car crash, I didn't do anything but spend money. I didn't meddle with his work."

"What about after you took over? This would have happened shortly before."

Fei Du looked at him and suddenly smiled.

## CHAPTER 158 - Edmond Dantès XXIX

“I know about the financial leasing company you mentioned. On the surface, we hold 45% of the shares and have control stock, but in reality the person who controls it isn’t me. If you look closely, you’ll know that the remaining three equal minority shareholders are in reality in concerted action.” As if to explain more clearly, Fei Du very patiently changed his wording. “In other words, the three minority shareholders are a single entity’s multiple personalities. As the largest shareholder, I have no say.”

“Why would a situation like that arise?”

Fei Du changed his posture slightly, gently leaning back in his chair, showing a particular mixture of youthfulness and shrewdness. “It’s under the conglomerate’s name, and the actual controlling company’s small shareholders themselves are at a high level within the conglomerate. They have strong backing and will have a much easier time taking up business. It’s tantamount to using the conglomerate’s resources to advance their private assets—though, actually, it’s also a good means for winning over the old people, tying their interests to mine. Everyone profits together and loses together. Interest becomes loyalty. Fei Chengyu tacitly accepted this. Water that’s too clear has no fish in it—I had no need to knock over their rice bowls when I stepped up.”

“And who is responsible?”

“Su Cheng, one of the conglomerate’s vice presidents,” Fei Du said. “As for that digital technology company you mentioned...”

“Tai Hua Digital Technologies.” The investigator watched every shade of expression on his face.

“I haven’t heard of it.” Fei Du shrugged gently. “Maybe it’s not on a large scale. Little sums of a few tens of millions don’t go by the board of directors or a meeting of the shareholders, and they wouldn’t deliberately report to me. What’s wrong? Have they been evading taxes, or have they committed some over-the-line policy violation?”

The investigator’s gaze deepened. He was about to say something when he heard Fei Du continue: “It must not be that bad. They’re inspected annually. Even if someone is up to some tricks, they’d still have to wear a cloak of legality and adherence to the rules. It wouldn’t be so easy to find a problem. So what is the problem? You really have me at something of a loss.”

The question the investigator had been about to ask had just been spoken by Fei Du himself. He had nothing to follow up with and was temporarily speechless.

Either this young man was genuinely speaking frankly, or he was too careful. Whichever circumstance it was, it was still unsuitable to keep beating around the bush.

The investigator abruptly went directly to the point, asking outright, “President Fei, when your business is so large and you’ve worked so hard to gain a foothold, why would you suddenly put your company aside to go to Yan Security Uni to do a graduate program that you have no use for?”

Without any hesitation, Fei Du said, “I wanted to find a person called Fan Siyuan.”

The investigator had been prepared to listen to a heap of dodges and excuses. He hadn’t expected this answer; he felt as though he’d missed a step. His next question came out almost subconsciously. “Fan Siyuan? You know who Fan Siyuan is?”

“I know roughly that he was a teacher at Yan Security Uni,” Fei Du said calmly. “But I’ve had people search for further information with no outcome, so I had to go and find the answers myself.”

“So why did you want to find Fan Siyuan?”

An hour later, the investigator received a call from his colleague. He looked at Fei Du fiddling with a teacup across from him, feeling that the information he’d just received was somewhat hard to digest.—Fei Du had told him an outrageous story. After he’d theoretically “died jumping into the sea,” Fan Siyuan had appeared with Fei Chengyu at the Fei family house and looked on indifferently as the sadist Fei Chengyu used outrageous means to abuse his wife and child; Fan Siyuan had even given him hints on how to thoroughly “tame” a person; this word “tame” had been the chief culprit in leading to Fei Du’s mother’s suicide some years later.

Had what he’d said been true or false?

The investigator had examined countless people. He thought that when Fei Du had been recalling these things, what he’d been holding back had been genuine feeling. That sense of reality couldn’t be conveyed through fakery or acting.

If that were the case, then the relationship between the father and son must have been rather fraught, without any sense of trust. Would Fei Chengyu really have dared to feign being incompetent in front of a son who hated him so much? Wouldn’t he have been afraid his make-believe would turn into reality? If, as Fei Du said, Fei Chengyu really was like the living dead, then who had stealthily kidnapped him?

Kidnapping Fei Chengyu definitely wouldn’t get them a penny from Fei Du, so...



If it wasn't Fei Du himself planning a patricide to gain control of everything Fei Chengyu possessed and feigning total innocence, then there was someone deliberately framing him, using Fei Chengyu as a shield in their misdirection.

As he performed this mental assessment, the investigator took his colleague's call. "Hello?"

"On this point at least Fei Du didn't lie, he really isn't the person with actual control over the financial leasing company that gave money to the suspicious factory connected to the eavesdropping. It's a senior executive called Su Cheng. We've looked into it. Su Cheng originally only held 20% of the shares. He took his opening right after Fei Chengyu's car crash. Fei Du requested an explanation from him at a senior management meeting, but 'when the emperor dies and the crown prince is young, the regent can get away with anything.' Su Cheng united a group of old people who had followed Fei Chengyu and nearly forced an 'abdication,' putting the heir in a very awkward position, so this business went nowhere afterwards."

The investigator looked at Fei Du and said heavily, "Call Su Cheng in to cooperate with the investigation."

"I was just going to tell you about that. Su Cheng has run for it."

"What?"

"His wife says he got a call today, then hastily packed his bags, only said he needed to go away on business, but he took his passport, and the company says there aren't any business trips on his itinerary, and no one booked plane tickets for him. And a female assistant who works with Su Cheng disappeared along with him. Her apartment is empty. The property management says they've seen Su Cheng coming and going from this assistant's apartment more than once and suspect Su Cheng has a dishonest relationship with her. There may also be an issue of a transfer of assets. We'll have to investigate further."

A transfer of assets, running off in the middle of the night, casting aside his wife and taking his mistress—

“Inspect the airports and the train stations. We have to bring him back!”

While Fei Du couldn't hear what the person on the phone was saying, he could judge somewhat based on the reaction of the investigator across from him. He silently picked up his teacup, using the simple cup to screen the slightly turned up corners of his mouth.

The information leak at the City Bureau had been revealed when they'd caught Lu Guosheng. Would a mole who'd been so deeply concealed have revealed his interference with the security cameras so easily?

Fei Du had thought at the time that it was a little unnatural. Now it seemed that it had only been a covert move, pushing forward the scapegoats.

Director Ceng was one scapegoat. The technical expert forced into a management role was in fact rather dim-witted when it came to management. These years Zhang Chunjiu had devoted to cultivating him evidently hadn't been because he valued his expertise. There had been a period when Director Ceng had constantly rotated jobs. On the surface, this had been so he could become an all-around manager who could cover every aspect as soon as possible, but in fact it had been so that before he'd had time to work out whatever plots were going on, he'd be uprooted by his task master to perform numerous and convoluted odd jobs, falling into countless holes in his confusion.

The other scapegoat, it seemed, was the Fei family. As soon as the police found that there was a problem with the factory, it would be only a matter of time before they followed that lead to them. Before, when Fei Chengyu had acted as bankroller, a part of the

conglomerate's funds had been moved, and traces still remained. Fei Du himself had been able to find the signs, and the economic crime investigation department's police officers would of course understand at a glance. And Fei Chengyu was a vegetable, unable to testify. This case would have a conclusion; those people had probably even come up with the concluding report for the police—

The one who'd sold out Gu Zhao had been the newly employed medical examiner Ceng Guangling. Because he wasn't in the Criminal Investigation Team and his qualifications were scanty, neither Gu Zhao nor any of the old criminal policemen who'd had suspicions about Gu Zhao's case later had suspected him. And meanwhile, apart from Zheng Kaifeng and Wei Zhanhong, the last conspirator had been Fei Chengyu. With his position, his motives, his financial resources, his wife and father-in-law dead under suspicious circumstances... No matter how you looked at it, Fei Chengyu made good material for the evil backstage manipulator.

Unfortunately, Fei Du hadn't been willing to behave and have an accident.

“This Su Cheng appeared at the Fei Clan Conglomerate today. When we contacted Fei Du, this Su Cheng was there. No one noticed him at the time or knew what he was doing. I remember he was the one who took care of the arrangements for sending a car to get Fei Du. We just learned that that car broke down on the way back. According to the driver, he nearly rear-ended someone.” As soon as he heard this, the investigator broke out in a cold sweat—Fei Du, a “hot-headed young man,” hadn't waited for anyone to come pick him up after getting word. He'd hastily rushed over himself. If he'd ridden in that car, would it only have been a question of “nearly rear-ending someone”?

The investigator looked at Fei Du in trepidation, but he saw the young man fussily drinking the black tea they'd provided, a look of “I'm holding my nose and drinking swill” hanging at the corners of

his eyes and the tips of his brows. He had no idea of the calamity he'd avoided.

“Go question his wife.” The investigator had no attention to spare for this “fortunate” youngster. He stood up and walked out. “He was keeping a mistress, and his wife had no idea? I don't believe it...”

Fei Du couldn't hear what he said after. A staff member politely invited him to go rest. Though his liberty was temporarily restricted, he was still being treated pretty well.

Fei Du smiled unflappably at the staff member leading the way. “Could you lend me something to pass the time? A novel, a game machine without an internet connection, anything.”

The investigators likely wouldn't have attention to spare for him for a time, because they'd soon find that Su Cheng's wife had hired a private investigator to secretly photograph evidence of his extramarital affair. Though the “private investigator” didn't operate especially legally, he was very dedicated. Apart from providing photographs to Mrs. Su, he'd also preserved a record of all of Su Cheng's recent movements.

Everyone who'd had contact with Su Cheng would enter the investigation roster.

When he'd dislodged all of Fei Chengyu's underlings, he'd only left Su Cheng, an idiot with high aspirations but low abilities. He'd even turned a blind eye and swallowed the loss of a small portion of assets. That had been for this day.

The monster Fei Chengyu had raised had turned on him. Fei Du, preparing to ask a tiger for its skin<sup>8</sup>, had of course needed to find a fall guy beforehand. Su Cheng was a lure, the opening in the net, a target he'd left for the other side. When he'd learned they'd planted

someone at Su Cheng's side, Fei Du had known that they'd taken the bait—these people had been complacent too long, and they were too arrogant. They thought they could control everything.

With Lu Jia and Luo Wenzhou there, it wouldn't be so easy for them to touch Zhou Huaijin. Now that Fei Chengyu had disappeared and Su Cheng had absconded after an unwise move, everything had gone out of control. What were those people planning to do?

One hoped they'd been cautious and hadn't left behind any dirt in their dealings with Su Cheng.

Otherwise, someone would soon need to flee to avoid punishment.

## CHAPTER 159 - Edmond Dantès XXX

“What did he say?”

“He said... ‘Humans are a very peculiar sort of animal. Take physical training, for example. High-intensity anaerobic exercise combined with long periods of low energy-consumption walking will have a much better outcome than maintaining a moderate intensity of jogging. Training the mind follows the same logic. Given invariable beatings and scoldings, she’ll become accustomed, numb, even hover on the edge of attempts at rebellion. So the key thing for you to do is create a set of rules and an atmosphere with distinct rewards and punishments. When she does well, you have to give her an appropriate reward. When she breaks the rules, you have to mete out the most severe punishment. That level just now works. You have to crush her at one blow...’”

The investigator paused the mini-recorder and looked up at the man across from him.

Pan Yunteng had been repeatedly questioned for half a week and had managed to remain unruffled, but his eyes were bloodshot. His expression had been somewhat dazed at first, but when he’d heard halfway through the recording, the dazed expression had cracked open. He looked up at the investigator in disbelief, then stared fixedly at the little mini-recorder, as though a demon were about to jump out of it. “He...said that?”

“Fan Siyuan’s own words. Fei Du’s signature is on the testimony,” the investigator said. “Do you need to see it?”

Fei Du and Pan Yunteng were at two completely opposite extremes. One had an answer for every question, the other had a mouth like a clam. Zhang Chunjiu had said the Picture Album Project hadn’t been named by him, pushing Pan Yunteng into the heart of the struggle.

But apart from acknowledging that he had named the second Picture Album Project, Pan Yunteng hadn't said a word from start to finish.

"You knew that Fan Siyuan wasn't dead." The investigator stared into his eyes. "That's why you named the second Picture Album Project."

Pan Yunteng's posture was somewhat rigid.

"You anonymously reported that Wang Hongliang and the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau were taking part in drug trafficking. Using your position, you went through special channels. In the back half of that report, you referred obliquely to the former director-general Zhang Chunjiu's negligence, even intentional harboring, and called into question the crime rate during his term of office, saying it was so low as to be suspect. Since there was absolutely no basis for the latter half of your suspicions, it was cut off and withheld.—Who gave you the material for that report?"

"As a citizen, I have the right to anonymously report lawbreakers, and the right to protect my personal safety and freedom from being threatened because of my report!" Pan Yunteng said, gritting his teeth. "Who gave you the authority to force me to tell you the source of my information?"

The investigator said, "You can anonymously report, but that doesn't mean you can anonymously denounce on false charges, anonymously say whatever comes to mind."

"The evidence about Wang Hongliang was conclusive. Was that denouncing on false charges?"

"What about the accusation you made against Zhang Chunjiu? Is there also evidence of it? If there is, please hand it over."

Pan Yunteng choked slightly.

“It’s all guesswork.” The investigator looked at him and tapped the mini-recorder next to him. “Professor Pan, did you guess that Fan Siyuan was this kind of person?”

Pan Yunteng’s eyes flashed faintly. He stared at the mini-recorder without making a sound.

“Why would you allow a student who had just started school to join the Picture Album Project?”

Pan Yunteng’s cheeks tensed.

“Because I read his assignments. He submitted papers concerning ‘victims of vicious crimes’ and ‘communal crimes.’ Those were precisely Fan Siyuan’s areas of research before he went off the rails!

“I...”

“You thought that Fan Siyuan had sent him. You thought he’d joined the Picture Album Project with the same aim as you! You didn’t think that he was one of the victims in these papers.” The investigator slammed the table. “Professor Pan, you’re an elder in the field and a model for others, widely respected. Do you wallow in the mire with that sort of person?”

Pan Yunteng said, “I didn’t...”

“When Lu Guosheng was captured, you listened in on the interrogation,” the investigator said coldly. “I don’t know whether you heard this part. In Feng Bin’s murder, there was one mysterious individual called ‘go ask shatov,’ and another with the codename A13. They drove Lu Guosheng to exposure step by step. Who do you guess arranged that? Let me tell you, concerning this point, Director Lu personally questioned Fu Jiahui, and she didn’t deny it. They used an innocent minor as a prop, as an offering. Professor Pan, were you entirely ignorant of this?”



Driven past the point of endurance, Pan Yunteng took off his glasses, put his elbows on the table, and rubbed at his haggard cheeks.

“Professor, where is your conscience?”

“The materials for the report on Wang Hongliang came from my... from Fu Jiahui.”

Hearing him speak at last, the investigator secretly sighed and motioned for the staff member next to him to take notes.

“I was very shocked when I’d read it and asked where this thing had come from. She said it came from the brother of one of the victims, called Chen Zhen, and it had indirectly reached an old friend of hers. I didn’t dare to trust lightly and secretly met with Chen Zhen and found a way to review the details about Chen Yuan’s case. I found that the girl’s death really had been suspicious. If this was true, then I knew I couldn’t let it go. Though there was something very strange about it. I asked Fu Jiahui why she had come to me, when I’d left the City Bureau long ago. Why didn’t she give these things directly to Zhang Chunjiu? Even going through me, I’d still go to Lao Zhang to resolve it. I couldn’t go around him and send these things to his superiors. What kind of a position would that put Lao Zhang in? Wouldn’t it be an injustice to him? That’s not how things are done.”

Pan Yunteng raised his head slowly. “Fu Jiahui said...she said, ‘Who doesn’t know this business is his responsibility? Do you think he’s going to do anything about it? I suppose you don’t know how Gu Zhao and Lao Yang died, either?’ Then she took out Lao Yang’s testament and had me read it. That’s when I learned that when he died in the line of duty three years ago he was privately investigating Gu Zhao’s case afresh. I looked at the photographs he’d secretly taken. He’d nearly found the den of those wanted criminals. His own strength wasn’t enough. He needed to find someone to assist him and

made the same mistake as Gu Zhao, trusted someone he shouldn't have trusted."

"Someone he shouldn't have trusted' means Zhang Chunjiu."

"I can't think of who else it could be," Pan Yunteng said quietly. "I demanded to know who her so-called 'old friend' was, and that's when I learned that he...he wasn't dead."

The last "he" evidently meant Fan Siyuan. The investigator followed up, "Have you had contact with Fan Siyuan? Have you seen him with your own eyes?"

"...yes."

Though he'd anticipated this, hearing him confirm that this person had returned from the dead, the investigator still sucked in a breath. "When?"

"This summer, the end of July, I'm thinking... It must have been the last day of July. Lao Lu's wife wasn't home, he was on his own and came to my house to eat. My wife is a distant cousin of his. He was even the one who introduced us, and the two families have always been on good terms. Before we'd finished eating, he got a phone call. I heard him say 'sister-in-law' and knew that it was Fu Jiahui calling him. My heart lurched. I dimly felt something was going on. On the phone, Fu Jiahui said that Yang Xin had some problem at school. She'd gone out of town and wanted him to help. As soon as Lao Lu heard, he left in a hurry without even finishing his food. Less than five minutes after he left, our doorbell rang."

"Fan Siyuan came to your house?" The investigator sat up straight, his speech involuntarily speeding up. "A serial killer come back from the dead was standing in front of you, and you didn't call the police?"

“Because he was with Fu Jiahui.” Pan Yunteng breathed out heavily. “He was in a wheelchair. He’d aged, aged so much he hardly looked like himself. If his bearing hadn’t been the same as before, I would hardly have recognized him. The first words he said when he came in were, ‘It’s been a long time, Xiao Pan. Do you want to know who sold out your brothers?’”

“What did he make you do?”

“He didn’t make me do anything.” Pan Yunteng’s gaze was somewhat vacant. He smiled bitterly. “I’d already handed in the report materials, and I’d started up the second Picture Album Project. He had no use for me. He said he’d only come to say goodbye. He told me to look after the second Picture Album Project, and that everything would soon be over.”

Everything would soon be over.

On the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth lunar month, the holiday rush was like a raging fire.

Before five in the morning, Zhou Huaijin was startled awake by a resonant segment of Five Rings Song.

Out of consideration for his personal safety, Zhou Huaijin hadn’t gone back to the hotel. His temporary abode was Luo Wenzhou’s living room—the rooms had all been given to the wounded and the girls, and the other men had scrambled around for space to hole up, all of them getting covered in cat hair.

Zhou Huaijin blearily opened his eyes a crack and saw Luo Wenzhou pick up the phone.

Luo Wenzhou was sitting in a small rattan chair on the balcony, the ashtray in front of him so full it was about to overflow. You couldn’t say how many cigarettes he’d smoked. It was still dark, and he was

fully dressed, his expression alert. Maybe he'd gotten up early, or maybe he hadn't slept in the first place. "Hello, Tao Ran?"

Tao Ran sat in a wheelchair. Both sides of the hospital corridor were full of sleeping relatives of patients who'd come from out of town and couldn't bear to go to a hotel. While there were many people, hardly any were awake, only two people from the investigation team discussing something with a doctor at the doors of the ICU. They looked somewhat lonely.

Tao Ran didn't make a sound for ages. Luo Wenzhou looked at the clock and suddenly had an ominous premonition.

"Wenzhou, shiniang is gone."

Luo Wenzhou froze, not knowing what he was feeling.

When she'd been alive, he hadn't been on good terms with Fu Jiahui at all. When he'd heard her dialogue with Director Lu from outside the hospital room, he'd had even less of an idea of how to face her. Now he'd been spared the trouble. "We are the reciters of the stories" had become her last words.

A few people who, like Zhou Huaijin, hadn't been sleeping soundly, had also been disturbed by his cheerful ringtone. Seeing that something was wrong with Luo Wenzhou's expression, they all silently sat up, looking at him.

The phone signal carried through the howling of the north wind, adding a taste of bitter cold to the voice coming over it. Tao Ran asked, "Has Yang Xin...still not been found?"

Just then, Lu Jia, his injured arm hanging up, came out of the bedroom. He couldn't do up the buttons of Luo Wenzhou's pajama top and could only awkwardly drape it over himself. There were still

bruises and lacerations on his face from the other day's late-night thrill. He had a strong sense of presence wherever he went.

“Someone pretending to be a taxi driver took President Fei to the villa that day. We followed them and found that they'd gone right out of the city to L City, near Binhai, stopping in a nearby county town called West Second Strand.”

Xiao Haiyang finished wiping his glasses and put them on. His voice a little nasal, he said, “I know the place. There's a wholesale market for small commodities and online shops running nearby. The wholesalers all go there to collect goods. There's a great number of people going through, the crooks and the good people together. It's very easy to hide.”

“Right. They've rented a very remote little warehouse. There's more than one parking spot. It looks like a stronghold. Our people didn't alert them. They've been staking the place out and just saw a strange car drive in.” Lu Jia showed Luo Wenzhou a few photographs that had been sent over. “Is this the car you've been looking for?”

At first glance, Luo Wenzhou didn't look at the license plate number. He only saw the profile of a young girl wearing a white down jacket and recognized her as Yang Xin.

“Boss.” Xiao Wu hadn't caught the team of vicious motorcyclists. As soon as he heard there was news, he was raring for action. “What do we do? Go after them?”

On the phone, Tao Ran was also silently waiting for his answer.

Luo Wenzhou carefully looked through the photographs that had been sent over. “Xiao Wu, take a few people, borrow a truck, and go to West Second Strand. Ask the special police to assist. You have to bring every single one of them back.”

Xiao Wu leapt up like a live fish.

“I’ll tell my people to cooperate,” Lu Jia said.

“Wait!” Luo Wenzhou called Xiao Wu to a stop.

“Boss, what else is there?”

Luo Wenzhou hesitated for a moment. “Be...be careful. Our target is the person behind them. We have to bring them back and interrogate them. Do your best not to harm them.”

Xiao Wu stared, understood what he meant, gave an “oh,” and left with some people.

The overcrowded living room had emptied by half. Xiao Haiyang washed his face. “Captain Luo, what’s our next step?”

“Tell me what you’ve found out about Yang Bo’s mother.”

“She was called Zhuo Yingchun. She died of illness eighteen months ago. She was fifty-three years old at the time of her death. Her permanent residence and place of birth were both in H Town, but her birth is unclear,” Xiao Haiyang said. “I asked about it, and they told me that her identity information isn’t necessarily true. People of her age didn’t get IDs as soon as they were born, and a lot of the information was later self-reported. Some may not even be the right age. Her only recorded relatives are from the Yang family, following her marriage. Her own parents and siblings are unknown. The civil policeman who deals with the household register said that in those circumstances, she may have been an orphan, or she could have been kidnapped and sold. It’s hard to tell what happened a few decades ago. We may have to go there to ask around.”

“Come on.” Luo Wenzhou stood up. “We’re all awake. When we’ve resolved this, we’ll come back and make up the sleep.”

In late winter, it was nearly seven o'clock before the sky showed the first glimmer of dawn. The long night, still not ended, made people and animals lazy. And there were also people wandering about in a desperate plight.

A low-key personal sedan was mixed into the traffic jam on the highway caused by the army of people returning to their hometowns. As it slowly approached the toll booth, Su Cheng's palms holding the steering wheel were full of cold sweat.

## CHAPTER 160 - Edmond Dantès XXXI

“Why’s there so much traffic?”

“Driver, could I just ask, have you been waiting in this line for an hour?”

“An hour? Nearly half my life! I hear there’s a security check up ahead.”

“A security check going into the city, and a security check leaving the city, too. Is the government crazy? Are they trying to turn the highway into a parking lot and collect parking fees?”

The drivers stuck in traffic at the highway toll gate got out of their cars one by one to look around, cries of discontent rising everywhere.

“They’re inspecting IDs and licenses up ahead,” the woman in the passenger’s seat said in a low voice.

Su Cheng gave a heavy affirmative, his hands slipping gently on the steering wheel, wiping the sweat off his palms. He’d put on a wig and a hat, pasted up the corners of his eyes, and stuck on fake whiskers. He looked like a slovenly, vulgar old man. He had faith that this appearance, which had nothing in common with the normally rather tasteful “President Su,” would make it difficult to recognize him. It shouldn’t be hard to slip out of the city.

But unfortunately, he’d been pressed for time and hadn’t had time to make a fake ID. And now he was looking down the barrel of a gun.

The greater part of the people in Yan City were leaving during these few days. The city was an empty ghost town, but the highway was jammed up into a pot of porridge. Su Cheng had thought at first that it was only the traffic caused by too many people. By the time he’d



worked out that there was a security check up ahead, it had been impossible to turn around and flee. Front and back, left and right, the cars were nearly rubbing shoulders. All the drivers were glaring like tigers, looking out for others trying to cut in line. Unless he abandoned his car, escape was impossible.

But Su Cheng had always lived like a prince. Normally he worried when he walked a few steps that he'd damage the soles of his shoes. Seeing all the surveillance cameras around, the police covering the area, he looked down at his own ornamental legs and really didn't have the courage to open the car door.

"It's all right." Su Cheng forced a smile at his mistress and said, consoling himself, "These kinds of security checks usually only inspect trucks and passenger vehicles. A private car will get through quickly. Don't worry."

The woman looked askance at him. The old man's vulgar appearance was already repulsive; if you added in idiocy, he was simply so hateful he made you want to destroy him out of humanitarian interest.—Security checks were usually only for coming into the city. If they were being so strict about leaving the city, there was clearly something abnormal.

The woman grabbed Su Cheng's arm. "Come on, we're getting out."

"O-out?" Su Cheng looked left and right. Just then, the car in front moved a few meters forward like a snail. Seeing the car next to them about to cut in line, the cars behind honked their horns. Like the totally worthless A Dou<sup>9</sup>, Su Cheng vacillated for a moment, then slowly pressed on the gas pedal and followed.

"We can't," he said, believing himself to be in the right. "That would be too obvious. What do we do if someone stops us? And if we leave the car here, how will we travel?"

Behind her sunglasses, the woman rolled her eyes. Then she took the sunglasses off and stuck them into her bag, pulled out a makeup remover wipe, and quickly cleaned the lipstick and eyeshadow off her face. She tangled up her hair, then reached into the backseat and fished up a pillow, wrapped it in her scarf, and stuck it into her clothes. As Su Cheng looked on, dumbstruck, in the blink of an eye she went from a tidy and graceful beauty to a dejected “pregnant woman.”

“The security check may be to catch you.” The woman bit her tongue, managing to bite back the word “idiot.” She grabbed Su Cheng. “Come with me!”

Su Cheng had no definite views. At a loss, he could only trail after her.

Everyone had been waiting in line together and shuffling their way forward perfectly well when suddenly some people ditched their car midway. The temper of the driver behind rose to the sky. He pressed down on his horn and prepared to curse. But before he could open his mouth, he saw that one of the people who’d gotten out of the car was a pregnant woman. The “pregnant woman”’s face was pale. She smiled very apologetically at him. The driver had to swallow down the swear words that had come to his mouth, wrathfully slamming on the horn.

Su Cheng’s back was soaked through by cold sweat. His moist hand clutched the woman’s wrist, making her feel somewhat nauseated.

Perhaps because this old man hadn’t been accumulating merit, his luck really wasn’t any good. As soon as he got out of the car, the road ahead inexplicably cleared, and the originally paralyzed car in front drove a dozen meters at once. A car in the next lane immediately jumped the line without any hesitation. The drivers behind Su Cheng would have loved nothing better than to knock the obstruction into

the atmosphere; the sounds of their horns reverberated in waves to the sky.

At last, this attracted the notice of one of the security personnel.

Su Cheng was too irresolute. As if suffering from procrastination disease, he'd been unable to come to a decision. When he'd been yanked out of the car by the woman, they'd already been very close to the toll gate. A security officer who'd just been relieved by his colleague was startled by the rising and falling car horns. He looked up and saw an "old man" pulling a "pregnant woman," staggering through traffic.

Slow-moving traffic was still traffic. It was still hazardous. The security officer immediately chased after them. "Why did you suddenly get out of your car? Do you need help with something?"

Su Cheng quivered at being suddenly stopped by a security officer. All of his pores instantly opened and his soul nearly evaporated out of them. His spinal column stiffened into a stone. But the woman, resourceful in an emergency, suddenly hugged her belly and squatted down, realistic pain on her face. She didn't speak, only groaned mournfully.

Then Su Cheng came around half a beat late. "I'm sorry, Comrade Police Officer, my wife just said in the car that her belly hurt, we didn't think we'd be sitting in traffic so long... There's really nothing we can do, could I ask you to..."

The security officer was alarmed. "Don't make her squat in the road. Hurry and pick her up. I'll call you an ambulance."

Then he ran off. The woman who'd been squatting on the ground grabbed Su Cheng, pulling and pushing him away. In this plight, Su Cheng no longer had attention to spare for his pampered, precious body. His steps were as fast as flight as he followed the woman to the

side of the road. The two of them jumped over the guard rail and came down off the highway, charging into the little woods of a green belt.

The security officer, who'd hastily found a colleague to help him carry the pregnant woman, quickly returned to the scene and was surprised to find that they were gone. When the elder he'd called over had heard the whole story, his expression suddenly turned severe. A moment later, a heap of official business vehicles drove out of the tiny highway security check and started a blanket search in all directions.

Human voices, the sounds of cars, even the barking of police dogs searching for traces constantly drew nearer. Surrounded on all sides, Su Cheng really couldn't keep running. He stumbled, releasing the woman's hand, briefly and fretfully saying, "I said we shouldn't have run! We wouldn't necessarily have been found out if we'd driven through, and now what? We've been exposed! We don't even have a means of transportation. Are you trying to tire me to death?"

The woman had no attention to spare for him.

Su Cheng grabbed her shoulder. "What do we do now, huh? Tell me what we..."

Just then, someone behind him suddenly said, "Is that Mr. Su?"

Su Cheng trembled and turned his head in bewilderment. A man wearing the uniform of a toll booth worker was standing behind him, looking at him with a conspicuous smile. "Our boss knows you've run into trouble. He didn't avoid your calls on purpose, he was only worried the police were already monitoring you. In the interests of prudence, it had to be this way. He told me to come help you. We must protect your safety. Please come with me."

Su Cheng stared blankly. Then a happy expression appeared on his face. He pushed aside the woman's hand tugging at him from behind

and went up as though he'd seen a relative. "Yes, yes, I called many times, and he never picked up. How did you find me? Listen to me, the police have found me, now..."

The man looked at him and smiled, cultured and refined. Gloved hands extended from the sleeves of his uniform, falling on Su Cheng's shoulders.

The woman's pupils contracted. Not batting an eyelash, she quietly called, "President Su!"

"What?" Su Cheng said impatiently.

Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of cold light. A switchblade had appeared in the gloved man's hand. With Su Cheng entirely unwary, it stabbed right at his chest!

H Town, a small town in T Province—

This place was five hours' drive from Yan City. It wasn't especially far, but because of the traffic leaving the city, Luo Wenzhou and the others had travelled all day, setting out at dawn and arriving when the golden crow had sunk into the west.

It overlooked the sea and backed against mountains, warm in winter and cool in summer. There were plentiful natural hot springs in the mountains. It was especially busy in winter. Because of the development of the tourism industry over the last few years, the unknown little place had changed its face and become filled with the air of modernity.

The hotel hadn't been reserved in advance; it was really very tight. Fortunately they'd brought along Zhou Huaijin—though the Zhou family's fortunes had declined, even a scrawny camel is bigger than a horse, after all. With Young Master Zhou acting as host, Luo Wenzhou, bringing along a few criminal police officers and Lu Jia,

checked into a hot springs villa hotel, purportedly with a six-star rating, temporarily booking a detached little villa to stop over at.

“Yang Bo and his mother lived in what used to be a village, called Yang Village. It was at the foot of the mountains, supposedly pretty unenlightened. Later the hot springs on the mountain were developed, and the place became a resort. All the villagers were relocated.” Xiao Haiyang, who’d been dispatched to contact the local public security personnel, returned carrying a stack of photocopied old materials. He bit off half a bun in one bite. “But, first because there weren’t many villagers in Yang Village, and second because most of them demanded payment, very few of them accepted the arrangements. Those were moved to the west city district. I asked for the addresses and contact information.”

“Come on,” said Luo Wenzhou.

They’d been moving without rest since dawn, taking it in turns to drive and rest. Arriving in H Town, they bolted a simple meal and unrelentingly set off once more, but the outcome wasn’t what they could have wished.

Over a decade had passed. Everything had changed. Among the few addresses Xiao Haiyang had found, the families had either moved long ago, or else the old people had passed away and the young ones were clueless. Even their memories of life in the village when they’d been little were blurry.

They made a round of visits and came up empty. Zhou Huaijin felt his hastily-eaten dinner sticking in his stomach, weighing heavily without going down. It was rather unendurable. He couldn’t resist smiling wryly at Luo Wenzhou. “I thought your usual work was waving around a gun and bellowing ‘Don’t move!’ at evildoers. How come it’s all running errands?”

“Who said all we do is run errands? We also have to attend interminable meetings and write interminable reports.” In the piercing wind, Luo Wenzhou stubbed out his cigarette butt on a garbage can. His expression was calm, but he was also impatient, unable to resist taking out his pack of cigarettes again.

“Hey,” Lu Jia couldn’t resist calling to him, “Luo-xiong, I think that’s about enough. Your fuming capacity is about to catch up with an airplane’s exhaust.”

Luo Wenzhou smiled indolently and didn’t respond, putting another cigarette in his mouth, thinking, “What’s it to you?”

Lu Jia said, “President Fei hates it when people are always smoking in the office. If you normally smoke like this, hasn’t he said anything about it to you?”

Luo Wenzhou paused, expressionlessly put the cigarette away, and waved. “Come on. The last family.”

At the house the last family from Yang Village had moved to, a young man in his twenties answered the door. Xiao Haiyang verified his address. “Excuse me, does Yang Yaozong’s family live here?”

“Yes, that’s my dad.” The man looked at him doubtfully. “Excuse me, you people are...”

“Police.” After working all night to no avail, when he finally saw a bit of hope, Xiao Haiyang’s eyes lit up, and he promptly displayed his credentials. “We’re investigating a case. One of the people involved used to live in Yang Village. We’re looking for someone who can answer some questions, could I ask whether your father...”

“Not very likely. My dad’s been sick for a couple of years, here—” The man pointed at his own temple. “He’s a bit dull-witted.”

When they came in and had a look, they learned that the old man wasn't "a bit dull-witted."

The skinny and wizened old man sat on the couch, snatching a tangerine from a small child a year or two old. The child couldn't speak clearly, and neither could the old man. After a moment, the child, unable to snatch the tangerine back, began to wail. Not admitting defeat, the old man also opened his mouth and followed suit with great sincerity. The old one and the young one each occupied one end of the couch, competing in funereal wails, making enough noise to shake the sky. A young woman, probably the daughter-in-law, inured to this, brought out a small bench for the guests without looking up.

They felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown in their faces.

Luo Wenzhou asked the old man's son, "Could you tell me whether you remember when you were living in Yang Village, was there a person called Zhuo Yingchun?"

The man thought about it, clearly eager to help, but shook his head. "I don't think I've heard of them."

Given his age, it was only normal for him not remember things from so long ago. Luo Wenzhou wasn't surprised at all, only very disappointed. He'd left Yan City for a day, and there was no telling whether another major event would occur. Another day closer to the last night of the year, and he was still at a total loss, without any leads.

"Captain Luo?" said Xiao Haiyang.

"Let's go." Luo Wenzhou shook his head. "We'll find some other..."

Just then, the senile old man who'd been competing in crying with the child suddenly said, "Xiao Hua'ao!"



“Dad, what did you say?”

The senile old man’s snot and tears hadn’t dried yet. He opened his mouth, lacking in teeth, and, as if entertaining himself, said indistinctly, dribbling saliva, “Zhuo... Xiao Hua’ao!”

His son stared. “Oh, you’re talking about Xiao Hua’ao!”

Luo Wenzhou’s steps paused at once.

“So it’s Xiao Hua’ao you’re asking about,” the son said, rather taken aback. “Sorry, I didn’t know what her formal name was.—She had a son about the same age as me, right?”

“Yes,” Xiao Haiyang said, “called Yang Bo!”

“I don’t know what his formal name was,” the man said. “We didn’t use formal names when we were little.—‘Xiao Hua’ao’ was pretty well-known back then. She came from out of town. We weren’t developed back then, there was still human trafficking; she was bought. At first they gave her to a cripple for a wife. Then a few days after the marriage, the cripple died, and she became a widow. The family thought they couldn’t have spent the money for nothing, so the elders made a decision and gave her in marriage to a cousin of the cripple. I remember the person she married afterwards was one of the first batch to drive a car to haul goods. He didn’t talk much, only kept his head down and made money. The family was pretty well off. Xiao Hua’ao was always very brightly dressed. Everyone in the village liked to gossip about her behind her back and gave her that nickname.<sup>10</sup>—Later her second man died, too. There was a fuss about the relocation. It was a pretty big deal. Everyone said she was a jinx on her husband. Then she took her son and moved away somewhere.”

Xiao Hua'ao (小花袄) means little floral jacket.

Xiao Haiyang quickly asked, "Do you know where she was kidnapped from?"

"She wasn't kidnapped," the man said, "she was bought. When I was little, I heard the old people say that the human traffickers had connections and got orphans from the city, without any roots or relations, not at all good-looking, so if one went missing no one would go searching, but they were definitely clean... Though those were all the corrupt customs from over twenty years ago, it must all be gone now, don't misunderstand."

"Do you know where the orphans came from?"

"How would I know?" The man smiled. "This is all what I heard. Though I remember Xiao Hua'ao spoke Mandarin very well, not like the locals. There was a rumor that said she'd grown up in Yan City."

Orphans, human traffickers, the girl Su Hui sold abroad... Why choose an ordinary woman like Yang Bo's mother Zhuo Yingchun as a contact?

In an instant, it seemed there was a lead coming together!

## CHAPTER 161 - Edmond Dantès XXXII

“Heng’an Orphanage’s original location was on the outskirts of Yan City, though it’s been too long. That place was turned into a ski run long ago.” In the temporary lodgings of the resort villa, Zhou Huaijin brought out the things he’d gotten from his old home’s Filipino maid for everyone to see. “This person—this girl—is called Su Hui. President Fei said that she’s a very important figure. She was one of the girls being raised at Heng’an Orphanage.”

The seated circle was silent, because apart from Zhou Huaijin, all of them knew about Su Hui; there was no need for him to add emphasis.

Su Hui had sold her own daughter; then her crimes had escalated, and she’d used her daughter to kidnap and sell other girls—a full range of kidnapping, selling, and murder, a range carried down through three generations.

The girl in the old photograph was naturally delicate-featured, a little dressed up, a sight that could amount to being pleasing scenery of the human world. Who could see the debt of blood on her hands? Only when she’d been dead over a decade had her crimes been revealed to the light of day.

What stuck in the throat was that in these sensational crimes spanning over twenty years, none of the three main culprits had come to a satisfactory end—Su Luozhan hadn’t been fourteen yet and had been spared from criminal penalty, and Su Xiaolan and Su Hui had died natural deaths, lying in drunken dreams on top of the girls’ corpses; in the end, apart from some insubstantial reputation, to the end of their lives, they hadn’t paid any price.

“Privately-run orphanages always have a problem balancing income and expenditure. In the end, there are two paths. Either they find a

way to be nationalized, or they find fixed long-term contributions. In the past, some overseas Chinese established donations to orphanages, and Heng'an was one of them. Afterwards, likely because of the death of its donor, the orphanage couldn't continue and wrapped up." Zhou Huaijin paused. "Its donor was Zhou Yahu.—I was just thinking that Yang Bo's mother and Su Hui were both orphans and both came from Yan City. The cities hadn't expanded at the time. How many people could there be in Yan City? How many orphanages? Could they have come from the same one?"

"The pretty ones were sold for a high price abroad, the rest were handed over to human traffickers and fell into the human trafficking market." Luo Wenzhou thought about it and nodded slightly. "That makes a certain amount of sense, but there's a small problem—given their method of raising children and then selling them, Heng'an Orphanage not only had a source of income, it must have been making considerable profits. Even without Zhou Yahu to act as donor, I don't think they would have gone bankrupt."

Xiao Haiyang said, "Maybe they were exposed and closed down?"

"Something like an orphanage being closed down for human trafficking, even if it didn't cause a sensation, would still definitely have left a record." Luo Wenzhou shook his head. "It wouldn't have vanished without a trace like this."

For a time they were all tired and without any lines of thought. They all fell quiet. No one spoke for a long time.

Then Zhou Huaijin suddenly cleared his throat, breaking the stillness. "I want... I'm planning to go back immediately to the old Zhou home."

Seeing everyone's gazes collect on him, Zhou Huaijin added, "Following my mother's lead, I found an excuse to take a vacation and leave the Zhou Clan headquarters. After I found that Filipino

maid and heard about those appalling things from her, I came right back here and found President Fei. I had no time, and I didn't think of going to carefully investigate Zhou Yahou.—If all of these things really are inextricably tied to the orphanage he donated to, I think that if a person's done something, there can't be absolutely no traces of it. There must be a lead.”

“If that's the case, then I can understand why they've been so determined to kill you,” Luo Wenzhou said slowly. “Mr. Zhou, I'm afraid it's not safe for you to leave the country alone. Why don't you wait a couple of days, I'll think of a way to get someone...”

“I can come along,” Lu Jia put in. “I can take along a few companions and go with President Zhou. Don't worry, spending money on private bodyguards won't get you anything more reliable than us.”

“Leaving the country isn't like hopping on a flight to Hainan Island.” Luo Wenzhou frowned. “It won't be very convenient for you to get visas at the moment.”

“We already have visas, all current.” As soon as Lu Jia smiled, his eyes vanished. He looked like an image of good fortune. “President Fei said before that this year's employee benefit is a collective vacation abroad. I thought the arrangements had been made for nothing, but now it looks like it's perfect.”

Luo Wenzhou stared. “When did this happen?”

“Last fall,” Lu Jia said. “He took care of it when he'd just gotten out of the hospital.”

Zhou Huaijin couldn't resist opening his eyes wide.—Fei Du had invited him to see him at the hospital and enumerated the suspicious details in Zheng Kaifeng's murder of Zhou Junmao. He'd also suggested that when he left, he should examine what his mother had left behind. Not long after he'd left, Fei Du had started making plans

for Lu Jia and the others to go abroad... There were so many countries in the world, so many scenic spots; why had the “vacation” been arranged there?

Had he already started preparing then?

What Zhou Huaijin could understand, the criminal police officers, each more sensitive than the next, would of course understand. Lu Jia very composedly accepted their visual salute and didn't explain, only smiled meaningfully. “I'll go book a flight.”

“We'll split up first thing tomorrow.” Luo Wenzhou was the first to avert his gaze. “You guys go investigate the old Zhou family house, and we'll stay here and look for traces of Heng'an Orphanage. Keep in contact at all times, and be careful.—Don't think about it for now, take the time to rest, conserve your strength and build up your energy.”

Everyone was used to hearing him issue orders. They stood up simultaneously and each went to their rooms, planning to make up for being forced to sleep in a cat's den by taking advantage of this rare opportunity to stay at a six-star hotel. But Xiao Haiyang's steps paused. He looked at Luo Wenzhou, who had only spoken and not moved. “Captain Luo, aren't you going to sleep yet?”

“There's been no word from Xiao Wu yet. I'm a little worried. I'll wait a while longer.” Luo Wenzhou waved. “Go on.”

Xiao Haiyang gave an “oh” and left, taken in.

Luo Wenzhou was left alone in the huge living room. He stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window, looked up, and saw Orion suspended at the culmination. Three bright stars side by side sketched the radiant Belt of Orion, slowly moving across the clean-washed night sky.

Luo Wenzhou had taken out his pack of cigarettes. He squeezed it in his hand, looking at it, then thought of something and put it back in his pocket. He pushed open the window and used the cold wind of the winter night to clear his head. Those few words just now had made him long irresistibly for Fei Du. While they'd been apart for less than the time a short business trip took, he had the feeling that he hadn't seen Fei Du in a lifetime.

When Fei Du had just gotten out of the hospital... Their relationship had been very delicate then. Fei Du's mouth had been full of honeyed words without a line of truth, and Luo Wenzhou had on one hand been admonishing himself not to act with undue haste, on the other hand wishing he could grasp him at once.

Luo Wenzhou remembered Fei Du hadn't had much energy then. He could fall asleep anytime and anywhere, leaning against something, not even noticing Luo Yiguo. Sometimes he'd be sitting on the balcony staring into space, not making a sound, looking thoughtful.

What had he been thinking then?

Just then, someone unexpectedly spoke behind him. "President Fei said that everything must have a source. Outrageous-seeming people often have outrageous pasts. If we could find that source, some things would become much simpler."

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and saw that Lu Jia, his arm suspended, had strolled over. The injury to his arm seemed to be like scraping off some skin for him. It had no impact. Lu Jia casually took a big box of nuts from the minibar, opened the lid, and offered it to Luo Wenzhou. "Do you want some?"

"...No." Luo Wenzhou looked at the little dimples on the back of Lu Jia's hand. "If I eat away my eight-pack abs, what will I use to carry out the plans of a beautiful man?"

Lu Jia was startled into a shudder by Luo Wenzhou's impenetrably shameless posturing and hastily opened a can of coke, too, to steady his nerves.

"What are you thinking?" Lu Jia asked. "Are you thinking about why President Fei could make so many arrangements ahead of time?"

"In order to steal the Zhou family's fortune, Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng collaborated to kill Zhou Yahou. Over a decade later, their company still hadn't found a domestic foothold, so they found someone to run over an obstacle. One was murdering someone for his property, one was an assassination. Though the methods weren't very similar, the cases in fact have similarities—they're both coordinated crimes, both require a certain degree of trust between the conspirators, both are murders disguised as happenstance," Luo Wenzhou said quietly. "Were Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng going to change collaborators each time, leaving dirt on themselves all over the world? So the two cases had to have had some degree of connection. That's a reasonable guess. It's no wonder he made arrangements ahead of time. He just thought of it a little earlier than others."

Lu Jia was wearing short sleeves, sipping ice-cold coke in the cold wind as though untouched by the elements. He looked quietly at Luo Wenzhou, not making a sound.

Luo Wenzhou paused. "What, were you afraid I'd think his scheming was too deep, his foreknowledge too suspicious?"

Lu Jia shrugged noncommittally. "It's not everyone who could accept our sort of person... Hiding secrets and trauma, divided from others by a layer of something."

"Brother," Luo Wenzhou said sincerely, patting his shoulder, "if you keep worrying of behalf of someone who's already spoken for, it's easy to get a beating."



Lu Jia laughed. “President Fei saved my life. What does it matter if I get a beating for his sake?”

“Fei Du is good to you,” Luo Wenzhou said.

“He isn’t good to you?” Lu Jia said.

“He’s all right. He’s good at humoring people. He’ll never do any work around the house voluntarily, only does a turn after all kinds of prodding. He’s always making me angry over nothing.” Solemnly, Luo Wenzhou said, “Very lacking in education.”

Lu Jia was speechless, his expression disdaining this show-off.

Unable to keep a straight face, Luo Wenzhou smiled. “What did you mean when you said ‘trauma?’”

“I don’t know. He’s never mentioned it.” Lu Jia hesitated, then said, “It’s just a feeling. That feeling of not trusting outsiders, living hand to mouth. Sometimes you think you’re very close to him, within reach, and he looks up and suddenly you’re far off again.”

Luo Wenzhou stared.

Fei Du’s blurry memories, his unstoppable coughing, his odd stress response, the tension in his body when he was in the basement... these were typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

But in the end Fei Du hadn’t said anything that day, just fobbed him off again.

What had actually happened in those memories he’d forgotten?

In this lengthy process of coaxing and wheedling, Luo Wenzhou felt that he’d spent every day tearing off Fei Du’s painted skins, one after

another, like a Russian nesting doll, until now, when he felt he was only a layer the thickness of a cicada's wing away from the final core.

Just then, Luo Wenzhou's phone rang. He saw "Xiao Wu" on the caller ID, quickly tidied up his far-wandering thoughts, and picked up.

"Boss," Xiao Wu said in a low voice, "we've found the warehouse they're using as a stronghold. These people are on very high alert, and Yang Xin knows us, so we haven't dared to approach. We've been lying low all day, and now that there aren't a lot of people outside, we're getting ready to implement an arrest at once."

"All right." Luo Wenzhou nodded. "Be careful."

"Apart from Yang Xin, there's another person." Xiao Wu held the phone with his neck, raising binoculars his hands, saying to Luo Wenzhou, "It seems to be that Zhu Feng you mentioned, the woman whose husband was stabbed by the crazy person. She came over with another batch of people around seven in the afternoon."

Luo Wenzhou frowned deeply, remembering what Fei Du had hurriedly said to him before leaving—

The Picture Album Project had been started to assemble psychological characteristics of criminals. There'd been no need to include a case of an incompetent person impulsively killing someone in the research plans. And Fan Siyuan had said that he'd only been responsible for six cases...

So was it possible that the case of the mentally disabled killer hadn't been one of those collected by Fan Siyuan in the Picture Album Project? And someone had secretly mixed it in among the others; then, imitating the criminal method, imitating Fan Siyuan's "privately judged execution," they had killed the mentally disabled killer.

This way, after Fan Siyuan disappeared, that case would naturally be blamed on him and wouldn't attract notice!

But there were some problems here. First, you had to guarantee that Fan Siyuan would die or disappear, or else, as soon as he was arrested, what he had and hadn't done would quickly come out in an interrogation. In the end, not only could you not achieve the result of "hoodwinking the public," you'd attract others' notice—but this was easy to explain. Fan Siyuan had absconded after committing the murders; while a formal wanted notice hadn't been issued, he'd still become a wanted criminal, and wanted criminals made up those people's collection. In particular, an expert gone bad like Fan Siyuan would have been a high-end "collectible," of a grade suitable for keeping under glass, so he would very soon have been gathered up and protected. The mole had known he wouldn't fall into the hands of the police.

But why had they needed to go to all that trouble to kill a mentally disabled person?

"Got it," Luo Wenzhou said to Xiao Wu. "Zhu Feng is an important witness. You have to take her alive."

Xiao Wu hung up the phone and gestured to the colleague next to him. Under the screen of night, a sniper quickly got into position. The special police drew close to the warehouse from three sides in a practiced manner. The criminal police separated to disperse the unrelated people in the surroundings, in case violence broke out.

Suddenly, a man walked out of the warehouse. He must have been a night watchman. He was too sensitive. As soon as he stepped out, he immediately sniffed something wrong in the air. A nearby special police officer reacted with extreme speed; a dart from a tranquilizer gun whistled, hitting him precisely in the neck. The man immediately fell back. In the instant he fell, his outstretched arm prodded

something, and a sharp alarm instantly began to wail. All the lights went up in the warehouse!

“Go right in! Block the doors!”

“Quick, quick, quick!”

Flickering human shadows quickly flitted over. Soon after, the stomach-clenching sound of gunfire rang out!

Xiao Wu’s scalp prickled—Luo Wenzhou had ordered them beforehand that, as there were important witnesses inside and Yang Xin was with them, they had to do their best not to injure them; the police wouldn’t open fire first, so...

Before, you could have said that Yang Xin had only failed to report a crime, had only run away, had even, for some purpose, deliberately had Xiao Haiyang learn about the hospital killer, and so on. These weren’t major doctrinal problems. If she’d cooperated after the fact, given that she was the daughter of a martyr, she may even have avoided punishment. But now, publicly resisting arrest, illegally carrying a gun, confronting the police—that was of a different nature!

Xiao Wu clenched his teeth firmly, put on a bulletproof vest, and charged in.

While the people inside the warehouse had weapons, when it came to a real fight, they were on the level of a mob—especially the way they’d parked all the cars together. The means of transportation were contained, the surrounding special police raising a brightly-lit encirclement, police sirens echoing wildly all around, entirely blocking them inside the warehouse.

The sniper took down each of the two people guarding the gates, the bullets hitting their thighs, even basically in the same place. The two

people had no time to react before they were controlled by the police who'd burst in. Xiao Wu took some people in and caught three or four people outside the warehouse. Then he saw a flash of a white down jacket heading towards a small building behind the warehouse. Xiao Wu turned and followed.

The scattered sounds of gunfire were exceptionally ear-piercing in the night. The smell of gun smoke floated through the biting cold air, pouring into people's lungs, choking them.

Xiao Wu roared, "Yang Xin! Come out here!"

Then he charged into the small building, a bullet from somewhere far off coming in with him, making a clear crash. The person who'd been hiding behind the window quickly jumped aside. Xiao Wu hollered into the walkie-talkie as if heartbroken: "Who the fuck is shooting? I told you not to shoot!"

He chased as he cursed, remembering the first time he'd gone to Lao Yang's house when he'd just started working. The girl, about to take her university entrance exam, had been unable to do a problem and had gotten into a huff, unwilling to eat. A circle of purported "university graduate" adults had been compelled by Lao Yang to tutor their little shimei. End result, it had turned out that this pack of good-for-nothings had long ago given their knowledge of the periodic table of elements back to their middle school teachers; they'd sat through a meal mutually ridiculing each other...

It seemed that the person hiding behind the window just now hadn't been Yang Xin. This was also a woman, thin and slight and seeming somewhat aged. Xiao Wu came closer and closer and saw that she looked like Zhu Feng.

Not verifying the facts of the matter, he threw himself forward. With the back of her clothes grabbed by Xiao Wu, Zhu Feng lashed out behind with something, and Xiao Wu dodged nimbly, grabbing the

woman's wrist. Zhu Feng cried out, and the weapon slipped out of her hand.

Panting, Xiao Wu handcuffed her. "Where is Yang Xin? You still have..."

The sound of gunfire suddenly came from behind him.

Xiao Wu froze.

In that instant, he didn't feel pain; he only felt like he'd been pushed. The inside of his head buzzed.

The bullet had gone through his neck. The hands of the girl in the white down jacket shook. She herself stared wide-eyed in disbelief.

Xiao Wu fell over sideways, rolling uncontrollably towards a corner, his whole body twitching. He met Yang Xin's blank gaze.

"Your..."

His mouth formed words, but he couldn't make a sound.

*Your mom's just died at the hospital...*

Xiao Wu thought, *Why haven't you gone back?*

*How can you be so thoughtless?*

He'd planned to deliver a whole lecture, but it had all been in vain.

## CHAPTER 162 - Edmond Dantès XXXIII

Downtown Yan City, the Chengguang Mansion.

This place had been particular about style when it had opened, filled up with classic pavilions and kiosks, as though everyone who went inside had to speak softly. Unfortunately, while the place was suitable, the people were unworthy; the atmosphere hadn't stood up to the talk and laughter of the wealthy illiterates who came there. By now, the Chengguang Mansion had reverted to type—lakes of wine and forests of meat everywhere.

At the end of the year, this place had many guests. Cars came and went, carrying load after load of drunken pleasure-seekers. Boastful lighting spurted wildly up to the night sky, making the stars and moon look dim and dejected amid the fireworks of the mortal world. In an unobtrusive little car at the corner, Lang Qiao was so sleepy she could hardly keep her eyes open. Her attention wavered, and her forehead knocked against the steering wheel. Lang Qiao sat up with a start and quickly felt for her binoculars. She saw that the car she'd been watching hadn't left yet and relaxed, pulling some mints out of her pocket to clear her head.

In the instant of nearly falling asleep and then startling awake, a person's heart rate would accelerate. Lang Qiao rubbed her eyes and crunched the mints, feeling that the disorder in her heart rate was lasting too long. It was so fast she was short of breath, as though she'd obscurely sensed something.

Her phone vibrated. Lang Qiao's eyes didn't leave the car she'd been ordered to track. She picked up. "Hi, boss... Yes, it looks like Zhang Ting has asked for sick leave and has been staying home recovering. Zhang Donglai is still inside the Chengguang Mansion... Don't worry, I have my eye on him—"

Halfway through speaking, she was interrupted by a yawn. “Anyway, what do I have to keep my eye on him for? Boss, if you still suspect Director Zhang, can’t you make me keep an eye on the main target? At least it’d feel like I was doing something.”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a while. His voice sounded forced. “No, it’s too dangerous, and it would be easy to alert the enemy.”

Lang Qiao breathed out a cool mint-flavored breath. “Boss, do you really think there’s something wrong with old Director Zhang?”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t answer. Lang Qiao thought it was strange, because Luo Wenzhou had definitely called her for a reason, and he hadn’t gotten to it yet. “Hello? Hello? Are you still listening? Which of us has the bad signal?”

Just then, laughing voices came from the direction of the Chengguang Mansion. Lang Qiao quickly looked that way and saw Zhang Donglai at the center of a cluster of flashy young women, hugging one with each arm, his legs about to twist into a braid; he walked rather like he was performing a folk dance.

“That good-for-nothing Zhang Donglai’s finally come out.” Lang Qiao was instantly alert. As she started the car, she quietly said to Luo Wenzhou, “Boss, are you still there?—Oh, did everything go well with Xiao Wu and the others? Has Yang Xin been caught?”

Luo Wenzhou said something, his voice submerged in the sound of the engine. The next instant, Lang Qiao’s car suddenly leapt forward, the front wheel driving right into the curb. She hit the brakes and was smashed against the back of the seat by her seatbelt.

Lang Qiao held the phone with one hand and the steering wheel with the other, her eyes still following Zhang Donglai at the gates of the Chengguang Mansion.



Zhang Donglai clung to the young women very indecently for a while, sent them all away, then sat sprawling on a little stone bench to sober up and wait for a driver, breathing out perfect smoke rings towards the night sky.

Meanwhile, a hundred meters away, Lang Qiao suddenly began to tremble.

“What did you say...” She heard her own voice seem to come from somewhere else, breaking as it left her mouth. “Boss, what did you say? Say it again, I didn’t hear clearly...”

“Lang Qiao,” Luo Wenzhou called heavily.

Normally, if Luo Wenzhou wasn’t calling her “Lang-Er” or “Lang Big Eyes,” then it was “Er-Qiao.” It was only when something major happened that he would earnestly call her by her formal name. Over time, she’d nearly developed a conditioned response. As soon as she heard her full name come out of Luo Wenzhou’s mouth, she wanted to cry.

“But why? Why!”

Tragedy often makes people feel that it can’t be true. Then they’re unable to resist trying to get to the bottom of things, seeking an “explanation,” whether it’s their own tragedy or someone else’s.

It’s as if this way, they can draw a lesson from the mistakes of others to obtain an exemption from bad things.

But the rain will fall, girls will marry, floodwater will burst into the anthill—where does the “why” come into it?

Far off, a car drove over and stopped in front of Zhang Donglai. Two people got out. This was rather strange, because drivers normally didn’t drive their own cars to take work. Zhang Donglai also seemed

very taken aback. In the midst of his tottering, he squeezed out a bit of intellect and propped himself upright, saying something to the newcomers in confusion.

The newcomers nodded. Then the two of them together very respectfully picked him up and put him into his car.

“Some people...some people have come to pick up Zhang Donglai.” Lang Qiao forced her attention back to what was in front of her. Her field of vision shifted, but her tears were falling, blurring her eyes, filling up as soon as she wiped them. “There are two of them, driving a black SUV, license plate number Yan BXXXXX. One of them is driving the car they came in back the way they came, the other one is, is driving Zhang Donglai.”

“What kind of people?” Luo Wenzhou said.

Lang Qiao was sobbing too hard to catch her breath. At the end of her endurance, she lowered her head, her sharp chin nearly touching her chest. With difficulty, she said, “Male, height...height over a meter seventy-five at a visual estimate, sturdy physique, on high alert, look like bodyguards—they’re leaving.”

“Don’t follow!” Luo Wenzhou said at once. “Did you place a listening device and tracker in Zhang Donglai’s car?”

“I did, but...” Lang Qiao’s heavily nasal voice was squeezed into a thread. “I was in too much of a rush, I don’t know whether they’ll find it.”

Luo Wenzhou asked, “When Zhang Donglai came to the Chengguang Mansion, did he also come with attendants?”

“No, he drove himself, bringing over a few girls. Apart from me, no one was following him.”

“So something happened tonight that has them nervous.” Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself for a moment, then quietly said, “Listen to me. Withdraw now and report on your tailing when you have a chance. Yang Xin... The suspect Yang Xin and the others have been arrested. They’re being transferred to the City Bureau under escort. You’ll see them there.”

“Boss,” Lang Qiao said quietly, “if I go back to the City Bureau, I won’t be able to see Xiao Wu, right?”

Luo Wenzhou was speechless.

“I understand, I’ll...I’ll take care of things.”

As she cried, Lang Qiao turned the car around, hung up the phone, and turned on the locator. She watched the bright dot representing Zhang Donglai constantly moving forward. The static coming back showed that the listening device was still in the moving car. The music on the car stereo was free and natural and distant. Though no one was talking, she still turned on the recorder.

The music coming over the listening device must have been playing on some radio station. It was intermittent, interrupted periodically by little advertisements and the time. Headphones on, Lang Qiao drove through the clear roads, remembering when she’d first come to work at the City Bureau. Everyone had been a senior, all of them older than her. Each day she came to work, all the way from the gates to the office, she’d call everyone ge and jie. When Xiao Wu had finally joined a year later than her, she’d practically felt that her position in the family hierarchy had risen. She’d held Xiao Wu’s head down and forced him to call her “jie.” Later she’d inadvertently seen his ID and found out that Xiao Wu was actually two months older than her, a senior “youngest brother.”

But the senior youngest brother hadn’t been fated to stay with them long; he’d come in a hurry and left in a hurry.

On the listening device, someone finally spoke. It must have been the driver. He said to Zhang Donglai, “Manager Zhang, wake up. We’re nearly home.”

Zhang Donglai mumbled, vaguely saying, “Hm? Where is this? What home?”

The driver answered, “Chairman Zhang’s. Director Zhang is also there.”

“Fuck.” Zhang Donglai sat up swiftly. “Who told you to bring me over to the old man? No... You took me right home without even consulting me. Dage, be nice, would you dare to go home and see your dad when you’d drunk yourself into this state?”

The driver very patiently said, “It was Chairman Zhang’s orders. He said it’s been a long time since he’s seen you and misses you a little. Something’s happened at home. He knows you were at the Chengguang Mansion today, tobacco and alcohol are unavoidable on a social occasion. He sent me on purpose to pick you up, didn’t he?”

Zhang Donglai had just sat up quickly, and his head was spinning. He kind of wanted to throw up. Blankly, he asked, “At home? What could have happened at home?”

The driver smiled politely and perfunctorily towards him. “I don’t know that. You can ask him yourself when you get there.—Here we are.”

The dialogue coming over the listening device came to an abrupt halt.

Lang Qiao turned her head and looked at the location of Zhang Donglai’s car. She found that the address was the luxurious house where the investigation team had gone to invite over their old Director Zhang. She quickly sent the information to Luo Wenzhou.

Zhang Donglai walked nervously through the door of the house. First he breathed into his hand at the door, feeling that after having the trip to disperse, the smell of alcohol wasn't so intense. Then he shuffled inside. Once through the door, he stared, because he saw Zhang Ting in the living room looking at her phone, luggage piled at her feet.

“Are you going somewhere?” Zhang Donglai asked. “Who are you going with? Where?”

Zhang Ting stared, too. “Aren't I going with you?”

“Huh?” said Zhang Donglai.

“I'm going to study abroad. When I didn't want to work before, dad and I came to an agreement. He contacted the language school, and he told me to take you away with me.”

Zhang Donglai was a little dizzy. He felt for the door frame, feeling that he really was drunk; he simply couldn't understand what Zhang Ting was saying. He stood where he was for a moment, staring blankly, pinching the bridge of his nose in total confusion, asking himself in bewilderment, “Am I going abroad?”

He'd thought he'd only gotten eight parts drunk, but now he suddenly had the feeling that he'd gotten blackout drunk.

The next moment, Zhang Donglai pulled himself together. “Even if I am going abroad, it can't be to study abroad. I finally managed to muddle my way to graduation after all those years, was that easy? I've finally been released upon completion of my sentence, and no one had better think of sending me back!

“Where's dad?” Without waiting for Zhang Ting's answer, Zhang Donglai swiftly stood up and went to slam on a locked door. “Dad, I

have something to say to you. Why are you banishing me again? What have I done?”

Inside the study, Zhang Chunjiu and Zhang Chunling sat across from each other. Hearing his son's hollering outside, Zhang Chunling let out a long sigh. He'd borne too many hardships in his youth; with his own descendants, he'd wanted to compensate for it. "I've never let them touch any of this stuff, always thinking that I've spent enough of my life in hatred and narrow escapes, and the next generation should be different, live a carefree normal life. Was I wrong?"

Zhang Chunjiu didn't answer. He put down the phone, grave-faced.

Zhang Chunling looked up and asked, "What is it?"

"There's been a problem with the 'nail' on Su Cheng. We've lost track of him," Zhang Chunjiu said in a low voice.

Zhang Chunling's expression turned ugly. "Another problem, with the nail now. Who is it?"

"A woman, original name Wei Lan. Brought over from another place by a subordinate. They say she killed someone, and she looks all right..."

"It's him again." Zhang Chunling squeezed the words out from between his teeth. "Didn't I tell you to look out for him exploiting an advantage, to use people you know inside and out as much as possible?"

Zhang Chunjiu couldn't answer. Having reached their current position, become a colossus entrenched in the shadows, they were no longer a small gang of a handful of people; how could they know everyone inside and out? Anyway, what did it mean to know someone "inside and out?" Fan Siyuan had hibernated for nearly a decade; who knew how deep his infiltration went?

Zhang Chunjiu changed the subject. “Starting from when Su Cheng left his residence, he shook my people off twice. Luckily I already had someone watching the car rental place, but I didn’t expect them to meet a security check at the toll gate, then ditch the car and run.”

“Didn’t I tell you to take care of it as soon as possible?” Zhang Chunling asked coldly.

“Yes, I know. He ran too quickly before. There was no time, and the last person I sent to deal with him has fallen out of contact along with the others.—Dage, Su Cheng can’t be this vigilant, and even if he were, he doesn’t have the skills. I didn’t expect this blemish to be hiding in plain sight, this Wei Lan...”

Zhang Chunling interrupted him. “Didn’t I tell you not to panic yet? Neither of us contacted Su Cheng in person. It’s always been our subordinates under cover of the shell company communicating with him. What about the people who were in contact with him?”

“They’re all being transferred,” Zhang Chunjiu said heavily. “And everyone in Wei Lan’s chain.”

Zhang Chunling stood up and walked two circles. “It’s all right, don’t scare yourself.”

“When I sent people to dispose of Zhou Huaijin last night, it also didn’t go well. The police came too fast. I haven’t dared to reach out in that direction. I’m running blind.” Zhang Chunjiu sighed. “Dage, I have a bad feeling.”

The two of them exchanged a look. Just then, there was another knock at the door. This time, there was a very cold and restrained voice. “Chairman Zhang, it’s me.”

Zhang Donglai had been throwing a tantrum outside the study door with no one paying attention, but now he watched in astonishment as the door opened when the driver who'd brought him here knocked gently.

Zhang Donglai said, "Dad! Uncle! What's going on! I..."

Zhang Chunling fixed his eyes on him coldly, and Zhang Donglai's demands instantly fell through. He laid down his arms, hemmed and hawed, and quietly said, "No, why hasn't anyone talked it over with me? Why should I go abroad, I have my job..."

Before he'd finished saying the word "job," Zhang Chunling had expressionlessly shown the driver into the room and once again shut his good-for-nothing son outside the door. Zhang Donglai raised a hand to pound on the door again, remembered Zhang Chunling's expression just now, and didn't dare.

Zhang Ting had walked up behind him at some point. She quietly said, "Ge, has something happened to our family?"

The purely innocent brother and sister looked at each other helplessly.

Inside the study, the driver pulled a listening device with its battery removed from his pocket. "Chairman Zhang, this came from the young master's car."

Zhang Chunjiu only glanced at it and recognized the little listening device's origin. "Police issue."

Zhang Chunling's face fell at once. "Someone was following you, and you didn't know about it?"

The driver quickly said, "Chairman Zhang, absolutely not! If there had been someone following us while I was driving, I would have



noticed!”

“What are we paying all those people downstairs for? Have the surroundings searched.” Zhang Chunling frowned at Zhang Chunjiu again. “What’s going on? Didn’t you say that they had temporarily stopped investigating you?”

“I don’t think it’s the investigation team’s people.” Zhang Chunjiu muttered to himself for a moment. “If the investigation team had bugged anyone, they would have bugged me. They wouldn’t have touched Donglai. Unless—”

Unless whoever it was had known that Zhang Chunjiu was an extremely dangerous individual, and that as soon as the listening device was placed, he would have been on the alert, and they may have paid dearly for their cunning. So they’d gone the roundabout way and bugged Zhang Donglai! Because the younger generation was a weak spot, as soon as there was a hint of anything, there would first have to be arrangements made for Zhang Donglai and his sister.

In an instant, Zhang Chunjiu met Zhang Chunling’s eyes and said, “It may be Luo Wenzhou’s people. Don’t delay, dage. Send away the people who contacted Su Cheng along with Donglai and Tingting tonight. Apart from that, while that Zhou Huaijin escaped calamity yesterday, I figure he won’t dare to stay in the country much longer. It’ll be the same thing to take care of him over there.”

“The two of us also have to prepare for the worst,” Zhang Chunling said meaningfully to Zhang Chunjiu.

“Don’t worry. Let’s see how things go first, not give ourselves away.” Zhang Chunjiu nodded. “Our escape route has been arranged. We can leave any time!”

In the long winter night, some were crying bitterly, some were absconding, and the future of some hung in the balance.

When the light of day first broke, Zhou Huaijin, who hadn't slept all night, and Zhang Donglai, knocked out by a drink, had already set out from different places, traveling to the same country.

Meanwhile, the fourteen suspects arrested at West Second Strand, including Yang Xin and Zhu Feng, were transferred under escort to the City Bureau. Xiao Wu, who hadn't had time to close his eyes, reached Yan City at the same time.

Fei Du's biological clock woke him precisely at six in the morning. He methodically cleaned himself up. He showed no traces of having been inconvenienced by being placed under house arrest by the investigation, and after breakfast he received his cell phone, which had been shut off for days. An investigator said to him, "Mr. Fei, you can go home. Make sure to stay in touch. We may contact you any time. Don't leave the area."

## CHAPTER 163 - Edmond Dantès XXXIV

Fei Du had two phones. One was comparatively clean. Apart from saving a bit of personal photographic work to it at odd moments, he used it for taking and making phone calls, and everyone he contacted was important; he'd given this one to Luo Wenzhou before leaving.

The other one he'd brought with him. It was full of all kinds of things. As soon as he turned it on, whistling advertisements, regards from his drinking buddies, and software update reminders nearly crashed the phone. He didn't display any happiness at being told that he could go. "So I can go? Have you questioned Su Cheng? What's his problem?"

The investigator was choked by his sudden question, because they hadn't found a single hair from Su Cheng's head.

A rental car had been found abandoned near an exit toll gate on North Yan Highway. Su Cheng's fingerprints were on the steering wheel. That was the last sign of him. Then he seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth, running away without a trace... No, if he really had run away, that would be good; the worst outcome was that he may already have been silenced.

But he couldn't mention these details of the investigation to Fei Du, so the investigator avoided the central issue, saying, "Concerning the problems of the property under your company's banner and Su Cheng, we're still investigating at present. Until all the details of the case have come to light, you're still under some suspicion, President Fei, so even though you're being released, we may still perform a follow-up investigation. Please understand when the time comes."

Fei Du looked up. The gaze hidden behind his lenses inexplicably made the investigator feel uncomfortable. For a moment, he even thought there was something demonic about the color of Fei Du's

irises. He couldn't even tell whether Fei Du had just been asking casually, or whether he was a suspicious individual sounding him out.

The investigator's tone cooled involuntarily. "Do you need us to send a car to take you?"

Light flashed off Fei Du's lenses, interrupting his gaze; he suddenly changed, once more becoming that clever but inexperienced young man. "I heard the last investigator say that the car the company sent to pick me up got into a crash midway—was someone trying to kill me?"

The investigator said, "We can send an escort, do our utmost to preserve your personal safety, President Fei."

Fei Du pushed at his glasses and smiled wryly. "Even if everything is all right on the way, what if they break into my house? I couldn't take that. It might even bother the neighbors. Everyone's on vacation now, it wouldn't even be possible to hire an hourly worker, never mind a bodyguard.—How about this, look, can I wait here a while for someone from home to come pick me up?"

Those who had looked into Fei Du's background all knew that "someone from home" meant Luo Wenzhou. The investigator thought it was very indecent, but he couldn't quibble with this request. "That could work, but while you're waiting, you can't run around all over the place."

"I'll just stay here. I won't go anywhere." Fei Du raised his cell phone at him. "Just lend me a charger."

The investigator looked at him, still thinking there were a few unsuitable things about Fei Du.—The whole investigation team's views about Fei Du were polarized. Some people thought he was an innocent and unconnected young man, who may well have been framed and killed by Su Cheng if he hadn't been fortunate. The

others, however, thought that he wasn't so simple. Being confined and investigated for days just before the New Year would have been an unexpected calamity for anyone, but when you thought about it, throughout the whole process, Fei Du had been actively cooperative, not at all flustered, answering anything he was asked without any resistance.

In stressful circumstances, however mild a person's temper, they would still show some aggression and resistance. People who'd been shut into a little dark room and weren't planning on confessing to a crime were usually either loudly stressing their own innocence, or obsessively asking non-stop, "What do you actually think I did?" Because of their worries, as soon as this question came up, implicated people would keep asking it over and over.

But Fei Du had only affably asked once at the beginning and hadn't brought it up again.

It seemed like...

It seemed like he wasn't at all worried about being investigated, like he knew that at a certain time, he'd be safely let go. Everything he said was just to accord with the seasonal lines the scenic characters in front of him had learned.

After leaving, the investigator didn't relax. He quietly turned on a surveillance feed and watched Fei Du.

In a very relaxed posture, Fei Du was openly sitting back and playing on his phone, totally ignoring the camera above him. Through the camera, the person watching the feed could even see the writing on his screen.

Like an ordinary young person, Fei Du had too many apps on his phone; it was unbearably cluttered.—He posted status updates and responded to the messages he'd received while the phone had been

off for a few days; meanwhile, quite a few people, learning he was back online, started sending him private messages. Fei Du was interacting with five or six people at the same time, now reporting that he was safe and sound, now asking people to bring him things from abroad, now very inappropriately flirting and teasing, somehow managing not to get any wires crossed; his playboy skills were expert.

The investigator listened to a few sentences—at first, Fei Du, cheered up by someone, beamed into the phone and sent a voice message: “Really? You’re all so disappointed that I didn’t go? That won’t do. How about I add another twenty thousand to each of your travel expense write off quotas? Not on the company’s account. I invited you, you should all enjoy yourselves.”

It sounded like there had been a trip arranged by the company for the employees. Given the quota, it seemed like it was a luxury tour abroad, the investigator thought absently, feeling a little sad—they had to go through the formalities just to get reimbursed for meals, but the young master’s lips flapped, and each person’s quota went up twenty thousand.

A while later, on the security camera feed, you could see that a friend noted down as “The Philosopher” had sent Fei Du a WeChat message: “Master Fei! How much money have you defrauded the revenue of! Why have you been locked up so long!”

When Fei Du had been taken away to be investigated, he’d publicly announced that the reason was to cooperate with an investigation into the economic problems of a subsidiary company. He hadn’t mentioned anything else.

Before Fei Du had answered, this “Philosopher” sent several more messages in a row: “You didn’t even get to see your brother one last time! My dad’s banished me to exile in a barbarian land!”

Presumably the only punctuation this person knew how to use was the exclamation mark; he was always yelling.

When he'd finished reading, Fei Du's face displayed schadenfreude. He sent a voice message, saying, "Your dad's finally had enough of a wastrel like you?"

The investigator sighed. It seemed this was one of his drinking buddies, come to complain about being taught a lesson by his parents. He cut off the security camera feed—he felt that there was no point in listening any further. Fei Du was simply passing the time. He wasn't blind; of course he knew the security camera was filming him. It may be assumed that he wasn't stupid enough to confess anything.

Under the security camera, Fei Du raised his phone, listening to the voice message "The Philosopher" had sent.

The man's voice seemed to be coming from very noisy surroundings. His speech was like his typing, full of its own punctuation marks: "You'll never guess, I got knocked out by a drink at home! Today when I opened my eyes, I even fucking thought I'd gotten blackout drunk, so I got up and looked around, and, fuck me, where was I? On the other side of the ocean, don't you know! Gone in the middle of the night, along with Zhang Ting! Do you think my dad's having a midlife crisis? Is he crazy?! I don't even have a signal on my phone, I'm in a restaurant bathroom borrowing their wifi!"

Fei Du, seemingly indifferent, asked, "Borrowing wifi in a bathroom? How does it smell?"

"The Philosopher" said, "Get out! My dad sent people to watch me, they watch me wherever I go, they won't let me contact anyone else, and they won't change my phone card. I was forced to hide in the bathroom!"

Fei Du laughed.

“Oh, I see, am I here specifically to provide entertainment for you?—Master Fei, to tell you the truth, I’m worried there’s a problem at home. Have you heard any rumors?”

Fei Du didn’t bat an eyelash. “I haven’t. What problem could there be? I think you’re the one with the problem. Have you stirred something up again lately?”

“I didn’t!”

Fei Du said, “Given your character, after you’d stirred it up, you may not have known it yourself.”

“That’s true,” “The Philosopher” himself acknowledged. Then he groaned sorrowfully. “But if I die, at least let me understand why I’m dying.—Even if I had to be sent packing, at least he could have left me some time to say goodbye to my brothers, right? And you, too! You’ve spent this last half a year indulging in pleasures in some siren’s Cavern of Silken Webs, forgetting your duties. I haven’t seen a shade of you!”

Hearing the description “Cavern of Silken Webs,” Fei Du thought of something and smiled for a while, unable to restrain himself. Then he said, “Oh, where are you now?”

“The Philosopher” told him the country and the place name.

“What a coincidence!” Fei Du’s “astonishment” was very convincing. “Some of my subordinates are just taking their annual vacation over there. They must have arrived around the same time you did. If you’re really going crazy from boredom, go play around with them for a few days. Consider that I’ve taken you there myself.”



Hearing this, “The Philosopher” instantly swore. “Why didn’t you say so? Give me the contact information, quick. Did Miaomiao come, too? All your assistants are great beauties, all of them dancing attendance on you alone every day, it’s too fucking wretched!”

Zhang Donglai, who had woken to find himself in an alien land, held his nose and waited in the bathroom for a moment. Fei Du quickly sent him a WeChat name card, saying this was the team leader. Zhang Donglai added them excitedly; they quickly verified him and very politely sent a smiley face in greeting. “Hello, President Zhang. President Fei told me to look after you. Let me know if there’s anything you need.”

This person’s profile picture was a little rabbit wearing a bow on its head. Though they hadn’t sent a voice message, from the tone of the words you could tell this was a cute, lively girl. As he salivated, trying to guess which of the beautiful women from Fei Du’s company this was, Zhang Donglai energetically set about flirting, ignoring even Fei Du.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Perhaps one of the people following Zhang Donglai had thought he’d been in there too long and had come over to knock. “Manager Zhang, are you all right?”

“What do you want?!” Zhang Donglai yelled to him, pestered beyond endurance. “You’re even rushing me when I’m shitting? You won’t let me take my time?”

His phone vibrated. Zhang Donglai looked down. The person had sent a group picture of some rather familiar-looking beautiful girls with their arms around each other, laughing merrily, dimpled faces smiling into the camera. It was like a beam of light, illuminating Zhang Donglai’s dejected heart.

The rabbit with the bow said: “We reserved the hotel’s pool. We’re planning to have a swimsuit party. Are you coming?”

Zhang Donglai's head heated up. "Even if I have to sacrifice everything I have!"

There was an update notification on Fei Du's Moments. He opened it and looked. A friend with a profile picture of a rabbit with a bow had posted a status update: "Dress up, beauties, a mysterious honored guest is coming tonight!"

When Fei Du looked down, the smile on his face receded like the tide. He closed the page and looked at the calendar on his phone: the twenty-eighth day of the twelfth lunar month.

He gently closed his eyes and sighed silently.

In an interrogation room in the City Bureau, Yang Xin, not making a sound, had sat idle for a whole day, unmoved by threats or persuasion, letting others counsel and scold her; there had even been one criminal police officer, emotions out of control, who'd jumped up, red-eyed, wanting to beat her.

Suddenly, the door of the interrogation room opened again. Yang Xin looked up gloomily and met the eyes of Lang Qiao, who'd come in—Lang Qiao was the one who'd nearly hit her and had been restrained midway by her colleagues. Lang Qiao looked at her expressionlessly but didn't come in. She held open the door, saying to someone behind her, "Slow down, it's a little narrow, take care not to bump yourself."

Then there was a rustling sound, and Yang Xin clearly saw who was behind her. Unconcealed astonishment at last appeared on her stiff face—a wheelchair forced its way through the door with Lang Qiao's help; it was Tao Ran, who should still have been in the hospital, returning while still wounded!

Staying in the hospital evidently wasn't at all pleasant. Tao Ran had lost a considerable amount of weight. His cheeks were sunken,

making the gentle lines of his face look somewhat more fierce.

“Xinxin,” Tao Ran said after looking at her for a while, “you could have beaten me to death and I still wouldn’t have thought that one day I’d be here talking to you.”

Yang Xin had thought that she had a heart of stone, but in the moment she saw Tao Ran, her human heart revealed itself inopportunely, defeating her in an instant.

All these years, no matter how cold her mom had been, Tao Ran had never taken issue. He’d been like an overly mild-tempered big brother, gentle and caring down to trivial details. Sometimes when she’d posted some grumblings online while at school, a package would arrive the next day—the tickets she couldn’t get, the out-of-print book she couldn’t find, the snack she wanted to eat that there was nowhere to buy. When he went to the city her school was in on business, the first thing he’d do when he was through with work would be to come to the school to see her, carrying bags of stuff.

Some classmates had even said jokingly that she had a model long-distance boyfriend, and for some reason she hadn’t denied it.

Tao Ran looked down at his own arm in its cast. “If it had been me, would you have shot me, too?”

The rims of Yang Xin’s eyes reddened instantly. She opened her mouth, subconsciously shaking her head.

“I’d rather it had been me you shot,” Tao Ran said quietly. “Since shifu’s been gone, I ought to have been taking care of you two, but I’ve never known the grievance you felt. I haven’t done my duty. I’ve wronged you, and wronged shifu. I deserve to take a bullet.”

Yang Xin’s tears rolled down like a dike bursting. “Tao Ran-ge...”

Tao Ran pursed his lips. “But Xiao Wu didn’t wrong you in any way. His mother and big sister have come, they’re downstairs now. I saw them from far off and quickly had Xiao Qiao push me in by the side door to avoid them...”

Yang Xin took in a shaking breath, holding her head. There was a clatter of handcuffs.

Tao Ran’s throat moved slightly. “Because I didn’t know what I should say to them.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” As if collapsing, Yang Xin began to bawl. “I didn’t do it on purpose...”

Luo Wenzhou stopped the car at the side of the road and waited for Fei Du to come out, meanwhile listening to Lang Qiao reporting to him over the phone. “Yang Xin says that warehouse was one of their strongholds. They’d planned to briefly stop there for a day, then go see ‘Teacher.’ Their reaction was so intense because they’d gotten a call from one of their people beforehand saying that the location of the stronghold had been given up by a traitor.”

From the corner of his eye, Luo Wenzhou glimpsed Fei Du walking out. As he opened the door and got out of the car, he said to Lang Qiao, “Did she say why they resisted arrest so fiercely?”

“She did. She said that Director Zhang...Zhang Chunjiu is the one who killed Lao Yang and Gu Zhao, that the ranks of the police are full of his people, and that he’d use the police to silence them, then throw dirty water on ‘Teacher.’ She also said she didn’t want to hurt Xiao Wu, she only wanted to scare him, make him let go of Zhu Feng... She’d never used a gun before, hadn’t expected the recoil to be so strong, the bullet went astray...”

Just then, a few investigators came out to escort Fei Du. Fei Du gathered up his coat and suddenly called them to a stop. “Oh... I

actually wanted to ask, what's going on with Teacher Pan?"

An investigator paused in his steps.

Fei Du said, "Sorry, I'm speaking out of turn.—Though I've only taken one semester of classes, he is my teacher, and Teacher Pan's wife has always been very good to me. If you can't talk about it, then forget it. Because you asked me what happened on July 31st, I suddenly remembered that before my car crash that day I'd planned to go see his wife..."

The investigator's expression flashed. He was thoughtful for a moment, then fixed his eyes on Fei Du and said, "That time you didn't manage to go, a major suspect who still hasn't been found came to the door to see him."

First, Fei Du stared. Then the investigator saw this young man, rather unmoved by honor or disgrace, suddenly think of something; his expression suddenly changed.

## CHAPTER 164 - Edmond Dantès XXXV

“Impossible.” In front of the investigator, Fei Du quickly restrained his out of control expression.

The investigator watched him closely.

“Impossible,” Fei Du repeated. “Teacher Pan’s wife did psychological counseling for me for many years. They’re both very upright people.”

The investigator had a thought, wanting to make him keep talking. “Perhaps you only know what they’re like on the outside, not in their hearts?”

“If he’d been connected to the person who sold out his colleague, he wouldn’t have resigned and gone to teach at the school. Given Teacher Pan’s qualifications, if he’d stayed at the City Bureau, his position would have been high by now, and he could have gotten hold of any information right away. What can he get at school? When we propose any materials to request for consultation, we have to go through a whole series of formalities to get them. It needs the ratifying signatures of at least five people, all the way up to Director Lu. That’s too much trouble.”

“But Pan Yunteng himself admitted this. There’s no use calling it into question.” The investigator made another attempt. “Perhaps he only came into contact with the suspect after leaving the City Bureau, and perhaps he was deceived.”

Fei Du frowned. “You mean to say that the true culprit framed someone else for his crimes and tricked Teacher Pan into trusting him, and used Teacher Pan to attain his goal?”

The investigator didn’t answer Fei Du’s question directly. He only calmly said, “That’s all possible.”

In sum, the evidence currently pointed to Fan Siyuan. After all, it was an unquestionable fact that he'd committed murder and absconded, and Fei Du and Pan Yunteng had confirmed the fact that Fan Siyuan hadn't died. But for the investigation team, the disappearances of Su Cheng and Fei Chengyu had made all of this increasingly bewildering.

“Teacher Pan used to be a criminal policeman. Criminal policemen are most particular about evidence and nitpicking logical flaws,” Fei Du said. “He wouldn't have been deceived so easily.”

The investigator had hoped to hear more valuable information from Fei Du, but when he'd listened to the end, he found that everything was conjecture. In spite of himself, he felt somewhat disappointed and smiled perfunctorily at him. “Perhaps you don't understand him so well.—President Fei, the car's come to pick you up.”

“I do understand about him nitpicking logical flaws. I don't mind telling you that when I first turned on my phone, there were quite a few people from school asking me about Teacher Pan's situation. He's been tormenting them over their dissertations for several semesters, and now that they're about to get results, this happens.” Fei Du smiled. “Sorry, I'm holding you up.”

Saying so, he very urbanely withdrew some steps, then turned towards Luo Wenzhou.

The investigator watched him get into the car, a thought suddenly flashing through his mind. He thought, “Fei Du was just talking to other people about Pan Yunteng? What did they say?”

Perhaps when he got back he'd request the security camera records of Fei Du playing on his phone and comb through them.

Luo Wenzhou had seen Fei Du standing at the door talking to the investigator, so he hadn't gone over. His face calm, he stood waiting

in front of the car. Likely because he'd been leading a vagabond life and resting badly for some days in a row, he now felt somewhat dazed, as though his field of vision was constantly narrowing. At last it was only the height and width of one person—just about large enough to fit Fei Du, wrap around him, draw in close bit by bit.

But this was broad daylight, with the investigator's gaze like a searchlight, and of course Luo Wenzhou hadn't come by himself—before leaving, Lu Jia had given him the contact information for a bunch of Fei Du's people. Now, their people were everywhere: at the corner, across the street, in a parking lot nearby, even the “peddler” hurriedly riding an electric tricycle.—Luo Wenzhou really couldn't do anything inappropriate with everyone watching, so he restrained himself, opened the car door, and lightly touched Fei Du's shoulder. When his hand fell on him, his heart, hanging suspended for days, fell back into his chest. Luo Wenzhou breathed out silently.

Fei Du's gaze met his bloodshot eyes and quietly said, “I'll drive.”

Luo Wenzhou didn't make a sound, nodding silently. When he couldn't see Fei Du in person, he was like a machine operating at high speed, with nicotine and anxiety for stimulants, letting him simultaneously process countless pieces of information, run around without sleep or rest, ignoring day and night.

But now, the suppressed grief and indignation, along with the boundless exhaustion, suddenly intensified and surged up, all of it submerging him. His mind empty, Luo Wenzhou was pushed into the passenger's seat by Fei Du. He quietly said, “We found one of their strongholds yesterday, caught Zhu Feng and Yang Xin, as well as the driver who contacted you. While arresting them, Xiao Wu...Xiao Wu...”

At this point, as if he'd forgotten how to speak, he repeated himself over and over.



Fei Du paused, then reached out a hand to cover his eyes. “You’ve had it hard.”

At his movement, Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes. Fei Du glanced all around, then quickly leaned over and pecked the corner of his mouth. “Rest. I’ll wake you if anything happens.”

Not making a sound, Luo Wenzhou leaned back in his seat. The hand covering his eyes moved away, and he instantly felt untethered, reaching out his arm and laying it on Fei Du.

At some point he drifted off. Then he was woken by the sound of his ringtone.

The moment he was startled awake, Luo Wenzhou felt he’d missed a step coming down from a height. He gave a start and reached out nearly in a panic, scrunching up a handful of stiff wool coat. Fei Du gently held his wrist, rubbing it with the pads of his fingers.

Luo Wenzhou turned his head to look at him, and his floating soul answered the force of gravity, returning once more to its place. He pressed down on his temple and turned on the speaker. “Yes, I’m here.”

“We just finished interrogating Zhu Feng,” Lang Qiao said. “Zhu Feng admitted that she dressed up as a school janitor, tailed Wang Xiao, and used a recording to mislead her. She said it was so that evil would be rewarded with evil. It’s one link in Teacher’s great plan. Zhu Feng’s attitude is very bad, she’s very defensive, and she doesn’t trust us a bit.—Also, she revealed a piece of information I thought I should let you know at once.”

“What?” Luo Wenzhou said.

“Zhu Feng’s husband was killed going out, and later the killer was arrested. But afterwards, in the course of the interrogation, the killer

was found to be incompetent, and the matter ended with the killer being sent to a mental hospital—Zhu Feng maintains that there was some plot there, that the criminal was swapped out.”

“What does swapped out mean?” Luo Wenzhou said.

“Zhu Feng was unable to accept the judgement that the killer wouldn’t have to pay with his life. She attempted to infiltrate Anding Hospital and assassinate the killer. Anding Hospital’s management was lax, and in fact she managed to get in. The reason she didn’t act was that she discovered that the man being kept in the mental hospital wasn’t the person who’d killed her husband. Zhu Feng believes that this killer bought off all the public security organs in one fell swoop, and we faked the evidence of his mental disability and found someone who looked very similar to him to take his place in the hospital, while he remained at liberty. So the police and the courts are all rogues cut from the same cloth, all worthless.”

Luo Wenzhou was subdued by the scope of this conspiracy theory. “Bought off all the public security organs in one fell swoop?”

“Don’t look at me,” Fei Du said. “I couldn’t afford it.”

“No...wait.” Luo Wenzhou thought about it. “When Zhu Feng says we found someone who looked ‘very similar’ to be a substitute...what’s the plot? Identical twins? Plastic surgery? Anyway, if he was very similar, how did she know the criminal had been swapped out? Slight changes in details of physical appearance may well have been due to being hospitalized and taking medication. Some people change a lot when their surroundings change.”

“Wait a bit, boss.” After Lang Qiao had spoken, a while passed, and she sent Luo Wenzhou a recording.

Fei Du had already stopped the car in the parking spot outside of Luo Wenzhou’s house. He stuck his hand out of the window and made a

gesture. The vehicles that had stealthily escorted them the whole way each dispersed to where they'd come from, standing by in the area. Luo Wenzhou opened the recording. There was a woman's hoarse voice on it.

“My husband was called Yu Bin, the ‘civil and military’ Bin<sup>11</sup>. He was an art teacher... He was very honest, good-tempered, none of the students he taught had anything bad to say about him. He only taught, didn't have office hours, so he had a good deal of free time, so he did all the grocery shopping and cooking. We went out together that morning. He was going to buy groceries, and that was on my way to work. Right after we parted, I remembered he had a class that evening, and I hadn't taken my keys, so I turned back to find him. I heard people shouting something from far away, I went over, and the crowd suddenly started to riot. People were screaming, children crying... Then a man all covered in blood, carrying a knife, charged right at me! I froze. I remember he was pretty tall, pretty bulky, with dirt all over him and his hair a mess. His hair looked like a mop, all in tufts, like the tramps living under bridges... I didn't know the blood on him came from my Da-Bin, or I...I would have...

“My mind went blank. I heard someone shouting, ‘Run, a lunatic is killing people!’ I had no time to react. I saw him go towards me and pushed my bicycle towards him in fright. The handlebar pulled up his sleeve, and I saw a long scar on his arm that looked like a centipede.”

A police officer on the recording said, “This information isn't in the old file. You didn't tell the police?”

“Because no one asked me. He committed a murder in front of a crowd, everybody saw. Someone called the security guards from nearby, and the police, the security guards, and also some brave and warm-hearted passersby all chased after him. They caught him quickly. The knife was in his hand, there was blood splashed on him. There was nothing worth investigating. I never thought that someone

could play a trick with a case like this. The guy in the mental hospital didn't know anything, he couldn't even understand human speech. At first glance he looked like the man who'd killed my husband, but he didn't have that scar on his arm!"

## CHAPTER 165 - Edmond Dantès XXXVI

“The first Picture Album Project included six unsolved cases and one additional case of an incompetent killer, seven ‘unsatisfactory’ cases altogether. The major suspects died under unusual circumstances one after another. The seventh case, the killing of Zhu Feng’s husband Yu Bin, was rather special.” Luo Wenzhou took an old file from Xiao Haiyang. He and Fei Du had only been alone together during the short span on the road. The house had been turned into a stronghold outside of the City Bureau; there were cigarette butts and half-drunk soft drink cans everywhere.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Zhu Feng persists in thinking that the man sent to the mental hospital was swapped out because his physical characteristics didn’t match the killer she encountered at the scene of the crime.”

“The name of this killer who committed murder in broad daylight is Qian Cheng. He lived near the scene of the crime. All the neighbors knew him. Because of his mental impediment, Qian Cheng was unable to live alone. He was still living with his father in his forties. When his father died, he was entrusted to a relative. The relative accepted the money but was very sloppy about taking care of him, only coming to see him once a week, allowing him to wander around everywhere, going through trash when he was hungry. But while he was crazy, the neighbors all said he didn’t spontaneously bother others, and his temper was rather mild. He wasn’t very aggressive. At first, when they heard he’d killed someone, no one believed it.—The person in these photographs is Qian Cheng.”

Xiao Haiyang pointed to the photographs in the old file. One was a photograph from when he’d just been arrested, the man and his ragged clothes both filthy, not looking human at all, like a walking mop. The second, however, was much tidier. He’d been cleaned up, had his head shaved, and been put into a prison uniform. In this one

you could see his face. He looked like a middle-aged man with rather regular features, his expression somewhat strange, not like a normal clear-headed person.

“There are rigorous procedures for a judicial determination that a mental disability makes someone incompetent. Even though the supervision wasn’t so comprehensive over a decade ago, faking it still wouldn’t have been as easy as outsiders imagine. And if someone had disagreed with the outcome of the determination, they could have applied with the court to have another institution issue a view,” Luo Wenzhou said. “This person was established locally, everyone in the area knew him, and they all knew he was crazy. It’s not likely to have been faked.”

“And this was a mental patient who ate garbage,” said another criminal policeman. “He had no money, no backing, not even his relatives minded him. This won’t sound good, but he was a burden. Who would go to the trouble of undertaking such a risk to fake it? I think Zhu Feng is untrustworthy.”

Fei Du quickly read through the description of the case details in the old file—

The killer escaped after the killing...police were dispatched at once... with the help of the warm-hearted crowd...stopped in a little alley... the weapon...bloodstains...

His eyebrows raised, and he suddenly looked at the two photographs Xiao Haiyang had taken out.

“You’re right. The relative treated him as a burden, kept him out of sight and out of mind, wishing he’d disappear. If he went missing, no one would have looked for him,” Fei Du said quietly. “Is there a map from the time of the area where the crime occurred?”

“Yes!” Xiao Haiyang did his work very attentively. Hearing these words, he at once took out an old map densely strewn with marks.

“The crime occurred in a spontaneously-developing little market street. I reviewed the eyewitness testimony. The victim Yu Bin would have been here—he had an altercation with the killer in front of a meat stand at the intersection. Then the dispute escalated. The killer suddenly picked up a knife from the meat stand and stabbed the victim, then fled across the intersection. And by the road, he bumped into Zhu Feng, who’d come back for her keys. After he got up, he kept running, waving the bloody weapon, and crossed the road. A few minutes later, the police and security guards arrived, and a few brave people from the crowd were instructed to help search. About ten to twenty minutes later—that’s what’s written in the eyewitness accounts, there are some differences—the police caught Qian Cheng in a little alley.”

Fei Du said, “Approximately where was he caught?”

Xiao Haiyang looked closely and drew a circle on the map. “It should be here, across from a shantytown about to be torn down.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “What, is there a problem?”

“I think there are two rather reasonable conjectures,” Fei Du said. “First, the substitution of the killer is entirely made up, Zhu Feng’s own nonsense...

“Second, the killer really was switched out, not during the course of the arrest and trial, but before he was arrested.”

Luo Wenzhou stared, then immediately came around. “You’re saying that the person who committed the murder in the street and Qian Cheng, who the police caught at the scene, weren’t the same person?”

“The killer, when he committed the crime, and Qian Cheng, when he was arrested, were both covered in blood, dressed up like typical tramps, their features indistinct. As long as their physical characteristics were similar, in an emergency like that, it would be normal for passersby who weren’t friends with him not to spot the difference.”

Xiao Haiyang said, “Qian Cheng was a mental patient with no one to look after him. He had no friends.”

Fei Du went on, “And at the time, apart from the eyewitness testimony, there was also the conclusive evidence of the bloody clothes and the weapon. If, as Haiyang says, there was a time lapse between the killer fleeing and finally being caught, it wouldn’t have been hard to play a trick in between.—He’d need to find a place to stay ahead of time in the shantytown about to be torn down, tie up the scapegoat Qian Cheng, furiously flee everyone’s field of vision after the killing, run into the shantytown, wipe his own fingerprints, and give the bloody clothes and murder weapon to Qian Cheng.

“A tramp appears wearing the bloody clothes and holding the murder weapon. If someone yells out, ‘There’s the killer!’ the people pursuing the killer will immediately subconsciously chase him, and they’ll think they’ve caught the killer. Anyway, the lunatic couldn’t even talk. He wouldn’t be able to work out clearly what was happening, never mind explaining himself.” Fei Du paused. “To kill someone in public without leaving a trace, you only need to plan an appropriate escape route. If nothing goes wrong, it’s much more workable than buying off all the public security organs.”

Xiao Haiyang shuddered at his words.

“All of Qian Cheng’s neighbors said that while he was abnormal, his nature was gentle, and Zhu Feng said in her confession that Yu Bin wasn’t of a disposition to get into altercations. Neither seems like the



sort of person to start fighting in the street over a trifle,” Fei Du said quietly. “It was premeditated murder.”

“But...why would someone want to kill an ordinary art teacher?”

“That’s a crucial question.” Fei Du looked up at Luo Wenzhou. “Also, who was the person killed in the mental hospital? Was it the real killer? Or was it the unfortunate scapegoat Qian Cheng?”

“It was Qian Cheng,” Xiao Haiyang said. “Qian Cheng’s basic information was recorded when he was arrested, and of course there would need to be an autopsy to confirm the identity of the corpse. If he’d been switched for someone else, it would have come out long ago. And Zhu Feng says that her husband’s killer got away. She won’t acknowledge that the person who died in the mental hospital was Yu Bin’s real killer—what’s the problem with that?”

Fei Du said, “If the above conjectures are correct, then it must not have been The Reciter who killed Qian Cheng, because he was innocent.”

“You think The Reciter doesn’t kill innocent people?” Luo Wenzhou’s expression was somewhat grim. “So Chen Zhen, Feng Bin, and Xiao...”

“No,” Fei Du interrupted him, “The Reciter wouldn’t use this ceremonial method to kill an innocent person.”

As he spoke, he stood up and walked up to the balcony connected to the living room. Fragmentary sounds of fireworks rose far off. The city center wasn’t being strictly managed this year, and quite a few people were furtively letting off fireworks ahead of time, filling the sky, which had cleared up briefly, with curling smoke.

“I can now roughly give a simple psychological profile of The Reciter.”

Fei Du closed his eyes slightly. In the depths of his memory, the man who had appeared like a specter in Fei Chengyu's basement displayed a secretive smile. He was tall and sturdy, his eye sockets deep, with thick, indissoluble shadows in his eyes... They were sharp, cold, and resentful.

“The Reciter was once a mutual aid organization composed of victims. Over long periods, trauma that doesn't receive proper treatment harms a person's sense of trust, sometimes followed by hyper-vigilance and aggression. It can change a person's character, make them alienated, unsociable, increasingly separated from the rest of society. Only facing a crowd of people who have encountered similar things will they feel a sense of belonging—that's why a mutual aid organization is beneficial.

“But ordinary mutual aid organizations create a comparatively comfortable environment where traumatized people can lessen their stress, accept reality, and slowly leave their small social circle and return to ordinary life with the guidance of professionals and mutual positive reinforcement. They aren't for steeping in others' negative reinforcement, aggravating their own separation from the outside world, finally developing into a sealed off, isolated group that has wiped out individual awareness.

“The materials studying group psychology are numerous. The famous September Massacres in Paris and the Rwandan Genocide are both typical cases, and The Reciter's originator is an expert in the field. The group he has successfully created is like this.—They believe themselves to be persecuted, to be righteous. Their hyper-vigilance is constantly being strengthened. Their initial hatred towards those who harmed them has overflowed like a bowl filled to the brim with water, spreading to everyone in the outside world.—They feel that injustice is society's fault, the fault of each person in that society. And as for the police, who ought to uphold justice, they're useless, neglectful of their duty, committing unforgivable sins.

“In the end, the people outside the group are objectified and can easily become the props of revenge. Even harming the innocent will be regarded as a necessary sacrifice on the road to revenge and justice.” Fei Du’s gaze swept over all the police officers containing their anger. “But a ‘prop of revenge’ and a ‘target of revenge’ are different. To increase the group’s cohesiveness, they have to have a certain faith. Fostering faith like that requires a sense of ceremony—for example, acting out ‘a tooth for a tooth’ on the criminals, making them die in the manner of their crime.”

“You mean that the originator of The Reciter, Fan Siyuan, was already planning this group starting from the first person he killed during the first Picture Album Project,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Killing was part of his plan. He didn’t lose his mind out of ‘gazing into the abyss.’”

“No,” Fei Du said. “This group has a stable structure. Its members are few, cohesive, very loyal. This was consciously planned and cultivated by Fan Siyuan. In the beginning, when he killed unpunished suspects acting as a ‘vigilante,’ it wasn’t out of a sense of righteous indignation. If Fan Siyuan had early contact with Zhu Feng, he must have realized that the person in the mental hospital wasn’t the real killer, and there would be no point in killing him.”

“The time when Zhu Feng broke into the mental hospital is very close to the time when Qian Cheng was killed in the end.” Luo Wenzhou muttered to himself for a moment, then said, “Could it have been like this? The real killer heard Zhu Feng’s accusation and realized that his substitution hadn’t been so seamless. Things had just started going wrong with the Picture Album Project then, so he used that case for his own advantage—giving the unconscious impression that since Qian Cheng had been killed for revenge, he was the real killer. First impressions are the strongest, and no one would look into it more closely later.”

Xiao Haiyang swiftly jumped up. “So the murder of Zhu Feng’s husband Yu Bin was arranged by the mole in the City Bureau!”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Go investigate Yu Bin’s social contacts when he was alive, the school, the students he taught, where he went.”

Xiao Haiyang hopped to it.

Then another criminal police officer asked, “Captain Luo, is there someone we suspect of being the mole? Should we go keep an eye on him?”

Before Luo Wenzhou could speak, Fei Du looked at the time.

“There’s no need now,” Fei Du said. “It’s nearly time. Someone will get to it.”

After seeing Fei Du off, the investigator who had been responsible for him couldn’t resist going back to carefully review the surveillance record of Fei Du.—It was very long, several hours of chat with different people, the information confused and disorderly. First he found the part concerned with Pan Yunteng and went through it from beginning to end. Just as Fei Du had said, it was all bewildered students asking about him and sending their regards; there was nothing of value. The investigator was somewhat disappointed and was planning to abandon it when he faintly thought there was something sticking like a fishbone in his throat.

While combing through it once more from beginning to end, he suddenly noticed something and hit pause and replay.

On the screen, a rather delicate expression flashed over Fei Du’s face. Then, seeming deliberately calm, he replied with a voice message: “I haven’t. What problem could there be?”

The investigator paused. Then he replayed Fei Du’s whole conversation with this “Philosopher” from the beginning once more. Then he called a technician—Fei Du hadn’t put on headphones, and

he hadn't pressed the phone close to his ear when listening to the voice messages. Over the listening device, you could faintly hear a male voice. When the technician had increased the volume, the voice messages "The Philosopher" had sent Fei Du became very clear.

The key term "Zhang Ting" made the investigator give a start.

Meanwhile, Zhou Huaijin, who had quietly returned to the old Zhou family house, was after all the only heir of the Zhou family. Very efficiently, he had already found where a former assistant of Zhou Yahou's from thirty-eight years ago had ended up.

## CHAPTER 166 - Edmond Dantès XXXVII

“Zhou Yahoo’s assistant comes from a collateral branch of the Zhou family. His Chinese name is Zhou Chao. After Zhou Junmao came to power, this person was arrested and sent to prison due to misappropriating company funds,” Zhou Huaijin said as he looked at a map. “Later, because he injured someone in prison and then attempted to break out, his prison sentence was constantly extended. I went through a bunch of people and found a bit of a lead. Supposedly this person is still alive. He’s over seventy. He changed his name after getting out of prison and has been hiding in a small town in C—. By coincidence, he got out of prison the same year Zheng Kaifeng gave Zhou Junmao the fake DNA test result. Do you think...”

Lu Jia was holding an ice cream, looking around pensively. Hearing this, he smiled. “Very likely. Your mom also mistakenly thought you weren’t Zhou Junmao’s biological child. For the sake of protecting you, a mother would do anything. It’s entirely possible this Zhou Chao hasn’t been found because she hid him.”

Having gone through the life and death chase in Yan City, as soon as Lu Jia’s big head started revolving vigilantly, Zhou Huaijin felt nervous. He quickly started looking wildly around, too. “What is it? We aren’t being followed again, are we?”

Lu Jia smiled, narrowing his eyes. “You just noticed? I figure they got their eyes on you as soon as you got back to your old house.”

“What?!”

The night before, giving “too many people, I don’t want to be a bother” as his reason, Lu Jia hadn’t gone back to the old house with Zhou Huaijin, only sending two bodyguards to accompany him. The rest had gone ahead to arrange the hotel.

Zhou Huaijin hadn't minded at the time, because having managed to return to a familiar place, he'd relaxed in spite of himself and slept soundly. He absolutely hadn't expected that the people who wanted to kill him would have followed him here like malevolent spirits.

Zhou Huaijin quickly twisted his head towards Lu Jia. "You already knew that..."

"Relax, they wouldn't have touched you yesterday." Lu Jia licked the ice cream. As if his tongue was barbed, half the ice cream disappeared in one lick. "They don't have as many connections here as you do. First they have to work out who you're looking for, bide their time, then catch you both in one go."

Zhou Huaijin: "..."

He couldn't see what about this merited relaxing.

Messily licking the ice cream, Lu Jia put his arm over Zhou Huaijin's shoulders, not letting him look around left and right, pushing him forward. "You haven't noticed that all my people are here? Let's go. You may not trust be able to trust me, but can't you trust President Fei?"

The place where this old man who had worked for Zhou Yahu lived was very remote, a rundown little compound, totally undecorated. The gate had just been swept, so it was at least clean. Lu Jia shot a look at one of his cronies, and a few people scattered smartly, lying low in the backyard.

Then Zhou Huaijin walked over and knocked on the door. After a moment, a female foreigner inside asked who was there over the intercom at the door.

Zhou Huaijin looked at Lu Jia. Lu Jia nodded, indicating that he should tell the truth. So he cleared his throat and announced Zhou

Chao's alias. "May I ask whether he lives here? My surname is Zhou. I'm the son of an old friend of his."

There was silence inside for a while. Then an East Asian-looking middle-aged woman stuck out her head and looked nervously at the crowd of uninvited guests. With a very forced smile, she said, "I think you're talking about the person who used to live here. We only moved in last month."

Zhou Huaijin frowned and took a photograph of an old man from his pocket. "Could you please tell me whether you've seen the previous resident? Is this him?"

The woman hesitated. Waffling, she took the photograph. Maybe she was face-blind or something; she looked it over for an age, then haltingly said, "I'm not really sure..."

Just then, there was an explosive shout in the backyard: "Stop!"

The woman's hand shook; the alarm on her face couldn't be hidden any longer. The photograph fell to the ground—she had been buying time!

Lu Jia looked over calmly and saw a white-headed old man climbing over the backyard hedge like a character in a martial arts film. While the housekeeper had been distracting the uninvited guests at the door, the venerable old fellow had seized the opportunity to make a break for it. You could see he didn't suffer from arthritis; his legs were nimble enough for parkour.

Lu Jia stretched out his neck and sighed feelingly. "Wow, that one's old but vigorous!"

Unfortunately, Zhou Chao hadn't expected that the people who'd come to find him would have prepared ahead of time. As soon as they saw him show his face, the people lying in wait in the backyard



swarmed up and quickly caught the old man who was fleeing as quickly as a hare. Lu Jia bent down and picked up the photograph the woman had dropped. He'd wanted to say something, but searching his guts and his belly, he found that of the foreign language he'd learned at school, only "thank you," "goodbye," and "good morning" remained; he could only shut his mouth like a great immortal, displaying an enigmatic smile.

This scene was photographed.

Not far behind Lu Jia and the others, in an unobtrusive white business car, a man in full battle gear put down his binoculars, adjusted the angle of his sniper rifle, and sent out the photograph of Zhou Huaijin, Lu Jia, and the crowd of people holding down the old man. He asked his employer, "Confirmation? We have to act."

In Yan City, China, separated by many hours' time difference from the small town in C—, darkness had already fallen.

Zhang Chunjiu picked up the phone, listened for a moment without making a sound, then suddenly raised his head and said heavily to Zhang Chunling, "Someone went to look for Donglai at the office."

To hoodwink the public, after they'd secretly sent Zhang Donglai and his sister away, Zhang Chunjiu had found someone to pretend to be Zhang Donglai and come and go from the office as usual—there weren't many people in the office now, and nothing to do. The fake Zhang Donglai, wearing a face mask and dark glasses, wouldn't have a problem going under the radar as long as he avoided saying too much to the employees on duty, creating the false impression that everything was as usual at the Chunlai Conglomerate...as long as no one went to look for him on purpose.

Why had the investigation team suddenly wanted to find Zhang Donglai?

Who had leaked?

The two brothers exchanged a look. Zhang Chunjiu quickly pulled open the curtains and looked out. The city's evening lights had been lit, passing through the hazy mist, jubilantly filling the air. It was a tranquil and auspicious scene.

So tranquil it made a person have an ominous premonition.

Someone knocked gently on the door and said gravely, "Chairman Zhang, we've located Zhou Huaijin. He's found an old man called Zhou Chao. We'd like to request guidance. Should we move at once?"

Zhang Chunling took a phone from his hand and saw the photograph that had been sent over; it was very clear. The old ethnically Chinese man was looking at Zhou Huaijin in alarm. His face had changed, and it was ashen pale, but after all these years Zhang Chunling still recognized him at a glance. "It's one of Zhou Yahou's people. He came to Heng'an."

Zhang Chunjiu seized the phone. "Why is he still alive? What were Zhou Junmao and Zheng Kaifeng up to all those years?"

"I don't think it's so strange. Zheng Kaifeng was greedy and lecherous, Zhou Junmao was indecisive, the two of them were as close as brothers but divided at heart under an appearance of harmony, and there was Zhou Yahou's woman in the middle. It's normal for a slip-up to happen.—Don't be impatient. We can take this opportunity to eradicate the trouble at its roots. Tell them to move." Unhurriedly, Zhang Chunling said, "It's fine, I don't believe they can have any evidence, and I don't believe they can dig up the traces of things that happened forty years ago. So what if Donglai isn't there? Which of the nation's laws am I violating by sending my son abroad?"

Zhang Chunjiu focused. "Dage, you should get away."

“What about you?” Zhang Chunling said noncommittally.

“The investigation isn’t over yet. Leaving now would amount to a confession. I’ll stay to take care of the follow-up,” Zhang Chunjiu said. “Don’t worry, I can extricate myself.”

Zhang Chunling looked at him deeply.

“Dage,” Zhang Chunjiu suddenly said out of nowhere, “I remember back then it was also winter, and you...you hid me in the coal basket. There was soot everywhere, I got covered all over, my face all black, and I watched from the basket...”

Zhang Chunling’s expression changed. He interrupted him. “Enough. What are you talking about that for?”

Zhang Chunjiu lowered his head. The wind and frost of over fifty years had forged for him a copper skin and iron bones. He was shifty and inconstant, all-conquering. The seemingly eternal fold in the center of his forehead temporarily relaxed for a moment. He took a coat from the clothes rack and respectfully put it on Zhang Chunling, then passed him a scarf. He said, “That’s true, what am I talking about it for? Dage, be safe on your way.”

Zhang Chunling hesitated for a moment, took the scarf, and made a gesture at his subordinates. A few people followed him, silently filing out.

Lang Qiao’s phone began to vibrate. She looked down and saw that it was her father asking when her lengthy overtime would be over and whether she would have time to visit relatives with her parents for the Spring Festival. Before she could reply, she saw the old director of teaching affairs beckoning to her, carrying a ring of keys.

“Sorry, teacher.” Lang Qiao quickly put her personal phone back in her pocket. “I’ve made you go to the trouble of coming out in the

middle of the night right before the New Year.”

Following Zhu Feng’s evidence, Lang Qiao had found the Fourth Middle School, where the art teacher Yu Bin had taught.

“It’s all right. The children have gone traveling, and it’s just the two of us left. I’m taking this as a bit of exercise after dinner,” the old director said. “Ah, it’s been over a decade. I didn’t think anyone would still come to investigate Teacher Yu’s case. It was too tragic. Such a nice young fellow, it’s heart-breaking just to mention.—Well, here we are.”

Lang Qiao looked up and saw that “Art Classroom” was written on the door.

“In recent years we’ve been pursuing higher education entrance rates. The physical education classes are still getting by, but music and arts classes are basically just for show,” the old director said. “When Teacher Yu was here, the school had specially enrolled art students. Later the policy changed and our school stopped enrolling them. The art classroom is used for visitors now... Let me see if it’s this key.”

Saying so, the door creaked open. An uninhabited smell assaulted the senses.

The old director turned on the lights and pointed at a portrait in oils hanging on the wall. “Look, that was painted by Teacher Yu.”

Lang Qiao stared. She was a layman who couldn’t tell the difference between good and bad painting. She only thought this portrait was very realistic, so realistic she could tell at a glance that the beautifully smiling girl in the picture had exactly the same phoenix eyes and dimples as Zhu Feng. She was wearing a dress, her eyes curved as she smiled at someone outside of the painting. It gave a person a favorable impression.

There was a label under the oil painting with the title, artist, and date on it.

Yu Bin had painted it fifteen years ago. The name of the painting was “Dream Partner.”

Now, the immortal smiling face in the painting remained, but the person outside the painting had become a hideous woman filled with rancor.

“Here.” The director of teaching affairs opened a display cabinet and said to Lang Qiao, “Young lady, come over here and have a look—is this what you’re looking for?”

Lang Qiao quickly went over. The director showed her a displayed certificate of merit. “Before Teacher Yu died, he took his students to paint from life. One of the students entered a painting he did at the time in a contest and got an award. One certificate went to the student and one to the teacher...but sadly Teacher Yu was gone soon after they returned. He didn’t have time to see this certificate. Teacher Yu’s spouse wasn’t in a very good mental state then. Seeing his things hurt her, so these stayed here at the school.”

Lang Qiao took the certificate. There was a reproduction of the award-winning work attached to the certificate. It was a very beautiful seaside landscape. Inside the certificate was a yellowed strip of paper that fell out as soon as it was opened.

“That was written by the student. He was on very good terms with Teacher Yu.”

Lang Qiao put on gloves and carefully unfolded the paper. Written on it was: “Facing the sea, spring has come and the flowers are in bloom. In memory of our last visit to Binhai with Teacher Yu.”

Yu Bin had gone to Binhai before his death!

Lang Qiao's pupils contracted slightly. "Teacher, can you contact this student for me?"

## CHAPTER 167 - Edmond Dantès XXXVIII

“Specs! Haiyang! Do you have a car right now?... Come with me to the airport, right now, immediately!”

Lang Qiao hurriedly summoned Xiao Haiyang—it wasn’t so easy to find a student who’d graduated over a decade ago. The director of teaching affairs, wearing reading glasses, had spent ages going through the student roster. The teachers who had taught this student had either retired or left; he’d spent a full hour calling around everywhere asking. When he’d finally contacted the former art student himself, it was nearly midnight.

The art student was at the airport, preparing to go traveling with his family; apparently it was an overnight flight.

Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang sped over, charging into the McDonald’s they’d arranged to meet at ahead of time.

After midnight, the fast food restaurant was full of exhausted travelers. It was very quiet. Some people were resting their eyes, using their bags as pillows. Those who were still awake weren’t communicating with each other; all of them had set up their phones and computers. At a glance, this seemed like a still, empty space. Xiao Haiyang had been dragged the whole way by Lang Qiao and was gasping for breath like a sick dog. Each of his steps rammed into the ground, disturbing quite a few lightly-sleeping backpackers. Escorted by angry looks the whole way, they finally found Yu Bin’s student in a corner.

The senior middle school student from over a decade ago was now an adult, over thirty. There was a small beard around his lips. Given the expense of his apparel, you could see that his economic situation was pretty good.

“Could I see your credentials?” The man’s bearing was genteel and polite but very cautious. First he asked for Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang’s credentials; he carefully checked the forgery-proofing marks against the light, then slightly apologetically returned their two work IDs. “Sorry.”

“No problem, it’s a citizen’s right.” Lang Qiao got the painting certificate and the strip of paper she’d taken from the school out of her bag. “Are these two items yours?”

“The winning painting was painted by me.” The man looked down at it a little longingly, examining the reproduction on the certificate for a moment. Smiling wryly, he said, “This is an immature work from my school days, but it’s really full of inspiration... Binhai is a very special place. The sea is so wide, but for some reason, it makes you feel wild and empty, especially when the wind rises around dusk. When it pours through the cracks in the reefs, it sounds like someone’s crying. It’s grim and lonesome.”

The two materialists Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao knew all the details about Binhai. Having heard this very artistic description, they shuddered simultaneously.

“I was nearly in my third year of senior middle then. Reasonably speaking, I ought to have been fully focused on specialized classes for preparing for the university entrance exam. When I went to Binhai, it was actually to spend some time with my schoolmates and scribble something for practice. I hadn’t planned on entering any contests. But when the painting was finished, the outcome was unexpectedly good. Teacher Yu loved it and strongly recommended that I submit my name. I didn’t even think of placing. I didn’t expect that by good fortune... I put the paper in there when I sent the certificate back.” At this point, the man was silent for a while, shaking his head somewhat bleakly. “In fact, I’ve sometimes thought over these years, could Binhai be...an evil place, like in folklore? I’m not superstitious, but



sometimes when I see that painting, I feel like there's an inauspicious atmosphere in it."

Lang Qiao got out her notebook. "Could you tell me whether you still remember how many of you went together? How long did you stay in Binhai?"

"Oh...four or five people. Me, our teacher, and some kids from senior middle year one, all special arts students," the man said. "It would have been the weekend. School was pretty tense then, there was no time apart from the weekends. I remember we stayed there two nights... We must have gone on Friday and returned on Sunday."

"Did you stay in Binhai?"

"No, there weren't even any people there at the time. There was nowhere to stay the night. We stayed in an agritourism village nearby—you could call it nearby, but actually you still had to drive over half an hour. We rented a car there. We'd find a view during the day, then go back to the village to rest in the evening."

Lang Qiao quickly followed up, "When you were painting at Binhai, did you encounter any unusual people or events?"

The man looked up at her and opened his mouth, but his answer was evasive. "Actually, Officer Lang, the reason I agreed to wait here to see you today is that someone asked me that same question before."

Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang froze simultaneously.

"Sorry, that's also why I carefully checked your credentials before," the man said. "After Teacher Yu died, more than a year later, around when I was in my first year of university, a person came to find me. Male, very tall, middle-aged, said he was a police officer handling Teacher Yu's case.—I don't know how to describe it, I just inexplicably

felt a little afraid of him. You may have noticed that I'm kind of sensitive. Anyway, I didn't quite dare to look him in the eye."

"What did he talk to you about?"

"He said he wanted to ask me about a few things connected to Teacher Yu's murder. I thought it was very strange. The killer who murdered Teacher Yu had been arrested, hadn't he? What was there to ask? But this person said that there were some things that weren't as simple as they seemed on the surface. He suspected that there was some plot behind Teacher Yu's murder, and that it had to do with our trip to Binhai."

Xiao Haiyang asked, "What was this police officer's name?"

"He was called Gu Zhao."

Xiao Haiyang's elbow shook, knocking over a cup of coke on the table. Ice cubes spilled over the table. His expression was disbelieving. "What did you say?"

"Gu Zhao—the 'Zhao' that's golden knife.<sup>12</sup> If I recall correctly, that was his name. What's wrong?"

Xiao Haiyang's fingers shook unconsciously. "Can you...can you describe his appearance? What did he look like? Around thirty-five, thin, about a meter seventy-five..."

"I couldn't really tell his age, but I think he would have been a little older. He was over a meter seventy-five tall." The man recalled carefully for a moment. "When I started university, my physical measured me as a meter seventy-nine, and he was taller than me. And when he was standing in front of me, he gave me a very oppressive feeling. A square face, pretty distinguished-looking. What, do you know him? So was he a fake police officer or not?"

As he gave the description, Xiao Haiyang's expression changed a few times. First it was lost; then a faint anger rose—that wasn't Gu Zhao. Over a year after Yu Bin was murdered, Gu Zhao had already died suffering an injustice, and someone had dared to use his identity to go around deceiving people!

He instantly felt as though the cleanest place in his heart had been sullied. If Xiao Haiyang had had fur, perhaps he would have bristled up into a ball. He clenched his fists with a crack and coldly said, "No, he was fake. What did he ask you?"

"Like you, he asked very carefully who'd gone to Binhai, how the trip had been arranged, whether we met anyone on the way, whether anything particular happened. I said I didn't remember, and that man thought about it, then asked me, 'Did your Teacher Yu ever go out alone?'"

Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao exchanged a look—yes, if Yu Bin's killing really was connected to his trip to Binhai, why had none of the students who'd gone with him been harmed? The criminals didn't have the bottom-line principle of not killing minors, so it was likely he'd encountered something while acting alone.

"As soon as he said that, I did remember. There was such a time. The night before we left, because we'd talked it over and agreed to set out first thing the next morning, Teacher Yu told everyone to make sure to pack up our things. Then a female student suddenly couldn't find her camera. We helped her remember, and we thought it was likely she'd left it at the painting spot we'd picked out. For a student, a camera is a valuable object. As soon as Teacher Yu heard, he went to find it for her. Because it was already late, he didn't take the student. He drove over by himself and scraped someone's car on the way. I only found out when I saw him settle the account for the rental car. That person calling himself Gu Zhao..."

Xiao Haiyang suddenly interrupted him. “Don’t call him by that name.”

The man and Lang Qiao both stared. Xiao Haiyang came back to himself and lowered his head slightly. “I’m sorry, but he wasn’t Gu Zhao. Please don’t call him by that name.”

Though he was being as polite as possible, his speech was still very stiff. Lang Qiao wanted to mediate, but the man was very understanding. He said, “Oh, I see. So he was using the name of a police officer of good moral standing and reputation? So I’ll just say ‘the fake police officer.’”

Hearing the expression “good moral standing and reputation,” Xiao Haiyang didn’t know what he felt.

“The fake police officer asked me to tell him who my teacher ran into. But I didn’t know. I wasn’t there. I only heard him say that it was dark, and his mind was wandering a little. When he was passing over a seaside cliff, a car suddenly came out of the woods. He didn’t react at once and accidentally ran into their door. Though they must have been nice people. They didn’t say anything, but my teacher felt very sorry. He insisted on going after them and giving them his contact information, telling them to send him the receipts for the repair work and the paint job. It was just a little matter. The accident came to a peaceful resolution. Teacher Yu was a sensible person.”

Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao exchanged a look.

Xiao Haiyang said, “Do you remember their license plate number?”

“Teacher Yu may have remembered, but he wouldn’t have gone out of his way to tell me.” The man spread his hands.

That was fair. In spite of himself, Xiao Haiyang was somewhat disappointed. But Lang Qiao said, “How did you know the person

who questioned you before was a fake police officer?”

“But...”

“Before leaving, I remembered something and wanted to tell him, but when I looked back, I saw that that man’s face was frighteningly grim, completely different from his genial expression before. There was an anti-fraud campaign going on at school at the time, and I suddenly felt uneasy and asked him for his ID—though I didn’t have any common sense at the time and couldn’t tell whether the credentials were real or fake. I furtively went through the anti-fraud tips the political teacher had sent out on my phone, and I saw that the first thing was ‘police officers normally act in pairs when gathering evidence, so be careful if you meet one acting alone.’”

Lang Qiao said, “What did you want to tell him?”

“It was the drawing,” the man said. “Teacher Yu was very diligent. He always had his sketchbook on him. When he saw something touching, he’d draw it. When we went to Binhai, he’d just used up his sketchbook, and there were a few drawings on loose paper... Contour drawings of the courtyard in the agritourism village, things like that. I asked for them before we left, and I found there was a sketch of a man and a woman. I’d never seen those two people before. I guessed they were the people he’d run into when he went out that night.”

Xiao Haiyang said, “Do you still have the drawing?”

“It’s a relic of Teacher Yu. Of course I’ve preserved it.”

When Luo Wenzhou took Xiao Haiyang’s phone call, Little Glasses was simply babbling.

“We’re outside his house, going to collect the evidence now!”

Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Have you two thanked the man?”

Xiao Haiyang only now remembered that Yu Bin's student had planned to leave Yan City on an overnight flight. He quickly turned to the man draped with luggage. "This...isn't making you miss your flight, is it?"

"The plane's already taken off." The man shrugged. "My spouse went on ahead with both our parents."

"Then..."

"It's all right, I'll see whether I can transfer to another flight. If I can't get a ticket, then I'll forget about it. It's only a vacation. It won't kill me to miss going once. But if there really is some hidden plot in Teacher Yu's murder, can you call me when you finish the case and tell me?" The former art student said, "Teacher Yu was very good to me. If I can do something for him, whether it's useful or not, my conscience will be easy. I think he should have enjoyed a long life."

Luo Wenzhou turned his head to look at the surveillance feed from the interrogation room. A criminal police officer was interrogating Zhu Feng about the case at Yufen Middle School.

"You dressed up as a school janitor and used a recording to mislead Wang Xiao. Who instigated you? Did you know what you were doing?"

Zhu Feng didn't answer. She only sneered.

"You say that your aim was to uncover Lu Guosheng and the place where he was hiding. Fine," the criminal police officer said, "but did you know that this would lead a boy's death? He not only died, he died without an intact corpse!"

Zhu Feng looked at him expressionlessly, the lines from her nose to her chin pulling the corners of her mouth down.

“Since you were shadowing Wang Xiao, didn’t you know about the schoolyard violence that child was experiencing? And you not only looked on unconcerned, you also used her?”

Zhu Feng flattened her lips and coldly said, “She didn’t die, did she?”

“What did you say?”

“A dozen wounds. Da-Bin was stabbed a dozen times... He didn’t even look human. Didn’t you all look on unconcerned?” Zhu Feng’s voice was hoarse. “She didn’t die. What does she have to complain about?”

For some reason, Luo Wenzhou felt these words stick like a fishbone in his throat. He sighed heavily, put a cigarette in his mouth, and walked out of the observation room. He searched all over himself and found that he’d forgotten to put his lighter in his pocket.

Just then, there was a click next to him, and a tiny flame appeared in front of him.

Luo Wenzhou turned his head. Fei Du had found a lighter somewhere. He asked him, “Need a light?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

He choked for a moment, then silently waved a hand, putting the cigarette away. Just then, his phone vibrated. Xiao Haiyang had sent him a picture. Luo Wenzhou opened it and had a look, finding that it was a pencil sketch. The paper was yellowed. The drawing was in a plastic folder, preserved pretty well. There were a man and a woman drawn in it, with the date and Yu Bin’s signature in the corner.

It was drawn very vividly. When he’d seen it, Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Su Hui, and...”

Fei Du looked over. “The head of the Chunlai Conglomerate.”

Over a decade ago, when Zhang Chunling and Su Hui had been traveling to Binhai through the night, they had been hit by the art teacher Yu Bin, returning to find something for his student.

What had they been going to do?

Had there been a girl’s corpse in the trunk?

Had Su Hui acted as Zheng Kaifeng’s contact with Zhang Chunling, so when Yu Bin had run into her with Zhang Chunling, for the sake of security, Zheng Kaifeng’s contact been changed to Yang Bo’s mother Zhuo Yingchun?

Luo Wenzhou knocked on the wall with his fist. “A drawing... It’s preposterous, and we can’t even verify whether this was drawn by Yu Bin himself, or on what occasion it was drawn. Even if my own dad ran the courts and the procuratorate, he still couldn’t give me an arrest warrant based on this... Master Fei, what have you got to smile about?”

“I may have something you can use here,” Fei Du said.



## CHAPTER 168 - Edmond Dantès XXXIX

A small town in C—.

The barrel of the hidden sniper's gun swept over Lu Jia and Zhou Huaijin, then aimed at the old man Zhou Chao, who had been pushed into the yard. The sniper shot a look at the car full of his accomplices—first shoot the old fart who should already have been dead, then get rid of the ticking time bomb Zhou Huaijin. The rest could be taken care of in batches.

In the yard, Zhou Chao, full of terror, was just yelling something. Lu Jia blankly asked Zhou Huaijin, “What’s this fake Western devil yelling about?”

“He’s praising you as a bandit,” Zhou Huaijin said solemnly.

“Oh, really?” Hearing this, Lu Jia straightened his collar and stood at attention. “I’ll get uncomfortable if he keeps praising me like that.—Old Mr. Zhou, if you absolutely won’t cooperate, that’s all right, although...”

His gaze focused on a small red dot flashing on Zhou Chao’s face.

“Down!”

The young person holding Zhou Chao had been prepared. His reaction was extremely quick. He held down the old man’s head, pulling him out of the way. Immediately afterward, a revolving bullet brushed the old man’s white hair, breaking the window behind him with a whistle. The East Asian housekeeper’s screaming formed a duet with Zhou Chao’s babbling cries.

“Fuck, not even any advance notice. These people leave the country and suddenly they’re running wild!” Lu Jia grabbed Zhou Huaijin

with one hand and the East Asian housekeeper with the other and swiftly kicked open the door, charging into Zhou Chao's house.

As he was involuntarily pulled by him, Zhou Huaijin inappropriately remembered a line of lyrics—a chicken in the left hand, a duck in the right hand<sup>13</sup>.

Just then, there were three honks of a car horn in the back yard. Lu Jia whistled and called out, "Coming!" Laden down, he used Zhou Chao's house as cover, carrying them through. A truck with a container was waiting behind to pick them up. "Lao Lu!"

Lu Jia sighed. "Sorry, a fault in my planning, we'll have to trouble the old fellow to jump the hedge again."

Before he'd finished, Zhou Chao, Zhou Huaijin, and the little housekeeper all cried out at the same time as they were thrown over. After their first sneak attack had failed, the armed ruffians quickly encircled, the concentrated sounds of gunshots constantly drawing closer.

In these circumstances, even Zhou Chao had no choice. He scrambled up into Lu Jia's evil truck.

"Where's Da-Zhao?" Lu Jia brought up the rear, slamming the container door. One dangerous bullet after another hit the metal door, denting part of it. He hollered at someone, "What are you still dodging and hiding for? If you waste any more time, we'll all get shot into sieves!"

Before he'd finished, the sounds of motor vehicle engines came from every direction. A few persistent cars had already gone around Zhou Chao's yard. The truck looked very stocky, and in fact wasn't very nimble. It had no room to advance or retreat.

They had probably realized that Lu Jia had been prepared. For the sake of fighting a quick battle, they became increasingly frenzied. Two small-scale SUVs came up on either side. There were guns on both cars. Amidst the wildly flying bullets, the truck's driver sharply turned the steering wheel. The people in the container instantly felt like they'd been thrown into a washing machine spin cycle, tumbling together into a heap.

Outside were the sounds of guns, of car wheels screeching, of collisions. Adding in the screams and groans inside the container... there was no need to open your eyes; you could imagine a soul-stirring scene of lives hanging by a thread.

The truck had dodged the formidable enemy ahead, but it hadn't dodged the pursing troops behind. The heavily burdened container truck was rear-ended with a huge bang. Zhou Chao was scared into clutching his head and wetting himself.

Zhou Huaijin was also so shaken he wanted to throw up, fingers convulsively clutching at the container's wall, clenching his teeth and bracing his arms, displaying a boxing defense movement he'd picked up from TV; perhaps he was planning to demonstrate blocking bullets bare-handed.

But while his heart rose to his throat, the second strike he anticipated didn't come. After being hit, the truck didn't linger, instead hurrying ahead, breaking out of the encirclement. And the bumping outside actually vanished!

For a good while, the only sounds in the container were rough gasping for breath and Zhou Chao's tearful muttering. No one spoke. Then someone turned on the lights inside the container. Zhou Huaijin wiped the cold sweat from the corners of his forehead, exchanging helpless looks with a crowd of companions who'd just survived disaster.

Lu Jia, however, was extremely composed, not a bit panicked. He looked very calmly at Zhou Huaijin. “You doing all right?”

“Not bad.” Zhou Huaijin smiled wryly. “I think I’ll be used to it soon... What’s going on now?”

“It’s safe now, don’t worry. They wouldn’t dare to keep chasing.” Lu Jia carelessly rolled up his sleeves and disdainfully lifted Zhou Chao. “Old uncle, you’re in good health, but your psychological quality won’t do.”

“Wouldn’t dare to chase? Why?” The container was sealed off, the circumstances outside unseen. Zhou Huaijin made a connection with the “Da-Zhao” Lu Jia had shouted to, in spite of himself developing some abundant imaginings about the driver. “What were you preparing at the hotel last night? Does the driver have some kind of murder weapon?”

A cannon? A rocket? Or a biological explosive?

In spite of himself, Zhou Huaijin became deeply anxious. “It can’t be too flashy. There’ll be trouble if you alert the police here.”

“Nothing so Westernized,” Lu Jia said after a moment of speechlessness, waving a hand at him and modestly saying, “An indigenous method.”

Zhou Huaijin displayed a vigorous desire for instruction. “What indigenous method?”

“Have you ever gotten one of those mysterious prank calls when you were at home?” Lu Jia smiled at him. In an atrocious accent, he said, “Your son’s life is in my hands.”

At the villa where Zhang Donglai and his sister were staying, Zhang Ting was staring emptily out the window. She still felt this was very

unreal, and she was faintly uneasy. Every time she remembered that she was thousands of miles from home without anyone to talk to, she couldn't resist feeling distressed.

Just then, urgent footsteps suddenly came from outside the door. Someone knocked on her door twice, then almost rudely opened it before Zhang Ting had answered. Zhang Ting turned to look in astonishment and saw the "steward" who'd accompanied them the whole way, his face green. He asked her, "Miss Zhang, do you know where your brother has gone?"

The curtains were drawn in Zhang Donglai's room, and the door had been shut starting last night. He'd picked up two bottles of wine before going into the room, looking like he was planning to drink himself into a stupor and sleep for twenty-four hours to adjust to the time difference.

Everyone was well aware of Zhang Donglai's character as one of Yan City's famous useless rich kids and knew he insisted on sleeping late. No one dared to go bother him in the morning. The outcome was that no one knew what time he'd slipped away!

The security here was first-rate. It would have been much too difficult to sneak in and snatch as hefty a fellow as Zhang Donglai without anyone being the wiser—he had to have run off himself.

"Where could he have gone? Who would he contact?"

Zhang Donglai was a stranger in a strange place here. Never mind speaking a foreign language; if he could remember the whole alphabet, he was already doing right by the nine years of compulsory education. You couldn't even have asked him to go out and buy a pack of cigarettes; where could he have run off to?

The Zhang siblings had been sent abroad for their own safety, but while the two of them had been perfectly safe amidst the turmoil at

home, as soon as they arrived at a “safe” place, it turned out to have been a miscalculation, and one had immediately gone missing!

Zhang Ting was too scared to make a sound.

The “steward” who had been ordered to look after them looked down at his cell phone. Someone had just sent him a photograph. In the photograph, Zhang Donglai was lying down curled up with one of the wine bottles he’d taken yesterday lying next to him. His eyes were closed. It was unclear whether he was asleep or... The text under the photograph provided: “If you keep chasing, we’ll have to break him to pieces and return him to you.”

The “steward”’s hand was shaking. Zhang Chunling had just the one darling son, practically his reason for living. Before coming here, orders had come down from above to put the two siblings above everything, and if anything happened to them while he was responsible...

“Does Donglai know Zhou Huaijin?”

“Who?” Zhang Ting was somewhat bewildered. After a while, she finally remembered. “I...I haven’t heard him say so, he only knew one person surnamed Zhou, the one who died a while ago. And they didn’t have many dealings before that. My brother said he was a dumb...a dumb something-or-other.”

When Zheng Kaifeng had been responsible for the Zhou Clan’s Chinese headquarters, Zhou Huaijin, unlike the thoughtless Zhou Huaixin, wouldn’t have shown his face in Zheng Kaifeng’s territory without a compelling need. He practically didn’t return to the country. And he was an elite who had graduated from a famous school, another species from Zhang Donglai and the other idle sons of the wealthy; they wouldn’t piss in the same pot. There was no intersection between them. The “steward” truly couldn’t imagine how Zhou had managed to get Zhang Donglai away.

“What’s the matter?” Zhang Ting’s gaze inadvertently swept over the photograph on his phone, and she grabbed the “steward”’s arm. “Has something happened to my brother? He...he was just fine yesterday, has he been kidnapped?”

The “steward” broke into a cold sweat.

Flustered, Zhang Ting said, “But...but I was right next door, I didn’t hear anything moving. And there are so many people here... If I’d known the public security outside the country was so bad, I wouldn’t have made a fuss about going abroad. Uncle, what are we going to do now? How much money do they want? I’m going to call Dad.”

“No, wait!” The “steward” trembled at her last sentence, quickly squeezing out a smile. “Where are you getting kidnapping from? Your brother may have gone to see a friend. He likes to go out. It’s all right, there’s a tracker on him, set your mind...”

Another photograph arrived before the “steward” had finished speaking. The “steward” couldn’t maintain his forced smile any longer—the tracking devices on Zhang Donglai’s shirt button, belt, and useless phone had all been found and arranged together, not a single one missing. The other side sent a message saying: “Do you want to come and find us?”

His expression sinister, the “steward”’s fingers shook. He responded to the message: “What do you want?”

There was a “ding” as a response came rather quickly to the message; an ID photo was sent over. The “steward” froze, then slowly raised his head. Everyone’s gazes collected on one of the people inside the villa.

The mysterious message said: “I want to swap for this person.”

The “steward” was shaken. This person had been specially transferred by Zhang Chunling, sent out of the country with the siblings to avoid the investigations. He was the one who had had dealings with Su Cheng!

The next mysterious message was a time and an address. “We want him alive. If he isn’t delivered at the stipulated time, we’ll cut something off the little young master and send it to you. No tricks. The little young master is worth more money than this trash.”

Under Zhang Ting’s tearful gaze, the “steward” angrily threw the cell phone.

Yan City—

When the investigation team had secretly turned the focus of the investigation to Zhang Chunjiu once more, Luo Wenzhou had returned to the leaderless City Bureau.

“What do you have?” Luo Wenzhou asked Fei Du.

“This.” Fei Du got out his cell phone full of odds and ends and showed Luo Wenzhou a status update. A friend called “The Philosopher” had posted two photographs captioned “boring.” One was a selfie, and the other was a living room scene, a group of people with a stack of luggage, looking as if they had just finished sorting their things and were planning on a long stay.

“That’s Zhang Donglai?” Luo Wenzhou stared, looked the pictures over, and couldn’t tell anything from them. “Why is he posting photographs now? What’s the matter with this photograph?”

“Of course you don’t know them, but Su Cheng definitely does. He not only knows them, they must have been in quite close contact. After all, they conspired to run me over on my way back to the office to be investigated...”



“What!”

“Shh—” Fei Du touched a finger to Luo Wenzhou’s lips.

Luo Wenzhou’s reaction, however, was to slap him on the back of the head, unfeelingly interrupting Fei Du’s playacting.

Fei Du: “...”

With his perfect hair messed up by Luo Wenzhou, the somewhat secretive smile on President Fei’s face instantly fractured.

“Fei Du, you bastard, didn’t you swear up and down to me that it was all right? And here I fucking thought you were reliable!”

“It was all right.” Fei Du silently backed away a couple of steps to guard against more of Luo Wenzhou’s pawing. “Su Cheng is timid and overthinks things. As soon as he noticed I was on my guard, he’d know the plot had been exposed, and he’d run off immediately. A good-for-nothing like him has no use but to be silenced. But Su Cheng mysteriously disappeared on the way. Given Zhang Chunling’s previous style of handling affairs, he would react at once and arrange a retreat for himself. The people who’d contacted Su Cheng couldn’t have been the wanted criminals he’s been protecting. I guessed that at a time like this, he wouldn’t rashly punish his own trusted aides. The most likely possibility was that he’d send the people who had contacted Su Cheng away, along with his own weak spot to what he thought was a safe place.”

Luo Wenzhou grabbed his collar and yanked Fei Du back to his side. “Zhang Donglai has landed his dad in it too fortuitously.”

“It’s not fortuitous. He trusts me,” Fei Du said. For some reason, he wasn’t smiling now; nor was he using that tone of showing off to the person he liked. He flatly added, “Zhang Donglai is impatient and

can't stand solitude. Suddenly arriving in a strange place, his first reaction would be to complain to someone he thought was trustworthy. I tricked him into leaving. The photograph was taken by someone I had pretend to be a beautiful woman in order to entice him."

"When did you arrange this?"

"On the way back to the office for the investigation," Fei Du said. "Su Cheng was a lure I left on purpose. One of my people was with him, keeping an eye on him."

"Where is Su Cheng now?" Luo Wenzhou said.

From the inside breast pocket of Luo Wenzhou's jacket, Fei Du took the cell phone he'd put there himself and dialed a number. The other party seemed to have been waiting for him. It was picked up as soon as it started ringing.

"Weiwei," Fei Du said in a very soft voice, "it's me."

"President Fei, good heavens, I've been waiting so long for you to call!" The girl's voice came over the speaker, her speech so fast it was a little garbled. "I've been worried to death, is everything going well with Lu-dage and the others? You weren't contacting me... I didn't know what to do!"

Fei Du smiled. "It'll be over soon.—Is your big sister there?"

"She is, wait a moment."

A moment later, a somewhat deep female voice came over the phone. "This is Wei Lan."

Weiwei's biological father had died, and her mother had been an irresponsible drunkard. She'd had a bad reputation locally. When

Weiwei had been little, other children had bullied her, calling her a “prostitute’s whelp.” She had a sister seven years older than her who’d protected her since she was small. She was arrogant and obstinate, dropping out of school young and leaving. She’d wanted to break free of the circumstances, take her little sister away from their hellish home; but circumstances were like a prison. How could it be so easy to break free?

After her big sister left, the young Weiwei’s mother remarried, but her life didn’t change for the better; instead it was adding frost on top of snow. Her beastly stepfather had given the young girl unforgettable nightmares for the rest of her life, until she’d finally gathered her courage and escaped her frightening “home,” helped by Fei Du’s fund.

At first, the fund had helped her search for her long-gone big sister as it looked for a way to get justice for her. But when the evidence had been conclusive and the police had come to the door to arrest him, Weiwei’s stepfather had run away to avoid punishment. Afterwards, his body had been found in a little pool about three kilometers from his house. He’d been stabbed to death. He was entirely naked, some organs cut off his body, soaking upside down in the sludge.

After dealing with the body, the killer had very calmly left, covered in blood. She’d encountered a witness on the way and had even smiled at them. The murder weapon had been stuck into the body’s chest, with the killer’s fingerprints openly on it.

Judging from the composite drawing provided by the witness and the fingerprints on the weapon, the local police had focused their suspicion on Weiwei’s sister Wei Lan and had issued a local wanted notice.

The fund had spent these years looking for her, but she had disappeared without a trace, becoming one of the kept wanted criminals, until the person Fei Du had set to monitor that idiot Su

Cheng had reported that Su Cheng had hired a female assistant of unclear origin.

“I think I can get the old fart off my hands now?” Wei Lan laughed softly.

“Be careful,” Fei Du ordered gravely.

Wei Lan snorted carelessly. “Save it. Little baby, I was fucking people up while you were at home drinking milk.”

Fei Du took no notice of her insolence. He only asked, “Are you ready?”

She had killed someone, after all. She was an escaped criminal. Revealing herself now, she’d spend the rest of her life kicking her heels in jail.

“There’s no need for you to worry about me,” Wei Lan said. “Fei Du, remember what you promised me.”

## CHAPTER 169 - Edmond Dantès XL

There was no need for Luo Wenzhou to investigate carefully. From the lawless way she spoke, he could roughly tell what kind of a person Wei Lan was. His gaze as he looked at Fei Du became increasingly stormy. He didn't flare up, waiting for Wei Lan to hang up, then gravely asked, "What did you promise her?"

"To take care of Weiwei."

Immediately after, Luo Wenzhou asked, "When did you contact her?"

Fei Du's gaze flashed. This business was a whole story that would take a long time to tell.

"Well?" Luo Wenzhou said.

"When I'd just gotten out of the hospital," Fei Du answered, treasuring words like gold. Then, perhaps his eyelashes had smeared his lenses or something; he earnestly wiped his glasses and directly changed the subject. "Su Cheng will turn himself in and give evidence. There's Zhang Donglai's photograph. With luck, we'll be able to lure the person who contacted Su Cheng back to the country. Do you think that with these conditions, you'll be able to request an arrest warrant for Zhang Chunling?"

Luo Wenzhou stared at him expressionlessly.

Fei Du didn't respond to the invitation. He reached out to do up one button on the jacket Luo Wenzhou was wearing open, his gaze sweeping over his waistline, delineated by his clothing; the corners of his eyes narrowed. "Zhang Donglai posted that status update five minutes ago. I've seen it, and Zhang Chunling and his brother will see it, too. If you don't hurry, it'll be too late."

“I’ll settle things with you when I get back!” Luo Wenzhou took up his phone, turned, and ran.

He’d only heard the tip of the iceberg and knew that Fei Du was hiding more than just this. Luo Wenzhou faintly felt something was wrong, but the moment was urgent, and he had no time to spare to look into it carefully.

Fei Du watched Luo Wenzhou leave. Then he put his hands on the windowsill next to him and let out a long breath.

Midnight passed and the last day of the lunar year began.

The zodiac animals changed places. The prohibition on firecrackers was lifted.

Having “accidentally” learned from Fei Du that Zhang Donglai and his sister had secretly left the country, the investigation team had increased surveillance on the Chunlai Conglomerate and the Zhang brothers, watching the Zhang house non-stop around the clock. Each car going in or out was carefully investigated to make sure that Zhang Chunjiu and Zhang Chunling stayed in the investigation team’s line of sight.

At 1:30 AM UTC +8:00, an enormous sound woke the night. Something seemed to have exploded in the tranquil Zhang house. The windows splintered to shards, and tongue-like flames poured out. The “eyes” ordered to keep watch over the Zhang house was stupefied, but before he could react and report it, he received an order to cooperate with the arrest of the Zhang brothers.

In a place like Yan City, the lowest density estate still had neighbors. There happened to be a wind. The dry wind scattered the strange fire everywhere. In the blink of an eye, it was uncontrollable. Cries for help and fire alarms rose and fell. The police and the investigation team, arriving at the same time, impenetrably surrounded the scene.

There was an accelerant in the fire. The more it was suppressed, the more arrogant the flames became, the heat wave nearly dispersing the chill of the winter night. The fire department kept calling for backup, throwing all their efforts against the fire. A moment later, a very realistic fire truck silently stopped outside, fully-equipped “firemen” going in and out. No one knew when it drove away again.

A full half hour later, the intensity of the fire was finally under control and the police impatiently charged in to search. They saw a complete mess; everyone was gone!

At this time, Zhang Chunjiu, who had been requested to remain in contact, had certainly absconded.

Howling police cars speeded away. The airports, the train stations, the traffic network, and the surrounding provinces all received notifications to assist in the arrest of Zhang Chunjiu and Zhang Chunling.

At the same time, the escaped Zhang Chunling was staring at the the photograph “posted by Zhang Donglai.” His expression extremely grim, he contacted the people keeping an eye on his unfortunate son. “That scoundrel Zhang Donglai...what!”

The news of Zhang Donglai’s disappearance could finally no longer be contained, coming over across the ocean.

At 2:15 AM, an abandoned firetruck was found near the Dongba River, and the widespread surveillance network finally found a trace nearby—the security camera footage showed people suspected of being the brothers Zhang Chunjiu and Zhang Chunling inside a black business car. After crossing the Dongba, they drove southeast, on the way out of the city.

Roadblocks and unmanned drones urgently set out. At the same time, the investigation team, monitoring the Chunlai Conglomerate, saw a member of the conglomerate's senior management left behind to hold down the fort silently change his clothes, dress up as a take-out delivery person, and ride away with the usual large bag of a take-out delivery person on his back. He was also heading southeast, out of the city!

The investigation team at once dispatched personnel to follow him and stop this person, who believed he was being covert.

“Chase them! Chase them immediately!”

“Wait!” As soon as he heard a bit of this, Luo Wenzhou, who'd hurried over with some people, felt something was wrong—he had no basis, but given Zhang Chunjiu's experience and anti-reconnaissance abilities, his tracks shouldn't have been found so quickly. “Wait a bit, I advise you to closely investigate the surveillance footage around the Zhang house for the last few days...”

“Captain Luo, Zhang Chunjiu's fingerprints have been found in that firetruck.”

“Captain Luo, have a look at this. This is security camera footage from a private car nearby.”

The police had done a blanket search around the abandoned firetruck. There had been a private car with a security camera at a perfect angle. It had caught the scene of the people in the fake firetruck abandoning it. One of the men peeled off his disguise as he walked. This person's gait and minute gestures...

He suddenly turned his head and looked around thoughtfully, and the camera caught his face. It was Zhang Chunjiu himself!



“Is that Zhang Chunjiu? Really?” an investigator clamored at Luo Wenzhou. “You’ve been at the City Bureau so many years, you wouldn’t mistake him, would you? He must be brought back at any cost!”

Like an inescapable net, the pursuit spread over the quiet southeast of the city, waiting for the poisonous insects to charge in.

Fei Du was waiting at the open window for the night wind. Suddenly there was the creaking of a wheelchair beside him. Without even turning his head, he said, “Why aren’t the wounded personnel resting yet?”

“I can’t sleep.” Tao Ran, shuffling, pushed his wheelchair up beside him.

Fei Du put a hand on the arm of the wheelchair to stop it, closed the window, then took off his jacket and put it over him.

In his capacity as a frail mummy, Tao Ran didn’t decline his care. He stared emptily for a while in the dimly lit corridor.

“When shiniang gave me shifu’s relic, I also didn’t sleep. I can recite every punctuation mark of that testament. I feel it’s more frightening than any vicious criminal. I spent all night reading it, and the next day I thought I was prepared...” Tao Ran lowered his head and laughed bitterly. “I didn’t think I’d prepared in the wrong direction.”

Lao Yang had said, “There are people there who have changed.” It really was ridiculous, because it now seemed that the chief culprit, unlike what they had guessed at the very beginning, hadn’t been corrupted by the influence of money. He’d been solid as a rock, bad from beginning to end. It was the person who’d preserved that testament who had been carved into another form by the piercing winds and biting frost.

Tao Ran asked hoarsely, “Why did Director Zhang do it? Was he short of money? Short of power?”

“I think it may have been because of this.” Fei Du got out his phone and showed Tao Ran an old black-and-white photograph.

It was a rather ancient group photo. There were around a dozen children in the photograph, from young children to teens, all of them expressionless, standing in two rows, clustered around two men. One of the men was wearing a Western suit and standing ramrod straight, lifting his chin; the other man was shiny-faced and balding. Each of them was holding one corner of a cardboard sign reading “Donation from the patriotic overseas Chinese Zhou Clan Conglomerate” and so on.

The smug middle-aged men made a stark contrast to the lifeless-looking children around them. Looking closely, you could nearly feel some of the dread.

In one corner was written “Yan City Heng’an Orphanage”; the date was over forty years ago.

“Lu Jia just sent this. They found Zhou Yahou’s assistant from back then.”

The old fart Zhou Chao hadn’t been cooperative at first, but he’d been scared out of his wits by the murderous pursuit. He’d learned that his whereabouts had been revealed, and not cooperating would have been a dead end. While he was old, he still feared death; he had handed everything over without another quibble—the person in the photograph representing the Zhou Clan Conglomerate in delivering the donation was Zhou Chao himself.

“Heng’an Orphanage.” Tao Ran looked closely under the light. “That’s...where Su Hui used to live? Oh, I think I can see which one is her.”

“Have another look. There are other acquaintances there,” Fei Du said. “The little boy curled up in the corner, and the teenager standing next to the orphanage’s director.”

The little boy was five or six, as skinny as the end of a radish. He was tightly clutching the teenager’s clothes, his grim gaze projecting from the photograph, the little fist at his side tightly clenched. At first glance, Tao Ran thought the boy looked familiar. Frowning, he carefully examined him for a while, then suddenly saw a clue in that old black-and-white photograph.

Tao Ran looked up at Fei Du in disbelief. “That...that’s...”

It seemed that the boy’s face, smaller than the size of a palm, could fit nothing but a pair of eyes. Fifty years of extravagant living had been unable to remove the thinness ground into his bones during his youth, and in his features there was some shadow of the way he would look when he had grown up—Tao Ran remembered the photograph he’d seen countless times on Director Lu’s desk of all of them when they had been young. “That can’t be Director Zhang?”

“The Chunlai Conglomerate’s big boss doesn’t show his face very much, but there are photographs of him from public occasions.” Fei Du searched on his phone for a moment and found a photograph of Zhang Chunling online. He put it next to the teenager standing beside the orphanage’s director. “Does that look like him?”

“Director Zhang... Zhang Chunjiu and Zhang Chunling came from Heng’an Orphanage? They were orphans?” Tao Ran adjusted his sitting posture with difficulty. “No, wait, I remember you said this orphanage was a den of human traffickers, so...”

“Lu Jia says that the director who received the donation was named Hao Zhenhua, of Yan City, born in May of 19—. With a full name and a place and month of birth, can you find out what happened to him?”

“Wait a moment.” Tao Ran swept away his earlier dejection and indicated for Fei Du to push him into the office. He started making calls and investigating.

With concrete information, it was much easier to search. Apologizing, Tao Ran woke up a string of sleepy on-duty personnel. A moment later, they really did scout out a person whose name and age matched.

“There was a case—the deceased was Hao Zhenhua, male, forty-six years old, stabbed to death. The killer came to the door and stabbed the victim three times in a row in the chest and abdomen. The victim experienced heavy internal bleeding and fled inside the house. The bloodstains extended from the door to the bedroom. The killer chased him inside, picked up a copper flowerpot belonging to the deceased, and pounded on the deceased’s head several times in a row, until he was dead... The scene was a disaster. It says the corpse’s head had been crushed like a watermelon. All the valuables and cash in the house were taken. The police at the time determined that it had been a burglary.”

“And after?” Fei Du found a bag of instant milk powder somewhere and dissolved it in warm water, then added extra sugar and put it next to Tao Ran. He asked, “When did this burglary and murder happen?”

“After, it came to nothing. Later, the city concentrated on an organized crackdown, dismantling a few violent criminal gangs. There were some vicious ones who perhaps didn’t even know themselves how many cases they were responsible for. They confessed to it along with the others in their confusion.” Tao Ran took the milk, drank a mouthful, and nearly spat it out. He suspected that Fei Du’s hand had slipped and he’d poured the whole sugar bowl in. It was so sweet it had become bitter. “The murder took place two years after Zhou Yahou’s death. What Captain Luo and the others said

that day makes sense—Heng’an Orphanage didn’t close down because of Zhou Yahou’s death... Comrade Fei Du, this is more sugar than goes into candied fruit.”

“Too sweet?” Fei Du raised his eyebrows very innocently and reached out a hand towards him. “Then you can give it to me to drink.”

Tao Ran had felt uncomfortable leaving food for other people to eat since he’d been three years old. He quickly waved a hand as if to show he could make do. He drank a large mouthful, finishing off half the cup. “In other words, it’s likely the orphanage’s director was the first victim. The orphans planned their revenge and feigned a burglary, killing the director. Criminal investigation techniques weren’t developed then, and the deceased’s relatives didn’t insist afterwards, so it was resolved in this muddled way.”

“Director Hao Zhenhua’s relatives probably knew what business he was in,” Fei Du said. “Even if they’d known who the killer was, they still may not have dared to look into it. You can seek sympathy for someone who died in a burglary, but if the truth came out, they may have brought shame and ruin upon themselves... They probably got a taste for it then and began to follow this road.—Ge, are you sleepy?”

Perhaps the heat was on too high in the room, and perhaps Fei Du’s low, gentle voice was too soporific. Tao Ran thought that hearing this shocking inside story, he ought to have been excited, but now he inexplicably felt that his eyelids were somewhat heavy.

“No.” Tao Ran blearily rubbed his eyes. “Keep talking.”

Fei Du raised the volume on his phone, playing Lu Jia’s voice.

Lu Jia said, “Most of the children the institution took in to raise were girls. Each year on Christmas, the orphanages Zhou Yahou donated to would send over photographs of girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen for him to pick from. The ones he picked would be sent abroad

and payment given to the orphanage's director in the form of a donation, according to the number. The girls sent over were normally kept in Zhou Yahou's villa. Sometimes he entertained friends that were as scummy as him.

“The rest of the girls would be sold to human traders when they grew up. As for the boys... Boys were more likely to be adopted then, so there weren't many healthy boys remaining at the orphanages.

“The girls had to be kept to be given to the bankrollers. They had to look somewhat presentable, so the orphanage wouldn't normally go overboard mistreating them. So the boys those bankrollers didn't want would experience even more intense abuse. As long as they could walk straight, they couldn't be idle. Starting from when they were seven or eight, they had to earn the cost of their provisions for the orphanage, whether they did it by hiring themselves out as child labor or by pilfering and stealing. If they couldn't pay up, the outcome would be even more terrible. Beatings and scoldings were nothing out of the ordinary, and then...”

Lu Jia's voice recording cut off midway, as though his hand had slipped and he'd accidentally sent the message before it was finished.

After a while, Lu Jia's voice continued: “And then, the girls waiting to be sold had to be ‘intact,’ but that problem didn't exist for the rest of them, so... President Fei, you understand.”

## CHAPTER 170 - Edmond Dantès XLI

As he listened to Lu Jia's lengthy report, Tao Ran's head felt increasingly heavy, and his field of vision became increasingly blurred. It was as though there was some odd power in the wheelchair, constantly pulling him down. He saw Fei Du pacing back and forth with two shadows, like a monster. Tao Ran finally realized that this wasn't a normal physiological reaction. His field of vision was so blurry he could hardly focus. With difficulty, he stretched out a hand and caught Fei Du's clothes.

Fei Du lowered his head slightly. His lenses reflected the light, and Tao Ran couldn't see his close-by gaze.

Tao Ran's lips moved slightly. "Fei..."

Fei Du put his phone aside and plucked Tao Ran's hand off of himself.

Tao Ran desperately wanted to open his eyes, but in the end he was powerless to resist. The boundless exhaustion submerged him. "You..."

In a flash, the odd taste of that too-sweet cup of milk came over his tongue, and a thought flickered through Tao Ran's mind—why had Fei Du allowed Zhang Donglai to publicly post those two photographs? Perhaps it had even been Fei Du's own people who'd posted them.

Since Zhang Donglai was already in his hands, if it had been only to serve as evidence, couldn't he have just handed the photographs over to the police?

*Fei Du, what are you doing?*

Tao Ran's consciousness let out a final inaudible murmur, then dissipated in total defeat.

Fei Du brought some chairs together, carefully laid a cotton-padded overcoat on them, then picked up a jacket someone had taken off, rolled it into a pillow, and, avoiding Tao Ran's wounds, carefully picked him up and arranged him on the chairs.

He looked over Tao Ran's unwilling sleeping countenance, made himself a cup of coffee, put on headphones, then used Tao Ran's access and communications devices to track the police force's progress in pursuit of Zhang Chunjiu and his brother.

At 2:45 AM, Zhang Chunjiu and the others had fled to an area near Yan Sea Highway, and an unknown number called Fei Du's cell phone.

"Hello," Fei Du said.

There was silence over the phone for a moment. "...I didn't expect you to be the oriole stalking behind."

"Chairman Zhang." Fei Du laughed silently. "I was just wondering when I was going to get this call from you. You truly are composed."

The police wouldn't resort to cross-border kidnapping. If they'd really had unfavorable evidence against him, they'd have come for him with an arrest warrant long ago.

Zhou Huaijin... The Zhou family didn't use these means.

And all the people who had been beside Zhang Donglai were old people they could trust, people they knew inside and out, some who had even been with them at Heng'an. If Fan Siyuan's hand really did stretch that far, he wouldn't have had to wait until now.



Zhang Donglai absolutely hadn't been kidnapped by force. He had snuck out himself in the night, changing his clothes and bringing wine, dressing as though he intended to go out raising hell with his drinking buddies. Evidently some "friend" who had his trust had tricked him away. After going through it all, if he hadn't been able to think of Fei Du, Zhang Chunling could have poured water out of his head.

And after kidnapping Zhang Donglai, the request had been to exchange him for one person. That person had been the one who had contacted Su Cheng. So it went without saying whose hands Su Cheng had fallen into.

Zhang Chunling said grimly, "Su Cheng was your lure. I should have known something was wrong starting when you escaped the assassination—it wasn't coincidence, and it wasn't your good fortune, either."

"My luck isn't any good. I don't dare to gamble on 'coincidence.' Later, I suppose because I obediently went into the little dark room to be questioned by the investigation team and picked up some inexplicable squabbles, you overlooked me, Chairman Zhang, not taking me seriously." Fei Du rested his elbows on the arms of his chair, two fingers propping his temples, calmly turning half a circle in the swivel chair. "When Su Cheng disappeared, you thought he had fallen into Fan Siyuan's hands. Just in case, you appropriately sent your children to a safe place... How sincere a parent's heart, Chairman Zhang."

"I never imagined I'd be sending him into your hands," Zhang Chunling said coldly. "President Fei, the pupil truly surpasses the master."

"You flatter me," Fei Du said somewhat coquettishly. "All I had to do was fool that stupid girl with Su Cheng. Nothing technical about it. You must find it funny, Chairman Zhang."

Zhang Chunling likely could only have vented his hatred by firing a bullet into Fei Du's head. One word at a time, he said, "Enough nonsense. What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Fei Du repeated the question, seeming very thoughtful. "Chairman Zhang, that doesn't sound very friendly. I'm a good citizen with a law-abiding business, helping the police solve a case..."

"Helping the police solve a case with a kidnapping?" Zhang Chunling snorted. "You deliberately luring my people abroad, was that to help the Chinese police solve a case? President Fei, my character is rather straightforward. I don't like going around in circles talking nonsense. Let's be honest and not speak in code. I could have another son if I wanted to. You'd better not think he's such a strong playing chip."

Fei Du didn't speak. He took off one earpiece and put it next to the phone's receiver.

The jumble of voices coming over the earpiece passed at once through the receiver, flowing over the signal to Zhang Chunling's ear.

"All departments take note, we've locked on the suspects' location!"

"Five cars in all, the difference in the license plate numbers is..."

"Take note, the suspects may be armed."

"The task force is in place—"

Zhang Chunling's breath caught.

"I heard you two grew up in an orphanage. With such a large age difference, it would seem that Director Zhang isn't biologically your younger brother." Fei Du picked the phone up once more and sighed in a hypocritical display of emotion. "Not related by blood, yet still so

much affection and faith. That's truly rare. No wonder you've never worried about letting him be such a crucial figure in such a crucial position."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Fei Du closed his eyes and could almost imagine the other's rage-twisted face.

"Chairman Zhang, even if you manage to run today, afterwards you'll be a criminal, wanted everywhere. You'll have to hide for the rest of your life. You may be extradited any day to come back and eat lead. It can't have been easy making it this far. Are you content with that outcome?" Fei Du lowered his voice. "How about I give you a clear road?"

Zhang Chunling still made no sound, but he didn't hang up the phone, either.

"You just heard—before, Director Zhang could get internal information from the police. I can get it, too. I have better connections, better means, more money than he does, and I'm on good terms with your honored son. I'm also generous. I won't haggle as much as Fei Chengyu, who was unwilling even to fund a piece of empty land. Aren't I an ideal business partner?" Fei Du said unhurriedly. "My requirements aren't high, either. I just need you to be a little loyal, not blow around all over the place, ganging up with all these Zhous and Zhengs... What benefit can there be to being with trash like that, aside from inviting trouble? I suppose you must have deep experience on that point, Chairman Zhang?"

Zhang Chunling at last spoke. Clenching his teeth, he said, "Fei Du, you really are Fei Chengyu's son, the same stock of greed and malice."

"You flatter me. Though I'm a little more strong-minded than that good-for-nothing Fei Chengyu." Fei Du's voice was very low, his tone almost gentle; if you didn't know better, you might have thought he

was coaxing a lover, not making threats and promises to an unprepossessing elderly man. He said, “My guess is that up to his death, Fei Chengyu had only found traces of Wei Zhanhong and his ilk. He wouldn’t have known your identity, Chairman Zhang, isn’t that right? Set your mind at ease. I’m not Fei Chengyu, and you aren’t the same person you were three years ago. Our collaboration will be smooth.”

Zhang Chunling coldly said, “I don’t know that I’ve changed at all.”

“Forgive me for speaking frankly, but three years ago, you were hiding backstage with victory in your grasp. Now...” Fei Du laughed silently. “You’re a stray dog at the end of your rope.”

Over the phone, you could hear Zhang Chunling suck in a breath.

“Your backers, your brother, your reputation, your reputation, your power—in the blink of an eye, it’s all gone. Chairman Zhang, think carefully. Do you want to be all alone in the world from now on, fleeing here and there in solitude, or do you want to listen to my arrangements and let me take care of you and those...capable people under your leadership? I’m very willing. After all, I’m very fond of Donglai. I don’t especially wish to see him grieved.”

Zhang Chunling was silent for a long time, then finally roughly said, “How do I know you aren’t playing a trick?”

As soon as he spoke these words, it was like an admission of defeat.

“Chairman Zhang.” Fei Du sighed. “There’s no value to me in playing a trick on you. Zhang Donglai is in my hands. If I’d really been planning to give you away to the police, I wouldn’t have let Zhang Donglai post that status update and alert you. Otherwise, maybe now the police would be chasing you through the streets along with Director Zhang. Where would you find the time to haggle with me? I

think I've demonstrated my sincerity enough as the first party. Don't you think so?"

Zhang Chunling choked, unable to get a word out for a long time. He was forced to acknowledge that Fei Du was making sense and come to terms. "Have Zhang Donglai talk to me. I'll send you the meeting place. You'd better come, President Fei."

Then the call was hung up.

Fei Du stood up, noiselessly put a blanket over Tao Ran, picked up his jacket, and walked out.

As he was passing by a corner of the hall, someone quietly asked him, "Are you sure you can lure him in like this?"

Fei Du was putting on his jacket as he walked. Without turning his head, he said, "We've both 'unveiled our secret intentions.' Not showing himself now would be admitting defeat. As far as he's concerned, catching Zhang Chunjiu alone has no meaning. Unless he's dead, there will be a reaction."

The person asked, "Why didn't you tell Wenzhou and the others?"

"Realism," Fei Du said.

The person didn't accept this perfunctory explanation. "Too realistic. So realistic it nearly seems real.—Can I trust you, Fei Du?"

Fei Du's steps paused. He raised the corners of his mouth ambiguously.

"Director Lu," he said rather pertly, "sincerity works miracles."

The southeast road out of the city was already firmly sealed. Police sirens shook the sky. The flickering streetlights swept over Zhang

Chunjiu. His face was like a stone. A police car suddenly charged out of an intersection ahead, red and blue lights flashing as it made its appearance, blinding them so they couldn't see how many cars were coming.

The surrounded driver was clearly panicked. "Director Zhang!"

"Turn east, go straight through," Zhang Chunjiu ordered, not batting an eyelash.

"Director Zhang, east of here is the sports park and the East Forest Ski Run, it's..."

"I know," Zhang Chunjiu interrupted him evenly. "Drive, don't waste words."

The sports park and the enormous ski run divided Yan City's city center from the East Forest suburb. It was in a crevice, something outside of anyone's jurisdiction. Apart from the little commercial district established based on the sports park, all around was a neither here nor there urban-rural fringe. The streetlights were sparse, and there was traffic year-round.

But in the small hours of the morning on the eve of the New Year, it was for once quiet here. The five cars located by the police went right over the roadside railing. Wheels almost leaving the ground, they charged horrifyingly down two sides of a great slope.

Zhang Chunjiu said calmly, "Show those tiresome sham goods some fun."

The pursuing police cars were drawing close. The car bringing up the rear of Zhang Chunjiu's procession suddenly opened its window, and someone threw something outside. In the dark, the leading police car couldn't clearly see what it was. By the time they sensed something amiss, it was already too late. The thing thrown out of the car

exploded as soon as it touched the ground. After an enormous noise, car alarms began to cry madly, and a few police cars overturned almost at once. Fire flared up instantly, raising a wall of flame.

Meanwhile, the five cars carrying the criminals raised their guns; a hail of bullets came pelting in from behind the screen of the flames and the explosion.

The quiet early morning, like a porcelain vase fallen from a high place, cracked with an ear-splitting noise, the firefight coming without warning.

“The ambulance will follow, and the bulletproof vehicles will go on ahead. Split up and hem them in. They must be pinned down.—Give me the map, be careful of the nearby communities...” Luo Wenzhou’s words suddenly paused.

“Captain Luo, the urban villages here are mostly concentrated to the west of the road. They aren’t in this direction. Set your mind at ease. Up ahead, there’s only the East Forest Sports Park and Ski Run. The ski run closed the day before yesterday and won’t open until the third day of the New Year. No one will be there now. We can trap them there!”

Luo Wenzhou quickly narrowed his eyes, remembering that when they’d been surreptitiously tracking down Yang Bo and his mother, Zhou Huaijin had mentioned something—that Heng’an Orphanage had been located in Yan City’s suburbs, and the place had become a ski run long ago.

The East Forest...Ski Run.

“Second detachment come with me, everyone else continue pursuit!”

Was this Heng’an Orphanage’s original location?

The place where it had all started, the place where it would all end?

Luo Wenzhou's spine went cold. He suddenly had an ominous premonition out of nowhere.

Fei Du arrived at the pre-arranged street garden and looked around. He saw no trace of Zhang Chunling, but he wasn't surprised. He quietly sat in his car, waiting.

"You Raise Me Up" was playing on repeat. He tapped the steering wheel with his fingers to the rhythm.

Suddenly, a bullet brushed against his car, hitting a rock next to his front wheel. The rebounding bullet leapt up and knocked against the bulletproof glass, making a frightening bang.

In the rearview mirror, Fei Du glimpsed the cars surreptitiously following unable to hold themselves back from moving.

Just then, the phone rang, the ringtone exactly the same as the song he was looping. The two overlaid refrains produced an unusually pleasant sound.

Fei Du couldn't resist listening to it a little longer before reaching out to pick up the phone. "Chairman Zhang, I came to rescue you, and you shot at me. What is that supposed to mean? You're not indispensable to me, and if your freedom and your son's life aren't indispensable to you, then we're fated to part..."

"Slow down," Zhang Chunling interrupted him. "Throw off your people."

Fei Du frowned.

"Throw—off—your—people," Zhang Chunling said heavily. "I told you to come alone."



Fei Du was silent. Neither of them spoke for a moment.

Zhang Chunling said, “President Fei, do you not dare?”

Fei Du slowly rolled down the window and made a gesture aimed behind him.

“Leave by the park’s back gate. I’ll tell you where to go.”

Zhang Chunling had him go around in circles around the street garden. Probably determining that he’d thrown off his people, he said, “Drive two-hundred meters ahead, stop by the road. There’s a car ready to take you, if you please, President Fei.”

Fei Du stepped on the brakes and indeed saw a small car parked not far away. He couldn’t resist taunting Zhang Chunling. “Our interests are the same now, and we’re in a cooperative relationship. Chairman Zhang, you clearly know I only want to protect you, but you’re so defensive... A businessperson ought to know when to be generous.”

“The generous all die young,” Zhang Chunling said coldly, then hung up.

Fei Du knew what he meant. He tossed his phone, wallet, and keys into the car and went over empty-handed. Two people quickly got out of the waiting little car and glared at Fei Du with hostility, scanning him all over with a detector, wishing they could peel off his skin.

“It’s lucky I don’t have a pacemaker,” Fei Du said, taking a dig, “or I’d have to implore you from the bottom of my heart.”

The two people searching him didn’t respond. One raised his head, gave him a grim look, and opened the car door, indicating for Fei Du to get in.

“Chairman Zhang,” one of Zhang Chunling’s subordinates said, “a few cars came over five minutes afterwards. There’s a crowd gathered near where Fei Du left his car. They’ve taken a phone from the car. I figure there’s a tracker on the phone. They seem flustered and are searching for traces of him in the vicinity.”

Zhang Chunling wasn’t at all taken aback—if Fei Du hadn’t tried anything, he’d have thought it was strange. “Got it, bring him over as arranged. Be careful.”

Fei Du changed cars three times, being searched each time. When he changed to the last one, he still didn’t seem angry at all, only looked a little tauntingly at the people searching him. One of them, who had the look of a chauffeur, suddenly departed from normal behavior, opening his mouth. “You’re asking a tiger for its skin, President Fei. You have some courage.”

“What, do I seem like the sort of person who’d be very scared of death?” Fei Du shrugged, then looked at his watch. “It’s nearly four. I’ll just give you a warning, if I’m out of contact too long, the people looking after Young Master Zhang may become uneasy. Perhaps something will happen that none of us wants to see.”

The chauffeur said, “Then it seems there isn’t much time left.”

“An hour.” Fei Du’s expression cooled. “Even my patience has limits. At most, I’ll put up with your boss’s ridiculous suspicions for another hour. Please pass that on to him. He’ll do as he sees fit if he wants his son.”

The chauffeur, seemingly very loyal to his post, turned to report something. As Fei Du prepared to get into the third car, his ears suddenly picked up a strange movement. Then something warm splashed onto the small bare patch on his neck. Fei Du quickly turned his head and saw the person who’d just searched him falling towards him, his neck sliced nearly halfway through by a knife. Blood from

the carotid artery sprayed all over him. Fei Du instinctively reached out a hand to block it and was nearly pulled down by the body. The next instant, a hand grabbed him, hooking firmly around his neck—

## CHAPTER 171 - Edmond Dantès XLII

The thick smell of blood assaulted his senses. Fei Du choked, unable to catch his breath. For someone who got sick at blood, this impact was too strong. He nearly blacked out.

Then, the corpse pressing on him was kicked aside, and the person holding his neck forced Fei Du into the car. His back bumped into the ice-cold car door.

The hand was cold and solid, almost smelling of metal. Fei Du nearly had the illusion that the smell of blood was accompanied by the dampness of the basement, pressing on his windpipe, for a moment even overcoming his revulsion at the blood and making him struggle fiercely.

The person impatiently rammed a fist into his unprotected belly. Fei Du's breath caught; for a few minutes he was in so much pain he had no awareness. He was completely tied up and thrown into the backseat.

There were two people in each of the cars Zhang Chunling had sent, one to drive and one to search him. This car's driver, however, had exchanged a few words with him, then without any warning had risen in revolt, slaughtering his unwary companion.

The driver pulled open the car door and looked loftily down at Fei Du, who was covered in blood, then suddenly sneered and reached towards Fei Du's bloodlessly pale face and pulled his glasses from his nose. The exquisite frames cracked, breaking in two pieces in the man's hands, revealing the tracking device hidden in the earpiece—

Fei Du had expected Zhang Chunling to be uncertain of him; it was unavoidable that he would be searched. At the same time, Zhang Donglai was in his hands, and he was perhaps their future bankroller

and meal ticket. Therefore, even if he was searched, Zhang Chunling would still have some scruples and not rudely touch his head, and naturally he would overlook the glasses he always wore.

The driver expressionlessly crushed Fei Du's glasses on the ground with his foot. "Trash."

Then he turned and got in the car, stepped on the gas pedal, and sped off in another direction.

At the same time, Zhang Chunling, waiting for Fei Du, realized that things had changed. The last car he'd sent after Fei Du had fallen out of contact!

Zhang Chunling's first thought was that Fei Du was playing tricks. But then he thought that, after making such a fuss, Fei hadn't even reached his temporary hiding place; would he need to play tricks out of nowhere now?

What would be the use of coercing a driver and a lackey? The police weren't so short on testimony.

Zhang Chunling suddenly stood up, cold sweat coming up on his spine.

Just then, a call came from the phone in that mysteriously vanished car. Zhang Chunling pushed aside his subordinates and personally picked up. "Hello!"

No one spoke over the phone. Faint white noise crackled. Then, someone played a recording—

"...if I'm out of contact too long, the people looking after Young Master Zhang may become uneasy..."

"Then it seems there isn't much time left."

“...At most, I’ll put up with your boss’s ridiculous suspicions for another hour...”

Cold sweat vied to pour out of Zhang Chunling’s pores. “Who are you?”

The rustle of the playback filled his eardrums. The other side said nothing.

“Fan, you fucking...”

Click. The phone was hung up, leaving behind a busy signal. Zhang Chungling punched the tabletop.

Near the park, Lu Youliang had arrived in person at the scene but was sitting in the car, not showing his face.

A plainclothes officer pretending to be Fei Du’s subordinate had searched Fei Du’s car and picked up the phone and wallet Fei Du had left behind. “Director Lu, he didn’t leave anything but these two things. The phone is locked, and I’ve gone through the wallet. There’s nothing but cash and cards.”

Lu Youliang frowned, looking helplessly at Fei Du’s lockscreen. He touched something, and a fingerprint prompt suddenly jumped up.

Lu Youliang stared. “What is this?”

“Apart from codes, the phone user’s fingerprints can also unlock it,” the plainclothes officer patiently explained to the old fogey who couldn’t keep up with the times. “It needs Fei Du himself to press...”

Before he’d finished speaking, he saw Lu Youliang fish around in his pocket, fishing out a fingerprint film. Then, under the

plainclothesman's dumbfounded gaze, Lu Youliang pressed the fingerprint film to the fingerprint pad. "Like this?"

The screen unlocked, and a draft opened.

The first line of this draft file was: "If the tracking signal on me has disappeared, then I'm already in the hands of The Reciter..."

Lu Youliang was horrified. Before he could react to the enormous volume of information contained in these words, someone next to him called out, "A problem, Director Lu! The signal from the tracking device on Fei Du suddenly disappeared!"

Fei Du's draft continued: "If I've guessed correctly, the financial backer behind The Louvre that Gu Zhao investigated was Fei Chengyu. The Reciter believes that a person who has committed a crime must receive retribution in the same form. This is their faith and their ceremony. Therefore, Zhang Chunjiu, who made Gu Zhao bear a stigma, has to be publicly arrested, lose his reputation, and restore Gu Zhao's good name. The instigators behind The Louvre also have to accept their fate—Zhang Chunling is one, and 'the heir to Fei Chengyu's legacy' is another. So if I've guessed right, the place where this started is the place where it will end.

"If I've guessed wrong..."

The contents came to an abrupt halt. Lu Youliang nearly had a heart attack at his pause.

"The place where this started is the place where it will end." Perhaps for some people, life was like an all-encompassing circle, from one end to the other; they were trapped inside it all their lives, never able to escape.

Zhang Chunjiu's five cars were herded by the special police from the Yan Sea Highway exit to the sports park.

The sports park's footprint was very large. When the weather was good, there were often amateur athletes training for marathons here. The initial concept had been for a "city oxygen bar," so every kind of vegetation had been piled up in it, so concentrated it seemed like virgin forest. The five cars entered the "man-made virgin forest" just like mice getting into an antiques storehouse, scattering all over, hard to find.—The air was dry and the plants were parched; if they dropped bombs at random in the forest, it wouldn't be any fun.

The whole area was cordoned off. The police gathered more reinforcements, surrounding the sports park in layer after layer. A crowd of firetrucks stood at the ready. The search for Zhang Chunjiu would soon have been going on for over two hours.

Wanted criminals could also exhaust their supplies. Of the five cars, three had already gotten into trouble. All the broadcasting devices in the park were urging them in unison to give up resisting and prepare to be arrested. Zhang Chunjiu turned a deaf ear to them. "Stop here. There's a lake up ahead. Drive the cars into the water. Let the police go search for them."

The place he mentioned was next to a little hill in the depths of the sports park—it seemed that the hill had been there already before the park had been built. It hadn't been fully developed yet and seemed to be under construction just now, blocked by "Out of Bounds" signs and chains.

Zhang Chunjiu, accompanied by a fat man pretending to be Zhang Chunling and a few subordinates, passed through the fence and familiarly walked up the desolate hill.

The gang of wanted criminals had been brought to an impasse by the police. Seeing his confident bearing, as if he had a countermove in mind, they hurriedly followed. They traveled through the thick forest with no traces of human work for about ten minutes, all entirely at



sea, then found unexpectedly that they'd somehow come out of the sports park, secretly leaving the police encirclement!

“Director Zhang,” the fat man dressed up as Zhang Chunling said fawningly, “you’re pretty familiar with this place.”

Zhang Chunjiu didn’t answer.

The trees had grown tall and the path had narrowed. The once unpeopled place had become a scenic spot. Looking down from on high at where the light of morning had yet to reach, there were tens of thousands of lights, a field of prosperity where everything had changed.

Once he had run up this hill countless times, had even passed nights shivering here on black nights like this and been captured and brought back.

Zhang Chunjiu swiftly raised his head and looked at the shadowy slope, thinking he could hear footsteps drawing close.

He subconsciously gripped the handgun in his pocket—the once weak and helpless boy had become an all-conquering man, but the terror he had felt then seemed to be carved into his bones...even though he had stabbed that person three times with his own hands.

“Director Zhang, the East Forest Ski Run is there!”

Zhang Chunjiu came back to himself and silently walked towards the ski run—the wide, smooth road, the distinctively-styled ski run, everything about the surroundings...in his eyes, all of it twisted and changed shape, restored to its “original form” of forty years ago.

The high-end, extravagant sports park and the buildings crumbled one by one, changing back into the barren hill and Heng’an

Orphanage. The highway disintegrated before his eyes, falling into a wasteland of thickly-growing reeds and sorghum.

This wasteland was extremely frightening. Walking through it, you couldn't show your head. If you carelessly walked two steps you would step in mud. After it had rained, small lizards and toads would shuttle back and forth. Someone's miserable shrieks went through it, accompanied by the barking of the orphanage's vicious dogs...

Zhang Chunjiu gave a fierce start. In the biting cold winter wind, his forehead was covered in thin sweat.

He remembered there had been a heart logo at the orphanage's gates. Over the years, a corner had fallen off, suspended high in front of the ruined courtyard with cage-like metal railings on both sides. There were always children leaning on the railings, looking out.

“Su Hui! Su Hui, run! Run!”

Su Hui had been only seven, like a poorly growing little flower, but those people had already been impatient to “harvest” her. Zhou Yahou didn't like this sort of pre-adolescent chick, but she really looked too conspicuous. The higher-ups had seen her photograph and wanted to take her away ahead of time, even if they sent her as a present.

He remembered that it had been Christmas Day. Heng'an Orphanage, with its connection to the West, had been hung full of bright red ornaments for the season, and faint Christmas music had been playing over the loudspeakers. Sometimes it was off-key, giving it a strange, gloomy atmosphere.

The girl's hair was messy, her face dirty. She was covered in mud. The young boy was too small. Not knowing his own limitations, he was pulling his small big sister by the hand. They were rushing in terror towards the big wilderness. The dogs bared their fangs and howled.

One of them hadn't been tied up. When the two children were about to reach the big iron gate, it swiftly leapt out and bit the girl's calf.

"Where are the little whelps?!"

The little boy climbing the metal railing was so scared he nearly passed out. Huge despair rose up. He watched as the beast tore at the girl's body, the people drawn by the crowd of dogs constantly drawing near...

Just then, a human figure rushed over and took the boy from the railing.

This was his big brother. He didn't know who his parents were or what his own name was. From the beginning of his memories, it was his big brother who had taken care of him, his big brother who had given him a name.

His brother stuffed him into a bamboo basket for storing coal, firmly covering him up. He picked up a wooden stick and tried to drive away the big dog biting the girl. The beast was salivating. Releasing the bloody girl, it fixed its ghastly gaze on the teenager.

The little boy in the basket watched as the big dog was pushed aside by the thin, frail teenager. Then those people came over. Cursing, they took away the girl, who had fainted. They thought it was his big brother who had tried to take Su Hui away. In a towering rage, they ordered the big dog to bite him, used a lash to whip him. On this day in the dead of winter, they poured freezing water with shards of ice in it over him. They even ripped open his clothes and stamped him down to the ground. The men's filthy bodies were exposed...

The basket was full of soot. In Zhang Chunjiu's memories, that Christmas Day also seemed soot-colored. He had cowered feebly in the bamboo basket, watching from among the ashes.

Always watching.

“The cars are there!” A subordinate’s excited shout wiped away the soot in front of Zhang Chunjiu’s eyes. The wretched old orphanage vanished like smoke.

A row of three cars that had been prepared ahead of time was lined up, respectfully waiting there. There were even weapons prepared inside. The drivers had waited for a long time, trembling with fear. “Director Zhang, everything is ready.”

“Director Zhang, all the police are in the sports park now, let’s hurry...”

Just then, lights suddenly went up above the stadium, dazzling, and sharp police sirens rose. Gun barrels aimed at Zhang Chunjiu and the others. Next, five or six police cars surrounded them from all directions.

Luo Wenzhou silently got out of his car and stood a few steps away, looking at his former superior with a complicated expression—

## CHAPTER 172 - Edmond Dantès XLIII

“Luo Wenzhou.” Zhang Chunjiu all of a sudden sighed gently.

*“Find Luo Wenzhou, have him take some people over there himself.”*

*“Call the Criminal Investigation Team’s Luo Wenzhou to the meeting.”*

*“Tell Luo Wenzhou to get into my office!”*

*“Where’s Luo Wenzhou? What, sleeping in the duty room again? Still sleeping at this hour? What does he do with all that sleep?!”*

When old Director Zhang had been at his post, he hadn’t been as easy-going in his treatment of his juniors as Director Lu, constantly ordering the young people under his command around by their full names. Luo Wenzhou had been ordered around the most by him. This name had come out of Zhang Chunjiu’s mouth countless times, sometimes calling for him to get to work, sometimes calling for him to come receive a scolding.

Luo Wenzhou had never expected that a day would come when old Director Zhang would call his name under these circumstances.

The police had guns, and so did the criminals. Neither side was willing to lay them down first. They pointed at each other, for a time deadlocked where they were.

Zhang Chunjiu turned his head to look at the person disguised as Zhang Chunling. His posture, his figure, his attire, his position at the center of a crowd, were enough to make the disguise convincing. Unless someone who knew him well got a close look, it would be hard to see any flaw...and if the police could get a close look, then it must mean that the dust had already settled, and his big brother had left safely long ago.

“You do have some skill, to be able to chase us here.” Zhang Chunjiu turned to Luo Wenzhou. “Secretly rescuing Zhou Huaijin, shadowing Donglai—it seems that was all you.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t respond to this nonsense. Ignoring both sides’ guns, he walked a few steps straight forward. “Director Zhang, I’d like to ask you for guidance on a certain matter.”

Zhang Chunjiu looked at him without turning a hair.

“Three years ago, during his annual vacation, for the sake of protecting a citizen, Lao Yang was killed by an escaped criminal while crossing an underpass.—Lao Yang had a bad knee. He left the sidewalk for no reason to walk through the underpass. I reported this suspicious point many times, and every time it was suppressed by you. Can you explain this to me?”

“What is there to explain? He didn’t go out to buy groceries that day. He’d received inside information and gone to track down a suspicious individual. With the groceries as a screen, he followed him all the way to the underpass,” Zhang Chunjiu said blandly. “He didn’t catch up to him. He met an escaped criminal who had been waiting there.”

“An eyewitness said that someone’s dog suddenly went crazy and haplessly enraged the criminal,” Luo Wenzhou said grimly. “In fact, the sequence of cause and effect is reversed. The dog felt the criminal’s ill-intent first, then started to bark, because he’d already been planning to attack a passerby or flee to attract Lao Yang.”

Yang Zhengfeng, an old timer soon to retire, who hadn’t dared to take the steps two at time going down into the underpass, with his gout and bone spurs—what kind of heroics had he been indulging in? He’d thought that he was still a strapping young fellow who could snatch away a naked blade bare-handed; randomly menacing a passerby was

enough to make him materialize. It was too easy to calculate, not worth mentioning.

“But at death’s door, Lao Yang didn’t mention the person he had been pursuing. He told Tao Ran a seemingly meaningless radio frequency —” At this point, Luo Wenzhou’s words suddenly stopped, because he had seen Zhang Chunjiu smile.

Luo Wenzhou stared for a moment, then suddenly realized something. As though speaking to himself, he quietly said, “Actually, he didn’t leave those words behind for Tao Ran. Did he leave them for you? With one last breath left, he didn’t mention the escaped suspicious individual because he thought that person would certainly be caught... He must have had a partner. The security cameras didn’t film that person because the two of them weren’t acting together. One was chasing, the other had gone around ahead to cut him off. This sort of coordination that doesn’t need verbal communication only works between old partners—that person was you!”

“At the very beginning, someone anonymously sent him some things, fingerprints and a DNA comparison, and a stack of photographs. The fingerprints and DNA both belonged to a wanted criminal, and the photographs showed where the fingerprints had been collected. Yang Zhengfeng didn’t report it.”

“Because this made him think of Gu Zhao?”

“No, because the person who’d sent him the stuff was not only a killer, he was a ‘dead person.’”

“Fan Siyuan,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly.

Zhang Chunjiu laughed scornfully. “I don’t know what kind of potion Fan Siyuan fed him that made him choose to conceal this business and secretly investigate it himself. The Reciter’s submissions to that program were Fan Siyuan hinting to him which cases had something

unusual about them. In fact, he had an ulterior motive—he was also protecting that nut job. He didn't tell me about him until just before his death. Fan Siyuan is a nut job. He killed six people, was wanted by the police, and jumped into the ocean. I cherished his talents and sent someone to rescue him. I didn't expect that I would be rescuing a wretch who bites the hand that feeds him."

"You didn't personally contact Fan Siyuan."

"My big brother and I didn't see people directly, including Zheng Kaifeng's sort. For ordinary contact with customers and for running errands, we used the people close to us, people we trusted."

"During the course of the investigation, Lao Yang couldn't have avoided using his privileges to look into some old case files. It's no surprise you discovered that," Luo Wenzhou said. "But he was investigating a mole. How did you gain his trust?"

"You have it backwards." Zhang Chunjiu smiled strangely. "The question is, how did he gain my trust?"

Luo Wenzhou stared.

"If you want to attain a person's trust, the best thing to do isn't to desperately try to prove to him that you and he are on the same side. It's the reverse. You have to make him realize that you're on guard against him, entice him into racking his brains trying to win your trust," Zhang Chunjiu said. "I pretended that I was secretly investigating Gu Zhao's case, and investigating very cautiously, covering up my tracks as I investigated, so he only discovered a trace 'by chance.' I made him realize that I was not only investigating, but for some reason, he was the one I suspected. I patiently played a game of 'probing' and 'counter-probing' with him for half a year—finally, Yang Zhengfeng made me 'believe' that he wasn't the mole."



At this point, Zhang Chunjiu, looking at Luo Wenzhou, suddenly changed the subject. “Does it sound unfathomable? Hasn’t Fei Du done that to you?”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

“First he schemed to get close to you, then accidentally revealed his defenses, got you confused and disoriented, going all out running after him, racking your brain to prove yourself to him and win his trust. When you’d fully fallen into his trap, you still had to suffer all manner of hardships to win yourself the ‘higher ground’ and feel complacent—do you really think he’s any good?” Zhang Chunjiu shook his head. “Luo Wenzhou, you’re as full of yourself as your shifu was.”

Luo Wenzhou sighed. “Director Zhang, in your position, don’t take the trouble to worry about other people’s business.”

“Of course, two negatives make a positive.” Zhang Chunjiu spread his hands towards him, displaying an expression of unclear meaning. “If a reprehensible person like me says he’s no good, then that may just go to show that his moral character is all right. That’s not for certain. See what you think. Perhaps he did grow unsullied out of the mud. The Fei family didn’t start out doing any kind of honorable business, and later Fei Chengyu had his father-in-law assassinated for his money and only gradually entered a close relationship with us based on that business. That person—Fei Chengyu. He was so greedy he really was like a monster wearing a human skin. He was the one who started plotting against us. Thirteen years ago, he conspired with Fan Siyuan to infiltrate us bit by bit and use the police to cut away our other major customers one after another, to make us have to depend on him like stray dogs, becoming the knife in his hand.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “So their first step was to use the suspicious points about Gu Zhao’s case to lure Lao Yang into investigating a few dens where wanted criminals were hidden—whose dens were these?”

“Most of them had been built with Wei Zhanhong’s money. Wei Zhanhong was young, wildly ambitious, really a little demented. His activities were too eye-catching. Fei Chengyu and Fan Siyuan planned to make the first cut with him.” Zhang Chunjiu shook his head. “Although those two really did take everyone for idiots.”

“You used Lao Yang to expose them instead,” Luo Wenzhou said grimly. “And Fei Chengyu’s car crash was your doing.”

Zhang Chunjiu hooked the corners of his mouth, silently acknowledging the charge.

“But Fan Siyuan got away. You knew he wasn’t finished yet, and you knew that the ‘empire’ you’d single-handedly built had been infected by him with a virus you couldn’t eliminate. So you took precautionary measures. First, taking advantage of the mess in the Fei family after Fei Chengyu’s car crash, you tricked Su Cheng into boarding your pirate ship, then deliberately tampered with the surveillance installations in the bureau—that way, even if you retired or were transferred, you could still get the information you wanted any time. And if it was exposed, Director Ceng would muddle his way into being your scapegoat, and Su Cheng and Fei Chengyu would become the ‘masterminds behind the scenes.’”

Zhang Chunjiu neither nodded nor shook his head.

“And you purposefully brought up the ‘Picture Album’ again—that’s right. It was Teacher Pan who named the Picture Album Project, but it was you who raised a project plan nearly identical to the ‘Picture Album’ from back then.”

Zhang Chunjiu raised his eyebrows.

“Because during the first Picture Album Project, you used Fan Siyuan as a cover to kill someone yourself.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Zhang Chunjiu said. “Was I only too anxious to have someone uncover me?”

“Because you knew better than Fan Siyuan why that unfortunate art teacher and lunatic had to die. You knew that even if that case was investigated from top to bottom, you still wouldn’t be implicated in any way. A normal person would think that the real killer would have loved nothing better than to wipe this thing out of existence. They absolutely wouldn’t voluntarily bring it up.—When Lao Yang died, it was likely Fan Siyuan would follow the traces and get his eye on you. You wanted to use this method to dispel his suspicions. When the investigation team reached you, you even used that bit of foreshadowing to incriminate Fan Siyuan and Teacher Pan together. Truly a stroke of genius.”

“Don’t disgust me. The outcome wasn’t at all ideal,” Zhang Chunjiu said rather carelessly. “That mad dog Fan Siyuan saw through it and realized that it was me—I don’t know why. I think it may have been because I didn’t come from Yan Security Uni like them?”

For a long time, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t say anything.

“Director Zhang.” He lowered his head slightly and went on with great difficulty. “On the day we...we saw off Lao Yang, you personally came to order each of us to put on our uniforms properly, personally led us to take part in the funeral. What were you thinking then?”

There was a moment where a subtle change came over Zhang Chunjiu’s expression. His lips, as thin as a line, curled, and his jaw tensed.

“Lao Yang was your friend for twenty years, the type that would entrust his wife and child to you, a friendship of life and death. He hadn’t wronged you in any way. Officer Gu came to the City Bureau in the same year as you and took you as a big brother. The two of

them trusted you at the most dangerous times, asked you to watch their backs. When you stabbed each of them in the back, did you feel happy? Did you make fun of their stupidity?”

Zhang Chunjiu was silent for a long time, then forced a smile. “...Are you saying that to prick my conscience?”

Pointing at the fat man hiding behind him, Luo Wenzhou said, “Zhang Chunling is your brother, so Lao Yang and Officer Gu weren’t your brothers anymore?”

For some reason, when he heard the name “Zhang Chunling,” the faint wavering in Zhang Chunjiu’s face vanished. He was like a river turning cold again after a moment of warmth, his human feelings like a spring breeze blowing across the surface, temporarily thawing the thick layers of ice under his skin. But soon, a more ruthless chill swept over everything, once more solidifying his heart into iron and stone.

“Captain Luo!”

Without any warning, Zhang Chunjiu got out the hand stuck into the pocket of his jacket and shot a gun right at Luo Wenzhou.

Sadly, while Luo Wenzhou’s speech had been uncommonly heartfelt and sincere, he hadn’t relaxed his vigilance. As soon as Zhang Chunjiu’s shoulder moved, he was on the alert. At the same time, a fully-armed special police officer next to him pushed him aside, and the bullet hit a bulletproof shield. Luo Wenzhou quickly rolled away.

The peace talks had come to an end. Zhang Chunjiu fired at him three times. “What are you standing there for, hurry up...”

He suddenly stopped, staring blankly, because the people who had come to rescue him, looking cool with their sub-machine guns hanging around their necks, all raised their hands.

Zhang Chunjiu instantly understood something and looked swiftly towards Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou patted dirt off of himself. "I know this is the former location of Heng'an Orphanage."

Zhang Chunjiu's expression suddenly altered.

"Sorry, Director Zhang. I've found some things you didn't want people to know, so I got here a step ahead and have been waiting here for you," Luo Wenzhou said quietly. "Director Zhang, all these years you've spent venting the pain you experienced onto others, has it helped?"

"You clearly knew that Zheng Kaifeng and Zhou Yahou were birds of a feather, and you still wallowed in the mire with him." Luo Wenzhou turned a deaf ear on him. "Do you have nightmares? Do you dream of the monsters that hurt you when you were little? Have you been afraid all these years, feeling that you couldn't surmount them, that you couldn't face them, and so you had to become like them..."

"Shut up!"

"You knew that Zhang Chunling couldn't control himself. He even went to Su Hui, like Zhou Yahou, like those heavy-jowled, pot-bellied assholes. It's written down in Su Xiaolan's diary. A girl who had just started elementary school—

"Who did Zhang Chunling take her for? The little Su Hui, who was the same age back then at Heng'an Orphanage?"

Zhang Chunjiu blank stare split open. "You understand shit!"

Luo Wenzhou's gaze met Zhang Chunjiu's in midair. He saw that the man's eyes were bloodshot, like a trapped beast forced into a dead

end. Zhang Chunjiu suddenly laughed quietly and slowly pressed down on his own chest. “You understand shit.—Luo Wenzhou, Young Master Luo... Have you ever been beaten? Have you ever been hungry? Do you know what it means to be afraid all the time?”

As he spoke, he slowly pulled his hand out of his inside pocket. The muzzles of seven or eight policemen’s guns locked on him at the same moment—Zhang Chunjiu was holding a small detonator!

“You don’t know anything, so don’t stand there talking about it.” One word at a time, Zhang Chunjiu said, “I’ll tell you a secret...”

Just then, a phone call came through to Luo Wenzhou’s earpiece.

Luo Wenzhou had no attention to spare, but he heard desperate panting from the other end, and Tao Ran struggling to spit out two characters in a wretchedly hoarse voice—

“Fei, Fei Du...”

“Fei Du is a good child.” Zhang Chunjiu lowered his voice strangely, his words coinciding with Tao Ran saying “Fei Du” over the earpiece. Luo Wenzhou’s pupils contracted.

Without warning, Zhang Chunjiu pressed down on the detonator.

## CHAPTER 173 - Edmond Dantès XLIV

The anticipated explosion didn't come.

“The bombs were buried at the former location of Heng'an Orphanage, from where the building used to be, all the way to the back courtyard,” Luo Wenzhou said. “We've already dismantled them.—Director Zhang, the orphanage has also been dismantled for many years. No matter how much you hated it, this place has changed. What meaning does it have now?”

Zhang Chunjiu slowly lowered the hand holding up the detonator.

Luo Wenzhou pressed his earpiece with one hand. Though he would have loved nothing better than to dive through the phone, he still had to divide his attention and deal with the person in front of him. “It's all over, Director Zhang.”

There was a faint smile at the corners of Zhang Chunjiu's lips. “Oh, really?”

Luo Wenzhou realized something was wrong. The next instant, a heatwave exploded. An enormous sound rendered him temporarily deaf, and something hit his bulletproof vest. Someone seemed to be pushing him. His pupils contracted rapidly at a powerful light—the “Zhang Chunling” hidden among the crowd behind Zhang Chunjiu had exploded!

Unidentifiable pieces of flesh and blood flew through the fire. A person raising his hands in surrender had been standing next to the human bomb; one of his raised arms disappeared without a trace, and half of his face caught fire. Maybe he was scared witless; he stood unmoving where he was and began to shriek.

All the bulletproof shields rose at once. The well-trained special police quickly broke away and sought cover. Zhang Chunjiu fell forward heavily onto the ground. His back seemed to be on fire, burning painfully. Raised earth and stones spurted right towards him. He saw the police come together in confusion. His ears thundered. He couldn't hear anything. He could feel the exquisite explosion from the tremors in the earth.

The smells of blood and gun smoke were chokingly thick. The only imperfection was that the much-renovated surface of the ground had changed, changed into some mixture of asphalt, cement, and rubber...not the stinking mud that it had been back then.

In all his dreams, Zhang Chunjiu could smell the stink of that mud, because his head had been stamped into it more than once when he'd been young. The hatred engraved in his memory came with it, permeating the mud like a toxin. Now, having passed through so many years, the venom at last exploded like a gushing oil well.

Apart from the fat man dressed up as Zhang Chunling, he'd had five people with him. Each person had a secret little strongbox on him. Zhang Chunjiu had told them that these contained cash and gold bars for emergency use, had them divide them up amongst themselves and carry them with them. The fake Zhang Chunling didn't need to personally carry a bag, so the explosives had been hidden in the stuffing at his underbelly.

He'd had two plans. If he couldn't detonate the bombs underground, the bombs on those five people would still be enough to blow this place sky high—with the police on the scene all serving as sacrificial victims. Faced with a pile of body parts, the medical examiners would have had to work overtime until the Lantern Festival to separate them out, and Zhang Chunling would have escaped long ago.

He'd planned well.



Most importantly, this way, he could happily go to his death, not fall into the hands of the police and suffer their interrogations and trials.

They weren't qualified—no one on earth was qualified to judge his crimes.

Zhang Chunjiu, lying prostrate on the ground, turned his head slightly to look in the direction of the sports park. The small practice field looked back at him peacefully and quietly through the guard rail. Then the practice field gradually dissolved, turning into the metal fence surrounding the old courtyard. Those children stared at him silently, lifelessly, like a row of sinister little ghosts.

He smiled at them.

Just then, Zhang Chunjiu's chest went hollow. The illusion of the old courtyard walls and the little ghosts dissipated at once. He was roughly pulled up off the ground. Zhang Chunjiu's eyes were still dazed. For a moment he couldn't understand what had happened. Something closed onto his wrist. Luo Wenzhou, clutching his collar, was roaring something. Zhang Chunjiu instantly opened his eyes wide and realized something was wrong.

The trembling of the earth had stopped!

Zhang Chunjiu found the strength somewhere to struggle out of Luo Wenzhou's grip and suddenly turn around—apart from the fake Zhang Chunling, the other five "bombs" were all mute! Those cowards had taken shelter here and there, shivering, not paying attention to the suitcases they were carrying. One of the suitcases had fallen and opened. Waste paper and stones fell out from inside it. The bomb that had originally been in there had vanished!

Most of the old newspapers stuffed into the suitcase had already burned up in the fire. A corner of one of them floated in front of Zhang Chunjiu's eyes. There was still some faintly distinguishable

writing on it. The date was fourteen years ago, and the article was about the fire at The Louvre—

Zhang Chunjiu began to roar and was pressed against the ground by the policemen surging up.

Luo Wenzhou handcuffed Zhang Chunjiu and immediately left him to his colleagues. He raised a hand to feel a little scratch on his forehead, then returned the call that had dropped just now. It didn't connect. Tao Ran's phone was turned off!

Tao Ran had spent a long time trying struggle free of his nightmares. When he'd woken and seen that it was still pitch black outside, he hadn't known how long he'd been unconscious. Panicked and confused, his first reaction had been to grab his phone and call Luo Wenzhou. But when he'd just connected, before he had time to say anything, there'd been a huge sound on the other end. Tao Ran's hand had trembled in fright, and he'd rolled right off his chair, knocking the battery out of his phone. As a half-immobilized injured person, Tao Ran had had to exert enormous strength to turn himself over, crawling over the floor feeling around everywhere for the parts of his phone.

Luo Wenzhou called six times without connecting. Remembering how Tao Ran had said "Fei Du" without any follow-up, his chest was about to explode. For a moment, his mind was blank.

His colleagues next to him had already quickly searched the suspects for other inflammable and explosive materials. A police officer ran over. "Captain Luo, there's one dead and one seriously injured. The dead person seems to be Zhang Chunling. It's likely he was carrying the explosive."

Luo Wenzhou's fingers almost subconsciously hung up and redialed. "Impossible. Zhang Chunling couldn't be the first to become a human

bomb. And just now that fat guy didn't say a single word. That doesn't seem like Zhang Chunling's style. It was a front."

"Huh? A front?" His colleague was confused. With a rather complicated expression, he looked over to where Zhang Chunjiu had been shoved into a police car not far off. "You're saying that Director Zhang... No, Zhang... Whoever, that he personally lured us away to shield Zhang Chunling? So where has Zhang Chunling gone?"

Luo Wenzhou had no attention to spare to answer—the seventh call had connected!

Tao Ran was sitting collapsed onto the ground, feeling he hardly looked human. Panting, he said to Luo Wenzhou, "Fei Du...Fei Du drugged me, I...I don't know where he's gone..."

As Tao Ran spoke, he turned his head to look. The computer he'd used to look into Hao Zhenhua was turned on. Under the screen were a walkie-talkie and his other phone—many police officers normally used two phones, a personal phone and one provided by their employers, normally used specifically for work.

"He touched my computer, walkie-talkie, and work phone before he left." Dragging his cast-encased leg, Tao Ran moved with difficulty, shifting over next to the chair and going to the computer. "Just now... Your pursuit of Director Zhang, and those status updates Zhang Donglai posted... That bastard!"

Tao Ran tried to climb into the chair but failed. He really couldn't resist bursting out into a curse that might not be heard from him once in twenty years. "Those photographs Zhang Donglai posted were wrong, he didn't post them for us to see, he..."

Luo Wenzhou's nerves had been concentrated on Zhang Chunjiu. He hadn't had time to think carefully. Hearing the thread of Tao Ran's conversation now, he came around and swiftly raised his head,

looking at Zhang Chunjiu. The blood that had poured from Zhang Chunjiu's ears had already dried. Through the car window, he was looking coldly at him.

Zhang Chunjiu must have mentioned Fei Du just now in order to distract him, to smooth the way for the explosion...but why had it been Fei Du he'd brought up? Who had those two photographs posted under Zhang Donglai's username been for? Where was Zhang Chunling?

Also...when Zhang Chunjiu had been preparing this drama for so long, it shouldn't have ended with only one dead and one seriously injured. Where were the other bombs? Why hadn't they gone off?

A few police officers urgently clearing the scene were rushing here and there gathering the scraps of newspaper that had fallen out of the suitcase. Luo Wenzhou looked over and instantly understood something. Not waiting for Tao Ran to speak, he hung up the phone and, gritting his teeth, dialed another number. "Hello—Director—Lu. How—are—you?"

Fei Du was shaken awake. When he'd just recovered a bit of awareness, he was picked up and thrown out of the car. It was dim all around, and he was unsteady on his feet. As soon as they touched the ground, he stumbled. He couldn't use his arms, which were tied behind his back, to keep his balance. He fell rather awkwardly to the ground.

The smell of the blood sticking to him made him want to throw up, and Fei Du had no interest in struggling. He simply rolled over where he'd fallen and laughed.

The driver who had grabbed him couldn't stand to watch his arrogance. He kicked him in the chest. "What are you laughing at!"

Fei Du really wasn't remarkable for physical strength. At the kick, he flew a length over the ground and immediately began to cough. His blood-soaked hair covered one of his eyes. After a good while, he finally caught his breath. He quietly sighed with emotion and said, "How truly barbaric. Teacher Fan, this good subordinate of yours has been pawing at me the whole way. It's anti-intellectual, and truly in poor taste."

Hearing these lines, the "barbarian" immediately stepped forward, planning to let him know what pawing truly meant. Just then, not far off there was a frail-sounding cough. A sickly male voice spoke. "Enough, don't give him something to laugh about."

Hearing these words, in the blink of an eye, the barbaric kidnapping driver turned from a teeth-grinding, blood-sucking wild beast into a domesticated animal. He agreed obediently and retreated a few steps.

Fei Du turned his head with difficulty and saw a woman come over pushing a wheelchair—if Luo Wenzhou had been there, he could have recognized the woman as the front desk receptionist who had passed him a note at the Great Fortune Building.

And sitting in the wheelchair was a man. His skeleton was holding up his big frame with difficulty, but he had lost weight dramatically. He was wearing a plain knit cap on his head, and his neck was feebly turned to one side. He was watching Fei Du with a smile that wasn't quite a smile...

Despite the bold mark this man had left in the depths of his consciousness, Fei Du nearly didn't recognize him.

## CHAPTER 174 - Edmond Dantès XLV

Fei Du lowered his head slightly, throwing his bloody hair out his eyes, putting it out of sight and out of mind. He nodded to the newcomer. “Are you unwell?”

The man in the wheelchair looked at Fei Du with a gaze full of interest, motioning for the woman behind him to push him closer. The barbarian driver immediately walked over to stand beside him and protect him to the death, like an utterly loyal dog, glaring menacingly at Fei Du—Fei Du could only smile at him very helplessly, demonstrating that he was an invalid who could only be kicked around; he didn’t have the ability to leap up and bite someone under these circumstances.

They were in a long-abandoned underground parking lot, perhaps in an unfinished building or a disused factory. Fei Du’s perspective was limited; he couldn’t tell.

Both the nearby cement floor and the suspended ceiling were undecorated, with years of accumulated dust on them. A few power cords reached from somewhere and hung precariously, a couple of lightbulbs tied to the copper wires. There was barely adequate light. At the least movement, the lightbulbs shook. Looking at it too long was dizzying.

Under the disorderly light, the flickering human shadows came and went. In every direction, the corners hid an unknown number of people. The echoes of footsteps rose and fell. Among these people were probably the fake security guard from the Longyun Center, Wang Jian, and the fake patrolman from the Drum Tower...and so on, and so on. They normally hid in corners others couldn’t see, like unspeaking human props. No one knew how much unremovable hatred you would find if you opened their chests.

Fei Du could almost feel the gazes of those people watching him. They were ice-cold—the icy cold of judgment. If not for the fact that he was still useful, they probably would have wanted to raise a stake and imitate the citizens who had burned witches in the Middle Ages, roasting him into a skewer on the spot.

“Teacher Fan,” Fei Du said to the man, “thirteen years ago, I saw you at home once, but it was too long ago. I’m not quite sure—I do have the right person, don’t I?”

“You’re more cool-headed than Fei Chengyu, more patient than him, more composed. And you can camouflage yourself better,” the man in the wheelchair said. He spoke slowly, and his voice was quiet, as if he didn’t have enough strength, full of a sense of sickness and weakness. “So young. You really are too frightening.”

Fei Du seemed somewhat astonished to hear such high praise. He tried to move and felt a sharp pain beneath his ribs. He suspected that the driver had broken a rib with that kick just now. Fei Du relaxed his breathing as much as he could and found himself a more comfortable position. “I’m a captive. How frightening can I be?”

Fan Siyuan beckoned, and a few people came over pushing a hospital bed. There were some pieces of simple life-preserving equipment on the hospital bed, wrapped around an old man who had been lying down for three years. This was Fei Chengyu, who had mysteriously vanished from the sanatorium.

Fei Chengyu wasn’t moving at all. His muscles had atrophied. His arms, merely skin and bone, lay at his sides, the deathly pale skin very slack, the texture of a rotten pancake. Fei Du looked at him absently and quickly looked away, not feeling any surprise that Fei Chengyu would appear here.

“You were unconscious the whole way, so now you must not know where this is. We’ve removed all the tracking devices on you. You’re

all alone and in my hands, but you aren't panicked or afraid." Fan Siyuan looked at him calmly and pointed at Fei Chengyu. "This person has the closest blood relationship to you. He used the techniques of abuse to mold you, shackle you, but there isn't any hatred in your gaze looking at him, I could even say no movement, as though you were looking at a piece of expired meat. You don't know fear or pain, so you can be precise and ruthless. Fei Chengyu didn't amount to anything in his life, but cultivating you may be a redeeming quality. You really are an ideal monster."

Fei Du laughed silently, reservedly displaying that he accepted this praise.

"We still have a while to wait," Fan Siyuan said. "A crucial figure hasn't arrived yet. I can speak to you a little. What do you want to say?"

Fei Du at once rudely asked, "Where is this place?"

Fan Siyuan smiled without speaking.

"Oh, I see, I can't just say anything." Fei Du thought about it, then asked, "I see you aren't in good health. What's going on?"

"A tumor. At first it was lung cancer. Now it's metastasized. There's nothing to be done, only chemo. Chemo is very painful. At my age, I don't plan on continuing to torment myself," Fan Siyuan answered frankly. "I'll give you some advice from an old man. Smoking is bad for your health."

"I don't have that bad habit. If these subordinates of yours could be as pleasant to deal with as you are, Teacher Fan, perhaps I can remain healthy a little longer," Fei Du said politely. Then he sighed rather sadly. "Zhang Chunling really is useless. He's not dead himself, but he's gotten flustered and left such a large opening."



“If not for that, how would I have known that you, the innocent President Fei, were the oriole at the center of the web? We old fellows have all been duped by you. You really are too deep,” Fan Siyuan said. “But now that I mention it, I don’t think it’s surprising. After all, you are Fei Chengyu’s son. There was poison in your bones from the moment you were born.”

“Teacher Fan, that’s very unfair of you to say. If I hadn’t gotten mixed up in this and driven the Zhang brothers thoroughly to the end of their ropes, would your people have been able to invade the enemy’s interior so easily? The two of us are natural allies to start with. It’s very unfriendly of you to talk about me like that.”

“Shut up!” Before Fan Siyuan could say anything, the driver standing guard beside him became enraged. “Who’s your ally? Trash! Sinner!”

Fei Du shrugged, an unspeakable craftiness permeating his smile. “You collaborated closely with my father over a decade ago, and now we’ve finally taken down Zhang Chunling and his gang... Of course, I’ve only put in a little force in this. Most of the credit goes to you. Teacher Fan, you’re the elder. Just say the word, and of course I’ll offer up that old dog Zhang Chunling with both hands.”

Hearing how he planned to take a share of the spoils without taking part in the plot, the driver was beside himself with rage. Likely he thought he was polluting the air by breathing here. Agitated, he said, “Teacher has done this to...”

Fan Siyuan waved a hand to interrupt his subordinate’s speech. “I’m not interested in controlling anyone, and I don’t want Zhang Chunling to become my dog. From the start, I’ve only wanted to destroy them.”

Fei Du raised his eyebrows, feigning astonishment. “Teacher Fan, you aren’t going to tell me that you’re an undercover police officer?”

Killing six people in a row is too high a threshold for going undercover.”

“Those scumbags deserved their punishment!” These words came from some believer’s mouth. The words “deserved their punishment” echoed in the empty underground room. It was ghastly.

“While I’m not a police officer, most of those who trained to be police officers back then were my students. I understand them,” Fan Siyuan said. “In a certain sense, the police are only mechanical props, following a rigid institution, obeying a rigid sequence. And most of them are only using it as a job to feed their families. They’re powerless. Fairness, righteousness? These things...”

At this point, Fan Siyuan laughed coldly. Behind him, all of his believers were filled with stereotyped righteous indignation. Their righteous indignation was unusually pious. Fei Du simply felt that he’d wandered by mistake into the den of some cult.

“But I couldn’t see back then where this colossus was, and I wasn’t in a position to investigate it. They had eyes in the City Bureau. They were everywhere. If I lightly touched the edge of it, I would have ended up like...” Fan Siyuan’s words came to an abrupt halt, the rest of what he was going to say disappearing. After a good while, he went on: “There was nothing to be done. If I wanted to get close to it, I had to descend into the shadows myself, descend into the abyss, become one with them... There was nothing I could do.

“Destroying one person, one family, is too easy. You think these malicious pieces of garbage should die, but they can easily evade retribution. And even if one victim has the luck to have the demon put to death, so what? Most killers don’t have to pay with their lives. Most of those who ought to die only eat and drink for free in prison for a few years. The price they pay isn’t enough to atone for their crimes.”

This time, there was no need for Fei Du to pretend. He displayed a very natural “Are you crazy?” expression. “Oh... So you’re an unpaid volunteer judge?”

Fan Siyuan ignored him. The old man’s gaze passed over his head, passed through the cement walls and the suspended ceiling, seeming to fall on a very distant place. “Much of the time, studying criminal psychology makes you very unhappy, because the more you know, the more you understand that those people—especially those guilty of heinous crimes, the most demented ones—even if they’re arrested and brought to justice, they don’t know regret at all. Some people are even pleased with their own control over others’ lives. Like you, President Fei.”

Fei Du felt that it would be best for him to keep his mouth shut at this time. Thereupon he could only smile.

“The more you understand these things, the more hopeless you feel. But sometimes there will be a few people who give you consolation, make you think there’s still hope for the world, that there are still things in this system that you’re reluctant to part with, that not everything you’re doing is a futile effort.”

Fei Du said, “You wouldn’t be talking about Gu...”

A bullet instantly brushed past him. Fan Siyuan raised his eyelids. “I don’t especially want to hear his name from your mouth.”

Fei Du shrugged carelessly and shut his mouth.

“After that fire fourteen years ago, the only meaning left in my life was to make sure those who deserved to die got what was coming to them.”

Fei Du seemed to be silently digesting for a while. “Zhang Chunling and the others took in wanted criminals, so you turned yourself into a

wanted criminal, succeeded in infiltrating them. But after you'd infiltrated, you found that this organization was more enormous than you'd imagined, and you were at the outskirts. So you and Fei Chengyu, each with your own sinister designs, hit it off easily and used each other—he wanted to weaken the organization and control it himself, and you wanted them all to die... Teacher Fan, I really admire your type of psychopath.”

“Teacher Fan.” The woman pushing the wheelchair looked at Fei Du with a hateful gaze. “This sort of trash isn't worth you making a mental effort.”

Fei Du raised his eyebrows at her slightly coquettishly. “Hey, young lady, have I offended you?”

The gaze of the woman pushing the wheelchair was like a knife, instantly stabbing a hole in Fei Du. “A scumbag who owes a debt like you ought to have sentence passed upon him!”

“Owe a debt? Whom do I owe?” Fei Du smiled as he looked at her, peach blossom eyes curving, plump lower eyelids emerging naturally under his eyes. “I never owe debts to beautiful young ladies, unless...”

Before Fei Du finished speaking, a bullet came from above, piercing through his ankle.

The sharp pain twisted through him. Fei Du groaned, all the blood in his body seeming to turn to cold sweat and pouring off of him. He curled his legs up painfully, leaving a long trail of blood on the ground. The change in the tempo of his breathing aggravated the injury to his ribs. Fei Du couldn't maintain in his sitting posture any longer. He sat collapsed on the ground.

Fan Siyuan raised his head. High up, there was a man with friendly, good-natured features holding a gun. “Teacher, you see it. This sort of

person doesn't cry until he's seen the coffin!"

These words of his nearly brought out the "people's wrath." All around was a babble of voices—

"They don't know remorse at all!"

"What's the use of the law? It can't distinguish between good and evil. This sort of person might only pay a bit of a fine and then get away clean, go on being powerful and entitled, continue to harm people."

"He doesn't count as a person at all!"

"I spit!"

"Shooting is too good for him, he ought to be executed by dismemberment!"

Fei Du had never expected that he would one day face this sort of universal contempt. After he had endured the worst of the initial pain, he laughed breathlessly. "Doesn't cry until he's seen the coffin... *Pft...* Haha, ladies and gentlemen, I don't mind telling you, I won't cry even if I do see a coffin."

Fan Siyuan's believers had become the embodiment of "a tooth for a tooth." Nothing else could fit in their minds. Hearing that he could still spout nonsense at a time like this, they were overcome with rage, planning to swarm up in a crowd and trample him.

"Teacher Fan." Fei Du turned over amidst the public wrath, casually setting aside his injured ankle, lying there relaxed, idly half-closing his eyes. Amidst the clamor of those wanting to peel off his skin and rip out his sinews, he unhurriedly said, "Could I trouble you to take some care? I would die very easily. If you touch me again, I won't be able to hold up to you judging my crimes."

As soon as he spoke, the surroundings quieted at once.

“You all fantasize every day that you’re righteous judges, and the climax comes when others weep bitter tears in front of you, kneeling on the ground in repentance, hopelessly and regretfully waiting for you to unfeelingly pronounce your unforgiving judgement—isn’t that right? How can a sinner be allowed to die a natural death? How can he meet death easily? How can he die privately, without undergoing your trial and sentencing? A dead person can’t feel anything, isn’t that right?” Fei Du carelessly turned his head and spat out a mouthful of bloody saliva from biting the inside of his cheek, but the smile at the corners of his mouth was increasingly obvious. “Only a sadist can know what a sadist feels. How about it, do I understand you all?”

Fan Siyuan was looking at him expressionlessly.

Just then, urgent footsteps suddenly broke through the silent confrontation. A middle-aged man charged in, bent down, and said something to Fan Siyuan. The next instant, the sound of gunfire came from outside.

Fei Du raised his eyebrows. “Oh, the long-awaited guest arrives—do you think he’ll kill you or me first?”

Two people came over, one on each side, and roughly hauled him up.

Yan City’s city center—

Howling police sirens surrounded the former location of The Louvre. This place had changed hands and been renovated many times. It had become a combination movie theater, supermarket, and eating, drinking, and merrymaking complex.

As soon as he saw it, Lu Youliang felt there was something wrong.

The on-duty staff member in charge totteringly followed after the police, looking bewildered. “Officer, we only open at ten, there’s no one here. There are just these few nighttime security guards, and they’re all here. What are you looking for?”

“Security cameras. All the security cameras in the area!”

The security camera records for the mall, the underground parking lot, and all the traffic cameras and surveillance cameras within a kilometer radius were requested. Everyone hurriedly searched through them, sweating—there was nothing.

The night was as calm as water. They went through the security camera records several times on fast-forward...

Fan Siyuan and the others had never been here!

Lu Youliang’s scalp went numb. He’d heard that Fei Du was a very reliable person, and when he’d come into contact with him, he’d also thought that, apart from being too deep a thinker, there was nothing else wrong with him. He was much steadier than these youngsters who would drop the ball at the critical moment. He hadn’t expected to become the first person to be landed in a hole by him!

## CHAPTER 175 - Edmond Dantès XLVI

Luo Wenzhou said, “What did you say?”

His voice wasn't loud, and based solely on his words, he was speaking reasonably. But Director Lu for a time didn't quite know how to answer. Putting himself in Luo Wenzhou's shoes, he felt that the next moment he would burst into vulgar language over the obstruction of the phone signal—of course, even if Luo Wenzhou really did speak rudely, Director Lu could do nothing but pardon it.

But instead, the two of them were silent over the phone for five seconds, and Luo Wenzhou didn't erupt. “Fei Du's message says, ‘The place where this started is the place where it will end.’ But there's no one at the old location of The Louvre.”

Lu Youliang said grimly, “Zhang Chunjiu betrayed Gu Zhao and made him bear a stigma, dying unjustly. Gu Zhao died in the fire at The Louvre, and The Louvre was bankrolled by Fei Chengyu and built by Zhang Chunling. The two of them should count as the chief culprits of Gu Zhao's murder. The Reciter's methods are private justice in the form of ‘a tooth for a tooth,’ so Zhang Chunjiu, who was responsible for the framing, had to take back the charge he framed Gu Zhao for—so if I've understood correctly, as the killer, Zhang Chunling should burn to death at the old location of The Louvre. But why aren't they here?”

Luo Wenzhou, wearing his headphones, really couldn't restrain himself. He opened the window of the speeding car, and the biting cold winter wind came pelting in, accelerated by the speed. His colleague driving the car gave a start as he was swept by the cold wind, but he quietly glanced at Luo Wenzhou's face and didn't dare to make a sound.



Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes, more and more fretfulness and anxiety amassing in his heart, enough to send the globe exploding up to the Big Dipper.

He unconsciously squeezed his knuckles. “Fei Du wouldn’t mislead us on purpose. There was no need for it, and he doesn’t want to commit suicide.”

Lu Youliang said, “I don’t understand. Since he had a premonition that the tracking device would be removed, why couldn’t he have given us a definite location...”

“Because he wasn’t sure.” Luo Wenzhou slowly let out a white breath. “He isn’t a roundworm in The Reciter’s—that Fan Siyuan’s—belly. Even though he roughly knows what he’s thinking, he still can’t accurately read his mind. That’s why he was unclear about the address and left us his line of thought. I think the general direction is right, but the ‘place where this started’ that Fan Siyuan thought of isn’t the same one we’re thinking of... The former location of The Louvre is where Gu Zhao was wronged, and the ski run used to be Heng’an Orphanage, the place where Zhang Chunjiu and his brother came from—if neither of those is right, where else can it be?”

Where else was there?

Drawing near to four-thirty in the morning, the sky showed no signs of lightening; the morning star was unhurriedly climbing up.

“Fei Du...Fei Du is extremely audacious. He’d dare to do anything. But he isn’t rash, and he’s very meticulous. If the message he left you hinted at the old location of The Louvre, it shows that he thought there was a good chance Fan Siyuan would go there, and it was worth a gamble. But he may also have mentioned the remaining low-probability chance. Uncle Lu, please help me...help me think...”

Luo Wenzhou's words had started out very orderly, but at the end, somehow his voice broke. He cleared his throat twice in a row, but it was still fiercely blocked. He couldn't keep back his last words.

Standing in the cold wind, Lu Youliang turned his head to look at the building behind him—that high, oddly-styled roof must have been the movie theater. Apparently the tickets were all bought out for the first two days of the new year; in recent years it had somehow become popular to go out for the family dinner on New Year's Eve. In another fifteen hours or so, this place would be a brightly lit scene full of a babble of voices.

Fourteen years had passed, and he still remembered the unforgettable ruins of the fire, still remembered how thunderstruck he had felt when he'd heard what had happened to Gu Zhao.

Lu Youliang took a deep breath. "Tao Ran—right! I've remembered, before he left, he contacted a friend of his abroad who's with Zhou Huaijin. They've found someone who used to work for the Zhou family. They mentioned Heng'an Orphanage, and then, according to that person's account, he had Tao Ran track down the file on the murder of Heng'an Orphanage's director!"

Fei Du had given Tao Ran a soporific. The dose hadn't been large. At a time like that, he ought to have been coaxing him to go to sleep, not talking to him about such an invigorating old case... So what had he thought of then?

"Hao Zhenhua was Heng'an Orphanage's director. He was stabbed three times when he opened the door. Then the killer hit him over the head with a blunt object continuously until he died. When he was dead, the killer still wasn't satisfied. He stabbed the body ten more times. This charge was placed on a gang of burglars." Tao Ran, half-immobilized, pressed the phone to his ear. "At the time of the crime, the deceased Hao Zhenhua was alone in his residence in the outskirts—no, it wasn't a villa, so-called villas hadn't been thought of yet at

the time. He'd somehow managed to get a homestead in his hometown, built himself a house, and used it specially for storing his valuables, like a secret treasury.—I have the address, I've sent it to you, but the whole area was relocated twenty years ago because of road repairs. I looked up the location on the computer just now. It must be where Yan Sea Highway passes through. No matter what, I don't think The Reciter can go up onto the highway.”

Luo Wenzhou had no attention to spare to answer. He quickly pulled up a map.—Yan Sea Highway stretched from the southeast of Yan City, connecting Yan City to the bordering Binhai District. The entrance to the highway was by the East Forest Ski Run. That was where Zhang Chunjiu and the others had left the main road, turning into the sports park.

The ski run was where Heng'an Orphanage had been. The asshole director had used the orphanage to frantically accumulate ill-gotten gains, which he couldn't take directly home to arrange, so he'd delivered them all to his little treasury in the countryside. The location of this “little treasury” was very delicate. It was under Yan City's jurisdiction, but it was on the border between Yan City and Binhai...

Yan Sea Highway...the Binhai District...

Tao Ran said, “This Hao Zhenhua was killed the year after Zhou Yahu's death, about thirty-seven years ago. Zhang Chunjiu would have been an adolescent, and Zhang Chunling would have been around twenty-five. This murder's comparatively bloody method, the mistreatment of the body, and the excessive stabbing show that the attacker's emotional state was very unstable. The scene shows violence and disorder. The deceased was entirely unguarded when he opened the door. On the one hand, he may have known the killer. On the other hand, he may have thought that there was no danger from the killer—synthesizing all of the above, my guess is that the one who stabbed him was the adolescent Zhang Chunjiu. There must have

been an adult assisting him to gather the property and calmly clean up the scene. This murder was later by coincidence attributed to a looting gang. I analyzed it for Fei Du and said I thought it may have been the first murder they committed. It's likely that their reasoning and method in committing crimes was a lesson learned from the experience of getting away with this one."

"Gather the property?" Luo Wenzhou quickly followed up. "How much did the killers take from the deceased's home?"

"Unclear," Tao Ran said. "The wardrobes at the scene had all been rifled. They were practically empty. If everything inside had been taken, the quantity must have been impressive. But in order to cover up the truth, the victim's family maintained that the wardrobes had been empty to start with. The case was resolved carelessly, without a close investigation."

Lie low, kill, disguise the scene, take a great quantity of property and flee... That was all right if it had only been cash, but if there had been other things—enough property to fill up a few wardrobes—they must at least have had a stronghold nearby.

That stronghold was likely the origin, where Zhang brothers had begun their crimes!

But where would it be?

Yes, there was also Su Hui's dumping site in Binhai.—In the past, the status of places on the periphery of Yan City, like the Binhai District, had been unclear; there were many unused plots of land in the outskirts waiting to be developed, none of them worth any money. Which one of them wouldn't have been more convenient than Binhai, a place in a different administrative district?

Why would Zhang Chunling and the others have chosen Binhai?

The art teacher Yu Bin had encountered Zhang Chunling and Su Hui in Binhai and had been silenced because of it. This had happened fourteen years ago. The organization had already been in its finished form then. Given Zhang Chunling's power and caution, would he have personally gone to that awful place to accompany Su Hui in dumping a body?

That didn't accord with reason.

But if it hadn't been to dump a body, then what had he gone there to do?

Was it possible that Zhang Chunjiu and the others' initial stronghold had been...

"Stop the car!" Luo Wenzhou suddenly said. "I have something to ask Zhang Chunjiu!"

Luo Wenzhou didn't wait for the car to stop fully before charging out, yanking Zhang Chunjiu out of the escorting police car. "When you killed Hao Zhenhua, the director of Heng'an Orphanage, the stronghold you shadowed him from, and where you divided up the loot, was in Binhai, right? Where was it?"

For a moment Zhang Chunjiu couldn't understand why he was asking this. He stared blankly. But since his scheme had fallen through, he truly was full of hatred towards Luo Wenzhou, so he only answered with a sneer, not saying a word.

If he could, Luo Wenzhou would simply have torn Zhang Chunjiu's head off, turned him over, and pulled out the words hidden in his belly. He firmly gripped Zhang Chunjiu's collar. Zhang Chunjiu was lifted by him, tottering, a breath catching in his throat, choking him so purplish red rose in his face. His gaze met Luo Wenzhou's bloodshot eyes. He displayed a cold smile.

“Will you answer?!”

Just then, Lu Youliang’s voice came over his earpiece. “Wenzhou, let me talk to him.”

Luo Wenzhou forced down the magma constantly erupting in his chest, pulled out the cord of his headphones, and pressed his phone to the coughing Zhang Chunjiu’s ear.

“Lao Zhang, it’s me.”

Zhang Chunjiu’s gaze flashed slightly—after all, he and Director Lu had been friends for over twenty years.

But Lu Youliang didn’t bring up old times to stir up emotion. “Listen to me. Your big brother Zhang Chunling is with The Reciter—Fan Siyuan and his gang. They’re all over there now. Fan Siyuan used your nephew’s life to lure him in. I don’t think you need me to tell you what he wants to do.”

Zhang Chunjiu’s expression at last altered.

“If we capture Zhang Chunling, we’ll hand him over to the procuratorate according to procedure after we’ve finished interrogating him. Even if the highest court condemns him to death with prompt execution, he can still die with dignity, and you’ll have a chance to see him again. But if he falls into Fan Siyuan’s hands... Do as you see fit—”

Fei Du couldn’t stand up. He was entirely dragged along. Hearing the gunfire outside constantly drawing near, for a moment he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Zhang Chunling, a psychopath guilty of heinous crimes, a scoundrel spanning the decades who could occupy the trending topics on all the major social networking sites, was grinding his teeth, on the one

hand wishing to rip him to pieces, on the other hand watching the clock, holding his nose, and doing his utmost to save his life before daylight.

Fei Du found laughter amidst suffering, feeling that he was like a human master who had summoned a demon from hell, and Zhang Donglai was an unbreakable contract—alcohol-scented, human-shaped.

“If you can still laugh at a time like this, I believe now that you wouldn’t cry if you saw a coffin.” Fan Siyuan sighed quietly by his ear. “The first time I saw you, I watched with my own eyes as Fei Chengyu dragged you out of that cabinet, beat your mother, put those zero sum metal rings around your neck and hers. She collapsed on the spot, but you didn’t make a sound from beginning to end, didn’t shed a tear... I was very curious then—what lived inside the body of such a beautiful, adorable little boy?”

Fei Du laughed mockingly. “The superhero Teacher Fan. A miserable woman and her child were being tortured like that in front of you—why didn’t you save us?”

“Your mother killed her father for Fei Chengyu’s sake, and you’re the continuation of his filthy bloodline. The two of you are parts of Fei Chengyu. What are you doing playing for pity? When I saw the look in your eyes, I knew that when you had spread your wings, you would backlash against Fei Chengyu. I was eagerly looking forward to knowing the outcome of the father and son battle. Why would I have prevented it? Unfortunately, time waits for no man. The tumor came before I got to see the end of the drama, so I had to move first.”

As he spoke, the gunfight outside had grown increasingly outrageous. Zhang Chunling’s criminal subordinates evidently had the upper hand and quickly charged in. Fan Siyuan’s attitude sitting in his wheelchair was truly out of tune with the surroundings, extremely eye-catching.

As soon as the other charged in, he saw them. He didn't say a word; a clip of bullets shot towards Fan Siyuan.

Fan Siyuan wasn't at all flustered. The cement floor in front of him rose out of nowhere, blocking the bullets whistling towards him and revealing an underground passage. The woman pushing him quickly went in, and Fei Du was hauled up and thrown over someone's shoulder, his chest caught against the person's hard shoulder. He nearly blacked out—

After taking the art student back home, Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao, carrying the sketch Yu Bin had left behind with his life, went to look for the place where the collision had occurred according to the art student's directions. When they'd found the approximate location, they received a dispatch call.

“Take note—approximately twenty kilometers west of the east coast cliffs is an abandoned vehicle rental center. The location has been sent to all of you. A group of criminals has taken a hostage. They are armed. Take care. Once more, they are armed...”

Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao exchanged a look.

“An abandoned vehicle rental center?” Xiao Haiyang muttered to himself for a moment. “Didn't Yu Bin's student say they rented a car from the scenic area where they were staying?”

Lang Qiao quickly scanned the map. “It's not far. Come on!”



## CHAPTER 176 - Edmond Dantès XLVII

“We’ve captured the suspect Zhang Chunjiu. According to his confession, Zhang Chunling formerly worked illegally at a privately-operated small lumber mill so the younger ones could study a little. But the lumber mill was poorly managed and soon closed down. The owner fled to avoid paying taxes, and they used the abandoned lumber mill as their stronghold. Using all manner of illegal means—including robbery and murder—they accumulated some assets.

“Because the location was far from crowded areas, backing on a mountain forest, it developed into the first den for hiding criminals. The boss was Zhang Chunling. You could call this criminal organization the initial form of the Chunlai Conglomerate.

“Later, the tourism industry sprang up, and the Binhai District was no longer as desolate as before, so they expanded their den and got involved in the car rental business, first to mask themselves, and second to get faster information.

“Though a good thing can’t last forever. Perhaps there were too many bodies buried in that patch of land in Binhai, and it was cursed. All the businesses failed, and the tourism industry in the end was more dead than alive, not gathering popularity. As the Chunlai Conglomerate expanded, they slowly moved away. The car rental business is now entirely abandoned.”

“Good heavens,” Lang Qiao gasped in amazement when she’d heard. “You’ve managed to dig so deep!”

Tao Ran sighed. “We had no other choice. The circumstances aren’t very good now. The Reciter lured the escaped Zhang Chunling over there...”

“What!” Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang said with one voice.

Then, not far from them, there came a sudden string of gunshots.

Lang Qiao gave a start, feeling all the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She turned and opened her eyes twice as wide. “Real guns? Or is someone letting off fireworks?”

Xiao Haiyang’s experience with both gunfire and letting off fireworks was limited. He could only look helplessly back at her.

Lang Qiao pressed her hand to her waist. “Specs, tell me you didn’t buy your firearms license.”

“I scraped by, but don’t ask me how,” Xiao Haiyang answered. “They all said it was because I lost five-hundred yuan before the test.”

“What’s going on?” Tao Ran had heard the background noise over the speaker. “Wait, precisely where are you two right now?”

“Deputy-Captain Tao,” Xiao Haiyang said grimly, “there wouldn’t have been many car rental businesses here fourteen years ago. Do you think...that when the art teacher Yu Bin and his students rented a car back then, it could have been from those people?”

Tao Ran currently wasn’t in the mood to discuss an old case with him and interrupted with rare harshness. “Don’t worry about that now. You’re too close. Stop where you are at once and await orders. Captain Luo and the others will be there soon!”

Lang Qiao said, “Hey, but...”

Xiao Haiyang hit the brakes and hung up Lang Qiao’s phone.

“What are you doing?” said Lang Qiao.

Xiao Haiyang touched the gun at his waist. This had been requested along with the whole team when Zhang Chunling had sent people to kill Zhou Huaijin. Xiao Haiyang still hadn't gotten accustomed to it, always feeling that it was rubbing uncomfortably at his waist. He suddenly unlocked the car doors and said to Lang Qiao, "Get out and wait for Captain Luo here."

Lang Qiao said, "No... What are you going to do?"

Xiao Haiyang pressed his lips into a line. After the nearby sounds of gunfire had broken through the night sky, they'd become increasingly more aggressively concentrated in this desolate place. He suddenly opened the car door without a word and got out.

"Crap!" said Lang Qiao.

She hurriedly chased after, grabbing Xiao Haiyang's shoulder, holding him in place. "Have you ever been out in the field? Have you ever shot a gun? Can you shoot or run, young master? I'm really impressed!"

Xiao Haiyang's face went white, because Lang Qiao was right. Even a slender-looking girl like her could hold him up, but, but...

"The first notice we received said that the criminals had taken a hostage. If the Chunlai Conglomerate and The Reciter are exchanging fire now, what about the hostage?"

Although Tao Ran hadn't had time to tell them who the so-called "hostage" was, Lang Qiao still frowned.

"Of course that's just my excuse." Xiao Haiyang sighed. Then, not caring whether Lang Qiao understood or not, he went on quietly: "All these years, I've wanted to know why...why there are people like Lu Guosheng in the world, why there are people who would hide them

away like treasures and with even greater malice use them to do even more evil things. I've always dreamed of personally arresting him..."

As Xiao Haiyang spoke, he struggled...and still couldn't break free of Lang Qiao's grip, but in his struggle he knocked into the phone in Lang Qiao's pocket, which hadn't been put away carefully. By chance, the phone fell onto its screen and bounced off a sharp stone, instantly cracking into a spiderweb.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Xiao Haiyang's voice was very low. He was practically humbly imploring her. "Over a decade—for over a decade, not a day has gone by that I haven't thought of ending this. I've lived this long without succeeding in cultural or martial arts. I have no other aspirations... Even if I die here bringing them down with me, I'll still be perfectly happy. You don't understand, let go!"

The emotions Xiao Haiyang understood were always a little different from others' emotions. This made him feel that he was communicating with others through a layer of something, like an eccentric who didn't understand human feelings. Lang Qiao had never seen such deeply convincing grief and desperation in him. She subconsciously loosened her hold.

Xiao Haiyang tottered back a few steps from inertia and firmly met Lang Qiao's eyes for a moment. Then he seemed to suddenly spontaneously learn how to speak sensibly; leaving behind the phrase "look after yourself," he turned to go.

"Wait!" Lang Qiao bent and picked up her cracked phone, sadly sucking at her gums—this wasn't the piece of crap the City Bureau assigned them. It was her own phone, worth nearly a month's salary, dead in the line of duty before she'd even had a chance to put a protective screen over it. "You know what? Before my university entrance exam, I also broke a new phone and actually got a hundred on the math. Isn't that the same as the principle behind you testing for your firearms license?"

Xiao Haiyang: "..."

"Do you believe in mysticism?" Lang Qiao opened the car door. "Get in!"

The two of them quickly approached the abandoned car lot—the former lumber mill. It was very spacious here, backing onto a gently sloping hill. There was an expanse of forest on the hill. Though much of the vegetation had withered, the dead twigs with their withered leaves and the old trees could still just about give someone a place to conceal themselves.

Lang Qiao efficiently hid the car and did a simple inspection of the surroundings. She beckoned to Xiao Haiyang. "Follow me."

Xiao Haiyang's expression was somewhat complicated. "You really don't have to..."

"Shut up—*hss...* Deputy-Captain Tao didn't say this place was so big!" Lang Qiao had nimbly hopped through the woods into the little thicket behind the old mill. She sucked in her breath when she stuck her head out to have a look.

Both the lumber mill and the car rental business had come to an utter end. The surroundings were full of weeds. But the building's footprint was awe-inspiring; it was fully the size of a school. There was a ring of cars surrounding it. Dense gunshots rang out inside. Lang Qiao at once saw a string of eye-catching bloodstains.

"On the surface it was a parking lot for rental cars, and in reality it hid wanted criminals. The structure inside may be more complex. I'm thinking, where should we start..." Before Lang Qiao had finished, Xiao Haiyang suddenly pressed down her head.

Lang Qiao, suddenly interrupted, stared at first, then heard the rustle of footsteps.

The two of them hid behind a few big trees growing in a row, not daring to breathe too deeply, listening to the hasty footsteps growing near and then fading away, passing nearly right by them, then running off in another direction. After a good while, Lang Qiao carefully looked in the direction where she'd hidden the car, then held down the trembling barrel of Xiao Haiyang's gun—fortunately the kid had forgotten to remove the safety, or else there would have been great fun when it went off by accident.

She pulled out a small set of binoculars from somewhere and saw that there were about a dozen people in that group, each of them carrying a weapon, walking very fast towards a place where the mill backed against hill.

“What are those people doing?”

“I think they're Zhang Chunling's subordinates,” Xiao Haiyang said almost inaudibly. “Look, they seem to be very familiar with the territory.”

“Wait, I remember Deputy Tao saying...that The Reciter lured Zhang Chunling here? But isn't this place the Chunlai Conglomerate's old lair? Fighting in another person's territory—what's wrong with these Reciter people's chief's head?”

“The Zhang brothers have always hidden behind the scenes. They must be very cautious and very afraid of death. They wouldn't have dared to come so quickly to a strange place. It may be The Reciter's aim to make them stop at nothing.” Xiao Haiyang paused, then said, “Xiao Qiao-jie, what should we do now?”

Lang Qiao, full of misgivings, froze when he called to her like this, her heart giving a lurch without warning, an ill-timed memory

stabbing her like a needle.

Xiao Qiao-jie...

Only Xiao Wu, when he'd just come to the City Bureau, had called her that.

“Come on.” Her gaze sharpened. “We follow them.”

Lang Qiao had guessed right; the structure under the abandoned lot was more complicated than it appeared from the outside, like an ant hill.

Storerooms and narrow corridors intersected. There were false walls and secret passages everywhere, perfectly separating the place where they'd carried on the disguise of doing business from the place where they'd sheltered evil.

Fei Du had taken a rough look and had a faint guess—this was likely the original form of The Louvre and the Beehive.

Fan Siyuan must have come here ahead of time to investigate many times. He was very familiar with it. Under Zhang Chunling's fierce besieging firepower, he quickly took a crowd of people to withdraw underground.

Underground there was a space with thick cement walls on all four sides, built like an air-raid shelter. There was a thick protective door at the entrance that could be tightly sealed. The protective door was painted the exact same gray as the surrounding walls. If you didn't get close and look carefully, you practically wouldn't notice the completely different world here.

There were peepholes and small openings for bullets to pass through in the door, enough to support a dozen guns. It was like a fort.

Fei Du was roughly thrown onto the cement floor. He turned his head to look. In these disorderly circumstances, Fan Siyuan and the others had actually brought the burden of Fei Chengyu along. Perhaps due to blood loss, Fei Du's vision darkened a little. He squeezed his eyes shut for a while, whispering as though talking to himself: "I guess this must be close to the place where Su Hui dumped the bodies. Is that right, Teacher Fan?"

Speech echoes in an enclosed environment. As soon as he spoke, Fan Siyuan's believers surrounding him all immediately pointed their guns at him in a very unfriendly manner.

Fei Du was entirely indifferent. "Did you find this place by following Xu Wenchao and Su Luozhan? No wonder..."

"No wonder what?" said Fan Siyuan.

"No wonder Su Luozhan knew the details of the crimes Su Xiaolan committed over twenty years ago," Fei Du said. "Su Luozhan is a little psychopath, jealous by nature. Tormenting people is her delight. If she 'by chance' found out about the harassing phone calls Su Xiaolan came up with, she certainly wouldn't be able to resist imitating them—truly a brilliant move, achieving so much with so little effort."

"Shut your mouth!" the woman who had been pushing Fan Siyuan's wheelchair all along suddenly said.

Fei Du looked at her in the dim light. With a smile that wasn't quite a smile, he said, "In the process, you must have witnessed the little girls' bodies being transported here many times, right? Such a pity. So many of them, such little girls. Flower buds that hadn't opened yet, dying in humiliation and becoming cold corpses..."

The woman could stand it no longer. She strode over and grabbed Fei Du's collar.



“Teacher Fan,” said Fei Du, “could you take better care of the important prop?”

Fan Siyuan sighed and called his subordinate to a halt. “Ruobing.”

The woman’s hands trembled. Her raised palm stopped in midair.

Fei Du was astonished to find that there were tears in her eyes.

Fan Siyuan said grimly, “We may have been able to prevent one or two cases, save a few girls, but so what? Catching Xu Wenchao and Su Luozhan alone wouldn’t change anything. Xu Wenchao was only a psychopath’s puppet. He didn’t know anything. And the Su family’s third generation little monster hadn’t even reached the age to assume criminal responsibility yet. The Chunlai Conglomerate behind them was the true culprit. It wouldn’t feel it if you cut off one of its tentacles. It would have been saving a little only to lose a lot, making many more people suffer.—Ruobing, some sacrifices are necessary.”

“I know,” the woman said quietly. “Teacher, I understand.”

Fei Du’s brow moved. “Oh, really? But from what I understand, you haven’t only watched people in mortal peril without trying to help. Zhao Haochang, who killed He Zhongyi, really was a scumbag, but there’s a cost for even a scumbag to kill someone. Without a compelling need, who would use that method? Who was it who made him steadfastly believe that He Zhongyi was a parasitic drug addict? And who sent that text message pointing at the Golden Triangle Lot? I ran into He Zhongyi and exchanged a few words with him. He was introverted and timid. All this time I haven’t been able to understand how he managed to get up the courage to go ‘pester’ Zhang Ting, a strange young woman.

“And then there’s Dong Xiaoqing. After Zheng Kaifeng’s second contact person, Zhuo Yingchun, passed away, your people took advantage of the vacancy to creep in. You knew that Zheng Kaifeng

was planning an internal war against Zhou Junmao, so you helped him arrange Dong Qian, a perfect killer—just like arranging for Lu Guosheng to kill Feng Bin—and afterwards you tricked that stupid girl Dong Xiaoqing...”

“We didn’t trick her!” the woman denied loudly. “We only told her the truth! Didn’t she have the right to know the true reason behind her parents’ deaths?”

“It was far more than the true reason behind her parents’ deaths. You must also have told her the secret of the mole within the police.” Fei Du sighed. “That old fart Zheng Kaifeng truly was crafty. First he use a trumped-up paternity test result to drive a wedge between Zhou Junmao and Zhou Huaijin, burying a chess piece. Then he secretly commissioned an assassination. This way, even if a conspiracy theorist discovered that there was a plot behind Zhou Junmao’s death, suspicion would all point to Zhou Huaijin, the eldest son of confused origin. Even Dong Qian may have thought his employer was Zhou Huaijin.—But, beauty, don’t tell me that your all-powerful Teacher Fan was also misled by him?”

The woman stared.

Fei Du laughed aloud. “Why didn’t you tell Dong Xiaoqing that Zheng Kaifeng was the real culprit, Teacher Fan?”

The woman stubbornly said, “Because...because Dong Xiaoqing couldn’t have gotten close to Zheng Kaifeng. What would have been the use of telling her? The outcome would only have been that old scumbag quietly getting rid of her!”

“After she killed Zhou Huaixin, wasn’t she still silenced according to pattern?” Fei Du’s line of sight went past her, fastening onto Fan Siyuan. “Teacher Fan, you clearly knew that until it was all over, Zhang Chunling’s people would be watching Dong Xiaoqing. You were afraid that the sluggish police wouldn’t be able to find traces of

the organization. Before they dealt with Dong Xiaoqing, you lured the police to her house, lit the fire to lead the police to investigate the security camera on the door across the way...”

Fan Siyuan’s face fell slightly. He shot a look at two men following him. The two of them quickly pushed aside the woman and stepped up.

Fei Du quickly said, “In fact, you’d always wanted to lead Dong Xiaoqing into killing Zhou Huaijin—yes, your original target was Zhou Huaijin, because Zhou Huaixin was stupider, easier to control! How would Dong Xiaoqing have known that Zhou Huaijin was getting out of the hospital that day? You helped her plan it! Zhou Huaixin was unsatisfied with his family to start with. If both his father and the older brother he mutually depended on for survival died unnatural deaths one after another, you could take the opportunity to get close to him, use him, get his help investigating the Zhou family’s association with Heng’an Orphanage... Ugh...”

Fei Du groaned. A man had grabbed his neck and punched him in the lower abdomen, forcibly cutting off his speech. The other person roughly taped his mouth shut.

Cold sweat rolled down Fei Du’s forehead, quickly soaking his eyelashes. He was curled up in pain, but from start to finish, his eyes were fixed on the woman beside Fan Siyuan, hunting down a flash of alarm on her face.

Fan Siyuan beckoned to the woman. “Ruobing, don’t you know how crafty this person is, how well he can confuse and poison people’s minds?”

The woman hesitantly backed up a step.

Just then, human voices suddenly came from outside. The person who’d been guarding at the protective door with a gun turned to Fan

Siyuan and said, “Teacher, they’ve caught up!”

Before he’d finished, rapid gunshots drew close—this place had after all been single-handedly built by Zhang Chunling. He knew perfectly well where the boltholes were. It was only a matter of time before he caught up. Everyone tensely went on guard.

“How many of our people have been sacrificed to reach this point? Including our brothers and sisters who were just standing with us. For the sake of luring Zhang Chunling here, they’ve smeared their blood on this filthy ground,” Fan Siyuan said coldly. “Ruobing, what are you thinking?”

The woman lowered her head, not daring to make a sound.

Fan Siyuan looked at Fei Du with a gaze as though looking at an inanimate object. “Put on the yoke. The last trial can begin.”

The woman hesitated, looked at Fei Du, slowly walked over to Fei Chengyu’s moving hospital bed, and pulled off the sheet covering him.

Fei Du’s expression at last altered.

At 4:50 AM, the “underground fortress” where Fan Siyuan and the others were located encountered an assault comparable to the firepower of a battlefield, but unfortunately one side couldn’t get in, while the other couldn’t get out; they were practically deadlocked.

Zhang Donglai was in Fei Du’s hands, Fei Du had threatened that he only had “one hour’s worth of patience,” and now daybreak would soon come to Yan City’s sky. No one knew what Zhang Donglai, held in a foreign land, would suffer. Zhang Chunling was simply about to go mad, very much wishing to blow that shit-stirrer Fan Siyuan sky high.

But Fan Siyuan was entirely unmoved, not at all worried about running out of ammunition and provisions and dying trapped here; he simply let them waste time.

At 4:55, Zhang Chunling couldn't take it anymore.

The phone carried by the driver who had kidnapped Fei Du suddenly rang. He respectfully handed it over to Fan Siyuan. "Teacher."

A faint smile appeared at the corners of Fan Siyuan's mouth. "Chairman Zhang, here I was thinking you weren't going to contact me."

Zhang Chunling ground his teeth. "What do you want?"

"Come down here and let's reminisce about the old days." Fan Siyuan smiled. "Though I'll be gone soon, I still have some time left. I'm afraid President Fei's people won't wait any longer. Isn't that right, President Fei?"

Fei Du couldn't answer. Zhang Chunling hung up the phone.

"Teacher, they've stopped firing outside, they're going to..."

The person pressed against the protective door looking out had gotten halfway through his words when he was interrupted by an enormous sound—one of the walls of this seemingly impregnable underground fortress collapsed.

Dust and smoke came pelting down. A corner of the innermost wall turned out not to be solid; there was a passage there about the size of a person!

Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang, with peril on all sides, had followed the group of people that had gone around to the foot of the hill the whole

way. They'd watched them go into a dilapidated thatched cottage, lift open the floor, and go right down.

Lang Qiao gaped, in spite of herself remembering when she'd been little and her school had arranged for them to watch *Tunnel War*<sup>14</sup>. She yanked back Xiao Haiyang, who'd wanted to go right down, and cautiously investigated the surroundings. Then she gestured at him, and the two of them, one after another, went in after those people. This seemed to be a small secret escape tunnel, only big enough for one person to pass through. It was easy to accidentally get your face full of the surrounding sandstone. Luckily, people had gone ahead leading the way.

When the winding tunnel was about to turn a corner, an enormous sound suddenly came from up ahead. Lang Qiao subconsciously put a hand over Xiao Haiyang's mouth and pressed him to the side.

Next, she heard someone's voice.

This person said, "This was our asylum in case of emergencies back then. I didn't expect that you would find it.—Fan Siyuan, you didn't think that when we built this place, we wanted to die trapped in it?"

## CHAPTER 177 - Edmond Dantès XLVIII

“Captain Luo, a surveillance camera at a nearby national road exit shows about a dozen cars driving towards the target twenty minutes ago. We suspect it’s the suspects.”

“Captain Luo, Xiao Haiyang and Lang Qiao are nearby, I told them to stay put and await orders, but now I can’t get in touch with them...”

Luo Wenzhou said, “How much farther?”

“We’ll be there momentarily. The drone is in position—”

“Wenzhou,” Lu Youliang suddenly said quietly over the phone, “I take responsibility for approving this business today, and it was my plan. If anything happens, I...”

“Captain Luo, there are bloodstains and signs of a suspected fire fight near the mill. We can’t see Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang.”

Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes, interrupting Director Lu. “It wasn’t you, Uncle Lu. I know. That scoundrel Fei Du arranged it. And I can guess that he made you hide it from me.”

Remembering Fei Du’s odd parting words of “sincerity works miracles,” Director Lu felt so sick at heart he couldn’t speak. After a long silence, he finally said, “...I asked him why, and he didn’t tell the truth.—Why?”

The whistling wind and the police sirens performed in chorus, and the cars’ lights wove through the pot-black sky, rising high above empty and desolate Binhai.

Luo Wenzhou’s throat moved faintly. “Because of Zhu Feng.”

“What?” Lu Youliang said.

“Because of Zhu Feng, Yang Xin, shin...Fu Jiahui. Those people aren’t like Zhang Chunling’s wanted criminals. They’re unassuming. Many of them have done things that don’t even amount to crimes. They can turn around and hide any time. Ordinarily, they don’t seem any different from normal people—but they’re like landmines left over after a war. If you can’t trigger them safely, there will be disastrous consequences afterwards. So there needed to be a ‘fuse.’”

With Zhang Chunjiu arrested and Zhang Chunling on the run, the Chunlai Conglomerate was already a spent force.

Over the last year, the whole Chunlai Conglomerate had been constantly weakened, and now it had disintegrated. Zhang Chunling’s identity had been exposed, and he was a fugitive in flight. It would be very easy for The Reciter’s people to sneak in next to him—Fan Siyuan being able to quietly snatch Fei Du away showed that—it wasn’t at all difficult to make Zhang Chunling die a violent death. At that time, the frightening group of “volunteer judges” would have retired covered in glory, noiselessly going to ground; it would have been hard to find them again.

The triggering “fuse” had to give them a greater sense of crisis, had to fill up the vacancy of the hatred they had nowhere to put—at a time like this, what better reason for their merriment could there be than a “mastermind behind the scenes,” an “oriole stalking behind?”

Fei Du had captured Zhang Donglai not only to arrest Zhang Chunling and expose The Reciter; he’d also planned to rapidly intensify the conflict between the two sides, fish them up with one net; everyone arrested would be an “illegally armed underworld element”; no one would be able to escape...

Fei Du, that lunatic!



The “lunatic” had planned backwards and forwards, but who knew whether he’d planned for his own miserable plight on the verge of death.

There was a metal ring closed around his neck, and the metal ring’s other end was connected to the unconscious vegetable Fei Chengyu’s neck. Violence was keeping Fei Du temporarily quiet, without further opportunity to “mislead the people with lies.”

Three or four surrounding gun muzzles aimed at him at once. One gun was pressed against his back, so he could be turned into a sieve at the least stir.

Fei Du couldn’t quite stand up straight and simply leaned back against the gun muzzle—the hand of the person holding the gun was very steady, allowing him to lean without moving, but the material was rather stiff, so it wasn’t especially comfortable.

He couldn’t speak, so he blinked his eyes at Zhang Chunling, who had “descended from the heavens.” In his eyes, reddened from the sweat dripping into them, you could still read a hint of ridicule, as though he was thinking that it was very interesting that Zhang Chunling still had to hold his nose and protect him.

Zhang Chunling put him out of sight and out of mind, his gaze sweeping over the inhuman-looking “corpse” of Fei Chengyu, then falling directly onto Fan Siyuan.

For some reason, in the instant Fan Siyuan saw Zhang Chunling, his hands resting on the arms of the wheelchair suddenly began to tremble.

Zhang Chunling coldly said, “I heard you wanted to see me. Here I am.”

“Zhang Chunling.” Fan Siyuan held this name in his mouth, chewing it over three times. In his eyes, clouded from illness, floated a brightness like the last radiance of the setting sun, like two flames lighting up.

Looking on with the cool eye of a bystander, Fei Du suddenly had an impression that for a moment he’d seen a trace of humanity in this man.

It was strange to say—Zhang Chunling was in fact a drowning dog come to a dead end; one slip-up, and Fei Du had grabbed him by the wounded leg; he’d become the biggest loser in this game of villains doing each other dirty. However you looked at it, from The Reciter’s point of view, it should have been Fei Du, the one who’d “taken all,” who was the greater danger, the greater “poison.” But while Fan Siyuan had called Fei Du “frightening,” he hadn’t displayed enough tribute to his “frightfulness.” In front of him, he could still mystify with skill and ease.

But faced with Zhang Chunling, who seemed no longer worth mentioning, he lost control.

Gods and demons couldn’t lose control; it was only humans who could.

Fan Siyuan’s emaciated back drew into a bow. His neck stuck out. In a tone of voice difficult to read yet also nearly empty, he said, “Fifteen years ago, on National Road 327, an unemployed young person named Lu Guosheng ganged up with a man and a woman, together killing three passing drivers one after another. After becoming wanted by the police, he mysteriously disappeared. You offered him shelter.”

Zhang Chunling’s cheek twitched. “Thirteen years ago, a criminal psychologist gone mad killed six people one after another and was secretly pursued by the police. I offered him shelter, too. I fed him

bones and gave him a nest, but now he wants to come back and bite me.”

Fan Siyuan’s believers one after another displayed an anger as though their faith had been blasphemed against, but their “faith” personified wasn’t touched at all. Fan Siyuan seemed not to have heard what Zhang Chunling had said. “Lu Guosheng went into hiding at The Louvre. Once he carelessly left behind his fingerprint and attracted the notice of the police. The police increased the reward for information about his location and within a week received over twenty reports over the phone. Some of the reporters were absolutely certain, but however quickly the police got there, they came up empty—because you had a pair of “eyes” in the City Bureau to quickly pass on the information.

“There was a police officer who became suspicious. After this case was shelved, he began to privately investigate it again, following the traces all the way to The Louvre...but at a critical moment when collecting evidence, he chose the wrong partner, trusted the wrong person.”

“That did happen,” Zhang Chunling said calmly. “We were forced to abandon The Louvre. I remember that busybody police officer was named...”

Xiao Haiyang, eavesdropping from the end of the secret passage, clenched his fist tightly, suddenly going forward without a word.

Lang Qiao was surprised, then quickly went after him, desperately hauling back Xiao Haiyang as she got out a communication device, planning to call for backup. But when she looked at her phone, she found that she had no signal!

No wonder her phone had been so silent!

Lang Qiao's hair stood on end. A moment's carelessness, and Xiao Haiyang had already reached the opening of the secret passage. Then, seeing something, he suddenly backed up a step, crouching back. Lang Qiao thought this was strange and carefully looked in the direction of his gaze. She covered her mouth at once—no one had told her that the “hostage” was Fei Du!

How had Fei Du gotten mixed up in this?

Why was he here?

What was he doing?

What was going on right now?

In an instant, Lang Qiao and Xiao Haiyang exchanged a number of looks—but there was no outcome from this exchange, and no tacit understanding. They only found that they were both equally at a loss.

The next moment, a bullet shot at Fei Du, and the two young people's hearts tightened; Lang Qiao nearly charged straight out.—The bullet brushed past Fei Du; the amazing thing was that Zhang Chunling looked even more nervous than the two of them.

Zhang Chunling's shoulders tensed the moment Fan Siyuan shot. The people behind him all raised their guns and aimed them at Fan Siyuan in his wheelchair. The atmosphere was abruptly fraught.

“Don't say his name.” Fan Siyuan's voice seemed to be squeezed out of his throat. “Don't talk about him!”

When he'd warned Fei Du not to mention “Gu Zhao,” it had been cold and ceremonial. As though Gu Zhao were a memorial tablet hung up high in a shrine, a symbol, theoretically holy and inviolate, that he was guarding out of duty.

But now, faced with Zhang Chunling, the reflexive nerves numbed for many years seemed to suddenly come back to life. Fan Siyuan was like a person just woken from a long hibernation; the indestructible ice wrapped around him cracked off bit by bit. The grief and indignation suppressed for many years once more revived. The ashes of his faded, indistinct memories glowed again. There was a tremor in his voice.

Lang Qiao pushed Xiao Haiyang and mouthed the word “Luo” at him, showing him her phone, which had no signal, using her eyes to signal to him—*I’ll stay here and watch, you go find Captain Luo and the others.*

Xiao Haiyang gravely shook his head.

Lang Qiao glared at him—*This isn’t the time to play the hero!*

Xiao Haiyang gestured at her and shook his head again—Lang Qiao understood what he meant. Little Glasses was saying that he’d just been following her with his head down; the terrain here was too complicated, and he wouldn’t be able to find his way out.

Lang Qiao: “...”

Xiao Haiyang pointed to Lang Qiao, pointed to himself, gave a thumbs up, and nodded. He meant, *You hurry up, I’ll stay here and watch, I know my limits, relax.*

Lang Qiao couldn’t relax, but right now she had no other choice. She’d seen that if she delayed for a second, something unimaginable might happen.

Lang Qiao clenched her teeth and shoved her protective amulet—her broken-screened phone—into Xiao Haiyang’s hand, then turned and headed out of the secret passage.

Fan Siyuan's accusation was still ongoing: "...the informers...those pieces of trash betrayed him, falling over each other to give false testimony. His good friends, his good brothers, not one of them made a sound. No one spoke for him, no one redressed his injustice. A trifling five million and an easy to duplicate fingerprint mold, and they all decided he was guilty. His file was sealed, his name was obliterated..."

Zhang Chunling was entirely unmoved. "That was a problem with the police. You can't put it on me."

"You're right. That was the indifferent and useless police," Fan Siyuan said. "If I wanted to destroy you all thoroughly, I could only choose this road."

Even a psychopath like Zhang Chunling, hearing these words, was astonished. "You killed those people, thoroughly discredited yourself, for the sake of infiltrating and investigating me?"

"Those I killed deserved to die," Fan Siyuan said coldly.

For some reason, the woman beside Fan Siyuan subconsciously lowered her head and looked at Fei Du, not expecting to meet Fei Du's gaze. Fei Du's eyes were calm and understanding, like a mirror that could reflect her heart. The woman couldn't resist feeling irritation; she quickly frowned. But Fei Du curved the corners of his eyes, smiling silently at her.

"The Binhai wasteland is full of buried souls who died unjustly. From over thirty years ago down to today, the people you've killed are innumerable." Fan Siyuan suddenly raised his head. "Zhang Chunling, do you admit your guilt?"

Zhang Chunling seemed to have heard the world's best joke. "Ha! You were the one who schemed to have that unfortunate Dong Qian act as Zheng Kaifeng's killer, hitting Zhou Junmao. And it was you who

planned for Wei Zhanhong's stupid little whelp to hire an assassin. For your framing plot, you sent someone to go to the hospital to kill that useless informer, and your man got tangled up with the police—the way I see, we're two of a kind. You ask for my guilt—what right do you have to ask?"

Fan Siyuan looked at him with a horrifying expression. "I ask because I can make you face retribution. Today you'll end up like the one you killed. Do you believe that?"

For a moment Xiao Haiyang's hair stood on end, and he was covered in gooseflesh—of course he knew how Gu Zhao had died, but this sort of underground space, with the overgrown secret passage and all kinds of weird storehouses and little rooms neighboring each other, was an exceptionally good place to bury kerosene and bombs!

Indeed, he then heard Fan Siyuan say, "Zhang Chunling, do you dare to look down? There's raging fire under your feet. You won't get away!"

The police force's unmanned drone had already arrived first on the scene and returned the disorderly picture. Next, the earliest police cars also came.

The police cars alarmed the crows on the barren mountain. The ominous black birds rose to the sky, crying hoarsely. The people Zhang Chunling had left outside as sentries exchanged looks and went towards the little thatched cottage leading underground to report.

Lang Qiao had already seen the light of the entrance, but she suddenly stopped—she'd heard rapid footsteps!

Lang Qiao took a deep breath, pricked up her ears, clung to the damp, ice-cold wall of the secret passage, and closed her eyes—two... three. There were three people coming. They had to be armed. She

couldn't shoot, and she had to fight a quick battle, or else it would endanger Xiao Haiyang and Fei Du inside...

"Captain Luo, something's not right. It's too quiet here."

Luo Wenzhou had jumped out of the car before it had fully stopped and was already at the entrance of the old mill—he couldn't hear the sounds of either gunfire or human voices. Apart from the ground covered in blood and scattered corpses, letting people know that there had been a fierce firefight here, it was absolutely silent.

Luo Wenzhou, looking at the ground covered in blood, felt his heart give a lurch, as though he'd fallen from a high place without warning. He tasted blood at the tip of his tongue.

"Impossible." Luo Wenzhou firmly hauled back his own scattering soul. "Impossible. The blood hasn't dried yet. Even if they've run, they can't have run far.—Listen to me, Zhang Chunling and the others used this place to hide wanted criminals. That couldn't have been on the surface. Don't stop, keep searching, bring the dogs!"

Lang Qiao stuck close to the wall of the secret passage, hiding in the shadows at a bend. At the moment the person walking in front passed by her, Lang Qiao reached out her foot to trip him. He didn't react at once, cursed, and fell forward. The instant he fell, Lang Qiao knocked heavily on the back of his neck. The second person didn't know why his companion had suddenly fallen. When he bent slightly to investigate, someone suddenly charged out of the darkness, without warning raising a knee into his underbelly. The person had no time to cry out before he was caught around the neck and his vision went black. He fell to the ground. Lang Qiao grabbed the gun and a long stick from his belt.

But the third person had already seen the ambush in the darkness and wanted to open his mouth to call out. At the same time, he threw himself towards her. Lang Qiao, already accustomed to the dark,



nimbly stuck out the long stick, hitting him in the throat, narrowly keeping back his cry. He grabbed her arm; Lang Qiao curled up inside her jacket and stamped heavily on his instep, prodding his chin from below with the stick, once more forcing him to shut his mouth. Then she pressed the muzzle of the gun to his chest.

Sweating, he raised his hands and backed up as she pushed. One walking forward and the other backing up, they came from the entrance of the secret passage.

In a low voice, Lang Qiao said, "Turn."

He didn't dare not to turn. Hands held high, he slowly turned around. Before he could get a firm footing, there was a chop across the back of his neck, and he collapsed soundlessly.

Lang Qiao found a length of rope on him and quickly tied him up. Then she peeled off her jacket and stuck the sleeve into the poor devil's mouth. Then she finally breathed a sigh of relief—she had outdone herself. It was lucky she hadn't made Xiao Haiyang run this errand.

Xiao Haiyang, entirely unaware of the soul-stirring events that had taken place behind him, was tense all over—Fei Du was too far from him; to get there from here, he'd have to deal with at least five or six people!

Before he could come up with an itinerary, he heard Fan Siyuan say, "Light it!"

Xiao Haiyang's mind buzzed. He got out his gun. But the fire he expected didn't come. The whole underground room was silent for a moment, and then Zhang Chunling laughed. His face was a little crooked; he looked unusually ill-intentioned when he laughed. "Did you think you could pull a trick here without me knowing? Fan

Siyuan, this is my territory. I built this place brick by brick, tile by tile, with my blood and tears. You're much too full of yourself!"

Xiao Haiyang hadn't expected this reversal; his legs went weak, and he nearly fell flat.

But before he could finish sighing in relief, he saw Fan Siyuan raise his gun, pointing at Fei Du. While he seemed to have been pushed to an impasse, he unexpectedly smiled.

"Your territory? That's right. Killing and starting fires are your specialties. How could I outdo you?" His throat was scratchy, his voice like an owl's. "But your son's life is in his hands."

The person pressing the gun to Fei Du's back tore off the tape sealing his mouth.

Fan Siyuan didn't look around. "President Fei, it's your turn."

## CHAPTER 178 - Edmond Dantès XLIX

“I’m in an awkward position, having to follow my enemy’s intention to threaten an associate I haven’t yet had time to turn from an enemy into a friend.” Fei Du was having a hard time enunciating. While the metal ring around his neck hadn’t been drawn tight, the familiar sensation was already making it difficult to breathe. His voice seemed about to tear apart along with his throat. “Chairman Zhang undoubtedly wants to open a hole in my head now.”

“The doctors say I have less than three months to live. For me, death is only a belated homecoming,” Fan Siyuan said to Zhang Chunling. He pointed at Fei Du. “You can shoot me now, as long as you’re willing to gamble—will you kill me faster than I’ll kill him?”

“I don’t especially want to die. I’m not sick, after all,” Fei Du said. “So...Chairman Zhang, has Zhang Donglai contacted you?”

His words, full of hidden meaning, succeeded in raising the veins at the corners of Zhang Chunling’s forehead—Zhang Donglai’s phone was sending him a photograph every minute of Zhang Donglai tied up, holding a giant countdown display. The countdown was constantly going down. There were only three minutes left on the latest photograph.

This was Zhang Chunling’s territory. He could easily remove the kerosene underground, clear away Fan Siyuan’s ambush, raise a hand and turn the whole gang of them into crushed watermelons. But Fan Siyuan’s gun was pressed to Fei Du’s head, and Fei Du held Zhang Donglai in his hands. Zhang Chunling had been short of close relatives since childhood. He was obsessed with the idea of pampering his children, and with their blood relationship to him. Zhang Donglai, far off in a foreign land, was Zhang Chunling’s life.

There were three protagonists on the scene; adding in the innocent useless rich kid Zhang Donglai elsewhere, they formed a life-and-death ring spanning over a dozen time zones and the boundless ocean, coming to a perfect deadlock.

But time was constantly ticking down.

“It seems that among the four of us, one must die to break the equilibrium. Who will die first?” Fan Siyuan looked at Zhang Chunling with a furtive smile. “Your territory. You have the say.”

Xiao Haiyang, hiding in a corner, had prepared to charge out, but he was held in place by the complicated “relationship quadrangle.” He didn’t know where to start meddling.

Lang Qiao ran to the secret passage’s entrance on one breath. She was just about to leap out when she suddenly thought of something, paused in her steps, and lightly tapped the mouth of the cave twice before showing her head. It seemed that her broken phone was secretly blessing her; Lang Qiao’s sudden quick wits gained great reward—as soon as she tapped, there was an answer outside. Someone walked towards the mouth of the cave and said in a low voice, “What’s wrong?”

Those three people just now had left a lookout outside!

Lang Qiao spat out a breath. In the instant he stuck his head out to look into the mouth of the cave, she flung out her handcuffs like nunchucks, wrapping around his foot. Then she yanked. The person cried out and lost his balance. He tipped over backwards and kicked at Lang Qiao.

Lang Qiao ducked and dodged, then quickly charged out of the secret passage. But before her feet touched solid ground, a fierce wind swept by her ear. Lang Qiao subconsciously blocked in front of herself

with both hands, and a wooden stick smashed into her forearms with a crash.

After a fierce pain, her arms went numb, and her gun slipped out of her hand—there was more than one lookout!

Meanwhile, the one she'd pulled down climbed back up, pulled a knife, and stabbed towards her.

This place was worse than the narrow secret passage; she couldn't launch a secret attack and take them unawares. Lang Qiao instantly went on the defensive. She'd just narrowly swept aside the knife with her handcuffs when she took a hit to the shoulder from the stick. The hit was accurate. All her internal organs shook, and she stumbled and went to her knees. Suddenly, in the faint light, she saw that there was a gun at the belt of the stick-brandishing person who had hit her.

They had guns, so why were they attacking with a knife and a stick? Posing for a photograph?

The Reciter's people were basically all gathered underground. Who were they afraid of alerting?

In a flash, a thought swept through Lang Qiao's mind—she rolled awkwardly into a ball on the ground and threw herself towards her own knocked-aside gun. The stick, as thick as a person's arm, flew through the air, smashing down on her back. Lang Qiao nearly felt she'd been smashed into two halves. The knife-wielding thug followed closely after, stabbing towards her. "Die!"

Just then, a beam of light from somewhere swept into the unremarkable thatched cottage. The two thugs were startled, and Lang Qiao seized the opportunity to turn, grab some grit off the ground, and throw it into their faces. The knife went astray and caught on her sweater, the ice-cold blade brushing her skin. The worn-out sweater was pulled out of shape. She struggled on the

ground with all four limbs. Her hand touched her gun. The stick-wielder brought the stick smashing down towards her head.

At the same time, Lang Qiao hooked her finger over the trigger, turned her head, and shot twice at the thug's shin—

The sudden gunshot in the forest at the foot of the hill made Luo Wenzhou, searching the old mill, raise his head.

Meanwhile, the phone in Zhang Chunling's pocket vibrated again with a message notification.

Zhang Chunling knew without looking that there were two minutes left on the fatal countdown next to Zhang Donglai!

If no one broke through the deadlock, the first to die would be Zhang Donglai!

Cold sweat rolled off Zhang Chunling.

“Zhang Chunling, you're guilty of monstrous crimes. Why don't you look at the vegetable in the hospital bed? When you were working hand in glove with Fei Chengyu, did you ever think a day would come when you would see him under circumstances like this?”

Zhang Chunling said, “Shut up... Shut up!”

“As for Fei Chengyu, he was a child of poverty. His father went to prison for intentional homicide when he was little. His family had no source of income and managed to survive relying on the financial aid of a kind soul. That kind soul supported him all the way through university, until he coveted the man's only daughter.—Oh, that's wrong. It wasn't the stupid, useless woman he coveted; it was the man's great wealth. His backer understood what there was in the bones of this presentable-looking man and forbade his daughter to have contact with him, and cut off his financial aid... There's no need

for me to tell you the outcome. Fei Chengyu thought it was *Wuthering Heights*, but to me it looks more like ‘The Farmer and the Viper<sup>15</sup>.’ Am I right, President Fei?”

Fei Du’s bloodless lips curved slightly.

“You’ve inherited everything of his—his property, his baseness, and his dirty methods. If Chairman Zhang decides to abandon his darling son, then I’ll have no choice but to abandon you. But you seem not to have killed anyone before, so for the sake of fairness, I’ll give you some preferential treatment... How about a choice?”

Fei Du’s gaze fell on the metal ring closed around his neck—this metal ring was so familiar, so strange.

When he’d been little, the other end had been a handful of simple rings, forcing him to squeeze his fingers closed when he was suffocating, squeezing the necks of those small animals.

Later, the metal ring had taken on a more complicated installation, the other end closed over a person’s neck with a small handgrip in between. If he only subconsciously squeezed it, he would see the other person’s panic-stricken, suffocated face...and breathe another breath.

This was an instrument of torture Fei Chengyu had invented himself, full of malicious imagination.

Now, his great invention, the other end of that metal ring, was closed over his own neck.

“Chairman Zhang is still rather indecisive.—President Fei, let’s play a game while we wait for him. Do you think you’d like to die first yourself, or do you have an injustice to report, a wrong to avenge? Will you make Fei Chengyu die first instead of you?”

Before he'd finished, one of his subordinates immediately stepped forward, grabbing the metal ring around Fei Du's neck and lifting him.

Fei Du had no room to resist. He was hauled up, the seemingly eternal calm at last disappearing from his face. He began to cough reflexively. Xiao Haiyang came to the end of his endurance. He wiped the cold sweat in his palms on his pants, raised his gun, and charged out, roaring, "Don't move! Police!"

The word "police" wavered midway, the pitch rising up to the ceiling of the underground room. The glaring, gun-toting criminals all turned their heads at once, silently watching the four-eyed young person charge in through the mouth of the secret passage in full public view—the above-mentioned young person's calf muscles were trembling, shaking so hard his pant legs were moving without a breeze. He only remembered halfway through the "Don't move!" that he'd forgotten to take off the safety again and fiddled with it as though fooling around.

For a moment, an expression of seeing a sight too horrible to look at crossed even Fei Du's face.

Xiao Haiyang was entirely unaware of his own awkward plight, insisting on reciting his lines to the end. He roared, "You're all under arrest! Put your guns down! Hands up!"

...but no one paid attention to him.

"Teacher Fan, I'm going to break this 'equilibrium.'" Fei Du's gaze flashed. While everyone's attention was divided, he seized the opportunity to speak. While he was addressing "Teacher Fan," he turned to the woman named "Ruobing" while he spoke. "Before Zhu Feng and Yang Xin were arrested, a taxi driver came to find me, saying he was one of your people. He was very sloppy, easily tailed,



letting the police follow him to catch Yang Xin and the others. Did you do that deliberately?”

The woman beside Fan Siyuan stared emptily. Then, as though her hand had been burned, she released the back of the wheelchair.

“Fu Jiahui had been revealed, so Yang Xin had no more use, either. Letting her run around would only attract the notice of the police and give Zhang Chunling and the others an opening. So you deliberately put her and the important lead Zhu Feng together, and...”

Ruobing realized something from his words and stepped back slightly, shaking her head in disbelief.

Fan Siyuan howled at the man holding the controls to the metal rings: “What are you waiting for!”

“...exposed them, but you gave them a misleading warning and weapons, because...”

Fei Du’s words came to an abrupt halt as the metal ring drew in tight. Boundless darkness engulfed him along with the familiar feeling of suffocation, and his memories opened their bloody mouths towards him. The basement, the ice-cold corpse, the bloody fur, the woman’s screams... There was a loud rumble. The man holding his neck by the metal ring cut apart the cords tying his hands. The fatal handgrip was in front of him, and he instinctively reached out to grab it.

At the same time, Ruobing understood what Fei Du hadn’t had time to say.

Because...

Because Fan Siyuan understood the marionettes under his control, knew that they were all carved wood steeped in poison, knew that they couldn’t forgive. He also absolutely didn’t believe that Fei Du

was as innocent as he had displayed himself to be at the start; he'd been certain that he would get his eyes on the warehouse where Yang Xin and the others were hidden. When the time came, there would be a conflict between the two sides, illegal guns and violent injuries; there was a 100% chance the police would be alerted, and he could kill two birds with one stone, blowing both the useless garbage and the deeply-scheming Fei Du out of the water together.

But something had gone wrong. Fei Du had kept calm, had held back and not moved rashly, letting the police find the warehouse first.

In a moment of desperation, Xiao Haiyang's mind went blank. He quickly pointed his gun at Fan Siyuan. "Let him go!"

Meanwhile, Zhang Chunling's mind roared; he'd heard a different meaning in Fei Du's brief description of these events—Fan Siyuan had deliberately exposed the warehouse where Yang Xin and Zhu Feng were hidden to Fei Du, but the people who ought to have been under Fei Du's gaze had inexplicably fallen into the hands of the police.

And when they'd tried to kill Zhou Huaijin, who had secretly ganged up with Fei Du, the police had arrived abnormally fast.

Fei Du could have gotten inside information from the police so easily by tricking them so they were going around in circles, or he could also have...

Now that he'd also seen the little four-eyes calling himself the police, what else was there for Zhang Chunling to understand?

Fei Du's plot to dupe them hadn't been at all seamless, but Zhang Chunling and Fan Siyuan, one because he was wild with worry for his son, the other because of his long-ago strong first impression, had determined that Fei Du wasn't at all a good person, and so they hadn't carefully considered some details. And Fan Siyuan still hadn't realized it!

“You told me to choose how to undo this ring?” Zhang Chunling’s expression changed several times. Unforeseen by anyone, he raised his gun, laughed coldly, and shot at Fei Du.

The equilibrium had broken!

The men holding Fei Du subconsciously pulled him aside. The bullet brushed past Fei Du and fell at the foot of Fei Chengyu’s hospital bed. The situation on the scene once again rotated a hundred and eighty degrees, and Zhang Chunling’s and Fan Siyuan’s people opened fire on each other.

All of Xiao Haiyang’s hair stood on end. In the confusion, he charged towards Fei Du.

Just then, Ruobing retreated into a corner and suddenly called out, “He put a bomb under the hospital bed! If you squeeze the handgrip it’ll...”

Before she had finished speaking, a bullet hit her. The woman groaned and went down.

The woman’s shout fell like thunder on everyone’s ears. Fan Siyuan instantly looked at Fei Du—Fei Du was holding that fatal handgrip in his hand, but for some reason, he would rather be choked than squeeze it. He was using the remains of his consciousness to look with his blurred vision at Fan Siyuan, actually forcing out a smile towards him, as though he’d had some insight.

When the word “bomb” was spoken, Zhang Chunling tensed, and his subordinates charged up without even thinking about it, wanting to screen him and run out in the midst of Fan Siyuan’s mad dog counterattack. At the same time, Zhang Chunling shot again at Fei Du, who was holding the handgrip.

Xiao Haiyang gave a cry, quickly pulled over Fei Chengyu's hospital bed, and threw himself at Fei Du, rolling him under the hospital bed. Something fell out of his pocket along with his gun. At the same time, Fan Siyuan found the strength somewhere to push away the wheelchair. Using the bodies of his subordinates as a shield, like a crawling monster, he fired his gun as he approached Fei Du and Xiao Haiyang.

Suddenly, Zhang Chunling, who had already retreated to the entrance of the secret passage, heard his subordinates calling out in panic. "Chairman Zhang, there's..."

Before Zhang Chunling could turn his head, there was a gunshot, and a fierce pain in his hand holding the gun—a bullet had passed precisely through his palm.

This time it was the genuine goods at a fair price—

"Police! Don't move!"

Fan Siyuan, taking no notice, raised the gun towards Xiao Haiyang, who was blocking Fei Du. "Press down! Press down! Fei Chengyu used that thing to train you to squeeze your mother's throat, countless times! Have you forgotten! Aren't all your dreams of killing him? Huh?"

<sup>1</sup> Chinese company that makes educational games for kids and game consoles that run them.

<sup>2</sup> Third line of Ma Zhiyuan's (Yuan dynasty poet and playwright, c. 13th-14th century) poem 秋思 (Autumn Thoughts) about being melancholy because it's autumn, as you do. Roughly, the complete poem goes: "A crow searches for an old tree at dusk,/Houses lie along a small bridge and running water./An ancient road, a west wind, a skinny horse,/The sun is setting in the west./The heartbroken traveller wanders far from home."

<sup>3</sup> Had this many a chapter back, but reiterating: puerile pun on Fei Du's name, using a word that means "troublesome."

<sup>4</sup> For useful reference: the chao (超) in Yin Chao means "surpassing" while the ping (平) in Yin Ping means "ordinary."

<sup>5</sup> National Bureau of Investigation and Statistics, military intelligence agency of the Republic of China prior to 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Both used for treating minor injuries and aches.

<sup>7</sup> A quote from Lao She's novel *Rickshaw Boy*.

<sup>8</sup> Meaning, attempting the impossible.

<sup>9</sup> Three Kingdoms era emperor, famous for being incompetent.

<sup>10</sup> Xiao Hua'ao (小花袄) means little floral jacket.

<sup>11</sup> 斌, made up of the characters 文 and 武, which mean civil and military; no one's going to directly call attention to it apart from this, but it's the same character as the kid Feng Bin's given name.

<sup>12</sup> 钊 - made up of the characters 金 and 刀.

<sup>13</sup> The song is 回娘家—the title refers to a married woman visiting her parents.

<sup>14</sup> 1965 Chinese film about a village defending itself against a Japanese attack during World War II using tunnel warfare.

<sup>15</sup> The Aesop's Fable that gives us the idiom “to nourish a viper in one's bosom.”



# 默读

5

Silent Reading / Priest