

Silent Reading / Priest

默
读

Epilogue

默读/*Silent Reading* by Priest - Epilogue

Translated by E. Danglars at edanglarstranslations.com. For comments, questions, and corrections, e-mail edanglarstranslations@gmail.com.

CHAPTER 179 - Reading Aloud (5)

In that instant, Xiao Haiyang felt split into three parts. The first part was dumbfoundedly asking his own ears, “What did that old windbag say?”

The second part, meanwhile, was controlling his hands, wanting to open the metal ring on Fei Du’s neck. Unfortunately, while Officer Xiao had an eidetic memory, he was entirely ignorant towards machinery and small appliances. And having heard the woman say just now that there was a bomb, he was even more at a loss, not knowing where to start, so panicked he was numb all over.

The remainder of his concentration was at his back, prepared to take the bullet about to breach flesh. Although he’d never had an easy time, he’d still never had a gun pointed at him before. Like a condemned criminal lying under a blade before the sentence was executed, he could already imagine his death.

A condemned criminal, bearing stocks and fetters, couldn’t move at all under the blade.

Xiao Haiyang couldn’t say clearly what he was bearing. All at sea with his enormous terror, he couldn’t understand why he didn’t dodge.

But still, he didn’t dodge.

There was an abrupt gunshot behind him, and Xiao Haiyang went stiff, a thought slipping through his mind: “I’m going to die.”

“Going to die” was only a fleeting feeling. He didn’t have time to recall his brief life; nor, like literary works described, did he feel distant grief. His mind was in chaos, like a huge sea he didn’t know where to start describing. Hundreds of thousands of thoughts rose

and fell and were destroyed like the tide; the most urgent was, “How do I open this ring?”

The next instant, Xiao Haiyang was pushed aside. Still stiff from being scared out of his wits, he turned and noticed that the sharp pain he’d expected hadn’t come. There was only a small hole in his pocket—

In the moment he’d shot the gun, Fan Siyuan had been kicked by Luo Wenzhou, who had come charging in. The bullet had gone astray, clipping the edge of Xiao Haiyang’s clothes, hitting the broken-screened phone Lang Qiao had left behind. The phone, only its screen originally broken, died on the spot in the line of duty, thoroughly beyond repair. Meanwhile, the terminally ill patient’s fragile bones couldn’t handle the kick. Fan Siyuan’s arm broke with a crack, and he was nimbly handcuffed by Lang Qiao, charging in after.

Starting from when he’d heard of Fei Du’s disappearance, Luo Wenzhou had been in a state of high stress—he’d roughly thrown aside all of his emotions, run a huge distance, sent Fan Siyuan’s gun flying with a kick. He knelt on the ground, not looking at Fei Du, taking what he’d just heard, just seen...screening it all off outside of his consciousness, focusing all of his energy into a narrow thread, quickly scanning the structure of the metal ring, methodically feeling the back of Fei Du’s neck.

At the same time, he could still systematically order, “Call in the bomb expert.”

There was a click, and the metal ring opened.

The air rapidly rushing in like a gale swept through Fei Du’s injured throat, forcing his slackening consciousness into alertness. Violent coughing made him convulse, and the fatal handgrip at last slipped out of his hand. Luo Wenzhou hugged him. Only now did the half-bloodstained pant leg and the bruises on Fei Du prick his eyes as

though they were pincushions. All the voices, the anger, worry, and terror he'd just screened off became like floodwater pouring in through a sluice gate, crashing in and drowning him.

Luo Wenzhou went weak, hardly able to hold Fei Du.

The colleagues he'd just left behind quickly charged over.

“Captain Luo, put him down!”

“Flat! Lay him flat, let him breathe!”

“Slow down... Come over and help!”

Blood from Fei Du had rubbed onto Luo Wenzhou's hands. He faintly noticed that the EMTs, not caring that the scene hadn't been cleared yet, had come in, and he blankly followed their instructions, walking after them.

Fei Du seemed like a bonsai that had never been pressed by wind and frost.

He wasn't hard to support. In day-to-day life there were only two sorts of things he didn't eat—he didn't eat this, and he didn't eat that. His honeyed words were the international standard, and he had the qualifications of a PhD advisor in seeking pleasure and making merry.

He was like glass, seamlessly weak and indifferent.

“Strangling someone is a lengthy and enjoyable means of killing.”

“Could you...give me another chance to pretend I'm seeing my mom?”

“The cause of her death isn't what's trapping me.”

“There are hundreds of thousands of tall buildings in the world. Why did she choose this one?”

“I don’t have any...trauma.”

The damp, ice-cold basement hiding boundless secret memories, the involuntary coughing every time he mentioned it, the eternally looping song...

All the signs strung together at Fan Siyuan’s few words, and the unimaginable dark truth collided without warning, for a moment hollowing out Luo Wenzhou’s chest.

He remembered that summer day, the boy who seemed unable to integrate into the world, leaning back against the lonely villa, his clear, stubborn eyes seeming to hide countless secrets.

He wished he could rip through time, stride seven years into the past, pick up that silent child, scoop him out of his unrevealed pain, say to him, “I’m sorry, I came too late.”

“I came too late...”

Only when he was in the ambulance did Fei Du recover some consciousness. His unfocused gaze lingered on Luo Wenzhou’s face for a long time. Then he seemed to recognize him; he showed a smile.

With an effort, Luo Wenzhou managed to understand the words he was mouthing soundlessly.

He said, “You didn’t... The monsters are all cleared away, and I’m the last one. Can you shut me up in your home?”

Three generations, beginning with filthy money and desire, the hatred continuing ceaselessly to ferment and expand...now the dust

had finally settled.

Luo Wenzhou couldn't bear it any longer.

Maybe all the Feis really were natural sadists. With only one breath left, Fei Du could still rig up the greatest torture of Luo Wenzhou's life to torment him with.

"Hey, Specs, are you all right?" Lang Qiao wiped the cold sweat from her forehead and pulled Xiao Haiyang up. Her jacket had vanished long ago, and her rather fashionable heavy gauge sweater had encountered some mishap, turning into a "fashionable" beggar's sackcloth. If she'd washed her face, her unconventional appearance could probably have appeared in a few novelty-seeking street shots in a weekly magazine.

Xiao Haiyang woke as though from a dream and climbed up. Seeing Lang Qiao, he suddenly remembered something and reached into his pocket. "Xiao Qiao-jie, your phone..."

As he spoke, Xiao Haiyang suddenly froze, then felt around all over himself.

"Don't worry about the phone," Lang Qiao said. "What are you looking for?"

"My work ID just fell out," Xiao Haiyang whispered, passing his fingers through the charred hole in his pocket, frowning as he looked around.

"Wait a while and have them help you look." Lang Qiao pulled his arm to let the bomb expert past. "It's not safe here, withdraw for now."

"Oh... Hey, I see it!" Xiao Haiyang's work ID had flown out along with his gun and fallen nearby, at the feet of Fan Siyuan, who was

being held up by two police officers. The case had opened when it had fallen; Little Glasses carried a photograph of Gu Zhao along with his work ID.

Xiao Haiyang didn't like Gu Zhao's black-and-white memorial photograph. The one he carried with him was a photograph of the two of them, taken at a park when Gu Zhao had been on vacation and taken him out to play. The man in it looked younger, a little more relaxed. He had a hand on the little boy's head and was holding up cotton candy for him, smiling a little unnaturally at the camera, looking quite different from the memorial photograph.

For some reason, Fan Siyuan had his eyes fixed on that photograph. He felt that the man in it was very familiar. When the police dragged him away, his gaze was still stuck firmly onto it.

Xiao Haiyang stepped up to pick it up, rather grudgingly blocking Fan Siyuan's view, wiping the dirt off it.

"Whose photograph are you carrying?" Lang Qiao asked carelessly as she urged him to hurry up and leave.

"Uncle Gu's," Xiao Haiyang said.

"Oh," said the young policewoman in her ringing voice, "that's Officer Gu Zhao? You really knew him? Hey, let me have a look..."

Fan Siyuan shook all over as though struck by lightning. He quickly turned his head and struggled, trying to get at Xiao Haiyang. "Wait!"

The criminal policemen escorting him thought he was up to some trick again and firmly held him back, sternly scolding, "What are you doing? Settle down!"

"Wait...wait! Show me! Come back! Let me look at him..."

But Xiao Haiyang coldly turned his head to look at him, not pausing at all.

Fan Siyuan was held by the policemen so his feet didn't touch the ground. With his neck twisted at an unbelievable angle, he was still implacably turning his head.

Fourteen years ago, in his mind, Gu Zhao's image had become that memorial photograph, always wearing the same expression; any difference, and he couldn't recognize him anymore.

The shy, gentle young man at Yan Security Uni, riding his bicycle under the parasol tree leaves that rustled as they fell... All of that had vanished like smoke, the traces silent. He only now realized with a start that he had forgotten Gu Zhao, forgotten how he looked when he smiled.

It had been over a decade, and the only things that remained in his mind were one Zhang Chunling and one Zhang Chunjiu.

The Chunlai Conglomerate had carved its imprint into his flesh and bones; along with his own efforts, it had molded him into what he was today.

Zhang Chunling watched Fei Du being carried away. Then the police officer who had handcuffed him searched him and took his phone from his pocket. At the moment he removed it, a message notification lit up the screen. The contents of the message appeared on the lockscreen: "Time's up. Game over. [photo]."

The photograph wasn't viewable in locked mode. Zhang Chunling, panicked, voluntarily offered the code. "That's the lockscreen code, let me look at him, let me see him!"

The criminal police officer holding him put the phone in an evidence bag. Through the clear plastic bag, he benevolently unlocked the

Zhang Chunling's phone and showed him the photograph. The countdown had reached zero. Zhang Donglai had fallen to one side, his eyes closed, his white shirt stained red, not moving.

“No! No—”

“No, no, no, stop pouring, it's sticky!” Meanwhile, on the other side of the ocean, Zhang Donglai suddenly leapt up. He was still tied up. “Red wine costs money! And you can't make me play by myself!”

A ring of merrily smiling young ladies surrounded him. One oval-faced girl shook his phone. “You lose! You lose! Zhang-dage, the person who got your messages didn't answer. Either you're too much of a failure, or they saw through it. Anyway, you lose, don't back out now.”

Smiling, Zhang Donglai let the girls help him out of the cords, then shook the wine off his head—he'd been playing a dull game of Truth or Dare with the girls. When it was his turn, he'd chosen “dare,” and they'd asked him to pretend to have been kidnapped and send photographs to a friend, see whether they responded.

Zhang Donglai had been poured so full of wine by the chirping beautiful young women that he was swaying all over the place. He hadn't noticed anything inappropriate about this game and had happily agreed. He'd been tragically refused. “Don't fool around, let me see who this wretched...”

His words came to an abrupt halt as he saw who the chat was with. He leapt up on the spot. “Crap! Jiejie! You're really something else! Do you know who you sent the message to? That's my frigging dad!”

The girl who'd taken pictures with his phone innocently tilted her head. “You call your dad ‘The Tycoon?’”

“The old man, you know,” Zhang Donglai said, hiccuping and pulling at his collar, which was wet with red wine, “he’s very stern at home. I’ve never seen him smile. When I was little, he’d sometimes come home, and when we talked to him, he’d make me and my sister stand two meters away from him, like we were giving a report at work. I remember once when Zhang Ting was little, she secretly wore a floral-patterned dress under her school uniform. Even the teachers at school didn’t say anything to her, but when the old man saw, oh, hell, he flew off the handle so badly even my uncle didn’t dare to try to soothe him. A teenage girl, going around all day looking dejected... Though we got quite a bit closer to him after we grew up. Maybe it’s because the old man was getting on in years.”

At this point, he suddenly stopped, because he’d found that the playful girl still splashing him with wine had a strange look. In her eyes, doubly screened by heavy makeup and contact lenses, a trace of unspeakable pity appeared, and her flower-like smile became forced. Zhang Donglai said, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I remembered my tragic school uniform from when I was little.” In the blink of an eye, the girl controlled her expression. “We haven’t finished punishing you yet, don’t change the subject. Go order wine!”

Sweetly tormented by a crowd of girls, Zhang Donglai didn’t know whether he ought to cry or laugh. “Spare me!”

Looking down from on high, Zhou Huaijin glanced at the crowd surrounding the swimming pool and walked out silently.

The sun had started to sink in the west. He heard Lu Jia talking on the phone with someone not far off. Lu Jia’s expression was very tense. He asked the person on the phone twice over, “Are you sure everything’s all right?” Then he relaxed slightly and his voice softened. Zhou Huaijin faintly heard him say, “We’ll go back in a couple of days, don’t worry.”

Go back—go back where? Zhou Huaijin thought, his mind wandering.

China was unfamiliar to him, and the old Zhou residence wasn't his home. His only close relatives were separated from him by the Wangchuan¹.

Where else was there to go back to?

After a good while, Lu Jia silently came over to him. He'd gotten two ice creams somewhere and gave one to Zhou Huaijin—according to Lu Jia, the Western devils' sense of taste wasn't keen, and the ice cream was made sweeter than at home, which happened to suit his tastes; he had to eat his fill before going back.

Zhou Huaijin hadn't researched the subject of regional ice cream tastes. As a cold breeze blew on him, he tasted a bite and shivered. These two men who were entering middle age sat side by side on a cold stone step in the hotel's backyard. Lu Jia said, "They've all been caught."

Zhou Huaijin turned his head.

"The head of the Chunlai Conglomerate—that's the crowd that tried to kill you before—and that gang of nut jobs who killed your little brother. They've all been caught." Lu Jia paused, then roughly put the whole story in order for him to hear.

The preposterous wealthy family drama, the sinister Zheng Kaifeng, the Dong family's father and daughter who had been used...and Zhou Huaixin, lying in a coffin in his place.

The whole story was very complicated; after all, it stretched in an unbroken chain of bitter hatred over forty or fifty years. He and his

brother had only been swept by a corner of that storm of hatred; they were insignificant characters in this story.

They didn't even count as walk-on parts; they were probably only worthy of being called "props."

Zhou Huaijin nodded and slowly ate a mouthful of the ice cream Lu Jia had given him, feeling that perhaps his sense of taste was frozen. He couldn't taste any flavor. With a bit of cream sticking to the corner of his mouth, he slowly lowered his head, buried his face between his knees, and began to wail.

The westering sun buried today's version of itself to the sound of his crying, and in Yan City, day broke on the last day of the year. The scattered sounds of fireworks going off one after another rang out. The criminal policemen working overtime quickly washed their faces, had a short meeting like in battle, and each got busy. In an interrogation room, Wei Lan, who had given herself up, wearing last night's faded makeup, pulled her hair back from her temples with both hands and asked the police for a cigarette.

"My original name is Wei Lan. I killed someone, and then I ran. They offered me shelter, gave me a false identity."

"Yeah...I can. I can testify."

"Regret?" Wei Lan paused, then lowered her head and smiled, tapping out cigarette ash. Someone in the area had gotten up early and set off a series of firecrackers, making such a large explosion that all the cars by the road began to clamor in unison. You could even hear it faintly inside the interrogation room. Wei Lan listened to it for a moment and let her mind wander. Not answering the question, she whispered, "It's about to be the New Year, isn't it?"

CHAPTER 180 - Reading Aloud (Final)

The white-haired man wore a jacket washed so many times it was turning white. He seemed to be unable to sit still from discomfort. A volunteer went over, and like an elementary school student who had done something wrong, he stood up to talk to her.

The volunteer was only around twenty, perhaps still in school. She quickly said, “Uncle Guo Heng, please relax, don’t be so polite. Do you want water?”

Guo Heng smiled cautiously at her. “No need, thank you. Is it my turn to talk?”

“My schoolmate is just checking the microphone. It’s nearly time for you to go on, they told me to tell you.”

“Oh, that’s good...” Guo Heng pulled his jacket down. As if feeling that his left and right shoulders were asymmetrical, he gave them a shake. There was faint sweat at the corners of his forehead, and he called the volunteer back incoherently. “Hey, young lady, they all know I’m coming, right? And they know who I am? Did you tell them?”

“They’ve all been informed,” the volunteer said. “We didn’t expect that so many people would come. I just heard that someone’s coming from the City Bureau, too. I don’t know if they’re here yet...”

Just as she said this, the other volunteer waved at her from afar. “The microphone is ready.”

Guo Heng stiffened all over, quickly taking the opportunity to drink a mouthful of water to wet his throat. Hearing the host call his name, he stiffly walked out. He took the microphone, his gaze sweeping the audience.—This was a lecture hall in Yan City University. The

students hadn't started school yet, so it had temporarily been lent out for their use.

There were over twenty people sitting down there. The youngest was thirty-five or thirty-six, and the rest were all middle-aged and elderly. Perhaps they weren't as old as they looked, but they'd been reduced to shadows by the ravages of time. Guo Heng pursed his lips, gaze sweeping over the front row, seeing a somewhat familiar woman—she seemed to be the mother of Qu Tong, the girl who was murdered last year. Guo Heng had seen her in the newspaper.

All the people sitting there had once had a lively, clever little girl, but the little girls had all remained buds at the tip of a branch, gradually growing further and further from their parents in the mortal world.

“My...” Guo Heng accidentally aimed at the microphone's amplifier, and the speakers instantly produced a sharp cry, going through his ears. The audience was silent; no one protested. The sharp cry faded. Guo Heng cleared his throat, bowing deeply towards the people below, bending his waist at a ninety-degree angle.

“My name is Guo Heng,” he said, raising an old photograph. “This is my daughter, Guo Fei. Over twenty years ago, we lived in Lotus Mountain...”

Luo Wenzhou silently came in by the back door and sat in the very last row, listening to the man on stage telling stories about his daughter's childhood and tearfully apologizing—for impulsively stabbing Wu Guangchuan, leading the real killer to evade retribution for over twenty years.

An hour later, the presentation was over. Guo Heng, red-eyed, got off the stage. Qu Tong's mother hesitated, then gave him a paper towel.

Guo Heng was speechless. He could only take it with both hands.

Just then, someone slowly walked up beside him and patted Guo Heng's arm.

Guo Heng stared. "Captain Luo?"

"I've come over today representing the City Bureau to give everyone an accounting." Luo Wenzhou was for once in uniform. The tidy uniform suppressed his usual slovenly air. "At the end of the year, we arrested Zhang Chunling, the chairman of the board of directors of the Chunlai Conglomerate, as well as his brother and all their associates. The principal persons involved have now confessed to the whole course of their financial support for and taking part in Su Hui, Su Xiaolan, and Su Luozhan's kidnapping and killing of female children. According to the criminal gang's confessions, we've found two more locations where bodies were buried. This time the evidence ought to be conclusive. We now know the whereabouts of all...all the children we were unable to find or find in their entirety before. When the medical examiners have finished making an inventory, we can let you take them home... My condolences."

Before he'd finished speaking, someone had already begun to sob.

Luo Wenzhou sighed and nodded towards everybody in apology. Leaving the echoing lecture hall, he had somewhere else to hasten to—he bought some things and went to the home of the South Bend police station's Civil Policeman Kong Weichen.

Because he had called Zhang Chunjiu ahead of time on the day they'd gone to arrest Yin Ping, he not only hadn't had the honor of a "martyr," he'd always borne suspicion. Now that the criminals on both sides had been brought to justice, that complicated and confusing silencing case had finally seen the light of day.

Lu Guosheng had been arrested, Gu Zhao's case had been dug up without warning, and the nails planted inside the City Bureau by Zhang Chunjiu had basically all been exposed. He'd lost his source of

information, but he had been at the City Bureau for many years and understood all the working habits of the Criminal Investigation Team; he knew that if they wanted to investigate Gu Zhao's old case, the police would have to go find the key witnesses from back then. All the witnesses had of course been dealt with, vanishing off the face of the earth, and the police could only go visit their friends and relatives—there had been someone watching Yin Ping for a long time, but at the start, even Zhang Chunjiu hadn't expected that the unassuming boiler attendant would have been bold enough to substitute himself for another.

“On the day it occurred, after our colleagues left Yin Ping's home, one of those pickup trucks began tailing the police car and midway found that they had turned around and gone back. At the same time, Old Cinder fled and the suspect realized something was wrong. He quickly determined it would be better to kill the wrong person rather than forego the planned silencing...” Luo Wenzhou spoke in as gentle a tone as possible to Kong Weichen's family. “It was our slip-up, nothing to do with Xiao Kong's phone call.—The suspect acknowledged that if he had known earlier that there was a problem with Yin Ping, he wouldn't have taken Xiao Kong's call to avoid attracting suspicion.”

Kong Weichen's family was in financially straitened circumstances. Even after he'd started working, it would have been hard to build up a family fortune relying on the small salary of a civil policeman at a local police station. His house was still rundown, part of the couch caved-in, making it hard to receive a guest. They could only have Luo Wenzhou sit with his legs uncomfortably curled up on a small stool.

“Kong Weichen's name has been cleared,” he said. “Set your minds at ease. I...and my colleague, who Xiao Kong saved, will do everything we can to fight for him to be recognized as a martyr.—You have my condolences.”

After leaving Kong Weichen's home, Luo Wenzhou went to Feng Bin's home, to the home of the art teacher Yu Bin's student... He felt like he was an announcer of death, delivering condolences as he went. At last he came in front of Yang Xin.

After Yang Xin had been arrested, it had always been Tao Ran who had come into contact with her. Luo Wenzhou hadn't come to see her—he truly had nothing to say to her.

Now, past a table and a set of handcuffs, both sides thought the other was a stranger. Yang Xin had her head down and her hair, freshly cut short, tucked behind her ears, facing Luo Wenzhou with the whorl at the top of her head, not daring to look at him, quietly saying, "I told Tao Ran-ge everything."

"I didn't come to interrogate you," Luo Wenzhou said. "I came here today on purpose to tell you the truth behind your father's sacrifice—Yang Xin, lift up your head and listen to me."

Yang Xin somewhat flinchingly raised her head.

"Three years ago, Lao Yang received an anonymous report from Fan Siyuan and started investigating Gu Zhao's old case. They used an anonymous radio station as their means of communication. Lao Yang mistakenly trusted Zhang Chunjiu, who plotted his death in the underpass—I think Fan Siyuan must have told you about that."

Yang Xin nodded.

"There are also things he didn't tell you," Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly. "Three years later, under your mom's manipulation, Fan Siyuan went to see Pan Yunteng, wanting him to report that Wang Hongliang at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau was involved in drug dealing and take the opportunity to pull down Zhang Chunjiu. He went in person that time. Don't you think it's

strange? Why was he so furtive contacting your father but went to see Pan Yunteng out in the open?”

Yang Xin was at a loss.

“Fan Siyuan must also have told you that he didn’t have proof that Zhang Chunjiu was the mole, so he wanted to force them to reveal themselves step by step.—Haven’t you wondered why, since he didn’t have evidence, he so sure that Zhang Chunjiu was the mole? He went to so much trouble; wasn’t he afraid he suspected the wrong person and that in the end he would fail for want of a last effort? If he really did suspect Zhang Chunjiu from the beginning, why didn’t he ever reveal that to your father, letting him be easily tricked into trusting Zhang Chunjiu, dying a violent death? Also, don’t you think that compared to his method of finally bringing the Chunlai Conglomerate down three years later, sending an anonymous report to an old police officer three years earlier is too crude, too unlike the style of a battle plan?”

Yang Xin opened her mouth. “Luo-dage...”

The corners of Luo Wenzhou’s mouth curled. One word at a time, he said, “When Zhang Chunjiu was arrested, he still couldn’t understand why, when he’d tried misleading the enemy by restarting the Picture Album Project, Fan Siyuan, like a turtle in its shell, still had his mind fixed on him.—I’m here to tell you the answer.”

Yang Xin seemed to have realized something and opened her eyes wide in panic, beginning to shake all over, subconsciously shaking her head.

“It’s very simple. Fan Siyuan found out at the time that he was seriously ill and had to accelerate his actions. His suspicions were concentrated on two people. One was Lao Yang, who had partnered with Gu Zhao most often, and the other was Zhang Chunjiu, who had been promoted because of that business. First he sent Lao Yang an

anonymous lure. After a few contacts, he'd basically eliminated Lao Yang from suspicion and concentrated on Zhang Chunjiu.

“Why would Lao Yang have trusted Zhang Chunjiu so easily?” Luo Wenzhou stared hard at Yang Xin. “Let me tell you, it wasn't because Zhang Chunjiu was brilliant, and it wasn't because your dad was carelessly credulous—it was because Fan Siyuan was hinting to him that Zhang Chunjiu was trustworthy.”

Yang Xin said, “No...”

“Your Teacher Fan used your dad as a pathfinding stone, deliberately wielding him to expose Fei Chengyu to Zhang Chunjiu, conveniently using the Zhang brothers' hands to dispose of Fei Chengyu, taking on Fei Chengyu's power and hiding himself behind the scenes—the Zhang brothers thought they had discovered Fan Siyuan's virus, but in fact the virus was deliberately revealed, and their positions were determined.”

Yang Xin rattled the handcuffs. “No! You're wrong! Impossible!”

Luo Wenzhou said callously, “Whether you believe it or not, those are the facts.”

This was his last visit to a victim's relative today, and she also the one he most didn't want to see. Yang Xin cried bitterly as though collapsing. Luo Wenzhou didn't want to see her anymore. He stood up and went to the door.

“Luo-dage!” Yang Xin called to him in helpless panic.

Luo Wenzhou's steps paused slightly, but he didn't look back, leaving her with his disappointed back view.

The weather had warmed up a little today. There was a bit of hidden moisture in the wind, foretelling of warm breezes to come from the

southeast north to Yan City.

It was evening when Luo Wenzhou returned home, pushed open the door holding a bag of roasted chestnuts and a stack of blood-enriching ingredients, and found that the cat ordinarily guarding at the door was gone.

Luo Wenzhou closed the door with his foot and whistled towards the house. “Children?”

There was no answer to his call, and Luo Wenzhou broke out in a cold sweat. This was an issue left over from when he’d carried Fei Du back from Binhai. If he couldn’t see him for a moment, his pulse would rise at once to 150. Tao Ran said he also had mild PTSD.

He tossed aside what he was holding and charged inside without changing his shoes—living room, study, bedroom...balcony. No one there. An indescribable terror gripped his chest.

Luo Wenzhou said, “Fei Du!”

This voice-breaking cry was probably loud enough to startle the neighbors. There was a sudden crash in the basement, as though something had fallen.

Luo Wenzhou turned his head and went down.

The lights were on in the basement. Fei Du’s injured ankle still couldn’t take weight; he stood with his back towards Luo Wenzhou, leaning on a crutch...confronting a fat cat.

Truly seeing him, Luo Wenzhou let out a long breath. His legs went weak, and he hastily touched the wall.

Fei Du was at last alerted by his quick steps. “When did you get back? I didn’t hear.”

Luo Wenzhou focused, walked over without a word, and hugged him. Inexplicably pressed to his chest, Fei Du seemed to lean over. He really couldn't stand firm on one leg, so he could only reach out and put his hands on Luo Wenzhou's back, inadvertently touching his rapid heartbeat. He stared. "You..."

Luo Wenzhou smacked his ass, vaguely saying, "You scoundrel. Are you deaf?"

He didn't want to excessively display his unease in front of Fei Du and pulled a long face as though nothing were the matter, pulling Fei Du's crutch aside and picking him up. "Who told you to take the stairs? What did you come down for?"

"To look for the cat," Fei Du said. "It's angry."

Luo Wenzhou only then noticed that Comrade Luo Yiguo was standing on top of a storage closet, staring at the two of them with a cynical look. There seemed to be...something missing.

Luo Wenzhou was shaken by Luo Yiguo's new appearance. "Who shaved the cat?"

"Your mom," said Fei Du.

"Who?" Luo Wenzhou glared at him a little unhappily. "Did you take that red packet at New Years for nothing?"

Fei Du obviously went still.

Luo Wenzhou had only been casually joking. Seeing him hesitate, he suddenly came around, feeling a pain at his heart—for Fei Du, the "mom and dad" that an ordinary person could blurt out were a barrier he couldn't walk over.

Perhaps it would take a long time to stride over, even a whole lifetime.

Luo Wenzhou knew he'd said something wrong and could only force a change of subject. "What's Female Comrade Mu Xiaoqing doing shaving the cat's fur on a cold day like this..."

Fei Du suddenly spoke: "Mom says it'll help it face facts, so it won't think it's only fluffy from the fur..."

Everything he said after didn't go into Luo Wenzhou's ears. He put a foot on the bottom basement step, turning to Fei Du in astonishment

As though nothing were the matter, Fei Du avoided his burning gaze. "I think I smell roasted chestnuts."

Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready.—The Old Man and the Sea

EXTRA 1

Luo Wenzhou startled awake in the middle of the night, heart beating like a drum, reaching out nearly in a panic. Touching Fei Du's hand lying outside the covers, the breath caught in his throat at last eased.

Luo Wenzhou wiped away cold sweat and looked down at the source of his nightmare—the bald cat Luo Yiguo.

Though this year's heating supply was about to come to an end, its strength was still unusually abundant. The warmth indoors was excessive, so they hadn't closed the door to the room at night. Anyway, given Fei Du's physical condition, they couldn't do anything "unsuitable for cats." Therefore, Comrade Luo Yiguo had not only overtly "entered the inner chamber," it had also sprawled over Luo Wenzhou's chest with half its body.

Luo Wenzhou first carefully stuck Fei Du's hand back under the covers, then picked up Luo Yiguo, inviting it to remove to the bedside cabinet, or else sooner or later President Guo would give him a heart attack.

He half sat up and glared at Luo Yiguo with an interrogating expression, but President Guo was awesomely unafraid. Claws catching on the surface of the bedside cabinet, it stretched hugely, yawned enormously towards Luo Wenzhou, and happily nestled down, indifferent to the guilt it still carried.

Yes, Luo Yiguo really had gotten into trouble today.

When Luo Wenzhou had been cooking dinner the night before, after putting the food in the pot, he'd found that there was no more cooking wine in the house and had had to open the liquor cabinet and take out a small jar of high-quality Shaoxing wine to make do

with. Because he'd been rushed with the trivial details of the cooking process, he'd forgotten about the detail of locking the liquor cabinet.

He'd been worried about Fei Du during the day at lunch and had called home as usual. He'd said hardly two sentences when he'd heard a bang and the sound of something heavy falling—this was a very familiar noise to Luo Wenzhou. When he'd first started taking care of the cat and hadn't been on his guard, he'd on average heard a twice daily live broadcast of "Luo Yiguo knocking over plates."

This time, what Luo Yiguo had knocked over hadn't been plates; it had been wine.

It had somehow managed to open the liquor cabinet. A tall and slender bottle placed closest to the outside had been standing unsteadily and had died a tragic death at the cat's paws. Though Fei Du had quickly cleaned up the scene, a good deal of evidence of the crime had still remained in the kitchen—a small quantity of red liquid in the cracks in the floor, half a red wine-scented cat's paw print by the fridge that Fei Du hadn't noticed...and the decisive evidence of the suspect cat Luo Yiguo's tail.

While the above suspect had been shaved bald, there were still tufts of hair remaining at its head and the end of its tail; the long hair at the end of its tail had been dyed red.

But so what if the evidence was conclusive? So what if it had a lengthy criminal record?

Luo Yiguo had already been shaved and neutered; aware that for the rest of its life, the sensuous world would be an illusion, it had nothing left to recollect fondly. Right in front of Luo Wenzhou's face, it brazenly licked its tail, totally disregarding the litter box attendant's threats.

There was nothing Luo Wenzhou could do to it. He could only put it out of sight and out of mind, lying down once more and looking at Fei Du in the faint light.

Fei Du's breathing was shallow and slow, half his face buried against the pillow. When his eyes were closed, their shape became only more clear to see. His soft hair fell down, idly curling over his chin. He seemed neither mighty nor crafty, only a quietly sleeping beautiful man.

Looking only at his sleeping countenance, it was impossible to imagine what he had experienced, what he had done.

Suddenly, Luo Wenzhou wasn't sleepy anymore. He reached out to move the strands of hair away from Fei Du's neck and saw that the frightening bruises had nearly vanished; there were only a few shallow marks left. He looked fixedly at the shallow marks for a while and couldn't resist gently stroking them with the pads of his fingers.

But Fei Du's neck was too sensitive; he unconsciously dodged, then rolled over. Luo Wenzhou was afraid he would accidentally press down on his still not fully healed ankle and quickly reached out to embrace him, pressing him into his arms.

Fei Du seemed to have been disturbed, but he didn't fully wake up, only blearily patted the back of his hand, turned his head, and kissed his neck.

He didn't move again.

Fei Du was a nuisance; he had all kinds of intimate little gestures at his disposal, ready to muddle a person up at any time; even half-asleep he could still put on the moves. Luo Wenzhou was hot and bothered at his kiss, all the blood in his body whirling up to escape velocity, howling to break free of gravity.

Unfortunately, at this moment, he could only hold Fei Du and stare at the ceiling, pondering the meaning of life, unilaterally burning.

When he was about to come up with a philosophical system out of frustration, Luo Wenzhou suddenly noticed a problem—he turned his head and looked at the little alarm clock on the bedside cabinet. The fluorescent display said that it was past 5:00 AM. Reasonably speaking, at this time, Fei Du would already be about to wake up naturally, his never especially deep sleep becoming very shallow. Why was he sleeping so soundly today?

Under normal circumstances, unless Fei Du was sick, it could only mean...

He'd had alcohol or coffee during the day.

Fei Du's constitution was very particular. Drinking an appropriate amount of alcohol or coffee could invigorate him, but once that bit of vitality was past, if he didn't have another cup, his earlier energy would seem like an overdraft; he'd usually get sleepy rather early in the evening, and his sleep would be comparatively sound.

Luo Wenzhou turned his head to look at Luo Yiguo and thought there was something suspicious about this. So he carefully moved Fei Du's hands away from his waist, went to the living room, and opened the glass cabinet containing the wineglasses. In all, there were nine wineglasses of different sizes, arranged in three rows. Luo Wenzhou took them out one by one to investigate. Finally, in an innermost corner, he found one with a ring of dried up water stains.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He'd seized the opportunity of the unlocked liquor cabinet to secretly drink wine, and when he'd finished drinking, he'd not only destroyed the evidence, he'd also put on a show and shifted the blame onto a cat!

President Fei's talents were increasing.

So that morning, the wronged Luo Yiguo received compensation for its injury from the "government"—a can of Whiskas—while the "mastermind behind the scenes" met with a household interrogation.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Tell me the truth."

Fei Du unhurriedly put a small lettuce leaf into a strip of smoked bacon and rolled it up. "I haven't not told the truth."

Luo Wenzhou was speechless.

That was true; hearing the noise over the phone, he himself had asked, "What did the damn cat knock over?" Fei Du's answer had been, "You seem to have forgotten to lock the liquor cabinet."—One sentence, nothing wrong with it.

Fei Du picked up the rolled-up bacon with his chopsticks and put it into Luo Wenzhou's mouth. "Just half a cup. I needed to deal with something at work."

Luo Wenzhou said, "No smoking, no alcohol, no egg custards. What did you promise me?"

"I was wrong," Fei Du said obligingly.

"Home is no place to argue" was one of President Fei's basic principles of behavior. Whenever there was any trifle, he was always in a hurry to admit his fault, lay on the honeyed words, and patch it up...and whether he regretted it or not would depend on his mood.

Luo Wenzhou thought expressionlessly that the next sentence would certainly be, "Shixiong, I love you."

Fei Du said glibly, “You can make me do anything in punishment, but half a glass of wine is only two-hundred milliliters. I don’t think it deserves as serious a penalty as you being angry.”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Even this routine could periodically update and go up a grade!

Fei Du’s gaze swept over the wide collar of Luo Wenzhou’s pajamas, admiring the clearly outlined collarbones and muscles and looking inward. He licked his lips. “I can provide special services, too, beauty.”

Luo Wenzhou refused him with an iron will. “Scram!”

In his capacity as a man who had thrown off vulgar interests, Luo Wenzhou drank a glass of cold water and came up with an “ideal” plan, the inspiration coming from the shadow of his own childhood—writing a self-reflection.

“At least a thousand characters, handwritten,” Luo Wenzhou said as he changed his shoes and prepared to go to work. “Read it aloud before dinner.”

“...A thousand characters for two-hundred milliliters?” Fei Du asked uncomprehendingly.

“It’s not only the two-hundred milliliters.” Luo Wenzhou paused slightly, becoming stern, and turned his head to look deeply at Fei Du. —He wanted to say, there’s also that you hid things from me; that you deliberately enraged Fan Siyuan; that you got yourself beaten black and blue; that I almost never saw you again; and also...that you’ll only answer me digging my heart out with impertinent remarks.

He simply couldn't think carefully about these things. Luo Wenzhou thought he still wasn't ready to remember it clearly, so he hastily swallowed down what he'd been about to say and quickly left.

Fei Du acutely sensed what he had left unsaid, stared, then, leaning on his crutch, wounded ankle held high, he slowly strolled to the study.

Luo Wenzhou had blurted something out and had already forgotten about it by the time he got home from work...until he saw Fei Du take out two sheets of writing paper.

"Fei Du" and "writing a self-reflection" were two entirely unrelated notions. The regular script covering the writing paper had a slightly threatening depth; at a glance, the total character count definitely exceeded a thousand. Luo Wenzhou reached out to grab it. "Did you really..."

Fei Du turned, avoiding him. "Didn't you tell me to read it aloud? Sit down."

Luo Wenzhou and Luo Yiguo sat side by side on the couch, looking at him in bewilderment.

Fei Du put one hand behind his back and half rose out of his chair as though preparing to appear on stage. The fact that he was standing on one leg didn't even effect his display; it was very free and easy. Then he took out the hand hidden behind his back; he was holding a half-opened red rose. He reached out and put it into Luo Wenzhou's collar.

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

He had a premonition of what the contents of the "self-reflection" were, but he still didn't dare to believe that Fei could be shameless enough to read it aloud himself.

But President Fei really was that shameless.

Fei Du cleared his throat and, right in front of the perplexed Luo Yiguo, without a trace of shyness, read out his love letter called a “self-reflection”: “In my heart, a cluster of flowers lifts their faces to the burning sun...”

“Fei Du, how nauseating are you, what’s your problem!”

“...more sweet-smelling than all fine wines...”

“Little bastard, I told you to write a self-reflection, and you’re making sport of me. You must really think I can’t govern you!”

“The boiling... Hey, gentlemen use their words, not their hands...”

Covered in gooseflesh, Luo Wenzhou transplanted the maudlin diseased seedling Fei Du to the bedroom. Luo Yiguo, hugging the remaining fur on its tail, gnawed at it for a while, pricking up its ears to listen to the laughter and pleas for forgiveness, continuing its abstention from sensuous pleasures with its tail fur as its companion.

In my heart, a cluster of flowers lifts their faces to the burning sun,

More sweet-smelling than all fine wines.

The boiling fragrance has engulfed the scarecrow’s chest,

The straw spirit henceforth enjoying boundless longevity.

EXTRA 2

A car crash had broken Fei Chengyu's brain, and he'd lain in bed for over three years, turning into a crab that had been in the fridge too long—his body was whole, but he had wasted away to a hollow shell.

Fan Siyuan had stolen him away; never mind dragging him around from place to place, he'd also nearly turned him into a human bomb, and presumably had been rather inconsiderate towards him during the whole process. The police and EMTs had dug him out of the "underground air-raid shelter," and Fei Chengyu had shown signs of being on his last gasp. He struggled at death's door for a few months before he finally croaked.

At this time, the mighty uproar attracted by the major case during the Spring Festival had gradually left the city residents' social media. Fei Chengyu's last breath was taken in the total ruin of his reputation. Death was too good for him; it couldn't attract anyone's attention. Fei Du took charge, unloading the still useful spare parts of his body and contributing them to modern medical treatment. For all the rest, conforming with the principle of simplicity, he found an out-of-the-way crematorium where there was no need to wait in line and burned him.

Fei Du's wounds had more or less healed, only he temporarily couldn't walk far or do vigorous exercise with his injured foot. But that didn't mean anything; to use Luo Wenzhou's words, the function of his feet had always been just better than nothing; admittedly it wasn't very convenient not to have it, but if you had it...there still wasn't any particular use.

The relatives' waiting room at the crematorium was very simple and crude; the furnishings basically consisted of a table and a few benches. Black smoke came out of the incinerator. By the natural light coming in through the window, Fei Du was fiddling with a watch—

Luo Wenzhou's watch buckle had come loose on the way here. There was a spring in it that wouldn't catch. Fei Du had borrowed a thin needle from a staff member and was manually repairing it.

Fei Du was very calm; complicated forms, scattered little parts, ropes tied into impossible knots...all the things that could drive an anxious modern city dweller to collapse ceased to be problems when they came into his hands.

The little spring in Luo Wenzhou's watch buckle was very thin. It was jammed on something. You could only hook it out with the needle by aiming at it for an age; if you didn't hook it into the appropriate position, it would bounce back on its own in a rhythm as though trying to hound an obsessive-compulsive sufferer to death. But after going through the above motions a dozen times, there was not the least change in the rate of Fei Du's breathing. Even the wind blowing over to him would automatically still into ordinary air. If you looked on at him for a while, you would also involuntarily calm down along with him.

"It's kind of magical," thought Luo Wenzhou, watching him with his head propped in his hand.

Fei Du was a mental attack system; if he wanted to make someone indulge in wild fantasies, he could make them indulge in wild fantasies; if he wanted to make them meditate in the middle of the day, he could make them sink into reverie with their eyes wide open.

Once again the little spring bounced back at the last moment. Fei Du didn't seem at all impatient. He only slightly changed his sitting posture, inadvertently meeting Luo Wenzhou's gaze; he gave him a questioning look.

"It's nothing," Luo Wenzhou answered like a lecher, "I'm exercising my eyes."

“...” Fei Du said, “Could we be a little more dignified in the crematorium?”

“You can comment on other people not being dignified?” Luo Wenzhou said in astonishment

Fei Du asked in turn, “Aren’t you always saying other people are shameless?”

This logic was flawless; Luo Wenzhou had nothing to say and could only resort to the body—he kicked him under the table.

Fei Du dodged quickly. “Don’t fuss, I’d finally gotten it, and you’ve made me bump it away.”

Luo Wenzhou said, “If you can’t fix it, then stop messing with it. It’s not like I wear a watch every day.”

“It’s fine, it isn’t hard.” In the light, Fei Du carefully examined the place where the little spring was jammed. His fingers were long and slender, the joints moderately sized, neither so bulky they stuck out nor so thin as to look boneless; they gave you a very gentle sense of strength, as though anything that fell into those hands would find the most appropriate treatment.

Luo Wenzhou stretched. “How can you have so much patience?”

“I wouldn’t call it patience,” Fei Du said carelessly, narrowing his eyes. “It’s just that time is limited, and you have to separate the important matters from the minor ones. It’s no big deal to spend some time on the important things.”

Luo Wenzhou didn't understand; how could tinkering with a watch count as an "important thing?"

Just then, Fei Du finally pushed the jammed spring back into its proper place, closing the buckle with a click. He opened and closed it a few times; it worked as smoothly as ever.

"There." Fei Du passed him the watch with a smile that wasn't quite a smile. "Making you happy is the most important thing."

He'd been holding the metal watch face in his hand too long; it was warm, the body heat tainting it all at once wrapping around Luo Wenzhou's wrist. Luo Wenzhou gave a cry, his left hand sinking as though unable to bear the burden.

Fei Du said, "Did you catch the skin?"

"Caught the bone." Luo Wenzhou put on a display of exercising his wrist. Frowning, he said, "It feels like... *hss...* feels like my wrist bone is a crispy little cookie."

Fei Du grabbed the hand groping towards his leg under the table. "So what's this, then?"

Luo Wenzhou calmly answered, "A crispy pig's hand."

A faint smile spread at the corners of Fei Du's eyes. Just then, there came the sound of footsteps. The two of them rapidly terminated the little game under the table, each leaning back, sitting up solemnly. Two of the crematorium's staff members walked in one after another, one carrying ashes wrapped in red silk, the other holding a box for ashes.

Alive, Fei Chengyu had stirred up trouble, but it turned out that when he was dead it didn't take him any longer to burn than other people.

Now, during his sojourn into the narrow box, he was a gray and white pile, like burnt up inferior-grade coal; you couldn't see whether he'd been loyal or treacherous, good or evil.

A staff member asked, "Do the relatives want to put something the deceased liked in life inside?"

Fei Du took a pair of rings from his pocket. They weren't even wrapped. He threw them directly into the silk bag carrying the ashes.

People put all kinds of things into boxes of ashes; the staff member had seen it all before. Seeing at once that this was a pair of wedding rings, and seeing Fei Du's attitude, he could make a rough guess—the individual in the box hadn't treated his wife and child well in life, and after his death, his son had made the decision to throw the wedding rings into the box of ashes, as though cutting off the ill-fated conjugal relationship.

The staff member was very quick. He opened his mouth, and, swallowing back the usual "the dead are departed, please restrain your grief," he changed his wording at the last minute: "Yin and Yang are separate worlds, old scores are settled. From now on, the one walking the bridge walks the bridge, and the one walking the road walks the road, not obstructing each other any longer."

Fei Du: "..."

Why was this crematorium's memorial speech so original and refined?

The staff member also took the opportunity to make a sale. "We have a promotion right now, a long-term storage service, only 1,998 for one year, and for a one-time payment of 50,000 yuan, you can keep it here all the time, take it away whenever convenient. Think about it, the cheapest graves in the suburbs cost over 150,000 and the

property rights only last twenty years. It's nowhere near as cost-effective as leaving it here with us, right?"

And so Fei Chengyu attained a very "cost-effective" little corner in this out-of-the-way little crematorium, hanging his contemptible life on the wall.

The crematorium was in a remote district, the incinerator halfway up a mountain. To leave, you had to go through a section of mountain road that wasn't very easy to walk. Luo Wenzhou was afraid Fei Du would twist his ankle and kept a hand lightly curled behind him, suddenly saying hesitantly, "When your mom...I think she wasn't wearing that ring."

"She'd taken it off herself," Fei Du said, "and tossed it into a pen container in my bedroom. Fei Chengyu didn't find it. I only discovered it after a good few days."

Fei Du's mother hadn't been a weak and insane woman from birth; the only thing she'd done wrong in her life had been to mistakenly trust Fei Chengyu.

There had been a rainstorm a few days ago, and the ground was somewhat muddy and slippery. Fei Du's foot slipped. His ankle couldn't handle the weight yet. Before he could reach out, Luo Wenzhou was holding him. "Can you talk to me about it?"

He'd learned from Fan Siyuan all that had happened in that basement; it had only been a few words, but they had already been appalling.

Fei Du sighed. "You've wanted to ask for a long time, haven't you?"

Luo Wenzhou's arms tightened.

“There’s nothing I can’t say.” Fei Du patted his arm and spoke in a very flat voice. “When he was young, Fei Chengyu was pretty good-looking. His background wasn’t very good, but I figure that to outsiders, he looked like an encouraging example, and he was very good at talking, naturally knowing how to make people lose their minds about him.”

There was no need to doubt this point—while Luo Wenzhou didn’t especially want to admit it, Fei Du really did look more like Fei Chengyu; if his tendencies hadn’t been unsuited for it, relying solely on that face would have been enough to make him undefeated in the arena of love, whether aiming at men or women.

Never mind also being venomous and sly, incessantly scheming.

“No doubt there were some good times right after she was married, good enough to turn her head, until my grandfather passed away and Fei Chengyu became his legal heir. He’d gotten everything he’d wanted, so of course he revealed his true intentions.” Fei Du paused. “None of it had anything to do with love. From beginning to end, it was all a hoax and a retaliation. Fei Chengyu’s brain wasn’t set up to be able to feel sentiment.”

“Retaliation?”

“My grandfather paid for him to attend university. Later, he thought there was a problem with his moral character and suspended his funding. A bit of good creates gratitude, a lot of good creates an enemy. In the end, he was the person Fei Chengyu hated most. Later he regarded my mom as the representative of this person who’d ‘set himself above the masses and looked down on him,’ so he wanted to do everything he could to abuse her.”

Luo Wenzhou quietly asked, “What about you?”

“I...” When Fei Du had just said one word, he felt Luo Wenzhou’s arms tighten around him again, the tense muscles in his forearms almost trembling. Focusing his attention on the gentle and level slope in front of him, his throat moved lightly, and he swallowed back the “I was fine” that he’d nearly blurted out.

“He wasn’t very satisfied with me. Fei Chengyu thought I was a shoddy product, with my mom’s blood flowing in my veins, weak and stupid. He hoped to correct these congenital deficiencies. Starting with easy small animals, because ordinary children go through a phase of personifying some small animals. During that period, that sort of training would be about the same mental experience as killing a person.” Fei Du looked down at his own hands. “There were little cats and dogs, rabbits, little birds...everything. If the legal provisions looked on killing animals the same as killing humans, I could probably get a few dozen death penalties.”

Luo Wenzhou said heavily, “When did it start?”

Fei Du quietly recalled for a moment and shook his head. “I can’t remember clearly... My mom made me remember, but I still can’t remember remember clearly.”

Luo Wenzhou was surprised. “Your mom made you remember what?”

“They all died with their necks gripped, unable to breathe, in a slow and hopeless struggle. She made me remember the feeling of suffocation, remember that they all died in my place.”

She had been deepening his pain. Worried that, like Fei Chengyu hoped, he would grow numb calluses over the wounds, she had used a sharper knife to constantly deepen his pain, passing through flesh, carving it into his bones, cutting the bone to cure the poison.

“But I probably wasn’t like what my mom had hoped for either,” Fei Du said. “I was weaker than she imagined. I didn’t acknowledge Fei Chengyu, but I didn’t dare to disobey him either...”

“Fei Du,” Luo Wenzhou suddenly interrupted him, “think carefully for me. Take an ordinary young woman and abuse her to the point of going crazy. She can’t get away, she can’t hide, she isn’t allowed to resist. What can she do? The only freedom she has is death. But she spent fourteen years like that. Never mind other people, I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to take it. But she did it. Do you know why she endured for so many years?”

Fei Du stared.

“Because when you were fourteen, you already knew how to protect yourself in front of Fei Chengyu, and because when you’d passed the age of fourteen, you were no longer an incompetent who wouldn’t receive criminal penalties no matter what you did. As long as Fei Chengyu didn’t want to run the risk of his only son going to prison, he’d do his best to avoid you personally doing anything that couldn’t be taken back. That day in the basement with the metal ring around her neck, you think she was afraid of death?” Luo Wenzhou grabbed Fei Du’s shoulders and forced him to turn around. “You’re so smart. Do you really not understand that death was the end she thirsted for most? She wasn’t afraid of death at all, she was only afraid of dying like that at your hands. She was afraid you’d never be able to wash your hands clean—”

Fei Du struggled subconsciously.

“She loved you. I love you, too.”

Fei Du said, “Wenzhou...”

Luo Wenzhou didn't give him a chance to speak. "On New Year's Eve, on the way to Binhai, I've never been so scared in my life, so scared I still don't dare to think closely about it. My hands start shaking as soon as I remember it. I wasn't afraid you couldn't defeat some... some pieces of trash like Zhang Chunling and Fan Siyuan. You could cook both of them put together in the same pot. I was afraid you didn't know to value your own life, that you'd take my heart and feed it to the dogs!"

These words had been suppressed in Luo Wenzhou's mind like a time bomb for a long time. Suddenly blurting them out like this, his chest ignited, blowing away the stones silted up there for so long, letting the mud-scented breeze blow through the emptiness.

Fei Du's pupils contracted slightly. The glib-tongued person was suddenly mute.

The mountain was full of stately old scholar trees, the sougning of the wind through the pines like rage, and the whispering of the breeze.

After a long time, Fei Du moved gently. Raising his stiff-jointed hands, he pressed them to Luo Wenzhou's chest.

"I'm sorry, I..." For an age he couldn't get anything out after that "I," as though he'd run out of words. He only gently closed his eyes, hands full of Luo Wenzhou's chaotic and rapid heartbeat.

Luo Wenzhou froze, fragmentary anger dispersing with a rumble, because in Fei Du's plump lower eyelids, faintly visible even when he wasn't smiling, and in the slender corners of his eyes, he'd seen a trace of redness, though it was only a bit, like a shallow watercolor halo.

"...I'm sorry," Fei Du repeated.

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer. Receiving this belated apology, he silently took his hand and led him down the mountain.

"I wasn't lying to you."

"Weren't lying about what?"

"In the crematorium waiting room, when I said, 'Making you happy is the most important thing.'"

"..."

"That was sincere, not sweet-talk."

The allotted time began now.

"...Yeah."

I'll trust you again, even though you have such an unreliable record, and if you hurt me again...

It seems I still won't be able not to love you.

He really had fallen into this asshole's hands.

EXTRA 3

Since the present society's criminal penalties didn't include a provision for "whipping the corpse," however steeped in iniquity Fei Chengyu had been in life, he had now turned to ashes and naturally avoided having his criminal responsibility investigated.

But the illegal gains he'd made while alive still had to be dealt with.

Fortunately, Fei Du had prepared for this long ago; he peeled off what he ought to have peeled off and pled ignorance where he ought to have pled ignorance. After all, in his original plan, he hadn't allotted himself a good outcome, so no matter what, he'd had to prepare an escape route for the people working for him. Though now he himself had to manage that "escape route."

In short, he could no longer present himself as that idle and spendthrift "useless son of the wealthy" from before. While Fei Du himself could make do with a mouthful of thin porridge to live on, he still had to support a big crowd of people and was forced to walk the road of a president occupied with numerous affairs, going to work every day.

Luo Wenzhou had found him a parking spot in the little estate where parking spots were scarce—there was a problem with the design of this parking spot; ordinary people couldn't park there. A resident who'd bought a second-hand apartment only found out about being duped after moving in and had very happily passed it on to Luo Wenzhou at a low price, and President Fei's skills, practiced racing cars in mountainous regions, finally had ample scope.

On that subject, those days of painting the town, racing cars and raising hell, seemed to have belonged to another lifetime, but being "busy" in itself absolutely wasn't painful, as long as you knew what you were busy about.

Every evening, Fei Du could take his laptop and sit on the steps leading down to the basement and work overtime. That was his fixed location; he had every kind of pillow and cushion, and a small cup holder. At his right hand he had a bowl of rock crystal pear water, at his left he had a Luo Yiguo—Luo Yiguo kept close to his computer's heating vent, enjoying the warmth, leaning on its front paws with its eyes closed—and when he'd been staring at the screen too long, Fei Du could also lift his head and have a look at a beautiful man to rest his eyes.

Especially as the above-mentioned beautiful man, dripping with sweat, was aware that he was handsome and wore only a pair of loose exercise pants.

Apart from odds and ends and the old bicycle, Luo Wenzhou's basement also had a complete set of home body-building apparatus, a treadmill, a sandbag, weights...everything necessary.

Still driven by inertia, he hopped off the treadmill belt, picked up a towel, wiped the glistening sweat on his body, and strolled over to Fei Du as though exhibiting his clearly outlined pecs and abs. "You sit there every day as an outside observer. Didn't that doctor last time say you could do appropriate exercise?"

Fei Du hit the last punctuation mark, sent his e-mail, and very perfunctorily said, "Wait until I get a gym card."

Luo Wenzhou picked up the half a bowl pear water he hadn't finished drinking and drank two mouthfuls. Then he bared a mouthful of white teeth at Fei Du. "What gym card? Isn't there enough stuff on display at home? Anyway, can a personal trainer provide the thorough 'personal service' that I can?"

Fei Du looked up at the "trainer" attempting to peddle his own body, then looked at the home gym in front of him. Looking reluctant, he

pointed. “Look, the middle of the night, a little dark room where you can’t see the light of day, running in place on a whatever-it-is treadmill rotating at a uniform speed—don’t you think it’s like a hamster ball?”

Luo Wenzhou: “...”

Owing to his impertinent remarks, President Fei was carried off in the big hamster’s mouth on the spot.

Luo Yiguo stood up and opened its eyes wide in surprise. Then it decided it wouldn’t necessarily be able to defeat the rodent demon and could only chase a couple of circles after its own tail in vexation, rolling up into a cowardly ball and doing nothing to help.

The next day, Fei Du was woken up by the slight sound of Luo Wenzhou’s belt buckle. For a moment he thought he’d overslept and abruptly sat up...and fell back again as his waist went weak.

Luo Wenzhou gathered him up along with the quilt, kissing his hair. He quietly said, “It’s not time for you to get up yet. Go back to sleep.”

Fei Du found that Luo Wenzhou was wearing his uniform today. They weren’t normally required to wear uniform; it seemed he was going to take part in some special activity today.

Luo Wenzhou said, “You’re still looking. Close your eyes.”

Fei Du said, “Mr. Policeman, with your looks, if you were willing to change professions and come work for us, you could even sleep till noon every day.”

Luo Wenzhou straightened his collar and said in astonishment, “Undermining Director Lu in broad daylight? You have prospects, young man—although, do you know that Director Lu has blacklisted you?”

Fei Du: "..."

"In fact, he didn't know how to blacklist. He came downstairs on purpose to find Tao Ran and ask him how, and when he'd asked he put it into practice on you. A middle-aged man past his fifth decade, thirty years behind the times, learning a new technical skill for your sake. Darling, isn't it glorious?"

Starting from when Fei Du had taken a nearly fatal risk in the arrest of Zhang Chunling and Fan Siyuan, Director Lu had determined that he was an unreliable young person. Later he'd discovered that when the above-mentioned young person posted Moments, they were all of Luo Wenzhou and their big-eyed, no-necked fat cat; it was extremely dull.

A few days ago there had for once been a post with slightly longer content. The subject was "The More Things Change, the More They Remain the Same." Director Lu had thought that President Fei was delivering some enlightening remarks about the fast-changing market-oriented economy; he hadn't expected that when he went to read it, he'd find that it was a summary of "deceit" written by the poster himself, including everything from basic principles to methodology, coherent and cogent. Director Lu had at once remembered his first-hand experience being duped by him and anger had instantly risen in his heart; he'd locked his screen, putting it out of sight and out of mind.

"Truly regrettable," Fei Du said dryly.

"It is! The venerable old fellow won't get to see the beautiful man living under the camera lens anymore, so I'll have to trouble myself to personally appear in front of him a few more times." Luo Wenzhou had unlocked his phone to show him; then he looked up at his watch and quickly restrained his grin. "No good, I really have to go."

Fei Du felt around the bedside and found his pajamas rolled into a ball, pulled them out, and draped them over himself. “Why so early today?”

Luo Wenzhou became earnest, straightening his clothes in the mirror. “It’s the anniversary of Gu Zhao’s death today. He’s going to be formally granted the status of martyr, as well as Xiao Wu. There’s a ceremony.”

Fei Du stared.

The ceremony took place where Gu Zhao was buried.

This graveyard was in a remote location, and its area wasn’t large; it seemed to have been built during a period when it was popular to speculate on graves.

For the sake of making a little more money, the spaces between the grave pits were very narrow, like a dovecote stuck into the ground. Between two rows of gravestones, there was only about a meter of space, just about enough to place two wreaths. As soon as there were a few too many visitors, the place became hard-up.

You couldn’t live beside too many people in life, but in death you could sleep in lively company.

Gu Zhao had been buried in this hard-up “dovecote.”

When the sun had just risen, the gates of the obscure little graveyard were parked full of cars.

This slow-coming ceremony was very solemn. Three rows to either side of the gravestone were full of people standing, and outside of that was an unending stream of media rushing over. The cameras that came late couldn't even squeeze in.

Director Lu was reciting a memorial speech written ahead of time.

Xiao Haiyang, absent-mindedly hugging a bouquet, was standing to one side, damp plant nutrients staining one of his hands.

Luo Wenzhou poked him with his elbow. “Director Lu is almost finished reciting. When he’s finished, you go up and present the bouquet. Don’t stand there sleepwalking, Yan City Satellite TV has their camera on you.”

Xiao Haiyang came back to himself and glanced out of the corner of his eye, indeed seeing a camera aimed at him. The camera person noticed his gaze and smiled at him from afar, making Xiao Haiyang suddenly remember a past event.

This was when he was little and his school had arranged a special performance in gratitude at a military camp, choosing a group of roly-poly little kids to form a “hundred-person” chorus, with a local TV station following to report on it. They were supposed to be on the evening news. Xiao Haiyang had managed to get chosen by some dumb luck. Because he was short for his age, he’d been placed in the first row in a corner.

That was Xiao Haiyang’s first time standing in front of a camera lens. Though he was only one percent of the chorus, playing the smallest role possible, for the not yet so cynical little boy, “being on TV” was still very much worth looking forward to.

He specially asked the teacher what day the news would be broadcast, specially ran to Gu Zhao’s home for the evening news that day and pulled him over so they could wait to watch together. But very sadly, the whole broadcast of the performance was less than a minute long, and the great “hundred-person chorus” only merited one shot. Just as the camera was about to pan over to him standing in the corner, the shot was cut off.

He'd been looking forward to "being on TV" for so long, and there wasn't even a hint of him; Xiao Haiyang was extremely disappointed, feeling more wronged the more he thought about it. He crouched in Gu Zhao's living room, wailing.

Gu Zhao had to rush to console him. He said, "Look, you're only six and a half, and you were almost on TV. When you're seven and a half, you may be standing in the center of the shot. You're doing much better than me. I'm so old, and I still haven't been on TV. I figure I never will..."

Gu Zhao likely hadn't expected that there would come a day when his memorial photograph would appear in the center of a shot along with Xiao Haiyang.

Once past the boundary between life and death, the glory and disgrace of the mortal world are all beyond reach.

Director Lu finished reading the memorial speech, and Xiao Haiyang stepped up to deliver the bouquet according to the prescribed order. Then everyone gave a salute, and there was a wave of shutter sounds, as though drawing a period at the end of the tangled and complicated major case. Only Xiao Wu's mom was standing in the crowd silently weeping. She truly couldn't control herself and tightly covered her mouth...because she was afraid she would let out an inappropriate wail and disturb the sacred solemnity of the moment.

"There's no one to accept Uncle Gu's pension," Xiao Haiyang said almost inaudibly, watching the departing crowd. "He has no relatives."

Luo Wenzhou's steps paused. He saw that Xiao Haiyang was caving in like a human balloon with a hole in it; he didn't seem to feel especially happy but was instead at a loss.

Xiao Haiyang's cerebellum was naturally a little underdeveloped; he was good material for sitting and staring at a book. When he'd been little, his science grades had been average, but his liberal arts grades had been outstanding. His teachers had seen that his temper was foul enough to have the makings of a martial arts expert and had thought that he could become the next generation's social science talent; no one had expected him to join the police. To be a criminal police officer, apart from taking the civil service examination, of course you couldn't be a loser who got out of breath chasing after the bus. Thinking back on it, Xiao Haiyang thought that his luck in being able to make it all the way to the City Bureau couldn't be explained with simple "mysticism"; it was as if he had been destined to be able to exonerate Gu Zhao of the gross injustice done to him, and he had been pushed and pulled into position, coming to this ending.

For over a decade, Xiao Haiyang had wanted to be a police officer, to investigate the old case, to clear away someone's unjust treatment; he'd never thought of he was going to do when the investigation was over. Sometimes, for a person who was still alive, an ending wasn't the final absolution from all problems; it could only wake a person from his tangled nightmares and give him the possibility of looking ahead.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Do you want to keep going?"

Xiao Haiyang looked at him blankly.

Luo Wenzhou asked, "Do you have any other plans?"

Xiao Haiyang silently shook his head.

"Captain Luo." Lang Qiao ran over, holding up a phone. "That cross-province swindling gang's den has been found. Do we go catch them?"

Before Luo Wenzhou could speak, Xiao Haiyang, in well-practiced fashion, had already cleared away his previous confusion. “Wait, Xiao Qiao-jie, I suspect they have more than one stronghold!”

Luo Wenzhou beckoned to him. “Walk and talk.”

As he followed Luo Wenzhou’s footsteps, Xiao Haiyang launched his rapid-fire mouth, words pouring out: “I’ve been tracing the patterns of their offenses and their methods of behavior since last month, and I’ve found...”

Walking ahead, looking ahead, even though the road ahead was a blank, even though you could only rely on force of habit to keep walking ahead—

One day, you would find direction in your own endless steps.

It just took a little patience.

EXTRA 4

“Something’s come up.” Luo Wenzhou opened the door to the office with a display of propriety; seeing his solemn expression, everyone thought there had been another major case; they put down the work at hand in a body and raised their heads to look at him.

But Luo Wenzhou unhurriedly picked up his teacup and slowly waved the stack of things he was holding, which looked like tickets. “I know you’ll be very excited to hear this. There’s a free collective friendship activity, next Sunday afternoon at two, travel expenses for the round trip reimbursed, limited opportunity...”

Before he’d finished speaking, Luo Wenzhou was already buried in universal eye-rolling.

“What’s with the attitude? The organization is concerned about the physical and mental health of you single dogs and has organized this on purpose and given a certain number of letters of invitation to our team,” Luo Wenzhou said in a lengthy style. “If anyone happens to be on duty that day and wants to go, tell me ahead of time and I’ll take your shift. Those with families have to make a sacrifice for you.”

But no one thanked Captain Luo for his “selfless offer”; hearing these words, everyone wanted to rebel on the spot, beat their superior into a ball, then kick him out the door.

“I’m putting the letters of invitation on top of the water cooler. Come take one yourself if you want to go. Those who aren’t single, don’t come along to watch the fun. If there aren’t enough places, you can all mutually modestly decline. The younger ones can have some conscience and line up at the back.” As he spoke, Luo Wenzhou passed Xiao Haiyang’s desk, casually ruffling his messy hair. He looked at Xiao Haiyang very meaningfully, nodded, and said, “Seize the opportunity, young man.”

Unfortunately, Xiao Haiyang couldn't grasp meaning from winks and nudges; he was in the process of shoving bread into his mouth, both ears shut to the outside world, carefully studying an old case. Receiving Luo Wenzhou's attack without warning, the arms of his glasses hung crookedly on his puffed-out cheeks. Xiao Haiyang tossed his head and looked at Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly, suspecting that he may have gone crazy.

Young people didn't have any interest in match-making parties organized by elders. Lang Qiao had worked the night shift the night before and had just handed over her work. Yawning, she lazily packed up her bag and prepared to get off work. As she walked, she said, "During school we were impeded in the pursuit of truth by dating, holding up our development into normal adults. And now, fine, not only do we have to brush shoulders with the Nobel Prize winner, we also have to go to a match-making party because we're single. Friends, how lamentable! Anyone who likes to can go. I'm not going, anyway."

In the corner, Xiao Haiyang raised his head and silently looked at her swaying figure.

Luo Wenzhou said, "It's called friendship! What match-making?"

Lang Qiao said, "Friendship means the men and women are separated, sitting at two tables, with some tangerines and melons seeds and bottled water on the tables, everyone is from the same system, everyone's staring at each other and awkwardly talking shop..."

"Who told you everyone's from the same system?" Luo Wenzhou's voice came from his inner office, interrupting her lines. "The event was sponsored by Director Lu's lady's song and dance troupe. Lao Lu ran the risk of being made to kneel in penitence to get his wife to agree."

Before he'd finished speaking, the acute young men had already seized the key words "song and dance troupe." A few of them leapt up together and started fighting over the letters of invitation. "There's an exhibition arranged at the beginning of the event, and a play in the evening... Hell, there's also a buffet!"

Lang Qiao, who had already swayed her way to the door of the office, paused in her steps. "Buffet?"

Her colleague reported the name of a restaurant. "Gourmet food from every country, unlimited supply of luxury seafood, hand-made Italian ice cream..."

Lang Qiao didn't finish listening; she gave a yowl and called back, "Me! I'm going!"

If you'd arranged all the "princesses" in history in order of seniority, Princess Xiao Qiao could probably only make a contribution in the area of "gluttony."

Luo Wenzhou was very pained. "Lang Big-Eyes, do I starve you normally? You seem to be making progress!"

Lang Qiao was a true disciple of Captain Luo; with utmost shamelessness, she quickly pulled out a letter of invitation and answered briskly, "Imperial Father, I'm not making progress."

Her conduct of cutting in line quickly drew everyone's dissatisfaction. "You're just a little girl, don't you know about order of seniority? Get in the back of the line, hand it over!"

Lang Qiao tossed aside her bag and imperiously raised her fists. "Come on, take it if you can!"

"Hey, no internal strife, we've got a spy in our midst."

“My good dage, your son is two years old already, have some dignity!”

The letters of invitation no one had wanted before had changed entirely, suddenly becoming very exciting. The unmarried young people shoved and jostled, joining together to attempt to throw the non-single people trying to scrounge a meal out of the line.

Xiao Haiyang seemed unable to bear the noise they were making; he silently raised his head and watched. While he was no longer as prickly as he had been when he'd first come, his temperament remained, and he hadn't become especially lively. He still didn't know how to take part in these daily boisterous fights and jeering. On such occasions, he always became a spectator, like a bunting free from the world, looking down from on high and disdaining the chaos.

Just then, Tao Ran suddenly walked over and knocked on his desk. Then, before Xiao Haiyang could speak, he put up his index finger and shushed him, furtively handing over a letter of invitation under the table; who knew how he'd gotten his hands on it in these circumstances?

Xiao Haiyang stared. Tao Ran quietly said, “It'll be quiet, no need to shoot a gun—are you going?”

Xiao Haiyang's first reaction was to shake his head; halfway through, his gaze once again turned to the crowd of his chasing, quarreling mentally deficient colleagues and fell on...a certain person who had spent the night on duty and could still easily knock down a crowd of elders; his shaking head seemed to jam.

Smiling, Tao Ran asked, “Well?”

Xiao Haiyang awkwardly pushed at his glasses and said in a voice like a mosquito's buzz: “...I'm going.”

Tao Ran smacked the back of his head and returned to his work station, hiding his merit. “What is there to be embarrassed about?”

When he’d walked over a meter away, the string in Xiao Haiyang’s mind, often half a beat slow, finally caught up, and he came around—it seemed that Tao Ran was quietly “giving up” this letter of invitation to him.

For once, Xiao Haiyang “understood something” and quickly said, “Deputy-Captain Tao, why did you give it to me? Don’t you want to go yourself?”

Tao Ran: “...”

Xiao Haiyang was a young man who didn’t know the meaning of the term “on the quiet.” Everyone in the office heard his announcement; they all turned their heads together to stare at Tao Ran.

Then the honest and frank Xiao Haiyang added another honest and frank statement: “Do you have a girlfriend already?”

In the inner office, Luo Wenzhou choked on a mouthful of tea; he very much wanted to tell Xiao Haiyang he was doing a good job.

This opportunity to expose the news truly was rather timely. Others weren’t aware, but Luo Wenzhou knew the reason Tao Ran had for once gotten off work on time last weekend—he’d gone to a concert with a young lady; it was Fei Du who’d gotten the tickets for them.

Due to his base nature, Luo Wenzhou, on learning of this, had wanted to spread this piece of exclusive gossip far and wide, but to this day he hadn’t found an appropriate posture—how to maintain his own glorious character while gloriously spreading gossip?

Luo Wenzhou had been thinking it over for days without thinking of a way, and holding it back was driving him crazy; just when he felt he was going to start talking in his sleep from frustration, the magical object Comrade Xiao Haiyang had risen into the clouds.

“N-n-no...” Tao Ran’s face heated up at a speed visible to the naked eye; he became a stutterer on the spot. “I, I don’t, girlfriend...”

At Deputy-Captain Tao’s slip of the tongue, everyone was silent for a moment, then let out a collective roar. Tao Ran was so embarrassed he wanted to dive head-first into the cracks in his keyboard. Ducking, he waved a hand. “Don’t fuss, don’t fuss, things aren’t even moving anywhere yet.”

Luo Wenzhou only wanted to see the world in chaos. “There’s no need to worry about things moving if you’re all right where you are.”

Hearing the familiar stuttering, Xiao Haiyang instantly remembered the young lady who’d spent so much time in Tao Ran’s hospital room. He spoke directly: “I know, is it the one from hospital?”

Very ambiguously, Luo Wenzhou said, “No wonder you asked me to get *that* for you.”

Lang Qiao said, “What?”

Tao Ran said, “Luo Wenzhou!”

Luo Wenzhou crossed his legs and calmly watched Tao Ran being pressed to his desk by the crowd.

Just then, Lang Qiao’s remarkable crow’s mouth came out with the sentence: “Is it the one who sent you flowers that one time?”

Tao Ran froze. “Huh?”

“A big bouquet!” Lang Qiao said, sketching with her hands. “And there was a love poem on a slip of paper. The signature was ‘Fei!’”

Tao Ran, pressed to the desk: “...”

Luo Wenzhou, watching the game with pleasure: “...”

Lang Qiao sighed in delight. “Hey, isn’t it a coincidence! Another Fei, from the same clan as President Fei!”

There’s a saying that goes, “Illness goes in by the mouth and calamity comes out”; material food and speech often carry with them immaterial disaster and bad luck. Lang Qiao’s words established the key note of her breakfast for the rest of the year—all cilantro.

And President Fei, whose fate was tied to Officer Lang’s, once again became a fish in troubled waters.

Fei Du felt something was wrong as soon as he got home after work. Luo Yiguo didn’t put its head out the door to welcome him. When Fei Du came inside, it was curled up on the shoe cabinet in the entrance hall, hugging its tail, silent as a cicada in winter. These two masters had some form of communication; at any rate, after exchanging a look with Luo Yiguo, Fei Du at once acutely sniffed out something wrong with the atmosphere—his footsteps nimbly paused, and he quickly reviewed everything he had done recently.

He’d left early and come home in the evening, not overlooking timely reports; he hadn’t participated in any irregular recreation activities; he’d spoken little and worked a lot, firmly put an end to the conduct Luo Wenzhou defined as “flirting all over the place”; he hadn’t even speeded or run any red lights. Could it be that he’d drunk the dregs of a cup of wine the afternoon before at a business lunch? It couldn’t be that when his car had been under the restriction the day before, he’d brushed against some girl on the subway and ended up with a

lipstick mark? Fei Du reviewed himself from top to bottom with a guilty conscience—his attire was perfect, with nothing amiss.

Then could it be...

Fei Du gestured at Luo Yiguo to be quiet, opened the door he hadn't closed firmly, and quietly strolled out, thinking up an excuse to work overtime.

Luo Yiguo turned its head and let out a sound: "Me-ow?"

Fei Du: "..."

He was afraid his friendship with this cat had come to an end.

A hand suddenly reached past Fei Du to close the door.

Luo Wenzhou had been silently repeating to himself the card a certain person had written out with his own hand to deliver flowers and had prepared a heap of belated settling of accounts. Drawing out his voice, he asked, "President Fei, where are you going right after coming back?"

Fei Du gave a start. Then the hand that had shut the front door uncompromisingly looped around his waist. Luo Wenzhou forced him to turn around. With a false smile, he said, "What are you running for?"

Fei Du saw that he had been exposed and quickly admitted his fault. "I was wrong."

Luo Wenzhou said, "Wrong how?"

Fei Du could only make an accurate confession. "The day before yesterday, when you were working the night shift, I played games until three in the morning."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

Well now, this was an unexpected harvest.

Seeing his expression, Fei Du knew he'd confessed to the wrong thing. He quickly corrected himself. "I drank a couple of mouthfuls of wine yesterday afternoon—a couple of mouthfuls at most, no more."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him, smiling, his gaze as kindly as a butcher circling a lamb for the slaughter, silently assessing where to make the first cut. "What else?"

Fei Du said, "...Last week, I was the one who knocked over your teacup and broke it, not the cat."

Luo Yiguo watched numbly from the side, licking its paw, its figure melancholy.

Luo Wenzhou had an unprecedented awareness that there really were two cats in his house. Luo Yiguo wasn't the only suspect in all misdeeds. According to experience, Fei Du felt that in these circumstances, the best plan was to voluntarily sell his body. Thereupon he firmly held down Luo Wenzhou's hand and drew close to kiss his nose and lips, lowering his voice ambiguously: "I'll make it up to you."

Before Luo Wenzhou could work out how he meant to make it up, Fei Du had invaded his lips and tongue, wandering around inside and out. Luo Wenzhou's fingers suddenly tightened—before withdrawing, Fei Du licked the crack between his lips. "I'll wet your throat for you."

Luo Wenzhou: "..."

This person's skill in courting death was truly professional.

Luo Wenzhou sighed, drew close to Fei Du's ear, and quietly said something. Fei Du's expression altered at once. He turned to run and was held by the waist by Luo Wenzhou. "Didn't you copy it out yourself character by character?"

Fei Du quickly said, "Those ones were all copied, the one I wrote for you was an original!"

For him, the focus was on "an original," but the speaker and the listener were out of alignment; Luo Wenzhou's focus was naturally on the remaining words. He narrowed his eyes. "Those—ones?"

Fei Du: "..."

Luo Yiguo wanted to look on; it eagerly leapt off the shoe cabinet and followed. It was shut out at the door, flattening itself against the door into a cat cake with its hind legs sticking out. It was very unsatisfied, because it felt that the whole blood debt had yet to be settled—for example, Luo Wenzhou's sweater with a hole in it had clearly gotten caught on a zipper on Fei Du's sleeve; it hadn't been clawed up by Luo Yiguo carrying it into its cat bed. Also...

There was a bang in the study, followed by the sound of books falling to the floor. Luo Yiguo pricked up its ears. Its whiskers shivered, and it was scared into clinging to the foot of the wall.

The night was very long, and there were many accounts to settle.

EXTRA 5

In late autumn, a stray animal rescue organization established a spot in a little park near Fei Du's company, placing some simple cat shelters for escaping the winter cold. The little park was surrounded by a ring of office buildings and commercial squares, and normally it was all city-dwelling white collar workers passing through; if an animal ever showed up, they would all come over like a swarm of bees to feed it. Gradually an inner-city village of stray cats took shape.

On this day, Fei Du went out early in the morning and took a little detour. After parking his car, he went to the stray cat village, carrying some cans of cat food.

The cans had been Luo Yiguo's. The night before, Luo Wenzhou and Luo Yiguo had had a major back and forth argument. As for why, Fei Du hadn't been able to work it out after a night of having Luo Wenzhou wrapped around him; he could only judge from Luo Wenzhou's unconventional manner of venting his anger that in this great human-cat war, the cat had gotten the upper hand.

Luo Wenzhou had taken all the packages of cat food cans out of the cupboard and then asserted that he'd rather eat them himself than let them go to that bastard Luo Yiguo.

Comrade Luo Wenzhou normally seemed presentable when he was outside, but at home, he could be unfeelingly childish. To keep Luo Wenzhou from keeping to his word and putting the cat food on his own plate, Fei Du had to personally take care of it for him, coming to deliver charity to the stray cat village first thing in the morning.

The cats living in the stray cat village were all vagrant "loafers" who relied on their talents and skills to beg for food; they weren't as domineering as Luo Yiguo. Smelling something good, a few cats

carefully stuck their heads out of the cat shelters. When one big gray cat had taken the lead and completed an inspection, tasting the food, the other cats vied with each other to come eat.

Just then, Fei Du noticed a damaged, broken-down cat shelter in a corner. It was half-collapsed, with a roof that was about to fall off. An extraordinarily ugly white cat was sticking its head out of the “unsafe structure,” its movements somewhat fearful. It was blind in one eye, and its ears were asymmetrical. There was an irregular scar over half its face where the fur didn’t even grow. Perhaps a human had injured it, or perhaps a stray dog or another cat; in the open, conditions weren’t at all friendly.

The big white cat showed its head. Its remaining pale blue eye met Fei Du’s gaze. It didn’t cry out, only looked at him ardently, giving him an odd feeling of an intelligence unusual in domestic animals.

Fei Du was still holding the last can. He could give it to anyone, so he walked over to the “unsafe structure” in the corner. When he’d walked close he discovered that the big white cat wasn’t on its own; the “unsafe structure” also contained some kittens the size of mice. They were all downy-furred. One of them had fur colored something like Luo Yiguo’s. They didn’t know to be afraid seeing a human; they opened their eyes wide and stretched their necks out towards Fei Du.

Fei Du opened the can and put it next to the half-collapsed cat shelter, but the big white cat didn’t eat it. It curled up and let out a dull roar, digging its claws into the ground, as though preparing to go to war against someone.

Fei Du looked up and saw some big cats soundlessly surrounding them, licking their lips as they greedily stared at the white cat’s family of children and cripples. As soon as the human left, they would rush over to plunder it. The kittens inside the shelter crowded together into a ball, the size of rats, their squeaking cries also about the same as those of mice. The ends of their stuck-up tails were short

little segments. They shivered together, whether from cold or from fear.

These little animals born in winter were like humans born during unrest; their lives were cheap, they died in batch after batch with nothing to pity.

Fei Du looked at his watch. Anyway, he was the boss himself and had no need to punch in, so he sat down next to the white cat's cat shelter.

Perhaps because of his aura, the stray cat criminal underworld seemed afraid of him. Their tails hanging down, the big cats coveted from afar, but they didn't dare to act presumptuously in front of him. Seeing he didn't intend to leave, they unwillingly scattered. After a good while, the big white cat finally relaxed and carefully licked at the can. Then it opened its mouth and gave a hoarse cry at Fei Du.

Fei Du had his headphones in and was checking his e-mail on his phone; he ignored it. Over ten minutes later, the white cat and its family had finished stuffing themselves. Fei Du glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw the little cat that looked like Luo Yiguo boldly climbing out of the cat shelter, swaying on its clumsy limbs, totteringly walking towards him and trying to rub against the hand laying on his knee.

Apart from Luo Yiguo, who he was used to living with, Fei Du still wasn't in the habit of getting close to small animals, and he wasn't planning on striking up a friendship with a cat less than a month old, so he stood up and avoided it.

The kitten cried out in disappointment. Just then, someone sighed quietly behind him. "It only likes you. If you're so hard-hearted, why are you favoring them?"

Fei Du's steps paused—there was a young man, both familiar and strange, sitting not far away on a stone bench. He was wearing an unassuming khaki jacket, his not very meticulously cared for slacks were a little wrinkled, and his hair was a little long. His features were still what they had been, but there seemed to be a different soul beneath them. At first glance, you couldn't recognize that this was the one-time famous Yan City son of the wealthy...Zhang Donglai.

Zhang Donglai met Fei Du's gaze and slowly stood up. The two of them looked at each other helplessly among the crowd of cats; everything had changed. For a time both were speechless.

In memory, whenever they had met, if the surroundings hadn't been drinking and gambling, then they had been luxury and dissipation, noisy laughter and the choking smell of perfume inseparable; who could have imagined that one day they would meet in circumstances like these?

Fei Du took off his headphones and spoke first. "It's been a long time."

Zhang Donglai looked at him with an indescribable expression and nodded almost over-cautiously.

Fei Du walked over beside him and pointed to the stone bench next to him. "Can I sit here?"

Zhang Donglai's gaze was firmly fixed on him; he didn't know why, when things had reached this stage, Fei Du was still so calm, as calm as though he'd never done those things.

On New Year's Eve that year, he'd climbed out of a sensual scene and, not yet fully sober, stepped into a freezing cold nightmare. He seemed to have mistakenly found his way into a bizarre parallel world; all these things he couldn't have imagined even in his dreams had

crashed into him at once. Everyone around him had changed shape, each one becoming a demon dressed in human skin.

The father he had always honored and revered was a cold-blooded, psychopathic killer; on the hands of his uncle, so upright he was daily ashamed of bringing dishonor to his door, there was a vast debt of blood crying out for retribution; and then there was his friend...his friend Fei Du.

A drinking buddy was still a friend.

Fei Du was interesting, daring, able to get along with any group, and his views were like Zhang Donglai's, believing in making merry while you could, never disgraced by his own ignorance and incompetence, wholeheartedly acting the happy idiot. In the circle of Yan City's rich kids, he was the person Zhang Donglai most admired, the person he was closest to; even when he'd been in a foreign land, when he'd been alarmed and anxious, the person he'd instinctively asked for help and trusted had also been him.

He'd taken Fei Du as a soulmate in ostentation, but it turned out that only Fei Du had known his soul—while he had had ears but couldn't hear.

Fei Du stretched out his long legs and sat on the stone bench next to him. "I haven't heard anything from you in over a year. How have you been? Is Tingting doing well?"

Zhang Donglai asked in turn, "If it were you, would you be doing well?"

Fei Du looked at him quietly without comment.

Zhang Donglai found for the first time that he'd never looked carefully into Fei Du's eyes. In his memories, Fei Du was always careless, his pupils seeming unfocused; his gaze would sweep over in

a flash, then retreat once more behind his lenses...or something else. He thought that if he'd noticed those eyes hiding abysses before, he definitely wouldn't have foolishly taken Fei Du for his own kind.

His voice somewhat sharp, he said, "I never knew you, President Fei, did I?"

"You could say that," Fei Du answered calmly.

Zhang Donglai was choked into a stumble, bloodshot eyes glaring fiercely at him.

"And you never knew your father or your uncle, or those people around them," Fei Du said quietly. "From the time you were born, there was a utopian casing placed around you with colorful decorations stuck to the outside of the glass. It dovetailed perfectly, and you never looked around outside it. Your father urgently heaped everything he'd wanted but couldn't have on you and your sister. He took you as extensions of his own life, as though this way he could attain compensation."

Zhang Donglai's breathing became rapid, and he subconsciously stuck a hand into his jacket pocket.

But Fei Du seemed to see nothing. He kept talking. "I ruined your utopia without a word of notice. I'm sorry. Did you come here today to settle things?"

"I had quite a lot of friends, but you were the one I took the most seriously." Zhang Donglai's voice was hoarse. "I believed everything you said. Really, Fei Du, I...I won't say I opened my heart for you, but near enough. I never thought to suspect you...but what did you take me for? An idiot who'd delivered himself to your door! Have I ever done anything to wrong you?"

“No, I’m the one who wronged you,” Fei Du said. “But a chip is a chip. If I had to do it over again, I’d do the same thing.”

“You...”

Fei Du spread his hands towards Zhang Donglai. His hands were long, slender, and pale; spotless shirtsleeves showed at the smooth cuffs of his jacket. “What’s in your pocket? A knife, or a gun?”

Zhang Donglai’s lips trembled fiercely. “You think...you think I wouldn’t dare?”

“If you wanted to kill me to take revenge, a paper cutter would be enough.” Fei Du sighed and quietly said, “That way, if you regretted it when the moment came, you’d have some leeway. But if you brought a restricted cutting tool or...”

Zhang Donglai gave a roar and seized Fei Du’s collar. The stray cats acutely sensed that the atmosphere was wrong and all hid, silent as cicadas in winter. Only the big long-haired gray cat that had eaten the first can stood up and cautiously walked a few steps forward, like a sentry on patrol, attentively watching the activity.

There was a chill at Fei Du’s neck, a paper cutter pressing to the side of it. Whether because the skin of his neck was too tender or because Zhang Donglai’s hand was trembling too fiercely, a small wound quickly appeared under the blade. Fei Du made a gesture at the bristling big gray cat; the odd thing was, the big gray cat’s ears went back; as if it had understood something, it looked around, then lay down again.

Fei Du glanced down and smiled. “It really is a paper cutter.”

Zhang Donglai said between his teeth, “You used me, destroyed our family!”

“I used you once, and I’ve apologized. If you want, in the future I can use any means within my power to make it up to you. If you don’t want, that’s fine, you can wave that knife here.” Fei Du slowly held down Zhang Donglai’s ceaselessly trembling hand. “It’s best if you find something to shield yourself from the blood, or else you’ll get covered in it. Make a firm cut, and in five or six minutes at most, we’ll be through—don’t worry, cats don’t know how to call an ambulance.”

At this point, he suddenly pressed down on Zhang Donglai’s hand, and more blood flowed out, staining his shirt collar red. Zhang Donglai was after all only a pampered child who’d grown up in a land of warmth and tenderness; he was nearly scared out of his wits by Fei Du’s unprecedented desperado manners. He loosened his hand and dodged, as though he couldn’t get away from Fei Du fast enough, opening his eyes wide in alarm.

Fei Du returned the paper cutter to its plastic sheath and tilted his head, wiping the blood with his collar. “You’re a good person. The worst slip-up you’ve ever made is clipping an electricity pole while speeding. Even when you got into fights, you still never seriously injured anyone. Donglai, you aren’t like us. I’ll take this knife as a parting gift. Take Tingting and go live a normal life.”

Zhang Donglai looked at him with a peculiar gaze. He finally determined that he didn’t know Fei Du. His friend was a wastrel who didn’t even wear a helmet to race motorcycles in open country in a rainstorm at night; he didn’t know the frightening man in front of him who was expressionlessly playing with the paper cutter as though he had no consciousness.

“That time at West Ridge, we came along for the fun and helped the police look for a missing little girl. The girl’s photograph flooded our social media, everyone reposted it whether they knew us or not. Sadly we didn’t find her in the end. The police only dug up her body,” Fei Du said. Zhang Donglai began to tremble as he spoke. “When it

got out, I saw you all post about her again. You even posted three candles. Later everyone forgot about it. I think you ought to know the truth by now.”

Zhang Donglai did know. He'd spent over a year searching, recalling, listening, looking... He knew that the little girl who had briefly appeared on his phone had been taken away on a muddy, rainy night and had died a violent death in extreme terror; her body had been chopped up, and she'd been buried with a grievance in the graveyard his father had personally bought. He'd been unable to sleep for a time, feeling that that girl was still hidden like a shadow in his phone, watching in satisfaction as he woke from his hateful ignorance, was tormented daily by the truth, living a state of constant anxiety.

“I didn't destroy your family,” Fei Du said. “Your so-called ‘family’ was a lie from the start. A lie can't last for long.”

Zhang Donglai knew that what he was saying was the truth, but his plight was so awkward that it seemed he would be wrong whether he accepted it or not. He was blank and helpless. Suddenly he felt drowned by the overpowering wrong; unable to endure it, he began to cry.

When a person is born, the doctor delivering him makes him cry, and he leaves his mother's body and begins to breathe on his own.

Then he's hit by the unfeeling truth countless times and gradually leaves his childhood, leaves the calm “village of novices” and goes towards a more distant, less beautiful, more unfathomable future.

Today, the belatedly-developing over-aged boy Zhang Donglai finally opened his mouth and began to wail.

Fei Du didn't bother him again, only sat quietly on the stone bench, waiting until Zhang Donglai had exhausted himself crying and walked away without giving him another look. Fei Du knew that

Zhang Donglai wouldn't come back again. He felt the side of his neck; the blood had already clotted. Fei Du sighed and pulled out the paper cutter from earlier.

"Has he left?" Lu Jia and Zhou Huaijin, looking grave, walked out of the thicket behind the stray cat shelters. Zhou Huaijin bent down and stroked the big gray cat's head. The big gray cat seemed to know him. It stuck up its tail, haughtily rubbed against his hand, then idly stood up and walked away.

Fei Du gave an affirmative, pulled apart the paper cutter's plastic sheath, and pulled out a small slip of paper with an address written on it.

"It must be a part of the Chunlai Conglomerate that slipped through the net." Fei Du gave the slip of paper to Lu Jia. "Find someone to get their eyes on it, then anonymously report it."

Lu Jia agreed, took the slip of paper, and ran off. But Zhou Huaijin bent down and stared at the blood on Fei Du's collar, frowning. "Are you dizzy? Are you going to throw up? Hurry up and go to the hospital."

"It's just a scratch. I haven't reacted that badly to blood in a while." Fei Du waved his hand, but when he stood up, his steps wavered—he didn't react that badly, but there were still some after-effects.

"What did I say!" Zhou Huaijin helped him get his footing. "Playing around with a knife? Can you just play around with a knife like that..."

"Zhou-dage," Fei Du said helplessly.

Zhou Huaijin looked at him sternly.

When the Zhou Clan and the Chunlai Conglomerate's major case had concluded, Zhou Huaijin had gone to drift around somewhere for a few months before returning to the country alone; the one-time heir to a multi-million dollar concern had now become Fei Du's chief financial officer. At first everyone had called him "President Zhou," but later, "President Zhou" had somehow become "Zhou-dage." From top to bottom, male and female, young and old, everyone at the company called him that. On coming back, the usually outwardly lofty and coldly elegant talent had become a fussy big brother overflowing with compassion, as though the whole world were his trouble-making, unreliable little brother.

The police force's reaction to the words "Chunlai Conglomerate" was extremely quick; as soon as they received the report, they hurried over to the overlooked den as suddenly as a flash of lightning, taking them unawares and rounding them all up at one fell swoop. Zhang Donglai had come to Yan City silently and he left silently, never returning again.

The ceaseless resentments that had pestered two generations had finally scattered.

In the afternoon, Fei Du sat in his car, looking helplessly at a palm-sized little stray cat.—When he'd just gotten into the car, before he'd turned on the ignition, a white shape had suddenly leapt onto the hood of his car; the big white cat with one blind eye had looked at him and put the little cat that looked like Luo Yiguo onto his car. Then, not waiting for Fei Du to react, the big white cat had turned and run, forcing the sale.

The little cat was sticking up its tail; as though afraid of the cold, it kept crawling into his arms.

Fei Du picked the cat up by the scruff of its neck and pulled it off. "Go back and tell your mom that I'm not planning on adopting a cat."

The little stray cat answered, “Mew.”

Fei Du said, “We already have a cat. If I take you back, it’ll knock you over with one swipe.”

The little stray cat stretched out its neck and sniffed at him with narrowed eyes, then looked at him abjectly.

Fei Du said, “...Luo Wenzhou is going to claw me to death.”

The little stray cat gave a deeply moving series of meows, then batted his jacket with its little claws.

Fei Du looked at the cat that didn’t know how to retract its claws yet, touched the band-aid on his neck, and was struck by sudden inspiration. “Fair enough.”

The little cat tilted its head, raising itself up. It moved its limbs uneasily, looking on uncomprehendingly as Fei Du squeezed its little paw and, pointing to the wound on his neck, said, “Remember, you scratched me. If you don’t give me away, I’ll adopt you.”

The little stray cat trembled amid the sound of the motor vehicle’s engine, as though it had had an ominous premonition.

Just then, Fei Du’s phone vibrated; the sudden sound of the Fives Rings Song startled the little stray cat into a shiver. As Fei Du slowly drove out of the parking lot, he picked up. “Hi, I’ve gotten off work, I’m on my way... Tonight? I want to eat steamed prawns... No, I want you to make them...”

The person on the phone grumbled something.

Fei Du smiled craftily. “Oh, yes, I’m also bringing you a ‘present’... Hm? I haven’t been throwing money around.

“You’re definitely going to like it.”

AUDIO DRAMA EXTRA

Before the new cat could come into the house, it first had to be taken to the vet to be dewormed and vaccinated, then observed for a time before it could be brought home. When the observation period ended, Luo Wenzhou picked the kitten up on his way home from work.

“I think there’s a cat cage in the basement, have a look and see whether it’s still there. In a little while we’ll try letting the little one out.” Veteran animal keeper Luo Wenzhou picked up the cat carrier and passed the groceries he had bought at the supermarket to Fei Du. Then he looked at Luo Yiguo, who had warily jumped up onto the shoe cabinet. “If it’s really no good, we’ll separate the two cats for a few days.”

“Keep the little one in a cage?” asked Fei Du.

“No, that would be cruel.” Luo Wenzhou changed to slippers. “We’d put Luo Yiguo in, of course.”

Luo Yiguo, not knowing whom it had offended: “...”

Luo Wenzhou opened the cat carrier, and the new kitten carefully walked out under the two people’s gazes. Luo Yiguo leapt off the shoe cabinet, making a *bang* as it hit the ground.

It hunched its shoulders like a vulture, narrowed its eyes, and made a big half-circle around the kitten.

Before a colossus of Luo Yiguo’s tonnage, the kitten’s belly clung to the ground, and the tip of its tail trembled.

But perhaps because it had understood the threats of that unfilial son Luo Wenzhou, Luo Yiguo was fairly mature and cool-headed towards

the household's new member. From start to finish, it showed no aggression. It sniffed for a while, then went away, ignoring the kitten.

“That’s fine. We won’t need the cage.” Luo Wenzhou relaxed. “I’ve heard that cats usually don’t attack old cats or kittens. It seems that while Luo Yiguo is a good-for-nothing, it still has some basic feline nature... Oh, right, President Fei, what name have you picked for the little one?”

“I haven’t thought of one yet,” Fei Du said, separating out the things in the shopping bag by type and putting them away.

In this he was particularly skilled, like a human-shaped automatic storage system. What there was in the house and how long there was before it expired would all be recorded in his brain the moment the item went into the fridge. Never mind that when he was idling at home, Fei Du would order food, he could still clearly arrange the storage of the ordered food. As long as he wasn’t away from home for too long, there would be no expired milk or food gone off in the fridge. You could call him a must-have at-home super food sorting machine.

The “super food sorting machine” casually switched around the positions of some things in the fridge, putting in place some mystical code. He absent-mindedly said, “Let’s call it Skinner, or maybe Watson²?”

This sounded jarring to Luo Wenzhou. “Picking such Western names for a local cat you picked up off the street, aren’t you worried about tripping over them? How about this, you picked it up, so it’ll have your surname. We’ll put it with Luo Yiguo in the family tree, give it an ‘yi’ for a generational character. Yeah... It won’t fill up a whole pot, but it can just about make up a bowl. Let’s call it Fei Yiwan³!”

“Look at me, shixiong.” Fei Du poked his head out from behind the refrigerator door. “Look at this: this expression is called ‘every last strand of hair is saying no.’”

“Give it a cheap name and it’ll be easy to keep... Oh, crap, that nearly... Listen, Comrade Fei Du, enough with the cliff hanging, how many times have I told you?”

While the “super food sorting machine” was practical, he still had his problems. Apart from going to bed late and getting up early, being inattentive towards housework, and refusing to wear long underwear, he also liked putting anything at all on the edges of tables, even with a bit dangerously hanging off—almost half his phone, the edges of bowls and cups, and, worst of all, if you made him cut up fruit, when he was finished cutting, he would put the knife down with an inch of the handle hanging in the air. Luckily, Luo Wenzhou didn’t have OCD, or else this would have hounded him to death.

Luo Wenzhou hadn’t been paying attention when he took off his jacket and had nearly swiped the phone on the edge of the table and sent it falling. Luckily, Captain Luo was deft and managed to catch it.

“Is our table too small, or are your arms too short?” Luo Wenzhou went into the kitchen and tapped Fei Du lightly on the head, holding his phone. “Maybe if I break it one day, you’ll finally behave.—What do you want to eat tonight? Take the food out, then go feed the cats.”

Fei Du gave an “OK” and went to work. “Oh, right, Lao Luo, I’m going on a business trip tomorrow.”

“Fine, I’ll pack some clothes for you after dinner.” As Luo Wenzhou washed vegetables, he asked, “How many days? Where? What’s the temperature there?”

“At least a week,” Fei Du said. “The temperature is about the same as here. It’s Binhai.”

“Binhai?” Luo Wenzhou stared. Wasn’t that a day’s round trip in a car? “You’re going to stay in Binhai for a week?”

“Yeah.” Fei Du paused. “We want to get that piece of land. Lao Zhou and Lu Jia have gone on ahead to lay the groundwork. They need me to connect on quite a few things.”

Luo Wenzhou was silent for a moment. He turned off the tap.

Fei Du hadn’t said what piece of land, but he knew as soon as he heard.

“Can you get it?”

“Of course. With enough money, you can command ghosts and demons.”

“Speak properly,” said Luo Wenzhou.

“We’re doing our best.” Fei Du finished squeezing out nutritional paste for the still nameless kitten, then turned his head and smiled at him. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have set aside a whole week. At worst I’ll have to make a few trips, chip away at it slowly.”

“What are you planning to do when you get it?”

“It’s been redesignated as a tourism spot. The plan we submitted to the local government is for a theme park.” Fei Du gently pushed aside Luo Yiguo, who was closing in on the kitten’s plate. “That’s nutritional paste for kittens. The calorie count is too high. I’ll buy you low-calorie stuff another day.—Didn’t Guo Heng tell you?”

“We haven’t spoken recently... Guo Heng? What does this have to do with Guo Heng?”

“We went to the victims’ relatives to get their opinions, and they voted on the amusement park,” Fei Du said. “Our initial plan is to integrate all the things those girls liked when they were alive into the plans. The...parents taking part in the planning are all basically shareholders. They’ll collect dividends. Though we’ll see about the exact operation when the time comes. If it touches on others’ copyrights, we’ll need someone to smooth it out. Lao Zhou may end up wasted on this for the next few years.”

“They...voted on it themselves?” Luo Wenzhou frowned. “They aren’t afraid of stirring up old memories? I thought...”

“That piece of land, that town, will be a nightmare they can’t escape to the ends of their lives,” Fei Du picked up. “But the existence of hell is an objective reality. If you don’t hear it, see it, or think of it, it still won’t disappear on its own, not unless you occupy it, rule it, pick up the hoe yourself and plant it full of flowers—the hardest part has passed, and of course the rest must be done.”

“All right, there’s some merit in that.” Out of professional habit, Luo Wenzhou warned, “Though this was a hotly debated topic. If you build an amusement park there, you may attract perverts.”

Fei Du, acting as a human meal separator for the two cats, smiled.

“In my territory?” He pushed up his glasses. “Shixiong, for ten leagues around the place where the King of Poison Insects resides, no insects survive.”

“All right, all right, go on, you’re amazing, you’re evil-warding camphor.” Luo Wenzhou puffed out a breath. “Go preheat the oven!”

Before his divine and mighty Majesty, the King of Poison Insects, could finish waving his tail, he was pulled up by it by Captain Luo, and because he didn’t remember the lesson, he was called a cabbage caterpillar by Luo Wenzhou that night—

When Fei Du had drunk half of his milk, Zhou Huaijin called him on business. The signal in the living room wasn't very good. Fei Du put down his cup and went out onto the balcony holding his phone, once again leaving a quarter of the cup suspended off the edge of the coffee table.

The nameless kitten was attracted by the smell of milk. Getting up its nerve, it hopped onto the coffee table, wanting to smell what was in the cup. In the blink of an eye, Luo Yiguo, with a vigor at odds with its figure, leapt up in one bound and swiped the mug with its tail.

Bang!

The nameless kitten: "..."

After committing the crime, the culprit Luo Yiguo ran off without hesitation, not leaving behind a single cat hair, unwilling to take credit.

Luo Wenzhou, just packing Fei Du's clothes, heard the noise and ran over to look. His soul of the salaried class tore apart. While he never harped on Fei Du's spending, he would sometimes go online to check some prices to avoid accidentally slighting some of President Fei's valuable but unremarkable things.

"Do you know how much that mug of his costs?!"

The kitten had grown up on the streets. It was malnourished, and its brain was also underdeveloped. It still hadn't worked out what had happened. It stood at the scene of the crime with its clueless eyes open wide.

Luo Yiguo, having scampered secretively onto the cat tree, was licking its paws like a cat who had nothing to do with this, displaying deep approval for what its unfilial child Luo Wenzhou had said—

what could be done? There were too many troublemaking spirits in this house.

“Stay away, can’t you see the floor is covered in shards?” Luo Wenzhou picked up the kitten and put it into the arms of Fei Du, who had rushed over. “The wastrel’s picked up a wastrel cat! Let’s just call it Fei Qian⁴ and get it over with!”

For the sake of the kitten’s future self-respect, Fei Du took a stand against Luo Wenzhou for half the night. When he had no choice but to leave the next morning, he went out of his way to instruct the kitten, “Your name is Skinner. Remember that. Don’t listen to Luo Wenzhou.”

The kitten gave a big yawn and saw him out in confusion.

Fei Du was away on this business trip even longer than expected. He spent half a month running around before bringing a haggard Zhou Huaijin and a self-professed “so tired he had edema” Lu Jia back to Yan City.

Zhou Huaijin went to sleep as soon as he got in the car. When he woke up, they were stuck in Yan City’s evening rush hour traffic. He rubbed his eyes and looked out the car window. He saw the strings of headlights, the blurred light and shadow, and felt that he had slept well and comfortably.

Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lu Jia writing something on his phone’s memo pad. He caught an accidental glimpse and saw that the fat man was writing:

X Month, X Day. My boss is driving the car I’m riding in. The luxury car has drawn attention the whole way. The passersby all think I’m the boss. A couple of girls smiled at me while we were stuck in traffic. Great! Oh,

boss, you think your charm comes from being handsome? No, it's your ride that has charm!

Zhou Huaijin said, "...What are you doing?"

Planning to revolt?

"Recording the wonderful moments of life." Lu Jia saved the memo. "Some people are born in a honey pot, so the very logic of their world is sweet. People like us, though, we're missing a bit, so we need to pay attention and collect all kinds of sweets, slowly save them up. In a few years, we can save ourselves up a honey pot—that's what the boss taught me."

Fei Du was driving and had his eyes on the road. Not looking back, he said, "Please don't put malicious remarks about me in with your sweets."

But Zhou Huaijin considered it seriously. "Does President Fei also keep a record like this?"

Fei Du denied it. "I have a bit of a sweet tooth, but I don't have such living requirements."

Lu Jia smiled wordlessly.

He took them back to Lu Jia's boxing gym. While getting out of the car and getting their luggage, Lu Jia suddenly seemed to inadvertently mention, "Hey, President Fei, that cake you posted to your Moments on Captain Luo's birthday last year, where did you order it?"

"He posted it, I just liked it..." Fei Du answered thoughtlessly. At this point, he suddenly caught up and looked at Lu Jia with a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

Laughing, Lu Jia picked up his and Zhou Huaijin's luggage and ran off even more robustly than Luo Yiguo after getting up to mischief.

“Damn fatty.”

Fei Du shook his head, closed the trunk, said goodbye to Zhou Huaijin, and went home.

There was no need for him to make a record. He was an automatic storage system for a “sweets warehouse”; he was perfectly well aware of each piece of income.

Oh, yes, as for “Skinner”... Skinner, indeed. Fei Du had been gone for half a month. When he returned home and looked, the stupid little animal had already acknowledged the annoying name of Fei Qian. It would come shaking its head and wagging its tail when the name was called.

What prospects could it have in its life if it was called “Fei Qian?”

It joyously took on Luo Yiguo’s legacy, becoming the new bottom of the food chain in the house. But that’s a later story.

¹ A river in the underworld.

² B. F. Skinner and John B. Watson were two psychologists, developers of behaviorism, a framework for understanding the behavior of people and animals that assumes that it is either a reflex response to stimuli or the result of past experience. For purposes of the joke, it's notable that both performed behavioral experiments on animals, often rats.

³ Of course, Luo Yiguo's name (一锅) means "a pot," and the proposed name for the kitten (一碗) is "a bowl."

⁴ 费钱, apart from using the character for Fei Du's surname, also means "costly."

Silent Reading / Priest

默
读

Epilogue