

终极蓝印

The Ultimate Blue Seal



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PRIEST

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1

SU QING THE LOSER

IT WAS LATE AUTUMN. The temperature dropped and dropped.

Su Qing, wrapped up in a dark grey trench coat, his sharp chin drawn into the turned-up collar, walked quickly through the intersection.

He was a young man of twenty-three or -four, with a slender figure, pale skin, single eyelids, delicate features, and soft, shaggy hair that fell over his ears. It floated up when the wind blew, indistinctly revealing a pair of black stud earrings. Even with his head down, walking hurriedly along the street, his looks could make many girls turn their heads.

Among those who knew Su Qing, some said he was useless, some said he was a pretty boy, and some said he was a sissy. There wasn't a word of good in all these appraisals, but on the other hand, no one had ever said he wasn't good-looking. Probably Heaven was fair—it gave one thing and took away another. When Su Qing's turn came, he got nothing of virtue, intelligence, or strength—all the supernatural influence went into his face.

His biography was also very simple—he had graduated from a second-rate university without earning a penny of scholarship or doing a single thing worth bragging about. It was anyone's guess what he had learned, but at any rate he had muddled his way into a diploma. He hadn't looked for work. He currently lived on the support of his man—oh, yes, we forgot to say, Su Qing was gay, already out.

Because of this, his nouveau riche father had disowned him in a rage. Since then, Su Qing had gone from an idle rich kid to a pretty boy being kept by a man, living a contemptible life of sitting around doing nothing.

If Guo Julin hadn't suddenly called and invited him to dinner, Su Qing would probably have wasted away in his room.

Guo Julin was his man, a young genius. He already ran a foreign trade company and was quite successful with it. He was doing pretty well for him-

self. He had a house, a car, and no wife. The only blemish on his life was keeping a brainless vase of a lover like Su Qing.

This was a long story. By chance Guo Julin had run into Su Qing fooling around with a group of idle young men at a karaoke bar. He had been shaken on first sight, nearly blinded. His hormonal secretion levels had been instantly thrown off. So he had begun an operation to encircle and entrap Su Qing, putting all his arts into play, paring away his hard-earned gains at a discount, tossing out cash like tissue paper, exchanging a thousand pieces of gold for one smile.

And Su Qing? As a standard wastrel of the modern era, there was no form of dissipation he wouldn't stoop to, and he felt good about himself. Before, he had been open to men and women alike and hadn't turned down those who danced attendance on him. Suddenly having this noble lover with more money than sense running after him, every word out of his mouth like Romeo's, apparently unable to live without him, his whole world did the cha-cha-cha—Su Qing really did buy his act.

When he came out at home, Su Qing had an earth-shaking dust-up with his father. His father, Su Chengde, had dropped out of school in his teens and gone into business for decades. He was quite a respectable figure. Who knew what sin he had committed in a past life to father a miserable piece of work like this? He only wished he could simply pick up a vegetable knife and resolve this problem handed down by history.

Guo Julin had been really good then. He had dropped everything to keep him company. He had promised to support him in the future, to comfort him. He had even found time to take him out for drives. His TV melodrama male protagonist's moves hadn't declined one bit. If not for his age, Su Qing would simply have felt that Guo Julin was his real father. From then on, Su Qing had been dead set on Guo Julin.

There is a certain type of person who likes to play the field, who won't date with marriage as a presupposition, who often tosses out the phrase "just playing around." This might be because he is especially shameless, but it might also be because, subconsciously, he takes emotions very seriously. Even if he isn't willing to admit it himself, in his heart, a person who "isn't playing" is different.

As soon as he takes someone seriously, he's dead set.

But when it comes to feelings, who can tell? The course of Su Qing and Guo Julin's relationship, from Guo Julin's hundred and one favors to the Beauty Su's budding feelings, to the pair's burning passion and tender affection and from there to the gradual cooling of enthusiasm, and up to the present when this Guo character was harder to see than a head of state and Su Qing had to get in line to even make an appointment—in total, it had taken less than two years.

Su Qing regretted not eating more instant noodles in university like his classmates; if his intake of preservatives hadn't been insufficient, he wouldn't have passed his best-by date so quickly.

He got to the place and gave Guo Julin's name. The hostess took him to a private room. The smell of sandalwood assaulted his nostrils. The young genius Comrade Guo Julin, dressed in a name brand suit, accessorized with a name brand briefcase and a name brand watch, was sitting there looking respectable. He nodded solemnly. He looked like he was worried people wouldn't know he was especially rich.

Guo Julin studied his face and said with in his usual mild and refined tones: "Look at yourself. Don't you go out and get any sun? There isn't a drop of color in your face. Come have a look at what you want to eat. Let's fill you up."

All of a sudden, Su Qing had a bad feeling. He felt that Guo Julin was being so solicitous to soften him up before an attack. He took the menu in silence. Feeling nervous, he looked at it absent-mindedly. He must have been taking too long. Guo Julin waited a while, then raised his wrist and looked at his watch as though hinting something. But Su Qing's willpower was strong. He wasn't moved in the least. He looked ready to stare at the menu until next year. The genius Guo finally couldn't resist speaking: "How about this? I'll order you a bowl of bird's nest soup with red dates for your health, and we'll have a few simple dishes. It's just the two of us, there's no need to be extravagant. We'll just have a bit of something."

Su Qing had no objections. He wasn't the one paying anyway.

Then Guo Julin once again condescended to a democratic enquiry: "Why don't you have a look and see what you want to eat?"

So Su Qing had to open up the menu again. But he hadn't turned a single page before Guo Julin's patience reached its limit. He gently but firmly

took the menu from Su Qing's hands. All smiles, he said, "Your stomach isn't strong. Why don't you have some vegetable dishes?"

Su Qing at last understood that Guo Julin was only asking him out of politeness. He didn't really mean to let him order. He thought, What can I say? He nodded to show that he would submit to the arrangements made for him.

His look of going where the current took him displeased Guo Julin. He thought that, apart from being good-looking, this man really did not have a single redeeming feature. He had no views of his own even in little matters like eating and dressing. How had he ever fallen for him in the first place?

The two of them, having nothing to say to each other, ate a sullen meal. During the meal, Guo Julin repeatedly exhibited the smooth and slick social skills that carried him through the business world. He pulled conversation topics out of nowhere, all of which were reduced to silence by Su Qing's pointless and disinterested responses.

Of course, when it came to highbrow or popular art forms, Su Qing really didn't know how to respond. He could keep up with a conversation about eating, drinking, and making merry, clubbing and playing games, but watching Guo Julin spraying spit about his appreciation for the fetter-breaking ideas of Dadaism, he had only one sentence in mind, which attempted to break through the fetters of his tongue to slip out of his mouth—act like a prick and you'll be struck by lightning.

At last, Guo Julin could stand it no longer. He asked, "What have you been interested in lately? What do you normally do for fun?"

Su Qing gave an "oh." With his mind a blank, he considered, then summed up: "Nothing... Watching movies online, playing games when I have nothing else to do."

Guo Julin thought that he had found an in. "What movies do you watch? I have a good movie collection over at my place. You can take some to watch."

Su Qing suddenly felt his food lose its flavor. He ruminated unhappily—before, when this asshole Guo Julin had stayed with him, he had always called Su Qing's place "our home" and his own apartment "outside." Later it had turned into "our place" and "my apartment." Even later, it had turned into the current awkward "your place" and "my place."

He felt resentful, but he also thought that it was really beneath his dignity as a grown man to quibble over terminology. He didn't feel comfortable expressing it. So he absently said, "Action movies. Starts with fighting, then the fighting ends and the credits roll. Who knows what they're about? I don't remember anymore."

With these words, he swept away all Guo Julin's interest in discussing cultural life with him.

Guo Julin shut his mouth. He thought that there was no such thing as utter disappointment. There was only greater disappointment. He found that he was truly powerless. No matter what, he had nothing to say to this hollow pretty face. So he lowered his head in silence, took a deep breath, and decided to go straight to the main subject.

"Su Qing." He tossed aside his chopsticks and became stern. "Don't you feel like...being with me is very dull, and you don't even have anything to say to me?"

Su Qing looked at his expression and felt a bit of panic. He forced it down and lowered his eyes expressionlessly. He began to race against the clock to mop up his food, because he had a premonition that soon he wouldn't have the stomach for it. It was pretty expensive. It would be a bad thing to waste it. He also said perfunctorily, "No way, what are you talking about?"

Guo Julin sighed. He really couldn't stand seeing his indifference. "You're always so... Ugh!"

He lit a cigarette, looked at Su Qing, and launched into a lengthy speech: "You aren't a child anymore. You ought to consider your own future. Think about it, in your current condition, you're out of line with all of society. What are you going to do afterwards?"

Su Qing was eating too fast. He choked and quickly picked up his tea to force the food down, thinking—there's nothing to do.

Guo Julin continued: "You still have a long life ahead of you. In the coming decades, how are you planning to live? You need some skills to rely on, don't you? Are you really going to waste your youth like this? Ah, I'm the one at fault, I never should have let you..."

Su Qing didn't speak, letting him continue his amateur performance of the caring big brother rescuing a wayward youth.

Guo Julin harped on for a long while. When he had smoked his cigarette down to the butt, he finally pinched it out and said in all earnestness, “You could stand to read some books. Why don’t you sign up for a training course, study a foreign language? I happen to have a friend in the industry. Do you still remember your university English? I think you...”

Su Qing rubbed his stomach. He felt he was just about finished eating. He had always liked to linger over his meals. This time, he had finally eaten a meal at normal speed and felt that he couldn’t quite digest it. It was sticking in his chest, causing him pain. He sat up straight, drank some tea, and interrupted Guo Julin: “Don’t look at me. I paid someone to take my fourth year foreign language exam for me.—What are you trying to say? Don’t natter on about useless things, just get to the point.”

Guo Julin’s speech came to a halt. The two of them looked at each other in silence for a while. Then he slowly exhaled and quietly said, “Su Qing, I think there’s really no point in us being together like this, really. Let’s break up.”

Su Qing thought, OK, I’ve been waiting all evening, and here it finally is. He felt numb. He didn’t know what his own reaction was. He only slowly came up with, Oh, I’ve been dumped.

All of a sudden, he felt exhausted. He didn’t want to ask why, and he didn’t want to know whether there was someone else. Their relationship had come to an end. They were both well aware of it. Su Qing was still in the mood to calmly say, “Fine, I understand. My apartment is yours, I’ll go move out.”

“Su Qing!” Guo Julin looked bitter and grieved, as though he was the one who had been dumped. “Don’t say such hurtful things, I know...we’ve been together so many years, you’re sad, and I don’t feel any better than you do, but it just isn’t meant to be. Emotions can’t be controlled by reason.”

“Yes, I understand.” Su Qing stared at the ashtray on the table and woodenly said, “No hard feelings. Should I snivel and cry and blame you? Thank you for the apartment, I’ll find somewhere to live and move out as soon as possible.”

“Su...”

Guo Julin was going to say something else, but Su Qing waved his hand and cut him off. He extended a hand and said, “Got a cigarette? Give me one.”

Guo Julin silently pulled out a cigarette and passed it to him. Su Qing familiarly picked up the lighter on the table. Narrowing his eyes, he took a drag. He stood up and said to Guo Julin, “Enough, let’s end it here. Thank you for the meal.”

Then he turned and left as though something was chasing him. He even left behind his trench coat.

Why was he running? Su Qing didn’t know. He simply didn’t want to see Guo Julin again. It was as though if he didn’t see him, he could fool himself and not have to think about how he had been pathetically dumped. He ran out of the restaurant as though fleeing in a panic. He hopped into a taxi and gave a familiar address, then stared blankly out the window in silence.

Half an hour later, he walked into a gay bar. Like a lost soul, he bought himself drinks—in fact, even if he hadn’t bought any, his mind still would have been empty, but after having something to drink, he was even more thoroughly witless. Then, just as intended, he became blind drunk and left in a daze with a man.

A breakup, a bender, and a one-night stand—fine, this time he had a complete set.

He never thought that real trouble would come out of his hook-up.

2

A FRIGHTENING ONE-NIGHT STAND

THE NEXT MORNING, Su Qing woke up to the sound of the person sharing his bed getting up and dressing. He opened his eyes and saw the hotel's dismal white ceiling. He stared blankly at it for fully half a minute before he remembered where he was.

He was sober, and his head hurt. His temples were pounding like a drum. He thought disdainfully of what he had been getting up to while turning his head uneasily—preparing to close his eyes and pass out in case he saw a Laughing Buddha or a gorilla.

The man was buttoning up his shirt with his back to him. His shoulders were broad, his back was straight, and his skin was a little dark—not the baked color that came from sunbathing; it looked instead like the genuine outcome of being weathered by the elements year round. The man was alerted by Su Qing's slight turn of the head and looked back at him. There was an unlit cigarette in his mouth. Then, unperturbed, he stood up, took the cigarette between the fingers of one hand and picked his pants up off the floor with the other. He said, "Oh, you're awake."

Su Qing pressed down on his forehead. *He* was feeling embarrassed.

When the man picked up his pants, a long scar was revealed on the outside of his thigh. Su Qing couldn't help taking another look. He saw a portion of the man's waist exposed by his shirttails. The firm muscles there were also covered with scars of all sizes.

The man buckled his belt in a trice. He was around thirty, with strong features and deep-set eyes. His gaze was faintly cold, with a hint of scrutiny. Seeing that Su Qing was looking him over, the man didn't react. He grabbed his hair casually, smoothed down the places that were sticking up, and said, "You getting up? If you are, get dressed. I'll buy you breakfast."

Su Qing nodded woodenly, and the man went to wash up without saying a word. He was very swift. Su Qing had only stuck one leg into his pants by the time the man put himself in order and came out. The two of them stared at each other in silence. Su Qing suddenly felt like a kid caught cheating on a test by the teacher. He quickly stuffed himself into his clothes and jumped out of bed. If he hadn't still been dizzy, he practically would have stood at attention.

The man looked at him and got out of his way. Su Qing vanished into the bathroom.

He splashed a double handful of water on his face and zoned out looking at himself in the mirror—the young man in the mirror looked sickly pale and dead-eyed, with a desolate expression. With this venerable countenance, if someone said he hadn't been dumped, *that* would have been strange.

Su Qing took a deep breath and buried his whole face in cold water, imagining that he was a fish. The cold water cleared his head somewhat. His rusty brain began to operate. He thought, What happens now? What am I going to do?

Life was too complicated. Before, there had been people to spoil him and let him squander his youth as he pleased. Now all the people who had spoiled him were gone, so he was lost.

The fish surnamed Su blew bubbles, feeling that his prospects were dim. But this lost mood was brief. Soon he could no longer hold his breath. He had to raise his head, scrub his face, hastily put himself in order, and go out.

Then he stood at the bathroom door, not knowing whether he ought to deliver a report or what. He stood there stupidly, waiting for the man to speak.

The man was sitting on the bed flipping through one of the hotel's old magazines. The cigarette in his mouth remained unlit. It was as though he didn't know how to relax. Sitting there casually, his back stuck up like a spear.

Was he military?

All of a sudden, Su Qing couldn't help also standing up straight, as though he felt a sense of inferiority about his own slovenly appearance.

The man stood up and beckoned to him. "Let's go." After thinking about it, he felt it would be awkward if he didn't say something, so he asked, "How old are you? Are you still a student?"

Su Qing followed him like a footman. With his head down, he said, “No, I graduated.”

“Oh. You don’t look it.”

After issuing his assessment, the man didn’t say anything else. The two of them returned to mutual silence. Su Qing had a lot on his mind. Though he had just slept with a strange man, he wasn’t in the mood to talk to him. The man looked at him and found that this young man had only a sweater on. He didn’t even have a coat. He must have lost it somewhere. So he took off his own coat and handed it to him.

Su Qing stared blankly, then took it a little sheepishly. “So...how will I give this back to you? Why don’t you write down your address...”

The man said, “I can’t just give out my address to others.”

“Oh...” Su Qing falteringly shut his mouth.

The man walked into the hotel’s dining area. When he put his hand on the door, it paused there. He suddenly said, “My surname is Hu, Hu Bugui. We’ll talk about it if we have a chance to meet again.”

Su Qing said his own name as though giving a report. Hu Bugui only gave an indifferent nod in response, then picked a table at random and sat down.

Su Qing had lazy habits. No matter what he did, he loitered. Even if he farted, he had to drag it out twice as long as other people. Hu Bugui asked what he wanted to eat, and he stared at the little menu for fully five minutes. Fortunately this big brother surnamed Hu had excellent patience. He didn’t rush him. With his cigarette in his mouth, he sat across from him in silence, demonstrating correct posture from beginning to end.

Breakfast was soon served. Hu Bugui ate very heroically, making a clean sweep. After bringing the campaign to a swift resolution, he wiped his mouth and knocked off work. He returned the cigarette to his mouth and waited for Su Qing to count grains of rice while eating his bowl of congee. He had no expression and said nothing. It was as if he wasn’t in a restaurant waiting for someone but instead by the side of the road waiting for a bus.

At first Su Qing thought this man’s aura was too powerful. He felt a little pressured. As soon as he bent his head to eat, he forgot about him and devoted himself to letting his mind wander.

It was half an hour before his soul returned to him. He felt a little embarrassed. He poked at the remaining half bowl of congee with his chopsticks,

then picked it up and drank, puffing out his cheeks.

Hu Bugui saw that his bowl was empty and said, "Are you finished? If you're finished, let's go. In the future..."

At this point, he came to a stop. He had meant to say, "In the future, be careful. Don't just go with anyone who takes you. Young people should learn better." Then he thought that saying this would sound like bragging. It would be indecent. So he swallowed the words and only came up with a stiff sentence: "In the future, don't drink so much. It causes trouble."

Su Qing had eaten and drunk his fill, and he was clear-headed. This time he was in spirits. He agreed, then began to make conversation. "Where do you work? You must exercise often, right?"

Hu Bugui stood up and walked forward, completely upright. "You could say I work for a government department."

Su Qing sniffled, feeling that he had caught a bit of a cold. He thought, if he works for the government, he definitely has to repress himself and mind his image; he wouldn't dare to be out. Then he asked, "Do you go to that bar often? I don't think I've seen you before."

Hu Bugui extended a hand to hail a taxi. "Occasionally. I don't have time.—Where are you going? If it's on my way, I'll take you there."

At his question, Su Qing went blank. He didn't know where he was going. He rather wanted to go back to the bar to continue his dissipation. He felt around in his pocket. He didn't seem to have enough money left, so he let it go and gave the address of his current residence: "South of the city..."

When he had just said this, Su Qing went quiet—he had been standing not half a meter behind Hu Bugui. A second ago, he had just watched the man extend a hand to open the car door while turning back to speak to him. The next second, he was gone.

He had really vanished in front of his eyes!

Su Qing stood there dumbfounded, looking blankly at the half-open car door. He felt dizzy. Then someone pressed down on the back of his neck and shoved him into the taxi's passenger seat. Hu Bugui, who had moved to his other side at some point, lowered his voice and grimly said, "Leave at once and keep quiet."

Then he shut the car door with a *bang*.

These great changes to the universe happened too rapidly, so rapidly that the taxi driver hadn't noticed anything amiss. He happily asked him,

“Where are you going, young fellow?”

Su Qing carelessly gave his own address while he turned his head to look around. In the blink of an eye, there was no sign of Hu Bugui at the hotel door.

What the hell...

Just then, the taxi driver inadvertently looked at him and gave a yelp. “What’s wrong with your neck, young fellow? That’s blood, isn’t it? Should I take you to the hospital first?”

Su Qing only then felt that the back of his neck was chilly and sticky where Hu Bugui had held it down. He reached out to touch it and came away with his hand covered in blood.

Whose blood? That man’s? His hand had been just fine while they were eating that morning... Su Qing shuddered. He thought, he had been fine just now, then he had suddenly shoved him into the car. Could they have run into a surprise terrorist attack? Was there a gun with a silencer?

Or was this Hu Bugui who said he worked for the government a terrorist himself? Worked for the government... *Which* government? Not the Taliban, surely?

Able to move in an instant, couldn’t even reveal his address...and he had so many scars...

Tying all these suspicious signs together, Su Qing, who liked to trawl the internet reading stallion novels, let all kinds of absurd possibilities soar through his brain—in the end, only one thing was clear. His sad and decadent tale of a lovelorn youth getting drunk and having a one-night stand seemed to have turned into a horrifying incident of a sniper attack in the middle of the street.

He didn’t speak. The taxi driver glanced at this decent-looking youth and thought, Ah, young people these days. They really wouldn’t learn. A perfectly nice child, and here he wouldn’t do any work; he had to be an idle little punk and get into fights with people. The driver didn’t want to make trouble. He shut his mouth and took Su Qing home as fast as lightning.

Su Qing dizzily went inside. As he searched for his keys, he inadvertently put his hand on the apartment’s doorknob. At a light push, the door unexpectedly opened.

The hair stood up on the back of his neck. He thought, What’s going on? He’d just gone to bed with a man he suspected of being a terrorist, and now

he came home to a burglary?

Su Qing reached for his phone, planning to call the police, but he found that he had left his phone along with his trench coat back with Guo Julin. He really was unlucky; he could get food stuck between his teeth when drinking cold water.

So he quietly backed up. As a weak little shut-in who couldn't lift or carry anything, he didn't have the skills to go up against bad guys for several rounds of battle. Though his life was a mess and his future a blur, for the moment he didn't mean to end his problems in death and be reborn.

Suddenly, a dark figure blocked his path. Su Qing stopped in his tracks and nearly bumped into the person. He looked in terror at the guy in front of him, who was wearing black clothes and black sunglasses—at a visual estimate, he was a meter ninety, and had the look of a fiend. One of his arms was thicker than an ordinary person's waist. The worst part was, he had an unidentified object in his hand—Su Qing swallowed with difficulty. While he had never seen such a high-level toy, he thought that this wasn't an unidentified object; ten to one, it was a gun.

This buddy, whose every cell asserted that he was a “thug,” bared his teeth in a grin. In a hoarse voice, he said, “We've been waiting for you for ages.”

Su Qing took a deep breath, gathered it in his diaphragm, then stretched out his neck and yelled: “Help! Fire!”

Teachers tell us that in this day and age, you can't yell “thief” if you meet a thief. No one but your dad will look after you. You have to say that there's a fire. That especially went for an apartment building like this, where there were many families upstairs and downstairs.

As he yelled, he squeezed through an opening as the thug reached for him and ran towards the corridor. Just then, a pair of hands reached out from behind. One hand covered his mouth, and the other clutched his neck. Su Qing quivered. He felt something ice-cold pressed to the artery in his neck. He wilted at once, not daring to breathe. His eyes rolled this way and that. The inside of his head turned into a pot of porridge.

But his brain didn't have long to cook its porridge. The next instant, Su Qing's vision went dark. He knew nothing more.

The man who had knocked him out was tall. He wore glasses and had a gentle and scholarly look. He seemed neither like a Spider-Man nor a Su-

perman, but he could lift Su Qing as easily as lifting a dog. His cold eyes scanned his face. Then he handed him over to the buddy in black and briefly said, “The people on this floor will wake up in thirty seconds. Take him. We’re leaving.”

3

“LITTLE GREY”

JUST AFTER Su Qing was carried away by two kidnappers from some unknown planet, the door to his apartment, not shut tight to begin with, was once again pushed open by an unknown element. The person who opened the door was a long-legged and vigorous young man wearing a jacket with the zipper open all the way, indistinctly revealing the outlines of two guns at his waist.

Behind the young man came a tall young woman with her hair in a ponytail.

The door had been open to start with. It opened wide automatically at a light touch. It was completely empty inside. The young man took out a gun and made a gesture towards the young woman. The two of them went inside one after the other and searched. No one.

The young man frowned and said towards the watch on his wrist, “Captain Hu, Qin Luo and I have arrived. There’s no one here. The door was open.”

After a moment, Hu Bugui’s voice came out of the “watch”: “Copy.”

The two of them left without a sound.

When Su Qing woke up again, he once more opened his eyes to the sight of dismal white. After a moment of blank staring, he quickly shot up—he remembered; he had been kidnapped. The kidnappers had left him in a little room with no windows. They hadn’t tied him up. He looked down. None of his clothing was missing. Even the thirty-two yuan and fifty cents of spare change in his pocket were still there.

Su Qing sniffled—he really had caught a cold. He got up, swallowed, and, willing to try anything in a crisis, began to mentally count sheep, as though this move could not only hypnotize a person but could also calm him down.

Actually, it really did do some good. When he had counted to thirty-eight, Su Qing's long-inactive brain at last undertook the monumental task of its proper duty. In these dire straits, he outdid himself. He restrained his fear and began to examine his surroundings, considering his circumstances.

Suddenly, there was a slight movement over his head. Su Qing tipped his head up and saw a security camera in a corner. As he walked around the little room, it followed him closely, swinging left and right, like a pair of eyes hidden in the darkness.

Su Qing cleared his throat and stood properly facing the security camera. He put his hands behind his back, forced a smile, and sincerely said, "Brothers, I'm only an unemployed youth. I have no family and no profession. I haven't broken the law, I haven't cheated on my taxes, and even my last fight was three or four years ago... Of course, I also have nothing to do with the collected public security forces..."

He thought, it didn't matter who his kidnappers were; first he would disclaim connection to both sides. He still had this drop of wit. When Su Qing got nervous, he started to babble, as though if he kept talking he could relieve the symptoms of cramp in his calves. He went on at length: "Well... look here, don't you think there's been some misunderstanding? I promise you, I didn't see anyone clearly, not the fellow who knocked me out, and not the fellow wearing the sunglasses. And if I had seen clearly, I wouldn't go around blabbing. Look at my honest eyes!"

As he spoke, he got close to the security camera. The security camera had no speakers. It only looked at him coldly.

Su Qing clutched his hair and racked his brains. He suddenly saw the light. "Oh...this isn't because of my dad, is it? Oh, hey, in that case, you've got it all wrong. My dad's got some stinking money, but that has nothing to do with me now. It's been two years since the old man disowned me. The old fellow has already said that even if I kick the bucket, he won't shed a tear for me. If you're expecting ransom money for kidnapping me, it's no use. He'll be only too happy for someone to clean up after him—ah, of course, I'm not telling you to..."

At this point, Su Qing's nonsense came to an abrupt halt, because the door of the little cell opened and two men walked in one after the other.

The one in front was a middle-aged man in a suit. He had a square face, triangular eyes, and a ferocious gaze. Behind him came a refined man with

glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose.

Su Qing stared. He realized that these two were bandits.

His brain, which had seen too many cops and robbers films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, immediately came out with—I'm a goner. They didn't blindfold me. Normally there's only one fate for the miserable devil who sees what the kidnappers look like—he gets killed off.

Then Su Qing made a subconscious gesture. He covered his eyes and turned his head away. "I didn't see anything. Haha, my eyes aren't very good, they start running as soon as I see a strong light. Damn, they're streaming everywhere. I can't see what you look like at all."

The bespectacled man couldn't restrain a laugh. When he laughed, he seemed even less like a bad guy. His gentle and refined bearing made him look more like a young university teacher. The square-faced one next to him, on the other hand, grunted coldly and gave speech: "Settle down. We ask, you answer. Talk nonsense again and I'll slaughter you."

Su Qing nodded as though crushing garlic. "Yes, yes, whatever you say."

"What's your relationship to the jackal¹? And what about that group of bastards at the RZ Unit?"

Su Qing didn't dare to remove the hands covering his face. Hearing this, he was completely baffled. "Brother, who are you talking about? What unit?"

The bespectacled man gently pushed up his glasses and patiently asked, "This morning, the man who left the hotel with you and opened the car door for you—who is he to you?"

Su Qing blurted out, "Holy crap, that can't be right—you can get into trouble cruising for a one-night stand at a bar? I-I don't have anything to do with that, that Hu Bugui, whoever he is. Really, look at my honest eyes!"

He got excited, forgot to cover his eyes, and put his hands down. Seeing the false smile of the bespectacled one, he felt cold at heart. He immediately raised his hands again. "My vision is really terrible. I forgot my glasses. And I have a touch of glaucoma. My eyes aren't much use. You three can set your minds at ease."

To win their trust, he had deliberately said the wrong number...

The square-faced man frowned. "Hu Bugui?"

“Ten to one, it’s a fake name,” said the bespectacled man. He looked Su Qing up and down with apparent interest.

The square-faced man quietly asked, “Is he talking crap, or is it true?”

“It’s true, brother, truer than the point of a needle!” Su Qing screamed.

The bespectacled one looked at him and unhurriedly passed judgment: “It’s probably true. At least, I don’t sense any signs of lying from his emotions.”

The square-faced man seemed to be in a very bad mood. He cursed under his breath: “Damn it, we finally manage to get the jackal alone, and he finds out. Tell that Gui, if he dares to tip off the enemy next time, I’ll chop him up for dog food.”

The bespectacled one didn’t respond. Su Qing listened, trembling, not even daring to breathe loudly, afraid that this man would chop him up for dog food, too. His legs were about to soften into noodles. They were barely holding up his weight. The square-faced man cursed for a while, then pointed at Su Qing and said to the bespectacled one, “He’s useless. You take care of him.”

Su Qing was so scared his heart stopped beating, but he heard the bespectacled man laugh softly. He walked over, pinched Su Qing’s chin, and sized him up at close range. His expression looked as though he was sizing up a little dog being sold at the dog market, fussily appraising his pedigree. He said, “No, since we’ve caught him, let’s not waste him. Jiang Lan and I are both short a ‘little grey,’ so let’s try with him.”

The square-faced man snorted and seemed to mutter something like “damn homo.” Then he tossed out a “whatever you like” and left.

Su Qing shakily said, “B-b-brother, if you let me go, I-I-I guarantee that I’ll go to my dad and beg him to thank-thank you, my dad is Su...”

The bespectacled man took a step back and let him go. He watched the panicked Su Qing slide down to the foot of the wall and quiveringly hug himself into a ball. He cut him off: “In a crowd, one out five people can become a ‘little grey.’ If you do become a ‘little grey,’ there’s also a fifty-fifty chance that you’ll match mine...or my companion’s type. In other words, you have a one in ten chance of survival—what do you think?”

He didn’t mention what it meant to “become a ‘little grey.’” Su Qing had gambled, but that was for money. He had never gambled with his life. He

opened his eyes wide in fear and looked at the smiling man in front of him. Like a mute, he couldn't say a word.

The bespectacled man slowly said, "Of course, you have the power to decide. I never force anyone. If you aren't willing, I can kill you right now. It'll all be over. It won't hurt very much."

Truly indulgent democracy, Su Qing thought. Was he really going to meet his end like this today?

Seeing that he still didn't answer, the bespectacled man extended a cold hand and put it on his neck. He tightened it slowly and asked again, "What do you think?"

It is said that when you are about to die, you recall the events of your lifetime. As the man's hand squeezed his neck tighter and tighter, Su Qing slowly began to feel suffocated, but his mind was still blank. There were only a few scenes of his dad poking him in the forehead and scolding while his mother dotingly hid him behind herself, or some scenes of drifting around with his drinking buddies or thoughtlessly messing around with Guo Julin. Each one was like a flimsy outline, gone in a flash.

It turned out that his whole life had been this flimsy, he thought.

Suddenly, a tremendous unwillingness welled up in Su Qing's heart. He laboriously brought up his hands and clutched the hand the man was using to squeeze his neck. Hoarsely, he exerted all his strength to spit out two words: "I...I...I agree!"

The corners of the man's lips turned up. He cheerfully let him go. He watched Su Qing curl up on the ground and begin to cough violently. Then he patted him on the shoulder. "Then get up and come with me."

Su Qing staggered to his feet and followed the man. The bespectacled man seemed completely unworried. He turned his back to Su Qing and stuck his hands in his coat pockets, walking confidently and easily. Su Qing's throat burned painfully. Staring at the man's back, for a moment his rage boiled up into courage, and he calculated, If I jump him now and hit him over the back of the head...

But just then, the man walking in front of him suddenly said without looking back, "Don't even think about it. If I stayed still and let you kill me, you still wouldn't necessarily be able to do anything to me."

Su Qing gave a start. Cold sweat instantly poured off him. He remembered the miraculous course of his kidnapping and thought, Is this mind

reading? This bunch...are they human?

The bespectacled man looked back and smiled at him. "It's a good mentality to be afraid of those stronger than you—if you survive, you can tell me your name."

He had just spoken when Su Qing suddenly felt a chill behind him. He whipped his head around and saw that a woman had started following him at some point. She was a pretty good-looking woman, but her eyes were like a venomous snake's, watching him fixedly.

Su Qing's neck stiffened into a piece of wood. His legs involuntarily walked forward after the bespectacled man, but his neck maintained its ridiculous position, twisted and petrified, staring at the woman who had appeared out of nowhere behind him and walked without making a sound.

The fuck... Was this Earth?

"Is this the new 'little grey?'" the woman asked.

"I don't know yet whether it'll be a success," the bespectacled man said.

The woman pursed her lips and said a little resentfully, "I don't want this one. You can see at a glance he's a pretty boy with less guts than a rabbit. Poor quality."

The bespectacled man said in gentle consolation, "You can make do. Those RZ Unit sons of bitches have been too lively of late, and the next 'feast' is coming up soon. You can't be short a 'little grey.' Don't be too picky. I heard one of your 'little greys' died just the day before yesterday. Don't you only have one left now?"

The woman snorted and said nothing.

Su Qing thought that those words just now had sounded something like, "We're going into the mountains to hunt soon. You can't be short a hunting dog. Don't be too picky. One of your dogs died just the day before yesterday. Don't you only have one left now?"

He instantly felt waves of gooseflesh striving to outdo each other.

The bespectacled man stopped at the door of a room. He grabbed Su Qing by the back of the neck and pushed him inside. "It will decide whether you survive."

Su Qing looked up. There were quite a few cold-faced white coats standing in this room surrounding a sinister-looking instrument. One white coat put on a mask and looked at Su Qing. Pointing to a place on the instrument, he said, "It's you? Lie down."

Su Qing swallowed and shifted his feet, shuffling over one step at a time. He looked at the cold instrument, then blankly looked up again. The woman grew impatient. She was some kind of demon. A *swish*, and she turned into a residual blur. She had just been at the door, and in less than the time it took to blink, she was standing in front of Su Qing. She picked him up with one hand and flung him onto the instrument.

Su Qing felt the world spin. The back of his head banged against the hard metal pillow. A droning began in his ears. His hands and feet were icy. He didn't know what would happen to him.

Then a sudden trace of numbness began at his feet. Before Su Qing could figure out what it was, he felt a pain like being electrocuted throughout his whole body. He began to scream.

4

EXPLODING HEAD

SU QING felt as though his body had been torn into several pieces. After the pain, his senses began to numb. All around was a vast expanse of whiteness. He struggled to open his eyes and dimly saw the bespectacled man with his arms crossed over his chest, watching him indifferently as he quietly chatted with the woman next to him.

For a moment, Su Qing thought he was going to die. He felt himself floating, as though rising up into the sky. Nothing around him had anything to do with him. He felt indifference and ignorance welling up inside him.

That four-eyed son of a bitch had said that one out of five people could become some damned “little grey.” Su Qing even found the time to irrelevantly think, That’s 20%... In his whole life, in exams big and small, including even physical education tests, he had never reached the top 20%.

In the numbness that came after the pain, Su Qing let his mind wander irrelevantly and suddenly felt that he wanted to cry a little.

For some reason, he remembered his dad, who wore Armani over frayed long underwear. He had made so much money, but he didn’t know how to spend it. Everyone said he was a nouveau riche.

Su Qing had heard it being said behind his back. He had been very little, taken out tottering to be shown off at a cocktail party by his dad. He had said, This is my son, our little golden boy. Along the way, Su Qing had got caught up in playing and been separated from his dad for a while, and he had heard the aunties and uncles who called him “Chairman Su” disdainfully saying behind his back, “No matter how much money he has, he’s still a bumpkin with a sack of bills on his back. He can make it, but he can’t spend it. He’s got no taste. That son of his is the same. However good-looking he is, he’s still golden on the outside but useless on the inside.”

These words had made a deep impression on Su Qing's young mind. Su Qing recalled that it seemed to be then that he had set himself the grand goal of learning to "spend money." It was as though, if he learned to spend money, he wouldn't be "the nouveau riche's son" anymore, wouldn't be "a bumpkin with no taste."

But while the ability to spend money could be learned, it wasn't so easy to learn taste. After so many years of earnest study, Su Qing had yet to escape the scathing and humiliating reputation of being "the nouveau riche's son." When others spent money, they were living exquisitely; when he spent money, he was squandering a fortune. Su Qing had thought about it for a long time but couldn't understand why this was.

Then, he inexplicably remembered how he had slipped up once and gone to do drugs at a karaoke bar with some young people. The first time, there was no legendary high, and he had a strong reaction. On the way back, he bumped into walls the whole time, and he threw up. When his dad saw him, he gave him two fierce slaps. His face swelled up like a mantou. He didn't dare to go out for a week.

Su Qing had wanted to jump up and resist, but he had seen the wrinkles on Su Chengde's face. They were so deep, deep as though carved by a knife day after day. He hadn't thought anything about it at the time, but subconsciously he hadn't touched the stuff again.

Now, with his consciousness blurred, an uncontrollable thought surged up in Su Qing's mind—That's my dad. He's old.

That's my dad, he thought. He has a son who hasn't been back home in years and broke off relations with him. The only offspring he's had in his life, about to die unnoticed in a place no one knows about. There won't even be a body. Years later, maybe he'll be even older and his heart will soften. He'll regret flying into a rage and fighting with his son and want to find his own flesh and blood to enjoy a few years of happy retirement. And maybe it's only then that he'll discover that his son is gone.

Vanished from this world.

The blurred memories of his childhood seemed to have been stimulated, awakening from slumber in the depths of his consciousness, event after event, all coming clearly into view. Su Qing abruptly remembered when he was little, how Su Chengde put him on his shoulders and took him for a ride around the yard like a horse. He remembered that the year his mom died,

Su Chengde, red-eyed, didn't sleep all night and smoked countless cigarettes. Then he sat at his bedside and said to him, "It's all right. Mom is gone, but Dad loves you."

Guo Julin was nothing...

Su Qing felt as though a huge hole had opened in his heart. All his emotions had leaked out, and the only thing that remained was that unassailable, indecipherable, all-permeating sadness.

The sadness was too powerful, like a vast net sweeping him up whole. Then the pain dwindled away, the numbness disappeared, too, and Su Qing once again felt the icy chill of the unknown instrument under his body and limbs.

His vision was still blurred. He blinked, and a string of ice-cold tears rolled down from the corners of his eyes.

A white coat wearing a mask walked over and rudely undid his collar. Su Qing sat up in a muddle in the direction he was pulled. He hadn't come around yet. Following the white coat's finger, he looked down. Just below his collarbone, he found a grey half-moon mark with intricate patterns on it. They seemed to be moving.

The white coat coldly announced: "A rare Type 2 Auxiliary Type Blue Seal."

The woman leaning against the door clicked her tongue, straightened up, pushed the door open, and left. "How dull. He's not mine."

The bespectacled man seemed a little surprised. He came over with a smile on his face and leaned down to examine Su Qing. He extended a hand and gently wiped the tears off his face. "It seems we've been brought together by fate—what's your name?"

"...Su Qing."

"Su Qing. Nice name." The bespectacled man pulled him up. "I'm Chen Lin. Remember, from now on, you're my 'little grey.' Come with me."

Su Qing stood up. His arms and legs still weren't entirely obeying orders. He stumbled and nearly fell on his face. Then his disordered brain at last caught up, and he tottered after Chen Lin, subconsciously touching the mark under his collarbone. He assembled the fates of all the lowly cannon fodder in the stallion fantasy novels he had read over many years and somewhat worriedly asked, "...Brother, can you tell me the truth? Am I—am I still human?"

Chen Lin didn't look back, only asked in turn, "What do you think?"

Though Su Qing was completely in the dark now, perplexed and terror-stricken, subconsciously following Chen Lin, he still maintained a careful distance of four or five steps from him. He kept feeling that Chen Lin, gentle on the surface, with a smile for everyone he spoke to, was in fact very dangerous.

His hands looked like a pianist's, slender and long, but they could snap a person's neck—as he thought this, Su Qing twisted his neck uncomfortably, feeling lingering fear.

He assessed his condition and felt that something was different about him, but when he thought about it, he couldn't tell what the difference was. He looked down and didn't see any missing arms or extra tails. There was nothing but a moving tattoo.

While no one was around, Su Qing lifted his shirt a bit and looked inside. After a while, his expression turned miserable—this time, his vision wasn't blurry, and he could be certain—the designs on the tattoo really were moving. He thought, that bunch of Frankensteins hadn't planted some mythical venomous worm on him, had they?

He stared at Chen Lin, who had the back of his head aimed at him. He mustered his courage and said, "So...brother, I heard him say Type 2 Auxiliary Blue Seal just now. What does that mean?"

Chen Lin said, "It's a type of 'little grey.'"

"Oh..." Out of habit, Su Qing pretended to understand when he really didn't. Then he considered it. No, wait, so what was a little grey? This had to do with his own life. He had to get a clear answer. So he spoke again.

Chen Lin was silent for a moment, then answered, "It's a general term for Auxiliary Blue Seals."

"..."

If Su Qing had paid attention in formal logic, he would have known that Chen Lin was using a "circular definition." But as a thorough-going ignorant and uneducated wastrel, there was only one word in his head—"nonsense." Of course, with his guts, he didn't dare to say this word to Chen Lin.

But not saying it wouldn't keep him from knowing. Whatever breed of demon Chen Lin was, he seemed to be able to read minds. He paused in his

steps and turned back. He stared into Su Qing's eyes and lightly asked, "Are you unsatisfied with my explanation?"

Su Qing nearly shook his head off. The corners of Chen Lin's mouth curved. He glanced at him and walked on. Su Qing noticed that they seemed to be in a very large base. Looking into the distance, there was a wide expanse of forest, dense, probably planted by humans, concealing.

He turned his head again, looked in the other direction, and watched as the square-faced man who had made a racket before about wanting him "taken care of" went by dragging a long chain with a person tied to the other end of it like like dog. This was a woman of indiscernible age. Her expression was dull, her eyes glazed. She was looking at nothing, going where she was dragged.

Chen Lin nodded elegantly to the square-faced man. Square-face only grunted in return. His awl-like gaze swept over him, then viciously gouged Su Qing. Su Qing didn't even dare to breathe loudly. He wished he could plaster himself to the wall.

When they were gone, Chen Lin said, "That's Shi Huizhang. He's usually in a bad temper. Don't mess with him."

Su Qing's expression was bitter. He thought, If I messed with him...I'd have to be tired of living. Seeing that his eyes still followed the dull-faced woman, Chen Lin explained graciously: "That's a 'reject.'"

Su Qing gave a start. His eyes opened wide.

Chen Lin consoled him: "Don't worry, you just have to behave. I don't normally abuse 'little greys.' When we go out on special assignment, we need people with special constitutions to assist us. If you help me three times, granted that you're all right, you'll be free when the time comes. You'll be able to go wherever you like."

As he spoke, he smiled at Su Qing, as though to reassure him.

The hair stood up on the back of Su Qing's neck. Alarm bells clamored in his mind—however stupid he was, he still didn't believe this. "Go wherever you like"—weren't they afraid he would go straight to the police? There had to be something wrong here.

Chen Lin took Su Qing to a small building and explained, "You'll live here for now. Many 'little greys' like you live here."

Su Qing looked at the dull grey building and hesitated at the door. He felt a sudden unspeakable premonition tightly clutch his heart, as though he

knew that once he stepped inside, he would become a kept pig to be brought out to go under the knife at any time.

Chen Lin saw him hesitate and raised his eyebrows slightly. “What?”

Su Qing was pale and sweating. He squeezed out a smile. “B-brother, it’s—pretty quiet inside.”

Chen Lin pushed up his glasses and smiled. “That’s right, the little greys are all very well-be...”

Before he could finish, a heartrending scream burst from inside, scaring Su Qing’s hair into standing on end. A figure that looked like a young man ran out frantically. His eyes were sunken-in, and he was skeletally thin. He looked like a living ghost. He screeched as he charged out for all he was worth.

Chen Lin turned aside slightly. He didn’t block his path, letting the man who was like a lunatic charge out.

Su Qing stretched out his neck to look. He hadn’t yet worked out what was happening when, just as the screeching man passed by him, he heard a faint click. Su Qing froze. Then he saw the head of the young man in front of him explode like a punctured balloon. Warm liquid slashed on his face.

Su Qing reached out to touch it. His hand came away covered in in red and white. Then he let out a more bitter scream than the man had just now. He backed up desperately. His legs refused to cooperate. They folded, and he sat down with a plop. His mind was a blank. He could only cry out harrowingly, as though trying to vent all his terror.

Not far away, the woman who had called him a pretty boy was holding an oddly-shaped gun. It was this thing that had blown up that dear friend’s head just now. The woman frowned when she heard his yell and aimed her gun at Su Qing. “Yell again and I’ll turn you into a crushed watermelon, too.”

Human potential is astonishing. Su Qing’s mouth was still open, but the moment she spoke, he went silent for his own good.

The woman laughed coldly and left. Leaning against the front door of the grey building, Chen Lin looked at Su Qing and the body on the ground as though this had nothing to do with him. He cheerfully explained, “That just now was a disobedient little grey. Jiang Lan’s methods are rather extreme. Don’t be afraid, as long as you’re obedient...”

“I’m...I...I-I am obe...” Su Qing was so scared he was babbling and nearly deranged—that had been a living person, and right in front of his face, he had just...just...

Chen Lin gave him a fake smile and raised his chin, pointing at the door. “Go in.”

Su Qing didn’t dare to delay, afraid that another gun muzzle would pop up. He scrambled in clumsily after Chen Lin.

5

THE GREY HOUSE

THIS WAS A BUILDING designed by some wicked person. As soon as Su Qing walked in, his unusually active imagination started incessantly heading to strange places—this was an old house with an antiquated look, whatever it had been used for before. It was grey from the outside and grey from the inside. The corridor was particularly long, with a small window at the end, not even south-facing. The lighting was extremely poor. The walls and the floor were all grey.

This place gave a person an extremely oppressed feeling. It might have been Su Qing's mistake, but it seemed that after the scream and the gunshot, this place was even quieter than before. There was no one else in the long hall, only him and Chen Lin, one in front and one behind, their steps echoing in the emptiness. Su Qing walked fearfully, looking back twice with each step, afraid that some rare creature like a vengeful ghost or a Sadako would suddenly come up behind him.

Chen Lin looked back, smiled, and said to him, "Everyone should be in the main hall eating now, so it's fairly quiet."

Then Chen Lin took him around corner after corner, and at last Su Qing saw the so-called "main hall." There were two men with loaded guns standing at the door of the "main hall." Su Qing suspected he had arrived at some prison concentration camp and subconsciously searched the walls for the indicative "Leniency to those who confess, severity to those who resist." Some faint voices came from inside, indistinct with the door closed.

There were many rooms next to the main hall. Even the doors to these rooms were grey. Su Qing looked closely and found many marks on the doors. With his shut-in's eyes, he couldn't really tell what had made these marks. He only thought they were chaotic and had a very sinister look.

Chen Lin said, “If you want, you can pick one of those rooms to stay in. They’re all the same. If you make friends with another ‘little grey,’ you can live with your friend.”

When Chen Lin said the word “friend,” the smile on his face seemed unusually secretive in this grey space, facing the two guys holding machine guns. Su Qing shuddered. Before he could say anything, Chen Lin pushed open the main hall’s door and took him inside—once inside, Su Qing was stunned.

The main hall was dimly lit, with a row of crude and simple tables and food on the tables. The quality of the food actually didn’t seem so bad, and there was a pot of fragrant soup cooking. There was also a row of men with machine guns monitoring the situation at all times.

In the main hall were all kinds of strange and grotesque...humans.

A fat man with heavy black bags under his eyes was tearing at his own face, contorting his features for all he was worth. When he was ignored again and again, he suddenly jumped onto a small table. The other end of the small table tilted up when he stepped on it. The fat man plopped down onto the ground, and a pile of food overturned onto his head, painting him all colors—really as though he’d come out of a circus troupe. But the merry gentleman was still very unperturbed, as though it wasn’t food that had spilled on his head but holy water. He was so pleased he began to dance with joy, even singing a tune.

Su Qing listened carefully and heard that he was singing, “Doll and bear dance, one, two, one...”

And this wasn’t all that horrifying. The next moment, a woman not wearing any clothes openly came up in front of him. Su Qing had forgotten about the concept of see no evil. His already large eyes became even rounder. He looked foolishly at the arrestingly beautiful girl boldly crawling in front of him—she *was* “crawling,” on all fours like an animal. She made a few circles around him, even sniffed his feet, then rubbed his calf with her head.

Su Qing nearly jumped. In a moment of desperation, he rambled out: “Oh, holy crap, th-th-this lady’s too hardcore...”

Wherever he looked, there were people bashing their heads against the wall, wailing as they bashed; people shoving food up their noses; people smiling foolishly as they sat on the ground hugging table legs; people dip-

ping their fingertips in sauce and imitating Picasso on their own bodies... Su Qing tearfully thought, Is this a lunatic asylum?

Apart from obviously mad ones, there were also some especially dull ones, conscientiously lined up one by one at the food table. A few white coats were feeding them. They were like the woman being dragged by Shi Huizhang, though their condition was a little better—at least they could still move their eyes. When someone spoke to them, though they were slow to respond, they could still more or less react like a living person.

The few remaining ordinary people looked away the instant they made eye contact with him. There was a sort of wary fright in their faces; Su Qing saw it clearly.

Chen Lin pushed him by the shoulder. “Go on, you’ll be their companion from now on. Remember the duty of a little grey. Be good, or else...”

He made the shape of a gun with his hand, adding, “Maybe I’ll come see you in a few days.”

If he hadn’t known something was off by now, Su Qing really would have been an idiot. Unspeakable panic surged up in his heart. He found the courage somewhere to grab Chen Lin’s sleeve as he was about to go. Chen Lin paused. His gaze fell on his tense, pale fingers. He raised his eyebrows. “What, is there something else?”

Su Qing’s throat moved. He spoke with difficulty: “You...tell me the truth, a so-called ‘little grey,’ does that mean...becoming like them in the end?”

Chen Lin slowly squeezed Su Qing’s hand. He was very strong. He seemed have to have no difficulty prying Su Qing’s fingers off himself. The smile on his face was gone. In a very low voice, he softly said, “So what if it does? So what if it doesn’t? Don’t try to escape, and be careful...”

He didn’t say be careful about what. He seemed to trust that Su Qing would know perfectly well.

Then Chen Lin turned and left the main hall. Watching the door shut tightly in front of him, Su Qing simply despaired. He suddenly took a step forward, but almost at once, the two guards nearest to him raised their machine guns. The black muzzles aimed at Su Qing’s head.

The white coats feeding the idiots looked up simultaneously, forbidding gazes like awls, jabbing into his back from different directions.

Su Qing felt as if time had come to a standstill. His eyes opened wide, his heart beat more and more violently, and his whole body trembled. His back was soaked in cold sweat.

He thought, What now? What should I do?

At last, his hard-won courage was once again defeated by fear. Su Qing took two steps back. The guards lowered their machine guns and faced him expressionlessly, standing in place.

The fat man singing “Doll and Bear Dance” rolled up in front of him, pinched his nose, stuck out his tongue, and shook his head, making an incomparably hideous face at him.

Su Qing looked at him sadly and felt that he had fallen into a boundless, bottomless nightmare. He suddenly raised his wrist and bit it fiercely. He bit through the skin and drew blood, but he didn’t wake up.

Just then, a hoarse scream came from a corner. A few “little greys” seemed to be having a fight. They were gathered in a circle, letting out all kinds of lifelike and high-tech noises. Through the cracks, Su Qing could faintly see a man among them, cowering in a ball.

A white coat wearing a mask looked up. His expression was invisible. He only looked indifferently in that direction and passed judgment: “The Type 4 Auxiliaries are erupting. Whom have they picked today? Tell Jiang Lan to keep her little greys in line.”

Another white coat seemed to sneer. “Jiang Lan?”

Then the brief exchange ended.

A man in ragged clothes timidly approached Su Qing. He asked in a whisper, “Are you...are you new?”

Su Qing turned his head. The moment after their eyes met, the man seemed to take fright, irresistibly avoiding his eyes. This was one of the rare people in his right mind among the lunatics and idiots. Su Qing felt that he was extremely precious. Not even daring to breathe loudly, he softened his voice, afraid that a loud breath would scare him off, but there was still a bit of urgency in his voice: “What is this place? How the hell did they get like that...and what are these people up to? What is a ‘little grey?’”

Bombarded by his string of questions, the man’s expression turned dull. He hesitated for a moment, then cautiously asked, “What...type of Auxiliary Blue Seal are you?”

“They said I was a Type 2.”

The man breathed a sigh of relief at once. He patted his chest and quietly mumbled, “Not a Type 4, not a Type 4, that’s good...”

He looked around shiftily. As though he had determined that Su Qing was safe, he bravely came a little closer to him, tugged on his clothes, and took him aside. He quietly said, “You should stay away from the Type 4 Auxiliary Blue Seals. You have to stay away from them.”

“Why?”

The man quietly said, “We Auxiliary Blue Seals have grey imprints, so we’re also called ‘Grey Seals,’ and that’s why they call us ‘little greys.’ Type 4 Auxiliary Blue Seals are also called anger type blue seals, it’s like...like them. They lose their reason. To let off the anger, they would do anything. Anyone they get their eyes on is a goner. In this place, no one cares about fights between little greys.”

Su Qing asked the question he had wanted to ask all along: “Who...are these people?”

The man shuddered and seemed even more afraid. His lips even went white. After a long while, he said, “They...are the genuine blue seals. I heard the researchers say that they’re called Conversion Type Blue Seals, a special kind of human that can absorb others’ emotions and use them as an energy source... Shi Huizhang is their chief. I saw with my own eyes how he snapped a stone pillar with one hand. And then there’s that woman...Jiang Lan, I’ve seen her walk on walls.”

Su Qing subconsciously tugged at his ear, feeling that this place was seeming less and less like Earth.

The man continued: “I overheard some things, I don’t know if they’re right. I heard that blue seals and grey seals are both only sensitive towards one kind of emotion. In other words, each person can only absorb one kind of emotion from others, so they need an opposing grey seal to absorb the opposing emotion to keep the person whose emotions are being absorbed from going out of control and exposing them...”

In these hopeless surroundings, Su Qing’s brain became unusually quick—the organ in his skull had never worked at such high efficiency in his life. When he heard this, he immediately asked, “Given what you’ve said, why do they absolutely need grey seals? Why can’t the blue seals absorb emotions for each other?”

The man stared. He clearly hadn't thought of this question. He haltingly said, "I...I don't know... I haven't been here long..."

Su Qing suddenly thought of something and asked, "So what type is a Type 2? And what about you? What type are you?"

The man explained, "Type 2 is sadness. I'm a Type 3, fear."

Su Qing stared. He wanted to follow up with something else, but just then, the group of so-called Type 4s in the corner clustered together like a flock of angry birds and began to howl. One of them, red-eyed, ran out and picked up the pot of soup still boiling over the fire.

His hands instantly began to smoke, but he seemed not to feel it. As if he was on drugs, he ran back excitedly carrying the burning pot and spoke in a human language: "Time to be doused alive in soup—"

The man next to Su Qing was so scared his legs went weak. His eyes rolled up. He plopped right down on the ground and lay there.

During this gap, Su Qing saw the person they were surrounding. It was an old man with grey hair, extremely thin, huddled in the corner and trembling all over. His arms were tightly covering his head. From Su Qing's point of view, he could just see one of his eyes, terrified to the utmost, with deep wrinkles at the corner.

The wrinkles abruptly made Su Qing's heart ache. Somehow, he remembered his dad, Su Chengde.

A whole day's fear, sadness, anger, despair, and other negative emotions collapsed in an instant. Su Qing's mind went blank. He suddenly picked up a chair and strode over. He swung it around and smacked it hard against the back of the head of the "dangerous element" carrying the soup.

6

CHENG WEIZHI

ALL THE CLEAR-HEADED PEOPLE present instantly looked over that way. The pathetic Type 3 man who had just struggled awake on the ground saw this violent scene and stared dully for a moment; then, accordingly, his head tilted and his eyes rolled, and he once again silently passed out.

As for Su Qing himself, after he had performed this earth-shattering unprecedented action, the hot blood surging through his brain began to cool, and he looked down blankly at his hands, thinking, I'd better chop off these worthless hands, chop them off...

The tragedy was, it was already too late to chop. It turned out that the guy who wasn't afraid of burning his hands could only ignore pain through the stimulation of excitement; he wasn't really made of steel—for example, after getting hit on the back of the head, he couldn't turn around and keep squabbling with Su Qing like a superman; instead, he gutlessly fell forward and didn't move.

Su Qing stood there, looking fierce while inwardly trembling, still holding the weapon in his hand. He swallowed with difficulty.

The “reveling” Type 4 nut jobs exchanged looks. The fanatical expressions on their faces had yet to recede. Their eyes were bloodshot. The three of them gathered into a small circle and slowly approached Su Qing.

Su Qing subconsciously wanted to retreat, but his brain irrelevantly came up with a memory of going to his grandma's house in the country when he was little and being chased by a big wolf dog. An uncle had rescued him and told him, when you met a beast like this that bullies the weak but fears the strong, the more fear you display, the bolder it will be; but if you stand strong, it will run off with its tail between its legs. If you're really afraid, then you should bend down and pretend to pick up a rock to scare it off.

So Su Qing raised the chair, doing his best to force a fierce and savage expression onto his face—though the outcome wasn't ideal, he acted like he was ready to violate the prohibition against taking life, trying to scare off these beasts.

Sadly, it was clear that while these men were insane, their IQs were still higher than a dog's. Watching Su Qing with his small physique wave around a shabby chair, not only were they not frightened, they also found it very entertaining. They pointed at him and laughed.

One of them was holding a length of metal pole he had picked up somewhere. He swayed back and forth and dragged the end over the ground so the pole scraped the floor and let out a scalp-numbing sound.

Su Qing's mouth went dry and his brain became muddled. He gave off a heavy air of being bitterly pressured. There really was no advance and no retreat for him.

Behind him, people began to comment, all kinds of voices mixing together into a buzzing in his ears. The head of the three lunatics took a step forward and put a hand on Su Qing's shoulder. He looked down at Su Qing's scrawny chicken claws and, grinning, asked, "What are you trying to do?"

The veins stood out on the backs of Su Qing's hands, but he didn't dare to make a sound, afraid that if he spoke, his voice would shake. His shoulders were rigidly tensed.

The lunatic became bolder. He lifted his hand from Su Qing's shoulder and lightly patted his face with the back of his hand. Narrowing his eyes, he looked Su Qing over and quietly said, "Kid, you're new. You need to understand the rules. Do you know what our rules here are?"

Su Qing squeezed out two words between his teeth: "Let go."

Looking provocative, the lunatic used all his strength to smack his face. The skin turned red.

Su Qing took a deep breath. He thought, he had gotten himself into this; time couldn't be turned back, and there was no medicine for regret. He would face a knife whether he stuck his neck out or drew his neck in. Better to go for broke!

He finally looked at the old man huddled in the corner. The old man was raising his head slightly. He hadn't yet lowered the arms covering his head. He looked astonished. His eyes met Su Qing's, and Su Qing couldn't understand the complex expression in his aged eyes. He only hurriedly averted his

gaze and raised his leg to kick the kneecap of the lunatic next to him, then rotated the chair and defiantly brought it down on the man's head.

This time the lunatic dodged, reaching up to make a fending off gesture over his head. A chair leg scraped his sleeve and left a mark. The corners of his eyes began to twitch, all the nerves in his face looking like they were going out of control. He yanked over the pole his companion behind him was holding. "Well, fuck, you're feeling full of yourself, aren't you!"

Su Qing shielded himself with the chair. Maybe the crappy chair was too crappy, or maybe this man's strength was too great. With a crash, the wooden chair broke into pieces.

Su Qing's elbows went weak, and a chair leg knocked heavily against his forehead, stunning him a little. Su Qing flared up again, thinking, Shit, my own dad never hit me, what the hell are you supposed to be?

When he got angry, his fear weakened significantly. Su Qing flung the wooden chair away and reached out to grab a big metal ladle from a pot. He brandished it like a mighty weapon.

He had meant to use some fake moves to fool the lunatics, like in a wuxia novel, and look for an opening to kill at one blow. Sadly, he didn't have a very good understanding of the notion of an "opening." He swung the ladle around for ages, and apart from getting rice all over the place, he gained nothing.

The three lunatics stood in a row and rushed at him with order and discipline. At the critical moment, like an iron tree blossoming, two white coats who had been keeping to the background suddenly stood up and reached out with their gloved hands, saying, "He's a newcomer."

Su Qing hadn't expected this bunch to step in on his behalf. Holding up the ladle, he stared blankly, thinking, How come it's like an online game here? There's special treatment for newcomers?

Then he heard a white coat say, "His period of usefulness is longer than yours. He's more valuable than you are."

Su Qing: "..."

The Type 4 angry birds paid no attention. Grim-faced and screaming, they were about to defy their superiors and execute the white coats as well. The one holding the pole jabbed a white coat with it, irritably saying, "Get..."

Su Qing guessed he was going to say “get out,” but when he had said only one word, the man turned ashen-faced and bent over, convulsing. Su Qing carefully stepped aside. He saw a white coat holding a tiny instrument to the pole. Based on his understanding, Su Qing thought it was a small taser.

The man who had been electrocuted gripped the conducting pole irresistibly, frothing at the mouth while performing an unconventional form of pole dance.

The white coat looked at him coldly and thought that he had had about enough, then pressed on the “taser” and watched the man fall exhausted to the ground. With one hand in his coat pocket, looking rather monstrous, he asked, “Would anyone else like to try?”

Their anger receding, the remaining two Type 4 birds who could still walk upright exchanged a look and obediently “did the heroic thing.” They picked up their two paralyzed companions and withdrew.

An electric bell rang in the main hall. Su Qing stared. He found the main hall’s door opening and a team of uniformed people coming in to methodically clean the hall.

Su Qing stood in the middle of this team of uniformed people. Someone pulled the metal ladle out of his hand, but none of them paid attention to him or even gave him a look, as though he were only a statue. They also didn’t talk amongst themselves at all, quickly and efficiently performing the tasks at hand, like a group of robots.

Su Qing saw that the collars of their uniforms were embroidered with the word “Utopia” in an unobtrusive location.

Just then, someone next to him quietly said, “This means that mealtime is over.”

Su Qing turned and saw that the old man who had just been pressed into the corner and beaten had come over to him at some point. At a close look, he found that this old man was actually tall and broad-shouldered, only somewhat skinny. The old man’s face was injured. He smiled at him and extended a hand. “Cheng Weizhi. Thank you for that just now.”

No one had ever tried to shake hands with Su Qing so solemnly. He stared, considering how much force it would be appropriate to use so as not to seem rude while uneasily shaking hands. “Just doing what I ought to do... My name is Su Qing.”

He had just spoken when a sharp whistle sounded. The group in “Utopia” uniforms had completed their work and dispersed. The guards with the guns heard the whistle and immediately switched modes from “at ease” to “at attention,” changed formation, and stood in two lines.

Cheng Weizhi gave him a gentle push and whispered, “They want us to leave the main hall and go back to our rooms. If you don’t mind that I’m an old codger, you can stay with me.”

Su Qing was all at sea. He didn’t understand anything. The guy who had just been providing commentary for him had turned his attention to fainting and hadn’t said anything clearly, so he readily went with Cheng Weizhi.

His mind was full of questions. For example, what did “absorbing emotions” mean? Could such insubstantial things really be used as an energy source? How were types of so-called blue seals and grey seals distinguished? Could grey seals also absorb emotions? Then why couldn’t grey seals leap onto roofs and vault over walls like blue seals?

Also...what was Utopia? Who had done all of this?

Cheng Weizhi walked ahead. His back was a little humped, but whether speaking or acting, there was a scholarly moderation about everything he did. Once over his scare, he actually appeared somewhat elegant, an intellectual from head to toe.

Su Qing couldn’t help asking, “Er...Uncle Cheng, what even is this place?”

Cheng Weizhi brought Su Qing to a room. He put his hand on the door-knob, paused, and said, “I’ve been here over two months. Based on my observations, apart from the ‘blue seals’ and ‘grey seals,’ all the personnel have a ‘Utopia’ symbol, either obvious or concealed. I have no way to determine whether this is the name of an organization or a research project.”

Su Qing followed Cheng Weizhi inside. The furnishings inside were simple but not crude. Nothing that should have been there was missing. In one room, there were three single beds. Cheng Weizhi opened a closet and with great effort pulled out a set of bedding. “Nights get a little cold here. I’ll give you an extra quilt.”

Su Qing suddenly seemed to see one winter, while he was attending university, how Su Chengde had had his driver take him to the school without saying a word in advance. He had come on purpose to bring him a quilt and personally put it on his bed, even muttering, “I’ve felt that it’s been a

little cold lately, and the heating in your school isn't any good, so I brought you another quilt. Don't keep using that electric mattress pad, it's not safe, and it's uncomfortable..." His heart ached, and he hurried over to take the bedding, clumsily making his own bed.

Cheng Weizhi was elderly and had gone through that irritating incident just now. He sat on his bed a little breathlessly and gave a bitter laugh. "Everything I know, I heard from the researchers. Sometimes when they talk they don't take particular care to avoid us..."

Su Qing stared, hearing the unspoken implication in these words.

Cheng Weizhi continued, "Grey seals are like a consumable good. I've kept track, and up to this point, there hasn't been a single grey seal with more than three 'uses.' Without a conversion system, absorbing energy three times is fatal to the 'energy crystal.'"

Su Qing, not understanding, quickly asked: "What crystal?"

Cheng Weizhi slowly stood up and poured himself a cup of warm water, then took a box of cookies from a cupboard. He beckoned mildly to Su Qing. "Here, young fellow, I snuck this out of the main hall another time. I saw you didn't eat anything just now. You must be hungry."

Su Qing clutched his hair and went over to sit. Cheng Weizhi drank some water and began to carefully narrate the cause and effect of this terrifying grey house.

7

ENERGY CRYSTAL

“I’LL TELL YOU from the top—actually, I also don’t understand why ‘blue seals’ exist. Were they born that way? Or are they like us, externally activated?” Cheng Weizhi’s voice was very pleasant, and he spoke neither quickly nor slowly. When explaining, he knew how to naturally let a person follow his train of thought, as though he was used to providing commentary. “I also don’t know what organization, what power is driving this base or formed it. Strictly speaking, ‘blue seals’ are separated into two kinds. One type is called a ‘Conversion Type Blue Seal,’ and one is an ‘Auxiliary Type Blue Seal.’”

“They said I was a Type 2 Auxiliary Type Blue Seal,” Su Qing put in.

Cheng Weizhi nodded, looking at Su Qing approvingly. “Yes. The Auxiliary Types are also called grey seals, because the seals on our bodies are grey, different from the blue seals of Conversion Types.”

Su Qing had never in his life been looked at as though being taken for a good student. He began to play up. “Yes, yes, that’s the thing, like a worm, and it moves. Uncle Cheng, what on earth is it?”

Cheng Weizhi considered, as though he was unsure how to express it. After a while, he responded, “I’ve seen that the seals on different types of grey seals are different, so I’ve inferred that the mark is cast on the skin by the energy crystal—do you know where the energy in a human body comes from?”

“It’s...some kind of reaction, I learned it in school, but I don’t remember clearly.”

Cheng Weizhi picked up: “Simply put, through a redox reaction, we use the energy-containing matter we eat—generally speaking, the chemical energy stored in carbohydrates—to support all the body’s functions. This energy can make you move and think, can make you a ‘normal human,’ but un-

der ordinary circumstances, it can't make you rise into the sky or burrow under the earth, can't turn you into a 'superhuman' like...those people."

Su Qing sat sloppily with one leg crossed over the other, leaning on the table, holding a cookie in his mouth. His bad habit was playing up again. He wasn't eating properly but gnawing like a mouse. He said indistinctly, "Now you say that, I remember—when I was little my dad hired a tutor to come and teach me this, and I thought that teacher was playing tricks on me, because when he was finished teaching, my young spirit developed a dream of becoming a superhuman. I put away four mantou in one meal like crazy, and the upshot was, I didn't become a superhuman—I became a patient and got taken to the hospital for over a week."

Su Qing seemed to have a natural ability to remember the good and not the bad, to forget a thing once it was out of his sight. Having come into this little room with warm water, cookies, and a place to sit, it was as if the earlier terror had been shut out by the grey door. In hardly any time, he livened up again at the speed of light.

Cheng Weizhi looked at him and smiled with a drop of unspeakable pain.

He thought, each person who came here was a vivid life like Su Qing at first, and then each one slowly decayed and was crushed in this lightless grey house, in the end becoming a walking corpse—the woman Shi Huizhang had taken away to get rid of, those Type 4s, himself, Su Qing...all of them would be buried here.

Su Qing carelessly continued to say, "But anyhow, if you eat a lot, you just get fat. I've never heard of a greedy guts turning into a superhuman."

Cheng Weizhi came around and looked down at the slightly shaking surface of the water in his cup. He gave an "oh" and continued to explain: "That's because if you ingest too many nutrients, it will only lead to carbohydrates that can't be broken down turning into fat in large quantities. But...if you assume the existence of a new energy form that utilizes an entirely different type of energy, thousands or tens of thousands of times greater than chemical energy, which enters the body in an entirely different form, then what?"

"Huh?" Su Qing, cookie in his mouth, blinked his clueless eyes, racked his brains, and said, "Then you blow up like a balloon?"

Cheng Weizhi nodded. “That’s one option. When a large amount of energy enters the human body without a way to release or use it, the storage organ will rupture—the energy crystal I mentioned is just such an organ for converting and storing energy. Those researchers use some extreme method to forcefully stimulate it. You can understand it as a latent capacity of the human body. The function of the energy crystal is precisely to use some means to absorb emotions and convert them into energy. That’s the new type of energy I mentioned, so-called ‘emotional energy.’”

At this point, Su Qing already somewhat understood. At last he gave up on grinding his teeth on the cookie. He stared for a while, then, with a miserable expression, said, “No...no way. I just heard someone say that the grey seals’ mission is to cover for the blue seals, absorb some opposing emotion. Shit, that Chen asshole even said that they’d let me go after three times. I knew it couldn’t be that easy!”

Cheng Weizhi quietly watched Su Qing spring up, return to a fretful state, and start pacing around the room.

It was probably a wrong impression, but Su Qing felt the grey seal on his body begin to burn. He suddenly stuck his hand fiercely into his shirt and clawed a few times. Welts at once rose on his tender skin, but the flowing grey seal remained there untouched.

Su Qing took a very deep breath and inadvertently looked at Cheng Weizhi. He thought, Forget it, the old fellow is all right, so what am I fretting about? This uncle just said he’s been here two months, so it seems I can also survive intact for at least two months. I can take my time thinking up a way to escape.

Then he plopped back down in front of Cheng Weizhi, found himself a cup, poured water, and downed it irrevocably. He said, “According to what you’ve said, the blue seals can use the energy, and the grey seals can’t use the energy. So they can leap onto roofs and vault over walls, but we just have to sit around waiting to turn into balloons?”

Cheng Weizhi said, “Yes, I’ve inferred that because the grey seals’ energy crystals are externally stimulated, there may be a flaw in the energy crystal’s energy system circuit.”

Su Qing restlessly tugged his hair, understanding that he couldn’t count on others in this damned place. He could only count on himself to think of a way. He considered it disconsolately for a while, then said, “Then can you

tell me precisely what is going on with all the blue seals, grey seals, and auxiliaries?”

Cheng Weizhi got out a piece of paper and wrote four words on it: “happiness,” “sadness,” “fear,” “anger.” He pointed with his pen tip and said, “I’ll start from the top. Each person here, whether blue seal or grey seal, has only one energy crystal. In other words, each person can only absorb energy of one aspect. Emotions are normally separated into eight basic types, but it may be that the other emotions aren’t strong enough, or there may be some other reason—at any rate, at present, there are only four kinds that can be used for energy.”

Su Qing concentrated whole-heartedly. He had never listened so earnestly to a lesson in his life—actually, thinking about it, if he had tried a little harder in life, he wouldn’t have met Guo Julin, so he wouldn’t have been dumped by him, so he wouldn’t have gone to drink away his depression and have a one-night stand, so he wouldn’t have come in contact with that plague god Hu Bugui, and so he wouldn’t have attracted Chen Lin’s band of psycho blue seals...

But so what? There was that expression again—there was no such thing as a medicine for regret.

Cheng Weizhi continued: “According to current classification, those who can absorb happiness are called Type 1s, and the rest are named in similar fashion—sadness types are Type 2s, fear types are Type 3s, anger types...”

He smiled somewhat self-mockingly. “You saw them—the so-called Type 4s.”

Su Qing, counting on his fingers, said, “Happiness is the opposite of sadness, so...fear is the opposite of anger? What happens if there isn’t a grey seal?”

Cheng Weizhi said, “If one aspect of a person’s emotions is depleted without limit, then the opposite will be amplified without limit. What do you think will happen?”

“Oh, you get Bao SEED².” Su Qing nodded, considered, then asked, “So if the grey seals are divided into this many types, then the opposing blue seals must also have corresponding types, so they could be a scourge onto each other—what are they doing dragging in so many sacrificial victims?”

Cheng Weizhi said, “I’ve inferred that when a Conversion Type Blue Seal absorbs energy, it’s like a person eating food. Some people can eat one mantou and be full, others eat half a mantou and it’s enough, while others can’t get full on two. But grey seals are different. Grey seals absorb emotions passively.”

“Oh, filling in the gaps. So they’re responsible for eating the meat, while we’re responsible for finishing off the soup.” Su Qing nodded again. After nodding, he caught up and asked, “So how do you know all this?”

Cheng Weizhi laughed bitterly. “The blue seals operate on a large scale. When they go out to ‘hunt’ emotions, they call it a ‘feast.’ I’ve taken part in one feast already. That feeling...”

He took a deep breath and actually trembled slightly. Su Qing’s eyes widened, and he subconsciously held his breath. He heard Cheng Weizhi say, “When it happened, I couldn’t hear any sound. I felt like the air around me was squeezing my brain with all its might. It hurt so much I wanted to bash my head against a wall or cut it off...but at the same time, I could still feel a bizarre happiness.”

“Happiness?”

“I’m a Type 1 Auxiliary Blue Seal, the happiness type. External emotions and my own emotions attracted each other, evoking many, many happy memories. The more it hurt, the happier I was. I desperately reminded myself that it was all fake, that all the illogical feelings came from outside. Gradually, as the pain increased, I could distinguish which were my emotions and which were external.”

Su Qing opened his mouth wide and didn’t know what to say.

Cheng Weizhi sighed. “You’re a good child. You must remember, if they take you out to do this thing, you must not get confused. You must not get confused by others’ emotions, or else you’ll be finished. Before your energy crystal can rupture, you’ll become like that crowd of lunatics and idiots out there.”

Stammering, Su Qing asked with boundless reverence, “Can-can you tell me, how-how not to get confused?”

“Be calm, use seamless logic, and understand what kind of person you are.”

Su Qing was silent for a while. The foolish expression left his face. The young man’s profile was astonishingly beautiful. When he wasn’t bewil-

dered, wasn't dejected, wasn't playing dumb, he really did look somewhat presentable.

Then, with a trace of hope, he asked, "If I do these three things and don't get confused, will I be able to survive?"

Cheng Weizhi gently closed his eyes and shook his head. "You'll only die with dignity."

Su Qing gave a brief laugh, stood up, and sat dejectedly on his own bedding. He fell back and lay in a sprawl, eyes looking fixedly at the ceiling.

It was already dark. Cheng Weizhi saw that he seemed to have sustained a shock, so he quietly stood up and went to the bathroom to clean himself up and get ready for bed.

When he passed by Su Qing, the young man who hadn't moved in a long time suddenly sat up in bed. "Uncle Cheng, if there's something I don't understand in the future, can I ask you again?"

Cheng Weizhi looked down at him and softly said, "Child, what are you thinking of doing?"

"We must be able to escape." Su Qing looked at him and said, "I've lived for over twenty years, and I never thought that I would die like this. I don't accept it. I don't believe it. We must be able to think of a way to escape."

Cheng Weizhi sighed. "Young man..."

8

THE RZ UNIT

THE YOUNG WOMAN hurriedly walked down the hall, hugging a folder to her chest. She had bangs level with her brows, a fair and clear face, and big eyes. The dazzling smile never seemed to leave her face. She looked like a student still in school, with an unspeakable freshness. This was one of the RZ Unit³'s support personnel, Xue Xiaolu.

At the end of the hall, an office door opened from inside and a dark, skinny man walked out. Seeing her, he called, "Xiaolu."

"Liao-da-ge, is Captain Hu there?"

The man nodded and turned sideways to make way for her.

Strictly speaking, the RZ Unit amounted to a military organization, but its administration had become independent long ago. It specifically targeted the mysterious blue seals that had shown up at some unknown time. The personnel who composed it were generally separated into two parts: field personnel and support personnel. The support personnel included scientific research personnel and medical personnel.

This Liao Chenyuan was an example of a field agent, a sniper by training. He was very amiable, but not much of a talker; he was always somewhat reticent.

Xue Xiaolu knocked on the door and went in. Hu Bugui was on the phone. He made a gesture at her.

Without leave, Xue Xiaolu came over to him and sat down, putting the folder she was holding on Hu Bugui's desk. An unsecured photograph accidentally floated out from inside. She bent down to pick it up. The photograph was of a delicate-featured young man looking a little impatiently at the camera but still forcing a proper enough smile.

After a minute, Hu Bugui put down the phone. His eyes fell on the photograph in Xue Xiaolu's hand, and he frowned. "Has everything been col-

lected? Is there news of him?”

Xue Xiaolu shook her head. “Fang Xiu and Qin Luo have been conducting a thorough investigation. They’re about to hit bottom. Fang Xiu says not even the old South-East Asian drug barons could hide like this. We can probably be certain that he's disappeared.”

Hu Bugui opened the folder, his fingers tracing the words “Su Qing, male, twenty-four years old.” He put a cigarette in his mouth and was silent.

He sat there wrapped in black clouds, each of his cells issuing the warning “I’m in one hell of a bad mood.”

Xue Xiaolu didn’t dare to disturb him. She could only look down at the young man in the photograph. As she looked at him, her thoughts went astray. On the one hand, she consoled herself that as a normal woman, there was nothing unusual in letting her imagination roam when she saw a picture of a handsome young man; on the other hand, she was inwardly shrieking—damn, this Su Qing’s looks really were noteworthy; what was his relationship with Captain Hu?

Captain Hu had only sketchily said that the blue seals had fixed on him while he had been with this person. Under the circumstances, it was likely that he would get dragged in, so he had sent people to check his residence and confirm his safety.

So Xue Xiaolu’s reasoning was as follows: had he been a random bystander, the blue seals, who didn’t all suffer from persecution complexes, wouldn’t have seen just anyone as a threat. So the two of them must have shown a certain degree of intimacy at the time. But if he had been a friend, how could Captain Hu not even know where he lived?

So there were only two possibilities: either this was an online friend he had just met, or he was a one-night stand.

Xue Xiaolu’s feminine instincts told her that their “earnest” Captain Hu wouldn’t go out to meet online friends like a youngster. This had to be a one-night stand, had to be!

She visualized it: after his assignment, an exhausted Captain Hu was hanging around dead bored at a bar. Then this Su Qing walked in. Captain Hu’s eyes lit up. He pounced and put the moves on, all this and that, and then...

“...Xiaolu?”

Hu Bugui looked up and found a strange smile on the young woman's face. Her consciousness had floated off to regions unknown. She didn't react when he called her name, so he rudely picked up the folder and hit her on the head. "Comrade Xue Xiaolu."

"Oh, right!" Xue Xiaolu nearly swallowed her own tongue.

Hu Bugui glared at her irritably. "Go contact public security and collect information about missing persons. See if there's any worthwhile information. Get to work, don't just sit here in front of me."

Xue Xiaolu blinked. "Captain Hu...I'm actually Dr. Lu's assistant, not a specialized data assembler."

Hu Bugui picked up the phone on his desk. "Fine, I'll ask Lu Qingbai for you whether he needs your assistance right now..." Before he finished, Xue Xiaolu had already fled at the speed of light.

The office door shut, and Hu Bugui picked up the photograph Xue Xiaolu had left behind—Su Qing, twenty-four years old. He sighed and scrubbed his own face, thinking, I have to find him. This child is innocent.

Meanwhile, the innocent Comrade Su Qing was starting his chaotic life in the grey house. The course of his life, which ought to have followed the usual pattern of living to old age and dying of sickness, had suddenly jumped the track, traveling on an increasingly out of control wild road.

After further conversation, Su Qing learned that Cheng Weizhi was a university professor. He immediately recovered his equilibrium. He had been feeling that he had ended up here because he was meeting divine retribution for not studying, but this Professor Cheng, who *had* studying, was in the same straits as him.

How did the blue seals select grey seals?

Professor Cheng explained: "I've been observing for a long time and have found that emotions can't be absorbed among the blue seals or between blue seals and grey seals. One out of five people can become a grey seal, so with that criterion, during their 'feasts,' they search for suitable grey seals to fill vacancies."

"So how did you get here?" Su Qing asked.

Professor Cheng gave a bitter laugh. "That day, my son made a fuss about wanting to eat McDonald's. There isn't one near our house, so I had to get on the subway to go buy it for him. Somehow, they got their eyes on me—I didn't even have time to bring home what I bought."

Su Qing nodded and thought profoundly, when a person was unlucky, he could get food stuck in his teeth drinking cold water.

But could you call this being unlucky? This wasn't a natural disaster, it was pure man-made calamity. The next day, when he went into the main hall to eat, he saw the frosty guards and the row of puffed-up self-satisfied white coats and thought, There are some people who can make others unlucky.

Su Qing's protection as a newcomer would probably continue until his first "use." The Type 4s who had already been warned once didn't come mess with him again. They only watched him and Cheng Weizhi from far away with hateful looks, like a pack of wild dogs with their eyes on distant prey, waiting to pounce, so hungry their eyes were red.

On the surface, Su Qing concentrated on eating and drinking, but inwardly he kept watch on that bunch. He had been on friendly terms with some rogues and delinquents. He knew that when these people had lost "turf," they had to get it back. At a time like this, there were only two ways to resolve the problem: those with money pulled out the money, those without money could only pull out the bricks.

Su Qing chewed on his chopsticks and thought it over. It seemed that the kings of hell weren't going to get in his way for now. He had to deal with these little devils, or else the lives and property of the masses would be in danger.

Cheng Weizhi had seen the day before that Su Qing was like a child spoiled by a nanny, chewing his chopsticks while he ate, not chewing his food for ages after putting it in his mouth. He went over and tapped him. "Eat properly."

Before, Su Qing had found it extremely annoying when people said this to him—hurrying him even while he was eating. But this time, these words suddenly made him feel warm inside. He felt there was still someone looking after him and actually put his head down and started to eat in earnest.

The fainting Type 3 from yesterday saw that no one was watching him and came over, too. He introduced himself, and Su Qing learned that this joker was named Tian Feng. His timidity didn't come from the type of his energy crystal; he seemed to be a natural born rabbit. He hadn't been in the grey house long and hadn't even been "used" once, and he was already scared out of his mind.

As he was speaking, the “nudist” female comrade ran over to hug his leg, scaring Tian Feng into a yelp. He leapt up like a lit firecracker and knocked right into a bushy-bearded man with a white towel tied around his head and utensils stuck into the towel like flowers. Knife, fork, chopsticks, and spoon fell all over the ground. The bushy-bearded man was irate: “My flowers have all wilted!”

Tian Feng looked at him, trembling. “I’ll...I’ll plant some more for you...”

The bushy-bearded man made a delicate gesture, pointed to Tian Feng, then brought an iron fist down on his shoulder. In a coquettish grumble, he said, “As if I’d want flowers touched by a layman like you!”

His punch wasn’t serious, but Tian Feng’s little body couldn’t handle it. He backed up two steps and plopped onto the floor, the back of his head hitting a table leg. A bowl of eight-treasure congee fell off the table, all of it pouring onto his head, turning him into a beautiful dragonfruit flower.

This accident attracted the unstoppable laughter of several surrounding lunatics. Some laughed too merrily. They jumped onto the table, turning over dishes. Vegetable juices splattered, plates and bowls flew. Even the people sitting dully waiting to be fed got involved. The lunatics flipped the table and knocked the dull ones over like dominoes, one falling into the next, making a spectacular sight on the floor.

All the white coats frowned. One of them blew the whistle hanging around his neck. At his order, a guard by the door fell out and shot once towards the ceiling. *Bang*—as if a pause button had been pressed, everyone in the main hall simultaneously settled down.

Su Qing had been pulled aside by Cheng Weizhi when the riot started, withdrawing from the great stage of carnage. While no one was paying attention, he quietly stole a fork and a table knife from a table and put them in his pants pocket.

When the meal ended, Su Qing saw the Type 4s from the day before crowding towards him while the white coats weren’t paying attention. Su Qing pushed Cheng Weizhi aside and told him to go on ahead. Cheng Weizhi uneasily turned back to look at him. Su Qing squeezed out a smile and mouthed the words “Don’t worry, it’s all right.”

Then he stuck his hand in his pants pocket. The chill of the metal seemed to give him the power to remain calm. More and more people

crowded towards the exit; this was the most suitable time to take advantage of the confusion—a hand suddenly landed on Su Qing’s shoulder, pulling him back.

In that instant, Su Qing fell back in the direction of the tug. Then he turned and pulled out the fork hidden in his pocket, stabbing hard at the center of the back of the person’s hand.

He was a young man—true, he was kind of a loser, but when he jabbed with all his strength, you definitely couldn’t call it light. The person gave a shriek at once. The skin on the back of his hand was torn. Su Qing took the opportunity to stamp on his lower body—and he didn’t just stamp, he twisted. The fierce-acting Type 4 fell to the ground, eyes rolling straight up in pain.

Su Qing stuck the bloody fork back into his pocket, put on his most contemptuous, most badass expression, and looked at the man. Before the white coats alerted by the shriek could crowd through, he quickly squeezed into the crowd and ran.

It was a long time before his heart rate calmed down. Su Qing seemed to have experienced a great adventure. He felt that he had never in his life been so fucking cool.

9

FATAL FLAW

THE YOUNG MAN on the screen heard the whistle and squeezed right into the crowd like a child slinking off after doing a bad deed. He turned back and pulled a face. He was extremely lively. Among the crowd of people whose expressions were numb or terrified or insane, he was like a unique splash of bright color.

The coffee in Chen Lin's hand was no longer steaming, but he showed no signs of drinking it. With his chin in one hand and his eyes narrowed, he watched the playback of the security camera recordings.

Without Su Qing knowing, he had watched many days of security camera footage. Now Chen Lin's mind was a little numb. Suddenly, like Su Qing on the first day he had become a little grey, he too wondered, was he still human?

He could hear the subtlest feelings in many people's hearts. He had superhuman strength. He possessed vast riches. In this world, he had only to want something to have it.

So-called power sometimes doesn't depend on the number of followers you possess, on how many people will come at your call. As long as you hold something that surpasses others, something that places you above others—as long as ordinary lives are like something you can grasp with your fingertips at any time, break at any time—then you hold authority.

Like Superman, like Spider-Man, like the omnipotent martial arts masters in the stories who can leap onto roofs and vault over walls—it's hard to say whether these people were designed to save the world or only to show the fascination power holds for people.

It captivates people, and it frightens them. It is like a double-edged sword hanging over people's heads, rising and falling, making them think themselves now omnipotent and now powerless.

Just then, a human figure silently appeared standing behind him. Chen Lin didn't turn back. His eyes remained fixed to the screen, once more rewinding the last several days' scenes of Su Qing schooling the Type 4s and playing them again. He shook his cold coffee, then said to the person behind him, "Jiang Lan, don't just show up behind people. Sometimes I'm distracted. I might automatically attack you."

Jiang Lan gave a cold laugh. "You think I'm afraid of you?"

Her eyes swept the screen, seeing the heroic excerpt of Su Qing stamping on a man. She exclaimed in surprise. "I've made an error of judgment. That pretty boy isn't gutless?"

Chen Lin casually spilled the coffee into a flower pot next to him and looked at her. "What, you want to vent your spleen on behalf of your little grey?"

Jiang Lan casually sat on his desk, her attention still on the screen. She absently responded, "The little grey? The little greys aren't my people, only my tools. If your chopsticks knock down my spoon, am I going to break your chopsticks to vent my spleen?"

Her eyes were like a cat's, big and round, and seemed to have a trace of peculiar quiet depths, and there was a bit of makeup on her face, giving her a demonic look. Chen Lin's eyes were hidden behind the lenses of his glasses. He didn't continue the conversation.

But Jiang Lan turned to face him. "Shi Huizhang said he was holding a brief meeting to revise the plan for the next feast. Why didn't you go *this* time?"

Chen Lin laughed lightly, mechanically rewound the recording, and played it again. His manner was irreverent, as though the question wasn't worth a response.

"Shi Huizhang," he said. From his expression and his tone, it was as if that name was a piece of straw he had put in his mouth to chew and disdainfully spat back out. "What the hell is he?"

At the mention of Shi Huizhang, his drained self-confidence came flying back. This was the power of comparison—because he thought that, if you said he was a superhuman as strong as an ox, then Shi Huizhang was the ox. While they seemed to have the same power, they were still beings from completely different dimensions.

Jiang Lan said, “You look down on him, but Gui Song and Luo Xiaofeng take Shi-ge as their guide, and Li Gu goes where the current takes him. If you oppose him so openly, aren’t you afraid Shi Huizhang will trip you up?”

Chen Lin exited the video and closed the laptop. He straightened his clothes and looked at Jiang Lan. “Don’t forget...” As for what she shouldn’t forget, he didn’t breathe a word, only tapped lightly on his collar as though hinting something. “It’s not Shi Huizhang’s place to throw his weight around.”

Jiang Lan’s expression curdled. Seeing Chen Lin heading outside, she couldn’t resist calling him back: “Where are you going?”

Chen Lin didn’t look back. “Going to have a look at my chopsticks.”

Jiang Lan frowned. “Little greys are little greys, not worth a second look. Why do you keep paying attention to him?”

Chen Lin said, “Even with chopsticks, sometimes you come upon a beautifully carved pair and can’t resist admiring them a little longer before they’re discarded as useless—don’t you think?” Then he gently closed the door and went out.

Just then, the carved pair of chopsticks Su Qing was making daily strides in his studies—Cheng Weizhi was a good teacher. He thought that this was fate. Would a normal person provoke lunatics? What person, suddenly dropped into a place like this, wouldn’t be too worried about his own life to pay attention to others, wouldn’t be constantly on edge? Tian Feng’s reaction was the normal one.

Cheng Weizhi didn’t know whether this Su Qing had especially coarse nerves or was himself especially simple. Su Qing could feel afraid, could feel powerless, but these were all passing matters. After a time, he would be back to eating and sleeping and even attempting to think of a way to escape this terrifying grey house.

Though to Cheng Weizhi, all his ideas, like “sneak some butter and smear the guards’ eyes with it” or “steal a white coat’s almighty little carry-on taser”—he obstinately believed that this object that could strike a person like a thunderbolt was a taser—“and cut down all barriers in our way” or else “pretend to be sick to get anesthetic or something, then knock out a blue seal during the next ‘feast’ and hold him hostage”—they were all lousy and far-fetched.

But he would still be moved by his never-abandoned spirit.

Su Qing's thoughts were very simple. He had never expected that he would die like this, and he absolutely wouldn't believe it. So he could only firmly trust in the expression "when we get to the mountain, there will be a way through."

He believed that Professor Cheng was a very learned person. There were strict guards in the grey house's corridors. Apart from when the bell rang at mealtimes, no one wandered the halls. Normally, they stayed in their room with nothing to do. The two of them, one with a late-coming desire to learn emerging for the first time in his life, the other with a teaching addiction that hadn't been satisfied in a long time, simply hit it off from the start.

So Su Qing got busy, learning every day from Teacher Cheng and doing battle with the Type 4s. Sometimes he won a complete victory, sometimes he was wounded in action, and sometimes he looked into new tactics and strategies. Each day was extremely lively.

Cheng Weizhi hadn't clearly said what he used to be a professor of, but he was an excellent tutor. He could tell Su Qing many things. Concretely, he taught principles of logic and psychology, and he could also discourse boundlessly about historical events; he had everything at his fingertips. Now and then he would insert some of his inferences about blue seals and energy crystals.

"By what mechanism does the energy crystal operate? I considered it at length without being able to understand its mysteries, until one day I heard a bit of conversation between two white coats. Then I learned of the so-called 'Law of Emotional Attraction.'"

Today, a Type 4 had gone crazy and scraped Su Qing with a shard of porcelain, drawing blood. Cheng Weizhi had gone out to ask a white coat for a first-aid kit and was carefully bandaging his wound. Su Qing, meanwhile, was becoming tougher the more he fought, and he had become considerably more agile. He had picked up quite an understanding of fighting. He had one leg carelessly crossed over the other while sticking out his bleeding paw, listening to Professor Cheng discuss the energy crystal. Having listened to this point, he couldn't resist asking, "What does the Law of Emotional Attraction mean?"

"Have you ever had the feeling that when everyone around you is laughing, it's easy for you to be driven to laughter as well? And when everyone

around you is sad, even if you aren't sad yourself, you still become sad along with them?" Seeing Su Qing nod thoughtfully, Cheng Weizhi concluded: "That's the Law of Emotional Attraction in action. Simply put, it means that human emotions with similar origins attract each other."

Su Qing, half-understanding, tilted his head. "You mean that the energy crystal actually functions as an intermediary, letting some emotion of my own attract those of others? Like...a magnet?"

"And like a lever—careful not to get the wound wet." Cheng Weizhi finished tying the bandage for him and admonished him, then drew a lever on paper with one long arm and one short arm. "My understanding is that the energy crystal is like this lever. It uses a comparatively small amount of your own emotions to leverage a large quantity of emotions with a common origin, then guide it into the energy crystal and convert it into energy. If that's true, then we can come to a conclusion—the energy crystal itself only possesses a certain attribute. It can't truly distinguish emotions."

"What...does that mean?" Su Qing thought that he understood each word individually, but put together they knocked him dizzy.

Cheng Weizhi patiently explained: "It means that the energy crystal is like an animal that can only eat one type of food, but it can't tell itself what it's eating."

"Oh, it's stupid." Saying this, Comrade Su Qing took no notice of the fact that this "stupid" thing existed in his own body.

Cheng Weizhi smiled. "If the foregoing conclusions are accurate, then we can understand why each person only has one type of energy crystal. The fact that up to this point no one has had two types bears out my conclusion from the opposite direction."

Su Qing had just turned a corner, but now he opened his mouth, feeling dizzy again.

Cheng Weizhi explained: "I don't know about the blue seals, but a grey seal's energy crystal is normally externally stimulated. You know that as long as you're alive, your brain will operate without stopping. All of your emotions maintain a certain balance through subtle proportions in your body's hormones. If you add yet another energy crystal to this, what will you get?"

Su Qing pressed on his temples and said, "A big mess."

"Right, you get a big mess. Ordinarily it isn't a problem, but the moment the energy crystal is stimulated, you instinctively begin to absorb emotions. I

trust you've already felt it. At that time, an energy inside your body absorbs emotions from the outside world. The absorbed emotions will be split into two paths in the instant the new energy crystal forms, then blend with another type of feeling in the new energy crystal. You'll fall into chaos."

Su Qing lay on the table like a dead dog and indicated, "Teacher Cheng, I'm in chaos right now."

Cheng Weizhi stood by the window, hands pressing on the window frame, looking at a small patch of woods. The trees were listless in the winter cold. He said, "You know, Su Qing, I actually suspect that there's a flaw in this energy crystal system, even for the blue seals."

Before Su Qing could respond, a voice came from the door: "Oh? What flaw?"

When he heard this voice, all the hair on the back of Su Qing's neck stood up.

10

PREPARATIONS FOR THE FEAST

SU QING jumped as though his tail had been stepped on—Chen Lin stood with arms crossed beside the door that had been opened at some point. He looked at Su Qing with a smile that made you want to smack him, then turned his eyes on Cheng Weizhi and asked again: “Tell me, the flaw in the blue seals’ energy crystal system—what is it?”

Cheng Weizhi became obviously nervous at his appearance, all ten fingers digging firmly into the window frame as though searching for support. But Su Qing had obviously become bolder after nearly a month of tempering. He had found the means of remaining firm in battle. In his one-on-four fights, the germ of an inclination towards violence had unconsciously grown up. From a delicate pretty boy young master, he had turned into a hardy expert fighter.

His eyes fell on Chen Lin’s neck. Grinding his teeth, he began considering where to strike.

Chen Lin passed right by him and looked Cheng Weizhi over. “Whose little grey are you?”

Cheng Weizhi leaned against the window and quietly said, “I’m...a Type 1.”

“Oh, a Type 1.” Chen Lin nodded. “Li Gu and Gui Song’s little greys are Type 1s. What a pity... You’re right. The blue seals’ energy crystal system does in fact contain a flaw. Human emotions are often mixed together and can’t be categorized so clearly. During each energy conversion, many unnecessary things get taken in. They need to be cleaned up externally.”

“In a...” Cheng Weizhi couldn’t resist responding, but when he spoke he found that his throat was parched. He cleared his throat a little unnaturally. “In a metabolic system that hasn’t successfully integrated with the organism, there will be many problems...”

Seeing the two of them begin to go back and forth discussing scientific problems, Su Qing thought that such an opportunity wouldn't come again. He stealthily picked up a fruit knife from the coffee table—it had been brought out by the Type 4s, then seized by Su Qing—gently extended the blade, and slowly came up behind Chen Lin.

“For example, unsteadiness,” Chen Lin said. Just then, while he was distracted by talking, Su Qing seized his chance and raised the little knife, jabbing down towards Chen Lin's neck. As though he had eyes on the back of his head, Chen Lin raised a hand and precisely caught Su Qing's wrist. His strength was astonishing. Su Qing felt as though his wrist was about to snap. He was dragged down, and the small knife fell to the floor.

Without any effort, Chen Lin twisted his arm behind his back and held him to himself, one hand clutching his neck. His fingers were ice-cold. Su Qing was forced to raise his head. Chen Lin laughed and looked up, carelessly saying to Chen Weizhi, “If we don't go through a cleaning for a long time, we enter a very unsteady state, like a grey seal going into mental chaos on his first mission from lack of habit. Our seal dims, our eyes become bloodshot, and also...”

He lowered his head and sniffed the side of Su Qing's neck, then glanced up at him. “It becomes very hard for us to be responsible for our own behavior—Su Qing, you were so well-behaved when you first came here. How come you can make such a disturbance now?”

Su Qing thought, Like hell I'm afraid of you, I've still got an invincible little steel fork in my pocket.

Then Chen Lin reached into his pocket. Su Qing felt a chill at heart and thought, I'm done for. I forgot this Martian shitheel reads minds.

Actually, Chen Lin could only sense others' emotions; he couldn't really read minds. The main reason he knew this brat was hiding a lethal weapon in his pocket was that he had seen it many times on the security monitor. Those comrades whose IQs had been shattered by anger had come to grief from it.

Su Qing howled. “Where-where the fuck are you touching?”

Chen Lin took the steel fork from his pocket and dropped it on the ground, then stuck his ice-cold fingers into Su Qing's shirt, sliding up along his waist, so chilly that Su Qing gave a start. The smile on Chen Lin's face

was gone. “What, after this long, you still haven’t figured it out? Little greys aren’t people, they’re our...personal property.”

As Chen Lin spoke, he brought his hand around to Su Qing’s chest and lightly pinched, hearing him hiss.

Before, it had always been Su Qing feeling up others. He hadn’t thought that today he would be felt up by this undesirable wretch in glasses. Su Qing felt sick at heart. It was as though ants were crawling all over his body, utterly revolting. But before he could say anything, Cheng Weizhi flared up.

Professor Cheng, having lived to such a great age, had heard of some social depravities and thought “Even such a thing exists—public morality really isn’t what it used to be,” then hadn’t taken it to heart. He really hadn’t expected that he himself would one day encounter a pinnacle of shamelessness like Chen Lin.

Of course, he didn’t know that Su Qing was in fact also very shameless. In Professor Cheng’s heart, he was a studious, sensible, righteous child, simply like a white lotus, a resplendent ray of sunshine that had lit up the whole grey house.

Cheng Weizhi’s face turned red. Pointing at Chen Lin, he said, “You, y-you let him go! He’s still a child, how can you do this kind of thing to him? Was your conscience eaten by a dog?! You...you’re a beast in human clothing, a swine!”

Su Qing’s high school homeroom teacher’s assessment of him had been: “Don’t be so pleased with yourself because you’re a bit clever and your family has some stinking money. Sooner or later, you’ll be the dregs of society!”

His university advisor’s assessment of him had been: “How could the Party and the people have brought up a useless thing like you?”

His dad had been even more direct. Mentioning him, his third-person address had always been “that damn son of mine.”

No one had ever said “he’s still a child.” Su Qing even forgot to struggle, staring, blank and touched, at Professor Cheng with his poor eyesight.

“You’re committing a crime!” Professor Cheng seethed.

Chen Lin laughed lightly and let go of Su Qing, saw him stumble two steps before finding his footing, then stuck a hand in his coat pocket. “Human laws are nothing to do with me. Those RZ Unit bastards are also nothing to do with me, unless they can take me down with a single bullet.”

An oppressive, somewhat mad smile emerged on his calm face. He looked profoundly at Su Qing and extended his other hand as if to touch his hair. Su Qing dodged it as though dodging something dirty.

Chen Lin indifferently drew back his hand. "I came to tell you that the next 'feast' will begin in ten days. I hope that you... Su Qing, I hope you can still be so frisky then."

He pushed up his glasses and turned to leave. At the door, he looked back again and laughed. "I mean it."

He closed the door and left.

Su Qing twisted the wrist Chen Lin had bruised and thought, Chen, you motherfucking four-eyes, you'd better look out and not fall into my hands.

Then he smiled comfortingly at the distressed Cheng Weizhi. "Uncle Cheng, I'm all right, look, and it's all thanks to you. We aren't scared of him. How can good people be scared of bad people?"

Very two-faced and phony.

The wound Cheng Weizhi had just bandaged for him had been bloodied again by Chen Lin. Professor Cheng quickly took him aside to sit. Su Qing couldn't help being curious again: "Uncle Cheng, what were you two just talking about? What did you mean, 'a metabolic system that hasn't successfully integrated with the organism'?"

Cheng Weizhi said, "The metabolic processes of living things can roughly be separated into 'matter metabolizing' and 'energy metabolizing.' There's no need to go into energy metabolizing, the general idea is that these processes store and release energy. 'Matter metabolizing' plainly speaking, are the processes of 'absorbing,' 'assimilating,' 'decomposing,' and 'excreting' matter. We analyzed the energy crystal's entire circuit for transforming energy. Did you notice a problem?"

Su Qing frowned and thought about it, then saw the light: "Oh, I get it, there's no excretion process!"

He subconsciously wanted to appear a little more refined in front of Professor Cheng, so he bit back the follow-up "it eats but doesn't shit."

Cheng Weizhi nodded. "There's nothing absolute in this world, so how can you guarantee that the purity of the emotions absorbed by the blue seals will be one-hundred percent? And if it isn't, over time, even if it's only a little, emotions that can't be used by the energy crystal will accumulate. That's unnatural."

Su Qing automatically visualized Chen Lin lying on an enormous instrument looking constipated while some white coats encircled him and opened up his guts to remove the “excrement” for him. He instantly felt much more balanced. His wrist didn’t even hurt anymore.

But Cheng Weizhi seemed to have thought of something else. Looking at Su Qing, he sighed. “I came before you did, and I’ll certainly leave before you do, as well.”

As the old man spoke, his eyes unexpectedly reddened. Su Qing, not even daring to breathe loudly, waited. After a long time, Cheng Weizhi finally continued: “Remember, whatever you encounter in the future, you can’t get confused. Draw a line for yourself and look at it often, tell yourself you can’t retreat over that line. This way, you’ll know what kind of person you are. You’ll never go astray...

“Also, I have a son about the same age as you.”

Su Qing stared. He had thought that the son “making a fuss about wanting McDonald’s” was a snot-nosed little brat. He saw Cheng Weizhi wipe his eyes and force a smile. Pointing to his head, he said, “My son is naturally... missing something that other children have. He only has the intelligence of a five- or six-year-old. His name is Cheng Ge. His mom couldn’t take the stress and left long ago. I don’t know how he’s surviving on his own when I’ve been here so long. If you get out of here in the future, there’s a slip of paper under my pillow with my address on it. You go look in on him for me, all right? I beg of you...”

Su Qing quickly cut him off: “Even if I don’t get out, I’ll tell others in the future. Someone will have to get out, right? Anyway, I think I’ll definitely be able to get out. I’ve always had accurate premonitions, since I was little. I’m not lying to you, really. Not only will I get out, I’ll think of a way to root you out, too. So don’t worry.”

Cheng Weizhi shook his head and sighed. “You think too simply. I feel that these things—”

He didn’t continue. Su Qing later thought that it was as if his cloudy old eyes could foresee a disaster. That day, the two of them went to sleep without speaking, though each had his thoughts in a whirl.

Ten days passed before their eyes as if at the speed of light. One morning, before mealtime came, a sharp ringing pierced everyone’s ears. Su Qing gave a start and heard Cheng Weizhi whisper, “They’re here.”

11

CHEN LIN

SU QING at last saw all the blue seals. There were six of them in all, five male and one female. The woman was that tigress Jiang Lan. Of the men, he had seen three: one was the smiling tiger Chen Lin, one was the square-faced Shi Huizhang, and the third was the “underworld element” who had come to kidnap him, reported to be named Li Gu—Professor Cheng was his little grey.

He hadn't seen the other two. One had very long hair and a gloomy look. Cheng Weizhi told him that this was Luo Xiaofeng, a Type 4 Blue Seal like Shi Huizhang. The little greys he used were Type 3s, the fear type. The last one had something wrong with him. He stood in the crowd of blue seals self-consciously occupying a footman's position. He was short, around a meter sixty-five at a visual estimate, skinny as a monkey and flinching. When he stood next to the stalwart Shi Huizhang, they looked just like Timon and Pumbaa in *The Lion King*—this was the Gui Song whom Chen Lin had mentioned.

Cheng Weizhi looked up and found at once that Chen Lin was staring at Su Qing with a meaningful smile on his face, so he surreptitiously pulled Su Qing behind himself, struggling to straighten his body and put on an expression of stern righteousness, fearlessly returning the villain Chen Lin's gaze.

Each blue seal would choose one little grey to take along. All the grey seals had been herded into the main hall by the armed guards and stood there panicked and uneasy. The blue seals scrutinized them loftily, like butchers choosing an animal fattened and ready for the slaughter.

Su Qing for the first time in his life felt the power of the food chain—the endless pillaging of one species by another and no way to resist, a cruel and

eternal jungle law running from beginning to end, like a brand on every spirit.

Without any suspense, Chen Lin chose Su Qing. Tian Feng was unluckily chosen by Luo Xiaofeng. Su Qing looked at his expression, despairing and on the point of collapse, and thought he would faint again. Luckily, Luo Xiaofeng glared at him fiercely just then, and Tian Feng took strength from that menacing and disgusted gaze, managing to keep upright and walk towards Luo Xiaofeng.

Jiang Lan also chose one of her Type 4s, who still had a bruise left over from where Su Qing had hit him with a frying pan. This fiendish person, hearing Jiang Lan pick him out, put on a panicked and helpless expression, instantly shrinking and bleaching from a big tiger to a little sheep. He shuffled over to Jiang Lan's side like a virtuous girl forced into prostitution.

Of course, the reason Su Qing was looking all over the place and inwardly mocking everyone in turn was that he was in fact also nervous, so nervous his hands were covered in sweat. His legs shook as he stood. He could only pinch his thigh with a hand in his pocket and shift his attention, attempting to hold back the urge to piss.

The lucky thing was, Cheng Weizhi wasn't chosen this time. When they were taken away, Su Qing saw Cheng Weizhi desperately squeeze out of the crowd and stretch out his neck, looking at him, struggling to mouth some words to him as though eager to convey something.

Chen Lin dropped his hand on Su Qing's shoulder and practically pushed him forward. Su Qing desperately turned his head and saw Cheng Weizhi, red-faced, finally vanish from his line of sight. He guessed that Cheng Weizhi had been saying "don't get confused."

This was Su Qing's first time leaving the grey house in over a month. The weather was rotten. It was grey, and the sun seemed to have only one bar of power left, occasionally struggling at death's door only to stick its head out of the dark clouds. Any moment, it was going to rain. A breeze blew through the thick woods. A row of blue-uniformed people stood in front of them like flagpoles. Su Qing noticed that their sleeves also had "Utopia" printed on them.

Chen Lin released the hand holding Su Qing's shoulder and took something like a pen out of his pocket. He pressed down on the "pen cap," and Su Qing felt as if a steel wire had been strapped around his neck. He

couldn't help reaching up to grab it. A faint crackling came from his fingertips, as if he had been shocked by static electricity.

It was just a moment, and then there was nothing there. Su Qing rubbed his neck, feeling around, and didn't find anything.

Chen Lin put the "pen" away in his pocket. "With this, even if you get lost, I'll still be able to find you."

Su Qing looked at him hatefully, thinking, So this dickwad put a leash on me, and it's a leash with GPS.

Chen Lin looked at him and laughed. He seemed to be in a good mood. Then he extended a hand and patted Su Qing's cheek. The other Blues Seals had gone far up ahead with their little greys. Jiang Lan turned back to look at them called, "Chen Lin, if you want to rut, you can wait until we get back tonight. Hurry up!"

Chen Lin ignored her. He pulled Su Qing over and said almost inaudibly into his ear, "After we get back, if you haven't become like...*them*, you won't have to stay in the grey house anymore."

Su Qing frowned, not understanding what he meant.

Five minutes later, they arrived in a wide open space. There were some helicopters grounded there. The little greys had their eyes blindfolded and their ears plugged and boarded the helicopters in ignorance.

Su Qing couldn't help starting to let his thoughts go astray. Like in murder mysteries, he silently counted, concentrating with all his might on feeling whether the helicopter was heading left or right, attempting to determine its route. But he couldn't keep it up for two minutes before he was so disoriented he didn't know which direction was which.

After flying for an unknown time, Su Qing was put down, and someone helped him into a car. This time, never mind counting, even Su Qing's basic sense of time was gone. All that remained in his head a line of lyrics going "so long, so long."

When his blindfold was removed, the other blue seals and grey seals had all been taken off somewhere, and only Chen Lin was left in front of him, as well as the rock-steady back of the head of a blue-uniformed driver.

Chen Lin looked at him, opened the car door, and got out. He looked back and saw Su Qing still curled up motionless in the car, then went to the other side of the car like a flash of lightning, opened that door, and lifted Su Qing from inside.

Chen Lin put on sunglasses and laughed coldly. “What, last time I saw you, weren’t you heroically trying to stab me with a fruit knife? Why so cowardly now?”

Su Qing avoided his eyes, lowered his head, and didn’t speak. His heart beat faster and faster—this was outside, he told himself. There were people, there were police. He could call for help. He could run. There would be no better chance than this...

As he thought this, all of a sudden, his neck hurt. Su Qing’s scalp bristled. Immediately after, he felt the “collar” seem to sink into his neck, pass right through his skin to strike his nerves. Su Qing subconsciously grabbed at it, but apart from getting a faint static shock to his fingers, he didn’t seize on anything substantial. His nails dug into his flesh, as if he wanted to strangle himself.

Chen Lin expressionlessly pulled Su Qing’s hand away. “What are you hoping for? Su Qing, stop dreaming. From the moment you were confirmed as a Type 2 Auxiliary Type Blue Seal, the company put a magnetic neckband on you. Only I can control the switch.”

Su Qing bent over. He abruptly found that he couldn’t make a sound. He could only pluck Chen Lin’s sleeve as if in entreaty.

Chen Lin sighed and lightly put a hand on his head. His fingertips passed downward through the soft ends of Su Qing’s hair and fell on his earlobe with its black stud earring. He lifted his chin.

Su Qing’s vision was blurred, tears pouring out nonstop from the stimulus. Chen Lin looked him over for a while, then turned off the magnetic neckband. Su Qing immediately felt the pressure on his neck vanish. He let out a long sigh of relief—while he opened his mouth, he found he still couldn’t make a sound.

Su Qing first wiped the blood off his neck with the back of his hand, then wiped his tears. He actually didn’t feel there was anything humiliating in this. When he was in his right mind, he believed himself to have a very strong backbone, but when you were in so much pain, who wouldn’t cry? Even that bastard Chen Lin would cry, he staunchly reassured himself.

Chen Lin pointed at his chest and quietly said, “I can hear the voice in there. Don’t try any futile escape attempts.”

Su Qing followed him, thinking, You’re just showing off.

Concerning the topic of whether Chen Lin could read minds, Professor Cheng had issued the conclusion that this ought to be untenable.

So called “mind-reading” was “knowing what other people were thinking,” being able to perceive the operations of others’ brains. But a person’s brain contained tens of billions of neurons. Each second it had hundreds of thousands of different chemical reactions and dealt with innumerable pieces of information. If Chen Lin really could “read minds,” then he would long ago have been driven mad by the volume of information.

So Professor Cheng had concluded that this person must have had some sort of sensory nerve optimized through the development of the blue seal energy crystal, which let him sense the emotional trends of people within a certain area around him.

With one hand, Su Qing held his neck where he had scratched it and ferociously looked at Chen Lin’s back, thinking, There are dogs that have such good noses they can sniff out their owners’ emotions. Doesn’t that mean you have a dog’s nose? What’s so great about that?

Chen Lin didn’t look back at him, only walked on ahead. The blue uniform sat in the car, showing no intention of following them. Su Qing was following him cautiously, neither close nor far. He could sense Su Qing’s intense emotions. He knew that this beautiful youth was right now desperately forcing down his own unease and fear, revealing loathing, resentment, and subtle disdain.

But when Su Qing’s gaze wasn’t on him, his attention was easily attracted by the crowds coming and going, by the buildings, and by the cars. At these times, traces of irrepressible “fondness” and “happiness” would well up inside him.

He missed this place, missed its liveliness...as well as a vivid life, Chen Lin thought, with his hand in his exquisite coat’s pocket constantly stroking the magnetic neckband’s little controller. He was a little lost. This was the human world. It wasn’t his place.

The crowds coming and going made him feel strange. He thought that his own feelings were increasingly sluggish. Only when he activated the energy crystal’s absorption could he plunder others’ love and hate, remember how he used to be.

It was as though he had forgotten that some years ago he had still been one of them.

Chen Lin took Su Qing to a large-scale shopping mall in the city center. There seemed to be some event going on inside. Chen Lin walked right in and made straight for the “off limits to customers” working area, as though this was his own backyard. Su Qing somewhat meanly looked forward to seeing him get put out by security.

But that didn’t happen. The security guard was very respectful towards Chen Lin, even called him “President Chen.” Chen Lin didn’t even remove his sunglasses. He nodded carelessly and boldly walked into the elevator, waiting for Su Qing, just as if he owned the place.

Su Qing was dumbfounded for a spell, extremely off balance. He thought, Damn it, you really can cover up murder with philanthropy. The Buddha has even given up and packed it in. What kind of sorry times are we living in?

He followed Chen Lin into the elevator as though in a dream. They went all the way to the top floor. Chen Lin walked in front of him in silence and took several turns to arrive in a control room. He pulled out a key and opened a little door. After going through the passage inside, he stopped.

Su Qing stretched out his neck and looked around—it turned out that all the people taking part in the event were at their feet.

Chen Lin opened a briefcase he had brought with him. An instrument popped out of it. He got out a swab, disinfected the back of his hand and Su Qing’s, then pulled out a needle connected to something or other, stuck it into a vein in the back of Su Qing’s hand, and fixed it in place with tape.

The moment the needle went in, Su Qing shrank away. Chen Lin looked up at him. Those cold eyes seems to stab painfully into his neck. So he obediently spread out his hand, feeling that he was as stiff as a frozen pig trotter.

Chen Lin lowered his head and attached a tube to himself as well. Suddenly, he explained, “There’s nothing to worry about. It’s only to make sure you don’t get overloaded.”

Su Qing looked at him, a little perplexed, but Chen Lin wasn’t looking at him. He laughed quietly and didn’t explain anything else.

He pressed a red button and closed his eyes. Su Qing couldn’t make a sound. His eyes only rolled this way and that in alarm. Slowly, an indescribable feeling enveloped his whole body.

12

PURSUIT

SU QING thought that his consciousness was like a sea. Normally it was calm and tranquil, as long as the wind didn't rise. If it did, the slightest movement could induce a boundless hurricane. Then, hints of the enormous black hole hiding under that mirror-like stillness would faintly appear.

How much sadness could one person bear in a lifetime?

Sometimes Su Qing thought that the painful events in the past hadn't truly passed. It was only that with the passage of time, the memories were no longer fresh. They had all become yellowed old photographs, pressed beneath the numerous and complicated activities of his consciousness. Otherwise, why would all his former feelings be so vivid in his mind when stimulated by a single touch?

He could feel something like a faint electric current passing through his whole body, not painful, only slightly numbing. And he felt once again that sense of emptiness, like that day he had lain on the ice-cold instrument, as if he had shed his body and entered a half-sleeping, half-waking state. Something was constantly attacking his brain, as though it was clogging his body with all its might.

Gradually, Su Qing felt the pain Cheng Weizhi had spoken off. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see anything clearly. With his remaining awareness, he couldn't tell whether he was crying. He only felt extremely pained and extremely sad.

He wanted to cry aloud, but his body wouldn't take orders. Despair, like a shoot, grew from his heart, dyeing all his memories a boundless dim grey.

An indistinct voice sounded in his ears, calling his name: "Su Qing, Mama's little fellow..."

A door seemed to appear before his eyes, dismal white. Su Qing hesitantly reached out to push it open and saw that once-beautiful woman, her head

bald from the chemo, looking at him yearningly. Her neck was very thin, as though it couldn't hold her head up anymore. She tried desperately to raise her head from the pillow and failed time after time. Her body was stuck full of transparent tubes, as though her life was tied in place. The tubes couldn't be undone, or else her life would scatter.

The woman beckoned to him: "Come, come to Mama."

A pair of hands dropped lightly on his shoulders. Su Qing turned to look. It was Su Chengde. He seemed to have shrunk, returning to his cowardly and confused youth. He hesitated, then walked step by step to the side of the hospital bed.

Su Qing remembered, this was the last time he had seen his mom—

The woman raised a skinny hand. Su Qing immediately bent down, took her hand, and put it on his head. She smiled softly and laboriously. "Eat well and grow tall, like your dad..."

These were her last words.

Su Qing began to cry, but the sound of crying seemed to come from other mouths. It was all around, crowding his mind. The whole world of his consciousness echoed with bitter cries rising and falling in succession, keener and keener, more and more resonant, scraping his mind and body like an inexorable tornado. Su Qing felt that the young self in his consciousness was going to be torn apart by the wind.

In that moment, a strange voice suddenly rose in his heart, saying to him, "Don't get confused."

Don't get confused...about what?

Don't get confused about these voices, these feelings. They belong to others. If you can't withstand them, you'll be assimilated by them and become worthless.

"Eat well and grow tall, like your dad..."

"It's all right. Mom is gone, but Dad loves you."

"Get the hell out of here! Get out! I have no son like you. I make no claims of kinship on you. Starting today, you can call whoever the fuck you want your dad—call a dog your father if it pleases you. I, Su Chengde, have no son like you!"

"Su Qing, let's break up—"

"Su Qing, don't get confused."

"Su Qing..."

“Su Qing...”

Su Qing desperately curled up and covered his ears, but the cries were as inescapable as ulcers on the bone. He began to shout inwardly: “Fuck your grandmother, Chen Lin! All you blue seals go fuck yourselves! You’re going to the depths of hell! Miserable deaths for all of you! I don’t want to think about it anymore... I don’t want to think anymore... I beg you... No more...”

When Chen Lin realized that things had gone overboard, the indicator needle on the little box had reached the critical level, swaying violently. Su Qing was kneeling on the ground, spasming all over, eyes open wide and gaze empty. His fingers were digging into his chest. If not for the thickness of his clothes, Chen Lin nearly suspected he would have dug out his own heart.

Chen Lin stared. This had never happened with the grey seals he had brought before. Generally speaking, Type 2 Grey Seals, as “sadness types,” didn’t have so violent a reaction as “anger types” or “fear types.” The average person would be dulled. Violent and self-harming actions were very rare.

Chen Lin immediately cut the connection between Su Qing and himself and grabbed Su Qing’s arms, holding him down.

Su Qing began to struggle unconsciously. A person out of his mind was always much stronger than normal. Chen Lin was nearly thrown off. He suddenly had a preposterous thought: That bunch of fatheads at the company couldn’t have gotten the type wrong, could they? Is this brat really a Type 2?

There was nothing he could do. He had to take out the switch of the magnetic neckband and give Su Qing a light prod. Su Qing stumbled and fell into his arms. He seemed to regain consciousness somewhat; at any rate he settled down.

He looked blankly in some unknown direction, his long, thick lashes wet with tears, a fine and fragile beauty emerging on his face. Chen Lin suddenly felt his heart soften. He sat on the ground and embraced Su Qing, tentatively patting his back.

Su Qing’s head fell slowly as though he were exhausted. He indistinctly spoke two words. He said: “I’m sorry.”

Chen Lin suspected he hadn't heard clearly. He bent his head and brought it close to his mouth and heard this young man as beautiful as a work of art issuing a belated apology to someone over and over. He sighed, a rare gentle expression appearing on his face. As though humoring a child, he softly said, "It's all right, it's fine now, it's over."

Su Qing's voice gradually fell. Chen Lin felt him curl up in his arms as though about to fall asleep. Just then, Su Qing woke up, moved, and struggled to raise his head.

Chen Lin thought he wanted to express something. He carefully lifted his chin with his fingers and asked, "What is it?"

Then he heard Su Qing precisely articulate: "Chen Lin, fuck your uncle."

Then his head fell and he fainted away.

Chen Lin stared, but he didn't feel angry. Instead, he was somewhat pleased. He thought, This brat really does have spirit. Then he actually couldn't resist laughing silently. His brows, always slightly drawn together, parted—because someone had coveted his uncle.

Chen Lin, his emotions calm, sat on the roof. His view was wide and his arms were full. A breeze came from somewhere and lightly brushed the hair at his temples. He was surrounded by scattered instruments. He began to entertain himself.

This very scene was captured on camera.

In the busy RZ Unit, a young man wearing glasses with ridiculously wide frames turned his head, his expression somewhat excited. "Captain Hu, we have a lock on the location. There's an 80% chance that this is the missing person you were tracking."

Hu Bugui was leaning against the door. His gaze left Su Qing on the screen. He turned to go. "Send the address. Everyone prepare to move."

Two men and one woman stood to follow him. These were the RZ Unit's three field agents—Fang Xiu, Qin Luo, and Liao Chenyuan.

The man in wide-framed glasses stared, then quickly jumped out of his chair and chased a few steps after Hu Bugui. "Captain Hu, don't be so swift and decisive. Let me finish. The energy fluctuations are very small this time compared to previous 'feasts,' and the 'monitor projection' caught someone. I suspect..."

Hu Bugui turned back and looked at him. His gaze was so incisive that it scared the glasses-wearing comrade's weak heart into a quiver. His left foot tripped his right foot and he fell flat on his face, wrung like a fried dough twist.

Fang Xiu squatted down and poked his head. "Lao Xu, what do you suspect?"

The man who had fallen flat pushed up his drooping glasses and earnestly said, "I suspect this is a trap."

Fang Xiu put a hand on his head and stroked it. He sighed. "It must have been hard work thinking that up with your IQ. Congratulations... Hey, Captain Hu, wait up."

Hu Bugui was already pressing forward indomitably, taking his heroes with him to jump into the trap.

The man with glasses sat on the ground looking worried. Xue Xiaolu ran over to apply a bandaid to the place he had scraped while falling.

Xue Xiaolu said, "Technician Xu, even though you're 'the consolation of love' for that Fang Xiu, you still don't have to put yourself to so much trouble."

Bespectacled Xu angrily said, "Have you ever thought that that group of field agents thinks with their muscles? They're boors charging around like farm animals, boors!"

Xue Xiaolu said comfortingly, "Yes, yes, Master Xu Ruchong. We're nerds, and nerds will save the world. Should we sink to their level?"

Xu Ruchong grunted, thought, then quickly climbed to his feet and charged in front of his computer screen. "No good, I have to think of a way to widen the range of the 'projection' as soon as possible."

Xue Xiaolu came over and stared curiously. "Master Xu, I heard this 'monitor projection' technology was just approved by the higher-ups. Can we apply it here? That's keeping up with the times."

Xu Ruchong seemed to want to squeeze himself into the screen. He absent-mindedly agreed. "Yeah...this is my patent..."

Xue Xiaolu was dumbfounded. Then she also stroked Xu Ruchong's head as though wanting some of that magic to rub off on her. Finally she looked at the back of this deity's head, then silently picked up the first-aid kit and left.

Chen Lin was staring into space hugging the unconscious Su Qing. Then his gaze sharpened, and a smile came into the corners of his mouth. He thought, Here it comes.

The plan for the feast had been proposed by Shi Huizhang. The six of them would go their separate ways; there was no need to say what the purpose behind sending Chen Lin to such an obvious location was. Chen Lin picked up Su Qing, glanced at the scrapped instruments, and suddenly took a stride. His figure moved quickly, flitting like a shadow. The next moment, he was standing at the edge of the roof.

A blue seal's senses were several times stronger than an ordinary person's. He looked down from on high, and his gaze fell on a speeding military vehicle not far away.

Then he saw the person driving the car.

"Jackal...I'll give you a big present, how about that?" After he said this, he suddenly leapt down from the roof. Holding Su Qing, he set foot on the wall of the building. The soles of his shoes changed shape, firmly grabbing the wall like a gecko, and he tore along at a speed invisible to the naked eye.

Hu Bugui had an earpiece in his ear, and a small screen in the car was connected directly to Xu Ruchong. They all saw Chen Lin vanish in midair.

Hu Bugui, holding the steering wheel, divided his attention and said to Xu Ruchong, "Follow him."

Xu Ruchong said, "It won't work, Captain Hu, the range of the new technology is..."

"I'm not listening to your nonsense," said Hu Bugui. "What are you going to do?"

There was no answer from the other end. Only the clatter of a keyboard remained. Five minutes later, an image of Chen Lin's form once again appeared on the small screen in front of everyone. The signal was a little unsteady.

Xu Ruchong said, "I'm sorry, Captain Hu, the technology is immature. I can only maintain it for about five minutes..."

Before he finished his sentence, the unit members in the car had automatically braced themselves. When Hu Bugui slammed on the gas pedal, everything in the car began to float as the car leapt up, making turn after turn in a disastrous state fit to bring about a multi-car collision.

13

“FORMER RESIDENCE”

SU QING first blearily opened his eyes and felt himself held in someone’s arms. Then he looked around and was thoroughly awakened—by fear.

Let anyone find themselves flying through the air head-down at maglev speeds—they would all be scared speechless.

Chen Lin felt the person in his arms falteringly clutch him like an octopus and knew he had woken up. He laughed. “You woke up pretty quickly. Well, how about it, feeling good?”

Su Qing was silent for a while, feeling that if he opened his mouth, the wind would choke him. Then he gripped the back of Chen Lin’s coat tightly and stammered, “I...I didn’t...buckle my seatbelt.”

Chen Lin was silent. He was finally beginning to understand that under this delicate exterior were hidden nerves as crude as a bucket. God really could skimp on making people.

Chen Lin suddenly leapt up. Su Qing felt himself helplessly suspended. Though he had managed to scrape through university physics only by treating the teacher to dinner, he still understood that if either he or Chen Lin couldn’t keep a firm grip now, he would fall out of the sky and make a big hole in the ground like a meteorite!

So the meteorite Su began to howl.

His screams mixed with Chen Lin’s clear laughter in an exceedingly thrilling spectacle—luckily the rumble of the cars passing in the street was extremely loud, or else this scene of voices coming from invisible people would have made it onto a paranormal TV show.

Chen Lin leapt up, then fell back down. Su Qing rapidly became heavy and then just as rapidly weightless. His face was white.

The scene in front of his eyes changed constantly. Su Qing didn’t have the strong constitution of a blue seal. Soon his head was spinning, and he

had to close his eyes, forcing down dizzy nausea. After some time, Chen Lin finally put him down.

Su Qing's feet touched the ground and his legs folded. He nearly paid his respects to the ground once more. Luckily Chen Lin was there to help him get his footing.

Chen Lin stuck up his index finger and blinked at Su Qing, who absolutely didn't understand what was happening. Like a child committing a prank, he quietly said, "Don't make a sound."

Su Qing glared at him.

Chen Lin took him to a small residential home. He turned back and saw Su Qing looking around in all directions, then grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shoved him through the gate. Su Qing saw him actually get out a key and unlock the door and couldn't resist asking, "Is this...your place?"

Chen Lin laughed quietly, nodded, and opened the door. "Come in."

Su Qing hesitated. He knew he didn't have any freedom and had to follow him inside, but he hadn't expected Chen Lin to live in such a "human" place—the house wasn't large, not in a luxury estate, and had no connection to a "mansion." It was extremely ordinary, and the furnishings inside were simple and comfortable.

"Where I lived before," Chen Lin said, pointing to the couch. "You can sit down."

Su Qing's throat bobbed; he decided that a wise man knows when not to fight and acquiescently sat down. His movements were cautious, as though he was afraid that an alien life form would pop out of the couch and bite his venerable buttocks.

Chen Lin poured him a cup of water and felt his forehead, looking him over in some surprise. "You seem so soft. I didn't expect you to have a fairly resilient mind. I don't go out 'hunting' often, so I couldn't quite control myself. I figure that the average person would have lost his mind. I didn't expect you to recover so soon...and it seems that you weren't even affected."

Su Qing didn't answer. He lowered his head and drank in silence, thinking, Oh, go banana your guava.

Chen Lin looked at him and laughed, then got out the switch for the magnetic neckband. Su Qing tensed up, guardedly watching Chen Lin.

He saw Chen Lin open up the center of the switch. A little screen popped up from inside. He pressed lightly on it a few times. Su Qing felt as though several ropes appeared in the air and lightly wrapped around his limbs. It was just a moment. Before he could work out what this was, the strange feeling vanished.

Chen Lin put away the switch. "I have some business to take care of. Don't run around."

Su Qing nibbled the edge of the cup and rolled his eyes at him. But Chen Lin seemed very unconcerned. He looked at him, then left. He didn't even lock the door from outside.

As soon as he was gone, Su Qing jumped off the couch and swore, "You shitheel, you think I'll stay put just because you told me to?"

He made two circles around the couch and kicked it. That didn't scratch the itch, so he ground his foot into the couch, leaving a black footprint. Only then did he feel he had gotten his money's worth out of his vandalism. He muttered, "Son of a bitch lives in this human nest, does he really think it means he isn't some kind of freak?"

Then Su Qing laughed nastily and heroically kicked the coffee table over like a bandit. He boldly opened the door and prepared to go out. The moment he walked out the door, the thing around his neck suddenly tightened. Then, as if some switch had been turned on, the magnetic neckband flared up.

Su Qing gritted his teeth and clutched the doorframe. Enduring the pain, he took another step forward. The magnetic neckband seemed to be trying to snap his neck. With each step he took, the pain became more intense.

He accidentally bit through his lip. Pressing down on his neck, he took another step—in his experience, when it hurt bad enough, your sense of pain would go numb. But he was wrong.

When he had taken three steps, Su Qing couldn't stand up anymore. He plopped to the ground and nearly couldn't resist rolling around.

His first attempt failed. He practically crawled back inside on all fours. Once through the door, the magnetic neckband calmed down. Su Qing sat in a heap at the door with his back against the doorframe, gasping deep breaths. After a long time, his breathing calmed. He spat bloody saliva into his hand.

Su Qing let out a long sigh and raised his head. After the shock, his head was clearer. He thought, What should I do now? Sit obediently in the house waiting for that four-eyes Chen to come back? Or go wreck the place?

Su Qing shook his head. He could imagine what Chen Lin would do if he came back and found a mess—he would call over a crowd of his henchmen and wave his hand, and all the furniture would be replaced. It would be useless work, a waste of energy.

Anyway, he was seriously exhausted and didn't have the strength to play an amateur Sun Wukong getting up to mischief. So Su Qing began to ponder. Chen Lin had left him here...and gone to do what?

He had been associating closely with Cheng Weizhi for over a month and had been somewhat influenced by the old professor. He couldn't help applying his usual methods of thought to considering this question—had today's "feast" ended? If it had ended, why not return to that carefully-hidden rathole of a base? Why had he wasted all that roof-leaping, wall-scaling power to bring Su Qing to this place, then left him here?

Was Su Qing in his way?

Su Qing climbed up and poured himself another cup of water, then collapsed on the couch. He washed his bitten lip as he continued to think—what could he be in the way of?

Chen Lin had such vast powers. He could keep him from speaking with the press of a button and confine him inside a circle with another press. Carrying a hundred-some pounds of grown man, he could still leap around in defiance of the force of gravity. So what...?

Suddenly, a light went on in Su Qing's mind. He remembered Cheng Weizhi once referring vaguely to the "RZ Unit." He had heard this term from both Shi Huizhang and Chen Lin. It seemed that unlucky Hu Bugui was a member.

Could it be that for their large-scale criminal activities, they were being pursued by this legendary "RZ Unit?"

Su Qing blindly emulated Cheng Weizhi's "propositions," but he found that he had no grounds to use as proof, only wild guesses.

In fact, he had made a lucky guess—Hu Bugui kept in hot pursuit on Chen Lin's heels. After five minutes, not a second more, the image darkened. When they looked again, he couldn't be found.

Before Hu Bugui could speak, Fang Xiu shouted into the walkie-talkie: “Lao Xu, how can you drop the ball at a critical moment like this? It’s humiliating for all of us!”

Xu Ruchong was so busy he was going around in circles. He had no time to spare to pay attention to him. All he wanted was to grow a third hand.

Hu Bugui spun the steering wheel in a big arc, turning onto a vast stretch of lawn. When they came to a deserted place, he ordered briefly: “Split up, stay in contact.”

Then the whole car actually split into two halves, the driver’s cab completely breaking off from the rear. Two more wheels appeared on the front and back. There was a clatter in front of Fang Xiu. The inner wall of the car opened and “re-grew” a driver’s cab.

When the three of them looked again, Hu Bugui had vanished. Only his voice came faintly from the comms: “He must have noticed us just now. That man...I went up against him once. He wouldn’t lead us here for no purpose.”

In his haste, Xu Ruchong spared the energy to respond, “I told you it was a trap...”

Hu Bugui ignored him and continued: “This man isn’t the same as the other blue seals. I personally think that rather than calling this a trap for us, we should say this is a trap for his companions.”

Xu Ruchong still wouldn’t give in. “Captain Hu, how can you guarantee that your idea is correct?”

Hu Bugui paused. “Xu Ruchong, how long before the pursuing image can be restored?”

Xu Ruchong wilted and didn’t answer.

Qin Luo said, “I have pretty much all of his data collected here. His name is Chen Lin, a Type 1 Conversion Type Blue Seal, so the grey seals he uses are the very uncommon Type 2s. It’s hard to find a suitable grey seal. With this restriction, he can’t ‘eat’ often. My guess is that he’s in a bad position among the blue seals.”

“But he doesn’t have a dependent or compliant personality,” Hu Bugui said, “so for him, if he’s smart enough, rather than dealing with us, it would be better to choose to use us to deal with the other blue seals.”

Xu Ruchong butted in: “No wonder you didn’t hesitate to follow when you saw him on the screen, but...”

Hu Bugui and Fang Xiu spoke in unison: “Xu Ruchong, shut up. The image!”

Xu Ruchong sighed and felt himself move another step further from the field work he yearned for day and night. His fingers tapped out dense strings of commands. Then he hit enter. “OK, it’s restored, but if he’s still moving quickly, in another five minutes we’ll lose...huh?”

Chen Lin’s figure appeared on the screen again. He was alone, his back to the screen, his hands stuck into his coat pockets. He was walking along a street. The grey seal he had been holding was gone. They didn’t know where he had stashed the the unfortunate youth in five minutes’ worth of time.

He seemed to have a particular reaction to the spying gaze. When the “monitor projection” fixed on him again, Chen Lin suddenly came to a halt, turned his head, and made eye contact with the members of the RZ Unit.

The people in the car all froze simultaneously. A mild male voice came from the comms: “A blue seal’s sensory system is a magical thing. Reasonably speaking, the physiological structure shouldn’t be anything different from a normal human’s, but there’s an enormous difference in function... Of course, I’m personally more inclined to say that the blue seals have recovered some latent potential humanity lost during the course of evolution. This is a very interesting problem, very interesting...”

“Dr. Lu, I don’t think it’s interesting at all. I feel like my head is so swollen it’s nearly overloaded.” Fang Xiu slammed on the gas pedal and bitterly followed Chen Lin.

Hu Bugui immediately pulled up a map of the area Chen Lin could have passed through in the gap between vanishing and reappearing. It was likely Su Qing had been hidden there. The veins on Hu Bugui’s hand stood out. He thought, no matter how deep he had to dig, he had to find this person today.

Su Qing was turning circles around Chen Lin’s “former residence” like a donkey pulling a millstone. He had turned it over and over in his mind and thought he had better run.

Because he was rather ignorant and had never heard of such a thing as someone simply dying of pain, he decided to make like a martyr and fight the villains to the end—Su Qing breathed in deeply from the diaphragm,

opened the door, backed up a few steps for a more convenient run-up, then charged out in large strides.

14

LIFE FORCE

HE TOOK FIVE STEPS out and nearly keeled over again. This time Su Qing felt he couldn't even draw breath. When he inhaled, the air only lingered in his throat, unable to get in, before being pushed back out.

As soon as his brain began to lack oxygen, his limbs turned cold and lost control. His legs went weak, and he fell to the ground again and curled into the shape of a comma, formally ascending to the rank of “commander.”⁴

The sun passed through the eaves and fell on the side of his face, warm and a little itchy. Su Qing strained to lift his head, desperately straightening himself out, fingers clawing at the ground. He crawled forward another step as though climbing up a rock face.

His chin scraped the ground. Maybe the skin broke. At any rate, there was a burning sensation, but it didn't hurt—right now, compared to the stimulus of the magnetic neckband, Su Qing could no longer feel the slight pains of bumps and scratches.

His fingers dug into the ground. His hands, which at a stretch could be called delicate, were quickly rubbed raw. Blood dyed his nails, and the veins on the backs of his hands stood out. Su Qing squirmed on the ground like a big caterpillar. His breathing was short and rapid. He crawled two steps, then flopped on the ground to rest again. When he was used to the new wave of pain, he continued forward.

Su Qing thought himself a typical example of the type who would go where he pleased and dig in his heels when he didn't want to budge. When he had lived in comfort, he had been so spoiled by money that he had been more demon than human. He hadn't even been able to bear the “hardship” of waking up in the morning to go to class. But forced to such a pass, he endured a pain like being subjected to the death of a thousand cuts, crawling out step by step.

At first his brain could still function a little. Slowly, all his mental force went to warding off the pain. Only Cheng Weizhi's words echoed repeatedly: "Draw a line for yourself and look at it often, tell yourself you can't retreat over that line. This way, you'll know what kind of person you are. You'll never go astray."

Su Qing felt that line following behind him moment by moment. When he crawled forward a step, the line shuffled forward a step, so he couldn't turn back.

He had made up his mind the moment he had charged out the door—never mind that he was, at any rate, a man; even if he had been a dog, he still couldn't let himself be confined by an invisible, untouchable ring.

The feeling of suffocation enveloped his whole body. Su Qing's throat began to issue unnatural gurgles. His face was ashen. It was as if there was a metal chain in the air, tightly choking him.

He thought he was going to die.

But for some reason, he wasn't afraid. Perhaps it was because he had spent too much time lately thinking he was going to die; after all that time dying, he was used to it. Perhaps it was his anger at being at the mercy of others and his fragile self-respect; having drawn that line for him, they were constantly urging him forward—

Even if I die taking the next step, he thought, I still have to get away.

Slowly, Su Qing left a trail of dirt and blood where he had crawled. His vision became more and more blurred. Finally he couldn't even see his own hands clearly. Su Qing felt that he had already gone very, very far. He had never made such a trek in his life. So he used the very last of his strength to look back to see how far he had gone. He found it was so "far" that he couldn't see clearly and was satisfied. He thought he really was amazing.

Then his vision went dark and his body spasmed. His consciousness abruptly sank.

In a haze, he heard a car braking. Someone seemed to be getting out of the car. Warm hands lifted his shoulders and picked him up off the ground. Su Qing couldn't see who it was, but he instinctively panicked and began to struggle. His limbs were held down tightly. Then a fiercer pain surged up. The taste of blood rose in his throat, and he knew absolutely nothing more.

Passing by this residential area, Hu Bugui had felt at once that something was off—it looked like an ordinary residential community, slightly dilapidat-

ed, with “No Stopping At The Intersection” written in chalk on the wall to one side with an “Eight Honors and Eight Shames” missing a corner pasted next to it. It really couldn’t be more normal. But it was too quiet here, as though something had cut it off from its surroundings. There wasn’t a shadow, not even a single one of the stray cats and dogs that were everywhere in the city.

Hu Bugui stopped his car at the intersection and took out an energy indicator. There was a crackle inside it, and this inferior product of the Xu clan turned to scrap.

Hu Bugui cursed Xu Ruchong under his breath, but there was a babble of voices coming over the comms; Fang Xiu and the others must have started their fight with the blue seals. At his wit’s end, he looked into the intersection, then stepped on the gas and charged in.

At first nothing happened when he drove in. After he turned a corner, a sharp alarm suddenly sounded in Hu Bugui’s car. The wheels rubbed against the ground, sending up little sparks. The car’s complicated instrument dials began to go wild. The most sensitive energy indicator lay unattended on the passenger’s seat. It began to spit out springs on its own, twitching.

So Hu Bugui kept driving this dazzling vehicle, occasionally dodging a flying part. He took a machine gun out from under the passenger’s seat and put it on his shoulder, then pressed a green button. After the alarm sound rose another octave, he once again broke the car into parts.

The majestic military vehicle turned into a mini-sightseeing bus.

Ferociously driving this mini-sightseeing bus, Hu Bugui picked up the half-dead Su Qing.

Over a month ago, this person had been loitering aimlessly in the bar, looking like a devotee of sensual pleasures. But in so short a time, he had lost weight; his cheeks were slightly sunken in, giving him a bit of a skeletal look. His clothes were ragged, and his fingers looked like they had been squeezed between bamboo skewers. He was covered in grime and blood. The whole effect was extremely horrifying.

Hu Bugui quickly leaned down to pick him up. He took off his coat and wrapped it around him. But just then, Su Qing opened his eyes. His gaze was a little unfocused. Hu Bugui didn’t know whether he could see him. But

his pupils were like obsidian. Peering closely, there was a lingering fierce expression. Whoever he took him for, he began to struggle fiercely.

Hu Bugui didn't know where he was injured. Flustered, he held his limbs in place. There was nothing else Su Qing could do—with an indistinct yowl, he bit his arm. Hu Bugui paid it no mind. His clothing was made of sturdy material, anyway; he wouldn't bite through it. And Su Qing probably wasn't a rabies vector. So he let him bite and stepped forward, holding Su Qing.

He had no idea of the house's control over Su Qing and didn't see anything wrong with walking away from it. The person who had just been glaring and resolutely maintaining a death grip with his teeth suddenly shuddered violently in his arms, irresistibly loosened his teeth, and spat up a big mouthful of blood, dyeing the whole front of Hu Bugui's clothes red.

Hu Bugui was instantly too scared to keep walking. He carefully propped up the back of Su Qing's head and gently patted him. There was no reaction. Hu Bugui didn't dare to move carelessly anymore. He gently put him back down on the ground at once, trying to make him lie flat, but as soon as Su Qing reached the ground, he instinctively curled up.

Hu Bugui frowned and ran back to his little streamlined car. He grabbed his comms, blocked the others, and went directly to the team doctor Lu Qingbai.

Under Chen Lin's malicious arrangements, Fang Xiu and the others had charged right into an abandoned factory on the outskirts.

The other blue seals' "hunt" wasn't nearly as open as Chen Lin's—flagrantly going to an obvious place and being noticed by the RZ Unit from the start. They had to be far more cautious.

That blue seal Luo Xiaofeng, while he had hair so greasy that a fly that landed on it would do the splits and was really nothing to look at, had a particular ability—he could confuse people's minds within a certain area. A large part of the "prey" were taken down by him, as though he was a child abductor. In this deserted factory, a crowd of trembling people were tied up together.

Going to an open area and indiscriminately attacking the passing crowds like Chen Lin, the people involved wouldn't be seriously affected. Each person only had a portion of their "happiness" and "sadness" absorbed by Chen Lin and Su Qing, remaining in equilibrium. There wouldn't be a problem then and there.

Of course, later there would still be a bad reaction, but for the most part it would only be a week or two of dizziness and lowered immunity resulting in a bout of sickness, and then it would be over.

But this group of people assembled together had the truly rotten luck. Caught and drained dry by some blue seal, they could basically be sent straight to a crematorium afterwards, and the crematorium wouldn't be able to tell whether they were living or dead.

Because Chen Lin didn't always have a grey seal he could use, he couldn't come along to each "feast." He didn't take much part in their hot-pot-style mixed "communal meal," but he knew where they operated—because of Jiang Lan.

Jiang Lan was a rather treacherous person. She was probably a little anti-social, displeased with everyone. She would only speak a few words to Chen Lin, that water lily sticking out of the mud like a sore thumb.

So Shi Huizhang and the others had quietly changed hands twice and were ultimately sold to the RZ Unit.

Fang Xiu and the others were at a loss when they arrived. The energy indicators nearly went crazy, and Chen Lin, whom they had been following, had vanished. They ran right into the blue seals' "feast." Both sides were taken by surprise, causing utter chaos. A messy and violent fight began.

Xu Ruchong faced the screen at headquarters, having nearly forgotten his own job. Watching got his blood up. He only wished he could jump into the screen and personally deliver the old one-two. The team doctor Lu Qingbai, holding a little notebook, stood behind him, occasionally noting down some data with a peculiar expression.

Just then, Hu Bugui forcefully switched over the communication frequency. "Dr. Lu? Where is Lu Qingbai?"

Lu Qingbai narrowed his eyes and raised his head just in time to see Hu Bugui holding a camera and adjusting the angle to fix on Su Qing. "Hurry up and take a look at him for me. I don't dare to move him now. I just moved him and he spat up blood all over me."

Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong drew close to the screen and listened to Hu Bugui's description of what had just happened.

"This is the Type 2 Grey Seal?" Lu Qingbai said.

"His name is Su Qing." Hearing this designation, Hu Bugui suddenly felt uncomfortable and automatically corrected Dr. Lu. He looked at Su Qing,

curled into a ball, ashen pale and barely breathing, and his heart suddenly filled with shame and remorse—if he had been more alert that day, if he hadn't insisted on meddling and seeing him home...

Lu Qingbai ignored him. "Let me inspect his mental state. Type 2 is the 'sadness type.' One of the reasons they're fairly rare is that these grey seals have comparatively weak minds and bodies. Without the strengthened energy use system of a blue seal, it's easy for them to break down during activation due to an influx of too much external emotion. Never mind that he's been dragged out and ravaged by that blue seal. If he's lost his mind, there's no need for you to waste effort on him..."

Hu Bugui interrupted him: "What do I do?"

Lu Qingbai instructed: "Your backup communicator—that watch, there's a button on the very top. Pull it out. It's a probe needle. Open his collar a little and find his grey seal... What are you being shy about, be assertive, just tear his collar open! That's right, no need to stick it in, just press the needle to the skin for a while."

Xu Ruchong quickly helped Lu Qingbai connect the equipment. The data from the probe needle on Hu Bugui's watch was soon in Lu Qingbai's hands.

Hu Bugui was as anxious as though his eyebrows were on fire, but Dr. Lu, like a charlatan, unhurriedly poured himself a cup of hot tea, then took a seat and had a look, chin in his hand. After a while, he gave a strange "oh!" and beckoned to Xu Ruchong. "Xiao Xu, Xiao Xu, come over and look at this."

Xu Ruchong went over to observe. "Unusual energy readings...very unusual, it can't just be the energy crystal, can it? Captain Hu, don't move him. See if there's anything on him."

"What?"

"Sweep the probe needle over him from head to toe. Stop when I tell you to," Lu Qingbai ordered. He put his teacup aside and rubbed his hands together. "How rare, only the energy readings are unusual, all the mental indexes are in normal bounds, even a bit of excitement—are there such callous Type 2 Grey Seals...? Ah...Captain Hu, stop, stop, stop!"

The probe needle was pointing at Su Qing's neck. Lu Qingbai gave Xu Ruchong a push. "Hurry, analyze that thing on his neck."

Without waiting to be told, Xu Ruchong was already doing it. “It must be some kind of magnetic force, maybe with an area restriction installed... Captain Hu, I’ve finally understood why the instruments seized up when you went in just now.”

Hu Bugui touched Su Qing’s neck and instantly received a static shock. He drew back his hand and frowned. “No nonsense, Xu Ruchong, tell me how to get this thing off.”

Xu Ruchong hesitated. “Well...”

Lu Qingbai cut in, “No need for you, I’ll do it—Captain Hu, stretch out the probe needle...a little longer, now bend it. It connects over there, do you see it? There, put it on his neck.”

Lu Qingbai began to flex his arms and roll up his sleeves. Xu Ruchong falteringly said, “D-doctor Lu, what, what are you going to do?”

Lu Qingbai raised one foot and planted it on the chair, pulling out a row of manipulators from above the desk. He held a wire in his mouth and indistinctly said, “No problem, just a magnetic neckband, I’ve seen it before, you just have to break its magnetic field. Relax, I can do it remotely.”

Xu Ruchong stared at him, dumbstruck. “Doctor...take it easy, that’s a human being.”

Lu Qingbai said, “It’s all right, he’s young and healthy, he can take a bit of rough handling. I don’t think it’ll kill him.”

Hearing this, Hu Bugui’s hands shook. He thought, This quack has a death wish...

There was a mess of crackling around Su Qing’s neck. As Hu Bugui and Xu Ruchong looked on fearfully, a thin thread of smoke came from the probe needle. Su Qing’s breathing was so faint it was almost inaudible. Hu Bugui stared blankly for a long moment, then hesitantly reached out to feel his breath.

Just then, Su Qing abruptly sucked in a breath and began to cough violently.

15

THE DECISION

WHEN SU QING woke up and found himself leaning against a plague god named Hu Bugui, he had the following reaction. He expended a great deal of effort to get up off the ground. In the process, his right foot tripped up his left foot, and he nearly once again made intimate contact with the ground. He knocked aside Hu Bugui's hand attempting to support him. Then, overestimating his own capacity, he grabbed Hu Bugui's collar, trying to drag him to his feet—unsuccessfully, because his arm was too weak—then gathered all his strength and, swaying, delivered a punch to the side of Hu Bugui's face.

Then, because this person's exterior was steel-plated, under the influence of the reacting force, he took two steps back and yet again plopped down to the ground.

Hu Bugui touched his face where it had been punched. It didn't hurt, but he was a little bewildered.

Over the comms came the sound of clapping. The quack Lu Qingbai and the tech nerd Xu Ruchong cheered in unison: "Left hook! Nice hit!"

Hu Bugui decisively cut the connection.

Su Qing propped himself up with one arm, shaking like a twig in the wind. He pointed to Hu Bugui. His lips moved, but his throat wouldn't work. After an age, he still couldn't force out a single word.

Hu Bugui hurried to the car, turned up half a bottle of water and offered it to him, but he was again pushed away by Su Qing. This time Hu Bugui clearly heard what he was saying. Su Qing said, "I, I fucking met you once, and I got, got eight lifetimes of bad luck. Each, each place you've been, even the air you breathe, it's all unlucky, you stay...stay the fuck away..."

Hu Bugui didn't know what to say and only sat by in silence, machine gun planted beside him, back leaning against the very mini car. His back

was slightly stooped, contracting his sturdy form, and he was carefully twisting the half-bottle of water in his hands. Seeing Su Qing wobbling as though drugged, he very much wanted to step up to support him, but each time he showed a hint of approaching, Su Qing looked scornful, so Captain Hu could only once again retreat in vexation.

Su Qing felt as though everything hurt. He grumbled and cursed for a long time, struggling where he sat, before finally managing to produce some coherent words. But his throat still hurt. A bit of air passing through it could make him cough for ages.

There were two full meters between the two of them. They sat there facing each other, each staring back at the other.

After a long time, Su Qing cleared his throat and asked in a thin voice: “What...what the hell are you?”

Hu Bugui answered seriously: “I’m with the RZ Unit. I’m very sorry about last time. I got you dragged into this.”

“Your apology is late in coming,” said Su Qing.

Hu Bugui bent his head and didn’t speak, looking like he was observing a silent tribute.

Su Qing inhaled. He seemed to want to issue a rather lengthy statement, but when he took this breath, the air immediately choked his fragile throat, and he began to cough violently.

Hu Bugui cautiously approached him and reached out with extreme reserve to pat him on the back. He placed the half-bottle of water in front of Su Qing. He hadn’t spoken until now. Afraid that Su Qing wouldn’t drink, he dully said, “Drink some. It’s all right, it’s my teammate’s water, I haven’t touched it. It won’t...”

He wanted to say, It won’t give you bad luck to drink it, but he felt awkward and falteringly shut his mouth.

Su Qing wiped the bloody saliva around his mouth, glanced at Hu Bugui, and reached out to take the bottle he had squeezed dents into. Hu Bugui lay a hand on his back. A faint smell of cigarettes came from him. His body temperature was unusually high, as though you could feel it even through his clothes.

But for some reason, Su Qing felt his nose suddenly itch. He abruptly turned his head aside and sneezed.

The first time he had met Hu Bugui, he had had some symptoms of coming down with a cold. Later he had arrived at the grey house and the symptoms had improved on their own. This time, he had met him again, and once again his nose started to itch and he started to sneeze. Su Qing turned his head and was about to speak. “You...”

Before he had said one word, he turned his head away again and sneezed, producing snot and tears, feeling that he had sneezed himself dizzy.

Probably because the look on his face was so indignant, Hu Bugui self-consciously stepped back a little, maintaining a certain distance from him. Su Qing at last determined that he wasn't coming down with a cold. This was an allergy—an allergy to an individual surnamed Hu!

After some mouthfuls of water, the taste of blood in his mouth had become much fainter. Hu Bugui stood by the car door and dully said, “There's an unusual energy reaction in this area. I couldn't take my car in, so I had to break it up. You aren't safe here...”

Su Qing looked at the minicar, then gave Hu Bugui a very annoyed glance. But, bowing to the circumstances, he didn't voice an objection. He silently got into the car. There wasn't even a place to sit. He could only curl up his legs and squeeze to one side...or rather, he was wedged to one side. When Hu Bugui also got in, it was a little hard to close the door. The two of them were practically stuck together.

Hu Bugui said, “If...if you're uncomfortable, you can lean on my shoulder.”

“...Thank you for the service,” said Su Qing.

“You won't get infected from it,” said Hu Bugui.

Su Qing: “...”

Then he sneezed yet again. Miraculously, a line he had memorized in high school appeared in his mind: “When fate is unfavorable, you will meet with many difficulties.”

Finding joy amidst sorrow, he covered the slightly reddened tip of his nose with his hand. When Hu Bugui attempted to start the car, he tilted his head back and examined all the complicated instruments inside the narrow car and feelingly thought that this car was truly “worthless on the outside, golden on the inside.”

Just then, a female voice came from the comms. It was the field agent Qin Luo: “Captain Hu, there’s something wrong.”

Hu Bugui quietly responded: “Talk.”

Qin Luo said, “Last time, we seized an energy shielding net being used by the blue seals. This time we seem to have run into a bit of a problem. They’re using something. There are large-scale short-circuits in the shielding net.”

Hu Bugui responded: “Have Xu Ruchong write up an inspection when we get back—is there a possibility of rescuing the victims?”

Qin Luo paused. After a while, she said, “The ‘feast’ was already halfway through when we arrived...”

Fang Xiu cut in: “Captain Hu, the victims’ mental responses are too weak, almost impossible to catch.”

Hu Bugui asked, “What about the grey seals?”

“One of the grey seals had a mental collapse on the spot. They shot him dead.”

Su Qing’s heart tightened. He thought, That better not be Tian Feng.

Hu Bugui briefly said, “Abandon the shielding net. Liao Chenyuan, provide long-range support. Be careful of the grey seals who are still alive. The mission has changed to taking down the blue seals on the scene. There’s no need to consider apprehending them.”

Just as he finished speaking, a rustling came from the comms. Hu Bugui stared, because Xu Ruchong, who had been calm and diffident for a long time, suddenly cried out, “Withdraw! Hurry and withdraw from there!”

Fang Xiu froze. “What?”

“Look at the monitor projection, you bunch of gorillas, don’t just shoot!”

Only then did Su Qing notice a palm-sized screen over his head. The control rod was broken, so Hu Bugui flipped it down manually. The image on the screen showed an abandoned warehouse. Su Qing was sharp-eyed. He saw Jiang Lan’s figure flicker past. He knew this was a legendary high tech article.

He wanted to know whether the rabbit-hearted Tian Feng was still breathing, so he narrowed his eyes and looked carefully. Just then, he saw that a part of the image seemed to be twisted—about three-quarters of the way down, there was an indistinct line. Looking closely, the images on either side of the line didn’t link up.

“Is this...” He wanted to ask whether there was a crack in the screen.

Then he heard Xu Ruchong’s rapid-fire shouting: “Fang Xiu, Qin Luo, withdraw—they have a space disrupter, hurry! The crack can turn even diamond into putty if it touches it, run!”

Hu Bugui grabbed the communicator. “Listen to him, withdraw!”

Su Qing stared at the indistinct line of the screen, not even daring to breathe loudly—it was as if it was alive, spreading in all directions. Having experienced the blue seals, grey seals, and the grey house, he felt himself very worldly. Even if an ET popped up right now, called him dad, and asked to be acknowledged, Su Qing thought he would faint away very calmly.

But the RZ Unit’s high tech goods still made him feel like he had transmigrated somewhere. He couldn’t resist asking, “A space disrupter...what does that mean?”

Xu Ruchong liked to play up a little. He was quite willing to speak to him. Hearing the question, he immediately responded: “That space disrupter of theirs actually isn’t all that high grade. They must have borrowed some equipment. To draw a comparison, suppose we lived in a cake. You can use a knife to cut a cake, and this is the same principle. You can also make ‘partial incisions’ in the matter around us using enormous energy. If a person is located at the crack, what will happen?”

“They’ll...”

Su Qing was a little interested, but before he could give his amateur view, Xu Ruchong impatiently went on, showing off to his own content: “Simply put, in this world of ours, at a fixed point in time, a person lives at certain spatial coordinates. Now, if those coordinates are suddenly torn apart, the person located at the crack will naturally also be ‘torn.’ I am still unable to calculate the precise degree of distortion.”

Then, explaining or otherwise, Xu Ruchong muttered, “Actually, the shielding net short-circuiting may very well have to do with this, too, it wouldn’t have done that out of nowhere...”

When he was certain the three field agents had withdrawn, Hu Bugui immediately interrupted Xu Ruchong: “A few blue seals can’t have this much power. Technician Xu, analyze the cause at once.”

Xu Ruchong gave an affirmative and didn’t dare to keep chattering.

Hu Bugui paused, then said to Su Qing, “I’m afraid they’re going to get away this time. You... Why don’t you come back with me first and have Dr.

Lu examine your physical and mental state, then...”

But Su Qing frowned. As though he had thought of something, he asked, “Do you guys know that the blue seals actually have a base with a grey house in it?”

Hu Bugui nodded. “We have some understanding. Our mission is to protect the people and do all we can to rescue the grey seals...but because most grey seals are unable to bear the operation of the energy crystal, when we rescue them, their minds aren’t very clear...”

“So what you mean is, you don’t actually know where the blue seals’ headquarters is?”

Hu Bugui nodded frankly. “We’ve been remiss in our work.”

Su Qing pointed at the scattered instruments above his head. “And all that...no good?”

Hu Bugui frowned. “Our guess is that they also have the support of a scientific research institution. Their shielding is very thorough.”

Su Qing’s heart sank. He suddenly thought, What about Teacher Cheng? His turn hadn’t come this time, but what if it came next time? Cheng Weizhi was so elderly. If others’ limit was three uses of the energy crystal, then wouldn’t he be in even more danger? He had an idiot son on the outside, too. Who was going to look after him?

He couldn’t help beginning to chew his nails. In the small, narrow space, he lowered his head and bent his legs slightly, beginning to wage a colossal battle in his heart.

He thought that the things he had experienced were simply like dying and coming back to life—but if he just went with Hu Bugui and his people now... Su Qing couldn’t help asking, “If I go with you guys, after I’m examined, what are you going to do with me?”

Hu Bugui said, “I’ll assign someone the job of protecting you until we’re certain of your personal safety.”

“Will I...be all right?”

Hu Bugui hesitated. “We’ll do our best to guarantee it.”

Su Qing got a mouthful of dirt biting his nails and spat it out. He put down his fingers and tightly gripped Hu Bugui’s shoulder. He took a deep breath. “You should let me out.”

Hu Bugui doubted his own hearing for the first time. “What did you say?”

“Stop the car and let me out. Shit, don’t make me keep repeating myself. Are you testing my willpower or what?”

Hu Bugui stopped the car, faintly understanding what he wanted to do. He looked at him, frowning.

Su Qing pushed the door open and jumped out of the car. He walked two steps and looked down gloomily at his toes. As if to himself, he said, “I have to go back. I have...an old friend, an old uncle inside. I have to get him out.”

16

THE RETURN

HU BUGUI'S EXPRESSION turned grave. His gloomy-looking face was a little oppressive. He said, "Don't be foolish. Get in the car and leave here with me."

Su Qing patiently attempted to explain: "That friend of mine is old, and I can tell you aren't going to find the place anytime soon. Even if you do find it, they can fight it out and go to another place. I..."

Hu Bugui wasn't interested in listening to his nonsense. He pulled him by the arm, ready to lift him back into the car. Su Qing shut his mouth, thinking that he had not only come to a clash with this person, their views were simply irreconcilable. So he bent his head, ready to bite. The instant Hu Bugui let go, he slipped out from under his arm and ran.

While Su Qing was tall and long-legged, his strength was average. He hadn't gone far before Hu Bugui caught him. Captain Hu very much wanted to knock him out to avoid him pulling any more stunts, but when he saw the wounds on his neck, he felt there was nowhere he could strike—furthermore, he believed that Su Qing saying these things at this time was because his psyche had been harmed, leading to an irregularity. So he very mightily caught Su Qing around the waist with his arm, "picking" him from the ground like a radish. Then he held his shoulders, tucked him under his arm, and strode towards the car.

Su Qing's arms weren't free, so he began unconsciously to kick and flail with his legs, like a turtle removed from the water. But not for nothing had Hu Bugui "trained." Holding a man weighing over a hundred pounds, it was as though he was holding an inflatable doll. He was very much at ease, taking no notice of his struggles.

Then, face red with frustration, Su Qing began to curse: "Some fucking RZ Unit, you're all a bunch of miserable fucks! More like the lazy unit! A lazy bunch of turtles, squatting in a hole without shitting! You won't do your

job, and you keep others from doing it, too. Hu, let me tell you, stand by and watch others suffer long enough and you'll be a turtle with its head stuck in its shell. Don't think you can..."

As he grumbled, he took aim at Hu Bugui's hand holding his shoulder. He slid down a little, stretched out his neck, and bit down, then let go in pain—villains had thick hides, but people's heroes snapped teeth.

Hu Bugui looked down at Su Qing and thought, Was this guy born in the Year of the Dog? In so short a time, he had already bitten him twice, as well as making another abortive attempt. He hesitated, then explained, "We can't let an ordinary citizen do such a dangerous thing."

Then he tossed Su Qing into the car. Before Su Qing could bare his fangs and get ready to pounce, he also quickly got in and closed the door, sealing off the little dog Su's path of escape with his body.

Su Qing was utterly exasperated. Seeing he was about to start the car back up, he reached out to grab Hu Bugui's wrist as he reached for the steering wheel. With his other hand, he quickly tore open his already ragged collar. His fair collarbones and the flowing grey seal flashed in Hu Bugui's eyes. He subconsciously averted his gaze and heard Su Qing say, "I'm an ordinary citizen? What fucking kind of ordinary citizen am I supposed to be? That's easy for you to say! With this thing, where can I run to? Am I supposed to have you people protect me my whole life? Have nightmares every night about what goes on in that grey house? Can I still go back to how it was before?"

This final sentence was truly too bitter. The rims of Su Qing's eyes reddened—he was aggrieved. He had been having a perfectly fine life when he had suddenly run up against these miserable things. Even if he normally acted like he didn't feel it, he was at any rate still human.

Hu Bugui was silent for a while, then quietly said, "I am truly sorry."

Su Qing forced back his bitter tears and sneered. He gave him a shove. "All you can say for yourself is 'sorry.' Anyone can say that. Get the hell out of my way, let me out."

Hu Bugui sat as motionless as a mountain, not speaking, not resisting, and definitely not cooperating.

"He's right." Into this deadlock came Lu Qingbai's voice from the long-silent communicator. Hu Bugui's eyelid twitched. He looked up. At some point, because of the fracture in space, the monitor projection had unfo-

cused entirely. Lu Qingbai simply took over the video and appeared before Su Qing's eyes in the form of an overeducated beast in human clothes.

His fingers were laced together, propping up his chin. He looked down loftily on Su Qing and Hu Bugui from the screen above their heads. "He's right. A grey seal's energy cycle is an incomplete circuit. As tools, when the blue seals go 'hunting,' their minds are sometimes more damaged than the victims', and for the most part it's irreversible. Even if you bring him back now, he'll still never escape being a grey seal."

Hu Bugui's hand tightened on the steering wheel, bones and tendons coming to the surface of his skin, making him seem a little savage.

Lu Qingbai continued stirring up trouble: "Though his mental indexes are basically within normal range now, it doesn't mean that he'll really be all right. We all know that psychological trauma doesn't always produce an immediate reaction. It may be hidden very deep, or his reactions may be too slow, and the signs of various mental illnesses will only appear after a while. Ultimately, because of the torment of those mental illnesses, he'll reach the same end as those who lost their minds on the spot."

In order to demonstrate the truthfulness of his words, Dr. Lu added, "While there haven't been many, I have seen some cases like this."

In Su Qing's eyes, Lu Qingbai in his white coat suddenly turned into a criminal, turned into an enormous crow in human shape.

Hu Bugui forced out words from between his teeth: "Lu Qingbai, what do you mean?"

Lu Qingbai wasn't afraid of him in the least. At any rate, he knew he couldn't crawl out of the screen. So he cut right to the chase: "I'm saying that if you bring him back, you still might not be able to save him. Since it's his own request, it would be better to let him return..."

"Impossible," said Hu Bugui.

Lu Qingbai suddenly cut him off, changing his face faster than in a Sichuan opera. One moment it had been the face of the mild and gentle guide; the next moment he turned into a yaksha's cousin. He hit the table with a *bang* and fumed: "It's impossible just because you say it's impossible? Hu, are you the doctor, or am I the doctor? What are you doing butting in when you don't understand shit? Do you think healing psychological trauma is a question of bringing him back and sticking a couple of band-aids to his

forehead? Even those blue seal animals know the law of balancing opposing emotions, you damned...”

“Gorilla,” Xu Ruchong put in.

“You damned gorilla!”

Hu Bugui frowned. In matters where the final decision was his, he had always stood by his word. But in matters he didn’t understand, he had always been able to listen to others talking reason—though Lu Qingbai looked more like he was collecting on a debt or looking for a fight, anything other than being reasonable. So he asked, “You mean that letting him return to the grey house may be beneficial towards his psychological recovery?”

Lu Qingbai waved a hand and turned to Su Qing. “If you come in for treatment now, it will be difficult. If you remember your friend, it will aggravate your sense of guilt. For a Type 2 Grey Seal like you, that will be particularly hard to handle. Returning will be fighting fire with fire. The outcome may be better. But if you decide to return to save him, you must think it through. You may not be able to save him and be broken there yourself. A person can’t come back from the dead.”

Su Qing had used up pretty much all his courage yelling at Hu Bugui. At these words, he froze. A little at a loss, he looked up at Lu Qingbai.

Lu Qingbai didn’t make a sound, only looked at him with an incisive gaze. After a long time, Su Qing at last slowly and hesitantly nodded. He felt bitterness in his stomach, and his guts shook. Amid the voices of every cell in his body screaming “nod and you’re dead meat,” dry-throated, he said, “I, I’m going back.”

Hu Bugui looked at him, then silently opened the car door and let him out. He reached under the driver’s seat, rummaged around, and got out a small box. “Then I’ll prepare you.”

He opened the box and took out a syringe. He looked into Su Qing’s eyes as though soliciting his opinion. Su Qing hesitated, then rolled up his sleeve in silence and extended his arm.

As he gave him the shot, Hu Bugui explained, “This is a simple blocker, newly developed. It hasn’t been tested yet, but you don’t need to worry. It doesn’t have side-effects. Though I can’t say whether it has an effect...”

Xu Ruchong hurried to blow his own trumpet: “The effect is that up to a certain point it can block the influence of external emotions on you when

you're passively absorbing emotions. I made it, you can relax about the quality."

Su Qing looked at the miserable minicar next to him. Not only did he not relax, he tensed up further.

Hu Bugui then took out a silver earring. He gently raised the hair at Su Qing's temple and held the earring to Su Qing's original one. There was a faint noise, and the next moment the silver rose-shaped earring had become the same as his original black stud. Hu Bugui drew slightly closer and clumsily put it on for him. He quietly said, "This is a communicator. It can remain in contact with me twenty-four hours a day, and it has a positioning function. It will help us find the blue seals' base."

This gesture was too intimate. It made Su Qing abruptly remember the circumstances of their first meeting. He felt the atmosphere turn suggestive. His breath caught unnaturally, and he lowered his eyes.

After putting on the earring for him, Hu Bugui released Su Qing. He added, "I can't give you an obvious weapon. You haven't had specialized training, it would be easily discovered and put you in danger. I can only give you this. You're right-handed?"

As he spoke, he took a ring from the box. Su Qing's eyes opened wide. He thought, Holy shit, what is these people's problem? Why are all their "tools" like this? Right hand or not, could he just...just casually put a ring on him like this?

His face like a blue screen of death, he stood there like a mummy letting Hu Bugui take his stiff paw and put the ring on his right middle finger. The moment he put it on, the ring vanished. Su Qing felt around curiously. The ring was still there, it was only invisible.

Hu Bugui lifted his finger and instructed, "There's a switch here. You can use your thumb to control it."

Then he pressed something, and a thread of electric sparks burst from Su Qing's middle finger. Hu Bugui dodged very promptly, but the wall in front of them was burned, startling Su Qing.

"You can use it to protect yourself," Hu Bugui said.

Su Qing looked at the traces of what seemed like a lightning strike on the wall and swallowed. He thought, That has to be excessive force in self-defense.

Finally, Hu Bugui pointed at his neck. “Your magnetic neckband is broken. If you’re really going to go back...be careful. Don’t let it be discovered.”

After this sentence, Hu Bugui had absolutely no idea what to say. Su Qing looked at him, then turned and walked back. He was covered in dirt, his collar was torn, and there was still blood on his sleeves. His hair hadn’t been cut in too long and was looking a little overgrown. He was dragging one foot a little. He looked like a vagrant fleeing a famine.

Hu Bugui stood by the car door, put a cigarette in his mouth, and watched his retreating figure without moving.

Su Qing walked for a stretch, and then, as though he felt something, he turned back to look at Hu Bugui. He heard him say, “You’re gambling with your life. You have to think it through...and be careful.”

It was as though his voice was speaking into his ear. Su Qing touched the earring on his ear and knew it was coming from the communicator. His steps paused. Then he turned and walked on without looking back.

Lu Qingbai commented: “Like a knife to the heart.”

Xu Ruchong said: “An eternal parting.”

Lu Qingbai added: “A heart-breaking farewell.”

Xu Ruchong continued the relay of idioms: “The shrike flies east and the sparrow flies west.”

Su Qing made a turn, and his figure vanished. Hu Bugui finally got into the car and flipped the screen above his head up, putting the two of them out of sight and out of mind.

Su Qing returned alone to the little house where Chen Lin had confined him. His steps hesitated at the door. He hardened his heart and finally raised his foot and walked in. He collapsed onto the couch and fell fast asleep.

When he woke up, it was already completely dark. There was no light on inside. His scrapes had been taken care of. Su Qing sluggishly sat up, raised his head, and saw Chen Lin standing at the window, looking outside, like a lonely and dismal silhouette.

Hearing movement, Chen Lin slowly turned his head. Su Qing smelled a heavy blood scent and noticed that there was a bullet wound on Chen Lin’s shoulder, still bleeding. His face was pale, his glasses were broken on one

side, and his breathing was little rapid. But he smiled slightly at Su Qing.
“You’re awake.”

17

UNDERCURRENTS

HE SMILED LIKE a suspicious stranger bearing gifts. Su Qing quailed inwardly and subconsciously wanted to touch his neck, but he held out with all his might.

After speaking, Chen Lin turned silently and went into the kitchen—Su Qing had never thought that there would be human food in the house of the rarefied Lord Chen. Then he saw Chen Lin take bags of bread and milk out of the fridge. He put them on the table and said, “I haven’t been back in a long time. There’s nothing but beer in the fridge. You can make do with eating this.”

Su Qing tore open the bag of bread and carefully pinched a supposed “slice” with his nails. The thing had been there for who knew how long. It was hard as a rock and raining crumbs. So Su Qing automatically turned over the bag of milk and checked the manufacturing date. As expected, it was expired. Looking carefully, it was a Sanlu⁵ product, too.

Chen Lin meanwhile took off his coat and walked half-immobilized into the bedroom with his shoulder dripping blood. He got out a first-aid kit, sat on the couch, and began to take care of his wound.

After a day of being tossed around, Su Qing was so hungry his front was sticking to his back. He thought that his teeth were still in good condition, so he sat there and began to crunch on this prodigious bread jerky. After nibbling half a slice, his cheeks felt sour, and he stopped, surreptitiously glancing at Chen Lin while he took a break.

Chen Lin looked like a four-eyed pretty boy, but his figure was actually quite impressive. He had taken his shirt off and wiped away the blood, revealing beautiful, firm muscles. Su Qing for the first time saw a genuine article “blue seal.” It was under Chen Lin’s collarbone, also half-moon shaped,

about the same form as a grey seal, but it wasn't bright blue at all; it looked a little dim.

Chen Lin took off his broken glasses and tossed them aside. His eyes were faintly bloodshot, making the lines of his face look hard and unfeeling. He was very uncommunicative. He took something like a pair of tweezers from the very high-tech-looking little first-aid kit and aimed at his wound. He pressed twice on the "tweezers." The thing emitted a quiet sound, and a clamp automatically popped up from the end of it, poking right in.

Su Qing bared his teeth. I hope it hurts like hell, you son of a bitch, he thought.

As though he had felt something, Chen Lin looked up at him. Su Qing quickly averted his gaze like a guilty thief and gnawed on the bread jerky like a rodent grinding its front teeth. Luckily Chen Lin had no mental energy to spare to pay attention to him. Faint cold sweat rose on his face. He let go of the "tweezers." As if it had its own consciousness, the thing stayed in his wound, automatically searching for the bullet inside.

After a moment, there was a quiet sound, and the "tweezers" fell from Chen Lin's shoulder, taking a bloody bullet with them.

Su Qing heard Chen Lin let out a long breath.

Chen Lin leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes for a while. He didn't bandage his wound. Su Qing inadvertently glanced at the wound and was so surprised that the bread jerky fell out of his mouth—the wound was closing up at a speed visible to the naked eye, the cells splitting faster than cancer cells. In less than five minutes, it had healed.

Chen Lin's blue seal became even dimmer. His wound was better, but his face looked worse. It may have been because of the lighting, but it actually seemed ashen pale.

With the bread jerky in his mouth, Su Qing opened his eyes wide and looked at him. He couldn't resist asking, "You...can heal yourself? Without stitches or bandages?"

Chen Lin raised his eyes—it was as if his eyelids were unusually heavy. He glanced at Su Qing and nodded.

Su Qing considered, then couldn't resist asking another question: "So... you can heal any damage by yourself?"

This time Chen Lin spoke. His voice was a little hoarse, and he spoke much slower than before. A little feebly, he said, "In principle, as long as

there are no foreign objects in my body, I can heal anything that isn't a fatal wound."

Su Qing, struggling to ignore the unpleasant odor, gulped down the "elderly" milk, thinking, No wonder he's rich. I hear the cost of meat is rising. If you can cut off a bit and regrow it again and again like this, you could go out and sell meat. It's doing business without overhead.

Chen Lin took no more notice of him. He leaned back looking like a portrait of the deceased. The only sounds in the room were Su Qing's gnawing and the bread jerky's cracking. After around half an hour, a car honked its horn outside. Su Qing froze, but Chen Lin opened his eyes like a risen corpse and stood bolt upright. He picked up his cast-off shirt and wrapped it around himself. To Su Qing, he said, "We're going back."

Then, as though he had remembered something, he took the controller for the magnetic neckband from his pocket. Su Qing's hands shook. His heart rate leapt straight to 140. He had only one thought—it's over, he'll see through me.

Just then, Hu Bugui's voice suddenly came from the communicator: "Don't be scared."

It had been fine as long as Hu Bugui didn't make a sound. When he suddenly spoke, Su Qing, unaccustomed to having a spiritual guide, was so startled he plopped down on the ground. His rapidly beating heart gave a thump and nearly stopped beating. But Chen Lin pressed on the controller a few times, then looked back as though nothing were the matter and said to Su Qing, "Your prohibition is lifted. You can leave."

Hu Bugui's voice sounded in his ear again: "Don't be nervous. Though the magnetic neckband is broken, some of its surface functions can be imitated through the communicator and the shock ring you're wearing. We can even keep him from finding out temporarily. Our technical staff are keeping an eye on it for you."

Su Qing blankly dusted off his bottom and got up of the ground. He thought this planted agent business really was a racket. Each second was a trial for body and mind. A few more times like this and Chen Lin wouldn't have to make a move; his soul would be scared right out of his body and up to the heavens.

Chen Lin stood at the door waiting for him. His eyes fell on Su Qing. As Su Qing was about to step over the threshold, fortune smiled on his efforts.

Without guidance, he made a gesture—he stopped his foot in midair, then slowly withdrew it. He grabbed the doorframe with one hand and looked out fearfully—in his understanding, someone who had suffered because of this thing would have a mental block about it.

He had something to hide and didn't dare to look directly at Chen Lin. His heart rate was rapid. He was uncertain and afraid. Like this, he really did succeed in misleading Chen Lin. The latter, showing rare patience, said, "You can leave now."

Then, leaning on the door, Su Qing totteringly extended a foot like an eighty-year-old lady. The bloodstains he had left behind were still at the door. He paused, then finally shuffled out—if you didn't know better, you would have thought he hated to leave this precious territory.

The car from the base was waiting at the gate. Su Qing was blindfolded as before. In darkness, he ignorantly changed hands several times and at last returned to the blue seals' base. The blindfold was removed. He found himself standing in front of the grey house once more.

It was already very dark, with only a sliver of light remaining on the horizon. The evening star had risen. There had been a big crowd leaving the base, but on the way back the ranks had dwindled severely. Only he and Chen Lin were left. Chen Lin didn't speak, standing with his hands behind his back, looking up at the sky at a forty-five degree angle, like an obnoxious and clueless little philosopher.

When Su Qing thought that his life was in the hands of that little philosopher, he felt that he was a heavy weight suspended in midair, his chances of survival relying entirely on the god of probability.

He was weary and exhausted, and his digestive system was sending up red lights, the hard bread jerky and expired milk sticking in his stomach. All his big and small wounds began to ache.

Su Qing looked up at the towering grey house and thought profoundly that he was truly crazy.

Just then, Hu Bugui's voice came from the false earring again. The signal wasn't very good, as though something was disrupting it. He only briefly said, "Stay calm. Don't be scared."

But how could I not be scared? Su Qing thought. I don't have your steel-plated skin that can snap teeth at one bite.

A wind gradually rose. Su Qing felt chilled. Whatever functions the little objects on him had apart from what Hu Bugui had said, Su Qing thought that Hu Bugui, like Chen Lin, could sense his unsteady mental state. After a pause, Hu Bugui added, "We're locating. It won't take long. Don't worry."

No matter what he was saying or doing, or even if he was sitting there doing absolutely nothing, this person gave off a sense dependability. Though Su Qing thought he was an infectious agent of bad luck, as he slowly got used to his voice, he still felt a little calmer. He bit his lip, clutched his hair, and scrubbed his face.

Then, Chen Lin, who hadn't moved in ages, as if he had turned into Amah Rock⁶, at last lowered his head, considered, and turned to say to Su Qing, "Come on. You'll come with me for now."

Su Qing stared, unable to work out what "come with me" meant. He looked at him foolishly. Chen Lin frowned. A trace of brutality appeared in the slightly greenish depths of his eyes, making him seem suddenly savage and frightening. Wasting no more words, he grabbed Su Qing by the collar and dragged him away. Su Qing stumbled a few steps after him, choked so he couldn't catch his breath, barely keeping a grip on Chen Lin's wrist, leaving a trail of uneven footprints behind him.

He began to panic. What was Chen Lin thinking? He wasn't going to let him return to the grey house? Then what about Teacher Cheng? And where were the other blue seals and grey seals? Was Tian Feng still alive?

Suddenly, Chen Lin let go. Su Qing kept struggling from inertia and abruptly took a step back. He barely managed to keep his footing. The next moment, he heard the roar of helicopters. He lifted his head and saw some helicopters preparing to land. Chen Lin's expression was dim and unreadable.

Su Qing had a profound understanding of this person's capricious moods. He stood there not even daring to breathe loudly, pretending to be part of the background.

The helicopters landed. Su Qing saw several staff members wearing "Utopia" uniforms hurriedly get out. Then four or five white coats ran over from somewhere and lifted a person out from inside—it was the dumb lump of muscle Li Gu, who had come carrying a gun to kidnap Su Qing.

Li Gu's whole body was covered in blood, but his eyes were open very wide. It was unclear whether he was breathing. He had a look like his eyes were about to burst from their sockets from rage, and his arms and legs twitched from time to time. Some terms along the lines of "burst cordon" and "spatial laceration" came to Su Qing's ears.

The other blue seals and grey seals followed them. Jiang Lan looked especially grim—she had returned alone; another little grey had been written off.

Su Qing had no time to attend to the others. He craned his neck to watch Li Gu being lifted away, feeling faintly joyous. Teacher Cheng was supposed to be Li Gu's grey seal. If the big idiot bit the dust, that would be for the best! He surreptitiously took another glance at Chen Lin and thought, If you went along with him, the world would be a more perfect place!

But before his daydream had ended, he heard a sharp scream.

The hair on the back of Su Qing's neck bristled. He turned to look along with the others. It was Shi Huizhang's little grey, who had been scared into boldness by the outing and was actually attempting to run. All of Shi Huizhang's little greys were women, and this was a long-haired, large-eyed beauty, though her current appearance wasn't so attractive.

Shi Huizhang had activated the magnetic neckband around her neck. Su Qing and the other grey seals, each with a different expression, stood there looking on, unable to do anything—she flailed desperately on the ground, her eyes beginning to roll upwards. After a while, she no longer had the strength to flail, only breathed in big gasps like a dying fish, twitching, her face purple.

Shi Huizhang attached no importance to her. He didn't even look at her. Instead, his ruthless gaze was fixed on Chen Lin. The woman twitched for a while, then gradually stopped moving. Froth bubbled from her mouth. The color of her skin was no longer visible in her face, as though all her blood vessels had burst, turning her face a horrible purple.

Su Qing stood there watching her pupils begin to cloud over and couldn't resist taking a step back—he knew she was dead.

The other grey seals were either frightened or numb. Tian Feng suddenly knelt down and began to wail, snot and tears mixing on his round face. He looked both ridiculous and despairing.

Shi Huizhang snorted heavily and spat on the woman's corpse. Su Qing secretly clenched his fist. But Chen Lin only calmly glanced at the others. Without looking back, he said to Su Qing, "Come with me."

Thus did he act as though no one else was present.

Jiang Lan suddenly called him back: "Chen Lin, you only have this one little grey to use now."

Chen Lin paused in his steps and nodded to her to indicate that he had heard, amounting to a show of deference. Then he ignored her warning.

18

THE FENCE, THE WOMAN, THE DOG

FOR THE FIRST TIME, Su Qing felt a fierce sense of reluctance to part from that lunatic asylum grey house. He looked back three times for each step he took after Chen Lin. He wasn't a person without a temper to begin with, and when he was irritated enough, there was nothing he wouldn't do. But now he felt that a heavy responsibility lay on his shoulders, so he began to learn to swallow his anger.

But blindly swallowing his anger wasn't the way to go, either. He thought that there seemed to be something off about Chen Lin and that crowd of blue seals. He felt he would have more peace of mind returning to the grey house—at least there, he was a playground tyrant with his own territory. He had built a small alliance against the Type 4s. Using simple tools, he could contend with the forces of evil.

But this Chen, with his mind-reading and his magnetic neckband—who knew how many other weapons were in his arsenal that he hadn't brought out for a public appearance yet? Science could be a real scam sometimes.

Apart from Jiang Lan's abortive speech, it seemed that Shi Huizhang and the two people he led all had different degrees of serious enmity towards Chen Lin. Shi Huizhang must have been venting his anger when he killed his little grey.

Su Qing was a little astonished. He thought, could Shi Huizhang and the others really be so useless that three of them couldn't take down one Chen Lin? Otherwise, if they had a conflict, why couldn't they bring it properly out into the open?

As he thought this, he couldn't resist rubbing the false earring.

After a moment, Hu Bugui's voice came from it: "I don't know what that blue seal is thinking. You be careful. Don't aggravate him. His condition is unstable."

Su Qing stared. He looked up and examined Chen Lin walking in front of him—he noticed that he was walking in especially large strides, a little rushed, but with a slight stagger.

Cheng Weizhi had said that while the blue seals' bodies and minds were hardier than the grey seals' due to the existence of the new energy system, making them unlikely to be unable to distinguish their own emotions from external ones and lose control like the grey seals, that didn't mean that could entirely avoid being impacted.

Though the blue seals had complete energy systems, they didn't have complete metabolic systems. After a period, they needed external intervention to clean out their bodies. Su Qing suddenly remembered something Chen Lin himself had said: "If we don't go through a cleaning for a long time, we enter a very unsteady state, like a grey seal going into mental chaos on his first mission from lack of habit. Our seal dims, our eyes become bloodshot, and also...it becomes very hard for us to be responsible for our own behavior."

Dim seal, bloodshot eyes—wasn't that Chen Lin's condition now? Su Qing shuddered, feeling his gall bladder turn over in his belly, soaking his intestines in bile.

He followed Chen Lin in even more resolute silence.

Chen Lin took him through some woods, all the way to a "villa estate." From outward appearances, the scenery was fairly good. Basic little villas with their own yards were scattered around. Su Qing noticed that the roofs of these little villas were different colors. They were separated into four types—red, blue, yellow, and green. The first villa they passed had a green roof. Su Qing looked up and saw the character "Shi" written on the door plate. He understood—this was where the blue seals lived.

The treatment was as different as heaven and earth. Compared to the lunatic colony of the grey house, one was a presidential suite, the other was a multi-person bed in a pigeon coop hostel—one was American ostentation, the other was Haiti.

Su Qing craned his neck to look into the yard and found that there was a doghouse in it. It looked pretty big. He was doubtful—was there a vicious dog inside?

Just then, perhaps hearing movement, out of the doghouse crawled a... person.

Su Qing's eyes opened wide. He stood there staring blankly. He forgot to keep walking forward.

It was a woman who had crawled out. Su Qing recognized her as a grey seal, because he could see the seal under her collarbone...because she wasn't wearing any clothes.

She lifted her head, and her eyes met Su Qing's. She threw herself towards him as though mad, mouth open wide, but she couldn't make a sound. Su Qing could only tell from the exaggerated movements of her lips that she was saying "help me." But soon, she couldn't go any further—because there was a collar with a chain around her neck like a dog's. The chain was just long enough for her to crawl out of the "doghouse" and bend her head to drink some water from a basin.

Su Qing couldn't resist taking a step forward. He reached out to pull open the villa's metal gate. When his fingers were about to touch the gate, Chen Lin, who had stopped at some point, all of a sudden quietly said, "There's a fingerprint recognition system. It won't let anyone but the owner in. Do you want to try out how it feels to be electrocuted?"

Su Qing drew back his extended hand and squeezed it into a fist, clenching his teeth—as if this way he could keep a guard on his mouth.

Chen Lin turned and looked indifferently at the woman dragging her clanking chain. He laughed mockingly. "Anyway, what do you think you can do to Shi Huizhang?"

Su Qing had not thought that he was a good person to begin with. He was only a little punk, and he firmly believed that "good person" was an insult. A good person was a sap.

When he had still been a lordling, he had heard a story, about the son of one of his dad's friends, a person he had met a few times, another wastrel like him. Su Qing had gone partying with him once and thought he and this little scum had a strong common language. One day, the little scum went out drinking with his friends. He got drunk and went racing in the city, hit and killed a pedestrian, some migrant workers's child.

And what was the outcome? Nothing at all. His father had money and connections. A bribe here and there, and everything was all right. The migrant worker couple had more than just this one child. They received a large sum of money, swallowed their anger, kept silent and lay low.

When the matter had passed with alarm but no danger, in order to get him over the shock, his family had invited a whole crowd of them to a meal. At the feast, the brat had prattled on: “It’s all right, don’t waste effort worrying about it. Do these trifling problems mean anything to people like us? You can settle them with some money, and it’s no big deal.”

At the time, Su Qing had belonged to the “privileged class.” Having gotten lucky in his birth, he was at the top of the food chain. He thought there was no such thing as justice; anyone who mentioned justice had a screw loose.

So he had never before longed for “justice” as much as he did now. And never before in this cramped, morbid, deformed world had he, as one of the weak, been so angry, so...powerless.

A phrase very much out of keeping with Su Qing’s personal style suddenly appeared in his head—there was no justice in this world; justice only existed in the resentment and self-consolation of the weak, and in the consciences of the strong. Suddenly, as a person without a conscience, in these circumstances where only resentment was left to him, he understood what conscience was.

Su Qing understood what Chen Lin meant by taking him with him. There was no difference between his position and this woman’s. Living in the grey house, he was a “tool.” In the blue seals’ territory, he was a “pet.”

His mouth tasted of rust. He had accidentally bitten through his lip—when Su Qing came around, he was already swinging his fist towards Chen Lin’s face. Chen Lin effortlessly grabbed him by the wrist.

Su Qing’s thumb irresistibly rubbed the ring hidden on his middle finger—this thing could deliver a thunderbolt, and the blue seals were scourges who deserved to be struck by heavenly lightning.

Suddenly, Hu Bugui’s voice sounded urgently: “Don’t! Su Qing, don’t take the risk! You don’t know how to control the shock ring, the likelihood that you’ll fatally wound him is low, don’t anger him!”

“You want to hit me.” Chen Lin looked at him, head slightly tilted. His glasses slid down a little, and his bloodshot eyes appeared more clearly in front of Su Qing. “You keep wishing a bad end on me, I can sense it.”

The strength of Chen Lin’s grip on Su Qing’s wrist increased. Su Qing’s thumb was forced to release the ring on his middle finger. He was pressed against the wall, bumping his back painfully.

Chen Lin looked at him viciously. Then, suddenly, he began to laugh, louder and louder, until at last it was almost ear-piercingly sharp. He reached out and lightly twisted Su Qing's chin with his fingers. Then, without warning, he let him go. His laughter came to an abrupt stop. "Don't worry, I also think I'll come to a bad end one day."

The rattling of the chain sounded in his ears, and a gruesome smell appeared out of nowhere in the air. Su Qing didn't have the courage to turn to look at her again. He only silently followed Chen Lin, lightly rubbing his bruised wrist. He lowered his head, the clear look in his eyes turning a little ferocious—blue seal, he thought, you thing that eats but doesn't shit, sooner or later the excrement will drive you mad.

The place where Chen Lin lived had a red roof. Chen Lin opened the gate and pushed Su Qing inside. Su Qing reeled, then stood firm. He looked around the yard.

The house was large, and the yard wasn't small, but it seemed that no one had looked after it for a long time. It was overgrown with weeds, with the deathly stillness of an abandoned house. There was a tree in the yard with something heaped under it. Su Qing walked closer and saw that it was the corpse of a big cat. Though it was rotting, you could still tell that the cat's body had been broken in two, as though something had torn it apart.

Something had...torn it apart.

Su Qing subconsciously looked at Chen Lin. Chen Lin had his head down. His expression was unreadable. After opening the door to the house, he said to Su Qing, "Go in."

Su Qing didn't move. Pointing to the cat's body, he asked, "Was that yours?"

Chen Lin laughed. His smile had a peculiar look. Su Qing's breathing became more and more rapid. He felt that his back was soaked with cold sweat. Even his breaths began to tremble.

Hu Bugui said quietly into his ear, "Su Qing, calm yourself."

Su Qing closed his eyes and struggled to recall Professor Cheng in the grey house, recall Tian Feng's heart-rending wails, recall Shi Huizhang's yard with that woman living there like a dog... I have to calm myself, he repeated numbly to himself. Calm myself...

Then he took a step forward. His knees went weak, and he nearly went down. Clenching his teeth, he managed to steady himself and walk inside

past Chen Lin.

The front door of the villa closed behind him. He had arrived in a room with an unlived-in feeling. Chen Lin said, “The room furthest to the left on the second floor. You can use that one.” Then he paid no more attention to him. He left without a word.

Su Qing stood in the living room for a while, decided that Chen Lin really wasn’t coming back, then let out a breath, wiped away his sweat, and crawled up the stairs. His not especially notable emotional resources were severely overworked.

He came to the room Chen Lin had indicated. As soon as he walked through the door, he knew that someone had lived here before. The wooden table bore the marks of fingernails. Su Qing forced himself not to think of the disturbing question of where the person who had lived here before had gone. He walked in anxiously, then let his imagination run wild all afternoon. He heard no movement from Chen Lin. Then his guts, which had been filled up with the expired Sanlu milk, once again requested sustenance. He finally got up to go through the fridge and found a slice of pizza. This time he didn’t look at the manufacturing date to spare upsetting himself. He grabbed it and ate.

When he was full, he rummaged through the room. It wasn’t very large, but it had its own bathroom and a bookshelf, as well as a wardrobe. Su Qing took a shirt out of it and measured it against himself. He found that it would be a good fit, only a little roomy. He figured it had been left by the person who had lived here before.

After rummaging through everything, he was tired. He went into the bathroom to wash the day’s worth of blood and grime away. He changed into clean clothes. The shoulders were a little wide, so the sleeves were long. He rolled them up and sat in a chair, took a book from the bookshelf, and whiled away the time.

By midnight, there had been no movement from Chen Lin. Su Qing couldn’t resist falling asleep.

The next day, there was still no movement from Chen Lin. The third day... On the evening of the third day, when Su Qing was starting to relax a little, Chen Lin came to his room without warning.

His bloodshot eyes were crimson. He grabbed Su Qing by the neck and pressed him against the table. Before Su Qing had worked out what was

happening, his head was forced up. Then the shirt he was wearing was suddenly torn open—

19

UTOPIA

SU QING didn't know whether Chen Lin had been taking aphrodisiacs like vitamins or whether he had been poisoned, leading to his body temperature being abnormally high and his behavior abnormally strange.

The moment Chen Lin had pounced, he had really been scared. He had thought for a moment of the tragically dead big cat in the yard. Then Chen Lin began tearing at his clothes, one hand holding down his shoulder, pressing half his body firmly to the table. Su Qing narrowly avoided wrenching his back. His legs involuntarily left the ground and were roughly parted by Chen Lin as he tried to pull his pants down.

Then Su Qing understood that he wasn't planning to kill him, he only wanted to compel sex.

Compelling sex—in fact, Su Qing didn't care so much about that. Since life was just one thing after another, having reached this point, he really was just short that last millimeter to being raped and killed.

This was known as not feeling the itch when there were enough lice and growing a thick skin after enough wounds. He wasn't any sort of decent person to begin with. He thought that while these things ought to be done willingly on both sides, sometimes circumstances were outside of your control. It was like letting a mangy dog bite you. Anyway, you wouldn't miss the piece of flesh.

But...all the same, he didn't want to let this Chen dog bite him.

His shirt was already ruined, hanging off his body in strips like a mop. He turned his head and saw a vase on the table. The flowers were wilted, leaving bald stems and half a vase of cold water. Su Qing seized his opportunity. He jabbed at Chen Lin's chin with his elbow, knocking Chen Lin's face aside a little. He raised himself up and desperately shuffled back over the

tabletop. He lifted the vase and brought it crashing down on Chen Lin's head.

Bang. Chen Lin's head was all right, but the vase broke. Some dried twigs stuck in the hair at Chen Lin's temples where a matchmaker would place flowers, and cold water poured all over his head and face.

Hu Bugui, that spiritual guide, indeed never rested. While most of the time when Su Qing had been alone in the room and talked nonsense to him he hadn't especially responded, he wouldn't be silent when there was a need to speak.

Su Qing heard him say, "Activate the shock ring, set it to its highest output. No matter where you hit, it can knock him out within three seconds. I'll tell you what to do then!"

Then...he would be exposed after only three days of being undercover. Su Qing couldn't resist pausing, but Hu Bugui's voice suddenly rose: "Move! What are you waiting for?"

But when Su Qing's thumb had just touched the shock ring's switch, Chen Lin, having been splashed with water, stopped moving. He looked at him with a complicated expression for a while, then slowly...let go.

Su Qing sat on the table. Feeling that the room was chilly, he gathered up his rag-like shirt. He saw Chen Lin cover his face with his hands, take two steps back, lean against the wall, and slide down. He looked wretched. Su Qing brushed away the shards of vase that had fallen onto him. His lower back had been bruised by hitting the edge of the table. It hurt. He bared his teeth and thought, *Shit*, he looks like he's about to cry for his daddy, just as if someone had been having their way with him.

Chen Lin was trembling all over, his head and face covered with the timely rain Su Qing had poured over him, like a drowned rat. Indistinct sounds came from his throat. They may have been crying or laughter.

Su Qing shifted backwards. He saw a wooden tube hanging on the wall that may have been a transverse flute or a vertical flute. He snatched it down and held it out in front of himself like a stick to beat a dog.

But Chen Lin didn't even look at him. He stood up shakily, opened the door, and walked out dejectedly.

Su Qing kept the stick held out for a while. Suddenly, Hu Bugui sighed and quietly said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have agreed to let you..."

Su Qing thought, We've reached the point where "I'm sorry" is about as much use as shit on a stick. He had been over-frightened time after time. Now, though his arms and legs still felt weak, it was as if he had worked up an immunity to fear. A reckless heroism rose in his heart. He thought, If I get torn in half, then I fucking get torn in half. Like hell I'm scared of you. Give it another eighteen years at worst and I'll be fine. If you dare to toss me under that big pagoda tree, too, I'll turn into a malevolent ghost the moment my eyes are closed and scratch at your door every night from dusk to dawn!

So he took a deep breath and jumped off the table, having another attack of stupid bravery. He pushed open the half-shut door, walked to the stairs, and went down.

Chen Lin was sitting on the living room couch with a syringe in his hand. Hearing movement, he looked up at him. His eyes or their rims were red, so red Su Qing had a mistaken impression that he was about to cry.

Chen Lin lowered his head and stuck the syringe into his flesh in silence. Su Qing saw him convulse and take a few rapid breaths. The syringe slipped from his hand. Then his head sank lower and lower, until it had nearly plunged into the couch.

Almost inaudibly, as though talking to himself, Su Qing said, "Oh my Lady Gaga, he's actually doing drugs..."

The false earring switched to another voice. Su Qing recognized this as that quack Lu Qingbai from the other day. Lu Qingbai had for some reason taken Hu Bugui's place. He said, "It's not drugs, it's 'cleaning.'"

Su Qing stared. He heard Lu Qingbai take a gulp of water and slowly say, "Captain Hu was anxious just now. He went out to follow the proceedings. I'm taking over for him for a while."

Then, Chen Lin slowly calmed. He spread out his body and lay face-up on the couch, looking at the ceiling. The blood and red glare in his eyes receded. He seemed much more tranquil. Though Lu Qingbai had said it wasn't drugs, Su Qing still thought that his greenish countenance and glazed eyes were just like those of an opium addict.

Lu Qingbai said, "The principle of cleaning is actually very simple. Don't think that blue seals are all that awesome. They're actually the same as you. They can also be influenced by excessive emotions. Over time the endocrine imbalance leads to menopausal symptoms. 'Cleaning' is using a particular

kind of drug to inhibit all his hormones relating to emotion, using an external force to calm him down.”

Su Qing thought, Isn't that just like a tranquilizer? Not very high-tech.

Lu Qingbai added: “It can also alleviate psychological trauma to a certain degree, cleaning out the leftover emotions inside the energy crystal that can't be converted—though this treats the symptoms but not the cause. Over time, it becomes easier and easier for them to lose control, and the time between needing to use drugs becomes shorter and shorter.”

Lying on the couch, Chen Lin's seemingly-rusted eyes suddenly turned, slowly coming to rest on Su Qing, meeting his lofty gaze.

Chen Lin laughed feebly. In a hoarse voice, he said, “Taking pity on me?”

Su Qing gave a cold laugh.

Chen Lin sat up, gave two low coughs, and beckoned to him. “Come down.”

Su Qing hesitated. Chen Lin noticed it and laughed lightly. “What, scared of me?”

This indirect prodding actually worked on Su Qing. He came downstairs without another word. Chen Lin looked out the window, the deep and shallow shadows on his face making him look years older. Pointing out the window at the sufficiently luxurious villa estate, he said to Su Qing, “Look at that. There's no difference between us and the little greys. We all live in cages.”

Su Qing knew he shouldn't speak, but he accidentally let out a stiff sentence: “There's a big difference—we're human.”

Chen Lin turned to look at him. Su Qing unflinchingly made eye contact with him, demonstrating that he was undaunted.

Perhaps because of that injection just now, Chen Lin's attitude was very mild. He wasn't angered. He only turned his head again and suddenly asked, “Do you know what the ‘Utopia Project’ is?”

Su Qing stared, his eyes opening slightly wide. He dimly felt that Chen Lin was revealing internal information and couldn't resist reaching up to twist the false earring. Lu Qingbai responded at once: “I'm listening, I'm listening, don't interrupt, let him talk.”

Chen Lin stood up and opened the living room window. Intermittent pleading and crying floated in through the window from somewhere. The

corners of his lips twitched slightly. He quietly said, “I don’t know what these people’s background is. They have an extremely powerful scientific research institution, even weapons. They call themselves personnel of the Utopia Project. At the beginning, we were all...ordinary people who signed contracts with them.”

Lu Qingbai became excited. “So it’s true! The blue seals’ unnatural energy system really isn’t spontaneously occurring, it’s artificially stimulated!”

Chen Lin continued: “I don’t know what this project’s goal is. I can only roughly deduce some hints. Their core content must relate to ‘energy.’”

“Energy?” Su Qing frowned.

Chen Lin didn’t continue this topic. He only raised his head and unbuttoned the two topmost buttons of his shirt, revealing the half-moon blue seal that was once again bright blue. As though talking to himself, he said, “You know, sometimes this mark puts me in mind of a quality mark on a pig.”

Su Qing crossed his arms in front of his chest, using very unfriendly body language to express—you deserve it.

Chen Lin laughed mockingly, then continued: “Everyone here keeps pets. Shi Huizhang keeps women, Jiang Lan keeps animals, and I like to bring back a little grey or two to keep me company. The people I bring back don’t have to absorb emotional energy like ordinary little greys. You could say there’s no danger to their lives...but for some reason, perhaps because of the type of their energy crystal, even so the people I bring back end up with depression for all kinds of reasons.”

Su Qing understood why he had been brought back—it was because he was especially callous and especially lively and seemed very unlikely to get depressed... In fact, he himself didn’t understand how he had ended up as a Type 2.

“But it seems that you would rather return to that lunatic asylum.” Chen Lin turned to look at him. “Since I’ve explained it to you now, you can choose. Stay here, or return to that place.”

Su Qing’s eyes opened wide. He thought that his morning nagging of everyone from Bodhisattva Guanyin to Jesus Christ had at last resulted in some immortal passing by and hearing him. It was simply like buying a five-million yuan lottery ticket.

Chen Lin continued: “Don’t think that I’m doing this out of kindness. It’s mainly because you’re the only little grey I have now. If I keep you here, it

won't be long before I'm low on power, and then they'll... I...can't die yet. I'm still not free."

Su Qing absolutely didn't hear his final heartfelt words. He said categorically: "I'm going back!"

Chen Lin gave him a profound look, nodded to show he understood, then leaned to one side and rested his eyes. So that very evening, Su Qing happily returned to his lunatic asylum in accordance with his own wishes and joined the assembly of the mentally ill. In view of the fact that in only a few days of undercover work, he had encountered a series of difficulties and hardships, and that the problem of his moral character was grave, Su Qing secretly resolved to change his name and call himself Su Zecheng⁷.

He was unperturbed, but Hu Bugui wasn't.

After returning from the last feast having successfully established a link, the RZ Unit's members thought that their Captain Hu was a little unsettled. Hu Bugui normally spoke little, keeping himself to himself, not having extraneous conversation with anyone. He was a typical example of someone who did much and said little. His sense of responsibility was first-rate; he wouldn't shift any responsibility that belonged to him. So he had silently taken on the blame for the major "accident" of Su Qing.

For three days and two nights after Su Qing was taken back, Hu Bugui kept close watch from his office for three days and two nights. Only when he saw that Su Qing was asleep and in no danger would he lie on his desk and doze for a while, then immediately be startled awake if a stirring came from the communicator. Meanwhile, he had handed the work of locating the blue seals' base over entirely to Xu Ruchong—until Chen Lin suddenly lost control.

Xue Xiaolu, who had just come to his office to report on the progress of the work, saw Captain Hu suddenly leap up and accidentally knock over a cup of tea. He fixedly watched the image from the communicator's nano monitoring system, nails digging into his flesh—more anxious than the interested party.

Only when the alarm was past did he pace a few times around his office like a trapped beast and tell Xue Xiaolu to call Lu Qingbai over to "substitute." Then he strode out without making a sound.

The original plan had been to use technological methods to fix on the location of the blue seals' base, then, avoiding alerting the enemy, quietly assemble a unit of special police to surround it. The ambush, the equipment, the surprise attack, it had all been planned out. At this point, Xu Ruchong had already fixed on seven potential areas, but Hu Bugui wasn't willing to wait any longer. Ignoring Xu Ruchong's obstruction, he gave an order and personally took people out to investigate them one by one...entirely overthrowing the original plan, deciding to use violence to curb violence.

And thus did the idiot's crusade dubbed the "Paramecium Operation" by Xu Ruchong begin.

20

DEAD END

BECAUSE THEY WERE CONCERNED about alerting the enemy and didn't dare to put the grey seals and hostages at risk, the RZ Unit they could only put themselves at risk.

For the tech nerds, any risks that could be avoided would be avoided, technological solutions would be used as far as possible, and it was best if there was no blood and no sacrifice. But for the field personnel, efficiency was king; going in guns blazing was king.

So Xu Ruchong became hopping mad, indicating that he could win this technological war. Sadly, Hu Bugui acted like he didn't exist at all. He autocratically held a brief meeting and promptly settled on a new course of action.

Xu Ruchong protested: "There will definitely be emergency shielding methods around the blue seals' base. As soon as you get close, you'll be discovered..."

Hu Bugui was silent for a moment. "Go find me a uniform and bicycle for the China Post."

Xu Ruchong: "..."

Fang Xiu efficiently found the items, and Hu Bugui changed rapidly. He put on a cap and turned into the gloomiest, most imposing deliveryman in the Chinese postal system—he looked more like he was going to deliver a bomb than the mail.

Liao Chenyuan was silent for a moment, then at last couldn't resist speaking: "Captain Hu, I think this is a little risky."

Xu Ruchong saw his opening. "Exactly. This definitely won't get you anywhere. If you do get into the blue seals' base, then those armed and dangerous...those...what are those people called?"

"Utopia," Lu Qingbai put in.

“Right, those people. Each one has a gun, and they’ll shoot you full of holes like a sieve!”

Hu Bugui looked at Xu Ruchong and didn’t speak, continuing to act like he didn’t exist. As though there was no such person present, he turned and ordered: “Let me off a kilometer away from the potential areas and take care not to attract suspicion. Qin Luo and Fang Xiu, cooperate with the special police unit. Stay in contact. Chenyuan, conceal yourself and provide long-range cover.”

Qin Luo hesitated a little. “Captain...”

Hu Bugui looked at her. “Do you have any objections?”

Qin Luo was silent for a moment, then clicked her heels together. “Yes, sir.”

Hu Bugui accepted a pair of plain glass spectacles from Lu Qingbai and covered up his eyes. It was as if he had also covered up all his spleen. His presence seemed a little more kindly and less oppressive; he actually did look a little convincing.

There was a switch on the glasses. By pressing it, Hu Bugui could flip between three channels on the left lens. One was connected to the other field personnel going with the special police unit, one was connected to headquarters, and the last was connected to Su Qing.

He changed the channel over to Su Qing, then turned to Lu Qingbai and said, “I’ll keep an eye on him, but there will be times I won’t be able to attend. You look after him a little from headquarters.”

Xu Ruchong saw that no one was paying attention to him. In pursuit of a sense of presence, he began to make noise: “Captain Hu, you can’t insist on having it your way. You’ll definitely be caught, and after you’re caught...”

Hu Bugui glanced at him and dully said, “I’m not making *you* go.”

Xu Ruchong was struck dumb for a moment, then realized the meaning behind these words and felt deeply looked down upon. He withdrew into a corner in heartbroken silence.

Hu Bugui briskly said, “Plan 2, move out.”

At his order, the RZ Unit moved with extreme efficiency. Fang Xiu put a gun on his back and glanced at Xu Ruchong. He patted him on the head and consoled: “It’s all right, you’re a technician, just do your technical work.”

Xu Ruchong raised his head and said darkly to him, “Do you believe this? One day I’ll become a superhuman. I have a premonition!”

Fang Xiu raised his head towards the ceiling, paused, then nodded against his own convictions. Xu Ruchong sighed and enthusiastically continued his daydream: “There will definitely be a turning point in between. What do you think it’ll be? Struck by a meteorite, or...”

Fang Xiu stuck up a finger towards him and with unusual gravity said, “I know.”

Xu Ruchong looked at him, full of expectation. Fang Xiu said, “All you need is a sleeping pill.” Then, holding back laughter, he quickly followed after Qin Luo and the others.

Three seconds later, Xu Ruchong got what he meant. He kicked over a chair and yelled angrily: “You...you prehistoric beings who haven’t had time to evolve brains, you can’t understand the mental landscape of a higher life form!”

When Su Qing saw Professor Cheng again, he understood the feelings of the Second Red Army joining the Fourth Red Army in Yan’an. Chen Lin took him back to the grey house, right past the guards, to the room he had shared with Cheng Weizhi before.

Cheng Weizhi was wearing reading glasses, reading by the window. He looked up when he heard movement and immediately opened his eyes wide. After a long moment, he tottered to his feet—it was three days after the feast. The others who had returned had all looked dizzy and confused, while Su Qing simply hadn’t come back. Cheng Weizhi knew the death rate for Type 2s was high, so he had thought he had already...

Such a good child. He had kept him company for over a month.

“Su...Su Qing?”

Su Qing really wanted to cry out “I, Hu Hansan, have returned once again⁸,” but when he saw Chen Lin next to him refusing to clear out, he held himself back and only smiled widely. “Uncle Cheng!”

“Oh...oh, good, you’re back, that’s good, that’s...” Cheng Weizhi pulled Su Qing over, then finally noticed Chen Lin and changed instantly from excited to guarded. “You?”

Chen Lin raised a hand, turned, and closed the door. He leaned back against the door and said to Cheng Weizhi, “I only have a few questions to

ask you. Relax, I'll leave as soon as I've asked them."

Like a hen protecting her chick, Cheng Weizhi pulled Su Qing behind himself and frowned as he looked at Chen Lin. "What do you want to ask?"

"Are the blues seals, like the grey seals, from a certain standpoint a kind of...half-finished product? What kind of energy system do you think would be natural?"

Cheng Weizhi stared. He hadn't expected him to ask this question. When Su Qing had been in school, he had loathed biochemistry the most. He had just managed to pass the university entrance exam because some private tutors had been hired for him. But at some point, he had begun to be interested in these dialogues of theirs. He listened with his ears pricked up. Now, he couldn't resist mentioning to Cheng Weizhi, "He says that the blue seals are also artificially stimulated, not naturally occurring."

Cheng Weizhi gave an "ah!" and pushed up his glasses. "That makes sense. You can use the human body's eight major systems as reference. A genuine naturally occurring thing ought to have a complete mechanism. When it uses a thing, it should have complementary means for how to supplement that thing, how to conduct biochemical processes within the body, how to deal with the material after the reaction and how to eliminate it. This way it can maintain a stable condition over a long period of time."

When he said "a stable condition over a long period of time," Su Qing noticed that the corner of Chen Lin's eye gave a slight twitch.

But Cheng Weizhi continued: "You have to answer one of my questions, too. I've thought about it for a long time—why do the blue seals need to use grey seals with corresponding types? The explanation I received at first was that if only one aspect of a person's emotions is absorbed, the opposing emotion will be limitlessly amplified, leading to a danger of that person losing control. But that's a far-fetched explanation. Blue seals are much fitter and stronger than ordinary people. Even if they lost control, what could they do?"

Chen Lin said, "You can't say that. A blue seal's so-called 'strengthening' is itself the latent potential of the human body being activated by a great volume of energy. An ordinary person in a crisis or a lunatic can also break through into the same level of power."

Cheng Weizhi shook his head. "No, that can't be right. For example, if the group of people whose emotions are absorbed is very large, the impact

on each individual isn't so serious. Lunatics whose emotions are out of control may be able to activate latent power due to stimulation, but they couldn't be a match for you people, in your right minds and knowing how to use the power...also, even if it is difficult for blue seals to collaborate with each other because they don't passively absorb emotions, at least they would have the ability to stop a lunatic whose emotions were out of control."

Chen Lin was silent.

Cheng Weizhi said sharply, "I have a guess. The grey seals need to exist because opposing emotions adhere to each other. You are unable to extract pure emotions from people. They're like the double helix of a strand of DNA, appearing in pairs, right?"

The only sound left in the room was the three people's suppressed breathing. After a long time, Chen Lin laughed almost inaudibly, took off his glasses, and lightly rubbed the bridge of his nose. Cheng Weizhi's eyes fell on his glasses. As if he had thought of something, he looked at Chen Lin thoughtfully.

"Yes, your guess is correct." Chen Lin nodded and put his glasses back on. He looked at Cheng Weizhi. "You deduced that much based on a few clues in this cut-off place. You're a genius."

Cheng Weizhi paid no attention to his compliment. He continued: "You need external assistance while absorbing the 'material,' and then you can't eliminate the 'material.' Blue seals can only convert and use energy. Never mind a living organism, even a machine is more precise than you."

Su Qing instantly became nervous, afraid that this "machine missing a part" might be unstable and abruptly flip out. He turned slightly and aimed at Chen Lin with the side wearing the shock ring.

But Chen Lin only lightly shook his head and sighed. "You're right. Blue seals are another experiment, and the funny thing is, they don't know it themselves."

But Cheng Weizhi hesitated, then suddenly said, "Unless..."

"What?" Chen Lin looked up at once, the look in his eyes so blazing it was as if they were about to throw out sparks. "Unless what?"

Cheng Weizhi paused. "Unless one person can have a pair of energy crystals. They could act as levers for each other, and use the individual's own emotions. The relationship between opposing emotions is very mysterious. The lower one aspect is, the higher the other aspect becomes. They en-

hance and inhibit each other, depending on each other for existence. Two energy crystals would be like creating a living perpetual motion machine...”

The more he spoke, the more excited he became, and his speech became more and more rapid. He seemed to have forgotten who Chen Lin was, clearly entering into lecture mode. “No, don’t tell me that’s wrong. Perpetual motion machines don’t exist. I ought to say that such an energy system’s origin is in the organism’s own nervous and endocrine systems. Fundamentally, it comes from the chemical energy of the food the organism ingests. Organs strengthened by this new energy system can absorb more food in order to support the new system’s operation. This link would create a greater, purer energy that would be easier for the human body to use. That would be a complete thing!”

Su Qing and Chen Lin were both stunned. Though Su Qing couldn’t entirely understand it, he still knew that Professor Cheng was talking about something amazing. He thought that those Utopia researchers must all be fatheads if they couldn’t think up as much as an old geezer working without access to any of the materials.

But Chen Lin’s reaction was a little faster. Softly, as though it took all his strength, he said, “But...one person can’t have two energy crystals, or else it would violate the Law of Emotional Attraction that the blue seals’ energy system is based on...”

The light in Cheng Weizhi’s eyes dimmed, as though a beautiful dream had been destroyed. Then he nodded silently—his conception had been built upon an “impossible conjecture.”

The corners of Chen Lin’s mouth suddenly turned upwards a bit, and then another bit. Then he laughed, louder and louder, until the laughter was almost hysterical—the tentative plan that could make a blue seal complete could only be built upon an impossible premise—their whole existence turned out to be a paradox.

For so long he had struggled alone between humanity and desire, like a clear-headed and suffering explorer, amid the suspicion, hatred, and blind ignorance of his companions, fumbling towards the end of the darkness—but when he finally staggered to the point where he could see the light of dawn and threw himself forward, disregarding everything, he found that he was trapped inside a glass cover.

Chen Lin laughed until tears came to his eyes. Then he abruptly pulled open the door and left as though taking flight.

21

NIGHT TALK

THAT NIGHT, there was a strong influence from a cold wave. It rained over vast areas of the country—where Hu Bugui was, it was strictly speaking a mix of rain and snow. Winter had already begun, and the nights were very cold. For people caught outdoors, this rain was adding insult to injury.

Hu Bugui was wrapped up in a raincoat, his face icy, struggling forward through the bleak wind and bitter rain. With the glasses on his nose, he felt even worse. While he was wearing gloves, his hands were still frozen numb. He was alone in this area and had already been traveling for three hours. Despite his raincoat, he was soaked through.

This place that they had designated “area 1” was particularly remote, very far from the cities, and it was a flat plain. The reserve personnel were concerned about exposing themselves and didn’t dare to come too close. They could only send him alone to make the arduous trek on a lousy mud-splattered bike.

When he heard a faint sound and received a communication request signal from headquarters, Hu Bugui stopped, took off his gloves, breathed on his hands, and rubbed them together. Then he took the glasses off, roughly wiped them with his fingers, and vigilantly stood in place for a while. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He looked down at the energy indicator on his wrist, confirmed that there were no unusual energy reactions, then finally got off the bicycle and pressed on his glasses, switching to headquarters. Out of caution, he still didn’t speak, only pushed aside the messy hair in front of his forehead, tapping three times on the other arm of the glasses with his nail—this was the signal they had arranged beforehand.

Xu Ruchong reported at once: “Captain Hu, your current position is basically at the heart of the suspected area. There’s no need to go any further. There currently appear to be no suspicious phenomena. Use your detector

to test the place at your three o'clock, five hundred meters away. There's an energy coordinate device there. Return the way you came immediately. Take care not to disturb it, there's likely to be an alarm system on the energy coordinate device—I can basically confirm now that that thing is disturbing the signal that friend of yours is sending."

Hu Bugui nodded and turned the bicycle around. Xu Ruchong continued to report: "During your investigation, area 7 can also basically be eliminated using technological means—though I still think that you're all running too great a risk..."

Hu Bugui turned and got onto the bike. Shivering but no less imposing, he said, "Shut up."

Xu Ruchong paused and suddenly said a little solemnly, "Captain Hu, this isn't right. Do you know what this energy coordinate device is?"

Hu Bugui didn't make a sound, waiting for him to continue. Xu Ruchong pushed up his ridiculously large glasses and frowned. "This is a new model anti-tracking-signal disruption device. When your friend's signal is emitted, because of these disrupters, at my end I receive at least forty or fifty possible locations scattered all over the globe. After three whole days of wrestling with it, I was able to eliminate a part of them. The remaining seven are the hardest nuts to crack. To make a comparison, they're like online proxies, but much more complicated. It's a mighty thing."

Hu Bugui paused for a moment—Xu Ruchong was regularly out of line and always thought highly of himself; his thoughts were bold and unconstrained in style. It was very rare to hear the word "mighty" come out of his mouth. "What's the matter?"

"This is used by the army. It hasn't been released to the public yet. In fact, the RZ Unit also has one. Chief Xiong just signed off on it half a month ago—I know about it because I took part in its development."

There was no need to say the rest. Having heard this much, Hu Bugui already understood better than he did—whether it was the blue seals or the insubstantial Utopia, plainly speaking, they were a group of anti-government militia with unclear goals and identities. How could they have technological power like this?

Who was behind them?

"Captain Hu..."

Hu Bugui interrupted him. Keeping his voice low amid the wind and snow, he said, “Don’t disclose this to others for now. Send General Xiong a special report. If this really is trouble above, he’ll take care of it. Don’t think about it anymore. Do your own work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Hu Bugui changed the channel over to the special police unit, explained that the sweep was over, and ordered them to stand by. Then, riding the bike, he wiped the left lens again and returned the channel to Su Qing. He found that the person who had just been lying there sleeping had at some point sat up. His elderly roommate was sleeping very soundly. The clock showed 2:30 AM.

Hu Bugui stared, thinking there was something off about Su Qing’s condition. This wasn’t the first time. Since Su Qing had returned to the blue seals’ base, however vigorous he was during the day, however much he seemed like he could eat and sleep his fill, he would wake up each night at precisely this time. Hu Bugui had been observing him for several days. It had been understandable at Chen Lin’s place; he might have been having insomnia from fear or anxiety or something. But hadn’t he already been at the grey house for a long time? Why would this still happen?

In the pitch-dark room, Su Qing sat bolt upright in bed, not moving, staring at his own hands.

Hu Bugui wanted to say something but was worried that suddenly speaking would scare him again, so he slowly increased the volume on his end, letting the sounds of wind and rain slowly increase so he would hear them clearly.

As expected, after a moment, Su Qing moved.

Hu Bugui turned the volume back down and asked him, “What’s wrong?”

Su Qing’s reactions seemed a little slow, whether because he had just woken up or for some other reason. He heard the question and only reacted after four or five seconds. He slowly glanced at Cheng Weizhi, then quietly got up and went to the bathroom. He closed the door and sat down with his back to the wall, then quietly said, “Can’t sleep.”

Hu Bugui frowned and softened his voice as much as possible—though it still sounded deep and gruff. “Could you not sleep the whole time, or did you suddenly wake up? Were you having a nightmare?”

Again, Su Qing didn't answer for a long time. He seemed to zone out sitting there. The communicator could generally detect his mental state. Though Hu Bugui wasn't specialized medical personnel, he could tell that all his index values were particularly low. He couldn't resist calling out to him: "Su Qing?"

Su Qing responded blankly, then reached out to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Oh, it's late, I'm not very awake, what did you just say?"

Hu Bugui heard that the tempo of his speech was considerably slower than during the day. His voice was a touch nasal. He repeated the questions he had just asked. Su Qing unconsciously reached a finger out to draw on the slightly fogged-up mirror. The young man in the mirror seemed to have had half his soul yanked out. His eyes wandered and his cheeks were pale. The shaggy hair in front of his forehead was long enough to touch his eyebrows, making him look even more downcast.

"It's...all of that, I guess," he said. "I think of things, and I don't know what I'm thinking about. I've been dreaming, too. It's a little blurred."

"What have you been thinking about?" Hu Bugui asked. Then he thought that was a little harsh and rigidly added, "Is it something you can tell me about?"

First Su Qing nodded. Then he seemed to think with some effort for a while. He laughed bitterly. "When you asked, I forgot about it. I must have been sleeping just now?"

Hu Bugui inspected Su Qing in the mirror and suddenly felt that the person in front of him seemed to have become someone else. From that energetic, aggravatingly brave, cheeky, brainless child he was during the day, he had turned into a porcelain doll who took ages to respond when you spoke to him.

Su Qing's eyes were listless, with traces of unspeakable blankness and weariness in them. If you didn't speak to him, he could stare at the same spot for ages, not moving a muscle, thinking of something. He wouldn't go to sleep.

Hu Bugui's heart sank—he knew something had gone wrong. Lu Qingbai had warned him that even though Su Qing appeared to have passed through one "feast" unharmed and seemed uncommonly resilient, they all knew that for grey seals, especially Type 2 Grey Seals, this was fundamental-

ly impossible. His psyche must have been harmed, he only didn't show it as obviously as others.

Hu Bugui stopped the bike, wiped the water off the glasses, rubbed his numb, frozen hands again, took a deep breath, and said as though humoring a child, "You go lie down in bed, I'll tell you a story, and soon you'll fall asleep, all right?"

Su Qing gave an "oh," but he didn't move at all, only kept sitting, looking straight back at himself in the mirror as though he had been possessed by the foolish unlucky god.

Hu Bugui patiently repeated, "You go back to bed."

Su Qing yawned. All his movements were slow now. He even seemed to blink in slow motion. "...Go ahead, I don't feel like moving."

After some thought, Hu Bugui cut his connection to the others to keep his teammates from having nightmares. Then he slowed down his speech and delivered a very countrified rendition of "The Tortoise and the Hare." This was an extremely dull story, both the original version and later expanded version. So according to Hu Bugui's experience, if you told this story while trying to lull a child to sleep, halfway through the first telling of the expanded version, the child would have fallen asleep from boredom.

But Su Qing didn't say he wouldn't listen, and he didn't fall asleep. After hearing two sentences, from his expression it looked like his mind had wandered away to parts unknown. He wasn't an attentive audience at all.

Hu Bugui stopped and called to him twice more: "Su Qing? Su Qing?"

Su Qing was like a computer with a malfunctioning system where the hourglass icon ran for ages after you touched it. You could poke him a few times without being sure of getting a response. After a long time, he finally came around and blankly asked, "What did you say?"

Hu Bugui saw that this wouldn't do. He spoke in a slightly heavier voice: "Stand up and go back to bed at once. Close your eyes, and don't talk. If that's no good, I'll get Dr. Lu to contact you. You need treatment."

He didn't know whether Su Qing understood him. He didn't answer. When Hu Bugui was about to repeat himself, Su Qing's eyes suddenly moved swiftly, and he asked, "Is it raining outside?"

Hu Bugui stared, not knowing why he had changed the subject. He could only follow along. "Yes."

"Are you still out?"

“The blue seals’ base uses some shielding measures. We’re manually eliminating the disruption devices.”

Su Qing gave an “oh” and slowly stood up. He had just put his hand on the bathroom’s doorknob when he suddenly stopped moving. His back was to the mirror, his head down, and his shoulders a little slouched. Without warning, he jumped back to the previous subject: “...I remember what I just dreamed about.”

Hu Bugui’s attention wandered for a moment, and his front wheel stuck in the mud. He braked at once and put one foot on the ground, but this night in the wild was really against him. His foot sank into the mud, and icy, muddy water quickly rose over his rain boot, leaking inside.

Hu Bugui shook his head. Pulling himself and his bicycle tire out of the mud, he ignored his waterlogged right foot. Afraid Su Qing would forget again, he quickly asked, “What did you dream?”

Su Qing gave an extremely brief laugh, there and gone. “I dreamed...of when I was little, and my dad took me to his old home to pay respects to our ancestral tomb. He stuck an incense stick in front of the tomb and lit it, and there was smoke on the tomb—though it was man-made, he still pointed to that thread of smoke and boasted to my mom that there was smoke on the ancestral tomb, so in the future I would definitely bring honor to my ancestors.”

Hu Bugui didn’t make a sound, strenuously pushing the bike through the heavier and heavier cold rain. Hearing Su Qing’s voice coming through intermittently, his heart suddenly began to ache.

“And what happened? He definitely never thought that twenty years later I’d bring home a man to make him mad—so this shows that smoke on an ancestral tomb is something that can only be found by chance, not by seeking. Lighting it yourself won’t do any good. It’s a counterfeit product, all the major deities and minor immortals aren’t so easy to fool, not like...”

“Su Qing.”

“...hm?”

“When you come back from the base, have Lu Qingbai give you a good looking-over, stay with the unit for a time, then...come stay with me?” Hu Bugui paused, then added, “Don’t misunderstand, I don’t mean anything by it. These people may have serious connections behind them. We have to

protect you. You would be comparatively safe with me, and anyway...this is my fault.”

Su Qing may have heard this, or he may not have heard it. He zoned out again.

Hu Bugui sighed. “Go back to bed and lie down.”

Like a marionette, Su Qing obediently walked back to the bedroom and lay down. Hu Bugui said, “Close your eyes.”—this was simply like guiding a feeble-minded child. In action he was vigorous and resolute, as strong as wind and swift rain, but his patience was unusually good...except towards chatterboxes like Xu Ruchong.

Su Qing closed his eyes. Against the backdrop of mixed wind and rain, Hu Bugui finished telling “The Three Little Pigs,” then told “Where Is Mama?” He found that Su Qing still wasn’t asleep, so he told classic children’s bedtime stories the whole way, until he could already see from afar the place where the special police unit was concealed, and dawn was about to break. Only then was there no more sound from Su Qing.

The rain had stopped. Hu Bugui was still wet. Dripping, he found the organization and hurriedly wiped the mud off himself, changed clothes, downed a big bottle of water, and drew a breath. “Notify headquarters and muster the helicopters. We’re going to the next target area.”

22

TIAN FENG

WHILE THE RZ UNIT worked out of doors in the wind and rain, the next day, Su Qing returned to his previous life.

He only fell asleep in the small hours of the morning and didn't sleep long—Cheng Weizhi was elderly and slept little. He got up first thing in the morning. Before, Su Qing had been the type who could sleep through a thunderstorm, but now for some reason he could be startled awake very easily. The slightest movement could make him jumpily open his eyes.

They arrived at the main hall on time, and Su Qing found that there were some new faces there, including even a little boy six or seven years old.

Cheng Weizhi sighed. "It's a sin."

Su Qing didn't respond. He was a little dizzy. The feeling he had had at night of not feeling like speaking hadn't passed yet. He self-diagnosed low blood pressure from not sleeping well. He followed Cheng Weizhi, passed a group of guards, went into the mail hall, and waited for breakfast.

As soon as he came in, a number of unfriendly eyes fell on him. Because they were so unfriendly, Su Qing sensed them. He frowned and glanced over, and saw the little team of Type 4s, missing one member, standing in a corner glaring savagely at him.

Su Qing's sleepy vagueness turned to anger. He thought, We're all here, all of us in a state of uncertainty, and all struggling to survive. But never mind ganging up and having a nice talk about our future, you're here being shit-stirrers who only want to make trouble. Damn it, so many people have been traumatized, what makes you guys so special? If you need to vent, why not go take it up with the blue seals? Why do you have to go for the soft targets and make life miserable for a bunch of little greys?

He returned their glare expressionlessly and quietly asked Professor Cheng, "Have they been making trouble for you?"

Cheng Weizhi was silent.

“Fine, I get it.”

As he said this sentence, Su Qing lowered his eyes and stuck a hand in his coat pocket. There was still a bandage around his neck. His messy hair covered his eyes. He was a completely different person from the trembling, nicely cleaned-up young man he had been when he had first arrived.

Cheng Weizhi acutely sensed the ferocity in his words and quickly held him back, quietly saying, “Don’t cause trouble.”

Then Cheng Weizhi pushed him towards the food table and shoved tableware into his hands. He found that Su Qing’s attention was still on the Type 4s. The old professor frowned. “Su Qing...Su Qing!”

Hearing his two calls, Su Qing somewhat absently turned his head. “Huh?”

Cheng Weizhi put some vegetables into his bowl and quietly asked, “What are you thinking of?”

Su Qing lowered his head, ate a leaf, then once again began to chew his chopsticks out of habit as he indistinctly said, “Nothing...”

Cheng Weizhi said, “Don’t try to fool me! Not at my age. My students were all the same age as you. Do you think I can’t tell what you’re thinking? You’re...”

Su Qing looked up and seriously asked Cheng Weizhi, “Teacher Cheng, do you think it would be a crime to kill someone here?”

“...” Cheng Weizhi stared at him, dumbstruck.

“Su Qing.” Lu Qingbai’s voice suddenly came from the communicator, and Su Qing remembered that he also had the government watching him. He laughed quietly. His laugh made Cheng Weizhi even more fearful. He thought that there was an unspeakable coldness to the young man’s laugh; it was even a little sinister.

Lu Qingbai’s voice sounded a little stern. “Captain Hu told me about your condition yesterday. Have you noticed that your mental state is a little off?”

Cheng Weizhi said, “Child, what’s the matter?”

Su Qing drew back his smile and drank a mouthful of the congee in his bowl in silence. “I’m doing fine.”

Lu Qingbai coldly interrupted him: “You aren’t doing fine at all. You haven’t noticed it yourself, but you’re displaying some of the symptoms of

manic depression. This is different from ordinary depression. Simply put, under the influence of stressors, the patient's mental state switches between the extremes of mania and depression. Don't contradict me. Since returning, you've had insomnia every day, and you've even had direct confrontations with blue seals you know perfectly well are dangerous. Think carefully, have you been different from before?"

Su Qing's hand holding his chopsticks paused.

Lu Qingbai continued: "Calm yourself. You were the one who said you wanted to go back to rescue this person. If your mental state is unstable, who can you save? Let me tell you, if it's severe enough, manic depression can make you cruel and callous. The symptoms are the same as those despicable Type 4s you're looking at. If you let it get to that stage, what do you think your prospects will be?"

Su Qing couldn't resist asking, "What...should I do?"

Lu Qingbai said, "Take a deep breath. Don't think about anything."

Su Qing did as he said, then immediately felt as though an electric shock went through him. He couldn't hold on to his chopsticks and dropped them on the table. He lost sensation and couldn't find his strength. He swayed and fell over, scaring Cheng Weizhi, who propped him up and quickly asked what was wrong—fortunately, while this grey house lacked for so much, it didn't lack for abnormal people. The white coats thought nothing of it, only took a glance and went back to their work.

Someone else also reached out to support Su Qing from the other side, propping him up along with Cheng Weizhi. Su Qing took a glance out of the corner of his eye and found that this was Tian Feng.

He was numb for about ten seconds, then slowly regained feeling. First he waved a hand at Cheng Weizhi and swayingly stood up on his own.

Lu Qingbai then explained: "That's the blocking device Captain Hu injected for you. I used it to adjust your hormone levels. Do you feel a little more clear-headed now?"

Su Qing leaned one shaking hand on the table, removed the other hand from Tian Feng's shoulder, and pressed down on his forehead, gasping as he felt strength returning to his muscles.

Lu Qingbai slowly asked, "Back to normal?"

Su Qing shook his head. He felt like a drunk who had been splashed in the face with cold water. A little astonished, he found that he really had

wanted to kill those Type 4s just now.

But this was his first time learning that psychological problems could be resolved this violently. Didn't other people sit on a couch and talk, take medicine, get hypnotized or something? Why did he have to nearly get knocked sideways?

Su Qing concluded that this was a charlatan with no regard for human life.

Lu Qingbai said in satisfaction, "Well, it's a little rough, but you get the desired effect quickly...though it hasn't gone through clinical trials yet—"

Su Qing's arm went weak, and he nearly fell over again.

Lu Qingbai cleared his throat. This time, in a more serious voice, he said, "Remember, all your symptoms are the influence of external emotions from the feast. Ignore them. You were the one who gave up on the path of returning to safety and getting treatment. You chose your responsibility, so you have to go on to the end. You look like a useless pretty boy, but you should take care how you conduct yourself."

As Lu Qingbai said, Su Qing took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. Then he raised his head and smiled at Cheng Weizhi. As though nothing were the matter, he said, "It's nothing. I just got up with low blood pressure and low blood sugar in the morning, all sluggish. I was grumpy about getting up and got dizzy. I'm fine now."

Cheng Weizhi sighed. Tian Feng quietly patted him on the shoulder. Su Qing only then remembered to ask after his health. "Well, how are you doing?"

A smile more painful than tears appeared on Tian Feng's face. Su Qing knew his question had been pointless. Then, he saw that Tian Feng was leading a child, the new six- or seven-year-old little boy with a ridiculous bowl cut. He had his head raised, looking at him with big, wide, dark and liquid eyes.

So Su Qing bent down and squeezed out what he thought was a "kindly" smile. "Hey, kid, what's your name?"

Tian Feng pushed the boy in front of Su Qing. The boy looked at Tian Feng a little fearfully, saw him nod, then crisply said to Su Qing: "My name is Tu Tutu!"

"Huh?" Su Qing thought he had heard wrong. "Tootootoo?"

What were his parents thinking? Were they raising a child or a machine gun?

The boy pursed his lips, looking at Su Qing. The two of them stared at each other for half a minute. Then the kid suddenly burst into tears loud enough to shake the heavens. Pointing to Su Qing, he lodged a complaint against him with Tian Feng: “Wah—this uncle is a bad guy—wah—he gave me a nickname!”

The little thing’s voice hadn’t broken. His wails were ear-piercingly sharp, covering up the noises made by the rowdy lunatics jumping around all over the room. Su Qing drew back his lips blankly, rubbed his ears, and bitterly thought, Oh, good grief...

Cheng Weizhi took a candy from the dining table, put it in front of little Tu Tutu, and pulled an exaggerated funny face. “Don’t cry, don’t cry. Look what grandpa has for you, look.”

The child stopped crying. He stared at Cheng Weizhi with big reddened eyes, then let himself be fobbed off with a piece of candy. Tian Feng then quietly said to Su Qing, “He’s like me. A Type 3.”

Su Qing stared. “And...his parents?”

“His whole family were ‘prey’ this time. His parents weren’t grey seals, so they...” Tian Feng’s voice came to a halt. He tilted his head and looked at Tu Tutu with his mouth open, letting Cheng Weizhi feed him. “Su, Su Qing, can I...ask you for something?”

Tian Feng was a man with guts smaller than a grain of rice. No matter where he was, he seemed to be quivering. Even now, as he was speaking to Su Qing, occasionally someone would make a noise dropping a piece of tableware, and it would scare him into a jump. Su Qing looked at him acting like a dead leaf in the wind and was a little impatient. “What do you want to say? If I can do it, I will.”

“The child is young, and he doesn’t take up much space. He’s normally pretty well-behaved and doesn’t cause trouble. Can you take him to sleep in your room tonight? Look after him?”

Su Qing stared. “Aren’t you taking care of him?”

Tian Feng smiled bitterly. “I have nightmares every night. I scream during them, in the middle of the night, and the child isn’t getting enough sleep, I...I heard someone say once that a child won’t grow up tall if he doesn’t sleep enough...”

Su Qing hesitated. He thought, how could he take care of such a young child?

Tian Feng implored him in a whisper: “Please help me out. Someone needs to look after the child, or else how will he survive in this place? I have no one else to ask. In, in this place, there are only a few clear-headed people, and then there are the Type 4s, and then...”

Seeing that Su Qing still didn’t speak, he drew closer to him and bent his knees, quietly saying, “Take it—take it that I’m begging you...”

Seeing he was about to prostrate himself, Su Qing quickly held him up. “Fine, brother, I said it’s fine. We’ve ended up here together, and that’s fate...though it’s an ill fate—I’ll take your place...take his parents’ place looking after him for a few days. Then maybe we’ll be able to get out of here!”

Tian Feng stood up, wiping away tears. “Can there be such a day?”

“Yes, absolutely.” Su Qing patted him on the back and sighed. He had just received violent treatment from Lu Qingbai, and now he had become someone else’s spiritual counselor—he really had a lot of hats to wear.

“Really? Don’t deceive me.” Tian Feng’s little nose and little eyes crumpled together. He rubbed his face with his sleeve, snot and tears smearing together. “You can’t deceive me!”

Su Qing laughed. “Why would I deceive you? No one’s paying for it.”

That day, Tian Feng parted from them with his face bathed in tears, and Su Qing took the little baggage Tu Tutu back to his room. Tu Tutu and Teacher Cheng got along very well, but Su Qing had misspoken once and earned himself eternal enmity. The child rolled his eyes at him all day.

At night, Su Qing made a bed for the little devil and flicked him on the forehead. “Little ingrate, sleep well.”

The child with the bowl cut stared at him, then suddenly said, “Uncle Annoying, when will my mom and dad come pick me up?”

Su Qing was stifled, not knowing how to respond. After thinking about it, he could only say, “I don’t know, either. I’m not familiar with them. How about we ask Uncle Tian tomorrow? They may come in a few days.”

Tu Tutu nodded and gave a tiny yawn. “I hope they come soon. I don’t like it here.”

At 2:30 AM, Su Qing once again woke up promptly. This time he didn’t sit up, only lay face-up in bed, gazing at the ceiling by the faint light. He

thought of what Lu Qingbai had said, what Cheng Weizhi had said, then closed his eyes again. In his mind, he imitated Hu Bugui's voice telling stories last night, trying to calm his emotions and get himself to sleep—these aren't my thoughts, aren't my emotions. I can't be influenced by them. I can't lose control...

Then, slowly, a voice sounded in his ear. Su Qing found that this wasn't his imagination. It was Hu Bugui, who had noticed that he had woken up again and continued his great undertaking of *One Thousand and One Nights* of bedtime stories.

Su Qing turned over and thought that while this Hu was unlucky, he was actually all right.

The next day, little Tu Tutu in the end didn't get a chance to ask his Uncle Tian the question that was crucial to him, because in the black night, Tian Feng had torn up his blanket, tied it into a rope, and hanged himself from a bathroom pipe.

He had finally become so scared that he no longer dared to live.

23

TENSION

CHEN LIN opened the door and saw the execrable Shi Huizhang standing there with a shining white row of Utopia white coats. Shi Huizhang spat out the cigarette in his mouth, held it between his fingers and used it to point. With a fake smile, he said to Chen Lin, “The base just intercepted a probing wave. It’s likely they’ve discovered the base’s location. We all think it’s a little strange for the RZ Unit sons of bitches to be showing such great magic powers this time.”

Chen Lin looked at him expressionlessly. Shi Huizhang was of the sort who could put on imperial robes and still not look like the emperor. Hearing him spout a bunch of high-sounding technobabble was ridiculous. Chen Lin was even worried he would bite his own tongue.

Shi Huizhang continued: “We suspect that some internal personnel... have brought back some unfriendly ‘little articles.’ What do you think?”

Chen Lin looked down and laughed quietly. “What, you think there’s something wrong with me?”

Shi Huizhang looked him up and down, then suddenly raised a hand and took Chen Lin’s glasses off. Chen Lin didn’t dodge. He stood at the door, looking at him coldly. Shi Huizhang pinched his glasses by the arms and turned them over in his hands. He held them up to his nose bridge, then passed them to a Utopia staff member next to him. “I think there’s something pretty wrong with these glasses of yours. A blue seal’s senses are hundreds of times more acute than an ordinary person’s. A near-sighted blue seal... Ha, now that’s a curiosity!”

A white coat behind Shi Huizhang took Chen Lin’s glasses as though they were an exhibit in a court case, wearing gloves and putting them into an evidence bag, then took a step forward and nodded to Chen Lin. “A mere formality. Please cooperate, Mr. Chen.”

Chen Lin and Shi Huizhang were busy staring at each other as though in a contest to see who had the bigger eyes, turning a deaf ear on these words.

This white coat was extremely self-possessed, displaying no trace of an unhappy expression. He took a pale blue envelope from his pocket and presented it to Chen Lin with both hands. “Mr. Chen, this matter concerns the safety of the base. Please cooperate with our work.”

Chen Lin lowered his head and reached out to take the envelope. After opening it, he scanned it, his gaze pausing for a moment on the bold and flamboyant “Fei” it was signed with. Then he turned back inside. “You may do as you like.”

The white coats entered his residence and began an orderly inspection. Shi Huizhang wanted to follow them inside, but Chen Lin extended a hand to block him at the door. Chen Lin lightly said, “There will be no need for you to come in. It’s too messy inside. I can’t receive guests.”

The corner of Shi Huizhang’s eye gave a twitch. He smiled coldly. “What, did that little beauty you brought back make a mess?”

Chen Lin acted like he hadn’t heard, ignoring him. But Shi Huizhang, as though struck with preaching disease, glanced at Chen Lin’s lower body and said in a peculiar intonation, “Let me just give you a warning. As a man, first you need your life, and then you can consider eating your fill. When you’ve eaten your fill, you can consider golden rooms, love affairs, all that—it doesn’t come above food.”

Chen Lin quietly returned the compliment: “I can’t compare to Shi-dage’s refined hobby of raising dogs by his gate.”

Shi Huizhang didn’t feel a bit of shame. With a meaningful smile, he patted Chen Lin on the shoulder. “I know you don’t have any little greys to spare. There are some decent ones in the new batch. They haven’t gone through a ‘feast’ yet, brand new. If you want, I can spare you one.”

When Shi Huizhang spoke, he was very close to Chen Lin. The smile on his face was sinister and vulgar; he looked hardly human. Chen Lin dodged aside in revulsion, thinking that this cretin must have been a dog that would piss anywhere turned human; power had made him savage—Chen Lin knew he was a nasty piece of work himself, but he was still ashamed to be associated with him.

Not long after, the white coats packed up and left. Shi Huizhang was rather regretful. He gave Chen Lin a ferocious glare, then reluctantly left

with them.

A figure appeared in front of Chen Lin. Chen Lin looked up and saw that it was the “gale force young lady” Jiang Lan once again. Jiang Lan’s eyes paused on the mostly rotted corpse of the cat in the yard. “You don’t like cats? How about I give you a dog next time?”

Chen Lin’s stiff face relaxed a little. He gave her a somewhat gentler smile. “Thank you, I’m not very used to living with animals.”

Jiang Lan frowned. “It’s just a pet to relieve boredom.”

She had found that Chen Lin was unusually sensitive towards non-human creatures. He practically regarded them as enemies. She didn’t quite understand. Chen Lin shook his head, not wanting to explain. He closed the door and let drop a sentence: “I’m going to the grey house.” Then he turned and left.

Even Jiang Lan was like Shi Huizhang and the others. They all thought they had risen above others by “evolving” into blue seals. They had power unimaginable to the average person, each with their own special ability. They could easily control the lives of ordinary mortals, easily obtain vast riches...but they couldn’t see their own fatal flaw.

Chen Lin thought he truly had nothing to say to these optimists living in their fool’s paradise.

Su Qing got up in the morning and voluntarily contacted Lu Qingbai from the bathroom, delivering himself up for electrocution. He currently had both elderly and young “dependents” and needed to maintain an optimal condition all day. Lu Qingbai didn’t stand on ceremony. He knocked him over with another shock. When Cheng Weizhi came in, he had just recovered. His organs protested against this excessively vigorous morning exercise. The outcome of their protest was that Su Qing hugged the toilet and began to vomit.

Cheng Weizhi thought he had had a nightmare. As he helped him up, he patted his back lightly. “It’s all right, all right, good child, it’s all right now.”

Su Qing only stopped when he was about to start bringing up bile. He rinsed his mouth. His exposed wrists looked like reed stems. He looked very pitiful. He pressed both hands against the sink and quietly said, “Uncle Cheng, draw a ‘line’ for me and hold tight. Don’t let me go astray.”

Cheng Weizhi, stern-faced, was silent for a while. Then he said, “Trust in logic, don’t trust in emotion.”

Su Qing looked at him blankly. Cheng Weizhi said, “A person’s emotions are sometimes like a complicated maze that can change at any time. Logic is a line you can follow. Hold tight to it, and you can follow cause and effect.”

The early morning passed in this grave, tense, dull way. All of Su Qing’s efforts were powerless against Tu Tutu. In the end, Professor Cheng, who had experience raising children, rescued the freshly minted single dad.

Finally they all went to the main hall together and learned the sad news.

Tian Feng’s body was taken away in front of everyone, just like many others who had been unable to walk out of this place. Cheng Weizhi held Tu Tutu, standing in silent observance. Even the troublemaking Type 4s behaved themselves. The whole crowd of lunatics and idiots seemed to have sensed something, too. Without prearrangement, they stood up in silence—each time someone died, there would be this sort of unusual silence in the main hall. They were like a group struggling spirits gathered together, watching the white coats carry formerly fresh and lively people away one by one.

When they passed by Cheng Weizhi, Tu Tutu seemed to sense something. He suddenly reached out his little hand and tore away the cloth covering the body’s face. The grey face of the deceased appeared in front of everyone. Cheng Weizhi rushed to cover Tu Tutu’s eyes with his hand.

Tu Tutu saw only darkness. Not understanding, he asked, “Is that Uncle Tian?”

Cheng Weizhi said, “Yes.”

“Why hasn’t he gotten out of bed yet?”

Cheng Weizhi: “...”

“He’s dead,” a girl cut in from beside them. She looked only about twenty years old, with short hair. She was another one of the new grey seals. Her eyes were a little swollen, and there was a cut at one side of her mouth. She looked a little wretched.

Tu Tutu didn’t speak again. Su Qing looked at the girl. “What type are you?”

The girl frowned, seeming very sensitive about this designation. She was silent for a while, then said, “The same as the child, a Type 3... A bastard with a face the shape of a mahjong tile caught me.”

Su Qing knew she was talking about Shi Huizhang, and he once again thought of the woman tied up in the yard. He couldn’t resist saying, “That

person is named Shi Huizhang. If he asks you to leave this place with him, no matter what he promises you, don't agree."

The girl looked like she had swallowed a fly. She opened her eyes wide, looking vexed. "Are you joking? How could I agree to such a thing? How disgusting!"

Su Qing laughed and didn't say anything else—a white coat had already given him a glance of unknown meaning.

The short-haired girl hesitated, then quietly said, "My name is Zhao Yifei. What about you?"

"Su Qing." Su Qing leaned against the table and relaxed his body. "The 'qing' in 'qingzhong,' 'degree of severity'⁹.' When I was little, a fortune-teller came to my house and said there was some unknown heaviness in my fate. I was going to meet with many difficulties in life. My dad made an attempt to simplify matters. He said, avoid the heavy, call him 'light.'"

Zhao Yifei's expression was a little sympathetic. She sorrowfully said, "But your fate didn't lighten. I can see you've had many misfortunes."

"So I have. As long as I can survive," Su Qing said quietly.

The rims of Zhao Yifei's eyes reddened. "My boyfriend...my boyfriend was killed by them. If I get out..."

Su Qing raised his index finger and shushed her. He looked down at Zhao Yifei, hesitated, then raised a hand and put it on her shoulder in an attempt at consolation.

When the dead man had been carried away, Tu Tutu opened his big eyes and looked all around. He suddenly looked up at Su Qing. The kid asked, "Uncle Annoying, dead means like on TV, getting shut up in a little box, right?"

Su Qing took the child from Cheng Weizhi's arms and quietly agreed.

Tu Tutu lay in his arms, shuffling around looking for a more comfortable position. Then he asked, "So my parents are dead, too? They've also been shut up in a little box?"

Zhao Yifei turned her face away and covered her mouth.

Su Qing paused, then nodded. Tu Tutu gave a disappointed "oh" and grabbed Su Qing's collar. He raised his little head. "Then when can they get out? Is it going to be a very, very long time before they can come pick me up?"

Su Qing pressed the child against his shoulder and patted him on the back. “If they don’t come, I’ll take care of you, all right?”

Tu Tutu wrinkled his nose. “No. You gave me a nickname. You’re a bad person.”

Su Qing slapped him lightly on the butt. “I put your clothes on for you, ingrate!”

Tu Tutu was even more dissatisfied. “You stuck my legs into a single pant leg and said I was a little frog. You’re so annoying!”

Just then, a lunatic suddenly jumped onto a table, straightened his neck, and began to sing like the wailing of ghosts: “The setting sun will rise again tomorrow, closing flowers will open again in the morning, the pretty bird that flies away won’t return...”

His voice grew hoarser and hoarser as he sang. His wide open eyes faced the ceiling in a daze. He was like a hopeless crier, going on until his voice was exhausted.

Only the little brat who didn’t understand anything could still maintain his equanimity. Tu Tutu tilted his head to listen to this novelty for a while, then forgot that he had condemned the quality of service of this single dad. He reached out a small fist and pounded Su Qing’s shoulder. Pointing to the pastries on the table, he commanded, “I want to eat that one!”

Zhao Yifei wiped away her tears and forced out a smile. In the happiest voice she could put on, she said, “Which one? I’ll get it for you.”

When they had just come out from the main hall, they ran right into Chen Lin. Chen Lin’s eyes paused for a while on Tu Tutu, who was still clutching a pastry and happily smearing cream all over his face. Su Qing put the child down and indicated for him to go to Cheng Weizhi. He flexed his slightly sore arms and put his hand wearing the shock ring in his pocket.

Chen Lin found that this young man’s gaze was much calmer. Standing there, not making a sound, unflinchingly meeting his eyes, he created a very powerful...false impression.

Chen Lin nodded to Cheng Weizhi, amounting to a show of respect for the beleaguered genius. Then he turned to Su Qing. “Come with me.”

Su Qing waved a hand towards Cheng Weizhi and gave him a comforting smile. He made a hand gesture like pinching a thread. Then he gave him a thumbs up, pulled a funny face towards little Tu Tutu, and finally followed Chen Lin without a sound.

Chen Lin took him out of the grey house. A helicopter was waiting not far away. Some personnel came up and covered Su Qing's eyes. The familiar darkness came. Su Qing's heart tightened. Then he was shoved into the helicopter. He heard someone say to Chen Lin, "Mr. Chen, the RZ Unit seems to have located the base somehow. The degree of danger has not yet been ascertained. It would be better for you..."

Chen Lin said, "I have to go out to replenish my energy."

The staff member continued to counsel him: "It has only been four or five days since the last feast, I think it would be best if you..."

Chen Lin drew out his words, enunciating carefully: "I—said—I—need—to—replenish—my—energy."

The staff member didn't respond. Su Qing knew that he was going to experience another nightmare.

In the darkness, Hu Bugui's voice suddenly sounded amid the silence. He said, "Don't be scared. The shielding device inside you can help you withstand part of the harm. There won't be a problem."

Of course there won't be a problem, Su Qing thought. Even if there was, he would just have that problem "shocked" away. Apart from Cheng Weizhi, he now had a little piece of baggage to look after. This was a responsibility Tian Feng had given him before dying. Words that had been spoken couldn't be taken back. He couldn't go back on his promise.

In two days and two nights, Hu Bugui had slept no more than three hours, but he didn't show a single sign of weariness. He still stood there like a javelin, issuing orders. Up to this point, they had eliminated three areas, and the technicians had taken care of another. There was one they were investigating just now. Through Su Qing, Hu Bugui sensed a bit of an unusual atmosphere. So, keeping an eye on Su Qing, he connected to Xu Ruchong. "How about area 5?"

Xu Ruchong was so busy his feet didn't touch the ground. "I don't know yet. We haven't seen anything suspicious yet, but the computer still shows that it hasn't finished taking care of it. I suspect that there's a problem with the program, wait while I..."

Hu Bugui didn't wait for him to finish prattling. He said to Fang Xiu next to him, "Everyone be on the alert. Area 5—it's likely we've already found the blue seals' base."

Fang Xiu said, "Yes, sir."

Xu Ruchong said, "...huh?"

When the black cloth in front of Su Qing's eyes was removed, he found that he had returned the estate where Chen Lin had hidden him. The Utopia car left quickly. The estate was extremely quiet—as though they were the only two people there.

Chen Lin suddenly grabbed Su Qing's collar and pressed him to a wall with great strength. His eyes looked into Su Qing's. Then, practically into his ear, he said, "The RZ Unit has located the base. I hear it's likely because some person snuck something in... What I want to know is, is that person you?"

24

CRISIS

HU BUGUI and Su Qing froze simultaneously.

It was frighteningly tranquil all around. Su Qing could practically hear the frantic beating of his own heart. He looked into Chen Lin's eyes and felt that his mouth was a little dry. "What...what are you talking..."

Chen Lin laughed coldly and took the magnetic neckband's controller from his pocket. Su Qing was extremely nervous and therefore outperformed himself. The image of that woman Shi Huizhang had throttled to death with the neckband flashed rapidly through his mind. The moment Chen Lin pressed down, he began to imitate it.

He had to clutch his neck with his fingers. It would only look real if he drew blood... Ow, it hurt—he had to gasp for breath, but he also had to act like he couldn't breathe. His breaths had to be very short. Then he had to slowly fall to the ground clutching his neck, twitching all over. After a while he had to add in rolling around...

Hu Bugui heard Lu Qingbai whistle. "Nice going, kid! It's so realistic."

The RZ Unit's field personnel were stealthily approaching "area 5." Fang Xiu, arms crossed, was sitting next to Hu Bugui. Through Hu Bugui's glasses and the vehicle's video system's sharing function, he was also watching Su Qing. He couldn't resist asking, "Captain Hu, what if we sent some people..."

Hu Bugui was silent for a moment, then shook his head.

"We can't alert the enemy too early," he said. He paused, then added, "He'll be all right."

In under two months, Hu Bugui had seen him transform at an astonishing speed from a dissipated, decadent unemployed youth into his present state—brave, steadfast, each step falling on the most frightening boundary of his inner being, exceeding his limits again and again.

Hu Bugui clenched his fist and suddenly broke off the video, putting the glasses on his nose, not letting Su Qing's circumstances disturb the others any longer. "Team 1 will infiltrate the target area on foot. Xu Ruchong, I need you to break through their signal blocking within an hour. Everyone else, stand by and await orders!"

But Su Qing's strenuous performance didn't receive approval from its sole audience member. Chen Lin stood by watching coldly, offering up neither applause nor coins. His expression was apathetic. Then he kicked Su Qing's shoulder with the tip of one foot. "Get up, don't play dumb."

Like a mechanical toy whose pause key had suddenly been pressed, Su Qing froze. He didn't know where he had slipped up. Countless reasons instantly flashed through his head, and at last he came up with a conclusion: oh no, I forgot to roll my eyes up!

Chen Lin leaned against the wall with his arms crossed in front of his chest and slowly said, "The magnetic neckband is in fact invisible, and if it's broken, it can be hidden for a time. Your friends even helped you simulate the geographical circle function, so when I 'undid' the house's restriction on you, I was fooled. But I forgot to tell you, when the magnetic neckband is activated, it creates bioelectricity. At this close a distance, I should be able to sense it."

So it wasn't because he forgot to roll his eyes up—since he had been seen through, Su Qing simply rolled over, sat up, and rudely said, "What have you got to show off about? Bragging that you're a human radar?"

Chen Lin ignored his provocation, only looked him over from above. After a long moment, he asked, "When did you stop being afraid of me?"

"I've been scared out of my fucking wits over and over. This time I don't have any left to be scared out of. What else are you going to do to me?" Su Qing wiped the dirt off his face and said, "I was the one who brought the RZ Unit's stuff in days ago. They know everything now, anyway, what they should know and what they shouldn't. What do you think happens now?"

Chen Lin didn't respond.

Su Qing wasn't planning on paying attention to him. He thought, could Chen Lin really let him off?—He couldn't even dream of such a possibility.

So he calmed down instead. He didn't look at Chen Lin's expression, continuing on his own: "I've spent over twenty years as a useless layabout. Starting from birth, my doom has been to only accomplish this one thing.

It's obvious that no one is going to care whether I live or die—it's for the better if no one cares, or else I'd have to start getting out photographs and leaving painful last words behind, 'tell so-and-so I love them.' This way I can do without."

Chen Lin was still looking silently at the delicate-featured young man. Su Qing sat there in a dire predicament, a pure smile like an overgrown boy's gradually appearing on his face, with the particular recklessness and unconcern of youth, dazzlingly beautiful. "I think this is worth it. I'm going to go see Grandpa Marx, and I'm taking all you sons of bitches and your big base with me. When I get there, I'll be able to face the old man seriously and say, I have nothing to be ashamed of before the revolutionary martyrs. I, Su Qing, am also a true man..."

True Man Su's speech was too impassioned. He was choked by his own saliva and began to cough.

Hu Bugui sat quietly in the military jeep, not making a sound, listening to him speak, his nails unconsciously breaking through the flesh of his palms.

Chen Lin suddenly leaned down and lifted Su Qing, who was breathlessly laughing and coughing at the same time, then roughly lowered his head and kissed him on the mouth. Not to be outdone, Su Qing used his tongue to file his teeth. Returning tooth for tooth, Chen Lin bit through his lip. Like a dogfight, each got a mouthful of blood. Then each retreated, one trying to catch his breath, the other tilting his head and spitting out bloody saliva.

Chen Lin looked at him. "I've only just now realized that you rather suit my tastes."

Su Qing said, "Ugh."

A smile flickered and vanished on Chen Lin's face. Then he pulled Su Qing up and headed out in long strides. Su Qing stumbled a few steps after him, realized that Chen Lin really wasn't planning to do anything to him, and couldn't resist asking, "Aren't you...worried about your base?"

"I am," Chen Lin said without looking back. "I'm worried the RZ Unit won't be able to catch them all in one fell swoop."

As he spoke, Chen Lin let go of Su Qing and let him walk by himself. He wasn't worried that he wouldn't follow. He said softly, "This is an enormous system. I told you, 'energy' is at its heart. Another step forward, it's likely to do with an energy source. An energy source is an issue that can incite a war between two countries. It's not as simple as you imagine."

Su Qing's reaction was direct: "You mean there's more than one base?"

Chen Lin looked at him. He neither nodded nor shook his head, only said, "Even if you knew, you still wouldn't have the power to attend to it. Asking is only creating needless worry for yourself."

Su Qing frowned. "It's not creating needless worry. I'm up for the slaughter."

Chen Lin said, "In fact, we all live on a mountain surrounded by clouds and mist. The mist is just too heavy, so they can't see what's hanging above them, so they think they're living at the mountain's peak..."

Hearing this, Su Qing knew he was getting pretentious again.

He heard Chen Lin continue: "But if you see it, what can you do? Apart from knowing that you're an ant, apart from suffering even more, what else is there?"

This man full of perplexity and suffering was for once speaking at length from the heart, but sadly the person walking behind him could only think of picking up a club and taking a swing at the back of his head... So you see that people's mental outlooks are always different.

Chen Lin took Su Qing back to the rooftop from before. Su Qing suspected he had accurately decided that the RZ Unit's attention was all on the base, with none to spare for him, so he had gone out to forage. For the second time, Chen Lin connected the line to Su Qing and laughed bitterly. "You know, during 'hunts,' I establish a particular kind of connection with little greys. Since we collect emotions that appear in pairs, and I'm more sensitive to emotion than an ordinary blue seal, in that moment, I even feel as though...our brain waves are joined together."

Su Qing couldn't suppress a bit of a tremor. He wasn't scared of death, but he was scared of this—this might turn him into a lunatic. So Chen Lin's slightly sentimental sighings appeared more and more repulsive in his eyes.

Chen Lin sighed. "This gives me a mistaken feeling, as though only this one person can enter my world. As though we rely on each other for survival. Especially because Type 2 Grey Seals are rare, and I'm likely to only have one little grey at a time. You know...I could even believe that I genuinely care for you."

He looked up at Su Qing, the deep-rooted chill in his eyes receding a little, revealing a trace of frail sincerity. But his listener didn't appreciate the kindness.

Su Qing said, "...Fuck!"

Chen Lin began to laugh silently and connected himself to the instrument's other end. "But whether it's a mistake or reality, I still have to use you to get energy for a second time."

...even though up to this point, there was no precedent for a Type 2 Grey Seal surviving a second feast—generally, before their energy crystal exploded, they would die from the powerful invasion of external emotions. Sadness was an emotion with an infectiousness that was truly too harmful.

"Do you know why that is?" Chen Lin asked.

Su Qing's lips were white. He was desperately keeping himself from displaying any fear. Gnashing his teeth, he said, "Because you're an asshole!"

"That's right," Chen Lin said. Then he pressed the button. "Who said otherwise?"

There seemed to be something invisible and untouchable in the air that pressed on him like a landslide. This time Su Qing's reaction was even more violent than the last.

"You've let everyone down. You shouldn't exist. Your birth was a mistake..."

"No one will remember you. Your birth was obscure and your death will be without glory. You accumulated merit in your last life, and in this life you came back to this world, wasted twenty years' worth of feed, and you're going ignorantly to your death leaving nothing behind."

"Even if you survive, you have no future. What can you do? Who cares what you do? Who will notice whether you succeed or fail?"

"You want to save others, but you can't even save yourself. You've never accomplished anything. When did you start thinking of yourself as a hero? Don't be so arrogant. If you're a hero, then the streets are full of Ultramen. Who can you save? Who will thank you?"

Su Qing couldn't stand it any longer. He began to scream. The blocking device inside him self-destructed at once. The computer Lu Qingbai had linked up remotely to the blocking device crashed on the spot. Hu Bugui's furious shout was already coming from the other end: "What's going on? Didn't you say that the blocking device..."

"The blocking device isn't all-powerful." Lu Qingbai was a little frantic, choking as soon as he opened his mouth. "Everyone's circumstances are different, their reactions to each feast are different. Some people have increas-

ingly violent reactions, and others become increasingly numb. Anyway, the blocking device can only ward off a part of the harm. If the technology existed to ward it off entirely, do you think the blue seals would be so stupid? With their high level of technology, wouldn't they have such a thing for themselves so they wouldn't need cleaning?"

Hu Bugui's eyes were red. "So now, he..."

"What are you asking me for? The blocking device broke, and they're thousands of fucking miles away from me. Who do you think I am? Sun Wukong?" Lu Qingbai was raving mad, going around and around in circles like a donkey pulling a millstone, yanking at his hair as he grumbled on. "How could he have such a big reaction the second time, how could it be such a big reaction... Shit, you just kissed the man, and now you don't care whether he lives or dies. When Lao Bao beheaded Chen Shimei, why didn't he save some for you, too¹⁰?"

But Hu Bugui was silent. After a moment, he took a deep breath and forced his voice very low. He said, "All divisions...continue to operate according to the original plan."

25

THE DEAL

CHEN LIN had no further scruples about Su Qing's condition. As though he had lived through a whole year's famine and come to a New Year's feast, he absorbed the energy he needed without any hesitation. By the time he came back to himself, Su Qing was entirely unconscious, lying on the ground showing no signs of life.

Chen Lin pulled the line off himself, then leaned down and pressed his fingers to Su Qing's neck. He felt a tiny throbbing there and knew that he had at any rate left this person a last breath. He slowly withdrew his hand and pushed aside the hair laying over the bridge of Su Qing's nose. The young man's almost perfectly exquisite face appeared before him in its entirety.

This amply proved an old saying—"Looking good has no use, you'll still be eaten in the end."—If Su Qing was later aware in the underworld, he could go to the palace of the Kings of Hell to bring his grievance before them. With his looks, he could still be carelessly tormented into such a state by a perfectly good gay man. From this, it can be seen that all kinds of light reading misleads; among all the possible schemes and stratagems, the "honey trap" is the least reliable.

Chen Lin tenderly rubbed his icy cheek with the back of his hand and sighed. In that moment, the expression on his face was actually a little sad, just as if he still had a conscience.

He took off his coat and wrapped it around Su Qing, easily lifting his skinny body. He quietly said, "How long it's been since we last met, my friends from the RZ Unit. I know you have some means to hear what I'm saying."

He was looking into the uncertain light, holding the fruits of his destruction, but his face, like a saint's, wore a compassionate and profound expres-

sion. Neither fast nor slow, he said, “In the past, we blue seals have always been the ones to have direct confrontations with you. Perhaps you have faintly perceived the organization behind us with its vast military and scientific power, but you don’t understand them well. I can undertake to tell you, Utopia doesn’t only have one blue seal base, and they aren’t only in our country. They’re hidden all over the world by various means. For them, nothing in the base is important, including the blue seals... Oh, of course, we precious experimental articles have a certain value, so perhaps we won’t be so quickly abandoned.”

Chen Lin laughed softly. “For Utopia, the only trouble may be that they can’t let core personnel who have the full inside story or their research apparatus fall into your hands. I can approximately guess how they will deal with your sudden sneak attack.”

Hu Bugui listened to him without making a sound. As a professional military man who regularly did battle with undesirable elements harming the people’s lives and property, anything Chen Lin could think of, he could naturally think of as well—Utopia would decide to abandon the base the moment it was discovered. The RZ Unit would encounter the resistance of powerful firepower when it invaded, in order to provide time for crucial personnel to withdraw. Then they would activate the simplest means of dealing with the situation—blow up the base.

Hu Bugui had absolutely no doubt that from the day the base was constructed, sufficient bombs to level the place had been buried. So the RZ Unit’s battle plan was to first infiltrate on foot, manually confirm the locations of the hostages, bring in a probe, cooperate with the technical staff, do everything possible to break through the other side’s mechanical shield, bring in helicopters to support, and use direct fire to buy time, placing the emphasis of the battle on rescuing the hostages.

Chen Lin said, “Jackal, if you come see me, I’ll help you.”

When Hu Bugui heard this, he didn’t hesitate for an instant. He immediately took off his glasses. He stuck up an antenna like a lightning rod from the glasses, then got out a little box, opened a controller, and familiarly switched to the “counter-projection” function of the communicator of Su Qing. His image was projected in front of Chen Lin from Su Qing’s false earring.

Half-sincere, half-false, Chen Lin said, “The celebrated Captain Hu. I’ve looked forward to meeting you.”

Hu Bugui looked him over, his gaze unavoidably falling on Su Qing in his arms. Su Qing was tightly wrapped in Chen Lin’s coat, only half of his face and a sharp chin showing. There didn’t seem to be a drop of blood in his face. He looked as pale as a lifeless dummy. Hu Bugui’s expression fell. “Tell me your conditions and reasons, and what you can do to help us. I have no time to listen to your nonsense.”

Chen Lin understood at a glance that Su Qing’s earring had been swapped out. For the sake of convenience, he took it off and stuck it right into the flesh of his own ear. The action was precise and ruthless, as though he wasn’t pricking through his own ear. The communicator was quickly dyed red with blood. He seemed not to feel pain. Carrying Su Qing, he began to move rapidly.

“Blue seals have latent abilities stimulated by energy, but each person has a different particular ability. Some people have extremely strong attack capabilities, some are extremely fast, and some can control the minds of living beings within a certain radius. My ability is comparatively trifling. My senses are very strong. I’m very sensitive towards everything in the outside world.”

Chen Lin’s voice was torn by the wind, indistinct. Hu Bugui didn’t interrupt him. Next to him, Fang Xiu was doing his best to filter out the noise from the instrument.

“When my energy crystal is full, I can hear tiny sounds, sense electrical currents as subtle as the bioelectricity in the human body, letting me completely sense their emotions—if I concentrate my energy, I can even sense what happened before in a certain place.”

This sounded unbelievable. The person speaking seemed to be a swindling “barefooted immortal.” But from a certain point of view, the blue seals no longer belonged to humanity. They had become incomplete yet almighty new creatures; even the government didn’t have complete data about them.

“There’s a forbidden area in the base. Never mind the little greys, even we can’t easily enter it. That is the control center and headquarters for the whole base. For certain reasons, my glasses have now been taken in there. The glasses are my personal property and haven’t been away from me all these years, so I have a sharper perception of them.”

Hu Bugui understood at once—Chen Lin was providing them a “periscope” that had already infiltrated the enemy’s interior. “To establish a clear and precise perception, what distance do you need to maintain from your item?”

“I need to return to the base.”

“Understood. We can let you go. You won’t be set upon.” Hu Bugui nodded. “What are your conditions for sharing the information?”

Chen Lin laughed softly. After a long time, he said, “When this is over, let me free.”

Hu Bugui laughed coldly. “What, you want to make up for all your previous crimes with a single act of knowing which way the wind is blowing? How are you planning to justify yourself to that person you’re holding?”

Chen Lin lowered his head to look at Su Qing. In that moment, no one knew what he was thinking. He was silent for a while. “I have nothing to justify to him. Even if he wakes up, I’m afraid he won’t be able to understand my justifications...”

Then he said with incomparable callousness: “To each his own destiny.”

“What grounds do I have to trust you?” Hu Bugui practically forced the words out between his teeth.

“I have no need to lie to you. Sharing information with you is first to fulfill my duty, and then to obtain my freedom. My combat abilities are middling among the blue seals. If the blue seals are truly abandoned by the base, I won’t escape the RZ Unit’s pursuit on my own.”

Hu Bugui was silent.

But Chen Lin wasn’t worried. He knew that Hu Bugui would agree—just as long as the jackal was the ideal commander he was reputed to be.

Fang Xiu couldn’t resist cutting in: “If you use your blue seal ability to violate the law in the future...”

Chen Lin said, “I swear to perform the fundamental duties of a citizen and strictly abide by the nation’s laws. Otherwise, our agreement becomes invalid, and you can arrest me any time.”

Fang Xiu turned to look at Hu Bugui, waiting for him to speak.

After a long time, when Chen Lin’s telescope-like vision could already see the car sent by Utopia to pick him up, Hu Bugui quietly said, “Tell me how you plan to supply the information.”

Meanwhile, in the grey house within the base, Tu Tutu was carelessly folding origami in their room. Cheng Weizhi's eyelid twitched. He felt that something was about to happen.

Why would Chen Lin suddenly take Su Qing away? Did he regret letting him return, or had something else happened?

He recalled that Chen Lin hadn't been wearing his glasses just now—Cheng Weizhi had considered this problem before. Reasonably speaking, a blue seal couldn't need glasses, so why was he always wearing them?

Cheng Weizhi thought that this blue seal was very special. Chen Lin was the first person to investigate the origins of the blue seals, and about the first person to realize that they had a problem. He had also deliberately “condescended” to pay a visit to this place and discuss the problem with him... Of course, none of that could efface Professor Cheng's deep-seated understanding of him—a shameless blackguard.

As his thoughts roamed, a sharp alarm sounded. Tu Tutu was startled. He didn't even bother to cry, only looked up foolishly at Cheng Weizhi. Cheng Weizhi quickly picked the kid up. Patting his back, he carefully opened the door a crack. The alarm echoed in the corridor. After a moment, a team of gun-carrying security guards in Utopia uniforms marched in on the double. Someone said in a monotonous voice like China Mobile: “All personnel take note, all personnel take note, the base is entering an emergency situation. All grey seals must leave the grey house within ten minutes and assemble outside. All personnel are asked to cooperate. All personnel take note, all personnel take note—”

The door to Cheng Weizhi's room was roughly pushed open from outside at once. A white coat wearing a mask was standing there with some ice-cold gun-holding security guards behind him. They were herding everyone out one by one. They looked at Cheng Weizhi, determined that his IQ was normal, and briefly ordered: “Come out.”

Cheng Weizhi didn't know what had happened. He held Tu Tutu tightly and carefully squeezed into the crowd, guarding him, following a crowd of excited or blank grey seals outside.

The sky had already darkened, and there was illumination everywhere, just as if they didn't have to pay an electric bill. It was dazzling to the eyes.

Just then, a helicopter landed not far from them. Cheng Weizhi narrowed his eyes and saw Chen Lin get out from it, holding a person who might have

been alive or dead. Cheng Weizhi's heart tightened.

Chen Lin walked right up in front of him and lightly put Su Qing on the ground. To the dumbfounded old professor, he said, "I wish you all good luck."

Then, like a genuine asshole, he turned and strode away.

26

THE FLAMES OF WAR

Tu Tutu blinked his big eyes, looking at Su Qing. He tugged at Cheng Weizhi. “Grandpa, is Uncle Annoying also going to get shut up in a little box?”

Zhao Yifei, who had been drawn over by the sound, was startled by the child’s words. She looked in a panic at the helpless Professor Cheng, took a deep breath, slowly leaned down, and carefully felt under Su Qing’s nose. Then she let out a light breath and quietly said, “Oh, good, he...he’s still alive.”

Cheng Weizhi focused and gave Tu Tutu to Zhao Yifei. “Young lady, hold this child for me.”

Then he squatted down, pulled up Su Qing’s arm, and put it around his own neck. The weak old scholar exerted all his strength to prop up the entirely unconscious Su Qing, making him lean against him.

Around them was a mess. Many grey seals were insane or stupid to start with, and when they got out, they absolutely couldn’t tell north from south. While the others on the base seemed orderly enough, there was a faint hint in the air of great events to come. Apart from Chen Lin, who had just returned, none of the blue seals had shown themselves. No one knew where they had gone.

Leading a girl and a child and supporting Su Qing, who wouldn’t wake up no matter what, Cheng Weizhi struggled through the screaming and braying disorder of the crowd, so stressed that sweat was pouring off him.

Just then, a man dressed in Picasso style suddenly leapt up in front of Zhao Yifei and exchanged a look with Tu Tutu. Zhao Yifei was startled and backed up, protecting the child. This person did a ditty and began to sing an absurdly off-key rendition of “The Internationale.”

Tu Tutu didn't know what fear was. He watched with enjoyment and even clapped along. But Zhao Yifei frowned. For some reason, she thought that this fanatical man who seemed ready to go out and liberate humanity at any moment didn't seem as insane as everyone thought he was.

The man finished singing and became quiet. He looked at her, then took Tu Tutu's little hand. Zhao Yifei trembled, wanting to raise a hand to throw him off, but she hesitated and didn't act.

The man lightly squeezed Tu Tutu's pudgy little paw and took a step back. He put a hand on his shoulder, made an elegant shallow bow, blew a kiss, pressed his fingertips to Tu Tutu's forehead, then turned effortlessly and left.

Tu Tutu, confused, rubbed his forehead and stared at his receding figure along with Zhao Yifei.

They saw the man open his arms wide. His rags hung from him like a piece of performance art. He raised his head to the sky and laughed loudly. The laughter was like an infectious disease, quickly spreading through the crowd of grey seals. Many people couldn't resist following along.

A row of firearms simultaneously rose before a row of chests, aiming at the man's chest.

He seemed entirely unaware, and he seemed like a courageously advancing martyr.

When the first gunshot sounded, the man's smile froze on his face. He took two more laborious steps forward, then fell with a crash.

The big crowd of grey seals began to scatter in a panic. The scene was extremely chaotic. Smoke and din rose. The sound of crying and laughter flooded people's eardrums. Countless lives came to an abrupt end in the bloodbath.

Cheng Weizhi gave Zhao Yifei a hard shove, pulling the girl who was standing there stupidly behind a few idiots who were drooling but still standing where they were. He indicated for Zhao Yifei to cover the child's eyes. He gasped for breath, looked all around, and gave himself a strong pinch to force himself to calm down. He said loudly to Zhao Yifei, "We can't go on like this. We have to think of something!"

Only then did Zhao Yifei feel the ice-cold tears covering her face. She quickly rubbed them with her sleeve. Cheng Weizhi at last recovered from his system error, pulled up Su Qing, who kept slipping down, and swal-

lowed. “Young lady, listen to me, I may know what’s happening... Under ordinary circumstances, they wouldn’t slaughter grey seals on such a large scale. It seems that the base has encountered a sudden sneak attack. They have other things to attend to, so they’re taking care of us.”

Zhao Yifei blankly repeated the critical term: “Sneak...attack?”

Cheng Weizhi nodded. “It’s likely to be people from the government. When they hear gunshots coming from here, they will probably move quickly. This place will soon turn into a battlefield. It’s too dangerous.”

“So...so what do we do?”

Cheng Weizhi took a deep breath and raised his head to look at the grey sky. There was a dampness in the air that chilled your marrow, like a precursor to snow. The tip of Professor Cheng’s nose was bright red from the cold, but his temples were sweating. His arms holding up Su Qing trembled a little. His eyes swept over the whole base, and he decided: “Listen, child, this place has a lot of equipment and materials, the base’s people can’t let these things fall into their enemy’s hands. When there’s no way out, they’re certain to get rid of them. It isn’t safe for us anywhere now, except...except for the grey house.”

Zhao Yifei opened her eyes wide at him. “We...we’re going to run back to the grey house?”

Cheng Weizhi said, “Yes. It’s too easy to get shot outdoors, and none of us can dodge. We need to hide somewhere no one will notice. The grey house is where little greys are normally locked up. There’s nothing there but the basic necessities of daily life. The base’s people won’t have attention to spare for it. While they’re all heading forward, we’ll retreat.”

Zhao Yifei had no ideas of her own. She followed Cheng Weizhi to the letter without a word of protest.

When Cheng Weizhi yelled “Run!” she desperately went against the crowd, holding Tu Tutu, running towards the grey house behind them.

Cheng Weizhi had guessed right. When the first Utopia gunshot sounded, the RZ Unit’s advance troops and technical staff had already torn through the blue seal base’s mechanical shielding net, and the two sides rapidly engaged in close combat, quickly exchanging fire, adding to the chaos.

Hu Bugui knew that Chen Lin had handed Su Qing over to a few grey seals, but Chen Lin had the communicator, and he had no idea what that

unlucky child Su Qing's current condition was.

“Squad 2, come with me to penetrate. Lao Liao, get into a helicopter and provide cover from above. Fang Xiu will be responsible for conducting the face-to-face battle. Qin Luo, stay in contact with Chen Lin to keep track of their movements.”

Meanwhile, the blue seals had been assembled as the second group to be moved after the core researchers.

Gui Song was pressed to the window, trembling with fear. When the gunfire became slightly louder, he gave a shudder as though sound-activated. Jiang Lan stood in a corner, not making a sound and holding a machine gun in her arms. Luo Xiaofeng was smoking furiously. Shi Huizhang, meanwhile, was pacing the room like a trapped beast.

Only Chen Lin sat relaxed on the couch, arms folded in front of his chest, thinking of something unknown.

After a long time, Luo Xiaofeng asked a Utopia staff member standing at the door, “Where will we be taken?”

The uniformed Utopia staff member responded, “To another base.”

Luo Xiaofeng's forehead furrowed. He raised his head to meet Shi Huizhang's eyes, paused, then asked, “A newly built base, or...a base where there are already people? Will there be other blue seals there?”

“Yes.”

Shi Huizhang had never thought that other blue seals would exist. He gave Luo Xiaofeng a look, and his eyes fell on Chen Lin—Shi Huizhang had always been the blue seals' tacitly acknowledged invisible head. While Jiang Lan didn't get along with anyone, she wasn't very likely to challenge others' authority if she wasn't provoked. But this Chen Lin always seemed to be everywhere, mocking him.

Shi Huizhang had wanted to get rid of Chen Lin for a long time. There was never an opportunity on the base. During the feasts, he had tried repeatedly to make trouble for him, but somehow, he always had the good fortune to avoid it.

The new base would have other blue seals—a whisper rose in Shi Huizhang's heart—he thought, I have to think of a way to get rid of Chen in the commotion before we see others like us, or else there'll be more trouble ahead.

He settled on this idea and pulled over the Utopia staff member standing at the door, dragging him away. “It’s too disorderly outside. Let’s discuss how we’re going to move.”

Chen Lin, sitting there, suddenly gave an inscrutable laugh. He leaned his head against the couch and closed his eyes, focusing all of his senses on his glasses, which had infiltrated Utopia’s headquarters.

Cheng Weizhi and Zhao Yifei had decent luck. They weren’t killed by a stray bullet in the commotion. But at the door of the grey house, Zhao Yifei was shot in the leg and fell to the ground along with Tu Tutu. Tu Tutu seemed to have understood something. Though his little hand was scraped raw, he only pursed his lips and held back his cries.

Cheng Weizhi quickly put Su Qing down and bent over as much as possible, as though planning to pass through a firing line. He ran back out of the grey house, picked up Tu Tutu in one arm and hauled Zhao Yifei with the other, and scrambled back with the two of them.

Zhao Yifei was in so much pain she was trembling all over. Her lips were white. As soon as Cheng Weizhi opened his mouth to speak, a pane of glass above his head was broken by a bullet. The old professor didn’t dare to move. He could only tear a strip of cloth from his own clothing and tie Zhao Yifei’s bleeding leg, ignoring everything else while he stopped her bleeding. Then he plopped down exhausted on the ground and leaned heavily against the wall.

Tu Tutu looked from one to the next. He saw that neither had attention to spare for him, so he shuffled over to Su Qing and squatted down. He reached out a pudgy finger and poked him in the face, whispering, “Uncle Annoying, hurry and wake up, don’t sleep anymore. If you keep sleeping, they’re going to shut you up in a little box.”

Cheng Weizhi’s eyes stung, but hearing Zhao Yifei’s sobs, he desperately forced back his tears and sighed. “Young lady, don’t cry. Heaven always finds a way. If we hold on a while, perhaps...”

He turned to look at Su Qing and swallowed his words with another sigh.

Hu Bugui and the others encountered unexpectedly fierce resistance. From his earphones came Qin Luo’s voice: “Captain Hu, news from Chen Lin. They’re planning to gather and obliterate all the grey seals, not let a single living being fall into our hands.”

Hu Bugui laughed grimly. “Tell the personnel on the ground to keep an eye on the whole base. Shoot down anything that goes up in the air, intercept anything that runs on the ground. Don’t let anyone get away. If they have the guts to blow up the base, then let their people and the blue seals all die here.”

The intense firefight lasted over two hours. Hidden in the grey house, Zhao Yifei had fallen asleep from exhaustion. Tu Tutu sat next to Su Qing, persistently tugging his hair in an attempt to wake him up. Cheng Weizhi, meanwhile, was tensely guarding this group of the young and injured, the least stirring keeping him nervous for a long time.

Just then, Cheng Weizhi sensed the earth shake beneath his feet. He gave a start and hurriedly turned his head. To Tu Tutu he said, “Tutu, quick, quickly come to grandpa...”

Before the words were out of his mouth, a huge explosion sounded. Zhao Yifei, startled awake, shrieked. Cheng Weizhi covered his head and was about to stand up when he was tripped by the buckling floor. The old fellow tumbled and nearly broke his back. He had a frightening thought—were they really going to blow this place up?

He desperately reached for Tu Tutu, but Tu Tutu was scared silly. He sat on the ground, looking at him with his big, innocent eyes wide open. Cheng Weizhi looked on as an enormous stone fell, hurtling towards the kid’s head.

Just then, an arm suddenly reached out, pulling Tu Tutu into an embrace. The two people rolled backwards. With a rumble, the whole corridor collapsed, and Cheng Weizhi knew nothing more.

27

BIRD

SU QING felt that he had been having a very, very long dream. In the dream he seemed to be a bird with a pair of wings on his back that shed feathers when he shook them. He lived in a nest above a precipice.

He stuck his head out of this dangerous abode, feeling that this place was more hair-raising than any tottering, creaking condemned house—below was a precipice of unknown depth, and a brisk wind streaked over his face as though it could sweep him away at any time. Farther on, the vast blue sky and the wind seemed to blend together, so wide that you could never see their limit.

The sunlight was blocked by the cliff. The bird Su Qing shifted carefully and found that he couldn't reach anything.

He understood. He lived in a fluttering condemned house.

Su Qing took one look and retreated fearfully into the nest—while the nest was built in a very exotic location, it was very comfortable inside, soft and warm. Not a bit of wind blew in.

At first he thought that he would starve to death trapped here, but not long after, he saw a big bird with the light at its back land and bring food up to his mouth. Su Qing narrowed his eyes and struggled to raise his head, but he still couldn't clearly see what the big bird looked like. He only thought that the look it gave him was very tender.

The big bird rubbed against him, spread its wings, and flew away.

So Su Qing began to live day to day suspended over a precipice. A long time passed. Every day the big bird came to bring him food or carried some sticks and straw in its mouth to shore up the nest. Then it went away. Su Qing very much wanted to communicate with it, but sadly he had failed bird language in university. He couldn't understand it.

He couldn't remember why he had turned into a bird, nor why he had come to this place. He also didn't have any desire to learn. He only dimly had a strange feeling in his heart, both serene and apprehensive. Each time he saw another bird wheeling through the air, he felt a desire to fly along with it. But each time he came to the edge of the nest, he looked down at the sharp, forbidding precipice and retraced his steps on weak legs.

Su Qing felt imprisoned in this warm nest.

Finally, one day, the big bird came again, and Su Qing gathered his courage and crawled out of the nest, clenching his teeth and stamping his feet, fanning out his wings. The big bird stood calmly at the edge of the nest, its head tilted, watching him nervously flap his wings like an airplane propeller and waveringly fly out.

Su Qing's body rose into the air. He couldn't resist looking down—he thought he was perhaps still human, because only a human would be scared of heights—it didn't seem so bad looking down like this, but Su Qing felt his blood pressure rise on the spot. Whizzing curses roared through his mind, shaking it so he couldn't think of anything else. His first flight encountered an in-flight incident—he bumped right into the opposing cliff and went tumbling down.

Su Qing thought, That's it, this time I'll really fall to my death.

Suddenly, his back was caught by a pair of strong claws. When Su Qing came around, he had returned to the nest in a daze. The big bird gently pecked his head as though reproaching a child who didn't know his own limits. Then it once more spread its wings and flew away.

Through wind and frost, through rain and snow, year in and year out, Su Qing felt that he had lost his faith in flight. The big bird always came and went in a hurry. Most of each day was spent staring emptily at the sky, where the colors and the weather changed frequently. He longed for the sunlight more and more, but he couldn't see it. He could never touch it.

Slowly, he began to hate this nest. Why did it have to be built above a precipice? Why did it have to be so warm and snug, and so small? Then his hatred turned on the sky, on the wind, on the stones, on the sunlight, even on the big bird. He dodged the big bird's intimate touches when it came. He was no longer interested in food.

Su Qing felt that for the rest of his life, he would be nothing but a stupid bird hiding in a nest, eating and killing time. He would never fly up.

After some more time, he couldn't even muster hatred. He only felt profound sadness. If a bird couldn't fly, why should it exist? He couldn't think of an answer, so he began to refuse food, planning to starve himself to death.

Over and over, the big bird found that he wouldn't touch the food it brought him. It became a little worried and turned circles around Su Qing. One day it even flew out and came back with a colorful flower.

Sadly, Su Qing was whole-heartedly running along his wild path to death. He had no interest in beauty. He only turned his head and took a look, then wearily turned away.

“Why do you have to be so nice to me? It must be because you're a big dumb bird with a stomach that's too big and a brain that's too small. You've made a mistake. What is there about a bird who can't even fly that's worth clinging to?” Su Qing thought dully to himself.

The big bird stuck to him more and more, exhausting its resources to bring all kinds of curiosities to cheer him up, but Su Qing became more and more fretful, even using his scant remaining strength to chase the big bird away. He despised this care that came out of nowhere, because he thought that he wasn't worthy of being cared for. It should leave him here and let him run his course.

The big bird had one of its feathers shaken off by his rough treatment. It stood there not daring to approach him, making a mournful sound.

The irascible and bristling bird Su Qing suddenly calmed down. He looked at the big bird. In a flash, he understood something—it turned out that he didn't despise the big bird; he didn't despise anyone. He only despised himself.

A bird...or a person by the name of Su Qing.

After its mournful cry, the big bird charged right into the skies. Just then, Su Qing dimly heard a child's indistinct voice in his ear. He could only distinguish the words “shut up in a little box.” He thought that the child's voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't remember who this was.

A thunderclap came down from the sky, rumbling incessantly. The big bird wheeled and flew back. It tentatively stood beside him and reached out a massive wing, blocking the wind and rain. Su Qing looked up and found that there was a straight line on its wing.

A line...

Someone had once drawn a line for him. He had said, “Don’t trust in emotion, trust in logic.”

Another clap of thunder. Su Qing froze—logic...yes, logic is a line, a line that can pursue cause and effect. Why do I want to die? Because I can’t fly. But why can’t I fly? Because I’m scared of heights. I’m afraid of the unmatched abyss below, I’m scared...that I’ll fall.

But so what if I fall? I’ll die...

Su Qing gave a start, because he found that the whole thing was nonsense—because he was cowardly and afraid to die, he was attempting to commit suicide.

Just then, the familiar childish voice sounded in his ears once more. This time, Su Qing heard it clearly. The child was saying: “Uncle Annoying, hurry and wake up, don’t sleep anymore. If you keep sleeping, they’ll shut you up in a little box.”

The rain had stopped at some point. Su Qing raised his head, his eyes meeting the big bird’s. The big animal’s eyes were gentle and sorrowful, like a father with a heart full of helplessness and no way to express it. The sky was still hazy, and muffled thunder rose and fell. Su Qing climbed up. His gaze swept over the abyss. He suddenly understood his path—freedom or death.

He stood at the edge of the nest, took a deep breath, then threw himself forward. The air supported his body. He sailed up on his wings. Sunlight pierced the thick clouds like a sharp sword and fell on him.

Su Qing suddenly opened his eyes. He had become human again at some point. He was lying on the ground, listening to Cheng Weizhi and Zhao Yifei’s cries, while Tu Tutu sat in front of him. A piece of stone big enough to crush the child like a watermelon was falling out of the air.

Su Qing grabbed Tu Tutu, rolling backwards without even thinking. There was a huge rumble, and his vision went black. He realized that the building had collapsed, and he was trapped in an airtight little space. A stab of intense pain came from his lower leg. He couldn’t move it. It seemed to have been broken.

Tu Tutu was crying like a little cat. Su Qing patted him on the back, wanting to comfort him, but he found that his throat was parched and aching fiercely. He couldn’t make a sound.

Hu Bugui hadn't thought that after their escape attempts were intercepted again and again, the Utopia members would really have the guts to blow up the whole base. Qin Luo contacted him urgently once again: "Captain Hu, news from Chen Lin. He says that Utopia is urgently assembling helicopters, preparing to lift off simultaneously and move researchers and blue seals mixed together..."

Hu Bugui interrupted her: "Is Chen with them?"

Qin Luo said, "No, one of the blue seals dislikes him and suggested that all the blue seals split up to cooperate with the long-range attack. He also requested to go with Chen Lin. He may have had something particular in mind, so Chen Lin refused to be moved."

Hu Bugui grunted. "So his luck is good. Tell Chen Lin to give a plausible goal for mixing in with us. Prepare to fire. Also, I need a topographic map of the base."

When he mentioned Chen Lin, Hu Bugui gnashed his teeth somewhat. Chen Lin had carried out his promise—handed over all of Utopia's internal deployments. He was having much more success as a "link" than Su Qing, but whether unintentionally or on purpose, the only thing he had left out was their plan to prioritize taking care of the grey seals.

Qin Luo said, "Yes, sir."

A moment later, a clear map came to Hu Bugui's glasses, which had one lens broken. Hu Bugui immediately put on a helmet and a bulletproof vest, broke up the military vehicle, and charged right into Utopia's firing line on an improvised motorcycle.

Fang Xiu glimpsed him through the monitor projection, and his eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets. "Captain Hu, what are you doing?!"

With reckless bravery, Hu Bugui rode the motorcycle like a rocket, laying flat along it. The front windshield was unusually bulletproof. It saved him countless times in the patter of gunfire. As though playing an extreme sport, Hu Bugui left the ground with both wheels several times, pursued by a row of machine guns hot on his tail. But his expression was extremely calm, as if he wasn't gambling with his life but playing Super Mario!

Pushed beyond his capabilities to become a temporary commander, Fang Xiu's heart rate jumped at once to 150, pounding so hard his throat hurt.

Hu Bugui could already see the grey house. In a moment of inattention, a bullet grazed his arm. This didn't seem so bad, but when his arm lost

strength, the charging motorcycle twisted into the steps of a folk dance, and Hu Bugui flew right off. He quickly adjusted his posture and protected his head...covering the last stretch of ground aloft to spare the trouble of riding.

He was thrown into a pile of corpses, at any rate not landing right on the hard cement ground. Hu Bugui was stained all over with blood. The instant he touched the ground, he subconsciously rolled aside to take advantage of the cover. He pulled the machine gun off his back and strafed a swath.

When he had brought down the people nearby, Hu Bugui spared some attention to look on the ground, his heart instantly missing a beat—when the words “too late” leapt up in his brain, Hu Bugui felt his hands go cold.

He felt a pain like his chest being torn and woodenly lowered his head to look at his hands soaked in someone’s blood. An indescribable feeling welled up in his heart, making all his organs ache.

Hu Bugui’s legs went weak, and he fell to his knees. He pounded his fist into the wreckage, then buried his face in his hands. The thick, sticky, ice-cold liquid on his palms stuck to his face. After a long moment, he took a deep breath and did his best to calm down. He fiddled with the glasses on his nose, which were letting off sparks and planning to go on strike at any moment. He quietly said, “Scan this area for life signs.”

28

FATAL MISTAKE

WHEN THE EXPLOSIONS BEGAN, Chen Lin was very calm—he knew that Su Qing was in there, and he knew that he cared for this person very much. So he gently closed his eyes and devoted himself to experiencing the tiny stab of pain passing through his heart.

Chen Lin thought, now that Su Qing was dead, all ties between him and this base had been cut. He wouldn't miss it, wouldn't even remember it. From now on, his body and mind would be entirely free.

While the fighting was in full swing outside, Su Qing, still lost in the dream of himself becoming a feathered animal, hadn't yet clearly worked out what was happening when he was buried along with a child.

He remembered that when he had just opened his eyes, he seemed to have glimpsed Professor Cheng. Was he back at the base, then?

Su Qing laboriously raised his hand to feel his earlobe and found that the communicator had been removed.

Fuck, wasn't it supposed to be "Heaven always finds a way"? Su Qing thought this was simply God going all out to *block* his way.

He bled more and more, and his body became colder and colder. His mind began to grow hazier as well. Su Qing had to exert what seemed like the last of his strength to bite his tongue, grimacing from the pain, to force his head to clear a little. He bent slightly in the small, narrow space, using his whole back as a support, shielding Tu Tutu in his arms.

The child's body was warm and soft, with a faint milky scent. This was practically his only consolation in this hopeless position. Su Qing could still hardly speak. He could only pat Tu Tutu's back and say in a hoarse, quiet voice, "Hush, don't be scared, don't be scared."

Tu Tutu rubbed against his chest. "Uncle, have we been shut up in a little box?"

Su Qing said, “Don’t talk nonsense. We’ll only get shut up in a little box after we’re burned up.”

Tu Tutu was scared silly. “Burned...burned up?”

The child considered it for a long time. “Uncle, I don’t taste good at all. I’m still little.”

Su Qing’s vision was going dark, and his ears began to buzz. He laughed bitterly. “Then eat me first. I’m tough. All right?”

After thinking about it, Tu Tutu cheerfully agreed: “All right!”

Su Qing’s other leg, which was still barely holding his weight, nearly folded. “Little ingrate, do you have any conscience?”

Tu Tutu couldn’t move at all, and he quickly found that Uncle Annoying’s voice was getting quieter and quieter, and his reactions slower and slower. He wouldn’t play with him.

It was pitch-dark all around. He couldn’t see a thing. Tu Tutu lay in Su Qing’s arms. Soon, he felt sleepy and began to emit little snores.

Su Qing laughed bitterly, thinking that the little devil was impervious; the sky came falling down, and he used it as a quilt, not taking anything to heart.

Su Qing tried to move and found that stones fell at his slightest attempt, so he settled down. Small stones weren’t so bad. At worst they would hit him on the head and leave a bruise or a cut. If a really big piece of something fell, he would be turned into a pancake.

Just then, Su Qing heard a faint cry for help. It sounded like a girl... Zhao Yifei?

Then he heard a familiar voice: “Can the person calling for help hear me? Please hold on.”

Su Qing gave a start, nearly bursting into tears from excitement. Hu Bugui!

As soon as he had heard that life signs had been detected in the still half-burning grey house, Hu Bugui had thrown himself in without a second thought. Xu Ruchong yelled over the communicator: “Captain Hu, you can’t go in! This place needs clearing, the fire hasn’t been put out yet, the intensity and spread of the fire are likely to set off another round of explosions...”

Xu Ruchong shut his mouth, because on the increasingly blurry monitor image, he saw that Hu Bugui had already put on his helmet and charged

in.

The nerd pitifully turned his head to Lu Qingbai and said, "I...I was talking to him."

For once, Lu Qingbai didn't pick up. He only stared fixedly at the increasingly jumpy image. After a long moment, he quietly said, "If that child really is... That would be a pity."

Su Qing wanted to shout, but sadly the hardware in his throat wouldn't cooperate. He couldn't raise his volume no matter what he did. Cold sweat was trickling into his eyes from his forehead. He decided to run a risk. Using one hand to shield Tu Tutu, he pressed the other against a big stone next to him and, for the first time since putting it on, activated the shock ring.

There was a *pop* and a small-scale earthquake. There was a strong pain in Su Qing's arm. It wouldn't move anymore.

He thought, That's it, this is a disaster. His arm had been crushed by a falling piece of sharp stone; it had broken with a snap.

And the worst luck was yet to come. Before he could think of a way to move his arm, a piercing pain came from his back. Su Qing shook, pushed forward by the great pressure. He abruptly remembered that he was still holding Tu Tutu and desperately pressed his shoulder against the wall on his other side. When he opened his mouth, he spat up a big mouthful of blood.

The stone that had fallen on his back had perhaps broken a rib, and the bone had punctured his lung. More and more blood came up, choking his windpipe. Su Qing was running out of strength to cough. He could only prop himself up with half his body. Tu Tutu was scared into wailing. Su Qing gave a start. He had no more strength to hold him and could only let the child slide from his arm and curl up at his feet.

There was more and more blood coming from his mouth, all dripping onto Tu Tutu.

Hu Bugui had seen a necklace Zhao Yifei had left behind and approximately determined where the little girl's cry for help was coming from when he suddenly heard noises, turned his head, and saw a hand sticking out of the wreckage, soaked in blood. Only the bottom of the middle finger was unusually clean. This was the location of the invisible shock ring.

"Su Qing, Su Qing, is that you? Are you in there, too?"

Never mind answering, Su Qing was even finding it hard to open his eyes. When he opened his mouth, he couldn't keep himself from coughing.

Hu Bugui drew close and frowned, pressing his ear to the wreckage. He could faintly hear the coughing and the child's crying inside. He made a visual estimate of how many stones there were, then took off his jacket and tossed it aside. He had no tools but a machine gun and his own hands. It seemed he would have to use bare hands. "Hold on a moment, I'll get you out."

Hu Bugui got no answer from Su Qing, but the child cried louder and louder. The child's voice sounded very robust, and he relaxed slightly. If the child had this much strength to cry, then there was probably enough space inside, and Su Qing could still think of using the shock ring to break open the wall. It appeared that for the moment the problem wasn't so serious.

And so Hu Bugui made the most regrettable, most appalling mistake of his life—he thought that Su Qing's coughing came from being choked by falling dust. When he heard the sound gradually fade, he thought that his coughing had subsided.

"Hold on a while, just hold on a while."

Su Qing felt that he had lost the ability to think. He didn't know how heavy the stone on his back was. He only felt that the thing was squeezing all the air right out of his lungs. There was blood blocking his airway, as though he was stepping in a sea of blood. Only the sounds of Hu Bugui's comforting and Tu Tutu's cries mixed together into his sole source of strength to continue holding himself up for all he was worth.

Just then, Zhao Yifei's cry for help sounded again. Hu Bugui froze, realizing that the girl's cries were considerably weaker than before. Strictly speaking, Hu Bugui had come to help Zhao Yifei and had found Su Qing along the way. His emotions had been stirred, and he had nearly forgotten about the girl. Hesitating, he looked at Su Qing's hand in front of him, then turned in the direction Zhao Yifei's cries were coming from.

This...was unfair to her.

The girl said, "Help...help...me...someone...help..."

Then her voice suddenly vanished. Hu Bugui's heart sank. He pulled up his communicator and rapidly said, "I've found survivors here, why hasn't a way been opened yet? How long before the search and rescue team gets here?"

Fang Xiu and Qin Luo were working with tacit cooperation. With a traitor like Chen Lin in the blue seal base, it would have been hard for matters

not to come to a head. Fang Xiu said, “We’re basically in control of the situation. The search and rescue team is working to reach you within five minutes.”

Hu Bugui took a deep breath and gently pressed Su Qing’s hand, wiping the blood from the back of his hand with his thumb. He softened his voice and said, “Wait a bit, the search and rescue team will be here within five minutes. Just hold on a while. There’s a companion of yours over there, a little girl. She suddenly stopped calling for help. I’m afraid she may be... Just wait for me!”

“No! Don’t go!” Su Qing felt alarm and despair, but when he opened his mouth, he couldn’t cry out. Only more blood came up, raining down on Tu Tutu’s head.

At last Su Qing could hold out no longer. He thought that he was going to die.

Don’t go... Why would you abandon me at a time like this... Why...

He had never felt so cold. Tu Tutu was hugging his leg, which trembled like a stalk of wheat. His little fingers were digging into his clothes, and he was calling non-stop: “Uncle... Uncle... Uncle Annoying...”

Su Qing forced himself to open his eyes. In the dark, he could faintly see the small figure. He didn’t know why he hadn’t fallen yet. Perhaps he was already stiff.

Why would he believe that someone would come to save him? As his consciousness approached dimness, this inexplicable thought suddenly appeared in Su Qing’s mind. Then more voices sounded. He could no longer tell what they were saying. He only felt very, very tired.

Before the light could prick his eyes, Su Qing’s eyelids closed. He didn’t hear the cry of alarm beside him.

When the search and rescue team arrived, Hu Bugui had already dug up Zhao Yifei with his bare hands—she wasn’t buried deep. But she had been shot, so by the time she was pulled out, she had passed out entirely.

Hu Bugui urgently called people to lift her, then immediately directed the rescue workers on the scene to start searching for other life signs and find a way to get Su Qing out.

When Hu Bugui saw the young man again, it was as though he had been struck by lightning. He stood there blankly, feet nailed to the ground, unable to say a word.

One of Su Qing's arms was broken, the bone sticking out of the flesh. One leg was caught between some slabs of stone. He was slightly bent, standing on one leg. The huge stone weighing several dozen kilograms pressing on his back at last rolled aside, but he still remained in the same posture—shoulder pressed to the wall, supporting his whole body, and one hand hanging down, fallen on the head of a child covered in blood.

The child was hugging his leg, lips drawn back in a wail. A rescue worker reacted at last, bending down to pick up the kid.

Su Qing swayed and fell to the ground as though all the blood had poured out of his body. He lay there lifelessly.

29

FULL MOON

HE WASN'T BREATHING, and his heart had stopped.

Hu Bugui heard the rescue workers' voices, and it was as though he didn't understand Chinese. Then his gaze slowly moved to Su Qing's face—when he had been speaking to him, he had only been coughing, he had only been coughing...

“I thought that...”

Only three words came out of Hu Bugui's mouth, then he came to a sudden halt. He didn't know himself what he was going to say. Countless words caught in his chest and tangled together, circling in place. In the end they turned into one thought—Su Qing...was dead.

He had thought that after breaking through the blue seal base, since Su Qing could be counted as having rendered meritorious service, the government would undertake all his medical and living expenses. It would only need time for his injuries to body and mind to be treated. They had Lu Qingbai, the best doctor, and the most advanced medical technology. And Su Qing was such a tenacious person.

He had thought that Su Qing would surely be all right. He would take him home, make up for the torment he had suffered because of Hu Bugui's own negligence... Perhaps he had also had some enchanting notions; after all, the circumstances of their first meeting had been both particular and awkward. Hu Bugui couldn't resist remembering Su Qing's disdainful expression and thinking that he was a bit like his little cat, who clearly liked being near people but had to put on a pretense of unwillingness.

He had thought...

If his attention hadn't been distracted midway by another person's cries for help. If his views about Su Qing hadn't been so optimistic.

“Captain Hu! Captain Hu!”

Hu Bugui woodenly pressed down on his earpiece. His vision was blurred. He reached up and felt that there were tears in his eyes. He didn't dare to close his eyes, afraid that the tears would fall. He only opened his eyes wide and tilted his head back, making the tears recede.

“What is it?”

“Captain Hu, we suddenly lost contact with Chen Lin, and the blue seals have disappeared. And then there are the armed personnel in ‘Utopia’ uniforms that we captured. There are microchips of unknown origin in them. Just now, all the prisoners simultaneously fell, twitching all over, like an epileptic fit...”

“Assemble the technical and medical personnel to inspect the prisoners' conditions, and take people to search the whole base.” Hu Bugui gave orders relying on instinct. “Seal the perimeter, intercept anyone escaping. Turn on the energy detector and keep watch for any unusual circumstances.”

“Yes, sir!” Qin Luo responded. She paused, then couldn't resist asking, “Captain Hu, how...how is he?”

Hu Bugui's throat bobbed. The flesh of his cheeks tensed, but he didn't say a word. Then he silently turned off the communicator and went over a step at a time. Next to Su Qing, a rescue worker was shaking his head.

Hu Bugui silently squatted down and put his rough hand to Su Qing's face, almost tenderly wiping the blood from it. He seemed to be able to feel his body temperature cooling.

Just then, a person threw himself over in a scramble and pushed Hu Bugui aside.

Cheng Weizhi was the most fortunate of them. He practically hadn't been injured at all. He had only received a slight concussion. He had passed out at the start. When he had been saved by the rescue workers just now, on first waking up, he had seen Su Qing.

He wanted to pick Su Qing up, but his extended hand paused in midair and didn't fall. Su Qing had so many broken bones. Cheng Weizhi had lived to his present great age without ever having seen someone this badly injured. He carefully checked under Su Qing's nose for breath, and his heart went cold—he couldn't feel a trace of movement there.

A rescue worker attempted to pull him away. “Sir, please lie back down. We need to thoroughly inspect your condition.”

Cheng Weizhi didn't move. He stared blankly at Su Qing along with Hu Bugui.

The rescue worker sighed. "Sir, I'm very sorry that there was nothing we could do for your friend..."

Cheng Weizhi seemed not to have heard. He stared blankly for a moment. Suddenly, he gave a fierce start and at last came around. He pulled Su Qing's shirt away from his shoulder.

The color of the flowing grey seal on Su Qing's half-exposed shoulder was very dim. Everyone present knew that this was because the energy crystal was also slowly dying.

Cheng Weizhi gazed at his grey seal with rapt attention. After a while, he suddenly shouted, "His...his grey seal is still flowing, really, look, there's still a bit of movement!"

The rescue worker sighed. "But he doesn't show any signs of life. The grey seal is likely moving because his body temperature hasn't dropped yet, he..."

Cheng Weizhi cut him off. "No! It's not like that, you don't understand. The grey seal is projected on the skin by the energy crystal. If it's still flowing, it shows that the energy crystal is still active. Even a grey seal isn't entirely like an ordinary person. I have a way... I've thought of a way!"

The old professor found the strength somewhere to grab Hu Bugui by the collar. "Make them take him to the blue seal activator, hurry!"

Hu Bugui stood in the direction of Cheng Weizhi's tug. "The blue seal activator? We couldn't have the blue seal activator. It's one of Utopia's core research products, they would have..."

"If you don't have it, then we can try the auxiliary blue seal activator... the grey seal activator, that is. Don't tell me it's also been blown up!"

Hu Bugui's throat bobbed with difficulty. Cheng Weizhi seemed to have been stricken by frost. He took two steps back in disappointment.

But after a moment, he raised his head once again. "I remember, there's a discarded one in the basement. Everything in the grey house is worthless scrap. Lift him, come with me!"

The rescue workers looked at each other, thinking that the old man had gone mad.

But unexpectedly, their Captain Hu had gone mad along with the old man. He ordered: "Lift him. Listen to the man."

The advance personnel efficiently cleared the way for them. Cheng Weizhi's grey hair was covered in earth and dust. He could have gone right into a beggars' union. His cheeks were ashen, and he was panting from running. In a moment of inattention, he even nearly went sprawling. Without another word, Hu Bugui simply put the old man on his back and dashed to the basement.

Machines always have a limited period of usefulness, but a machine tossed into the grey house wouldn't be discarded because it had passed its normal use-by date. It would be completely irreparable and unusable.

When Hu Bugui saw the grey house's so-called basement, the light in his eyes immediately faded.

Total squalor—rats had even taken up residence here. They weren't afraid of people. Squeaking, they lined up to run past the rescue workers. The so-called "machine" was an antique that had stood there for an unknown length of time, mottled with rust and covered in spiderwebs.

Cheng Weizhi took a deep breath. "It's worse than I imagined."

Hu Bugui followed him in silence. Cheng Weizhi turned back to look at him, then went around the RZ Unit's captain to look at Su Qing lying lifelessly on the stretcher. He took a deep breath. "I'll fix it—don't worry, I'm sure to be able to fix it. You, sir... I know you must have something like an energy detector on you with an energy core in it. If you don't object, give me one."

Hu Bugui looked at him, not quite catching up. Just then, headquarters suddenly forced in a communications signal. Xu Ruchong's voice exploded in Hu Bugui's ear: "Captain Hu! Give it to him! Give him anything he wants! That person is Professor Cheng! He's Professor Cheng!"

Hu Bugui stared.

Xu Ruchong was about to cry. "Those blue seal sons of bitches! Professor Cheng was my academic advisor in university! "

...What a small world it was.

Before he finished speaking, Hu Bugui immediately took off the RZ Unit's multipurpose watch and gave it to Cheng Weizhi and looked at him a little eagerly. "Will this do?"

Cheng Weizhi took it. Pointing to a small box next to the dilapidated activator, he said, "Open that for me. That should be the instrument's toolkit."

Hu Bugui simply took Xu Ruchong's place as Cheng Weizhi's student. He stepped up without another word, lifted his machine gun, and brought it crashing down with a *bang*. The lid of the box broke at once. Cheng Weizhi surged up and began to rummage through the toolkit.

Hu Bugui couldn't understand what he was doing at all, and there was nothing he could do to help. He could only stand there nervously, wringing his hands, from time to time checking the grey seal on Su Qing's shoulder, afraid that the grey seal would stop flowing in the blink of an eye.

Cheng Weizhi opened up Hu Bugui's watch and produced a dazzling thread from somewhere in the scrapped instrument.

Xu Ruchong watched Cheng Weizhi work without blinking. He quietly said, "The activator's energy core is broken. He's using the energy core from the multipurpose watch to set up a one-time link. Only he could do this in such an urgent situation..."

Though Lu Qingbai didn't especially understand, he still couldn't resist butting in: "Do the watch and the activator have the same energy core? That can't be right."

"No...look, he's shorted out thread number four and turned it into something like a capacitor..." Xu Ruchong provided commentary as though no one was around. Sadly, no one was in the mood to listen, and they didn't understand, either.

Three minutes later, Cheng Weizhi raised his head and said to Hu Bugui, "He only has one chance, and this is only a conception of mine, I can't guarantee..."

The old professor's words paused. Then he clenched his teeth. "There's no other way now. Put him on it."

Su Qing was placed on the rusted platform. Cheng Weizhi looked down at him, took a deep breath, and picked up two electrical leads. Now he at last became nervous, shaking so hard he couldn't aim. Hu Bugui silently extended his hand and took the electrical leads from him. "Tell me what to do."

"Connect...connect the two leads. Your hands can't shake. Look at the five indicators on his head. When the last indicator lights up, break the connection at once. Can...can you do it?"

"And then what?" Hu Bugui asked.

"Then...either he'll live, or..."

Hu Bugui nodded and closed his eyes. Extremely steady, his hands connected the two electrical leads. The activator began to buzz. Sparks flew from the place where it was connected to Hu Bugui's watch. Hu Bugui kept his eyes tightly fixed on the five lights lighting up in succession. The moment the last one lit up, he pulled the two electrical leads apart once more. The activator made an enormous sound, and the place where the watch was connected burst into flame.

Cheng Weizhi and Hu Bugui simultaneously dashed to Su Qing's side. Just then, Hu Bugui saw the seal on his shoulder change.

His seal was still grey, though the color was a little lighter—then it turned from a half-moon into a full circle. The stagnating flow sped up—

TRUE AND FALSE HEROES

“IF YOU HADN’T said that you wanted to be the last to go, I wouldn’t have suspected you,” Shi Huizhang said, flicking his lighter. A tiny flame leapt up, illuminating a trace of a cold smile at the corners of his mouth—just as if he really did have such a high IQ.

Chen Lin had his back to him and didn’t answer. He stood very upright, face turned to the window. Some Utopia white coats and uniformed armed personnel were standing in a row, silently looking at the blue seals with their varied expressions.

Shi Huizhang turned to look at his diehard follower Luo Xiaofeng. Luo Xiaofeng took out a small silver article the size of a thumb and handed it over to a white coat next to him. “The base’s product. You can tell for yourselves whether I could fake it.”

The white coat reached out to take it and exchanged a look with his companions. He unscrewed it and removed a chip from inside. Then he rolled up his sleeve and pressed on his wrist. The flesh on his forearm lifted. This arm really did seem to be made of flesh. The white coat stuck the chip inside. There was silence from within for a moment, and then a man’s voice came from it: “There are many helicopters, mostly empty. Pay attention to numbers 3, 18, and 26, ignore the rest...”

Everyone present could hear that this was Chen Lin.

Jiang Lan looked at Chen Lin’s back, opened her mouth, but didn’t know what to say. She felt that her venerable buttocks had lost direction; she didn’t know whose bench to sit on.

After a moment, the white coat ended the playback of the recording and looked at Chen Lin with a grave expression. “Mr. Chen, I hope that you have an explanation for this.”

Chen Lin still stood unmoving, looking out the window. A smile suddenly appeared on his face, whatever he was thinking.

Like a slavering dog, Shi Huizhang butted in: “Can there be an explanation? I think the question is obvious enough, no? I recorded this when Chen Lin left the room on the excuse of going to the bathroom. I’ve thought there was something wrong with him for a long time...”

But Chen Lin suddenly turned to the silent Luo Xiaofeng. “When did you plant the listening device on me? That couldn’t have been easy.”

Luo Xiaofeng looked out from behind his oily curtain of hair—this person liked to keep his head down and his chin drawn in, raising his eyes to look at people. But while this gesture was innocent and beautiful when done by Audrey Hepburn, done by him, it looked like something out of a ghost story. “In the water you drank.”

Chen Lin stared. Luo Xiaofeng explained: “It’s very simple. The base is having an emergency, all our drinking water has become bottled, so I put a capsule listening device in each bottle. Unless you didn’t drink at all, you couldn’t avoid it.”

Chen Lin nodded, seeing the light. “What good luck you have.”

He didn’t say that his own luck was bad. Chen Lin knew that no one else was aware of how acute his perception was when his energy crystal was full to the brim, and Shi Huizhang and the others also didn’t know about the little spy Su Qing; they couldn’t have suspected that he would defect...so he instantly guessed Shi Huizhang’s goal in planting the listening device—to learn his movements and find an opportunity to deal with him before they encountered other blue seals.

To resist foreign aggression, you first need to resolve internal problems.

But their luck really was too good. They had accidentally heard this.

Jiang Lan looked at his expression in increasing disbelief, then bluntly asked, “Chen Lin, have you not had a ‘cleaning’ in too long? Has your brain been cooked?”

Chen Lin glanced at her. He wanted to laugh a little. Lunatics believe that only those as insane as them are normal, while the others are all idiots, and idiots believe that only those as stupid as them can be called normal, while the others are all lunatics. When all was said and done, Chen Lin couldn’t tell whether he was insane or she was stupid.

He looked in turn at each of the people surrounding him—Jiang Lan was closest to him, standing a little off to the side. Shi Huizhang and Luo Xiaofeng stood one behind the other directly in front of him. Gui Song still looked as diffident as ever, standing a little further from him. The Utopia white coats and armed personnel were standing even further away, close to the door, sticking to the wall.

Chen Lin thought that he and the other blue seals were like the gladiators and wild animals in the Coliseum in ancient Rome, using all their tricks to fight each other to the death, while the people watching the games were outside.

Chen Lin suddenly asked, “How is it at the grey house? Have they all been taken care of?”

A white coat said, “The RZ Unit’s firepower is too strong. That area is already under their control. Though it can essentially be considered completely cleared.”

Shi Huizhang laughed coldly. “You can relax. When you really get to the other side, there will be someone to accompany you.”

When you really get to the other side... Chen Lin laughed in self-mockery. When he really got to the other side, going up to heaven or down to hell, how could he go the same way as Su Qing? Hell had long ago prepared a room for him; it was waiting there for him to go squat in.

Failure for lack of a final effort...

He went right around Jiang Lan. When he passed by Luo Xiaofeng, he raised his head with an inscrutable smile and quietly said, “You saw your opening and took it. Nicely done, I acknowledge defeat.”

Luo Xiaofeng felt that these words weren’t meant as praise. He looked up and made eye contact with Chen Lin. In that instant, Luo Xiaofeng suddenly had a strange feeling, as though while he had succeeded in plotting against Chen Lin, he still hadn’t won... No one had won.

Then, without so much as looking at Shi Huizhang, Chen Lin calmly walked up to the white coats and met their scrutinizing gazes, lightly nodding his head. “Let’s go.”

He went to his death as unflinchingly as a hero, dying for resistance and freedom. Sadly, no one would commemorate him in the future, or if they did occasionally recall his life, they would simply sum it up in a single phrase—reap what you sow.

In the end, the RZ Unit was unable to seize the blue seals and core researchers who changed their itinerary at the last minute. Taking the eight or nine surviving grey seals, including Su Qing, they returned to the RZ Unit's medical treatment center.

Xue Xiaolu was so busy her feet didn't touch the ground. She did so much running her legs became skinnier. To lighten the burden on his subordinate, Captain Hu voluntarily shared in a portion of the nursing—he assigned himself to tend to Su Qing.

Su Qing was comatose for over two months, stuck full of all kinds of tubes and lines—he was the first human being on earth to possess a pair of energy crystals, becoming an unrivaled freak. No one knew what changes he would undergo.

Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong stood one on either side of Cheng Weizhi, looking through the glass at Su Qing lying in the hospital bed—Hu Bugui was just bent over, using a towel to clean Su Qing.

Though Lu Qingbai had said that his pair of grey seals had formed a circuit in his body, giving Su Qing a healing ability that could rival that of a blue seal, meaning that he wasn't likely to get bedsores like an ordinary person, their Captain Hu was adamant, absolutely insisting on taking care of Su Qing as though he were an ordinary patient. Day after day, in rain or shine, if he had nothing else to be doing, he would come to the treatment area to put in some work, either turn Su Qing over, or read to him, or sit there staring at him, not moving for ages, like Amah Rock.

Cheng Weizhi had presented his theory concerning the “perfect double core” to Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong. Lu Qingbai wasn't a technician, after all; when he had heard, he felt that he only had a slight understanding. He couldn't resist asking, “Teacher Cheng, you inferred that, according to the Law of Emotional Attraction, the moment the second energy crystal takes shape, the emotions within the body will instinctively attract surrounding emotions of similar origin. The two energy crystals of different type will be unable to distinguish which emotion to use, and the individual will collapse into chaos, so a double core can't exist, right? Also, under ordinary circumstances, the activator stores up simulated emotions. The temporary link you set up had no such function, but the people present still weren't affected, right?”

Cheng Weizhi thought about it. “His circumstances aren’t ordinary. All of his bodily functions had stopped. You could even say he was already dead. But there was still a bit of activity in the energy crystal from the remaining body heat...”

Lu Qingbai couldn’t resist interrupting him: “What does ‘dead’ mean here? Braindead? If not, then how can you judge that all his bodily functions had stopped? And if so...you mean that the energy crystal system can activate already dead brain cells?”

Cheng Weizhi shook his head. “I can’t tell you for certain what the situation was then, but it couldn’t have been worse, and I only proposed the attempt because I was so distressed. This operation is actually pretty dangerous.”

Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong exchanged a look, nodding simultaneously—so it had been a last-ditch effort.

Xu Ruchong also thought of a question. “Teacher Cheng, how could you be certain that the second activated energy crystal would be a Type 1? What if it had been one of the three other types?”

Cheng Weizhi smiled bitterly. “Reasonably speaking, he only had a one-in-four chance.”

Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong exchanged another look. Xu Ruchong was silent for a while. “You have to tell me when he wakes up. I’ll have him buy me a lottery ticket.”

Lu Qingbai rolled his eyes. “Get a load of you.”

Xu Ruchong smiled apologetically. “Yes, yes. Look, Lu-ge, I still haven’t married myself a wife, I need to save money...”

Lu Qingbai said, “If you go, bring me back a dozen.”

Xu Ruchong: “...”

Just then, Hu Bugui came out of the hospital room carrying a basin. He looked up at Lu Qingbai and quietly said, “There was just something I wanted to ask you—is there something wrong with his nutrient fluid? Why has he been losing so much weight lately? Is there some other problem with his health?”

“A double core energy crystal is different from a blue seal’s single core energy crystal. It forms a circuit within the body. It doesn’t need to absorb external emotions. Fundamentally, it consumes the chemical energy of the food he absorbs. His new energy system is repairing his seriously injured

body. He looks like he's lying there doing nothing, but actually he's consuming more than if he had spent the last two months running marathons."

When Lu Qingbai finished, he looked up at Hu Bugui, paused, then suddenly said, "Captain Hu, reasonably, I ought to say that this is all your fucking fault. But I can't say that, because I egged you on in letting him return. If you're a bastard, then I'm Bastard 2.0."

Hu Bugui gave a bitter laugh, waved a hand at him, and didn't speak again. Finally he turned back to look at Su Qing lying there quietly, then turned and left. His steps were slow and a little dejected. He looked like a wounded lone wolf.

Cheng Weizhi looked at him and sighed. Then he turned and said to Xu Ruchong, "Oh, about my son... Thank you for taking the trouble."

Xu Ruchong quickly said, "No, no, no, teacher, it's just what I ought to have done, it's just that I didn't know, if I had known sooner... Ah, when you come down to it, it's that you have good neighbors, or else after all these months, I don't know what would have happened to him."

Cheng Weizhi gave a care-laden smile. This idiot son really was a sore point for him.

Xu Ruchong looked at him carefully. "Teacher Cheng, I'd like to ask you something. Would you...like to be our special consultant?"

Cheng Weizhi shook his head. "What would I do? I'm an old codger who retired many years ago. I'll go home to take proper care of my son, live in peace, do nothing. I'm just still uneasy about that child Su Qing. I can only go when I've seen him well..."

Before he could finish, a sharp beep suddenly came from the hospital room. The three people in the corridor stared. Lu Qingbai pushed open the door, glanced at the instrument screen, frowned, then peeled open Su Qing's eyelid. "Look at his brainwave activity. He might be about to wake up. Teacher Cheng, will there be anything else wrong when he wakes up? Reasonably speaking his memories shouldn't be affected, but what about the rest? Receptiveness, perception..."

Before he finished, he seemed to sense something and raised his head to look out. He saw Hu Bugui, alerted by the beep, coming back again. The happiness on Hu Bugui's face was plain to see. He prepared to go in, but when he had only taken a step, he stopped where he was. The expression on his face dimmed, and he actually seemed faintly flustered.

Su Qing's fingers trembled lightly. After a moment, under the attention of four people's eight eyes, he slowly opened his eyes.

31

THE NIGHT BEFORE

SU QING'S VISION was a blur. He blinked, and things came into focus. When he looked up, he saw Xu Ruchong's lips drawn back to the roots of his ears in a big, stupid grin. Su Qing felt that his facial muscles weren't especially taking orders yet, so his expression remained calm while he was startled. He thought, What temple sent this dumbass?

Then he saw Lu Qingbai bring two raised fingers up in front of him. "Tell me, can you see how many this is?"

Su Qing: "..."

Damn, there was an even dumber one. It was a buy-one-get-one-free fad.

He also felt very tired, as though he had just gotten through climbing the Himalayas. He didn't feel like moving a single finger. His just-opened eyes once more involuntarily fell closed. Lu Qingbai immediately became urgent. Not caring at all whether the person lying in bed was a guardian deity or a sufferer, he reached out to give him a push on the shoulder. "Hey, hey, are you planning on hibernating here or what? Why are you closing your eyes again? Wake up—Xiao Xu, go get a cup of cold water..."

Fortunately, Cheng Weizhi appeared to put a timely stop to this. He took a step forward and drew close to Su Qing. Softly, he said, "Su Qing, look, do you still remember me?"

Su Qing stared. At last he woke up entirely and opened his mouth, silently forming the word "Cheng." In that moment, Cheng Weizhi finally relaxed and laughed until tears fell. He simply didn't know what to say. It was as if he was the one with a new lease of life.

Sadly, not everyone could grasp his crying and laughing sincerity. Lu Qingbai got out a notebook and drew close obnoxiously. "Well, then, this is a rare opportunity, let me ask you some questions first. Do you feel that you

see thing differently now? Is the world still three-dimensional in your eyes? Can you see the movement of people's cytoplasm when you look at them? Have you heard any strange sounds? Are you feeling full of power..."

Su Qing gave Lu Qingbai a look of disbelief. Because there was some distortion over the communicator, he hadn't realized that this white-coated, open-armed slob with half his shirt tucked into his pants and half sticking out was the quack who had electrocuted him several times. He silently turned aside, thinking, Did this comrade forget to take his meds before coming to work?

Lu Qingbai doggedly occupied his field of vision, displaying his intense interest towards everything about this freshly-minted freak, buzzing around Su Qing like a fly, carrying out a prattling mental attack against him: "How is your dynamic visual acuity now? When I wave my fingers like this, do you not see overlapping images? Does it look like slow motion... Hey, look over here, don't look at the ceiling..."

"..." Su Qing thought that an accurate translation of his action would have been "rolling his eyes."

When Lu Qingbai got fired up, he was even noisier than that chatterbox Xu Ruchong. At last, Hu Bugui couldn't stand it anymore. He lifted him by the back of his collar and dragged him two steps away from Su Qing's side. Lu Qingbai wanted to say something, but he saw Su Qing meet Hu Bugui's eyes and swallowed his words, his eyeballs rotating with profound mystery.

Hu Bugui stood there like a lump, looking fixedly at Su Qing, not saying a word. After an age, when he was about to start sweating from holding back, he somewhat hastily squeezed out a sentence: "Are you feeling better now?"

Su Qing looked at him expressionlessly for a while, then dropped his gaze and lowered his sharp chin in something like a nod. Then he turned his head aside and closed his eyes again, indicating that he wasn't receiving visitors.

Hu Bugui was silent for a while, then quietly said, "Everyone leave. Let him rest."

Lu Qingbai was still a little reluctant to part from this living rarity, but sadly he was forcibly ejected by Hu Bugui. Su Qing then opened his eyes again and looked out through the glass at the receding people and under-

stood what place he had come to. He felt very vexed. He bitterly thought, Why is it always this crowd of plague gods pestering me?

It was really no way to live.

Su Qing's consciousness began to be clear at times and muddled at others. Much of the time he was still heavily asleep, frequently dreaming. Occasionally he would be disturbed by people around him and would be blearily half-waking and half-sleeping for a while, then fall back asleep.

During his hazy periods, he could feel that there was always someone beside him. Though this person made his movements as light as he could, it was still possible to sense that he was a little clumsy. Sometimes when he was turning Su Qing over or cleaning him he would hurt him.

Su Qing faintly knew who this person was, but he was unwilling to open his eyes, and he was also too tired and couldn't open them.

By the time he completely woke up, another ten days had passed.

This time he was shaken awake by a *thump-thump-thump* sound—little Tu Tutu was bouncing a rubber ball in his hospital room. When he saw Su Qing open his eyes, Tu Tutu gave a start and threw the rubber ball at the wall. When it bounced back, it came hurtling towards Su Qing's face—who knew what wicked person had let the little whelp in.

When the ball came towards him, Su Qing suddenly had a very strange feeling, as though it really had been freeze-framed. It slowed visibly, enough for Su Qing to turn his head away. The rubber ball brushed past his ear, shook the pillow, then fell back to the floor.

Tu Tutu pounced, yelling, "Uncle Annoying, you're alive again!"

Su Qing: "..."

Tu Tutu continued, counting on his fingers: "You were 'dead' for weeks. If you didn't come back to life, they were going to 'roast' you up and shut you up in a little box."

Su Qing struggled to use his sore throat to say, "I'm...not...some...damn...roast duck."

Tu Tutu paid no attention to what he was saying. He gravely expounded his contribution: "But I said to them that you were definitely going to come back to life, so they couldn't shut Uncle Annoying up in a little box."

Su Qing, with a double meaning, said, "It's all...thanks to you."

Tu Tutu took a big step back and pushed the little baseball cap he was wearing askew. He jiggled his leg and said, "No need for thanks, you can

‘repay me with your body’...Huh? Wait, I don’t think that’s how it goes... Well, anyway, you can come along with me after this and go halves with me on everything you get...”

Su Qing: “...”

What kind of rotten movies had the RZ Unit been showing this little brat?

After Tu Tutu had stammered through his gang leader’s lines, he threw himself fawningly at Su Qing’s bedside again, his big, round eyes curving in a smile. “So, first, can you buy me lots of different colors of chocolate chips?”

Su Qing very much wanted to sit up and thrash the little devil into lots of different colors of chocolate chips.

After waking up, Su Qing didn’t see Hu Bugui again. The person taking care of him changed to a pretty little girl named Xue Xiaolu. The little girl was a professional and made Su Qing’s life much more comfortable. The only flaw in this perfection was that he thought this girl might have been dropped on her head as a child. She frequently had attacks—she would be talking and talking, and then she would think of something and put her hands to her cheeks, look right at him, then start smiling idiotically as she looked. If there wasn’t something peculiar in that idiotic smile, Su Qing practically would have thought the little girl had fallen in love with him.

Only late each night would a person come to his room. He didn’t do anything, only occasionally turned off the lights or straightened his covers for him.

This person’s movements were very light. Generally speaking, if he snuck in, no one would notice. But Su Qing’s senses had suddenly become very acute. Even when this person stood at the door, his heartbeat was enough to alert him.

In fact, Su Qing knew who this person was, but he didn’t think he had anything to say to him, so each time he feigned ignorance.

Cheng Weizhi also came to see him once. When he came, Cheng Ge waited for him outside under the care of a specialized nurse. The old professor had come to say goodbye.

“I’ve had no peace in this life.” Before leaving, Cheng Weizhi sighed. “Perhaps I didn’t do good deeds in my past life, so payment is being demanded of me in this one.”

Su Qing said, “Uncle Cheng, you’re a scientist. How are you so nonmaterialistic?”

Cheng Weizhi laughed. “It has been my good fortune to meet a good child like you. Your parents are also blessed to have a son like you.”

Su Qing smiled bitterly. “It seems that my dad really doesn’t know his own blessings. He not only doesn’t know his blessings, he hates them.”

Cheng Weizhi reached out to pat him on the head. “If you get a chance, go and see him. How can there be hatred that can’t be resolved between a father and son?—I’m leaving. It wasn’t easy surviving. Come and visit me during the holidays, I’ll make you dumplings.”

Su Qing suddenly called Cheng Weizhi back. “Uncle Cheng, draw me another line.”

After thinking about it, Cheng Weizhi said, “Regardless of how the ways of the world change, regardless of how others change, and regardless of how you yourself change, all you need to do is remember who you are.”

When he finished speaking, the old professor put on his cap, covering up his head of grey hair, and left. He had left Su Qing with new coordinates for life.

Lu Qingbai meanwhile became the person Su Qing saw every day. Though Su Qing thought that this quack had a very hungry expression when he looked at him, as though he wanted to peel off his skin and rip out his tendons, he still learned from him what had happened.

Su Qing looked at his own hand, so thin that the veins stuck out, and felt that this was all a dream, because he hadn’t noticed anything different about himself—until the first day Lu Qingbai permitted him to get out of bed and walk. When Su Qing’s foot touched the ground, he thought that his legs were weak after lying down for so long and his footing was unsteady, so he stepped with particular force when he stood up.

And so the tragedy happened. Under Lu Qingbai’s apparently unperurbed but actually excited gaze, Su Qing stamped a crack into the floor.

Lu Qingbai was so excited he rubbed his hands together. “Yes, right now you’re like a poor little joker who’s gotten rich overnight. Your body is suddenly full of an energy system that’s unfamiliar to you. This is contradictory to your previous understanding of yourself, and it may give rise to some trouble in your life. But it’s all right. This is a part of your body. It won’t be long before it’s as familiar to you as your own hands and feet!”

Su Qing looked at the floor he had cracked, then looked at Lu Qingbai with his eyes flashing green. He thought, This really *is* government property. No one is concerned about it.

Lu Qingbai clapped his hands. "I'll go prepare a test now to test all your body's indexes so I can put together an exercise plan. Though it's a very unique case that came about by pure chance, I believe that you're a harbinger of good for the evolution of all humanity!"

Before he was even finished speaking, he ran off as though his ass was on fire. Su Qing wordlessly kicked the floor tile that was sticking up at one corner back into place and carefully began to teach himself to walk.

Three days later, Lu Qingbai impatiently arranged all kinds of tests for Su Qing, planning to conduct a study. Su Qing meanwhile had basically learned how to walk, eat, and perform other basic life skills. That night, after Hu Bugui had concluded his habitual nightly patrol, Su Qing suddenly turned over and sat up in bed.

He carefully avoided the security cameras in the corners and felt his way to Tu Tutu's room. He shook the heavily sleeping child awake. "Wake up. Little chief, let me ask you, will you elope with me?"

Tu Tutu rubbed his eyes. "Oh...where are you going?"

Su Qing said, "I'm going away from here, to a place that none of them will find."

Tu Tutu asked, "Why?"

Su Qing said, "The people here are all unlucky. If you spend too much time with them, you'll step in dog shit as soon as you walk out the door."

Tu Tutu wrinkled his nose. "Will you buy me candy?"

"I will, I'll buy it for you every day, all right?"

"Will you buy me a big train?"

"A train is no good, I can't afford it. But I'll consider a motor scooter."

Tu Tutu pondered seriously for a while, then cheerfully nodded and gave the final word: "All right!"

THE GREAT TRIUMPHANT FLIGHT

SU QING made a pinky promise with Tu Tutu and arranged to keep their plan a secret. Then he quietly returned to his own hospital room. In the grey house, he had learned patience and planning.

As he learned at an astonishing speed how to control his own body, Su Qing was allowed to leave the hospital room during the day and take walks outside. At first he would accede to the little chief's requests and play ball with him, but Su Qing only knew one way to play—throw the ball as far as possible, make the kid trot over to bring it back, then throw it again and make him pick it up again—as time went on, though Tu Tutu was little, he still understood that he was being taken for a dog and told to go fetch. The little chief showed himself very displeased with this disrespectful behavior and abandoned Su Qing for the sake of bothering the great beauty Xue Xiaolu.

Su Qing meanwhile took the opportunity to examine the RZ Unit's treatment area inside and out. He noticed that security was good here; anyone staying here could sleep free of worries and pass their old age in peace. But wanting to get out was a problem, so observing and plotting a route took quite some time.

Su Qing couldn't say clearly why he had to run. When he had been at the grey house, he had thought of getting out every moment. Though he had later returned to it, it had been for the sake of running again—he suspected that over time he had become accustomed to running and was unwilling to stay put anywhere.

But one thing was true. He didn't want to have any more contact with the RZ Unit.

While this place had food, drink, and beautiful women, he still felt increasingly stifled into a panic—especially each night, when Hu Bugui snuck

over like a thief to look at him. Su Qing could sense his guilt. But did he himself care or not? He wasn't sure. After waking up clear-headed, he had said to himself again and again that in fact there was nothing you could call wrong about what Hu Bugui had done, and anyway, he was alive now, and Tu Tutu was hopping all over the place annoying the whole world—wasn't that pretty good?

Before, Su Qing had thought that life should consist of enjoying yourself while you could. While he had turned to a decent life now and wasn't such a scoundrel, he still thought that while a person was alive, there were many things that could just be muddled through, and it was better not to be too choosy. Otherwise, weren't you just making trouble for yourself?

But he still felt that Hu Bugui's presence was upsetting to him, especially after he woke up. Su Qing found out via direct and indirect channels that when he wasn't doing his proper business, Captain Hu was a human oyster, suppressing everything. Though he perhaps felt very unhappy, very guilty, he wouldn't go apologize directly in front of the "victim." He only quietly used his own means to make up for it.

Before, Su Qing had been used to people pampering him and spoiling him. He hadn't felt that there was anything uncomfortable about it. But having gone through a period of misery worse than death and then having nearly died once, he had ended up covered in calluses, simply a little iron-plated. Hu Bugui acting like this made him uncomfortable.

He thought that Hu Bugui looking after him this way, as though he was made of porcelain, was taking him for a useless person—since he knew that he had been useless, he particularly couldn't stand this.

Before, he hadn't thought that there was anything bad about it. Even when Guo Julin had resentfully advised him to consider his own future, it still hadn't moved his numb, lazy spirit... If not for being buried in the exploding house, Su Qing might have gone his whole life without understanding as deeply as he did now that however good other people were to him, however much they felt, they were still other people. Friendship had no price, but it also had no guarantee. At the critical moment, they could nevertheless turn around and go towards someone else; it all depended on them.

Lean on the mountain, and the mountain will fall; lean on the tree, and the tree will sway—said to others, this was a sermon; but said to Su Qing,

who had leaned once and fallen down, it was a deeply personal pain. So he had decided to leave this place that made him unhappy.

As for Tu Tutu, he had been entrusted to him by Tian Feng before his death. That man had trusted him. Su Qing thought that he ought to do what he had promised. He didn't feel easy handing the child over to anyone else.

He thought that all he needed was to take along this little baggage and a mirror in which he could see his own reflection, and he could be on his way and leave. He didn't need anyone else to hate him, to loathe him, to disdain him, or to feel guilty about him. He would go with himself.

Hell is other people.

When Su Qing worked out a route, he brought Tu Tutu to sleep in his room. He said to the child, "Tonight we advance quietly, no need for gunfire. Little chief, this escape relies on you. You can't drop the ball."

Suddenly receiving his revolutionary mission, Tu Tutu felt his little body grow stalwart. He indicated that he was resolved to fulfill his mission.

So that night, when Xue Xiaolu came to inspect the rooms, she encountered Tu Tutu's shameless offensive. The little thing really did have some smarts. He twisted his neck and his butt, drawing out his words, making Su Qing break out in gooseflesh. He really did get the little beauty to agree to let him stay the night in Su Qing's room.

Tu Tutu stuck out his tongue and jumped onto Su Qing's bed like a little monkey. "Now what do we do?"

Su Qing patted the space next to him. "Come here and pretend to sleep. I'll call you when the time comes."

Tu Tutu squirmed into his arms like a caterpillar and obediently closed his eyes. Normally he needed to be coaxed for ages before going to sleep; today, when he was told to pretend to sleep, he dedicated himself to his work. Not much time had passed before he really was asleep. Su Qing turned his head to look at him and quietly reached out to pinch his nose. The child snorted twice and used his little paw to knock him away. The idle youth was entertained and also closed his eyes.

When Hu Bugui came to report as usual, he saw Tu Tutu curled up in Su Qing's arms, one pudgy hand clutching his collar. Su Qing had turned slightly in the direction of his pull. His soft hair covered his forehead. His profile looked especially gentle and beautiful in the darkness.

Hu Bugui froze at the door for a while. He couldn't resist holding his breath, feeling that there were two angels, a big one and a little one, lying in that bed—though the little angel had a ridiculous bowl cut.

This actually gave him a sense of unworthiness. For once, he didn't go in. He only stood at the door for a while, then silently left.

As soon as he left, Su Qing opened his eyes, listened attentively for a moment, determined that there was no one in the corridor for the moment, then pushed Tu Tutu awake. He picked up a towel hanging nearby and, ignoring everything else, wiped the child's face. Lowering his voice, he said, "Division Commander Tu, we must prepare to break out of the encirclement!"

Division Commander Tu blankly let him mess around.

Su Qing opened the beside cabinet, took a bottle of capsules from inside, and put it in his pocket—the capsules were one of Lu Qingbai's prize creations: a high-purity nutritional substance. Supposedly others couldn't eat this stuff; it was like the Heaven's One Holy Water in Mr. Gu Long's *Chu Liuxiang*¹¹. Eating a single one could fill a dinosaur to bursting, but it wouldn't do the same to Su Qing.

Since finding out that he had returned as a hungry ghost, Su Qing firmly believed that nutritional substances and so forth were good things. Otherwise, he would do nothing but eat from morning to night; he wouldn't even have enough time for that. He was still wearing his hospital gown, his original clothing being pretty much in rags. Since he had been staying in the hospital, the RZ Unit hadn't prepared any other clothing for him. Su Qing frowned, planning to resolve this problem with a spot of pilfering after he got out.

He pushed open the window and stuck his head out to have a look. There was a guard rail outside the window. This was the fourth floor, and supposedly falling from here wouldn't kill him... Su Qing swallowed. He didn't know whether Lu Qingbai could be relied upon in this instance. There was a security camera at each turning on the stairs, and the lobby downstairs had fairly tight security. Su Qing made his mental preparations and decided to go with his original plan—go by the window.

He reached out and shoved the iron window guard rail and only then unfortunately found that though he had become a freak, he still wasn't as

strong as he imagined, able to send an ox flying with one punch and knock down a building with one kick—it was likely that quality of that floor tile he had cracked hadn't been up to standard.

This time, exerting all his strength, Su Qing at last managed to bend the iron bar into an arc with his bare hands. Fortunately he was quite thin and didn't need much room.

Tu Tutu was craning his neck beside him. He yawned and haughtily said, "Haven't you done it yet? Why are you so slow?"

Su Qing glared at him irritably. "Because your head is so big that I'm worried you'll get stuck. Come here!"

He leaned down and picked Tu Tutu up, then stood on the windowsill. Tu Tutu gloomily explained, "A big head means you're bright."

Su Qing smacked his butt. "Shut your mouth, big lightbulb¹². Mind the wind."

Then, with a *whoosh*, Tu Tutu felt Su Qing jump down holding him. Though the rate of falling was also "played in slow motion" in Su Qing's eyes, he still felt uncertain and couldn't resist reaching out with his feet to catch the railing outside the second floor. The two of them hung upside down in the air.

Tu Tutu didn't know what fear was. He chuckled, probably thinking that he was on a rollercoaster. Su Qing covered his mouth. Like Spider-Man, he used his back muscles to bend himself and turn his sight of the world right-side up at last. Then he grabbed the railing with one hand, let go with his feet, and continued to fall from the second floor, making a landing that was frightening but not harmful.

Just as he touched down, a flashlight beam swept over. Su Qing thought, That's it. What rotten luck. Just down, and they had run into a patrol. The patrolman heard movement and initially wanted to request support, but when the words came to his lips, he saw that of these two people, one was a patient, and one was a child. So he walked over and asked in friendly way, "Why are you out so late? Aren't you afraid of catching cold?"

Su Qing's eyes turned, and he immediately shivered cooperatively. The young man on duty was fairly attentive. He took off his coat and gave it to him, and even smiled understandingly. "Sick of staying in the hospital, so

you snuck out to get some air, huh? That's not out of the question, but don't stay too long. It's better to listen to the doctors."

Su Qing took the coat he had won by trickery. He didn't shed any tears of gratitude. Looking at this soldier's stiff army uniform, malicious intent formed in his heart. He squeezed out a smile like a weasel's. "I've been in the hospital so long I'm about to put down roots. It's this little whelp who won't sleep in the middle of the night and insists on going out to look at the stars."

As he spoke, he pinched Tu Tutu's butt. Tu Tutu immediately howled, his small mouth drawing back. He began to cry. "Wah—I want to look at the stars—I want to see 'Cirrus' and Vega, and I want to see the bird bridge¹³, wah—I want to see..."

The soldier was stunned. He helplessly patted Tu Tutu on the head. "Don't cry, kid, I didn't say you couldn't look. Look for a while, then go back. Hurry and stop crying."

Pathetically, his ears had been so pierced by the little whelp's demonic voice that he had forgotten in his torment—it was a cloudy night.

Su Qing pinched Tu Tutu's butt again. As though he had an on/off switch, Tu Tutu stopped his tears at once and peeked out from between his fingers. "Really?"

The soldier grinned at him, displaying a mouth full of charming white teeth. He waved a hand at Su Qing and turned to go, glad to have helped someone out.

The moment he turned, Su Qing's non-standard chop nimbly came down on his neck. His bodily hardware was good, and he acted extremely quickly; an ordinary person had no way to react.

The soldier silently fell forward, giving Su Qing a scare. He carefully tested his breathing, found that he was all right, then let out a sigh of relief. He patted himself on the chest and told Tu Tutu to stand by. He deftly removed the soldier's clothes and changed out of his hospital gown.

Before leaving, he rather considerately covered this living Lei Feng¹⁴ with his cotton hospital gown. Using the clothes as cover, Su Qing pulled the brim of his cap very low, and, according to the original plan, with several soul-stirring narrow escapes, he finally got out with Tu Tutu, frightened but unharmed.

He took off the cap and waved in the direction of the RZ Unit's treatment center. He gave it a slightly malicious smile, then went off with a swagger.

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THE VAGRANT'S ROAD

THE NEXT DAY, as soon as Xue Xiaolu pushed open the hospital room's door, she saw an empty room, without a shadow of a human figure. The curtain rustled, blown to one side by the breeze coming in through the open window. The covers were pushed aside and long cold.

Xue Xiaolu thought, That's done it! She turned and ran out to find Lu Qingbai.

Lu Qingbai was sitting in his office drinking tea. The unfortunate thing was, Hu Bugui was also there. Xue Xiaolu's expression immediately became visibly pained. She took a deep breath and quietly said, "Reporting—we've lost them."

Lu Qingbai picked up a folder and smacked her on the forehead. "What kind of report is that? Who's lost?"

Xue Xiaolu swallowed and looked cautiously at Hu Bugui. "Reporting to the captain—he...he's gone."

Listening to her evasive speech, Hu Bugui was at first frowning. At this point, he suddenly realized with a start who she was talking about. He pushed aside Lu Qingbai, who was in his way, and charged out.

Lu Qingbai nearly burned himself with the hot tea he was holding. "Hey! What are you doing?"

Then he turned to Xue Xiaolu. "Is he really gone?"

Xue Xiaolu gesticulated: "Really! The window guard rails were pulled into a hole this wide."

Lu Qingbai listened expressionlessly, feeling that his back molars were beginning to ache. Xue Xiaolu asked, "Dr. Lu, is there anything on him we can use to track him?"

Lu Qingbai's back molars ached even more. He sucked in a breath and shook his head. "The blocker self-destructed, the communicator was re-

moved by that blue seal, and the shock ring broke when Teacher Cheng activated his second energy crystal. I said we should secretly plant something on him, and Chief Hu overheard—he looked like he wanted to eat me alive. Would you dare to bring that on yourself?”

Xue Xiaolu shook her head like a rattle-drum.

Lu Qingbai sighed. “Come, let’s go look.”

They went one after another towards the in-patient department. From far away, they saw Hu Bugui leaning on the doorframe of Su Qing’s hospital room, standing there staring blankly.

Xue Xiaolu couldn’t quite bear it. She whispered, “Look at Captain Hu’s expression.”

Lu Qingbai was in complete agreement: “As though his parents had died.”

Xue Xiaolu shut her mouth, profoundly understanding that nothing good would come out of her superior’s mouth.

She had heard others describe what had happened. With her powerful imagination, in her eyes, Hu Bugui simply became a wronged husband subjected to unspeakable suffering through the toying of the will of heaven, finally abandoned by the one he loved. He gave off an air of suffering like “contemplating the vastness of the universe, I weep in my lonely sorrow¹⁵”—he was so melancholy he could be turned into a song.

Lu Qingbai took a glance at her imbecilic features and knew that this young lady was having another attack. So he ignored her and walked right over to say to Hu Bugui, “What do we do? Send people to search?”

Hu Bugui nodded and looked at Lu Qingbai with a grave expression. “Remember that information about the double core must be kept strictly confidential. Nothing can leak out.”

Lu Qingbai raised his eyebrows. “Captain Hu, that isn’t what General Xiong said. The higher authorities are very concerned about this matter. From him, we’re likely to be able to find a direction for human evolution, and also, given his physical condition, if he’s well trained, he’ll be a great help if he joins us. You don’t know what kind of special abilities the double core system will give him. Also...”

“Enough,” Hu Bugui interrupted him. “Seal the information, tell the searchers to be quiet about it, and when they find him...if he doesn’t want

to come back, then forget it. Don't disturb him."

"Captain Hu..." Lu Qingbai wanted to say something else, but he was again interrupted by Hu Bugui.

"I have the final say on this. If the higher authorities are dissatisfied, they can take disciplinary action against me."

Then he dejectedly turned and left. Lu Qingbai took a deep breath. "Bleh, Hu the stubborn donkey."

Meanwhile, that very night, Su Qing wrapped Tu Tutu tightly in the soldier's coat. The kid had tired himself out and lay in his arms dozing. At daybreak, he squeezed into a freight truck with the child—the rumor in the jianghu was that the country had a policy during this time that trucks that specialized in delivering vegetables wouldn't pay tolls, so the great working people had thought of a trick: openly carrying vegetables on the aboveboard path while secretly transporting big porkers on the underground.

Su Qing stealthily bent a metal cage's bars and squeezed into the "underground" along with Tu Tutu. Over their heads was a rag blocking out the sky, and in their noses were all kinds of strange smells. They were surrounded by several large pigs and leaning against onions, radishes, and spinach. It was very rustic.

Though their escape had been leisurely, they were currently in the condition of having nothing but the shirts on their backs, belonging to the absolute most unpropertied proletariat.

If Su Qing had gone on his own, everything would have been fine. He could easily have eaten for himself and kept from starving without spending. But he also had the little encumbrance of Tu Tutu. The little encumbrance had to eat, had to play, had to sleep for a long time every day, or else he wouldn't grow up tall. He also had to go to school and study, but without a residence registration booklet or an ID, what school would take him?

When Su Qing attempted to discuss this problem with Tu Tutu, Division Commander Tu was just teasing the pigs, squatting among them—for Su Qing, the space in the truck wasn't big enough to turn around in, but for Tu Tutu, it could just about amount to a little playground. He was indifferent; wrinkling his nose, he dusted his butt and stood up, smacked a pig on the nose, then said, "Go to school? You can go. I'm not going."

Su Qing said, "None of your nonsense. For me to go, they would have to want me."

Tu Tutu concentrated his gaze on his guardian and thought he was making a big deal out of nothing. Like a little grown-up, he said, “It costs lots of money to go to school. I don’t have money. Do you have money?”

This sentence struck Su Qing in his weak spot. He was kept silent for a long moment. He reached out to pluck a vegetable leaf from Tu Tutu’s hair and waved a hand, feigning carelessness. “There’s no need for you to worry about that. I’ll think of a way. Tell me, before you came, what grade were you in?”

Tu Tutu followed suit, also waving a hand with sophisticated self-importance. “There’s no need for you to worry about that.”

Steam nearly came out of Su Qing’s head from anger. Then Tu Tutu suddenly put one hand on his waist and pinched the other hand’s fingers in a delicate gesture. Pointing to the pig in front of him, which was about the same height he was, he put on a sharp voice and said in an affected, babyish way, “You little money-burning whelp. Tell me how it is. Your old mother gives you food and drink, and keeps on good terms with your teachers to the tune of four or five hundred yuan each time. I take you to make-up classes, and I find you tutors. So you don’t get tired of your tutors, I get you three, one each for language, math, and English. And you test last in your class. What does your old mother owe you from a past lifetime, you little money sink?”

Su Qing was simply dumbfounded. Tu Tutu turned, raising his bowl cut head, and blinked his big eyes at Su Qing. “See, that’s what my mom said.”

Su Qing gave a dry cough and warned himself to be sure to speak and act cautiously. This little thing’s imitation skills were appalling.

Tu Tutu seriously said, “Uncle Annoying, as far as going to school is concerned, I know a song.”

Su Qing dully asked, “What song?”

Tu Tutu sang: “The sun is shining brightly, the flowers are smiling at me. The little bird says, So early, so early, why is there a pack of dynamite on your back? I’m going to blow up my school...¹⁶”

The pigs next to him began to grunt as though providing musical accompaniment.

Su Qing was utterly speechless. He felt that his heart was full of bitter tears. It was really inexpressible.

Just then, the truck stopped. Su Qing made a shushing gesture towards Tu Tutu and pulled the child over. He squatted down himself, hiding behind a pig. Another pig shuffled its head over and opened its two black bean-like little eyes wide, looking curiously at the two people. But it was still shuffling forward, so Su Qing had to free up a hand to block the pig's nose in order to maintain a certain distance from this warm-hearted beast.

There were voices outside. Su Qing's excellent hearing let him understand in a moment—this old smuggler turned out to be a hothead. His first time on the road, and never mind plain smuggling, he was brazenly smuggling living things. Was he totally senseless?

Su Qing heard the inspector outside shouting angrily: "Vegetables? Bullshit! I heard something calling from inside. Are you transporting ginseng? Does it have legs? Can it grunt? How stupid do you think I am?"

As he spoke, he tore away a corner of the cloth outside. Su Qing held Tu Tutu's head down—the pigs had been revealed; better for the people not to be revealed, too.

The inspector stuck his hand into the cage, bristling with rage. He grabbed a pig's ear and began to roar: "Is this a vegetable?"

Su Qing drew his neck in at the howling. Just then, a low, deep masculine voice sounded in his ear: "Su Qing, it's me, I think you can hear me."

Su Qing, who had been laughing into his sleeve while cheerfully watching the fun, froze. He slowly freed up one hand and touched his sole remaining earring... It turned out that Captain Hu had at some point switched out that last one, as well. This was a communicator. It had a locating function that could even break through Utopia's protective net. No matter where he went, this magical item could follow his tracks...

Su Qing felt as if his heart had been lowered into icy water. He immediately reached out to remove the false earring. As if he knew something, Hu Bugui quickly said, "No, don't throw it away, listen to me. This one is different from the one you had before. It doesn't have a locating function, or a projection function, or a detection function. I can only use it to talk to you. If you don't press the little button on it, I won't even be able to hear you. It...it really is just an ordinary communicator."

Su Qing was silent. He could hear Hu Bugui's slightly agitated breathing. After a long moment, Hu Bugui said, "Just...trust me this once."

As he said this, his tone was unusually soft, almost entreating. It even made you think there was a hidden frailty in his words.

Hu Bugui continued: “I put it on you in secret, the others don’t know. Don’t take it off. In case...in case anything happens later, if you need me, I’ll always be here.”

Su Qing watched out of the corner of his eye as the unlucky idiot driver was hauled off to be fined by the enraged inspector. In trepidation, he thought, “How could I possibly dare to trouble you? You’re a great personage, protecting our homes and defending our country. Why would you be looking after the trifles of a little commoner like me every day?”

He carefully lifted aside a bit of the rag covering the cage. He gestured at Tu Tutu, found the place where he had bent the bars to squeeze in, and hopped off their free ride. Upon seeing this, the pigs fell over each other to imitate them, all of them squeezing towards the opening. Sadly, the first one was too stout in figure and got stuck there, forming a natural barrier. The ones after it naturally also came to grief.

There was silence from Hu Bugui. Su Qing didn’t know what he was thinking, but in the end he didn’t throw the communicator away. He took Tu Tutu to a highway, tossed aside the coat smelling of decaying vegetables, made up a story that was full of holes that went “I took my son back to my home town and the child’s mother got in an accident first thing this morning, so I ran out in a panic without having time to take anything.” Relying on his own attractive and harmless looks and the tears he pinched out of Tu Tutu, he bluffed his way from one hitched ride to another, arriving in B City. On the way he acquired cookies, drinks, and a big bun from a compassionate lady, as well as three red Grandpa Maos from a kind couple taking a self-guided tour.

B City was his home—his true home, with the house he had lived in as a child, and his dad.

34

TIMIDITY

SU QING spent a hundred yuan to buy two sets of clothes, one adult and child, for himself and Tu Tutu to change into. Tu Tutu asked, “Uncle Annoying, what are we doing?”

Hearing this form of address, Su Qing frowned. He explained briefly where they were going, then half-crouched and said to Tu Tutu in deadly earnest: “Listen, let’s talk something over. You act as my son from now on, change your name to Su Tutu. Tu Tutu sounds awful. It’s like a tractor.”

This hit Tu Tutu directly in his sore spot. The child’s greatest defeat in life was his name. He had probably had many children in school give him nicknames. As soon as he heard this, his eyes reddened, his lips pursed, and tears trembled on the rims of his eyes.

He took a deep breath from the diaphragm and stood as though ready to howl. Su Qing softened at once. Trembling, he said, “Chief, I was wrong, spare this unworthy one’s life. I won’t dare to do it again. You aren’t my son, you’re my ancestor.”

After a moment, he insolently added, “Though actually...my ancestors were also surnamed Su.”

Tu Tutu: “Wah—”

So Su Qing shelled out three coins, made his way into a KFC, and bought an ice cream cone. In his poor and wretched situation, where each yuan had to be stretched to the limit, he regretted the expenditure so much that he looked constipated. Then he carried the little devil around on his shoulders for ages to cheer him up. Only then did the little chief finally agree not to take issue with him.

Tu Tutu knocked on Su Qing’s head. “You can put me down.”

Su Qing thought, The little devil’s finally found his conscience. Then he heard him say, “There’s not enough space, and it hurts my butt. I’m

uncomfortable.”

Su Qing’s inner world was full of tears amid a raging storm.

Next, Tu Tutu raised the ice cream cone that he had licked all over and asked, “Do you want some?”

Before Su Qing could answer that he didn’t, the little devil decided for himself to withdraw the ice cream. “Fine, I know you don’t.”

Su Qing: “...”

He felt that in the blink of an eye the little devil had taken liberties with him twice.

He looked up at the increasingly familiar scenery of the neighborhood. Three or four blocks from his house, he suddenly stopped and swatted Tu Tutu on the back of the head, saying, “We’re going to see Grandpa. You have to be polite.”

Tu Tutu was happily nibbling on his ice cream. He nodded deferentially.

Su Qing suddenly felt a little timid as he approached his old home. He couldn’t resist saying, “If Grandpa asks how you’re doing in school, you say you’re doing all right. You hear me? You’re not allowed to talk about testing last in your class.”

Tu Tutu impatiently shook his hand off. “I know. Every time someone asked my mom, she would say, ‘Tolerably well, he’s just not very studious, but the teacher says he has a lot of potential.’”

Su Qing was silent for a moment. He raised his hand and smacked the top of his head. “You’re also not allowed to keep imitating your mom.”

Tu Tutu: “...”

Then he raised his head and rolled his eyes to look at Su Qing. He waved a hand and said, “There’s no need for you to worry about that.”

“Motherfaker... You’re also not allowed to imitate me!”

Just then, a car came around the corner. Su Qing just glimpsed it out of the corner of his eye and subconsciously picked Tu Tutu up, dodging aside extremely fast. His vision was different from before. A single look, and he had seen that sitting in that car were Su Chengde and a young assistant from his company. The two of them were dressed very formally. It seemed that they had just finished work. The car stopped at the intersection up ahead.

Su Qing hid at the corner, turned carefully, and looked over.

The assistant probably lived here. Perhaps there had been a problem with his own means of transportation, so he had hitched a ride home with his boss. When he got out of the car, he thanked Su Chengde a little overcautiously.

Not all people dubbed “nouveau riche” had gold teeth and went around spitting all over the place, looking like rich landlords from the old society—he didn’t know about other people, but Su Qing’s father Su Chengde seemed very proper. There was in fact no ink in Su Chengde’s belly; he had never done any studying. But a successful career had naturally given him a layer of gilding. His every move came with a kind of solidity that others didn’t have...though half of his hair was already white, and he looked like an old man.

Su Qing thought, Why does my dad have so much more white hair than the last time I saw him? Then his vision blurred, and he felt an icy chill on his face. At some point, tears had begun to pour down his cheeks.

Su Chengde got out of the car and exchanged some small talk with the assistant. Then, like an affectionate elder, he patted the young man on the shoulder and returned to the car. Su Qing thought, his assistant’s surname was Zhou. He was an outstanding student who had graduated from a famous school. He was young, and both his abilities and his learning were top notch. Before, when Su Chengde had brought up “look at that Xiao Zhou, he’s hardly older than you, so on and so on,” Su Qing had been annoyed. Father and son were always parting on bad terms because of this subject.

Right now, hiding at the corner, wearing the cheapest clothes he had ever worn in his life, with only a single hundred yuan bill and some change left in his pocket, his long-uncut hair covering half his face when he lowered his head...he thought that he was in no shape to be seen.

He suddenly picked up Tu Tutu and went in the opposite direction. He thought, if his dad didn’t have a son like him...or if Assistant Zhou were his son, then the old man would have great success in this lifetime. This thought was like a wind sweeping through his heart, agitating everything that could be agitated. All the clear and hazy grievances of days on end instantly came surging up at once.

Tu Tutu looked at him quietly for a while. “Why are you crying? It’s shameful.”

Su Qing said, “Bullshit. I have an eye infection, the wind makes me tear up.”

In that moment, Su Qing made a decision—he decided to leave B City, then come home when he had talent and means.

That very night, he used his remaining money to buy a train ticket to another city. Taking Tu Tutu, who could just scrape by without needing a ticket if he bent a little, he went to a strange place.

He had been confused, but when the little whelp lay sleeping on his shoulder, drooling and indistinctly saying “I want to eat another one...”, the confusion dispersed.

Su Qing thought, first he had to find some work, raise this little whelp, think up some way to get him into school. He suddenly had so many things to do; where would he find the time to be confused?

He was a little tired. He got out a nutritional capsule and swallowed it. He leaned back in the hard seat and fell heavily asleep.

On the other end, Hu Bugui was in his office. Fang Xiu, who had been ordered to undertake a low-profile search for Su Qing, suddenly charged in looking grim. As soon as he opened the door, he asked, “Captain Hu, who knows about Su Qing?”

Hu Bugui could tell instantly from his tone that something was wrong. He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Fang Xiu lowered his voice and said, “I figured that he might go back home, so I took some people to stake out his house. We didn’t see Su Qing, but we did see another group of people... Am I being oversensitive? Were they our people?”

Hu Bugui’s expression became grave. “Did he return?”

Fang Xiu said, “I have people keeping an eye on his house. At present he hasn’t been there yet.”

Hu Bugui nodded, then said, “The people who know the whole story are limited to Professor Cheng and the people within the unit. I’ve also sent a report to General Xiong, and the higher authorities have been informed. Even the rescue workers sent from the treatment center that day have only a partial understanding. I’ve already strictly blocked access to the information. Reasonably speaking...there shouldn’t be superfluous people in the know. Up to this point, matters concerning this mysterious ‘Utopia’ have been

dealt with through me, and the higher authorities don't intend to change to someone else. I didn't send anyone else."

Fang Xiu asked, "Did Professor..."

"He knows the risks involved in this. He wouldn't speak out of turn." Hu Bugui paused, then added, "Anyway, I've sent people to keep an eye on him."

Fang Xiu looked at him in amazement. "Then it can only mean that we've had an internal..." He made a gesture and didn't continue.

There was no expression evident on Hu Bugui's face. He met Fang Xiu's eyes for a long moment, then quietly said, "Take precautions, but don't go suspecting things at random. The key task now is to find him. I said before to do as he wanted when you found him. That changes now—he must be made to understand the circumstances outside and brought back. We can't have another..."

Fang Xiu knew what he meant. "Yes, sir."

Then Fang Xiu turned to leave. When he reached the door and had a hand on the doorknob, he suddenly looked back. "Captain Hu, there's another situation, I don't know whether I ought to say..."

Hu Bugui sat at his desk, his eyes looking directly into Fang Xiu's. The look in his eyes was like the "jackal" of his nickname—cold, sharp, and unusually deep. In that instant, Fang Xiu knew that there was nothing he needed to say. He gave a salute, opened the door, and left.

Hu Bugui folded his hands together and propped his chin on them—there was another situation: that the "higher authorities" weren't clean. He remembered Xu Ruchong mentioning the blue seal base's blocker and felt that he had faintly touched an enormous web.

Chen Lin had mentioned that the blue seals' core concerned an energy source.

While half-sleeping, half-waking, Su Qing suddenly heard Hu Bugui's voice. Hu Bugui said, "Listen to me, don't go home anytime in the near future. There's a group from an unknown power keeping an eye on your house. Returning in haste will be dangerous."

Su Qing gave a start, all the sleepiness leaving his head. He instantly broke out in a cold sweat. He glanced over at the fellow passengers in his train compartment. It was the middle of the night. Most people were sleeping. Then he hesitantly reached up to fumble with his earring. He did in-

deed find a very covert little protuberance and pressed down. He quietly said, "You...say that again."

This was the first complete sentence he had said to Hu Bugui since waking up. Hu Bugui paused, then softened his voice a little. "Don't worry, we also have people there. Your family currently isn't in any danger. I think that you must be their only target. If you don't return, they'll naturally retreat over time."

"So my dad..."

"There will only be danger to your family if you return. If they find that your father has no relationship with you, they naturally won't take the risk of acting against him, you understand?"

Su Qing clenched his fist. Hu Bugui asked, "Where are you? I'll come to you."

Su Qing was silent.

After a long time, when Su Qing's answer didn't come, Hu Bugui quietly said, "Did you...leave the treatment center because of me?"

Su Qing thought that this Captain Hu must have misunderstood something, but he still didn't know what to say.

Hu Bugui said, "Come back. I'll stay away. You won't see me. Is that all right?"

Su Qing hesitated, then reached out to turn off the communicator's switch. Hu Bugui heard the faint noise vanish and knew that Su Qing wasn't planning to speak to him again. He sighed, closed his eyes, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and bent over. His posture looked huddled and a little pitiful.

35

SU ZECHENG

THE POINT about man being a social animal at last became obvious at this inconvenient moment. If it had only been a matter of not having money, Su Qing was a young man with his arms and legs intact. He could have made enough to eat on even if he had to go work as a miner in a coal pit. But he also didn't have an ID.

After unilaterally breaking off the connection with Hu Bugui, Su Qing sat in the train's hard seat compartment, no longer sleepy.

It was just time for the post-Spring Festival surge of farmers going to find work in the cities. The compartment was seriously overcrowded. Even the bathroom was packed. The air was awful. He tilted his head back and looked at the compartment's dim lighting. Narrowing his eyes that had turned into small telescopes, he began to look ahead towards the unseeable future.

When day was about to break, Su Qing and Tu Tutu arrived in C City. The two of them loitered around the train station until it was light. Su Qing now still had 92.5 yuan. He placed Tu Tutu in a little restaurant, spent five yuan to buy him breakfast, and instructed him: "Wait here for me. You're not allowed to go with anyone who asks you to. Do you hear me?"

Tu Tutu, seeing that there was food to eat, behaved. He nodded obediently.

Su Qing took him to sit in a seat by the window. "Sit right here, eat slowly. I'll be able to see you, don't be afraid. I have something to do, and then I'll come back. If someone asks if there's anyone sitting next to you, you say that there is, your dad's just gone to the bathroom, understand?"

For Tu Tutu, whoever had milk was mom and whoever bought him food would be obeyed. Without another word, he nodded again.

Then Su Qing left him and walked out with his remaining eighty-some yuan. From time to time he looked back at the child sitting by the window. He went to a little internet cafe across the street that didn't look especially up to standards, ready to do a bit of something illegal.

The pudgy internet cafe owner was just flirting with a girl online. Hearing someone come in, he only raised his eyelids and looked at Su Qing indifferently. "Show your ID, how many hours?"

Su Qing didn't answer. He saw that there was no one around, then drew close to the internet cafe owner, saying with familiar ease, "I'd just like to ask, do you have 'that' here?"

He mimed the shape of a card with his hands. The owner looked up at him warily. "What? What are you talking about?"

Su Qing gave a gentle cough and leaned his whole body forward. Lowering his voice, he said, "Zhang-ge recommended that I come." Based on his experience, if you said a common surname like Zhang, Wang, Li, Zhao, or Liu, ten to one you could pull off a deception—unless this internet cafe owner didn't know enough people.

As expected, the owner narrowed his eyes and considered. "That's Zhang Xiaoliu?"

He'd pulled it off. Su Qing nodded at once. The owner looked him up and down. "Are you a minor? You don't look like it?"

Su Qing gave a sigh of deep bitterness and resentment. "I've been brought to this against my will. See, I've got a wife in a game, you know how it is, and somehow it got out at home."

The internet cafe owner gave an absent-minded "yeah," his ten short, thick fingers click-clacking on the keyboard.

Su Qing watched this forty-something oily-faced internet cafe owner with a quivering belly type into the chat box: "We rove all over the world for the sake of pursuing art. We have nothing but a bellyful of experience and loneliness." He was instantly astonished into calm. His heart and breathing were steady.

He gave a dry cough and adjusted his situation a little, continuing to invent: "So guess what, the harpy actually hired a private detective to tail me. Wherever I go, there are people watching me. I feel like a member of the underground Party, like I've gone back to before the liberation."

The internet cafe owner at last spared him a piece of his attention. “That’s new.”

“Don’t I know it.” Su Qing pulled a long face at once. “There’s the ‘Anti-Indulgence System’ now, and you need to verify your real name. And this harpy took my ID, my bank card, and everything...”

The internet cafe owner looked at him disdainfully. “Buddy, you’re an idiot. I can see you’re all right-looking, can’t you just find someone else? Why go up against her?”

A line popped up in the owner’s chat window. Su Qing narrowed his eyes and looked over. He found that the stupid girl being flirted with had said: “Don’t be like that, I’m so sad for you that I’m about to start crying.”

Su Qing surreptitiously rubbed his own arms, thinking, I’m so disgusted that I’m about to start crying, too.

“Her family has money and power. I can’t afford to offend that harpy.” As Su Qing spoke, he touched his earring, deliberately or not, and invented more and more smoothly: “Twenty-four hours a day, she can look in on me whenever she feels like it. It’s like I’ve got a fucking security camera on my back. Everywhere I go, I’m carrying enormous psychological stress.”

The internet cafe owner sent the line “Only you understand my soul,” then said to Su Qing, “One hundred fifty for one. I’ll have it for you in a while.”

Su Qing thought, Who are you trying to hoodwink? The lousy thing costs ten yuan. But he didn’t show it on his face. He drew back his lips in a slightly bitter smile. “Boss...look, could it be a little cheaper? It really is... with the way things are at home, I’m embarrassingly short.”

The internet cafe owner sneered. “That won’t do. What did Zhang Xiaoliu say to you? These are our rules—an individual purchase is one hundred fifty. No discount without a group purchase.”

Before he was through saying this, the girl in the chat box sent the line “Can I see you?” The internet cafe owner’s short, thick fingers paused. Su Qing took the opportunity to say, “Listen, brother, no one’s fooling anyone here. I’m not some little kid in school with more money than brains. You and I both know perfectly well how much money this thing is worth. I don’t mind telling you, the last time I got one, so real that I could take it to the bank and open an account, it only cost me sixty yuan.”

The owner sent off “That’s no good, I’m not such a casual person.” The girl started pestering him to go on video. The owner seemed a little annoyed. He laughed grimly. “Who did that for you? Go straight to them.”

Su Qing thought, Motherfucker...

He looked out the window, found that Tu Tutu was sitting there eating quite steadily, and decided to hold out to the end. “Brother, I’ve really never seen anything like you. Business walks up to your door, earnings are earnings, how can you push it out?”

The internet cafe owner had been hounded into gloom by the girl who insisted on seeing his true face. He didn’t respond to Su Qing, letting him chatter on. Just when the young lady was starting to get suspicious and the internet cafe owner had settled on a strategic diversion, Su Qing saw his chance and put in a word: “Hey, go ahead and video chat with her, say there’s no microphone, only typing. You take the keyboard, and I’ll sit there in your place.”

The internet cafe owner raised his head at last and looked right at him.

Five minutes later, the two of them reached an agreement. Su Qing sold sex appeal, working the front desk in the owner’s place for ten minutes and landing the girl. Then the owner sold him a fake ID for a fifty percent discount. Fifty percent off was seventy-five, leaving him around ten yuan. He could buy Tu Tutu some buns in the afternoon, and a bowl of noodles in the evening.

When Tu Tutu had been finished with his food for a long time and was beginning to swing his legs in boredom, Su Qing returned with his new ID. He had chosen an “auspicious” fake name for himself, the name he had coveted while at the blue seals’ base—he called himself Su Zecheng.

The “Zecheng” in “Yu Zecheng.”

And so began his life of swindling and deceit.

With an ID, Su Qing felt much steadier. He didn’t dare to delay a minute. He took Tu Tutu to blend in with the crowd of migrant workers surging out of the train station, and in a few words got chatting with an old brother who had a family to feed. Su Qing invented himself another background of bizarre suffering—he found that he simply had a talent for this; the lies came to his mouth as soon as he opened it—he talked the old brother’s wife right to tears.

Tu Tutu started playing with the old brother's two children, watched by his wife, so Su Qing started in on looking for work along with the old brother. During the day, the kind-hearted sister-in-law looked after Tu Tutu's food and drink, and Su Qing still had the nutritional capsules. One would do him for a day or two. To save on housing costs at night, he took the child to stay the night at the train station.

C City's train station didn't collect tickets at the door, though he did have to dodge the patrols at night—however, he had even dodged the patrols at the RZ Unit's treatment center; these little skirmishes were nothing to him.

During the day, he would leave the train station and continue rushing around looking for work.

You couldn't call looking for work either simple or hard. The alterations to Su Qing's body from the double core energy crystal system showed themselves incomparably advantageous. He began to work at the lowest level. His hands were quickly worked raw, though they healed soon after. After a night's sleep, all his little bumps and bruises would be good as new.

Later, at the old brother's invitation, Su Qing and Tu Tutu moved out of the train station and into the small house they had rented locally. This was a single-story house as small as a pigeon coop. With the addition of the two of them, it became even more cramped.

The old brother was surnamed Liu, Liu Daqing. People called his wife Mrs. Liu. They were both kind-hearted people. Su Qing at first said that he would give them half his wages every month for rent, but Liu Daqing absolutely refused. Only after politely declining for ages did he agree to accept a symbolic two hundred yuan each month, and warmheartedly helped Tu Tutu get in contact with the school for migrant workers' children.

So, with his fake identity, the only human on earth to possess a complete energy system, the former young master Su Qing, hid in a corner of this noisy, bustling big city, completely devoting himself to the hard labor of construction work. His days were full of untold hardships, and he also had to take care of a thoughtless little whelp. Su Qing thought that if not for the sturdy double core in his body, he wouldn't have survived.

The grey house in the blue seal base had been one kind of misery, and this was another kind of misery. The former had been frightening and tumultuous; the latter was like a blunt, rusty knife hacking at his flesh every day.

It is said that it takes twenty-one days to form a habit. In less than a month, Su Qing forgot his former pampered days and began to get used to the dirtiest, most tiring life; began to get used to days of not being able to shower, began to get used to lowering his level of consumption day by day, even began to get used to asking Mrs. Liu to mend his coat when it tore.

He also got used to Hu Bugui's voice coming over the communicator every evening, more punctual than the news broadcast. Hu Bugui would tell him what means they had tried and what places they had searched. There were still no leads. Then he would advise him to come back. When Su Qing ignored him, he would tell him about the actions of the other group of people looking for him, even guide him in using his power based on Lu Qingbai's examinations of Su Qing's body.

Su Qing learned that what the double core energy crystal system used was his own energy. While it didn't have a fatal weakness, it wasn't as powerful as the energy the blue seals got from robbing others—for example, his wounds healed at a rate much slower than Chen Lin's; for another example, after secretly experimenting several times, he didn't find that he could turn into a human gale like Jiang Lan.

But there was one thing that he found he could do; when he concentrated all his forces, he could faintly sense the emotions of the people around him.

After a period of time, his boss found that Su Qing could write and reckon—though he had graduated from a second-rate university, he was still a university graduate—so he promoted him to bookkeeper, put him in charge of some accounting and writing work, didn't make him do the heavy work of the construction site anymore, and gave him a raise.

Meanwhile, the nutritional capsules Su Qing had taken from the RZ Unit's treatment center were about to run out. He knew that in principle he needed a great quantity of nutrients to support to his energy system, so he began to worry that soon his wages wouldn't be enough to fill his belly.

But while this problem was still weighing on him, something went wrong.

36

VIRUS

LIU DAQING was a warmhearted person. Bringing Su Qing to live with him after their chance encounter was just one item on the list. He was also very honest. He had never told a lie and judged others on the basis of himself, believing that they wouldn't lie, either. He believed everything anyone said, taking everything seriously.

He didn't have much money, but he was really so foolish that he frequently caught the eyes of swindlers—for example, some taxi drivers got together to gamble near their home and particularly liked to bring him in to play, then trick him out of his money using some extremely low-tech means. Later, Mrs. Liu found out and chased him through eight streets with a frying pan, nearly splitting Liu Daqing's head open before she considered him sufficiently cautioned.

Today, Tu Tutu was once again kept back by the teacher after school let out—because he had put a worm in a female classmate's cup of water. By the time Su Qing had collected the whelp and brought him home, it was already near seven in the evening. He had been worried that the whole family would be waiting, but when he got home, Liu Daqing hadn't come back yet.

Liu Daqing's two children were playing outside, and Mrs. Liu was waiting at the dining table. The food was already getting cold. She looked anxious, but she still welcomed Su Qing. "You're back!"

Su Qing took Tu Tutu firmly by the scruff of the neck and tossed him inside, determined to settle the account with him. He turned back to Mrs. Liu. "Is my big brother not back yet? Should you call him and ask where he is?"

Mrs. Liu frowned. "I called. No one picked up. I don't know if his phone's run out of power or what."

Su Qing gave an “oh” and took no notice. After all, someone like Liu Daqing, who had neither money nor looks, saved other people the trouble of worrying about him. So he calmly turned away to deal with the defiant Tu Tutu. He righteously threatened him: “Little devil, listen carefully. If you make me go to your school and humiliate myself again, I’ll string you up and beat you, do you believe that?”

Tu Tutu said, “Hmph! As if you’d dare!”

Su Qing: “...”

He really didn’t dare. This pudgy little child was soft all over. Su Qing was worried he would slip up and kill him.

He took a deep breath and pointed at Tu Tutu’s nose, scolding: “Putting worms in a little girl’s cup, how impressive! What’s the point of bullying a little chit in your class who weighs less than twenty pounds? Why don’t you go put glue on your two-hundred-pound homeroom teacher’s chair if you’re so great?”

Tu Tutu, confident that justice was on his side, said, “Who says I didn’t put glue on it? He just doesn’t know it was me.”

Su Qing: “...”

He jumped up in exasperation to grab Tu Tutu. “You fucking little whelp, when I’ve dealt with you, you won’t know how many eyes Ma-wangye¹⁷ has...”

Tu Tutu wasn’t about to resign himself to his fate. He began to run. Sadly, his legs were too short, and the space was too cramped. He couldn’t perform. Su Qing captured him before he had run two steps. Su Qing lifted the little devil entirely and suspended him in the air, smacking him on the butt where the flesh was thickest.

Tu Tutu: “Wah—”

Mrs. Liu quickly stepped in to mediate. “Hey, brother, if you have something to say to him, then say it. Why hit the child?”

Seeing that there was someone to support him, Tu Tutu wailed even more lustily. Mrs. Liu’s two children came in from outside and craned their necks to observe the men’s singles match.

Just as the house was turning into chaos, someone burst in breathlessly. Leaning against the door, he yelled, “Sister-in-law, your Lao Liu’s in trouble!”

Su Qing stared. He knew this person—he had worked on the same construction site as him. His name was Xiao Yu. He was on good terms with Liu Daqing, a good fellow.

Seeing them just standing there, Xiao Yu panted for breath, then continued: “Lao Liu got into a fight, I don’t know how. They had backup. There are lots of people, and they’re going to beat him to death!”

Mrs. Liu’s face turned white.

Now Su Qing had no time to match his strength against the little whelp. He tossed Tu Tutu aside and held Mrs. Liu back. “Don’t worry, sister-in-law, I’ll go take a look.”

—In the field of fighting and brawling, Su Qing had tempered himself into an expert in the grey house. Now he thought he had ascended yet another level.

Mrs. Liu tugged at his sleeve. The inside of her head was paste. She had no ideas. Su Qing gave Liu Daqing’s eldest son a push. “Keep watch with your mom and look after your sister.” Then he followed Xiao Yu, and they went to the place where the incident had taken place.

They saw six or seven delinquents with bricks, steel pipes, and other such common weapons beating and kicking Liu Daqing, who was curled into a ball. The one in the lead had a head of hair like a feather duster. As he kicked Liu Daqing, he said, “That’s what you get! That’s what you get!”

Then he felt a hand fall on his shoulder. The feather duster turned his head and saw a delicate-featured young man looking at him expressionlessly. He didn’t react, only said one word: “You...”

Somehow, there was a great change in the universe. Under the influence of gravity, he firmly embraced Mother Earth. When he opened his mouth, he dropped a spare part—a bloody front tooth.

He howled for his mom in pain. The other delinquents exchanged looks, abandoned Liu Daqing, and slowly gathered around Su Qing.

Su Qing’s first experience of feeling like a “superhuman” was granted by the favor of these gentlemen—only in a real fight would his significantly increased reaction speed, strength, and sensitivity be thoroughly reflected. It was very...addictive.

When he found that he could send a person flying with a single kick, he gave a yell like Bruce Lee, making Xiao Yu and Da Liu stare at him, dumbstruck.

Sadly, the extras fighting him weren't very pleased with their roles. They quickly threw in the towel and quit, leaving behind a classic "just you wait" and heading for the hills.

The breath caught in Su Qing's chest from Tu Tutu's antics was at last released. He felt relaxed and alert.

Then he worked out how the fight had come about, and he was frustrated once more—Liu Daqing explained that he had run into an old fortune-telling old immortal and had a long chat that he felt was very inspiring for his life. As money was about to change hands, that feather duster had come along, wanting to knock over the old immortal's stand and calling him an old swindler.

Liu Daqing's personal worship for the old immortal had yet to recede. He had gotten worked up and stepped forward on the "old immortal's" behalf.

Everyone knew what happened next.

"So where's the old immortal?" Xiao Yu asked.

Liu Daqing only then came around. He looked every which way. "Huh? He was just here, why is he gone?"

Xiao Yu and Su Qing exchanged a look. They were both speechless. That breath Su Qing had managed to let out stuck once more. The two of them pressed Liu Daqing between them and went back and forth delivering a reeducation. Just then, Su Qing suddenly heard a faint *click*, like some instrument's mechanism being triggered.

He stopped in his tracks and realized that there was someone behind him. Instantly, for some reason, he had an indescribable feeling, and all the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

Liu Daqing and Xiao Yu both stopped along with him in confusion. Su Qing forced a smile towards them. "I suddenly remembered the foreman telling me to help him out in private with something. You guys go on. Daqing-ge, tell my sister-in-law when you get home not to wait on me to eat. Have a good talk with her, don't make her worry."

Liu Daqing and Xiao Yu didn't doubt him. They turned and left. But Su Qing brought out his fastest speed, quickly chasing in the opposite direction. He had faith that as long as this wasn't a blue seal, the average person would find it very hard to duck his speed.

Then, turning a corner, he saw a tramp in filthy clothes with a little stick in his hand, rifling through a garbage bin. Hearing someone coming, the tramp only calmly looked up and glanced at Su Qing, then lowered his head and slowly searched through the garbage for his food.

Su Qing stopped in his tracks and looked this person up and down suspiciously. He watched the tramp get half a loaf of bread out of the garbage, hold it in his hand, then give him another blank look. Then, dragging his feet, he slowly walked away, as though he had nothing to do with anything.

In a flash, Su Qing suddenly remembered that ever since he had gradually found under Hu Bugui's guidance that he could faintly feel the emotional changes of people around him, his sense of other people's presence had become more and more acute. Even if someone could move as silently as Jiang Lan, he could still sense through their emotions that there was someone nearby.

But this grubby tramp had almost no sense of presence. Su Qing's heart jumped. He blocked the tramp's way. "Wait a minute."

Just then, a weird expression flickered over the tramp's face. Before Su Qing's body could react, he was automatically falling backwards. Then his keen hearing caught the sound of a bullet being ejected from a gun with a silencer.

The "tramp" had pulled a gun out of his coat, which was so dirty you couldn't tell its original color. In the cramped alley, he shot at Su Qing three times in a row.

Su Qing was a good student, but he had just started getting accustomed to his body. And this place was really a little too narrow. There was a sharp pain in his leg, and he fell to his knees.

But the "tramp" wielding the deadly weapon seemed even more panicked than he was. Not caring whether he hit anything, he shot three times, then turned and ran. The blood from Su Qing's leg quickly soaked his pant leg. He desperately tried to prop himself up on the wall and stand—I can't let him get away, he thought, I can't let him...

He stared fixedly at the "tramp," his mind a blank apart from this one thought—Su Qing knew that though the RZ Unit's people were discreetly making inquiries about him, they certainly wouldn't shoot at him. This person was...

Suddenly, the fleeing “tramp” inexplicably fell to the ground. Then he began to convulse. Under Su Qing’s stunned gaze, he stopped moving after a moment. Su Qing raised himself with a great deal of effort. Dragging one foot on the ground, he shuffled over to look. This man was dead.

He stared blankly for a long moment, then turned the body over and opened its coat. He saw that this person was wearing a perfectly ordinary shirt; in a very unobtrusive place on the collar the word “Utopia” was embroidered.

Su Qing searched him and found a palm-sized instrument on him. He tinkered with it for a while and found that this was a surveillance monitor containing a recording of him fighting the delinquents.

Su Qing’s palms were ice-cold. He didn’t think about this man’s bizarre death again. He only thought of one thing—for some reason, this organization was pursuing him, and, like a virus, they were everywhere, forcing their way through every crack.

Time to take the little devil and leave, Su Qing thought.

THE OLD SWINDLER

THEN HE SLOWLY SLID down the wall behind him. His vision went black, and he knew nothing more.

In his haze, Su Qing felt that he seemed to be floating, swaying in the wind. A great wind blew him away somewhere. After a while, he faintly felt that the scenery before his eyes was a little familiar. Looking closely, he found that he had returned home.

His consciousness wasn't especially clear. When he came here, he tensed, thinking that there were still people waiting around to take their chance if he walked into their trap. Why had he run here?

Just then, someone came towards him. Su Qing stared blankly. He was standing in the street. There was no time to dodge—it was the Su family's housekeeper, Xiao Wu.

Su Qing's heart beat faster and faster. He suddenly didn't know what to do. But Xiao Wu only came right towards him and passed him by as though nothing were the matter, just as if she hadn't seen him. Su Qing stared. He stood in the street for a while, then couldn't resist chasing after and tapping Xiao Wu on the shoulder. But his hand went right through her shoulder.

He suddenly had a strange thought—was he dead?

Su Qing ignorantly walked towards his house. He went up the familiar stairs and wanted to push open the door, but his arm went through it. Su Qing realized that he had acquired the skill of passing through walls. He laughed bitterly and went right in.

Su Chengde had always been busy at work, and meals in the Su home were late. Now it was already dark, and Su Chengde was only just sitting down to dinner.

Xiao Wu didn't eat at the same table as him. She laid out the food and went to the kitchen to eat. The dining table was so big that Su Chengde sit-

ting there on his own seemed a little lonely.

Su Qing walked over quietly, slowly approaching Su Chengde, hugging him from behind, the way he had hung off his dad when he had been little. When he had been little, he had thought that Su Chengde was truly massive. He could lift him onto his back with just a slight effort. But now he found that Su Chengde seemed to have shrunk. He appeared to have turned frail.

Then, Su Qing's eyes went around Su Chengde's shoulder towards the table.

After all these years, the old man hadn't improved his lifestyle. If he wasn't going out for social engagements but staying home to eat, he always ate plain and simple fare. He wasn't picky, either. He could happily eat last night's rice casually fried up with some scallion oil.

Su Qing sighed inwardly. Suddenly, he trembled—on the table, apart from Su Chengde's tableware, there were two other sets arranged.

One was for Su Qing's mother; this had been a tacit understanding between father and son. The other...

His eyes burned. He blurted out, "Dad..."

Su Chengde, who was gobbling up his food, paused, looking around suspiciously. He raised his voice and called to the housekeeper: "Xiao Wu, Xiao Wu?"

The housekeeper answered, "Yes, uncle, what is it?"

Su Chengde asked, "I think I heard someone speaking just now. Was it you?"

Xiao Wu paused. "Me? I didn't say anything."

Su Chengde responded in a careworn way, nodded, and didn't pursue it any further. Su Qing sighed and went around the dining table. He wanted to sit down across from Su Chengde.

But just then, it was as if there was a black hole outside the window, dragging him out. Su Qing reached out to grab hold of Su Chengde, who was so close by, but he couldn't resist the enormous attractive force.

"Dad! Dad! Pull me back..." He yelled loudly, but Su Chengde couldn't hear it. Su Chengde only raised his head a little doubtfully. His eyes turned in Su Qing's direction, as though he could faintly sense that something was off. After a while, he thought he was only being oversensitive, shook his head, and continued eating.

Su Qing felt as though he had been swept away by a hurricane. He was in total chaos. Then his body suddenly dropped. He twitched and opened his eyes.

He found himself lying on a hard plank bed. A shriveled little old man was craning his neck to look at him. The old man saw him open his eyes and grinned. His teeth were as crooked as a piece of abstract art, and his face was wrinkled. He looked like a big chrysanthemum. “Hey, lad, you woke up pretty fast.”

Su Qing’s pupils contracted. He turned over and sat up. A strong pain from his leg restrained his movements. He turned his head a little warily to look at the old man with his very alternative get-up, not quite monk and not quite priest.

“Tsk, young people these days, you have less and less idea how to respect the elderly. Look here, I hauled you back here with my poor old bones. I saved you, and here you are blaming me.”

Su Qing followed his gaze and found that his injured leg had been cleaned and bandaged. Before he could relax, he heard the old man continue: “Would you have preferred to lie in that poky corner with that corpse waiting for the police to invite you in for tea?”

Su Qing shivered and stared straight at the old man. “You saw the dead man and still dared to bring me back here? Who are you?”

“Hey, hey.” The old man didn’t answer him. Shaking his head, he calmly got an old-style cigar pipe from the head of the bed—Su Qing had always thought that his dad smoking tobacco from a long-stemmed pipe was enough of a return to ancient ways; he hadn’t expected to meet a cave man smoking a cigar pipe.

The old man puffed away to his own delight, seeming to have no intention of answering him. Su Qing, enduring the pain, grimaced and moved his legs off the bed. He began to examine this room.

At a single look, he discovered the room’s peculiarity—the place wasn’t large, the floor was cement; a peach wood sword hung at the door, and scattered all around were some yellow talismans, the kind drawn with cinnabar. The corner of Su Qing’s eye twitched. He couldn’t help asking, “Listen, what do you do?”

The old man slowly breathed out a mouthful of smoke and calmly said, “Great fortune and minor influences, the five elements of the universe, heav-

en and earth are all at last collected in my heart. I'll reckon you a rough doom, I'll reckon you a romance soon to come, heh-heh, I'm the one who..."

Su Qing gave a disdainful "bleh," put one foot on the ground, and propped himself up. "So you're a fortune-telling old swindler."

The old man fumed with anger and tried to hit Su Qing with the pipe. Su Qing grabbed it and returned it to him with an unfriendly expression. Several ideas spun through his mind. He remembered an issue, then dragged his injured leg over to lean against a big nightstand. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and interrogated: "Hey, old man, let me ask you, were you the one who tricked that idiot Liu Daqing into standing up for you and got him beaten up?"

The old man wagged his head and said, "That charitable person... Ah, I don't mind telling you, I predicted an upcoming calamity for him, and hey, that could be anything—a bit of fisticuffs if his luck was good. Otherwise, it could have been a bloody fate. He and I were brought together by fate. I used the opportunity to change his..."

Su Qing said, "Speak Chinese, don't talk nonsense."

The old man pursed his already very pursed lips. "It was me."

Su Qing gave a cold laugh. "Then you ran for it. Did you come back later to see whether Liu Daqing was dead?"

The old man hunched his shoulders. "That's rubbish, I was seeing whether his inexorable doom had changed..."

Su Qing frowned. "That man...was he really dead?"

The old man kept silent. An unfathomable expression appeared on his withered face. He returned the pipe to his mouth, inhaled deeply, then blew out. Then, after sending a cloud of mist spiraling upward, he finally said quietly, "Completely dead. That man's death is no simple matter. From what I saw, he had simply been scared to death."

Su Qing stared, not really understanding. Then he looked at the fortune-telling old swindler again and calmed down. He thought, There's no difference between this guy talking and farting, what am I doing listening to him?

So he began to shuffle laboriously on his way out. Behind him, the old man slowly continued: "If you go out that door, you will certainly meet a bloody fate. Young man, think thrice before you act."

Su Qing stopped in his tracks and looked back. From this point of view, the old man wreathed in clouds of smoke really did have something of the look of a transcendent being. He couldn't resist asking, "What exactly...do you mean? Why did you save me?"

The old man laughed silently. He was elderly, but his eyes weren't clouded like an ordinary old person's. A faint light still gleamed from his dark eyes. "I know that you have an extraordinary gift, that you possess unique skills. You are unlike other people. And I know that your days have not been easy of late, and there is a calamity in your future, although...it can still be avoided."

At this point he stopped. Seeing Su Qing looking directly at him, he extended a hand and grinned. "Old rules, three hundred to pass through a minor calamity, five hundred for a major. Yours... It's extremely dangerous. Add another two hundred. I only accept cash, no cards, and I don't take checks..."

Su Qing smiled insincerely. "Old immortal, you're so magical—do you know what my surname is? My full name? Where I live? How my mom's health is doing?"

The old man waved a hand and twisted his fingers as though he was the real thing. Shaking his head and wagging his tail, he said, "You're a young man with considerable filial piety. Set your mind at ease. As I see it, your esteemed mother is in the prime of life, blessed with riches and the prospect of living to a ripe old age. This year she ought to get out of doors more, stay in a room with south-facing windows, and she will certainly have good luck and great prosperity, live smoothly and well."

Su Qing said, "Go fuck yourself. My mom is dead."

The old swindler choked, waved a hand, and said, "Right, your esteemed mother has already crossed the Wangchuan and been reborn. The dust of her last life has settled—naturally I can't reckon it. I told her fortune in this life."

Su Qing ignored his nonsense. Something really did occur to him. He took three hundred yuan out of his pocket, considered, then put two hundred back. Under the old swindler's yearning gaze, he gave him the cash. "Go to Liu Daqing's house and bring back a child named Tu Tutu for me. When you come back, I'll give you another hundred."

The old swindler said, "Two!"

Su Qing agreed cheerfully. "Fine, go on."

He thought, The strange thing would be if I gave it to you.

The old swindler worked himself over and even put on a pair of dark glasses, pretending to be blind. He even got a stick from somewhere and went out the door tapping all over the place. Only then did Su Qing, grimacing, kneel on the ground to undo the bandage on his leg—he wasn't sure yet whether the bullet that had hit his leg was still there, and he really didn't trust the old swindler's bandaging technique.

Just then, Hu Bugui's voice suddenly sounded in his ear: "Su Qing, are you in C City?"

Su Qing's hand shook. Hu Bugui didn't hear an answer from him and became urgent: "Did you run into 'them?' Are you injured? What is your situation now?"

There was unmixed urgency in his voice, Su Qing could feel it. He subconsciously raised a hand, but when his fingers lightly touched the false earring, he drew it back again.

Su Qing lowered his eyes and slowly unwrapped the bandage, thinking, Forget it. This time I can provide for myself.

When Su Qing had been dying, Hu Bugui had thought that he had been choked by dust. Now, when Hu Bugui was about to lose his mind from worry, Su Qing thought that he only felt overly responsible and was a little apologetic.

So it would seem that in fact the words "I thought" are the greatest source of trouble in the world.

CATCH YOU LATER IN THE JIANGHU

Tu Tutu abandoned his studies once again, sending thanks up to the heavens. Anyway, he was only six and had just started first grade; it wasn't very urgent. In the end, Su Qing didn't give the old swindler the promised two hundred and even blamed him for trying to eat out of the communal pot. Requiting kindness with enmity, he used force to make the old swindler take him out of C City.

He thought that his words now were more and more full of hot air. His name was false, his identity was false, everything about him was false. When he flapped his lips, nine and a half out of ten sentences were cooked up.

Oh, yes, we forgot to say, the old swindler's name was Ji Pengcheng. He had wandered the jianghu for a long time. He had no rival in deception; there was no swindle he wouldn't stoop to. He could have been called the pinnacle of shamelessness, though when he met Su Qing, he learned the meaning of the new generation excelling the previous one.

That night, they boarded an illegal passenger transport and left, and Su Qing bid farewell to his last normal days, beginning his lengthy wanderings.

The ramshackle bus spat exhaust as it whistled along. A slightly cold night wind leaked in through a window with half a pane of broken glass. Su Qing turned to lean against the window, shielding Tu Tutu from the wind, and for the very last and very first time, he voluntarily contacted Hu Bugui.

Hu Bugui had sent Fang Xiu to search everywhere for traces of Su Qing while he himself quietly kept an eye on the other unknown force searching for him. When he found that they were suddenly moving towards C City, he had realized at once that Su Qing was likely there, and that he had revealed himself.

Hu Bugui had moved like lightning, personally taking people to C City, not anticipating that Su Qing would have another fortuitous encounter and

move too quickly, leaving just as he arrived.

The RZ Unit was extremely efficient. Following the clues, they quickly found the internet cafe owner, Liu Daqing and his family, and even the construction team Su Qing had worked with. But none of these people could tell them where he had gone. Mrs. Liu, however, remembered Ji Pengcheng picking up Tu Tutu. But when they reached his humble home and had a look, only a bloody bandage and some yellow talismans drawn with cinnabar remained; the premises had been vacated.

Su Qing had chosen the right person. This old fox Ji Pengcheng had plenty of means for vanishing off the face of the earth.

Hu Bugui squatted on the floor clutching the bandage Su Qing had removed, staring blankly at the blood-stained places. It was as if there was something blocking his chest.

It seemed that for a very long time, the center of gravity of his life and his work had been concentrated on a single person. At first it had been to find him. When he had found him, Su Qing had insisted on returning, leaving him anxious once more. Later he had been injured, and before his injuries had been fully healed, he had left without saying goodbye.

Hu Bugui remembered how Su Qing had looked the first time he had seen him. The young man wearing just a dark-colored sweater was sitting in a corner of the bar. The dim lighting outlined his features like a drawing. He was extremely beautiful. Quite a few people had their eyes on him, and he took no notice, seeming naturally dim-witted. When someone came over to take advantage of him, he didn't know it, even happily launched into conversation.

Some nerve of Hu Bugui's was struck wrong then. He meddlesomely stepped in to defend him. The young man drunkenly raised his head and smiled foolishly at him, stood up swaying, put an arm on his shoulder, and whistled lewdly. "Nice figure. Are you...coming with me?"

Hu Bugui thought that at the time Su Qing had been like an exquisite but empty bag of skin, and in all that had happened afterwards, it was as if he had watched a soul fill up that bag of skin bit by bit. So vivid, lively, even inspiring respect...and a sudden other indescribable feeling—when one person for some reason always, always thinks of another person for a period of time without stopping, they come to understand that feeling.

Just then, his earpiece sounded. It wasn't the channel for headquarters or for any of the field personnel. In that moment, Hu Bugui's heart actually stopped.

Wherever Su Qing had gotten to this time, the sound coming through the earpiece was very noisy.

Probably because Hu Bugui's aura was so strong, Su Qing never felt entirely natural speaking to him. Like the first time when he had woken up in that little hotel room, he had an impulse to deliver a report.

He gave a dry cough, clearing his slightly tight throat. "Ahem, Captain Hu, you can hear me?"

Hu Bugui quickly stood up and gestured to all the field personnel searching Ji Pengcheng's room attempting to find some clues, making them be quiet.

"Where are you? When did you leave? There's blood on the bandage, where are you hurt?"

Su Qing stared, understanding that in such a short time Hu Bugui had already found his final stop in C City—Ji Pengcheng's home. A little uncertainly, he asked, "So you really *are* looking for me?"

If Su Qing had been in front of him, Hu Bugui thought that he would have punched him. This scoundrel hadn't noticed at all his own importance as the world's only possessor of a double core. So many people with different motives were searching for him all over, and for him it was a casual "you really *are* looking."

Su Qing gave a soft laugh. His voice was actually very pleasant, especially when he laughed softly. It was like a little brush swiping over the heart. He said, "Stop looking, don't hold up your proper business."

The veins stood out on Hu Bugui's temples. "We currently have no way to know how large Utopia is, how many people it has. Do you know how much danger you're in on your own?"

"Oh," said Su Qing, "it's all right, really. I think I can deal with it. In the future there will come a day when even if they don't come to find me, I'll go to find them."

Hu Bugui's heart tightened. "What are you going to do?"

Su Qing was silent for a while. After a long moment, he quietly said, "I'm just calling in on you, and then I'll go. I won't contact you again. If

something happens, I definitely won't reveal any information about the RZ Unit—of course, I don't actually know any information."

He paused, then added, "Thank you for taking care of me for such a long time before."

Hu Bugui clenched his teeth, suddenly unable to speak.

After another moment, as though feeling a little awkward, hemming and hawing, Su Qing said, "Actually...what happened at the grey house, don't take it to heart. It doesn't mean anything to me, really."

As though he was afraid Hu Bugui wouldn't believe him, he continued: "Actually, you were all fulfilling your duty. And back then, I was the one who wanted to go back for Uncle Cheng. It doesn't have much to do with you. Anyway, everything was so confused, there were so many people..."

Su Qing paused once again as though considering what words to use. After a long moment, he inarticulately squeezed out the sentence, "Well...let's say to each his own destiny, life and death depend on heaven."

When he had brought the unconscious Su Qing back to the grey house and watched him go to his death, Chen Lin had concisely used the words "to each his own destiny." Around and around, and now these words had once again come out of Su Qing's mouth, but they carried an unspeakable air of ease and self-mockery, with a precise drop of petty complaint.

"Anyway, thank you very much, Captain Hu. Catch you later in the jianghu."

Then, not waiting for Hu Bugui to respond, Su Qing didn't even turn the communicator off, simply took it out of his ear and threw it out the window. He watched it bounce a few times, burst into a tiny shower of sparks, then disappear into the night.

He turned his head to lean it against the remaining half of the window, letting the wind blow the hair in front of his forehead.

The place where he had been shot in the leg still hurt, but it was already much better. Su Qing knew that his body was repairing itself. After tonight, he would probably be able to manage walking on both legs.

When he remembered himself from a year ago, he suddenly thought that it was like a dream.

When I set out, the willows were stirring. Now I return, the snow falls heavy.¹⁸

He pulled a little blanket up over Tu Tutu, then closed his own eyes. Su Qing thought, he had experienced life and death, poverty, even having nothing. Whatever hardships lay on the road ahead, he could go on ahead—go on...on his own.

Ji Pengcheng, who was already snoring, suddenly opened his eyes and looked at him with a thoughtful expression. Whatever he was thinking, he smiled slightly.

After leaving like this, the three of them traveled for three full years, their steps covering almost the whole country—the coldest places, the hottest places, the most remote places, the most bustling places.

From beginning to end, Ji Pengcheng continued to fight on the front lines of fraud. In an exchange of pointers with his forced disciple, in what could be called the teacher profiting as much as the student, his skills in the arts of trickery ascended another level.

Su Qing went to many places he had never been and began to study all the books he had never studied before with all his might. All around he went through around ten IDs. He used fake diplomas, fake residence registration booklets, fake work histories, and so on... He tried out practically everything that could be faked in this world; he falsified so much that he was about to forget what his own real name was.

He did heavy labor on construction sites; relying on a fake diploma, he wormed his way into a company—even, with the ability to talk to anyone in their own language that he had perfected with Ji Pengcheng, into a division management role, though sadly they had to change places again before he could get his fill of power; he worked as a bodyguard in a night club and got mixed up in drug trafficking during the course of it; he took part in illegal boxing matches and made his living in underground casinos; he acted as an informer for the police, passing a period of time as a sort of bounty hunter; for Su Qing, the most bizarre experience of all was when he, a person who had started out by paying someone else to take his university English exam for him, spent a month as a substitute teacher for New Oriental¹⁹.

The nutritional capsules he had brought from the RZ Unit soon ran out. Su Qing was worried that his eating would scare people, so he ate candy by the handful. He was always crunching on a piece of hard candy—anyway, his current body wasn't readily susceptible to tooth decay.

He put himself through demanding training. In three years, he never slept over an hour and a half in one day. Su Qing didn't want to spend the rest of his life fleeing and hiding. He thought that one day he would have to stand up and go uncover Utopia to get a look at its true face.

In this, Ji Pengcheng unexpectedly helped him quite a bit. From some unorthodox school, he scared up quite a few bizarre props—palm-sized “little stones” to tie on the body that in fact weighed over a hundred pounds; wearing a few of them, Su Qing could spend a day living a life worse than death; or a little taser the size of a flashlight—the old man would sit quietly in a chair drinking tea and press the button, sending Su Qing fleeing all over the yard with bolt after bolt of electricity.

He never got a clear answer about what Ji Pengcheng had done before, and he hadn't worked out why he had saved him—if there wasn't cold hard cash in front of the old fellow, he really would give off a slight air of a lofty individual who saw through the world's scenery.

Tu Tutu was nine now and had grown up looking presentable. He still didn't like going to school. Every time they came to a new place and he had to transfer to another school, he looked pitiful, and every time he quit school on leaving he was cheerful—in school he was a tree-climbing, wall-scrambling troublemaker, though on the other hand he had learned very well from Ji Pengcheng how to imitate a blind person.

After Su Qing hardened his heart and gave him a spanking a few times, he at last developed a bit of reverence for his rather weird guardian. Over the course of three years, most of his Chinese, math and English had actually been taught to him by Su Qing.

At last there came a day when Su Qing saw a news item on the second-hand TV in their temporarily rented little apartment: during the grand opening of a certain commercial building in a certain city, dozens of people suddenly became delirious; they seemed deranged and were suspected of having caught an unknown illness. Experts were being organized to investigate the exact circumstances.

There followed footage of some symptoms of the “patients.”

Su Qing watched and watched, frowning. He knew that his wandering way had reached its end.

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REUNION

JI PENGCHENG held a cane in one hand and led Tu Tutu with the other. When he opened the door and went in, it was already dark. Su Qing had his back to them, holed up bonelessly on the couch. He hadn't turned the lights on. He was playing with a lighter, turning it over and tossing it, lighting it, letting the flame go out. The tiny flame shone on his face, faintly showing his countenance. At a glance, he seemed to have become a different person.

At some point, there had begun to be some inscrutable, indescribable thing about him, a faint smile at the corners of his eyes, that made you think he had reached enlightenment. There was a thick book of newspaper cuttings on the coffee table in front of him. It had evidently been thumbed through many times by its owner. There was wear and tear at the edges and corners.

Tu Tutu didn't notice anything unusual about him. He trotted over to turn on the light and went up to Su Qing, smiling brightly. He reached out his somewhat longer but still pudgy little arms, squeezed his hands into fists, and began to knead Su Qing's legs for him. "Little Uncle, did you have a hard day today?"

Most recently, relying on his tricks and his glib tongue, Su Qing had been working as a reception manager in a hotel. He did it very skillfully, which, when added to the employee benefits and the group of beautiful girls under his leadership, meant that his life was practically comfortable—Su Qing didn't have much of a reaction to Tu Tutu's obvious flattery. He looked up at him absent-mindedly. "What is it? Did you fail another test?"

Tu Tutu: "Heh-heh..."

The little devil shuffled around in his bag and turned up an English test paper as crumpled as used toilet paper. Drooping and lifeless, he put it un-

der Su Qing's nose. What met the eye was a bunch of unsightly scribbles, a group of big red Xs, and a frank 40%.

Tu Tutu said, "Look, Little Uncle, our class's great traitor to the nation foreign language teacher insists on having a parent or guardian sign..."

Su Qing glared, and Tu Tutu stuck out his tongue. "I...I mean that our class's dashing English teacher insists on having a parent or guardian sign. He keeps thinking that I'm not studying well. Actually, he doesn't understand, I'm a patriot, I believe..."

But before Tu Tutu could finish his nonsense, Su Qing left a flourishing signature in the place for the parent or guardian to sign, then waved a hand to send him away. "Go, go, go, do what you're supposed to. Don't stand there offending my eyes."

Tu Tutu rubbed his eyes, simply not daring to believe that his guardian had been so easily dealt with. He was empty inside, feeling that the quibbling arguments he had meticulously prepared had been squandered, his feelings wasted. Ji Pengcheng gave a dry cough, and Tu Tutu came around. He picked up his tragic test paper and dizzily walked away.

Su Qing stared at the book of clippings. There was news of every variety in it. On the surface, there were some items concerning missing people, some concerning infectious diseases, and some about car accidents, train crashes, and so on. The locations were all different, too, spanning the whole world. Many of them were foreign language articles—his advancing foreign language level was connected to collecting these things.

Ji Pengcheng got out his pipe and puffed away, polluting the air quality in the room. After a long time, Su Qing said, "Shifu, I need to go away for a while."

This was a complete non sequitur, but Ji Pengcheng took it as completely natural, as though he had been waiting for him to say this. He nodded indifferently. "Oh, then go ahead. Will you come back?"

Su Qing nodded. "It should be ten to fifteen days. Please watch the child for me."

Ji Pengcheng blew two threads of smoke out of his nostrils, like a big, wizened teapot. His lips were pursed practically down to his chin. Agreeing to take on a difficult task, he said, "Fine. First hand over the boarding expenses. No installments, one-time payment only."

Perhaps it was Su Qing's mistake, but every time he attempted to indirectly talk a bit about proper business with the old man, he would dodge him with twists and turns, putting on an "I understand everything but I don't want to say anything to you" air that made you want to smack him.

So Su Qing simply didn't waste words on him. He pulled out a suitcase from under the couch, stuffed the clipping book on the table into it, looked at Ji Pengcheng, pulled out his wallet, counted out some money and pressed it down with the remote, then left dragging the rolling suitcase.

But Ji Pengcheng, who at his age was still happy to play godson for the sake of cash, for once didn't touch the money on the table. He only took drags on his pipe, gazing at the door where Su Qing had disappeared. Each wrinkle on his face looked as if it had been carved with a knife. He looked a little like he was keeping a secret.

In three years, Su Qing had never given up pursuing Utopia's tracks. All his free time every day was given over to newspapers—looking for clues in them, then repeatedly chewing over and pondering the clues.

In the blue seal base with the grey house, apart from the blue seals and the captured grey seals, all the staff had been ordinary humans. And Chen Lin had confirmed that the blue seals were also externally stimulated. Su Qing had at first been unable to understand, since blue seals were such awesome and impressive beings, why didn't the Utopia personnel turn themselves into blue seals, too? At least then they could have an advantage during their squabbles with the RZ Unit.

Until he had been in the hospital and learned from Lu Qingbai what had become of Chen Lin. Lu Qingbai believed that this rebellious figure had most likely already gone to the Western Paradise to pay his respects to the Buddha. Utopia had treated them well, so why would Chen Lin turn traitor?

Later Su Qing understood that there were probably two reasons. One was that Chen Lin himself was a nasty piece of work, an ingrate who couldn't develop a sense of loyalty. The other reason was that Utopia probably didn't see the blue seals as "people" at all. In their eyes, the blue seals could very well be the same as the grey seals, only experiments with a little more freedom.

Starting three years ago, when the blue seal base where Su Qing had been located had been rooted out with his support, no one knew where the

blue seals and Utopia elites who had been moved at the time had gone. Xu Ruchong's guess had been that there was more than one blue seal base in the world, and they had probably been moved to another place. Su Qing meanwhile had secretly investigated the building where Chen Lin had taken him—it seemed that it had been Chen Lin's private property before, but later it had fallen through for no apparent reason. Now it had turned into a household appliance market.

They seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth overnight.

But Su Qing had just seen a familiar face on the news—Zhao Yifei.

As the only person dead in that incident of unknown cause, she had been accorded a frame. Su Qing of course knew that after that major battle, the RZ Unit had instituted special protections for all the surviving grey seals. At need they would even clear their personal records and identities and send people to guard them. Reasonably speaking, the whole process would be carried out by the government and ought to be very strict.

But...why was Zhao Yifei dead?

This was the first time the blue seals had appeared so openly in the eyes of the public. Su Qing couldn't work out what change had taken place, but for this matter to be reported, even if to the majority of city residents it was only an immaterial bit of wind blowing past their ears, it still had to have been tacitly approved by the government.

Su Qing decided to personally go take a look. He put on a pair of plain glass spectacles and a leisure suit and boarded a plane that very night, looking like a presentable young genius. Even if someone who knew him had been standing in front of him, they would still have had a hard time discovering who this young man with a completely altered manner was.

Su Qing had developed skills like a chameleon's—by studying under Ji Pengcheng.

He found a hotel to stay at a block away from the site of the incident. He got up first thing the next morning and looked in the mirror. He didn't feel easy, so he did a bit of tinkering—rubbed quite a bit of pomade into his hair and combed it back, making it shiny and glistening, like a spokesman for China National Petroleum. Then he altered the corners of his eyes a little, pasted himself a laugh line and bags under his eyes. He tried a smile and found that his lips were quite naturally crooked, and his eyes were quite naturally dull. Then he concentrated the extremely high density “burden

stones” Ji Pengcheng had scared up around his waist and added a bit of cushioning, and his midsection became “middle-aged,” looking like a middle-aged man who had filled out with age.

The young genius had turned “middle-aged”...and not so genius.

He took out a small camera and put it on his back. Taking his phone in hand, he called his secretary. Under the fine-sounding name of arranging her work, he said that he had had the sudden idea of going out of town to a place where the hotel business was good and paying a visit to learn from their example. Then he added that it was “at my own expense,” using his own annual leave time.

Probably even the boss wouldn’t have anything to say to that.

In the afternoon, like an ordinary sightseer, Su Qing talked a lot of nonsense to the secretary about how to arrange the work while he was away while holding the camera in one hand and taking pictures of everything.

He split his mind into countless parts. Though he only went around some hotels in the vicinity, he worked out the circumstances of the location where the incident had taken place. Su Qing knew that quite a few of the RZ Unit’s people were hiding here. For example, the girl “handing out flyers” on the corner wasn’t especially professional, very indifferent towards passing pedestrians. The majority of the people who passed before her eyes were not honored with one of her flyers. Only when she suddenly began nervously keeping an eye on a certain person would she shove a few flyers at passersby in an obvious attempt at a cover-up. Then, when the crisis had passed, she would go back to looking around vacantly, absent-minded.

Su Qing was inwardly amused, but it didn’t show on his face. After hanging around for a while, he went into a restaurant.

As soon as he walked in, he could determine that there were also quite a few people in this restaurant who hadn’t come to eat—both the RZ Unit and Utopia, when having dealings with blue seals, would carry special blocking equipment to prevent the blue seals from absorbing their emotions.

Su Qing’s perception of this blocker was especially clear. For instance, as soon as he walked in, he felt a weird “quiet.” Not that there were few people or that none of the people eating were conversing—at a glance, they seemed like ordinary people, eating and drinking, dating and talking nonsense. But people’s mental activity gave Su Qing a sense of faint noise like mosquitoes

and flies buzzing. When he was already used to this noise, if it was gone, it would seem particularly strange.

Su Qing chose a place by the window and sat down, glancing all around the restaurant with feigned indifference, inwardly calculating how many of these brightly-dressed men and women were from the RZ Unit and whether any Utopia personnel would have wormed their way in.

Based on Su Qing's understanding of this mysterious organization, under ordinary circumstances, they wouldn't allow the blue seals to conduct such a high-profile "hunt." Had they been careless this time, or had they deliberately allowed this blue seal to go out to conduct some new experiment?

Countless thoughts revolved through his mind, but at the same time he was idling. As he ate, he put a small netbook on the table and began to *click-clack* away, sending e-mails, like a businessman who was busy at work.

Just then, a man with bright red eyes walked in through the door. Su Qing's eyes hidden behind the plain glass spectacles flashed. Looking in something reflective, he carefully looked the man over—this man's eyes were bloodshot, his eyeballs spinning extremely fast, his breathing heavy, all his emotions in a chaotic state, his mind extremely unstable. If you had taken off his shirt, you would have seen the blue seal on his shoulder turned dim.

A typical example of the symptoms of needing a "cleaning."

But he didn't recognize this person. Was he a blue seal who had been developed later, or did he come from another base?

Su Qing sipped his coffee. When this man like a time bomb was still five steps away from him, he was typing on the keyboard as though nothing were the matter, sending an e-mail to a beverage supplier. Before a notice of receipt for the e-mail had come up, someone suddenly came hurtling over and pressed Su Qing down. This person said into his ear, "Don't be afraid, sir, we're the police, pursuing a wanted criminal."

Out of the corner of his eye, Su Qing glimpsed a few people sitting in different corners stand up. The restaurant became a mess. There were even gunshots. But these were the RZ Unit's elites, after all. The dust settled after a moment. The suspected blue seal was quickly brought under control. In others' eyes, he settled down when he was hit on the back of the head by a "plainclothesman," but Su Qing saw a vague electric net floating through the air—even though the thing was five steps way, it still gave him a faint feeling of chest pain. Had the RZ Unit's equipment gone up a grade?

Then his attention rapidly shifted over to a man in a corner by the bathroom door. In the whole restaurant, Su Qing thought, he was the only one carrying a blocker who didn't give him a sense of belonging to the RZ Unit.

The man holding him down finally let go. In a "sincere" and apologetic tone, he said, "Sorry, a police ambush needs to be concealed. We had no go-between."

Just as though what he was saying was the truth.

Su Qing put on a shaking, scared-silly look and raised his head. Then he really did go blank... This person passing himself off as a policeman, who didn't even dare to meet his eyes when he lied, was Hu Bugui.

40

HUNTER

A THOUSAND shouted “Motherfucker!”s couldn’t express the bitterness of Su Qing’s emotions at this moment. He thought, Shit, Heaven’s landed me in it!

Why wasn’t the person in front of him that girl who could be seen through even while handing out flyers? Why wasn’t it a special policeman who couldn’t do anything but charge under his boss’s orders? Why wasn’t it that Xu Ruchong, with his glasses like the bottoms of bottles?

After telling his lie, Hu Bugui was no longer uneasy. He reached out to pick up the fake uncle whose arm he was kneeling on. He examined him out of professional habit, his eyes like a demon-reflecting mirror, sending out X-rays.

Then, amid this wealth of mental activity, Su Qing performed an action. He carefully stood up, but he didn’t take Hu Bugui’s hand. Instead he climbed up his arm. He did it by stages. First he raised his head, opening a pair of frightened and panicked eyes wide and looking towards the captured blue seal. When he looked over and found there was nothing the matter, he patted himself on the chest, but was still in no hurry to stand up. Instead he craned his neck, putting on an appearance of excited observation.

“Oh, hey, tsk-tsk...” He turned his profile, carefully altered to give the impression of age, towards Hu Bugui, and said in Mandarin thickened with a realistic southern accent, “In broad daylight! I was scared to death.”

Hu Bugui frowned, thoughtfully looking this “middle-aged man” up and down. This man...really looked like *him*.

From the corner of his eye, Su Qing saw Hu Bugui’s X-ray eyes still scanning him, so he disgustedly patted dust off his suit pants, not forgetting to look up and sneak glances to watch the fun, until the RZ Unit and the arrested blue seal had gone.

Su Qing saw the man he had gotten his eye on put his head down and concentrate on his food. He thought, I need to think of a way to throw off this venerable great Buddha.

So he turned with a smile that was both philistine and scrutinizing, warmly extending a hand towards Hu Bugui. “You’re a policeman? An honor, an honor. My nephew just graduated from the police academy this year and doesn’t know where to go to look for work. Your job looks pretty dangerous to me.”

Hu Bugui hesitantly shook hands with him and smelled the nose-stinging fake cologne scent at his sleeve. Come summer, the mosquitoes probably wouldn’t come near him.

Su Qing searched and searched through his pockets, finally turning up a very flashy business card case and picking a card out to give to Hu Bugui. Hu Bugui felt an even thicker scent assault his nostrils. He sniffed, feeling that his sense of smell was about to give out, a little dizzy from the fumes.

The title on the card was “Fresh Springs Hotel General Manager Li Meng.” It was edged in gold, as though giving a demonstration of what it meant to be “golden on the outside, rotten on the inside.”

Hu Bugui felt it would be awkward not to take it, but he quietly took a step back. When he stepped back, Su Qing shuffled forward, blinking dead-fish eyes not as wide as his eye bags. With an unspeakable perverse excitement, pointing to the door, he asked in a low voice, “That man just now, what crime did he commit?”

Hu Bugui’s eyes were still roving over Su Qing’s face. His initial suspicion at last slowly vanished. He felt that this man’s features only had a faint resemblance to Su Qing’s. The temperament and age were entirely inconsistent—if you said that age could be faked, then there was still...

Captain Hu watched the man grin. The smile twisted his mouth, making him look even more vulgar.

Why would he think that this old man looked like him? Hu Bugui inwardly gave a self-mocking bitter laugh.

In Hu Bugui’s mind, Su Qing always had that slightly underripe youthful look—features out of a painting, lively, beautiful, stubborn, and strong. Perhaps Hu Bugui didn’t really understand Su Qing. During their brief encounter and lengthy separation, he had only ever seen Su Qing’s merits. And these imagined merits had slowly fermented over the course of three

long years of pursuit and deep-rooted guilt, creating an almost illusory image.

Su Qing may not have thoroughly studied anything else while following Ji Pengcheng, but he had successfully studied how to read people's expressions. He noticed at once that Hu Bugui's eyes had shifted away from his face and understood that whatever he had suspected, he was hesitating now. So he redoubled his efforts. Pretending not to notice that Hu Bugui was backing away, he deliberately drew another step closer and lowered his voice ever further. "Is he a drug dealer, murderer, or...heh-heh, you know, the rather shameless kind of offender..."

Before he had finished this sentence, Hu Bugui stiffly gave him a perfunctory "I have something to see to" and hurriedly left.

Su Qing waved behind him. "Hey, don't go, I wasn't done talking!" Seeing Hu Bugui speed up when he heard this, he put on a regretful expression. Continuing to shake his head and click his tongue, he returned to his seat, turned to a server, and began to yell stridently: "Hey, what's up with your service here? Why hasn't the soup I ordered been brought out yet? I'm in a hurry, you know!"

"I'm sorry, sir, because there was just..."

"I don't want to hear excuses. Get me your manager. I'm not like you people, you understand? Do you know how much money you're losing me by holding me up for just one minute?"

When Hu Bugui reached the door, he could still hear the man's unsatisfied voice cursing and scolding. He paused slightly at the door and finally shut the reflective device in his hand and stuffed it back into his pocket—if this person had only been pretending, then under ordinary circumstances he would have relaxed when Hu Bugui had turned his back on him to leave. A different expression would have appeared on his face.

But it hadn't happened. If... Then his performance was flawless.

If a person wants to be invisible in the art of trickery, he must first trick himself.

Su Qing understood this very well, so when he was "Li Meng," he wouldn't use another person's body language. At the same time, he also knew that Hu Bugui was a very attentive person. He was attentive in taking care of people, and attentive in carrying out a mission. Though he had been

sent running by the fumes, as long as there was still a trace of suspicion in his mind, he would leave someone behind to keep watch.

Su Qing played the game up to the hilt, not sparing any efforts. At last, when the restaurant's owner finally appeared to intervene, he ate his meal for free and left satisfied.

He had chosen his timing perfectly, leaving right on the heels of the man who had been eating in the corner.

The man who had been sitting in the corner looked around thirty, with a crewcut and a forgettable ordinary face. He was wearing an equally ordinary outfit of a white shirt and slacks. Blending into the crowd, he was a drop of water.

He noticed the man who left right after him—the fuss Su Qing had made to get his free meal had been so noticeable that no one in the restaurant could help hearing it.

Because of his special identity, the crewcut was always wary of people who approached him, whether deliberately or not. As he walked, he used all kinds of things to observe the man who walked behind him for a time. Luckily, after only two red lights, the man made a phone call and walked impatiently into a big store.

The crewcut breathed a sigh of relief and continued walking towards the place he had arranged with his companions. Ten minutes later, his nerves tensed again, because a filthy tramp suddenly rolled up at his feet. From the look on his face, he probably wasn't all there. Smiling and drooling, he mumbled, "Give a little, give a little."

The crewcut frowned, planning to go around him, but the tramp followed him, persistently muttering, "Give a little, give a little." He even reached out a grimy paw to grab his pant leg.

The crewcut got annoyed and extended a leg to kick him away. "Move, get out of my way."

The tramp didn't dare to pester him any more, curling up by the wall. Sobbing sounds came from his throat, and he trembled as he watched the crewcut walk away from him.

After a while, the tramp stood up and walked down the street, still stupid and crazy, waving his arms and singing some incomprehensible Martian song with occasionally a quiet "Move, get out of my way" mixed in. Pedestrians avoided him as they walked, assuming he was only having a fit. No

one noticed that after repeating this sentence three or four times, his voice was exactly the same as the crewcut's.

After shaking off the tramp, the crewcut sped up. A faint bad feeling rose in his heart. The sky gradually darkened, and the streetlamps lit up one by one. He quickly walked a whole block, passing without leave through a park in the city center. He bought a cup of warm orange juice and a newspaper, then sat on a stone bench in the depths of some manmade woods, drinking and reading, pretending to be carefree and content. But if you examined him closely, you would find that the surface of the orange juice in his hand was uneven.

He sat there long enough to go through the whole thick newspaper. It was already deep night, and stars covered the sky. The visitors strolling through the park had all gone home, never mind in his remote location.

The crewcut confirmed one final time that there was no one around, then bent down and pulled a silver cellphone out from under the seat. He opened the cover, put a call through, then opened his mouth and said, "I've arrived..."

His voice came to an abrupt halt—the power indicator on the altered cellphone suddenly began to spin wildly, practically like an electric fan.

Before the crewcut could work out the source of the danger, he blacked out and knew nothing more.

Su Qing, having gone from vulgar uncle to tramp, had once again resumed his "young genius" appearance from the plane. The moment the phone fell, he scooped it up, looked down at the crewcut, whom he had knocked out, and brought a tiny recording device close to the speaker with his other hand. "I ran into some trouble on the way. It's been resolved."

The imitated voice sounded extremely like the original.

The person on the phone said, "What happened?"

Su Qing considered, then ambivalently said, "He...was too easily caught."

The answer came: "No problem, he doesn't know anything. He's already lost his mind. As expected, the blue seals do in fact have a limit. This life form is still imperfect."

Su Qing laughed. "I think this life form's imperfections aren't only in this aspect, eh?"

“True enough—be careful. Number 3’s death has been reported. This is very delicate. It seems that the RZ Unit’s recent operations have been running wild.”

Su Qing realized at once that “Number 3” must mean Zhao Yifei. So he took a breath and quietly asked, “What do you think...is the right next step to take?”

The other side was a little surprised. “What’s wrong, 6086? Why would you suddenly ask such a question?”

As soon as Su Qing heard this form of address and this tone, he immediately understood that this Utopia member was only an errand boy. He didn’t have the authority to question the “higher powers.” So he softened his voice. “I just have a bad feeling. Maybe it’s that there are too many of the RZ Unit’s people. I’m feeling a little stressed.”

“No need for you to overthink it. Come back and assist in taking care of Number 4. It will be hard to act over there, but he’s much more important than Number 3. No matter what, he can’t be allowed to live, you understand? Leave the experiment for now.”

Su Qing paused for a moment, then hesitantly said, “...OK.”

Then he hung up the phone, lowered his head, and looked expressionlessly at the Utopia member he had knocked out. He bent over, pulled a palm-length dagger from his pant leg, slowly squatted down, and brought the blade up to the crewcut’s neck.

In that instant, no one knew what he was thinking under his calm, unruffled expression.

After a long moment, Su Qing sighed, put the dagger away, then stripped off the Utopia member’s clothes, searched him several times, confiscated all the assorted instruments scattered on him, confirmed that there was no danger, then tied him up, naked.

Then he pulled out a crumpled napkin, drew a route map on it, and wrapped up the recorder and the phone he had seized.

The next day, these things were delivered by a little boy around ten years old into the hands of the young lady still pretending to hand out flyers. Su Qing himself, meanwhile, had boarded a plane and left that same night—he thought he knew who “Number 4” was.

41

LYING LOW

QIN LUO looked at the bulging kraft paper pouch, looked at the little boy in front of her blinking his big eyes, stared blankly, then said in a whisper, “For...for me?”

This young lady was one of the RZ Unit’s core field agents. She was tall and wore her hair in a high ponytail. When it came time to pull a gun, she seemed capable and dashing, like one of Charlie’s Angels. But when she was speaking with others, she always seemed lacking in self-confidence. Her voice was weak, and she had trouble communicating with strangers. Lu Qingbai said she had social anxiety. The symptoms were especially obvious when faced with the opposite sex—even if the member of the opposite sex in front of her wasn’t tall enough to reach her chest.

The little boy had his cap on crooked and was dressed up like a little punk. He was chewing a piece of gum. Like a little grown-up, he said, “I don’t know, a guy gave it to me. It must be a love letter.”

Qin Luo’s face flushed red at once. Her skin was pale. Like this, she looked as though she had been boiled. However, while social anxiety was an impediment, Qin Luo knew perfectly well that she was on duty now, and this was likely to be important evidence, so she took it. The little boy extended a hand and gave her a look that said “you get me.”

Qin Luo looked back at him. When they had been staring at each other for an age, the little boy finally realized that this woman had grown up under a rock. Her thoughts were on a completely different wavelength from his. So he puffed out his chest and said, “Sister, I’m tired from running errands. Where’s my service fee?”

Only then did Qin Luo see the light. Flustered and sweating, she rummaged around for her purse. Just then, a hand reached over and put twenty yuan into the little boy’s outstretched hand. The little devil clicked his

tongue and thought, What, are you sending off a beggar? But when he looked up, he saw the strapping Captain Hu Bugui standing there looking grave. So he stuck out his tongue, dejectedly took the money, and went, thinking, Good grief, is he catching her cheating?

Hu Bugui took the pouch and put it to his ear, listening to a moment. He got out a detector and performed a simple inspection through the pouch. He found that it didn't seem to contain any dangerous articles, then tore it open. When he had heard what there was to hear and read what there was to read, his expression changed.

“It's him!”

Qin Luo watched in bewilderment as their captain suddenly said this sentence, then turned and left, quickly ordering, “Tell everyone to withdraw from this street. Contact Cheng Weizhi, ASAP! Block communications, say it's a routine safety check, find a...”

At this point, Hu Bugui paused. Even though Qin Luo couldn't be considered especially good at reading expressions, she could still tell he wasn't in a very good mood. After a long moment, she heard him say, “Forget it, no need, if he gave you these things, he's definitely gone on ahead.”

His steps were long. Qin Luo had to trot to keep up. Hu Bugui had his head slightly lowered, his eyes watching the ground. He seemed to be clenching his teeth. His profile had a tense, fierce arc. Then Qin Luo heard Hu Bugui suddenly sigh. She nearly thought she had heard wrong. She turned her head in astonishment, then heard him almost inaudibly say, “I've actually already seen him...”

Though Su Qing's performance in the restaurant had been flawless, with Hu Bugui's principle of it being better to get the wrong person than to miss a chance, after he had left, he had sent two RZ Unit members to follow him. But that night, Hu Bugui had received a report saying that they had lost him. Then he had realized that something was wrong.

In his mind, Hu Bugui again and again reviewed the whole course of encountering that person, then letting him slip out right from under his nose again. He thought of that “middle-aged man”'s every look, every movement, but he couldn't think of how Su Qing had done it. He also couldn't think of where Su Qing had gone during these three short years and what he had experienced.

The RZ Unit's efficiency in maneuvering was very high. That very night, there was a great shift in the universe, and they moved from one city to another. Xue Xiaolu very efficiently contacted Cheng Weizhi. Given the emergency situation, they brought father and son directly to the RZ Unit headquarters.

Hu Bugui, not stopping for a moment, returned with Qin Luo. Before he had taken a sip of water, he strode into the conference room, startling Cheng Ge, who was curled up on the couch putting together a jigsaw puzzle. He opened his mouth and cried, "Ah-ah!", nearly bursting into tears. Xue Xiaolu quickly brought out her angelic smile and patted him on the back to comfort him.

Hu Bugui nodded to Cheng Weizhi and sat down solidly next to the conference table. "Professor Cheng, let's make a long story short. Based on reliable inside information, I believe that you are currently in danger."

Cheng Weizhi opened his mouth, a little stunned at this sudden attack.

Just then, Fang Xiu also came through the door. His eyes swept the conference room as though confirming that there were no outsiders. Then he cautiously got out a thin folder and put it on the table. He looked at Hu Bugui, his expression a little solemn.

Hu Bugui nodded to him, and Fang Xiu began: "I'll go first."

He opened the folder. The topmost file was Su Qing's. In the photo, he was still twenty-four years old, wearing an insolent smile. Fang Xiu picked his file out and set it aside. "Three years ago, we breached a blue seal base in one fell swoop, obtaining a considerable amount of valuable information from it. Working with our comrades in the technological department, in recent years, we have been specially targeting them, inventing a great deal of new assistive tools. You could say that it has allowed us to take the initiative, and 'Utopia' has been in hibernation all this time."

He paused and looked at Cheng Weizhi. A nervous atmosphere spread through the conference room. Only Cheng Ge wasn't affected. His intelligence was very low. He had practically no way to live on his own. But his memory for pictures exceeded that of the average person. In hardly any time at all, he had put the several-thousand piece-jigsaw puzzle together. Then he looked at Xue Xiaolu with a crooked, happy smile, making Xue Xiaolu find him another box and reward him with a bag of chips.

Fang Xiu continued: "At that time, there were nine surviving grey seals, including one who was seriously injured and died on the way when rescue efforts failed. We later simulated the blue seal activator, attempting to manufacture another miracle, but for some reason, likely because some unknown condition was absent, the same miracle did not occur again. So far, of the eight rescued grey seals, apart from Su Qing and Tu Tutu, who went missing three years ago and whose whereabouts are currently unknown..."

"What?" Cheng Weizhi nearly stood up.

Hu Bugui waved a hand. "You can't say their whereabouts are unknown. I saw him two days ago. He's still safe now. If we can't find him, Utopia can't find him, either."

Fang Xiu cleared his throat and opened the next file, continuing the topic under discussion. "Of the remaining five, apart from you, Professor Cheng, two were severely mentally traumatized and may never recover. They are currently still in the RZ Unit's medical treatment center. The remaining three..."

Fang Xiu lined up the three remaining files on the conference table. Zhao Yifei's was in the center. Under her picture was a glaring red word: "Deceased."

The short-haired girl in the photograph was obstinately pursing her lips as though having a fit of pique against someone.

Cheng Weizhi slowly extended a hand and picked up Zhao Yifei's file. "This young lady, she...she..."

"Not only her," said Fang Xiu. "Of the other two, one has disappeared, and the other is dead. Cause of death is suicide. At present we can't eliminate the possibility that the cause was the psychological trauma from the energy crystal. But the three guardians of the person who disappeared all died under mysterious circumstances. We have yet to discover their causes of death."

Hu Bugui took out the recording device Su Qing had sent him and played the recording. When it ended, for a full half a minute, no one in the whole conference room spoke. After an age, Hu Bugui raised his head. "We have reason to believe that this 'Number 4' is you."

Cheng Weizhi looked up at him in confusion.

Xu Ruchong, hugging a notebook and leaning against the wall, suddenly spoke: "Teacher, why don't you come stay at headquarters with your son?"

When he had spoken, he looked at Hu Bugui and saw that he had no intention of opposing him. Then he pointed at the ceiling and quietly said, “They’ve suddenly become active after lying low for three years. We suspect...that it’s likely we have an internal problem.”

Cheng Weizhi looked at him in disbelief, simply thinking that nowhere in the world was safe. He glanced anxiously at Cheng Ge. The latter was harmlessly holding the completed puzzle. He looked at it for a while, then turned it over completely and began to chew on a puzzle piece.

Xue Xiaolu quickly reached out to rescue the piece and used a lollipop to plug his mouth. Cheng Weizhi sighed. “I just want...just want to live without anxiety for a few days.”

Xu Ruchong’s tail drooped as though he had done something wrong. “Teacher, I’m sorry.”

Cheng Weizhi sighed again, his eyes roaming over the conference room for a while. Then they fell on Su Qing’s photograph. Pointing to the file, he asked, “What about that child? Will he be in danger?”

Hu Bugui raised his head, his eyes meeting Cheng Weizhi’s directly. His voice wasn’t loud, but it extremely firm as he said, “We’re going to find him.”

Cheng Weizhi remained at the RZ Unit headquarters. That afternoon, Hu Bugui took a call from the RZ Unit’s direct superior, General Xiong, asking him to protect at any cost the survivors from the blue seal base. Hu Bugui hung up the phone and tilted his head back to stare emptily at the ceiling for a while. Then he took a photograph from the middle section of his desk. It was the very photograph from Su Qing’s file. At some point, he had made a copy and furtively hidden it in his desk.

Time hadn’t made this person fade from his life; instead, it had left a deep, deep gouge.

At this moment, he didn’t know yet that the person they were turning over heaven and earth to find was exhausting his resources planning to infiltrate the RZ Unit headquarters.

Su Qing guessed that when Hu Bugui received his tip, he would take Professor Cheng to the headquarters in the interest of safety. But he had a similar guess to the RZ Unit’s members—that there was an enemy agent within the military. Of course, infiltrating the RZ Unit headquarters was no easy mission, because that would be Utopia’s goal as well.

Su Qing urgently returned, threw some money at Ji Pengcheng, and asked him to take care of Tu Tutu for a while longer. He quit “Li Meng”’s job and traveled through the night to the location of the RZ Unit headquarters.

He found a hotel to stay at for one night, slept a full five hours, felt that he was alert and awake, then cautiously began to plan.

42

CHAMELEON

THE NEXT DAY, Su Qing cautiously went through three disguises as he covered the area, quietly drawing a mental map.

Over the years, it had become a habit for him to first plan a line of retreat before doing anything. Then he walked into a little alley, carrying an express delivery food box, wearing a deliveryman's uniform with the cap brim pulled low. He walked to the very end of the little alley. In the absolute most unobtrusive corner, there was a painted little arrow with an outline around it like a chalk outline of a corpse.

Su Qing fixed his eyes on the "deceased" little arrow and smiled. He bent and put down the box of food, stretched, stuck earbuds in his ears, put on music that would have raised the dead, and went off humming.

The next day he came back again carrying another box of food. He found that the box he had left the day before was empty. The chicken legs inside had been gnawed clean; only a few chicken bones remained. For some reason, there was a filthy little stray dog tied to a garbage bin nearby. It was stretching its neck, struggling to get at the chicken bones.

Su Qing, not minding the filth, lifted the stray dog. It was this dog's habit to tuck its tail between its legs and seek survival. It fawningly wagged its listless tail at him and stuck out its nose to rub Su Qing's palm.

Su Qing looked down, felt around on the stray dog's belly, and as expected pulled a small roll of paper out from its filthy long fur. There was a crooked flower drawn on it.

Su Qing put on a cunning smile, expressing his pleasure. He kicked away the empty food box from the day before. The little dog began to bark anxiously. Su Qing patted it on the head. "Hush, you can't eat that. If you crunch up the bones and swallow them, they might scrape your guts."

Then he took out a piece of pork rib from the food box and tossed it aside. He put the food box in a place where the dog couldn't reach it and took a piece of paper from his pocket, hiding it under the dog's belly. He took a look at the dog waving its tail like a fan, then turned and left.

In his years of roving with Ji Pengcheng, Su Qing had become acquainted with the ways all the people who, like him, had no identities survived on the fringes of the cities. Each circle had its own rules—for example, this framed arrow was in reality a sign left by one of the city's tramps indicating that he could sell information to the best of his ability. Eating Su Qing's food and replying with this flower meant "we can discuss business."

As a "superior person," Cheng Weizhi had instructed him in the conduct of a person with reason and conscience. Ji Pengcheng had taken him to see all the walks of life and all the conditions of the world.

Most people in this world live within a comparatively narrow circle—students live the life of a student, office workers live the life of an office worker; they have habitual routes and lines of thought. But Su Qing and these others were different. None of them had a so-called "societal role." They could change to fit all kinds of societal roles. They were chameleons, swindlers.

Each day after this, Su Qing brought a box of food, and waiting for him would be the empty box from the day before. But he didn't encounter the stray dog again. This lasted half a month. Su Qing wasn't in a rush, though. He knew that this couldn't be rushed, and he had more than one channel for gathering information. The other channels were in the process of arranging themselves.

Apart from this, he also took some time to make himself a false identity. A "false identity" was different from changing clothes and becoming a different person while on the run. It required a complete conception and character.

His current name was "Lu Dacheng." Male, forties, a little gossipy, an easy-going and likable fat guy, a former truck driver who had had no choice put to start picking up work all over since his son had gone to university. His family background was clean. He had been born into a traditional blue-collar household and graduated from a technical college. His driving was excellent. He had always made his living on the road.

Su Qing didn't dare to get sloppy this time. Unlike last time, he didn't hurriedly throw something together. He set about his disguise very diligently,

even changing his speaking voice completely, putting together this Lu Dacheng's whole life.

Sometimes when he made a false identity, he felt he was accomplishing a work of art. Compared to the very start, when he had taken along the little baggage and gone to the internet cafe to seize his chance, bought a false ID that was full of holes, now, when he had improved his technique bit by bit with Ji Pengcheng, his present level could be called the perfection of his art.

This imaginary person's background and personality, all the mishaps in his life, his bad habits, his pet peeves, his distinguishing characteristics and catchphrases, his subconscious movements, what his ID and diploma looked like—he took each and every one of these things into consideration.

He preferred coming up with fairly elderly characters, because several decades back, technology hadn't been as developed as it was now. Many databases were incomplete, and filed records were hard to trace.

Of course, over time, these imaginary characters had a negative impact on him. For example, if he used a single identity too long, when he had to change it again, he wouldn't quite be able figure out who he was for a time.

At these times, his reactions would be very slow. When someone spoke to him, it would take him an age to come around. He would constantly chew candy. It was a little like a computer crashing from an overloaded CPU. His mood would also be very bad. Most of the time he could still control himself. He would know there was a problem, so he would keep his head down in contemplation. Sometimes he really couldn't control himself and would be a little irascible. At these times, Tu Tutu and Ji Pengcheng knew from experience to stay far away from him.

At last, when "Lu Dacheng" had established his connections and the people around him were used to the presence of this truck driver and took him as an acquaintance, as though he had been in their circle from the start, Su Qing once again saw that stray dog tied to the garbage bin.

Though Su Qing had completely changed his appearance, covering himself in machine oil scent, appearing entirely like a truck driver who spent all his time on the road, this little animal seemed to still recognize him as a benefactor who had given it food. As soon as it saw him, it began to wildly shake its head and wag its tail, forcing a fawning expression onto its blackened, filthy dog's face.

Su Qing patted the dog on the head, felt around under the dog's belly, and again turned up a small piece of paper. This time there wasn't a flower on it. There was a route map, with a bunch of symbols under it, incomprehensible to ordinary people, that looked something like chatspeak. But Su Qing had long ago left the category of ordinary person. He had no trouble reading it. After he scanned it, he nodded. His mood was good. He shared a piece of pork rib with this "messenger" dog, then got out another piece of paper, put it with a stack of bills, and tied it back under the dog's belly.

After a number of exchanges with this "arrow," whom he had yet to meet in person, Su Qing basically understood the location and peripheral organization of the mysterious government department the "RZ Unit." For him, this was plenty.

There were no walls on earth that didn't let the air in. An experienced fly could still sting an egg, no matter how seamless it was.

Even Utopia, which kept even its name carefully hidden from others—at the very beginning, Su Qing had nearly paid with his life to pocket their base; later, he had slowly learned that this organization wasn't completely untraceable.

Utopia's people used mysterious signal-blocking technology; unraveling it had made Xu Ruchong's head swell. In fact, it seemed that it wasn't so secret. In the final analysis, this organization was too superior, so superior they thought they had escaped the category of humanity and were about to leave Earth headed for the universe. They had forgotten that they still lived in a human society.

Or perhaps they couldn't understand the true meaning of the word "society." These people with their high-tech minds—where would they find the leisure to consider dealing with the network in the cities' sewers?

In the final analysis, it came down to this: there were loads of people on earth whose tricks ascended to the heavens, but not so many whose tricks "ascended to the earth."

He lay dormant, carefully planning his itinerary. He quickly changed from a truck driver to a passenger car driver; and then from an ordinary passenger car driver, he became a driver specializing in transporting plumbers.

This group of plumbers were the RZ Unit's regular maintenance workers. Their work was carried out under strict supervision, and the vehicle that

brought them to headquarters couldn't come from outside. There was a fixed car responsible for picking them up and taking them away at fixed times. Su Qing was the driver privately hired with the pooled resources of a few plumbing maintenance workers who lived far away to bring them to the assembly point on time.

At this time, Su Qing was already fairly familiar with the city's roads. He deliberately missed an intersection and turned onto a different road, "just happening" to pass through the section of road filled with the after work rush; as anticipated, they got stuck in traffic.

Amid the grumbling curses of his passengers, Su Qing calmly opened the car window and lit himself a cigarette to clear his head. He didn't have an addiction, but this was how he steadied his mind.

It took about forty-five minutes for the vehicle to get from the RZ Unit base to the assembly point; then it waited at the assembly point for about half an hour. During this time, due to safety and secrecy concerns, the driver couldn't leave his post. Under Su Qing's planning, the six people he was conveying arrived over forty minutes late. The driver had then been waiting close to two hours.

An ordinary adult would probably rather want to go to the bathroom by now—especially if he would have to hold it in the whole way back if he didn't go.

When Su Qing at last conveyed the complaining plumbers to their destination, he jumped out of the car and, tugging on his belt, made straight for the public bathroom, not even locking the car door. In "Lu Dacheng"'s loud northeastern voice, he grouched, "Oh, good heavens, why so much traffic, I'm dying for a piss."

This was a wicked move. Sometimes, even if a person could still bear it, when they saw someone acting like this, the urge to piss would come down like a mountain.

The driver gave the guards protecting him a bitter look. There was one guard who accompanied him, and there were also a few plainclothes guards waiting at this intersection.

Su Qing had gathered information about this setup ahead of time as well. The accompanying guard and the waiting guards could change shifts. Only the driver was irreplaceable and had to stay put.

The guards took a look and felt sympathetic. They exchanged glances, and one of the plainclothesmen stepped up to follow him to the bathroom door, waiting for him there.

And then... Of course, the person who came in and the person who came out weren't the same—in the guard's eyes, the first person who came out was the hefty northeastern man, looking contented. He went right around him and returned to his car, then drove it away. After a moment, their driver also came out. Two in, two out, one after another. There didn't seem to be any problem.

So the coach majestically carrying a team of plumbers to the RZ Unit continued on its way. The delinquent who had been bribed to wait in the public bathroom wearing the appropriate clothing lived up to expectations and obtained his reward—a car.

“Lu Dacheng,” after three months of silent work, infiltrated the RZ Unit headquarters. For the rest, there was no need to worry about gathering information. Once he was inside the headquarters, he would adapt to the situation as he saw it.

43

TRAP

TWO HOURS after Su Qing drove into the RZ Unit headquarters, successfully infiltrating it, the knocked out and stripped driver at last, after suffering untold hardships, contacted headquarters.

The responder at once realized that something was wrong and put in a call straight to Hu Bugui's office, alerting everyone in headquarters.

Perhaps Su Qing wasn't the first to infiltrate, but he had definitely infiltrated using the most aggressive method.

Wasn't it awful? If there was one, there could be two. Like this, wouldn't the RZ Unit headquarters turn into a vegetable market where people could come and go as they liked?

But after Hu Bugui heard the report, he was silent for a moment. Then he told Qin Luo to take people to protect Cheng Weizhi, while he and Fang Xiu took people to split up and begin a thorough search.

The outcome was...they came up empty-handed.

A grown man had squeezed into the RZ Unit headquarters and seemed to have turned into a puff of smoke, suddenly vanishing off the face of the earth. Even the tech department was alerted. Xu Ruchong brought out all the weapons in his arsenal one by one, but the intruder simply couldn't be found.

Hu Bugui finally instructed Xu Ruchong to place energy detectors in every nook and cranny. Xu Ruchong's eyes lit up. "Captain Hu, you mean that this unknown individual may be a blue seal?"

Before Hu Bugui could respond, Xu Ruchong went on by himself: "If it's a blue seal, then I have a way. The newest DM net is specially targeted towards blue seals. You've tested it out in the field, haven't you? It's reliable. It's no threat to ordinary people, aimed directly at the blue seal energy sys-

tem. It's low-visibility, and supports wide-scale application. If he bumps into it, even if he doesn't die, he'll still end up half-crippled..."

Before Xu Ruchong could finish, he received one of their captain's death glares. The tech nerd comrade, threatened for absolutely no reason, pushed up the big glasses on his nose and blinked innocently. He heard Hu Bugui deliver the efficient word "bullshit." Then he walked off without so much as looking at him.

Xue Xiaolu took a glance with her eyes that saw romance everywhere and made a guess. So she patted Xu Ruchong on the shoulder. "Master, Captain Hu knows what's going on. It must be one of our people. Don't worry."

Xu Ruchong looked at her cluelessly. "One of our people... Why would one of our people break in..."

Sadly, at this time, Xue Xiaolu's innocent girl's heart was full to the brim with melodramatic obfuscations like "love-hate relationship," "I love you in my heart but I can't speak of it," "I only want to see you from afar but don't want you to see me." She absolutely didn't hear Xu Ruchong's question. She floated off as though in a dream.

The outcome of Hu Bugui rejecting forceful technological methods was that two weeks later, they still hadn't found the mysterious individual who had infiltrated the RZ Unit headquarters without leaving a trace. They could only strengthen the guard on Cheng Weizhi and his son by two people.

But for some reason, the RZ Unit's members felt that their captain gave off a thoroughly unperturbed atmosphere, as though he wasn't worried at all.

And after two weeks, General Xiong came.

Who was General Xiong? He was a rarely seen man, and also the RZ Unit's direct superior. Each time he came to direct their work, he would to varying degrees arouse the desire of the mighty RZ Unit's elites to make trouble.

He seemed like just an ordinary little old man. He wasn't handsome enough to shake heaven and earth or make ghosts and gods cry, and he didn't have a domineering air—he was around fifty, wore an army uniform, had upright shoulders, and was of average height. Half his hair was white, and he had a round face. As soon as he walked through the door, he took off

a big pair of sunglasses, rather amiably gave his regards to the row of guards standing at attention to salute him, then hurriedly removed upstairs to the conference room with Hu Bugui and Fang Xiu, who had come out to receive him.

The RZ Unit headquarters couldn't be called small. While it couldn't match up to the large scale of the blue seal base, it was close enough. It had all the personnel and armaments it needed. But there were only six core members. Yes, only six remained now.

When General Xiong walked into the conference room, he looked silently at the empty chair. Then, his expression unchanging, he averted his gaze and spoke: "Everyone sit down."

Xu Ruchong stealthily lowered his head. His movements very small and very subtle, he avoided everyone's lines of sight and yawned. As expected, when General Xiong spoke, he slowly enunciated every syllable: "It has been a long time since I have seen all of you. I came today with two aims. First, because you have all been working very hard recently, I came to represent the Party and the leadership in conveying my regards to everyone. The people thank you for your contributions to the safety, stability, unity, and harmony of society."

This speech of General Xiong's contained less than a hundred words, but it took him fully three minutes. There was a "Special English" for learners with a talking speed so slow it was hypnotic. It was used for correcting the pronunciation of beginners. What General Xiong was speaking wasn't merely "Special Chinese," it was "Special Special Chinese."

After he was finished, he paused and reached out to pick up a teacup and calmly drank, then cleared his throat—it even took him twice as long as others to clear his throat. He was a paragon of leadership.

Luckily, the six people sitting there were already very used to this. Each of them minded their own business...earnestly letting their minds wander.

"Second," General Xiong continued after rehydrating, "I am representing the leadership and the Central Committee in countering certain problems in our work. I present the following three points."

Xu Ruchong lowered his head, once again yawning in the midst of General Xiong's lengthy words. When he found General Xiong glancing at him, he quickly shut his wide-open mouth as though afraid a fly would fly in.

They barely made it to the end of General Xiong's long-winded "Points 1, 2, 3," then saw the old fellow pick up the teacup and drink once again. "Next, representing only myself, I will add a few supplemental points."

This time Xue Xiaolu also couldn't resist. She forced back her yawn with an ingenious posture, bringing tears to her limpid eyes.

They were all faintly guessing what this sudden digression of Lao Xiong's could mean. Fang Xiu and Lu Qingbai exchanged a covert look. Meanwhile there were no hints on Hu Bugui's face; he sat there quietly, listening to Lao Xiong's interminable platitudes.

Had something gone wrong up above? Had there been an outcome in the investigation into the enemy agent within the RZ Unit, or was there to be some other alteration in personnel?

But this leader was truly too composed. He spoke for over an hour without reaching the main subject.

At last, the ideological education concluded. Hu Bugui, with a face as stiff as a carving, led them all in a round of applause. Then they heard General Xiong say, "All right, that's all I have to say today. Everyone, please return to your positions and continue your work."

The seated people stared at each other, all of them thinking that this lordship's heart was truly unfathomable. Fortunately, Lao Xiong added another sentence: "Oh, Xiao Hu, stay back a bit, I still have a few things to tell you."

Hu Bugui seemed to have been expecting this move from him. Unsurprised, he waved to the others. "Go ahead. If anything happens, just come see me."

The others then fled helter-skelter.

The conference room door was closed from outside. Only General Xiong and Hu Bugui remained inside. General Xiong was silent for a while, then sighed and extended his arm to pat the chair that hadn't been sat in. He said, "When I came last year, Xiao Liao was still with us."

Hu Bugui agreed dully. "In our line of work, we're always prepared to make a sacrifice."

General Xiong propped one arm on the table and slightly lowered his head. His expression looked a little profound. Then he extended his other arm and turned his palm upward. His palm was different from the tender, pampered-looking back of his hand. From the center of the palm to the fin-

gers, there were all kinds of calluses and scars. He gently spread his hand and tapped the teacup next to him. "I'll be staying here all day tomorrow to cooperate with your plans. But have you considered what to do if that person doesn't show themselves?"

Hu Bugui twitched the corners of his lips in a not very sincere smile. "That won't happen," he said. After a while, he added, "I understand the circumstances. The RZ Unit is my territory. Anyone who wants to act here won't have it so easy. I have a rough idea of who the enemy agent is. The preparations for the investigation are done."

General Xiong looked at him and frowned gently. "I believe what you're saying, but you seem to be a little fretful. Is there something else?"

When asked this question, Hu Bugui would never answer at once. He would always pause for a long while and turn it over in his mind. Only when he had determined that there was no problem would he shake his head. It gave people an impression of extreme deliberation and certainty.

General Xiong considered, then smiled. "Oh, I see. It's because of your little friend who still hasn't been willing to make an appearance? I heard."

Hu Bugui stared. The day he had learned of the intruder in headquarters, he had guessed that it was likely to be Su Qing, so he had kept the matter under wraps and hadn't reported it up. But this old fox still knew.

General Xiong gave an unfathomable smile. "Hey, I'm getting on in years. Sometimes I like to listen to some young people's stories."

Hu Bugui was silent, not speaking. But General Xiong continued on his own: "This little friend has talent and guts. I think that the RZ Unit is missing just such a person."

Hu Bugui immediately looked up at General Xiong and heard him use that richly unique "Special Special Chinese" to unhurriedly comment, "Xiao Liao gave up his life last year, so there are only the three of you left to attend to the field work. Fang Xiu is passable. Let's not mention Qin Luo. That young lady hasn't gotten any better at talking to people. She still doesn't dare to raise her head. As for you, I'm not casting aspersions, but you have your problems."

Hu Bugui said, "Yes, sir."

Pointing to the tabletop, General Xiong said, "You aren't very good at communicating. Though we basically have a nearly militarized administration here, ideological work between comrades can't be overlooked..."

Seeing that Lao Xiong was about to start on some more “supplemental points,” Hu Bugui quickly turned the subject back. “General, do you mean that he can stay?”

Beaming, General Xiong said, “Ah, we can’t limit ourselves in our use of talent. Talent is one of our country’s most precious blessings. How could we not value it highly?”

Hu Bugui forced a smile. “I’m afraid he...”

General Xiong waved a hand. “There’s nothing to worry about. Find him, and I’ll talk to him. I have experience with ideological work concerning young comrades.”

He said this as though it would only take a snap of his fingers.

The corners of Hu Bugui’s lips twitched slightly. He didn’t get into a pointless argument with his old superior.

This day was destined not to be tranquil. Near evening, when the sun was beginning to set, a sharp alarm suddenly rang. General Xiong and Hu Bugui in the conference room, all the personnel at their posts, Cheng Weizhi...and Su Qing, all heard this alarm.

People from three camps began to move simultaneously. A group of armed personnel immediately charged into Cheng Weizhi’s rooms, tightly surrounding the room where the father and son were staying.

The air in the RZ Unit headquarters abruptly tensed.

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PLANS A & B (PART 1)

HU BUGUI sat unmoving. Quietly, he said to General Xiong, “The first step is triggering the fire alarm.”

General Xiong laughed silently. “Your equipment has been swapped out time after time, but your methods are still the same old stuff, the same things your old ancestors used, without a bit of innovation. If this continues, your work will have no vitality. How can you consider making progress?”

Hu Bugui closed his mouth, thinking that General Xiong was being truly overanxious in considering how to innovate in their work at a time like this.

Thickly massed steps sounded in the corridor. The RZ Unit’s strict emergency response system had been set in motion. Hu Bugui couldn’t resist glancing out, turning his sitting posture slightly askew.

But General Xiong sat calmly in the midst of the crisis, entirely unhurried. He took out a cigarette and lit it, narrowing his eyes, then blew out a leisurely smoke ring. Speaking almost to himself, he said, “If you’re fretful, it shows that you haven’t adequately prepared, don’t trust yourself enough, aren’t strong enough.”

Hu Bugui couldn’t understand the old leader’s lofty words. He turned to look at him.

Wreathed in smoke, General Xiong said, “It’s possible to judge others using yourself as a standard, but you can only judge those similar to you. You can’t apply your way of thinking to everyone.”

Hu Bugui frowned. “But he... Su Qing, he isn’t an RZ Unit insider. He doesn’t know the procedures for an emergency situation. I’m afraid he...”

He remembered Su Qing covered in blood in the ruins of the grey house, and his voice vanished in his throat.

Actually, he hadn’t only thought of it this moment. In three years, this scene had always been in his mind, impossible to escape in his dreams, like a

lingering spirit, making him unable to resist feeling shaken whenever he thought of this name.

General Xiong looked at him silently, then hit the nail right on the head: “Given the same level of ability, I prefer to use a person like you, with your comparatively stronger sentiments, as opposed to a cold-hearted person. But I hope that your personal feelings won’t excessively interfere with your judgment.”

Hu Bugui insincerely said, “Yes, sir.”

General Xiong sighed. “Is it so easy to sneak into the RZ Unit headquarters? There’s no saying how long that little friend of yours lay dormant, how much time he spent preparing his plans. But while this was an audacious act, you still haven’t been able to catch him up to this point, right? Then that shows he succeeded. Could he succeed if he was only foolishly bold, not cautious?”

There were faint gunshots outside. Over his earpiece, Hu Bugui heard Fang Xiu’s well-trained voice issuing orders. He knew that the first target, a personage roughly equivalent to bait, had appeared. So he became even more absent-minded, blurting out another “Yes, sir.”

General Xiong then closed his mouth and didn’t speak again, feeling that Hu Bugui was planted there in front of him like a huge lump of rotten wood. So he quietly smoked, no longer attempting to perform alchemy on him.

Just then, Xue Xiaolu hurriedly charged in. “Captain Hu, Cheng Ge is gone.”

Hu Bugui looked up at her, his gaze slashing over her face like a knife. “When was it discovered?”

“Before the alarm sounded. Just as I was getting people to help me look for him, the alarm rang.” Xue Xiaolu’s words were extremely fast but orderly. “I’ve already told Professor Cheng that no matter who this is, they would get no benefit from harming Cheng Ge, and that nothing would happen to him for now. I told Professor Cheng not to act rashly.”

“What about the guard unit with Cheng Weizhi?”

Xue Xiaolu said, “The daily guard unit has been withdrawn, and response groups one and two have been brought in. Apart from the door guard, there are twenty bodyguards who can act as necessary. No one is per-

mitted to leave their posts, or else they'll be punished for the crime of spying. We're waiting on instructions to move on to the next step."

Though this young lady appeared very unreliable and her work in normal times was logistics, she still demonstrated her exceptional quality in an emergency.

Hu Bugui was silent for a moment. "Who was the last person to see Cheng Ge?"

Xue Xiaolu froze. "It...it was me."

Cheng Weizhi and his son's daily life at headquarters was basically managed by Xue Xiaolu alone. She looked at Hu Bugui. "Captain Hu, I know there's that... Should I temporarily isolate myself..."

Hu Bugui waved a hand. "No need. If I can't even trust you, who can I trust? Think back carefully, who was the first person to notice that Cheng Ge was missing?"

Xue Xiaolu's long, thin brows drew together slightly. "Xiao He from the treatment center. He Yongkang."

"Where is he?"

"We split up to search..." Xue Xiaolu wanted to say that even though He Yongkang wasn't a core member, he had already been at headquarters for several years. But Hu Bugui didn't wait for her to finish. He stood up off the couch and briefly instructed, "Lead the way."

Xue Xiaolu wasn't a mere pretty vase. In that instant, her mind spun through several turns. She couldn't resist turning her head to look at the carefree General Xiong, leaning back against the couch and smoking. She thought there was something a little strange here.

Why had General Xiong suddenly come to the RZ Unit? And why had something gone wrong today of all days?

She understood Hu Bugui's misgivings—Cheng Ge wasn't the type that spared people worry. Sometimes if you didn't keep an eye on him, he would run around in the corridors. But each door had a strict guard on it, so there was no need to worry that he would get out. Before the alarm had sounded, how would an ordinary treatment center worker notice that Cheng Ge had gone missing?

But if he really was...

Xue Xiaolu felt as though someone had poured a pail ice-cold water into her head—if he really was one of Utopia's people, hidden for so many years,

how could he expose himself so easily? Because of Cheng Ge, who had no value to them? Also...even Cheng Weizhi himself—was he worth such major movement on their part?

Wasn't there something else concealed here?

As soon as Hu Bugui left the conference room, a division of the RZ Unit's most elite guards ran up to keep watch at the conference room door—like the panda bear that was his distant relative, the bearish General Xiong was also a rare and precious national asset; there couldn't be any mishaps²⁰.

Meanwhile, Cheng Ge, whom everyone was looking for everywhere, was in fact right now inside a restroom in a corner of the second floor—it was a women's toilet, but there were few women at headquarters, and they were concentrated mostly in the medical and research departments. Practically no one used the second floor women's toilet all day.

Behind the wooden door of one of the stalls, Cheng Ge was peacefully putting together a jigsaw puzzle. This was a very special puzzle; it was made up of broken up colorful little blocks embedded in the wall. There was a rotating axis in the center of the little blocks. The only way they could move around on the wall was by rotating around this axis.

You not only had to consider where to put each block. You also had to consider its path of rotation, how to avoid the other blocks, and so on.

This deliberately original puzzle on the wall at last succeeded in giving pause to the little puzzle superhero Cheng Ge. He couldn't reach the highest place, so he stood on the toilet seat, staring unblinkingly. From outside, it looked as though there was no one there.

The three open wooden stall doors in the restroom had been opened to a particular angle. When someone came in from outside, they would push aside the first door, which would touch the ones behind it, half-screening the stall in the corner, creating an unusual blind spot and blocking off Cheng Ge, who was entirely immersed in his own world.

After a group of searchers went by, some time passed, and then a man wearing a milky white uniform the same as Xue Xiaolu's walked back in, stroked Cheng Ge on the head, and put a handful of candy in his pocket. Then he took off his uniform and tossed it aside. Underneath, he was wear-

ing an ordinary RZ Unit guard unit member uniform. There was a gun stuck into his pant leg. He turned and left.

The moment he waked out the door, the drainage hole under the bathroom sink suddenly moved. A floor tile was pushed up, and a reeking man climbed out. He was covered in a layer of something unknown and looked like an ET. Then he took off his layer of “skin,” wrinkled his nose, then shoved back the skin and the floor tile.

This was “Lu Dacheng,” who had “shrunk” by half within two short weeks—Comrade Su Qing, who had become a sewer-dwelling mermaid.

His steps were absolutely silent. He lightly pulled the half-blocked door open a crack and took a look at Cheng Ge, a thoughtful expression appearing on his face. He picked up the milky white uniform on the floor and wrapped it around himself. Then he very shamelessly took the handful of candy from Cheng Ge’s pocket, sniffed to make sure there was nothing unusual about it, then unwrapped one and tossed it into his mouth, chewing it with a crack. The rest he put in his pocket.

Next, Su Qing didn’t go directly to Cheng Weizhi’s room. He had spent two full weeks concealed in the RZ Unit headquarters. He had basically worked out the circumstances of the room where Cheng Weizhi was staying.

Now Su Qing, like Xue Xiaolu, had realized the instant the alarm rang that something was wrong.

Utopia was currently still performing experiments, and it seemed that they hadn’t succeeded in creating a “perfect blue seal.” So why did they absolutely have to kill Cheng Weizhi? If his own circumstances had leaked out by some channel, then Utopia had to know that his double core system had been single-handedly accomplished by Cheng Weizhi. If they killed him, what benefit would Utopia get?

Also...killing Zhao Yifei and the other surviving grey seals, what benefit did they get from that?

Su Qing paused in his tracks—there really *was* a benefit. If they killed Zhao Yifei, they could make them take for granted that Cheng Weizhi was the next target.

General Xiong finished smoking a fleet of cigarettes, picked up a cup of tea, put one hand behind his back, and stood, bored out of his mind, under a calligraphy painting on the conference room wall, his head tilted up to

look at it. Just then, a member of the urgently deployed response groups who had the look of a captain quickly stepped up and rapidly knocked twice on the conference room door. “General Xiong, it isn’t safe here. Captain Hu requests that you relocate.”

General Xiong raised his eyebrows and looked at him, remaining unmoved as a steelyard weight. “Why didn’t Xiao Hu come to tell me in person?”

This captain seemed a little anxious. He took a step forward. “General...”

General Xiong’s expression chilled. Two guards at the door immediately stepped forward, blocking the man’s path. General Xiong sternly said, “Get out your credentials!”

He had just said this when there was a *whoosh* in the air. A bullet hole noiselessly appeared in the captain’s forehead. He felt straight down.

The guard unit immediately charged into the conference room, tightly encircling General Xiong, forming a human shield. Closest to General Xiong was a guard group leader with a little mustache. He made a crisp salute towards General Xiong. “General, please remove to a safe location, sir!”

General Xiong looked gravely at the corpse on the floor, then quietly instructed, “Go.”

The little mustache very naturally reached out a hand to support him. Just then, a slightly peculiar smile suddenly appeared on General Xiong’s face. In a flash, before the little mustache could react, several guns that had been facing outward suddenly turned towards his head.

The little mustache froze. General Xiong slowly drank some tea, then let out a sigh that could reverberate around the rafters for three days. “It’s been a long time since I last made a public appearance, so now everyone believes I’m a moldering old codger. What’s to be done?”

At General Xiong’s direction, a guard removed a tiny syringe from the little mustache’s sleeve.

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PLANS A & B (PART 2)

GENERAL XIONG took out yet another cigarette and looked past two guards at the captured little mustache. “Is your Dr. Zheng still in good health?”

When he said this sentence, his tone was indifferent, as though he was just idly chatting. But for some reason, an enraged expression appeared on the little mustache’s face, as though General Xiong hadn’t been making small talk but had made an offensive remark about a female elder of his family.

General Xiong belatedly caught up. He nodded. “Oh, I see. It would appear that Dr. Zheng’s health isn’t at all good.”

He looked up a little melancholically and blew a very elaborately-shaped smoke ring and slowly and ruefully said, “Ah, we’re all old. Look at me, then look at Zheng Qinghua. Both of us are the sun around eight or nine in the evening—we’ve crossed the whole country’s time zone, yet we haven’t retired or gone to our rest. What good is a final struggle?”

The members of the RZ Unit were well-trained. Each stood by with a wooden expression, some holding guns and some holding the captive, turning a deaf ear to General Xiong’s words.

General Xiong still felt he hadn’t spoken to his heart’s content, so, slapping a young guard nervously holding a gun next to him on the shoulder, he said, “Look—this Zheng Qinghua, I’ve always thought that he enjoys laying down the law for others, but he isn’t suited to being a teacher. I told him so long ago. But he didn’t listen; he insisted on being a spiritual guide to a crowd of young people. And what was the outcome?”

The young guard didn’t know what to say. He could only divert part of his attention. Hands still holding the gun, he prepared to listen respectfully to the old leader’s enlightening remarks: “The outcome was that he fostered

a crowd of silly children who can't do anything but indulge in fantasies. Their own mothers wouldn't know them! Ah!"

For some reason, it seemed that after he spoke, someone not far away snickered. This startled the outer layer of guards, making them jittery with nerves for a long moment.

The person who had accidentally laughed was in fact Su Qing. He had dug up an old brick-colored coat from somewhere. Wrapped up in it, he was clinging outside the window like a big gecko, seeming to have melted into the background.

He had followed the individual who had changed clothes in the restroom, unexpectedly following him all the way to the conference room upstairs. He had watched with his own eyes as the man took down the team member who had hurriedly come to counsel General Xiong to relocate.

Su Qing was a little taken aback—it would have been suspicious for anyone to leave their post in such tense circumstances and come to the conference room. Su Qing was looking on with the cool eye of a bystander. From the moment the alarm had rung in the RZ Unit headquarters, the core personnel, the response personnel, the guards, and the members of all the other departments, had all strictly followed regulations.

Where there was a major question concerning national security, at such a sensitive time, demonstrating a tiny bit of suspicious behavior could incur a disaster for yourself and others. Reasonably speaking, how could there be a weirdo like this who would come dashing boldly into the conference room?

Su Qing, taking the cynical view, believed that this person had bad intentions.

He frowned. Abstracting the whole business into simple language, it was: "One person with bad intentions was shot dead in front of everyone by another person with bad intentions. Then a third person with bad intentions attempted to take advantage of the commotion to get rid of the old general."

While he was attempting to understand the whole business, he suddenly heard a huge sound. Su Qing nearly fell off the wall. He was startled. He hung on there and looked carefully—it turned out that after the third person with bad intentions was exposed, he "self-destructed."

It wasn't the old-hat move of the Middle Eastern terrorists of the past—strapping on a pack of dynamite and charging towards the target, turning

yourself into a bomb on legs. Compared to those “revolutionary martyrs,” this human bomb was obviously in a more fashionable style; the means of carrying were more convenient.

Because he blew up from inside.

The floor tiles were lifted by the explosion, and a big hole appeared in the conference room’s wall, but miraculously, no one was hurt.

The instant the explosion occurred, an enormous clear shield suddenly stood up from the floor. Some of the guards hadn’t been expecting it and in their panic had their guns “seized” by the clear shield. Then, in the blink of an eye, the shield reached the conference room’s ceiling, firmly supporting the building and limiting the scope of the explosion’s damage.

Su Qing clicked his tongue in admiration at this—now *this* was the standard of a developed country... He suddenly found that this RZ Unit truly had too many good things. They simply couldn’t be fished up.

A great portion of men display interest in machinery from a very young age. Su Qing was the same. He observed with an almost unbearable itch, then looked down at himself and instantly felt sadness welling up.

Then he suddenly noticed that the second “person with bad intentions,” the one who had fired the gun, was moving. Number 2 had been standing in a very distant corner. Before the rest had recovered from the aftereffects of the bomb and the protective shield that had come up out of nowhere, he turned and left without anyone noticing.

Su Qing had an idea. Without overthinking it, he immediately followed Number 2.

Right after he left, General Xiong puffed on his cigarette and glanced at the place where Su Qing had been hidden, a thoughtful expression appearing on his face. The sound of the explosion had disturbed many people. Qin Luo was the first to arrive with backup. After a moment, Hu Bugui came, too. But he didn’t go over to investigate. He only looked at General Xiong from far away.

He saw General Xiong spread the webbing between his left thumb and forefinger, press his right forefinger and thumb respectively to the tip and the second joint of his left forefinger, and hold the tip of his left thumb to the base of his right thumb. It looked like an English capital letter “B.”

Hu Bugui nodded and left in long strides.

Su Qing didn't see these little gestures. He dodged the RZ Unit headquarters' security monitors and alarms along with the person he was following, moving quickly. Then he stood by and watched as the person he was following imitated him, ducking into the sewers.

Su Qing wanted to cry. His sense of smell was much more sensitive than an average person's. There had been nothing for it these last couple of weeks; he had spent quite a long time underground. Now he thought that even the air around him smelled putrid. Even though he wasn't obsessed with cleanliness, he also wasn't obsessed with filth. He really didn't want to relive his past experience.

But the man he was following had thrown himself right in and showed no signs of coming out anytime soon. Su Qing staked the place out for a while, hiding from several batches of searchers as he did so, then at last decided to lay down his life for the revolution. Gnashing his teeth and stamping his feet, he squeezed in after him to pass through the sewers.

At this time, of the enemy agents hidden in the headquarters who had jumped out, four had been shot dead by mobile search teams and one had self-destructed. The work on the ground was drawing to a close. Cheng Ge had also been found. After he had put together that huge and difficult puzzle, he had felt hungry, so he had wandered out of the restroom on his own.

The fuss had already taken up half the day. The RZ Unit's core members and General Xiong went together to the emergency backup conference room.

Only then did Hu Bugui take out a big document pouch and line up the things inside one by one. "Recently we have received considerable inside information from various channels."

The document pouch contained audio recordings and pieces of paper, even video. All the contents amounted to one sentence: the next target is Number 4.

Hu Bugui set aside the recording device Su Qing had given him on its own, laced his fingers together, and put his elbows on the table. Qin Luo caught up at once. "I understand. Aside from the recording device I received on the street that day, the other information doesn't include the information about 'killing Number 4.'"

After she said this, Qin Luo realized that she had actually spoken in public—even though everyone sitting there was familiar to her, she still blushed

uncontrollably.

Fang Xiu shook his head, thinking that if she didn't have social anxiety, this colleague of his would be a quick-thinking genius.

Hu Bugui said, "Up to this point, we haven't received any information of value concerning Su Qing, and I trust that it's the same for the other side. It would be hard for them to expect Su Qing to intervene in this matter. Or rather, even if they anticipated it, it would be hard for them to assess how he would intervene."

General Xiong smacked his lips and sat up a little straighter, looking at Hu Bugui with narrowed eyes. He was very interested in the subject of "Su Qing."

Fang Xiu frowned. "Then if we suppose that the information on the final recording device is the most accurate—in other words, that 'killing Number 4' is the information nearest to the truth—while the rest was to some extent disseminated to deceive us..."

Hu Bugui shook his head. "We can't say it was disseminated. They could anticipate that we would have our own informers and intelligence workers. So 'Number 4 is the target' is accurate information. What was concealed was the crucial information about 'killing Number 4.'"

At this point, since none those present were stupid, they understood at once—if Cheng Weizhi was Number 4, killing him would truly be a big loss. General Xiong accepted this without concern, nodding his head significantly. "An intellectual's life is worth more than those of rough and ready fellows like us, who can only hold a gun. So it's said that science and technology are the number one productive force. Xiao Hu, see about finding time next week to organize a lesson for our comrades with that as the specific topic."

Hu Bugui simply ignored him. "The death of Number 3, Zhao Yifei, and Cheng Ge's disappearance, are both their smokescreens."

"And the true target was General Xiong?" Xu Ruchong pushed up his glasses, belatedly catching up.

Hu Bugui didn't respond, only took something else from the document pouch.

Su Qing waited in the gas-chamber-like sewer for a full day and night before the unusually patient dear friend began to move. It was the small hours of the morning. The RZ Unit headquarters had already resumed normal operations. Even the guard on Cheng Weizhi had relaxed considerably.

A human figure stealthily approached the sixth floor VIP room. His hand was stuck into his pocket, pressing on a small instrument. Waves of a particular frequency went out. The guards at Cheng Weizhi's door silently fell over, and the security monitor's screen broke immediately.

This was precisely the time when a person was most fatigued.

His whole way was smooth and unhindered. But just when he had easily pried open the door to Cheng Weizhi's room open and was about to go in, he suddenly felt something was off—this seemed to be too easy.

During his momentary hesitation, the sharp fire alarm in the corridor once again began to ring like an avalanche—the wicked tailer Su Qing had stuck a lit cigarette end into the alarm's sensor.

The location with the “fire” was immediately sealed off. Then Su Qing turned and ran. He broke the switch on the powered door to the emergency exit passage, completely sealing the way. He picked up a fire extinguisher, pulled a mask over his face, then quietly glided along the wall.

The door to Cheng Weizhi's room opened on its own, revealing a black gun muzzle inside. The concealed agent who had been startled by the fire alarm—call him He Yongkang, rather—backed up a step when the gun muzzle touched his head, slowly raising his hands—but one of his hands was squeezed into a fist.

Su Qing also slowly retreated and put the fire extinguisher aside, thinking that this time around the RZ Unit was pretty impressive.

When he had followed this last concealed agent into the sewer, he had understood that Utopia had complementary and supplementary Plans A and B. Each person had an assignment to carry out; each person was a front. The so-called Number 4 was both General Xiong and Cheng Weizhi.

He had been a little worried, but it turned out that his fears had been groundless. Su Qing silently smiled in self-mockery, finding that he had underestimated that unlucky devil Hu Bugui.

Fang Xiu coldly said, “Open your hand. Raise it.”

There came the sound of footsteps. The emergency exit Su Qing had sealed to prevent the man from running was opened manually, and Qin Luo appeared leading people from the other side.

A strange smile appeared on He Yongkang's face. He opened his hand. Fang Xiu's pupils contracted at once: he was holding a brown instrument

the size of a thumb.

He Yongkang quietly said, “Waves are a miraculous thing. Some can make people unconscious, and some can kill them. They can even form a resonance with the human body, instantly shattering all your internal organs. That feeling...bang.”

Fang Xiu lifted the muzzle of his gun, his facial muscles tensing.

But He Yongkang didn't look at him. “One, two, three... There are over twenty elite personnel present. I think it's worth it. We...”

He seemed about to sigh with emotion. Just then, with everyone watching, there was a sudden change.

He Yongkang's wrist was pierced, and the wave-producing instrument fell and was quickly caught by the sharp-eyed and deft-handed Fang Xiu. Qin Luo cooperated faultlessly with him, hitting He Yongkang over the head with the butt of a gun, knocking him out. “Put the magnetic vest on him at once, don't let the chip inside him explode.”

Then she looked down and had a clear look at what had pierced He Yongkang's wrist. It was a piece of candy.

Qin Luo and Fang Xiu looked at each other helplessly. Fang Xiu nodded and quietly said, “Check each exit and window. Search.”

But they searched the whole sixth floor from top to bottom and still came up empty-handed. At last, when day had fully broken, Qin Luo and Fang Xiu, having no alternative, withdrew with their people.

Then, someone crawled out of an extremely realistic dummy guard that had been “taken down” at the very beginning. In such a short time, he had somehow disguised himself seamlessly.

Su Qing pulled aside the uniform covering him, smiled, and quietly snuck into “Cheng Weizhi's room,” thinking that he could retire after winning merit. He was planning to change his method. Cheng Weizhi's danger had been resolved, and he would certainly leave the RZ Unit headquarters within a certain period of time. He decided to freeload off the old professor for a few days, then leave with him. The safety factor was higher, and he could reminisce about former times with an old friend.

But when he walked in, Su Qing found that there was already someone waiting for him inside.

THE FIRST CONFRONTATION

HU BUGUI slowly raised his head. Their eyes met, and Su Qing broke out in cold sweat at once, thinking, Motherfucker, is God at it again? Why would this great Buddha be here?

He had trespassed into his headquarters and been caught red-handed. In his three year career of swindling and fraud, he had never encountered such a thing. In an instant, countless disorderly thoughts flashed through Su Qing's head. Then his professional quality allowed him to make the most ideal response in the fastest time: he stood at attention, gave a salute, and, relying on the uniform he had picked up, properly said, "Reporting!"

Concerning the possibility that Hu Bugui had already recognized him, the thought never crossed Su Qing's mind.

On one hand, he was still wearing the skinny edition of Lu Dacheng's appearance. On the other hand, he thought, after such a long time, with all the myriad affairs Captain Hu dealt with every day, how could he remember a minor figure like him?

But even if he didn't remember him, how was he supposed to explain his sudden appearance in Cheng Weizhi's room now? Considering it was giving Su Qing a bit of a headache. He was afraid Hu Bugui would simply take him for an enemy agent and deal with him the way the little mustache had been dealt with. Then this business would get rather messy.

But Hu Bugui didn't violently pull a gun right away like Fang Xiu. He only sat unmoving on the cloth couch in Cheng Weizhi's living room, quietly looking at him. The look in his eyes made Su Qing feel as though a flower had opened on his face.

Su Qing focused and said with matchless shamelessness, "Reporting to Captain Hu, this floor had already been searched. General Xiong sent me to notify you to come down."

Hu Bugui's expression became a little complicated. Staring at this professional swindler's face, he found that with his own vision, he couldn't read a single clue from it. It was as though Su Qing was naturally missing the thread called "guilt." His expression didn't change and his heart didn't race as he fabricated.

Hu Bugui thought that if he hadn't known ahead of time, he would really have thought that the person in front of him with his somewhat familiar but also somewhat strange face was in fact one of headquarters' ordinary guards. He couldn't resist pondering just what sort of shape this person was in now.

Su Qing found that Hu Bugui's venerable buttocks were still stuck unmoving to the couch and grumbled inwardly, but his face displayed a perfect bewilderment. He asked doubtfully, "What's wrong, Captain Hu? Is there a problem?"

Hu Bugui's mouth, which apart from giving orders, basically didn't speak any superfluous words all day, suddenly turned up at the corners, almost creating a "he's smiling at me" impression.

His features were sharply defined and rather handsome. He should have been very good-looking when he smiled. But for some reason, when Su Qing connected the terms "Captain Hu" and "smiling," a great horror spontaneously arose in his heart.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up one by one and cried out—you can't stay here for long.

So he continued: "General Xiong said to be sure you came down within five minutes. If there's still something you need, I'll go down and report. Please act quickly."

Su Qing controlled the speed of his speech, doing his best not to show his impatience. After saying this, he very accurately clicked his heels together lightly. After performing all the moves, he turned and unhurriedly headed out. From behind, his shoulders and back were very upright, his slender body tall and straight—he really did look like a professional soldier.

The moment he put his hand on the doorknob, Hu Bugui at last spoke. He seemed to also be uncomfortable, as though he didn't know how to organize his words. Rather dryly, he quietly said, "Su Qing, I haven't seen you in years. How have you been?"

Su Qing, with his back to him, maintained his position of putting his hand on the doorknob. He froze.

After a long moment, Su Qing laughed lightly and slowly raised his hands. With this one gesture, his body language changed miraculously. His shoulders only bent a tiny bit, and that soldier's bearing was immediately gone.

Then he turned around, and Hu Bugui found that this person's smile had changed.

Before, Su Qing had smiled when he wanted to smile, gotten angry when he wanted to get angry. His beautiful features were especially lively, with a recklessness peculiar to youth. But the person in front of him now smiled noiselessly. First his eyes curved, then the corners of his lips turned up bit by bit as though with some profound meaning. His eyebrows went up a bit, revealing the gaze from his narrowly curved eyes. He calmly peered out at anyone standing in front of him, seeming particularly like bad news.

Su Qing took off his cap and held it in his hand. He removed his false eyebrows, then took something semi-transparent off his eyelids and wiped a few times with his sleeve. The wrinkles disappeared. The eyebrows like Crayon Shin-chan's²¹ and the squinting little eyes at once resumed their original appearance. He also tore off the circle of beard pasted around his lips and casually rubbed his face a couple of times. The original color of his skin appeared in some places. His face looked extremely colorful.

"I'm sorry, my craft has fallen off today," this swindler said carelessly. Then he gave a thumbs up. "Captain Hu truly is a superstar. You actually still remember me... And never mind remembering me, you even recognized me. Only you could have done it. An ordinary person definitely couldn't have measured up."

Hu Bugui gazed steadily at him and suddenly found that his emotions were in even greater turmoil than he had imagined. He thought, How could I not remember? Time and memory would soon have carved this person into his heart. When he closed his eyes, he saw his appearance from back then.

He heard Su Qing continue: "Well, then, you see, sir, I was purely meddling without knowing what I was doing. Casually charging into a state organ was wrong of me, but don't we both have the same goal? Captain Hu,

you could call us old friends. Heaven knows, earth knows, you and I know—let me off. When I get home I'll burn incense for you every day, and in the next lifetime I'll pay repay you for your great kindness even if I have to work like a farm animal.”

As he babbled, he glanced at the door, rubbed his hands together, then insolently and fawningly said, “Anyway, I can see you're all pretty busy. Don't hold up everyone's work efficiency on my account. Me, I came quietly, and I'll quietly go...”

Hu Bugui heard the word “go,” and it was as though some mechanism in his body had been set off. He immediately jumped off the couch and gripped Su Qing's shoulder. “You can't go!”

Su Qing felt that his gall bladder burst, sending up bitterness. “Brother, I swear, I really didn't make a disturbance on purpose. I know that military installations can't be profaned, but, look...”

Hu Bugui's hand squeezing his shoulder slowly relaxed and moved downward slightly, pressing against his shoulder blade, as though embracing him. But his face was very tense. He didn't know how he could make Su Qing understand him. He stifled himself for a long moment until his lungs nearly burst, then haltingly spat out: “Don't go. I've spent three years searching for you. Since you've come back, stay.”

Su Qing gave a dry laugh. “Captain Hu, that tone and these actions of yours are too easy to misunderstand.”

Hu Bugui only looked at him profoundly. He didn't let go, and he didn't explain anything. He was silent for a while, then repeated: “Stay.”

Su Qing frowned slightly. He didn't know what this was. He only took half a step back, dodging Hu Bugui's hand. But Hu Bugui grabbed his arm. He didn't make a sound, didn't explain, and didn't let go, only looked directly at him.

Just then, Lu Qingbai's voice suddenly came from a corner of the room. Just dying to make trouble, he said, “Captain Hu, just snap on some power-limiting handcuffs and cuff him to yourself.”

Xu Ruchong said, “The unit has just received a new binding cord with a slight electric current. It can't be forced open. If you want, I can bring you one.”

Hu Bugui completely ignored these two prattlers. Pulling Su Qing with one hand, he opened Cheng Weizhi's door with the other and pulled him

outside. He turned left and counted two rooms. Su Qing noticed that the doorplate had his name written on it. He was a little bewildered.

Hu Bugui said, "Fingerprint recognition. You go ahead and open it."

Su Qing instantly backed away automatically, but sadly Hu Bugui had a tight hold on him. "Captain Hu, you really don't need to be so polite, I'll go out and find a hotel, really, setting aside an individual room just for me..."

Hu Bugui said precisely, "When you were in the hospital three years ago, I set this room aside for you. But before I could tell you, you left."

Su Qing said, "Thank you, thank you. My thanks to the Party and the people for their care and concern for me. I'm going to cry from gratitude, really."

While he said this, his eyes were whirling around, and he was backing away nonstop. Hu Bugui half-compellingly raised his hand and pressed it to the door's fingerprint recognition system. There was a click, and the door opened. Su Qing looked up and froze.

The layout of the room looked familiar. He stood at the door in a daze for a long time before realizing that it looked like his childhood room. Even the wooden guitar displayed in a corner was there—this was from middle school, his only time being appraised as a triple A student. His dad had been wild with joy and given it to him as a reward, even though at the time the school had suddenly put together an encouraging teaching experiment, making more than half the class triple A students—it had been a novelty for a time, and then he hadn't played with it again, because he had found that it wasn't nearly as effective as money when it came to flirting.

Hu Bugui quietly said, "While we were searching for you, we monitored your house, though you never returned. I had Fang Xiu take a few pictures of your room and bring them back, then rearranged it according to them so it would be ready if you ever came back to stay."

Su Qing was silent.

Hu Bugui was silent along with him. After a long moment he once again, in a somewhat beseeching tone, said, "Come back. Don't go."

He was standing behind Su Qing, his chest almost pressed against his back. He spoke very quietly, his voice striking Su Qing's eardrums again and again. For a moment, something like a throb really did rise in Su Qing's heart, but it was only for a moment. He knew that he had been constantly

on the run too long. He hadn't been moved by anything for a long time. That was where the mistake came from.

After a long time, Su Qing lowered his eyes and made a very small nod.

Hu Bugui felt a large stone suddenly fall in his heart. He nearly became wild with joy, feeling that, more and more, he would shine with only a drop of sunlight. "The electricity and hot water in your room haven't been stopped. There's someone assigned to come clean periodically. It's ready to be occupied."

Su Qing turned to look at him. As soon as their eyes met, Hu Bugui couldn't resist letting go. He took half a step back and a little unnaturally said, "Take a look and see if you need anything else."

After thinking about it, Su Qing said, "I'll just take a shower first. I smell like the sewers. Also, is there anything to eat? I'm starving.—Heh, this place is pretty big."

Hu Bugui watched him go in, but he didn't follow. He frowned slightly, as though uncertain, then asked again, "You won't go, right?"

Su Qing waved a hand and gave him an especially sincere smile. "It would be impolite to refuse."

Hu Bugui lowered his eyes, paused, then said, "There's a clean change of clothes in the cabinet."

Before he had finished speaking, Su Qing had already very familiarly turned up everything he wanted—after all, this was a room he had "lived in before." Then, not standing on ceremony at all, he said to Hu Bugui, "Thank you, Captain Hu, close the door for me on your way out."

Then he dashed into the bathroom as though he couldn't wait.

The bathroom door closed before Hu Bugui's eyes. Hu Bugui took a deep breath, then let it out like a sigh. He leaned somewhat wearily against the doorframe next to him. He didn't look happy at all.

General Xiong had warned him that if Su Qing, after careful consideration or not, really decided to stay, the first thing he would say would definitely concern the grey seal child he had taken away. If he didn't say it, then he was lying.

The sound of water came. Hu Bugui thought that from the moment he had seen Su Qing, he hadn't said a single word of truth to him.

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A DOOR

EACH PERSON'S LIFE is like a river. Its upper reaches are like the water droplets running off a snow-capped glacier, slowly collecting into a rivulet carrying the air of the highlands, passing through mountain ranges and flatlands, now rapid and now slow, now stopping and now starting, bringing along sand and grit as it goes. Its middle reaches become muddy and furious; then, as it flows on, this fury wears away, and it passes through cities, being structured by their clamor, becoming placid and silenced.

Until at last it reaches its end in the great sea that joins the blue sky, stretching as far as the eye can see.

The River God meets the North Sea, comically exposing smallness in the face of greatness, henceforth coming to an end, yet also henceforth beginning; the wheel comes full circle, continuing forever.

Heaven and earth are the guesthouses of all living things; time is the sojourn of hundreds of generations.

And our fleeting lives are like dreams; how long can happiness last?

Each person looking at another person sees only a brief span of his life. Who knows how far he will have gone when you turn to look again? It seems that one person can never truly understand another person, unless he curves his own life into an arc, adjusts to the same tempo as that other person, from birth to death, not parting for an instant.

But how hard would this be? An old saying tells us that "you can't take a book a thousand leagues"; on a long and cold road, even a notebook half an inch thick is a burden that can be carelessly mislaid or lost, let alone walking a road several decades long taking another person with you.

Hu Bugui leaned quietly against the doorframe of Su Qing's room, separated from him by a bathroom door. Neither understood the other.

Su Qing didn't understand why Hu Bugui insisted on making him stay. He thought that if the RZ Unit were high quality government products, then he himself was a counterfeit "Notorola" cellphone. While his functions were complete, he wasn't precisely fit to appear in public view. But he didn't have a sense of inferiority, either; the work of the revolution didn't make distinctions between the high and the low. High-end goods had their high-end market, and counterfeit goods had their benefits. He thought that even compared to the government's group of superstars, he could still be counted as a specialist in his arts and profession.

They could cooperate, but it would be very miserable to stay here year-round.

How could a fish's eye pass itself off among pearls?

Su Qing looked at the super luxurious bathroom full of steam and thought that this really was a good place. Though it didn't amount to corrupt opulence, at least it reached the level of a developed country. It made the down-at-heel Su Qing, who had crawled out of the sewer, feel like a floating immortal. But however comfortable it was, what did it matter?

As soon as he thought of the enormous organization in the RZ Unit headquarters, the scrupulous and methodical military personnel, the superiors coming to deliver orders now and again, and the ceaseless "serve the people," he simply felt that it was a pain from the stomach down to the balls.

At first, when he had taken Tu Tutu and obstinately left the RZ Unit's treatment center, he probably *had* been nursing a slight fit of pique, though he would have died sooner than admit it and had hypocritically put on a magnanimous front. But now Su Qing thought that there wasn't anything bad about the way he lived. He had even developed a sort of objective point of view and could observe his own chaotic life with detachment.

Today surnamed Zhao, tomorrow surnamed Qian—he had gone through The Book of Family Names one by one, wandering through every corner of the cities and the countryside, but he hadn't left a trace. Cutting up an ID card was like throttling a person. When he realized that that person was himself, he would have a feeling approaching warped pleasure.

These were his yesterdays. Using this method to renounce yesterday, it was as if there was no need to look back, and therefore no memories. Without memory, he had no roots. He was like a spirit floating through the air.

No one could catch him, no one could number him, and no one could hurt him. This way, he felt safe and at ease.

All structures were like talismans of control, giving him an endless headache.

Perhaps Su Qing himself hadn't realized why he was so opposed to staying at the RZ Unit. Because elsewhere, he was Li Meng, he was Lu Dacheng, he was Su Zecheng. Even if he changed his name to Su Wukong, no Tathagata Buddha would idly come along to seal him under the Five Elements Mountain. But in the RZ Unit, he could only be Su Qing.

The year he was twenty-four, he had been drawn into a monstrous and motley world. He had lived once and died once, like that stupid bird Su Qing suspended above the precipice, who didn't dare to fly up, only dared to jump down. The instant he had seen Hu Bugui, he had even automatically withdrawn from the state of being "Lu Dacheng" and returned to his original appearance.

Like a fox demon running into a monster-revealing mirror, forced back to its true form.

But at the moment he didn't think so much or so deeply. He only thought that Hu Bugui's presence was too powerful and made him uncomfortable. So amid the steam, this professional swindler persisted in thinking that he had to run; if he didn't run, it was simply like picking up a carful of fathers for himself!

When Su Qing had cleaned himself up to something like a proper human appearance and walked out of the bathroom, he found that Hu Bugui was still standing upright at the door in his earlier posture, as if he was a door god.

Hu Bugui looked at him and saw that Su Qing was only loosely wrapped in a bathrobe with the collar open to the base of his chest in a style that was a grave offense against decency. So he averted his eyes and seriously said, "Go ahead and get changed, I'll take you to get something to eat. General Xiong and the others want to meet you."

Su Qing paused in his tracks. "Are there nutritional capsules?"

Hu Bugui directly bent down and took a small bottle from a cupboard next to him. He carefully read the directions and the date on it, then put it on the coffee table in front of Su Qing. Then, providing excellent service, he

poured him a glass of water. Afterwards, he cautiously solicited his view: “Later...will you come eat with the others?”

Su Qing put a capsule in his mouth. A bit of weariness appeared on his face. “What, do you have urgent business, Captain Hu?”

Hu Bugui shook his head.

Su Qing swallowed the capsule and yawned, rubbing his eyes. “Then let’s talk about it tomorrow, OK? It’s been a long time since I dared to sleep for real. I relaxed a little just now and felt like my bones were coming...haaa... apart.”

His indistinct voice rolled into another yawn. He seemed so sleepy he could hardly keep his eyes open.

Hu Bugui’s expression sank—General Xiong had said that for a person like Su Qing, having a handle on his surroundings was something he relied on to live. His exterior slickness was built on his excessive sensitivity towards his environment. If he wanted to stay somewhere for a time, he would do everything in his power to blend in, actively take note of the routes, and attempt to start conversations with each person to get as much information as possible.

On the contrary, if he didn’t actively do these things, then he wasn’t planning to stay. He was going to retreat.

So Hu Bugui didn’t say anything. He nodded. He stood up and walked right out. He even closed the door behind himself. Only then did Su Qing see that there was a piece of paper stuck to the back of the door with a careful analysis written on it of where he should go to look for the things he wanted.

Looking closely, the text was handwritten, but it was very neat, like printed regular script, scrupulously exact. Even the line spacing was just about uniform.

Su Qing drew closer to look, and a sudden wild guess rose in his mind. He thought, Hu Bugui couldn’t have written this, could he? He felt very strange, just like a stray dog suddenly receiving the treatment of a house pet, picked up by a perfume-scented wealthy woman and carried to a high grade estate, treated like an only son, so overwhelmed by the unexpected favor that he didn’t know what to do.

A person he thought had forgotten him long ago had been searching for his whereabouts nonstop for three years, had even been able to recognize

him at a glance under these circumstances after those three years, and had reserved a room for him—this couldn't be faked, Su Qing could tell. The things and the food here were all according to his standards—and anyway, a person like Hu Bugui wouldn't fake it. This person was like a big, hard stone who would leave a dent anywhere you tossed him. He had spent his whole life marching forward without hesitation; he had no need for circumvention.

Su Qing sighed and crossed his arms, averting his gaze. He felt an emotion of mixed awkwardness, sadness, embarrassment, gratitude, and helpless confusion sticking painfully in his chest.

If your stomach is used to noodles with fried bean sauce, seafood will give you the runs; how could a fox demon live under the nose of the three-eyed Erlang God?

Sighing with emotion, Su Qing stood up and stretched, quickly and calmly using all the reflective objects to glance around the room. For the moment, he couldn't see anything like a security monitor. There wasn't even that fingernail-sized loudspeaker that had projected Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong's voices from the upper left corner of Cheng Weizhi's room.

Inside was rather free, but outside the window it wasn't so friendly. There had just been a major event at headquarters, so the patrols everywhere were very strict. Su Qing had no malicious intent. It was one thing to want to leave, but never mind kicking up a fuss with the RZ Unit; it was correct behavior to leave yourself a line of retreat.

He couldn't get out that way, so Su Qing turned over and lay down on the bed, considering a new plan.

Hu Bugui had left his room, but he didn't go away. Xue Xiaolu, just coming by to take Cheng Weizhi and his son back to their room, saw Hu Bugui with a cigarette in his mouth, standing with his back to the corridor wall. She was a little surprised but wasn't in a position to ask—Cheng Weizhi still didn't know that Su Qing had come back.

When the two of them were settled, Xue Xiaolu quietly walked up beside Hu Bugui. "Captain Hu, why haven't you gone to rest?"

She could tell that Hu Bugui was a little on edge. Their captain had quit smoking. When he had quit, he had always gone around with a cigarette in his mouth, not lighting it, only smelling it. As time went on, he had devel-

oped a habit. As soon as he got fidgety, he would put a cigarette in his mouth and chew on it.

Hu Bugui didn't explain, only quietly said, "Go to bed early. Tomorrow, prepare the materials. While General Xiong is here, he wants to call everyone in for a meeting in the afternoon."

Xue Xiaolu looked at the room with the doorplate reading "Su Qing" on it and swallowed her words. She nodded in silence and left. Half an hour later, the lights in the corridor automatically went out. Hu Bugui stood in the dark, turning his tormented cigarette over and over until all the tobacco spilled out.

There were no monitoring installations in Su Qing's room, because Hu Bugui believed that, since he was neither a criminal nor a high-risk witness with no means of self-defense like Cheng Weizhi, he couldn't do as Xu Ru-chong and the others said and crudely lock him up.

So Hu Bugui decided to wait here all night for Su Qing to come out—this method was very clumsy, but it was flawless. He decided to follow Su Qing closely until he didn't want to run anymore.

There was no doubt that Su Qing wouldn't be able to think of how to deal with this, because probably no one but Hu Bugui would do such a thing.

Hu Bugui thought that a word was binding. He had said he wanted to take care of him, so he had to implement it so there wasn't any exaggeration. Even if Su Qing was unwilling, he had still decided to follow him for the rest of his life.

A lifetime wasn't long, but everyone had failed a couple of people. Anyway, whether it was true or false, Su Qing swore up and down that he hadn't taken it to heart. And Hu Bugui had never made such a promise to another person.

Why?

Hu Bugui sat down with his back to the wall and cast aside the spilled cigarette and took out another one to defile. He thought that "why" didn't come into it. This wasn't an elementary schooler's popular science book. It was only that Su Qing had always been different from other people.

THE LAST TIME

SU QING woke up earlier in the morning than other people. He got up before it was light and didn't go out. He thought that he had cleared his head enough. He glanced out the door through the peephole and found to his horror that there was an unknown being squatting at the door, head down, sleeping or waking, with a row of disemboweled cigarettes next to him, in appearance very much like a mass grave.

Su Qing sucked in a breath. Dripping cold sweat, he quietly retreated. He hesitated a moment, then started to go through the whole room.

The little cupboard was full of nutritional capsules. Further in, there were all kinds of food in the fridge. Su Qing turned the food over to look at the labels and found that it had all been put there recently and was still within its shelf life. Passing through the dining room, there was a balcony attached. The balcony was very big. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows was an artificial flower garden suspended in midair. From the balcony, you wouldn't have to see the solemn sentry posts downstairs. The garden was arranged simply and tastefully, with a recliner and a little coffee table next to it. There was a tea set and tea leaves, and even a small bookshelf.

Su Qing noticed a small paper tag stuck to the corner of the bookshelf. Still in that precise regular script, it said: "There's wireless coverage in the room and a laptop in the study. It's new, with an operating system already installed, ready to be used."

What good treatment!

Su Qing plopped down into the recliner and expressionlessly tilted his head back to face the false sky on the ceiling. It was as though out of nowhere he owed Hu Bugui a favor.

After sitting there for a while, he slowly went into the bathroom with a rather vexed expression on his face, washed up, took a deep breath, and

gently opened the door. Hu Bugui was leaning against the wall, half-sleeping and half-waking, resting his eyes. He was alerted by the sound of the door opening and raised his head at once. His appearance of anticipation in the face of an enemy attack startled Su Qing.

Hu Bugui's voice was a little tense. "Where are you going?"

Su Qing said, "...I was going to ask whether you wanted to come in and sit down."

He didn't ask Hu Bugui why he hadn't gone to sleep but had instead spent all night guarding his door. With Captain Hu's alertness the moment he woke up, anyone with eyes could tell that he was worried Su Qing would run off again.

Hu Bugui's slightly raised shoulders relaxed, and he blinked with all his might, finally seeming more like a person who had just woken up in the small hours of the morning. Su Qing found that Hu Bugui's eyelashes were actually particularly long. The shadows they cast made the color of his eyes look a little darker, giving them a profound air. But his expression was too solemn, and there was a faint scar between his brows, making him seem a little severe.

Su Qing let him in, inwardly going off on a digression, thinking that in any case here was a man with regular features. Without his expression of deep resentment, how many straight little girls and gay little boys would have paid to have him!

Ah, what a waste.

Su Qing had always been a qualified host when receiving guests. He didn't mention Hu Bugui squatting at his door all night, only asked with a smile, "Should I bring you a blanket? It's not even five yet. You can still lie down for a while."

Hu Bugui shook his head at once. "No need, I'm not sleepy."

Su Qing knew that he definitely didn't feel easy lying down, so he didn't insist. He made Hu Bugui a cup of tea. When he went to get tea leaves, Hu Bugui followed him to the little cupboard with the tea leaves; when he rinsed a cup, Hu Bugui followed him to the kitchen; when he put the tea leaves in the cup and poured water, Hu Bugui watched from two steps away. Only when Su Qing brought the tea to the living room and sat down on the couch did Hu Bugui also sit down and quietly say thank you.

Su Qing pretended he didn't know and rambled some nonsense to Hu Bugui. Hu Bugui had no idea how to respond. Normally, the members of the RZ Unit very rarely said anything unnecessary in front of him. The only one who liked to go through reams of nonsense was General Xiong, and Hu Bugui ignored him out of habit.

But he thought that he couldn't very well ignore Su Qing the way he ignored General Xiong, so he racked his brains, following along with his conversation topics while keeping watch over Su Qing's expression. Sadly, no matter what he said, Su Qing always respond with a broad smile. There was no way to tell whether he was pleased or not.

Su Qing said, "With headquarters located on the outskirts, it must be inconvenient to go back home normally, right? Do you live in the city, Captain Hu?"

Hu Bugui said, "Yeah." Then he thought this answer was too brief, so he added, "I normally stay here, too, next door to you. I only go back during vacations."

Su Qing nodded. Sucking up, he said, "You probably don't take many vacations, do you? Wow, you all work so hard, and you can't casually leave your posts most of the time and have to stay here. That's pretty hard on you. It's a little better if you're single, but it must be painful for those with families."

—Not only did they have to work, they had to work at high intensity for long periods and be ready to report to Elder Lenin at any time. No wonder that the moment this serious Captain Hu returned to the city he went to a bar to kill time and relieve stress. How long must he have been holding back?

When he said this, Hu Bugui's heart jumped. He was currently very overanxious about each of Su Qing's words and actions. His mind was at a high level of tension when listening and speaking. He felt that there was something off about this speech of Su Qing's, so he quickly said, "Actually, we're not so busy as you imagine. The core personnel aren't the same as ordinary soldiers. They can go home on the weekend if they aren't out on assignment. As long as they don't have any special duties, they can just drop a word and leave their post..."

—Of course that was impossible.

At this point, Hu Bugui realized that he had gotten excited and gone too far, so he stopped talking immediately. After a long pause, he added, “Of course, under ordinary circumstances there are still some procedures to go through, but don’t worry, they aren’t complicated. You can just mention it to me later, and I’ll go through the procedures for you, and you can leave.”

Su Qing felt that he really was too nervous, so he gave a light cough. “Captain Hu, are you hungry? I’ll go put together something to eat.”

Then he stood up, and Hu Bugui, who had been sitting bolt upright on the couch, stood up immediately after him like a conditioned reflex.

Su Qing: “...”

When Su Qing boiled water, there was someone next to him to pass chopped vegetables and eggs. When Su Qing put the dried noodles in the water, a pair of chopsticks reached out from beside him to stir the pot. When Su Qing thought the food was just about done and picked out a noodle to test its firmness, there was someone to offer him a row of seasonings.

Hu Bugui resolutely put into practice his campaign of limiting the scope of his activities, with Su Qing as the center, to within a radius of half a meter. Su Qing found that Hu Bugui was simply marking time with him. He felt profoundly that having such a large hanger-on was a massive strain.

So when they ate, Su Qing turned the TV on and didn’t talk to Hu Bugui again. Otherwise, he wouldn’t only have been putting pressure on Hu Bugui, he would have been putting pressure on himself, as well—watching Captain Hu looking as cautious as if he was standing at the edge of an abyss, like he was carrying out some great mission, gave Su Qing a bit of indigestion.

When it came time for normal human activities to begin, Su Qing, who had already sat there watching hours of boring television, said, “Captain Hu, didn’t you want to take me to meet some people?”

Hu Bugui hadn’t slept all night, and he had been hypnotized by the TV. He had been a little listless, but as soon as Su Qing spoke, it was as though his springs had been wound tight once more. His sleepiness vanished at once. He was incomparably awake. “Oh. Yes.”

Then he looked at the thin clothes Su Qing, who had already stood up, was wearing, and frowned. Pointing to the big wardrobe, he asked, “Do the clothes in there not fit?”

“I haven’t tried them yet.”

So Hu Bugui silently stood up and pulled a coat out of the wardrobe. Then he picked up a little bottle of nutritional capsules and put them into the coat's pocket, quietly passed the coat over, and watched Su Qing put it on. Then he handily pulled out the collar of his shirt and lightly flattened it with his fingers. When he saw Su Qing raise his head to look at him, Hu Bugui at last drew his hand back, pursed his lips, and quietly explained, "It's uncomfortable to wear like that."

Speechless, Su Qing thought, Lord, take me!

Half an hour later, Su Qing had his wish fulfilled when he met General Xiong. And, after General Xiong had cordially and kindly taken his hand and asked after his health, his wishes were even more fulfilled when he received General Xiong's message that he had "a few words to communicate in private."

Hu Bugui could only watch at the door, feeling aggrieved, waiting for General Xiong to use ideological education and morale boosting to move the little comrade Su Qing, who had his heart set on running, and bring his ideas onto the right track.

Hu Bugui personally stood at the door, upright as the shaft of a pen, the voices inside coming faintly to his ears. Lu Qingbai happened to be passing and rather curiously stood with him. Pointing at the door, he asked, "In there?"

Hu Bugui quickly shushed him. He felt that General Xiong and Su Qing seemed to have hit it off. It sounded like they were having a warm chat. So he pricked up his ears with single-hearted devotion, planning to learn from his leader how to communicate with a special personage like Su Qing. Seeing his earnest expression, Lu Qingbai couldn't help becoming earnest along with him. Tilting his head, he put his ear to the door and listened along with Hu Bugui.

The upshot was that ten minutes later, Lu Qingbai's face had a greenish tinge. He thought that putting Su Qing and General Xiong together, the record of their conversation could be used to write an entire course on ideological and moral self-cultivation. He understood each individual word, but put together, he had no idea what the two of them were trying to say. All he felt was that gooseflesh had come up all over his body.

He looked at Hu Bugui, grave-faced, listening raptly as though afraid to miss a single syllable, then walked away on the verge of collapse—he

thought that this was really no way to live. Even Captain Hu was unhinged.

While Su Qing accompanied General Xiong like a bosom friend, ignoring the difference in their ages, he didn't waste any time getting up to a few little tricks. This venerable uncle wasn't one of the RZ Unit's field personnel, each one of whom could thread an embroidery needle from three meters way. He didn't feel pressured at all.

Half an hour later, General Xiong, still not fully satisfied that he had said all he wanted to say, finally ended the conversation and indicated that if there was a chance later he would have to communicate more with Su Qing, this little comrade who strove so vigorously to improve himself. He personally took him to the door.

Seeing him come out, Hu Bugui let out a sigh of relief—he had no peace of mind if he couldn't see Su Qing. Then he continued his great undertaking as a hanger-on.

Su Qing smiled to himself and counted his steps. Five, four, three, two, one... Just as he and Hu Bugui reached the corner, there was a *bang* behind them. The alarm reacted at once, crying out sharply. Su Qing looked back with perfectly played astonishment, deliberately making eye contact with Hu Bugui for a moment, his face the picture of bewildered innocence.

Hu Bugui followed his gaze and saw dense smoke suddenly billowing out of the office where General Xiong was. The guard at the door had already charged in, but the smoke was too thick. It was impossible to see what was happening inside. In his haste, Hu Bugui still didn't forget to hold onto Su Qing—because if he let go, this person would be lost. He had already lost him once.

Su Qing absolutely hadn't expected him to have this subconscious reaction. None of his well-planned escape routes came in useful. He could only stumble a step as he was pulled along, thinking, *What racket is this?*

Many people responded to the emergency. As they passed by one team of emergency responders, Su Qing deliberately bumped into them, slowing down Hu Bugui's steps. When Hu Bugui reached the door, his view was blocked by the people inside. He couldn't see clearly what was happening in the thick smoke. But Su Qing suddenly struggled and began to cough violently.

Now Hu Bugui at last let go, letting him take a step back and lean against the wall, one hand stuck in his pocket and the other holding his collar as he

coughed. Tears even came to Su Qing's eyes. He waved a hand towards him. "It's fine, I just choked. Go ahead and see what's going on."

Hu Bugui hesitated, then at last went into the thick smoke, keeping half of his attention out to listen to his coughing. But he didn't see that the moment he turned around, Su Qing stopped coughing and took a small recorder out of his pocket. It was playing a realistic cough on repeat.

By the time Hu Bugui found that someone had only thrown a smoke bomb into General Xiong's office and quickly turned around, he found that Su Qing was already gone—the recorder by the wall was still faithfully playing the sounds of its owner's coughs.

Hu Bugui fiercely punched the wall, an unprecedented feeling of being thwarted rising in his heart. How could it be so hard to keep him here?

Just then, someone gently patted him on the shoulder. At some point, General Xiong had come to stand behind him under the escort of a whole group of guards. "Young man, don't be so irritable all the time."

Hu Bugui closed his eyes and turned to give him a salute. "Yes, sir."

But General Xiong smiled meaningfully and lied through his teeth: "I figure that Comrade Xiao Su has only gone to the restroom. When I see him in a little while, I'll notify him to come see you at midday."

Hu Bugui stared.

But General Xiong continued on his own: "I've already written an official report concerning the problem of Comrade Xiao Su's position. If there's time in the afternoon, arrange the other matters and make some time to take him to go through the formalities and get acquainted in the surroundings."

General Xiong raised his head and saw Hu Bugui looking at him blankly. Then he patted the back of his hand. "What are you waiting for? Go get to work."

When Hu Bugui had left, turning his head three times with each step he took, General Xiong finally turned. He glanced around, then pointed to a very unobtrusive man on the very periphery of the guard team who had his cap brim pulled very low. He said, "Comrade, come in for a moment. I have something to request of you."

Su Qing's heart went cold. He had thought that his whole course of action from changing his disguise to slipping in among the guard unit had been seamless. He had no idea how General Xiong had seen through him.

But with everyone watching, he could only brace himself and follow General Xiong back into the already cleaned-up office.

General Xiong didn't even close the door. The guard captain outside had noticed the moment Su Qing had been pointed out that he was a stranger and immediately became nervous. Afraid something would go wrong, he paid close attention to what was happening inside.

The guard captain saw General Xiong mildly say something to the unknown young man behind him. The young man hesitated, looking at him with his head down, not making a sound. Then General Xiong made his voice very low and said another two sentences to him. The young man didn't answer.

The two of them looked at each other oddly for a long moment. Then General Xiong raised his hand and took off the young man's cap. The young man didn't resist. The guard captain found to his astonishment that the person who had been here before had somehow come in again.

Then General Xiong said something and pointed to the door. While speaking the last few words, he didn't deliberately keep his voice down. This time the guard captain heard. General Xiong's final words were, "...if you've made up your mind, then go on."

Then the young man stood where he was for a long time before finally nodding extremely slowly. Without even taking his cap, he lowered his head and thoughtfully went out.

Twenty minutes later, Xue Xiaolu knocked on the office door of the uneasy Hu Bugui. Then he saw Su Qing following Xue Xiaolu as though nothing were the matter.

Su Qing got right to the point: "Captain Hu, there's something I want to discuss with you. Back then, I took a little devil with me, I don't know whether you remember. That little thing named Tu Tutu, also a grey seal. He's always lived with me. Can I bring him here, too?"

AN ABNORMAL WAVEBAND

WHEN HU BUGUI finished all the formalities and was planning to take Su Qing around headquarters, he found that he was already rather familiar with it—even more familiar than the captain of the RZ Unit. After all, Captain Hu had only operated aboveground; he hadn't spent time in the sewers.

In his gloom, Captain Hu couldn't resist asking, "What do you think of our headquarters' defense system?"

Su Qing casually answered, "It's pretty good."

Then he remembered how he had gotten in. The two of them paused awkwardly at the same time. After a while, Su Qing said, "...I didn't mean anything by it. I was just being polite."

Hu Bugui made no sound. Su Qing carefully glanced at his future superior's expression and found that there was once again a not very conspicuous smile on Hu Bugui's face. There were fine laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. So Su Qing smiled along with him, shaking his head, thinking that suddenly there was a feeling of all debts of gratitude and vengeance dying out between him and Hu Bugui with a chance smile.

He raised his head and looked at the RZ Unit headquarters' main building and the guards posted at the gate, feeling that worldly affairs were a little fickle.

Hu Bugui began to slowly explain the internal structure and working rules and regulations of the RZ Unit. He was much more at ease when talking about proper business. His speech was neither slow nor fast, like long ago, when he had told stories late at night. It was very orderly. Su Qing didn't respond anymore, listening with single-hearted devotion.

General Xiong left that same afternoon. After another day, he dispatched someone to bring Tu Tutu back. Though this little thing had been born un-

der the red flag, he had grown up alongside two professional swindlers. He had been somewhat influenced by what he had seen and heard.

A new recruit drove the car that brought him back. Whatever tricks Tu Tutu had been playing on this soldier, when Su Qing came out to pick him up, he was just in time to see the soldier's eyes all red and glistening with tears as he got money out of his pocket, firmly set on giving it to Tu Tutu.

And Tu Tutu was brazenly holding out his little paw, planning to take the money. Sadly, before his fingers could touch the Chairman's bright red head, he was lifted by the scruff of the neck. Tu Tutu gave an "ow!" and turned his head to look. When he saw a grim-faced Su Qing in front of him, he immediately put on a fawning smile and reached out to pat his crooked cap. "Hello, chief. You've been working hard, chief."

Su Qing rudely smacked him on the head.

The soldier who had brought Tu Tutu back already knew Su Qing. He brought his heels together and gave him a salute. Su Qing wasn't very used to this. The upshot was that the next moment, this soldier sniffed forcefully, his dark face flushing red at once under the darkness, like a mulberry.

Su Qing was amused. "What has the little thing been saying to you?"

Tu Tutu quickly said, "Chief, I didn't say anything, just talked some clean, sanitary, exhaust-free bullshit. Really, Grandpa Ji's guarantee!"

He had grown considerably taller in three years, and his skill at glib talk had improved at a tremendous pace. With two guardians like Su Qing and Ji Pengcheng, he seemed ready to complete his apprenticeship any day.

Su Qing smiled at "Brother Mulberry" and told him to go report back. When he had gone, he coolly said, "Your Grandpa Ji is guaranteed not to speak the truth—where *is* the old fart?"

Tu Tutu took a step back, affectedly scrunched up his shoulders, rolled his eyes upwards, and stroked a nonexistent goatee. Imitating Ji Pengcheng, he said with the self-importance of the elderly, "Oh, well, good, you have made something of yourself. From now on you'll be like a person!"

Su Qing heard the little whelp's speech become less and less sensible and wanted to roll up his sleeves. Tu Tutu quickly rolled his eyes back down. "That's not me talking, that's Grandpa Ji! Uncle Su, my butt knows where to go. I'll always sit on the same bench as you!"

Su Qing asked, "What else did he say?"

Tu Tutu stuck his hand in his pocket, felt around for ages, then came up with something as crumpled as a used piece of toilet paper and gave it to Su Qing. “He also told me to pass this on to you. The verbal message is ‘you’ll understand.’”

Su Qing opened it and read. The writing on the paper was Ji Pengcheng’s. The old swindler’s moral character was very bad, but his handwriting was excellent. Many people had been duped by his skill in writing both simplified and traditional characters with a soft brush or a hard pen, which really did give him some of the air of transcendent being. Ji Pengcheng had very briefly written him three lines:

“From the standpoint of physiological structure, I can be called human, and the rest is not to be considered.

“My name is Ji Pengcheng.

“Wherever I am is my home.”

There was nothing else. Tu Tutu stood on tiptoe and craned his neck over. “Uncle Su, what does it say? I can’t understand it at all.”

Su Qing smiled, put the paper away, and stroked Tu Tutu’s head, affectionately saying, “You don’t understand? That’s normal. Your IQ is too low.”

Tu Tutu’s face turned green.

Just then, Xue Xiaolu came over. “Hey, the tech department’s people seem to have something urgent. They’ve called an emergency muster.” Then she saw Tu Tutu rolling his big eyes and staring at her furtively. She bent down and beckoned, saying to Su Qing, “I’ll get the child settled for you, don’t worry.”

Su Qing nodded, then turned and went towards the conference room.

Beaming, Xue Xiaolu said to Tu Tutu, “Last time I saw you, you were tiny, and now you’ve grown up so tall. Do you still remember me?”

Tu Tutu, looking cute, opened his bright and innocent big eyes and said, “I remember. Jiejie is the most beautiful. I would forget anyone before I forgot jiejie.”

This flattery was perfectly placed. Xue Xiaolu was instantly overcome with delight. “What a sweet talker. Who did you learn it from?”

Tu Tutu continued adorably flashing his gleaming eyes in blink after blink. “Huh? I’m telling the truth! Da-jiejie really is the most beautiful, even

better looking than my English teacher, even better looking than the celebrities in the posters my classmate buys!”

Xue Xiaolu was about to die of fondness for this little thing—of course, she didn’t know that Tu Tutu’s English teacher was a balding middle-aged man, and the celebrities in the posters his classmate bought were named Zeng-ge, Chun-ge²²...

Tu Tutu jabbered on, flattering. Suddenly, his words came to a halt. Xue Xiaolu looked up and saw Hu Bugui with a cigarette in his mouth walking towards them. Xue Xiaolu knew that their captain’s aura was too strong and thought that the kid was scared. So she quietly said into Tu Tutu’s ear, “Don’t be scared, this uncle has a very good temper. He just looks stern, but really he isn’t scary at all.”

Sadly, she was completely mistaken. Tu Tutu still remembered Hu Bugui. He had faintly known back then that this uncle was the most important, so he was just hatching little plans, considering how to get on good terms with this boss and find himself a solid backer.

Hu Bugui had also seen Tu Tutu. He stopped in his tracks. Tu Tutu obediently raised his head and crisply called out, “Hello, uncle.”

Hu Bugui patted him on the head, took a brightly colored handful of candy from his pocket, and shoved it into Tu Tutu’s pocket. Xue Xiaolu’s eyes nearly fell out of her head. Even thinking with your toe, you would know that their Captain Hu never ate this stuff himself. Had he timed it on purpose so he could give the candy to the child, or was it to give to a certain person...?

Hu Bugui was in a hurry to get to the conference room. He gave Xue Xiaolu an order and was about to leave, but, as if he had remembered something, his steps stopped again after shifting a bit. He lowered his eyes, thoughtfully looked at Tu Tutu for a while, then all of a sudden quietly asked, “How have you been living these last few years? Have you been doing well?”

There were no traces to be seen from Su Qing. No matter what you asked him, he would answer that it was fine. Hu Bugui saw Tu Tutu, remembered this, and decided to ask the child for the truth—sadly, he had figured wrong. He didn’t know that Tu Tutu was a miniature edition little swindler.

Tu Tutu's eyes spun and his little mouth pursed in a tearful way, looking just like the real thing. Pitifully, he said, "It's been very hard. Uncle Su is always changing jobs. He only comes home in the middle of the night and leaves in the morning before daylight. Sometimes I don't see him for weeks at a time..."

Not seeing Su Qing for weeks at a time, not being criticized for not finishing his homework or failing a test, was one of Tu Tutu's beautiful dreams.

"Sometimes he moves very heavy bricks and pieces of metal. In summer he sometimes has to wear long sleeves or else all the scraped places would show..."

The heavy objects he moved were all the ones Ji Pengcheng tied onto him, and the injuries came from internal strife with Ji Pengcheng.

"And we're always moving. Whenever I've just gotten familiar with my classmates at school, we have to switch to another place. The teachers always cry when I leave..."

Of course the teachers were crying with joy at finally getting rid of this chaotic little fiend—Tu Tutu wiped his eyes, actually forcing out a few teardrops.

Xue Xiaolu was devastated. Hu Bugui pursed his lips and didn't say a word. So Tu Tutu looked up at him with his tear-misted eyes. "Uncle, will we have to move again after this?"

Hu Bugui sighed and softened his voice. "No, not this time. You won't move again. You'll stay here forever. If you're unhappy about anything in the future, come see me and tell me about it, do you hear?"

Tu Tutu buried his face against Xue Xiaolu's fragrant bosom. Very pleased with himself, he thought, Heh-heh, that's what I was waiting for you to say.

With this delay, Hu Bugui became the final person to arrive in the conference room. As soon as he walked through the door, he saw Xu Ruchong standing to one side. There was a huge instrument on the table. Su Qing had naturally been included in the field personnel group and had spontaneously sat down next to Qin Luo. So Qin Luo was having another attack. She simply didn't even dare to raise her head, didn't dare to take a single glance at him.

Hu Bugui patted her on the shoulder and rescued this social anxiety sufferer, sitting between the two of them. He asked Xu Ruchong, “What’s the matter? What is this thing?”

Xu Ruchong was in high spirits. “This is actually a byproduct of the emotional blocker we made before. It’s an emotional detector. Before, we’ve always concentrated our attention on power but ignored the source of the blue seal energy system—emotion. Do you know what the fundamental nature of emotion is?”

Awkward silence.

But Xu Ruchong’s enthusiasm didn’t decrease in the least. Gesticulating joyfully, he said, “The current theory believes that emotion is fundamentally a wave. Physics argues that the origin of power is waves. Emotion, meanwhile, is like light, both a wave and a particle. Its transmission medium is very particular. There was a physicist named Stephen Lord who proved the existence of this medium. We normally call it the MTC medium. It’s a very particular medium, like...”

Hu Bugui knocked on the table. “Xu Ruchong, that’s about enough.”

Xu Ruchong resentfully shut his mouth, showing himself very disdainful towards this lack of interest in a deeper understanding.

Fang Xiu looked at the instrument on the table and said with a look: “So?”

Xu Ruchong clapped his hands together. “So, human emotions have certain frequencies. Over a long period of analysis, I’ve found that the frequency of happiness is a little higher, and the frequency of fear is a little lower. As for why opposing emotions counteract each other, I haven’t yet looked into it. For now I can only explain it using the fact that emotional waves possess a wave-particle duality. There may be some characteristic of the particle...”

Hu Bugui knocked on the table again, indicating for him to speak Chinese.

Xu Ruchong stiffly came to a halt and sighed, his expression aggrieved. “Yes, sir. The important point is, the frequencies of human emotions fall within a certain range, like the frequencies that our ears can hear. Normally, they can’t exceed this waveband.”

Fang Xiu, finding this a little hard to understand, frowned. “You mean that...humans can’t be especially pleased or especially angry? Huh? That can’t be right.”

Xu Ruchong looked disdainfully at him with his four eyes. “Was your high school physics class taught by your PE coach? Can’t you tell the difference between frequency and amplitude?”

Fang Xiu quickly said, “Yes, yes, yes, Master Xu, please proceed.”

Only then did Xu Ruchong continue: “What I mean is that anything that exceeds this waveband doesn’t come from a human—however, this instrument of ours just caught a very special waveband. Come take a look!”

Fang Xiu and Lu Qingbai responded to Master Xu’s call, drawing close to have a look. Then they met each other’s eyes and simultaneously indicated that they didn’t understand.

Xu Ruchong pulled up the instrument’s screen and pointed to a little segment of waveband on it that looked like an earthworm. “Damn, how can there be such a huge disparity in human IQ? Is there any lower limit? Look here! It’s this segment. It’s obviously forty times higher than the highest waveband for human emotions. Because it’s so high, I actually didn’t notice it at first!”

Su Qing asked, “If it isn’t human, then what is it?”

Smiling foolishly, Xu Ruchong. “That...remains to be analyzed.”

Hu Bugui glared him. “Bullshit! Turn on the projection ASAP, see what the circumstances are.”

Only then did Xu Ruchong remember that this was an option. He hurriedly flipped over the surface of the conference table. Inside was a neatly laid out keyboard. Master Xu’s fingers flew over it. Ten minutes later, an image from the outskirts lit up before everyone’s eyes—it looked like a very remote place. There were no roads or villages around it, and no sign of people. They were looking at a big patch of wilderness.

The camera slowly revolved in place. Xu Ruchong whispered, “Strange, the source ought to be this place...”

All of a sudden, Su Qing, who had been indolently leaning back in his chair, sat up straight. “Wait, stop there, move the camera down a little.”

The camera slowly went down. Everyone’s gazes collected on the screen. Su Qing frowned. “What’s that thing buried underground with a tip sticking out? Why does it look like a hand to me?”

THE MYSTERIOUS BRACELET

HU BUGUI arrived on the scene with the three-person field personnel team, now including Su Qing. Personally Hu Bugui had the boldness of execution that stems from great skill. With him driving them, the RZ Unit's members generally didn't hesitate. They turned the energy detector up to its maximum sensitivity and drove a military jeep right in.

Of course, this was all built on the premise of the tech department's analysis confirming that it was safe for the time being.

The whole way there, the energy detector showed no unusual alterations. This desolate patch of countryside had the leisurely quiet of wind moving through grass. There wasn't a trace of human activity. When they reached the place, Hu Bugui stopped the car and jumped out first. Qin Luo followed closely after him, staying far away from Su Qing—these last couple of days, even when this young lady had been forced by circumstances to speak to him, she had kept her head down and spoken in a voice as thin as gossamer, her speech as fast as though it had boarded a high-speed railway. When she had finished speaking quickly, she would rapidly withdraw. During the whole process, she would be as nervous as though in the middle of a street fight.

Su Qing watched her retreating figure in puzzlement and quietly asked Fang Xiu, "Have I offended her somehow?"

Fang Xiu said, "Ah, that's normal. She even blushes talking to a ten-year-old child. When she first came to the unit, we were all busy, and there was no one to greet her, so she stood at the door all day with her head down, holding onto her transfer order. Xiaolu only came to lead her in when it was already dark. When she saw anyone, she couldn't get a full sentence out. She's much better now—the two of you can complement each other."

Perhaps it was his mistake, but Su Qing felt like Fang Xiu was accusing him of being a chatterbox.

By this time, Hu Bugui had already squatted down and put on gloves. He looked back and beckoned to them, so the three of them came over together and found that Su Qing's binocular-like eyes really hadn't let him down. There was indeed a hand sticking up out of the ground—a dead person's hand.

When they managed to get the corpse out, they found that the deceased was a man, but they couldn't see his appearance anymore. All they could see was how he looked from the neck down; the head was all floating clouds. Looking at this gentleman's venerable countenance, Su Qing remembered an old game he had played when he had been very little, called *Theme Hospital*. It had a type of patient with Bloaty Head disease. These patients needed to go to the hospital and have the doctor puncture their head like a balloon, nip off a part, then reinflate it.

Sadly, after this citizen's had been punctured and nipped, the quack had forgotten to reinflate it for him.

Even Fang Xiu and Qin Luo hissed. Fang Xiu, pale-faced, dodged aside. "What's going on here?"

Su Qing squatted down and opened the deceased's shirt. The area under his collarbones was clean. There was nothing there. He was a little perplexed. "Are we sure this person is connected to Utopia? I remember that normally within Utopia, apart from blue seals and grey seals, there were only working personnel."

He picked up the deceased's hand. The deceased had very coarse hands, covered in calluses. Su Qing examined it and judged: "I believe this man did manual labor when he was alive."

Fang Xiu was rather curious about him, so he asked, "You can tell that just by looking at his hand?"

Su Qing curved his eyes in a smile and half-jokingly said, "Not only that—give me any hand, and I can tell you whether he's married, whether he has kids, what he does and what he used to do, and I'll know whether he was a Baigujing or a Zhu Bajie²³ in his past life, whether he's had ease or misfortune in this life, and whether he's in danger of meeting a bloody fate soon. For this man, I not only know his approximate labor intensity, I can

also see that he was a construction worker for a long period before his death.”

Listening to this for its meaning, the others heard that Su Qing was spouting nonsense. But Hu Bugui gave him a profound look, becoming increasingly convinced of the truth of Tu Tutu’s lies about how difficult their lives had been and how hard Su Qing had worked. In his eyes, Su Qing was simply like a wilting cabbage, surrounded by hardships, disabled in body but firm in spirit, every pore letting out a smoke called “deep bitterness.”

Captain Hu’s heart with its restless desire to aid the poor swayed once more and sank for a while. His expression when he looked at Su Qing was grieved.

Fortunately, his first time out on this kind of mission, Su Qing was extremely excited and didn’t notice him.

Su Qing lowered himself and cautiously crawled over to carefully examine the head that someone had forgotten to inflate. He reached out to squeeze the earpiece on his ear and asked, “Dr. Lu, can you tell what happened to this man’s head? Reasonably speaking, neither sharp weapons nor blunt instruments would be able to create this result. Did he really get pumped full of air and explode?”

Lu Qingbai’s voice came from the communicator: “Back when we caught some Utopia members who self-destructed, it had basically this result. Do you see if there’s a Utopia insignia on his clothing?”

“There isn’t,” Hu Bugui put in. “I checked. And if he had blown up from an implanted chip, there should be traces of the remnants of the chip. For the moment we haven’t found any.”

“And also, what’s going on with the unusual frequency of emotional waves that you were talking about?” Su Qing asked. “Could he be giving them off?”

Lu Qingbai paused. After a long time, he somewhat hesitantly said, “No...that’s not possible. Xu Ruchong says that under ordinary circumstances, energy waves of that frequency can’t form inside the human brain. If it really is forty times the frequency of ordinary emotions...”

“Then can it still count as emotion?” Su Qing asked as he rolled up the dead man’s sleeve to inspect. “Emotion ought to be something that humans can feel, right? Actually, there’s a question I’ve been thinking about all these years. If the function of the energy crystal is to convert emotion into energy,

then what is its mechanism? Could it be that if emotional waves rise to an abnormal waveband, they'll be power in themselves?"

Lu Qingbai gave a "hey!", paused for a moment, then all of a sudden loudly said, "That makes sense! Lao Xu, get a look at this, our field group finally has a gorilla with an IQ that's evolved to the human level!"

Su Qing: "..."

He really felt like he was getting shot lying down.

But before Xu Ruchong could respond, Su Qing and the others heard an explosion over the comms. Then, headquarters' alarm, which had been unusually put-upon over the last few days, once again poured its soul into howling. Mixed in was a scream in an altered pitch from Xu Ruchong.

Hu Bugui pressed down on the communicator on his ear. "What happened?"

There was an uproar over the comms, and then Xu Ruchong yelled hysterically: "It's on fire, it's on fire, stamp it out! Ow! It's about to light me on fire, it's all burnt!"

Fang Xiu took out a little screen from the bag hanging at his waist and connected to headquarters, and they all saw Xu Ruchong's appearance, which very much belonged to the Picasso school—a small part of his bangs had been scorched, his glasses hung askew on his ears, and his face was covered in soot. He was hopping in front of the screen, reaching out his hands to try to block the projection's filming device. "Don't broadcast, don't broadcast! Get rid of this roll!"

Amid the chaos of war, Lu Qingbai calmly explained: "It's all right. Master Xu has laid down his life for scientific research. He just blew up the lab."

Xu Ruchong seemed to have taken rat poison. He jumped up with unusual excitement. Not minding his appearance, he put his hands on the recording image. "Which one of you just said that high frequency emotions are energy? Who said that? Hahaha, great minds really fucking do think alike! I just performed a simple experiment. I found a neutral liquid with a similar density to the brain, then manually imitated emotional waves and slowly raised their frequency. Sadly, the technology here isn't up to snuff. I could only raise it to five times the frequency at most. And guess what happened?"

“...” From the deserted countryside, the four of them speechlessly watched Xu Ruchong jumping around with his head like a plucked chicken’s.

“Hahahaha, it blew up!”

“...” Hu Bugui and the others absolutely couldn’t understand what the hell he was so worked up about.

“Yes,” Lu Qingbai said coolly, “Master Xu was only concerned about the density but forgot to consider the flammability of the liquid and nearly got himself turned into a roast pig.”

Xu Ruchong waved a hand, so stirred up that he was becoming incoherent. “That’s a minor detail, the crucial thing is that I may have discovered the mechanism by which the energy crystal functions off emotions! My heavens, this is tremendous, why didn’t I think of it before?! Su Qing, next time we’re on vacation, you have to come buy a lottery ticket for me, you really are a good luck charm, hahaha! I’ll rely on you to get myself a wife!”

The corners of Su Qing’s lips twitched. He thought that his mission was truly glorious but arduous.

But Hu Bugui’s brow furrowed. “You said you could only raise the frequency five times as high, and there was an explosion? But they produced a frequency forty times higher.”

Xu Ruchong’s smile instantly froze on his face, like an eggplant withered by the frost. Hu Bugui’s frown deepened. “In other words, they’re more than a few steps ahead of our tech department in this respect.”

Xu Ruchong went from a frosted eggplant to a drooping cucumber, seeming even more malnourished. Hu Bugui’s expression began to turn grim. Dark clouds fell across his face and lowered.

Just then, Fang Xiu found a semi-transparent bracelet on the dead man’s elbow and touched it tentatively. There was no reaction. “What’s this?”

Wearing gloves, Su Qing reached out to take the bracelet off. The moment his hand touched the bracelet, the indicator needle on the energy detector in Hu Bugui’s hand suddenly turned a 180 degree angle.

“Don’t touch that!”

Sadly, it was already too late. In view of the fact that Fang Xiu had already pawed at it and that he was wearing gloves, Su Qing underestimated this thing’s danger. The moment he touched it, he felt as though an electric current ran right up from his fingertips. It was as if something slammed

heavily into his chest. His vision went dark. He subconsciously went backwards, breaking the connection between his fingers and the bracelet. It took him a long time to come around.

He heard someone loudly asking something near his ear. Su Qing's ears were ringing a little. It was all a drone. He couldn't hear clearly, but he could still guess what the person was saying. He waved a hand and quietly said, "I'm fine, I'm fine, no big deal."

His voice was a little indistinct. He only then found that even his tongue was numb.

When Su Qing finished his sentence, Fang Xiu and Qin Luo stood there watching as their Captain Hu took absolutely no regard for the wishes of the interested party. He picked him up without so much as a by-your-leave and strode away in the direction of the car.

The two groups, Fang Xiu and Qin Luo here and Lu Qingbai and Xu Ruchong there, each began to look at each other helplessly.

After a long time, Xu Ruchong finally gave an "ah." "What happened?"

"I was going to ask you." Fang Xiu recovered and looked seriously at the bracelet he had touched. He slowly reached out a hand again.

Qin Luo watched from beside him, not daring to breathe too loudly. "Be careful."

But nothing happened, and there was no reaction from the energy detector. Fang Xiu hesitantly took the mysterious bracelet off the dead man's arm and held it in his hands. Just then, there was a faint pop, and this bracelet made out of some unknown material suddenly broke down the middle, turning grey at a speed visible to the naked eye.

THE MYSTERIOUS BRACELET (2)

IF YOU ASKED Su Qing to describe it, then the feeling he had was numbness all over. It wasn't that he couldn't move. It was like the feeling of numbness in your legs after spending too long squatting over a toilet and then suddenly standing up. When this feeling spread to your whole body, it was very irksome, making a person not know whether to laugh or cry.

Fang Xiu and Qin Luo got into the car together and showed the mysterious bracelet to Dr. Lu and Master Xu. Xu Ruchong and Lu Qingbai deliberated in whispers for a long time. Then Lu Qingbai said, "Xiao Su, how are you feeling now?"

Su Qing, grimacing, said, "Numb, but a little better than before."

Hu Bugui was a little anxious. "What happened to him?"

Lu Qingbai considered for a long time, then said, "Based on our preliminary conjectures, perhaps he was short-circuited."

Su Qing's features instantly twisted. Hu Bugui at once anxiously asked, "How do you feel?"

"No..." Su Qing struggled to look at Lu Qingbai on the little screen and forced out a fake smile. "It's just that I heard what Dr. Lu said and felt like I got kicked in the teeth by a donkey."

Lu Qingbai felt that he was being insulted, but he opened his mouth, didn't know how to respond, then deflated, feeling a little gloomy.

After a very long time, Su Qing slowly recovered. He drank two bottles of water in one gulp. The four of them turned the site upside down and in the end didn't find anything of value. Fang Xiu judged that the body must simply have been dumped here.

Su Qing squatted on the ground, propping up his chin, holding an evidence bag in his hand. In the bag was the mysterious bracelet. Though Hu Bugui was strongly opposed, Su Qing still insisted on making another exper-

iment of himself. He found that the thing had broken completely. There was no reaction this time. He asked, “Getting back to the main subject, why would a corpse be sending out such high frequency emotional waves? Rising from the dead?”

When he had just spoken, his expression suddenly turned serious. He tilted his head, frowned, stuck up his index finger and shushed. “Wait, don’t talk. Listen, guys.”

A breeze rustled the abundant weeds that were past their prime and beginning to yellow, raising a chilly layer of gooseflesh of people’s skin, making a sound like a sob when it passed through cracks in the rocks. Su Qing’s expression was very grave, making the scene appear increasingly haunted. Fang Xiu hopped up, anxiously watching Su Qing. Qin Luo also couldn’t resist taking a step back, away from the body.

Hu Bugui asked, “What is it? What do you hear?”

Then Su Qing raised his head and showed his small white teeth in a grin. “Half-time break. I was joking.”

Fang Xiu missed a breath and nearly got a stitch in his side. Qin Luo’s face turned red. Hu Bugui looked at him in some exasperation. He wanted to say something, but seeing him in a good mood, he couldn’t bear to. After hemming and hawing for an age, he reached out to give him a smack on the head. “Stop that.”

Afterwards, Hu Bugui couldn’t resist thinking—he knew that there was a type of mental illness in which people were addicted to stealing things. Maybe they weren’t missing anything; they just couldn’t resist wanting to steal. He thought that Su Qing’s situation was about the same as that. He must have suffered too much over the last few years and developed this glib-tongued habit. He needed to fool people now and then to be able to let off the enormous psychological stress.

So Captain Hu felt conscience-stricken. General Xiong had warned him that he had to make Su Qing feel relaxed and safe when interacting with him. He couldn’t put too much pressure on him. Hu Bugui thought that that mild “stop that” of his just now had been a little excessively strict, so he immediately started thinking of a way to make up for it.

He racked his brains, recalling his limited leisure time over the last few years and the even more limited recreational reading material he had consumed during it. He stiffly forced a smile onto his stern and proper face—

the others found it nearly a little horrifying. Then they heard him say in a tone just as stiff, practically in deadly earnest: “Wukong, you’re up to your tricks again.”

Su Qing: “...”

Qin Luo: “...”

Fang Xiu: “...”

Over the comms, even Xu Ruchong and Lu Qingbai were quiet. All of them looked in silence at Hu Bugui’s forced, slightly asymmetrical smile and thought that the end of days had come early. The GDP was faltering, and Captain Hu had lost his senses.

Finally, with Hu Bugui apprehensive and the three others in disarray, they returned to headquarters. The medical and technical departments immediately each took over the work of studying the corpse and the mysterious bracelet. Su Qing meanwhile dropped a word and went out into the corridor. He opened a window, lit a cigarette, and put it in his mouth, lightly tapping on the window frame with one hand.

He hadn’t been deliberately teasing everyone just now. He really had heard a voice. He could even be certain of its source. It had come out of that bracelet that had broken in half. Hu Bugui had only been a step and a half away from him then, but he seemed not to have heard any sound. Su Qing didn’t know whether he had been hallucinating.

As soon as he closed his eyes, he could recall that voice. It belonged to a man. He was screaming himself hoarse: “Help! Help! Ahhh! Save me!”

It hadn’t only been the voice. He had also clearly “heard” fear.

In three years, though he had practiced meticulously, Su Qing from start to finish had been unable to clearly sense the emotions of people around him like Chen Lin had back then. Only when someone’s emotions were particular strong could he faintly perceive a trace of them.

He had been reflecting on the four types of emotion—happiness was floating, sadness was falling, fear was shrinking, and anger was release.

Shrinking fear was the hardest emotion for Su Qing to get a “fellow feeling” for. It was practically impossible to succeed even once. But just now, for the first time, he had very clearly felt that man’s fear. For humans, emotions were always tied to fixed events and memories. In that moment, Su Qing had suddenly recalled the scene of the first time he had come to the blue

seal base and been splashed with the brain matter of the grey seal Jiang Lan had shot.

This was a rather strange feeling, because Su Qing thought that even if Jiang Lan appeared in front of him again and shot another person before his eyes, things had changed—he wouldn't be scared. This was a very different feeling from when his grey seal had first been activated and he had been unable to distinguish between external emotions and his own.

So what the hell was that bracelet?

Just then, a voice suddenly broke through his thoughts.

“Su Qing?”

Su Qing turned his head to look. “Uncle Cheng!”

Cheng Weizhi was a little moved. He walked over in big strides and hugged Su Qing, slapping him twice on the back. “Good! How have you been all these years?”

Su Qing felt his heart sting a little, but despite the stinging there, his nose didn't begin to sting. The nerves between his expression and his emotions seemed to have rusted from not being used in too long.

“I heard Xiaolu say you had come back, but you've been busy, and I haven't found an opportunity to see you.” There were tears in Cheng Weizhi's eyes. He carefully scrutinized Su Qing. Suddenly, all sorts of feelings welled up in his heart, and he sighed. “You've changed quite a lot.”

It wasn't his appearance that had changed, but the look in his eyes.

Su Qing smiled. He figured there was nothing for him to do now, so he pulled Cheng Weizhi aside. “How about the two of us sit down and have a chat?”

So they went to Cheng Weizhi's room. Cheng Ge was amusing himself fiddling with things and ignored them. Su Qing put some pieces of candy in his pocket as an apology for shamelessly eating his candy before. Then he and Cheng Weizhi began to chat back and forth, and he explained the bracelet they had brought back.

Su Qing reached out and pressed on his own temple. “It wasn't a hallucination. I could tell. A hallucination wouldn't have triggered my ‘fellow feeling.’”

Cheng Weizhi was silent for a while. “No, you can't be so certain. Hallucinations are produced by your brain. They can appear in all kinds of forms.

There's no final conclusion. Your five senses and even the fellow feeling system of the energy crystal may all be impacted."

Su Qing frowned. "Do you think it was only my hallucination?"

Cheng Weizhi picked up his teacup but only held it suspended in midair. He didn't bring it up to his mouth. He considered carefully for a while. "Remember what I taught you. We'll try to use reasonable logic to look at this business—you received a 'shock' from this unknown bracelet, but when others touched it, there was no reaction, right?"

"Right, Fang Xiu also touched it, and he was fine."

Cheng Weizhi nodded and cautiously said, "As far as I'm aware, in regards to physiological structure, the greatest difference between you and Xiao Fang is the possession of a grey seal and a paired energy crystal system. We can temporarily accept this, yes?"

"In other words, what that thing shocks isn't people but energy crystals."

Cheng Weizhi hesitated, then said, "Rather, let's say that it established some particular resonance with your energy crystal. You say that you felt your whole body go numb, but you didn't lose control of your muscles. It's likely because of discomfort caused by the energy crystal system temporarily going out of control. Tying in the abnormal waveband Xiao Xu spoke of..."

Su Qing picked up: "He was already dead—I'm not a great expert, I may not be reckoning correctly—but from the look of him, I would say that he had been dead for over twenty-four hours already. So it's likely that the abnormal waveband was emitted by the bracelet."

"The waves emitted were uncontrollable, but they contained enormous power. That can't be denied," Cheng Weizhi said. "I'm wondering whether the bracelet you're talking about might be a sort of external energy crystal."

Su Qing was silent. After a long moment, he looked fixedly into Cheng Weizhi's eyes and quietly said, "Because the energy crystal's operative mechanism hasn't been thoroughly researched yet, this sort of external energy crystal would produce enormous power because it couldn't be controlled, and burst open the wearer's head. What does that seem likely to you?"

Cheng Weizhi stared, not catching up. But Su Qing immediately stood up. "Uncle, I'll come talk to see you again in a while. First I have to go to the tech department."

Cheng Weizhi stood up along with him. "What's wrong?"

Su Qing gave a cold laugh. “Given those fuckers’ usual behavior, I suspect that this time they’re performing human experimentation.”

As soon as Su Qing walked out of Cheng Weizhi’s door, he bumped into Hu Bugui coming towards him. “Captain Hu, I’ve just been talking to Uncle Cheng, and I suddenly wondered if they could be...”

Hu Bugui hurriedly nodded and held up the folder in his hand towards him. “I know, the report from the tech department has already been sent out. I’m notifying all members to go immediately to the conference room—Xiaolu!”

He raised his voice to bring Xue Xiaolu, who was just passing by, to a halt. “Tell Lu Qingbai that I want to have an autopsy report as soon as possible, and learn the identity of the deceased!”

“I have it all here. We’ve already confirmed the identity of the deceased.”

DONG JIANGUO

PASSING BY the shopfront of a dilapidated “communal bath,” you saw a little alley. At the mouth of the alley, the words “for demolition” were written large in white paint with a slightly sinister-looking underline.

Looking into the black alley, at first glance, it looked like a dead end. Only when you went in would you discover that inside was a little passage just wide enough for one person to pass through. Walking through, you had to watch where you put your feet, or you would accidentally step on an overturned paving stone or a patch of some unknown milky white substance sticking to the ground with a thick green growth.

On the scrap building materials by the wall hung a filthy plastic bag. A public toilet stink reverberated in the not very large space, mixing with damp and hitting you right in the face. Su Qing turned up the collar of his trench coat. He was carrying two bottles of wine and a gift box. He turned his head to avoid an open broken window, then turned back to instruct Qin Luo to be careful.

Qin Luo still didn't dare to look at him. She nodded silently and looked down at the little piece of paper she was holding—it was the address of their mysterious dead man, Dong Jianguo.

She hadn't known that there was such an overcrowded place in this city—these grey streets, twisting and turning in all directions, with overcrowded little houses everywhere, garbage flying when the wind blew, and traces of barbecue carts at the intersections. Though she had the address, she was still a little dizzy and turned around. She could only keep her head down and follow Su Qing.

Just then, a woman in pajamas appeared at the other end of the little street. She looked around forty, or perhaps a little older. Her yellowed hair

was clipped up high with a plastic clip. She was carrying a garbage bag and met Su Qing head on.

Su Qing's appearance could be considered very remarkable. The woman couldn't resist taking another look at him. Only one person could pass through the little street at a time, so the people at both ends were blocked. Su Qing looked back and pointed behind himself at Qin Luo, indicating that the two of them should retreat and let the woman come out.

The woman looked at the two of them hesitantly, a bit of vigilance appearing in her eyes. "Who do you want?"

Su Qing didn't speak, giving Qin Luo a look—Utopia was likely fermenting some major act. Before operating, they had to report to their superiors. General Xiong had called on purpose to indicate his satisfaction with the current makeup of the RZ Unit's core members and to request that they foster their strengths and circumvent weaknesses, developing on all fronts. They needed to overcome their bad habits. So Su Qing, who had been ready to go out on his own, had taken along this tail that breathed but didn't speak.

Qin Luo gave him a slightly panicked look. With an outsider present, Su Qing seemed a little more familiar, so she at last dared to look at him. Sadly, Su Qing suddenly pretended to develop an interest in an overturned paving stone at his feet. He thought, It's only saying hi, and this is a middle-aged woman, not some devastatingly beautiful young man you wouldn't dare to so much as look at. So he decided not to say a word.

There was nothing for it. She had to shuffle forward a step and say in a quiet voice, "H-hello, ma'am... We're looking for this person."

Qin Luo waved the piece of paper with Dong Jianguo's address written on it in front of the woman's eyes as though afraid someone would be blown away if she breathed too loudly.

The woman took the paper and glanced at it. When she looked up, her expression was even more cautious and vigilant. "Who are you people? What do you want with him?"

Qin Luo didn't know how to continue. She gave Su Qing another harassed look.

Smiling broadly, Su Qing said, "Sister, we're his relatives from back home. We've brought some things for him."

The woman frowned. “Relatives from back home? His parents have both been dead for years, and there’s only his dim-witted brother left back home. I haven’t heard of him having any other relatives.”

Su Qing didn’t answer. Instead, he looked her up and down. “You are...”

The woman said, “I’m Dong Jianguo’s wife. I’ve seen all his relatives from back home, and I’ve never seen any people like you.”

Su Qing gave an “ah” and looked back at Qin Luo in deliberate surprise, saying, “Oh, it’s our sister-in-law. I didn’t realize. She looks way too young for it.”

Qin Luo opened her mouth and briefly met Su Qing’s eyes, and found that his eyes were too sincere, so sincere that it didn’t look at all like he was telling lies. She had no choice but to nod silently.

The woman’s expression warmed a little, even displaying a trace of a smile. Su Qing continued: “Sister-in-law, you’ve forgotten, there are some cousins on Jianguo-ge’s third maternal uncle’s side. It’s been years since we’ve visited with each other.”

“You’re talking about...” The woman stared, thought for a long time, then doubtfully asked, “Do you mean you’re from the second cousin’s family?”

“Of course!” Su Qing, entirely unashamed. “It’s no wonder you don’t recognize me, I was only this tall when you married Jianguo-ge, still running around wearing open-split pants.”

The woman gave an “ah”, suddenly seeing the light. “Right, right, I remember a little, your childhood name was Xiao Dong, right?”

Boldly and confidently, Su Qing said, “That’s me, that’s me! Oh, wow, haha, it’s been years since anyone’s called me by my childhood name!”

The RZ Unit belonged to a secret branch. Whether they were collecting evidence or investigating, they couldn’t alert ordinary citizens. In the end, when the investigation was complete, they would go through some procedures to pass Dong Jianguo’s body on to the public security agency, and only then could his family be notified. The usual principle was that all operations were to be carried out secretly. At great need, they could temporarily impersonate the police, but there was currently no precedent for Su Qing’s flashy shamelessness.

The woman seemed to have relaxed, her expression warming entirely. She looked at Qin Luo with a happy smile. “Then this lady is...”

“My wife,” Su Qing casually cooked up.

Qin Luo felt the inside of her head buzz. Her very soul burst out. She stood where she was, staring foolishly.

Then Fang Xiu gave a howl over the comms. With a trace of a smile in his voice, he joked, “Su Qing, what’s going on with you? If she’s your wife, then what happens to me? It ought to be first come, first served, right?”

Qin Luo’s face was about ready to drip blood.

Hu Bugui gloomily cut in: “Enough. Fang Xiu, have you finished investigating his assets? Su Qing, don’t go too far with your jokes.”

Punishing the guilty and the innocent alike... Of course, given Captain Hu’s hidden inner world, perhaps it was primarily to punish a certain person.

The woman rather enthusiastically took Su Qing and Qin Luo inside. Su Qing put down the gift box and the wine, made some small talk, then looked all around. “Hey, sister, isn’t Jianguo-ge here?”

“No, he’s out working.” When the woman said this, Su Qing looked closely at her expression and found that her features looked expansive and her eyes lit up.

So he followed along: “He’s very capable. Everyone knows that.”

The woman curved her eyes in a smile, but she said, “Is he? He’s only making a living by the sweat of his brow. Look how small this place is—”

There was no need for her to say it. Qin Luo had noticed. The whole house was around ten meters square with a worn out couch, a little 21-inch TV, and a double bed in a corner. On the other side there was a curtain, separating off a “room.” Qin Luo glanced around and faintly saw some cartoon and comics posters sticking out from behind the curtain. She remembered that in the materials, Xue Xiaolu had said that Dong Jianguo had a daughter who was attending high school. This seemed to be the little girl’s space.

The woman tucked a strand of hair falling from her temple behind her ear. Bragging a bit, she said, “Although we *are* going to move soon. We bought a house this year. Though it isn’t big, either, at least it looks like something. Ah, it’s really better back home. It’s too hard living in the big city.”

Hu Bugui had been keeping his attention on them. He quietly said over the comms: “It seems that the family’s financial situation suddenly improved. Could he have taken part in Utopia’s human experimentation willingly?”

Su Qing immediately said, “What’s so great about home? You have to get out and see the world. My wife and I came to seek shelter with da-ge—sister, we’re not strangers, tell me the truth, what does da-ge do? How much does he make?”

Hu Bugui found the expression “my wife and I” rather grating and wanted to admonish him again, but he was worried about interrupting his train of thought and held back.

“Eh, just temporary work, manual labor all over the place. He does whatever people make him do. How much can you earn like that? Just enough to keep body and soul together.”

As soon as he heard this, Su Qing knew that the woman was having an attack of petty-mindedness. She was afraid of having poor relations sponging off them, so she didn’t tell the truth. He pretended not to notice and moved the subject away. But the woman was good at keeping her mouth shut. Su Qing made several attempts and couldn’t get anything of much value out of her. Ordinarily, he would have time to visit with her a while longer, but Hu Bugui was urging them on. If Utopia really was performing human experimentation, then this business was major.

Just then, the door opened, and a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl came in. She had earbuds in and was wearing a school uniform too big for her, but there were rows of bracelets and hoops around her wrists. Looking closely, you could see that she was wearing nail polish, too. She walked in, glanced at Su Qing and Qin Luo, then, without saying a word, turned to go behind her own little curtain.

The woman looked on the verge of losing her temper. In a heavy voice, she shouted, “Xiao Jing, where are your manners? Don’t you see we have guests?”

The little girl kept a stiff face, seeming not to have heard. The woman stood up to scold her, and Su Qing quickly stood up to hold her back. “Sister, sister, don’t be angry with the kid.” This was a typical encounter between middle age and youth. The woman’s face turned red, and she began

to mutter obscenities. The girl shoved the curtain door closed in nonviolent noncooperation.

Su Qing had a thought and shot Qin Luo a look. “See, we’ve come at a bad time today. Da-ge isn’t here. When will he return? Should I come another day?”

The woman took a deep breath and forced down her anger. “He comes home once in two weeks. He was just back last week and left a bit of money. I figure you’ll have to wait until the middle of the month.”

Su Qing gave an “ah”. “So long?”

The woman said, “It’s not easy for him to come back. He’s outside the 5th Ring Road.”

Su Qing put on an expression of embarrassment and mumbled, “Sister, tell me if this works. You tell me how to contact da-ge, and we’ll go and see him. It’s really...a little urgent. Let me tell you the truth, Xiao Luo and I are planning to go it alone. We’ve contracted for a place, planning to go into business, and we want to find some people to join up with us—no need to put in money, just to put in some work for us, and later we’ll share the profits. When it comes to business, we need our own friends and family to feel secure, don’t you think so?”

The woman was dazed. “Well, why didn’t you say so? What are your plans?”

Su Qing said, “We’re planning to sell building materials. We’ve already settled the suppliers and the shopfront, and we’re just missing manpower. And da-ge has experience on this front. I figure that benefits ought to be kept within the family. If he has the time, he can come help out, be another boss. If he doesn’t have time, he can also recommend some friends. They’d still be our own people.”

The woman repeated “building materials make a profit” a few times. Her eyes spun. She grabbed a piece of paper and wrote an address and a land-line phone number. “Why don’t you try this? What he’s doing now, while he’s making money, it’s not long-term, and it’s tiring. Last time he came back, he was all white.”

Su Qing played the game up to the hilt, not leaving out a single polite formula or word of thanks, and heard their Captain Hu’s praise come over the comms: “Well done.” Then, taking the piece of paper, he left Dong Jianguo’s house with Qin Luo, one after another.

When they had only made two turns, Qin Luo suddenly grabbed Su Qing's clothes and quickly made a gesture.

This woman who blushed no matter what she did suddenly got a keen look in her eyes and nimbly pulled a silenced gun from her pant leg, then shot three times in a row—you could see how she had made it into the RZ Unit. The only time Qin Luo didn't blush was when she was shooting. Not only did she not blush, she really had skill.

At the same time, Su Qing suddenly jumped onto a wall. Hu Bugui roared, "Don't be rash, come back!"

Su Qing was selectively deaf. He called "you go ahead" to Qin Luo, and without even taking a partner was gone in a flash.

LIFE-AND-DEATH SPEED

GRIM-FACED, Hu Bugui slammed the gas pedal down to the floor. He hadn't said it over the comms, but he was actually two blocks away from Su Qing and Qin Luo.

Letting these two go out, Captain Hu absolutely couldn't feel easy—Qin Luo didn't know how to talk; you could send her to direct a battle or go into combat herself, but you couldn't send her to collect information. Su Qing, on the other hand, was really too good at talking; from a few direct and indirect confrontations, Hu Bugui had a deep awareness of this fellow's unrestrained style. No one knew what he was going to get up to.

But there was nothing for it. Even if he was worried, he couldn't let it show on his face. There had to come a day when Su Qing assumed responsibility for a task within the RZ Unit. He could only quietly follow so he could come quickly in case of incident. And indeed, there was an incident.

Qin Luo knew that the only way she could catch up to Su Qing would be with her bullets, but it wasn't like she could shoot at her own teammate. When she was at wit's end, a car horn came from the end of the little alley. Qin Luo saw Hu Bugui, and it was as though she was seeing a dear friend. She quickly ran over.

Hu Bugui asked, "What happened?"

"When we came out of Dong Jianguo's house, I realized we were being watched. I shot three times and believe I hit the target, but for some reason, the person still ran off..."

"Where's Su Qing?"

Qin Luo pointed.

"Get in," Hu Bugui said briefly. Qin Luo quickly jumped in. Before she had closed the door, Hu Bugui turned on a little screen on the steering wheel with a *smack*. A map of the whole residential neighborhood immedi-

ately appeared in front of them. Driving a car, Hu Bugui couldn't squeeze in anywhere like Su Qing. He took a glance, determined a route, and fiercely slammed on the gas pedal, charging out, black rage bubbling from his head. Qin Luo sat in the back, not even daring to breathe loudly.

Hu Bugui drove quick as lightning. There was a brown lens clamped to his nose bridge with all kinds of data quickly pulsing over it according to the map, the nearby energy readings, and the direction of the vehicle. Looking closely, the pulsing numbers seemed to float over Hu Bugui's eye, giving his already dark eye a certain deep coldness.—He didn't have any new energy crystal system. He couldn't gain extra energy from eating lots of candy and nutritional capsules like Su Qing, and he couldn't build his blessings on others' sufferings like the blue seals, becoming strong as the result of plunder—he came by his reaction speed and iron-like nature through at least a decade of genuine tempering under enemy fire.

Fierce, prudent, steady—he would stand his ground if Mount Tai collapsed in front of him.

Su Qing smelled a strong scent of blood and knew that Qin Luo's feel for a gun was truly good. She had definitely hit her target. He only needed to follow this smell.

He knew this person wasn't a blue seal. The gun in Qin Luo's pant leg was only an ordinary handgun. Even Su Qing himself, if he concentrated, could have dodged it, let alone the blue seals, who despite their imperfect systems had much stronger explosive force and constitutions than he did with his double core grey seal. They wouldn't have been hit so easily.

So, if this was an ordinary person, how could they still move so quickly after getting shot?

Su Qing thought that this person had to be using some sort of external technological means. He suddenly turned down another alley, raising his speed to the utmost, looking like an afterimage flashing by.

He wasn't like Qin Luo. Su Qing had spent quite some time in anthills like this, and he was accustomed to getting a firm grasp on his surroundings. The two of them had walked the same path, and while Qin Luo had been dizzy and turned around, he had a map in his mind that was no less detailed than Hu Bugui's.

Three sides raced through this extremely cramped and narrow space. Hu Bugui was calculating where Su Qing would go, while Su Qing was calculat-

ing what tactics the fleeing person using mechanical support would adopt.

Just then, a bullet ripped through the air and brushed Su Qing's shoulder to hit the foot of a wall. Su Qing raised his head at once. A red light flashed on him. He immediately grabbed the eaves and flipped down to the ground. The second bullet hit hard on his heels.

Su Qing felt a chill at heart. He knew that this sniper couldn't be an ordinary person.

Hu Bugui had no time to fly into a rage. He reminded him: "The multi-function communicator can produce an ultra thin telescopic lens. Take note of the sniper's position!"

Su Qing ignored him. With his current vision, even without a telescope, as long as he knew the direction, he could still clearly see anyone in range. The problem was that he hadn't undergone strict training. He couldn't determine the bullet's path or the sniper's possible position.

He could only divide his attention, chasing the smell of blood while he hopped around dodging bullets the thickness of tarsal bones. In under half a minute, the hem of his somewhat wide trench coat had been shot through. Su Qing simply took the trench coat off and tossed it aside. He gripped a few double-edged knives between his fingers. These knives were twice the length of an adult's middle finger. At a glance, it looked like he had suddenly grown a monster's claws.

The red dot following him like a shadow flashed over the center of his brow; the next instant it flashed into his eye. Su Qing knew the situation was bad.

He was more than slippery enough—he had very rarely run into such a scene of life and death speed. Hu Bugui seemed to be saying something, but he didn't pay attention. All his mental force was concentrated in his eyes and ears. He broke through his highest speed once more, changing course, but no matter what, he couldn't throw off the red dot that seemed to be growing on him.

He didn't know where this mysterious sniper had come from. Su Qing felt like a panic-stricken rat scrambling around under the gaze of a nearby malicious cat. Before, the cat had been teasing him, and now it had run out of patience and gone straight to the main event.

When the bullet came, Su Qing felt as though he couldn't see anything. Only that fatal object remained. The sniper had control of the whole situa-

tion. Only in the instant after they squeezed the trigger and everything was approaching an end did they no longer have control.

Su Qing's final foothold was on a dump for old bricks. He went to his knees in the extremely narrow place, raised a hand, and aimed the faces of the knives at the bullet. Then an impact force even stronger than he had imagined hit the raised faces of the knives, immediately tearing cuts between Su Qing's fingers. Two of the three knives between his fingers broke at once, and the last one slipped out of his hand.

Just then, Su Qing glimpsed a human figure out of the corner of his eye—this person wore a backpack. The backpack looked like a chrysalis, with faint arteries on it. At a glance, Su Qing noticed that the thing even seemed to have a pulse, beat after beat. This person was half-drenched in blood but still pushing through the little alley at high speed.

He'd caught up!

Keeping his knees bent, he landed along with a pile of toppling bricks. Just before landing, he grabbed the dropped blade with his uninjured hand and flung the blade away with an opportune gesture.

He couldn't use a gun, but he had some skill in fooling around with these knives. Just as the person was about to turn a corner, he hit the largest "artery" on the backpack.

Pop! A string of sparks burst from the "backpack." The person staggered and fell forward, but before they could answer the call of gravity and fall flat on the ground, before Su Qing could celebrate, the head of the backpack-wearing person was pierced by a bullet right before Su Qing's eyes.

The bullet touched something. Right after being hit, the head exploded, like the dead Dong Jianguo.

Su Qing expressed his viewpoint: "Shit!" This time he finally saw the source of the bullet. The next instant, he shrank into a blind spot. His lips were turning white. He wiped his blood-covered hand on his pants and took several rapid breaths. Only then did he notice that he was soaked in cold sweat.

He was now less than three meters from the body of the person with the backpack. Su Qing, clinging tightly to the wall, turned his head to look and found that the "backpack" on that corpse with its face to the dirt and its back to the sky was completely destroyed. From his point of view, he could clearly see the mechanical structure inside. One glance made Su Qing feel a

little sick—the thing really did look like a silkworm chrysalis, with unidentified yellow liquid inside, wrapped around something that looked like a worm, though at a closer look it was made of metal. The “worm” was curled up at the point where several arteries met. Something set off a short-circuit, and half the thing’s “body” exploded, revealing a belly full of circuitry.

On the corpse’s wrist was another semi-transparent “bracelet.”

Su Qing remembered his earlier lesson. This time he didn’t dare to touch it with his hand. He took a silver-grey chain from his pocket with a little hook like a scorpion’s tail at the end of it—a product of the RZ Unit’s tech department, which was supposed to block unusual energy waves within a certain range.

Su Qing deftly flicked his wrist, and the little hook caught precisely on the corpse’s wrist. He used just the right amount of force, pulled back, and hooked the bracelet. This time he wasn’t “shocked,” but the moment the hook touched the bracelet, earth-shattering screams exploded from inside it, and the emotion of “fear” coming from fellow feeling once again rushed into his brain.

Su Qing’s hand shook. He felt his ears ache from the thundering. Then, like the one before, the semi-transparent bracelet quickly turned grey and broke in half.

There was a sudden gunshot. Su Qing turned his attention from a pile of ruins just in time to see a military vehicle brake sharply at the narrow intersection. The car roof was open, and a W03 sniper rifle was sticking out. Su Qing cried inwardly, thinking, At least this sniper knows to put on a silencer and keep quiet, while you’ve probably forgotten that there are people living here.

Luckily, the sniper wasn’t in the mood to have a shoot-out with Captain Hu, and they had probably accomplished their mission. They quickly withdrew.

At once, someone stuck their head out a window and looked down. As soon as they saw this battle, their first reaction was to rub their eyes, feeling that they hadn’t woken up yet.

Qin Luo got out of the car at once under their captain’s instructions to save the show. Carrying a camera that may have been real or fake over her shoulder, she jumped out. Her face as red as a pig’s butt and her eyes low-

ered, she stammered out her lines: “Cut! The-the male main character’s expression is too rigor... No, no, it’s too rigid...”

Su Qing noticed that the expression of the person looking down became even more wondering. He only wanted to cover his face.

He evened out his breathing, then shakily stood up. Putting on a displeased expression, he raised his bloody hand towards Qin Luo and yelled, “Director Qin, can’t we ask the screenwriter to change the script? I’ve gotten my hand covered in tomato paste three times. The stuff doesn’t wash off, I’ve written off shirt after shirt. It’s not like the production team is reimbursing me. My shirts are custom-made, very expensive, you know?”

He walked over with a cold and haughty expression, as though he was wearing a tux and walking down the red carpet, not covered in dirt and walking through a little street full of garbage. When he passed the person peering around, he looked up at them impatiently and snorted, whispering, “What’re you looking at, bumpkin?”

He was altogether an unsuccessful third-rate minor celebrity just there for show, putting on the airs of an A-lister.

Hu Bugui watched, grim-faced, as he got into the car, then finally withdrew into the driver’s seat along with the gun. He closed the car roof. Qin Luo, deeply relieved, followed him into the car, carrying the camera.

Hu Bugui turned the car into an F1, returning to headquarters as fast as lightning. As soon as he got out of the car, he said, “Qin Luo, go on ahead, connect with Fang Xiu and the others’ work for today.”

Qin Luo felt that the atmospheric pressure was as low as in the Mariana Trench. Without a word, she ran off at once.

Su Qing finally realized that he had angered Captain Hu, who never seemed to react to anything. Following the principle that a wise man knows when to retreat, he immediately owned up to his mistake. “Reporting to Captain Hu—I spent the whole trip reflecting deeply upon my error. My guts are turning black from remorse! Really, it’s too bad I can’t get them out and let you have a look...”

Hu Bugui’s anger had already burned up to his chest. When he saw this little swindler’s conduct, the flames of his anger leapt up, boiling his whole head. When it boiled, he raised his fist and punched Su Qing fiercely on the chin. Su Qing was caught off guard. The back of his head knocked against

the car door. He was a little dazed from the punch. His chin bruised at once at a speed visible to the naked eye.

He raised his hand to touch it. It may or may not have been on purpose, but the hand he raised was the one covered in blood that still hadn't dried. The visual effect of this was even more deeply tragic.

Hu Bugui's clenched fist relaxed at once. There was a brief and awkward silence between the two of them.

Finally, Hu Bugui said, "A thirty-thousand character self-reflection, and if you don't hand it in, you don't take a step out of headquarters starting now."

Then he turned and left. Only when he had gone far away did he contact Lu Qingbai. "Come out and see to Su Qing's injuries." He paused, then added, "Come in person."

Su Qing stood where he was, touching the split corner of his lip. He hissed, pulled a funny face, then indifferently thought that he was the most experienced in writing self-reflections. As a kid, his record had been fifty thousand characters. He hadn't expected to take up his old trade now.

Then he pressed down on the communicator. It had an automatic recording function. Su Qing rewound to before the sound of the gunshot, when he had heard the heartrending scream.

But he played forward a full five minutes, up to Hu Bugui's gunshot. In between, there were no sounds but his own breathing and the wind.

SERIAL NUMBER 11235

THE MAN had a gun over his shoulder and wore a huge pair of sunglasses. He watched from far away as the RZ Unit completely cleared the scene in under three minutes.

Half of the man's face was hidden behind the sunglasses, so his age didn't show. The contours of his face were distinct without seeming too harsh. He had a pair of long, slender hands like a pianist's. He leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette, looking as leisurely and carefree as if he had woken up from a midday nap in bright afternoon sunshine and was leaning idly against the headboard of his bed—as leisurely and carefree as if he hadn't been the one to kill that person just now.

Just then, his phone rang. The vibration and sound hadn't been turned off. First it vibrated, and then the ringtone sounded. He was dressed like one of the men in black in *The Matrix*, but his ringtone turned out to be the sacred tune “Love Sale²⁴.” Somehow, out of nowhere, he took on a somewhat vulgar counterfeit air.

This sniper of singular tastes unhurriedly blew out a smoke ring and enjoyed his distinctive ringtone for a while. He even seemed to be singing along with a few lines. After a long while, he finally picked up and gave a lazy “yeah.”

The person on the other end was silent for a while, then said in a somewhat deep male voice: “11235, can you change your ringtone and not make me listen to “Mouse Loves Rice”²⁵ for such a long time?”

“If you don't like listening to it, you can just not call, and we'll both save on our phone bills.” Sniper 11235 pinched out his cigarette, which had burned down to the end, and twisted it against the wall. He picked up a big bag, put the rifle away, then tossed the bag over his shoulder as though it were a wooden guitar. He took off the sunglasses and hung them from his

chest, then opened his tightly-buttoned coat, revealing a lining made of one very non-mainstream patch after another, as well as a half-ancient colorful shirt. Next, he bent down and rolled up his pant legs. The pant legs hung over his feet, one longer than the other, revealing a pair of obviously unmatched socks underneath, and a pair of knockoff sneakers with “NIKE” written as “NICE.” He had changed completely from a “man in black” to a kid selling knockoff CDs at a subway entrance.

He took another cigarette from the pack and put it in his mouth and with one hand fished out a lighter of the type that cost one yuan a piece at the supermarket, then lit up. As he sauntered along, he said, “Relax, I didn’t kill your ‘treasure.’”

The man on the other end paused slightly. “What? You saw him?”

11235 snickered. “As if you didn’t know. If you didn’t know, why would you call? So the two of us could have a nice chat about the weather? Don’t worry, the weather forecast said it would be sunny...”

There was a boom of thunder on the horizon. 11235 said, “...skies.”

“What do you think of him?”

11235 indistinctly said, “What do you expect? Same as that bunch of stamped stupid cunts in your lab.”

“No, you don’t understand,” the man on the phone said. “He isn’t like the blue seals. He’s perfect, with a complete metabolic system, a masterpiece that can separate external and internal emotions. His existence likely represents a whole new possibility for human evolution...”

11235 listened expressionlessly for ages as he talked up the merits of the double core grey seal as though he was conducting a pyramid scheme. In a response that was far from warm, he said, “So what? I’m not buying.”

The man on the phone: “...”

An inscrutable smile appeared on 11235’s face. “I’ll report to you. You pass on to the old man that I’ve accomplished my mission. Everyone who should have died is dead, everyone who shouldn’t have died is still hopping. If there’s nothing else, let’s hang up. I’m going out moonlighting. Don’t get in the way of my livelihood.”

Then he nimbly hung up the phone, turned it off, and swaggeringly turned into a subway entrance. He opened the big bag hiding the rifle from the other side and really did get a guitar out of it. He cleared his throat, squeezed onto a subway train heading towards the train station, and put on

a somewhat stupid, somewhat insolent smile: “Today, I’m bringing you an old song. I hope you’ll all like it. Those with change can support me materially, those without change can give me a bit of applause, thank you, thank you for your praise.”

His voice was actually very moving. He sang a rather elderly song. He did a round of the subway car and really did take in some earnings. His serial number was 11235. He was the fastest and most consummate gun in the world, and he didn’t have that ridiculous stamp on him. Of course, at this time, he didn’t know yet that the man he had teased into hopping up and down with his gun, whom he believed only had two more circles than others, would later become his arch-rival.

There were fates in the world that needed the word “treacherous” added in front of them.

Following the address that Su Qing and Qin Luo had brought back, the RZ Unit organized an armed team at the utmost rapid speed, but when they arrived, they still found that the premises had been vacated. On opening the door, there was only a floor littered with bodies and some pages of disjointed, incomprehensible materials. The move had clearly just taken place.

The moment they charged in, the bracelets on all the bodies’ wrists cracked simultaneously, turning grey. Sadly, Su Qing couldn’t accompany the team this time, so no one heard any of the mysteries of the universe contained in these bracelets.

And what about Su Qing? The wounds on his hand had been bandaged, and the bruise on his chin had been treated slightly. He was in his room in the RZ Unit headquarters, writing his self-reflection. Tu Tutu, who had come back from a class with Professor Cheng, walked in, peering around to examine his guardian’s other guise. He drew close and said a little fawningly, “Uncle Su, are you busy?”

Su Qing was just typing at lightning speed, as though he didn’t even have to think about the words—they simply came from the bottom of his heart. Hearing the question, he answered without even looking up.

“I need to write something.”

Tu Tutu trotted over and leaned on Su Qing’s shoulder to look. He was just in time to see a line pop up on the screen of Su Qing’s laptop: “This is a conduct that harms the discipline of the organization. Though it did not re-

sult in grave consequences, the circumstances were still very grave. What is discipline?”

Next came several hundred characters of circular definitions and reams of verbose and rambling exposition. Then he began to quote authorities: “Chairman A said... Leader B said... Elder C said... Master D said...”

Tu Tutu’s eyes opened wide. He developed an even greater admiration for Su Qing. He thought, My uncle really is full of statecraft. He’s memorized so many famous people’s famous sayings that he doesn’t even need to write a draft. How awesome! He couldn’t resist asking in a reverent voice, “Uncle, where did you learn all this from? You can write a composition just like this?”

Su Qing’s flying fingers paused. Then, not turning a hair, he said, “Oh, you won’t find it in books. It’s all their oral sayings.”

Tu Tutu became awestruck to the point of prostrating himself before him. He thought, He can even find the oral sayings! That’s not just awesome, that’s divine!

That night, around a dozen bodies were brought back. The technological and medical departments were turned upside down, busy confirming the bodies’ identities and studying the seized materials. The field personnel had been running around all day and each went their own ways. But Hu Bugui arrived at Su Qing’s door and stood there for an age without knocking, pacing in small circles.

Sudden, the door opened from inside. Su Qing had heard him going in circles at the door like a donkey pulling a millstone, so he stuck his head out. “Captain Hu, I’m sorry, the self-reflection still needs another couple of thousand characters. It’ll be done in a jiffy.”

Nearly finished with a thirty-thousand character self-reflection, and he had an injured hand. Hu Bugui found he had underestimated Su Qing’s bullshitting level. His gaze slowly traveled down and fell on the bruise on his chin. Su Qing’s skin was pale, making the bruise even more obvious. Hu Bugui’s gaze sank. He couldn’t resist reaching out a hand to rub his chin. “Does it still hurt?”

It did hurt a little, but that wasn’t the important point. Just as Hu Bugui’s rough fingers touched Su Qing’s skin, with a moment’s carelessness from one of them, his fingertips brushed the corner of Su Qing’s mouth, where the skin was very thin. It was as though a faint cluster of sparks burst out.

The two of them paused simultaneously, both feeling that this action was a little...over the line.

Just then, Tu Tutu, having taken a bath and put on little duck pajamas, ran out barefoot and yelled, "Imperial Uncle Su, come and read Our Imperial Presence a..."

Then he noticed the big shot named Hu's action and froze. He tipped his head back and blinked. He looked at one, looked at the other, then very calmly turned around and went back the way he had come, carrying his storybook. "Oh, haha, you're busy, forget it, I'll go close the door to my room."

Hu Bugui pulled his hand back a little awkwardly, unconsciously curling his fingertips into his palm.

Su Qing gave a dry cough. "He hasn't been raised right. How embarrassing for me."

Hu Bugui lowered his head. After a good while, he said, "During the day today, I was a little anxious..."

Su Qing immediately realized what his current superior had come to do. He quickly said, "No, no, no, *I* was in the wrong, Captain Hu, I know I'm asking for it sometimes, no need to be polite... No, I mean, you absolutely don't need to apologize."

"No matter what, I shouldn't have hit you."

"It's all right, I'm tough."

"..." Hu Bugui paused. "I'm sorry."

Su Qing looked at him with an especially exaggerated expression of being overwhelmed by unexpected flattery.

Hu Bugui forced a smile. "Don't be so rash in the future. We're a team. When something happens, we all discuss how to take care of it together. One person going in alone isn't our working style."

Su Qing immediately made a pledge: "Yes, sir, I definitely won't make trouble for the organization next time."

Hu Bugui looked at his sincere face and felt that there was nothing else to say. He nodded. "Rest early. Tomorrow is the weekend. If you want to go out, I'll arrange a car for you."

Su Qing said, "No problem. I guarantee I'll have the self-reflection finished before tomorrow."

Hu Bugui seemed to laugh softly. “Don’t worry about the self-reflection. Just remember your pledge.”

Su Qing pointed to heaven and swore: “May the Party and the people trust in me.”

Hu Bugui said, “OK, I trust you.” Then his gaze paused on his chin once more. Only then did he turn and go.

Su Qing closed the door behind him, thinking, Seriously? You dare to trust what I say?

Then he frowned and raised a hand to touch his chin. He thought he really had been run off his feet lately. He ought to find someone to “relax” with.

Hu Bugui... Su Qing tossed his head and sighed, thinking, He does have a good figure, but would hooking up with him be violating discipline?

Eh, how annoying. Forget about it, then.

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KOWTOW

SU QING wasn't really sure what benefit he would get out of doing this. It had been over three years. Would Su Chengde have moved? Even if he hadn't moved, would he necessarily be home? Would he have gone out to a social engagement? Would he have gone on another business trip somewhere?

Over the years, Su Qing had developed a habit. No matter where he went, he would find a way to get his hands on a B City evening paper. This paper was in fact worthless. Half of it was taken up by ads. Apart from the front page headlines concerning the government's major policies that every Chinese citizen already knew brought out as news, the unreliable celebrity gossip in the entertainment section, and the even less reliable commentary about stocks and bonds in the finance section, basically all that remained were lost-and-found notices and funeral announcements.

Su Qing's only sentiment towards it lay in the occasional publication of interviews or hearsay concerning the city's entrepreneurs. Su Chengde from time to time appeared in it, satisfying his old-fashioned vanity about "being on TV" and "being in the papers"—even if supposedly only B City's major institutions subscribed to the paper in question, and it was mostly used as a coaster for teacups.

When Su Qing saw anything concerning Su Chengde, he would cut it out and save it. Sometimes he would think, The old thing is closing on sixty, why does he still need to earn his living? What's he trying to do spending all day hustling and bustling? But when he asked this, Su Qing's heart began to sting—Su Chengde was on his own in that big house with only the housekeeper. If he didn't go gamble with his life doing business every day, what else was he supposed to do?

Su Qing felt that he had climbed thousands of walls and had at last fallen off of one—he duped others every day, and one day he had at last been duped by someone else. That day, General Xiong had asked him three questions, none of which he had been able to answer. So General Xiong had promised him: “If you come to the RZ Unit, I’ll give you an identity, an identity that will let you go home.”

However, he now had an identity and could say “I work for the government” as breezily as Hu Bugui had back then, and the name on his ID had at last returned to his original one, but he found that he still didn’t dare to go home. He didn’t know whether there would be another hidden sniper or another person with a “big chrysalis” on their back lying in wait.

He only dared to dress up as an old beggar with a face covered by a big grizzled beard and smeared pitch-dark, wearing very “cutting-edge” clothes and dragging a fake missing leg. Holding a small enamel tin, he huddled at an intersection Su Chengde had to pass on his way home from work.

There was often traffic at this intersection. Su Chengde sometimes had the driver take the car away and walked home on his own.

All afternoon, he leaned idly against a wall. When passersby tossed change into his bowl, he didn’t react and thank them, only squinted at the murky light. He only collected around ten yuan during the afternoon.

The sky gradually darkened, and people started to pass by one after another on their way home from work. The flow of people and cars became congested. Only then did Su Qing slowly come around. At the noisy, bustling intersection, he looked out from the sea of people and flow of traffic, gazing fixedly in one direction for a long time.

Suddenly, a light flashed in his thinly narrowed eyes. Su Qing’s back, disguised as an old beggar’s hunchback, stiffened undetectably, and the hands hanging at his sides shook slightly—he had seen a familiar car.

It was slowly coming his way through the congestion of the afternoon rush hour. Five hundred meters, four hundred meters...

Then that figure, unseen for many years but still familiar, got out of the car as usual. Someone slowly walked towards him. Su Qing cleared his slightly tight throat, which felt as though something was blocking it. Tapping his worn-out enamel tin, he began to sing quietly and deeply: “Men and ghosts, heaven and earth. Riches give the appearance of bounty. If life is like

a drunken dream, the way will be smooth. But sadly conscience remains—
26”

Every person came and went hurriedly. Very few people noticed the old beggar by the wall with his missing leg. Su Chengde's steps weren't fast, because he had nothing to do when he got home. The weather had been bad lately, and his joints were giving him trouble. He avoided the flow of people and went slowly along the wall, so by coincidence or not, he heard these lyrics mixed in with the din of the city.

Not a single note was on key, but the whole thing was permeated with an unspeakable sadness.

Su Chengde glanced at him and suddenly felt miserable. Self-mockingly, he thought, At least I still have some money. I don't need to beg on the street.

As he thought this, he paused next to the old beggar. He listened to him finish singing the whole song, forgetting the words and going off tune, humming and making it up.

Only then did the “old beggar”'s slightly sluggish gaze move away from the corner. Like the thousands upon thousands of people who begged for a living, he cupped his hand in a salute, bent over laboriously, and in the most humble gesture, lightly touched his forehead to the ground, indistinctly speaking in a dialect from some unknown place.

Su Chengde ordinarily would have ignored this. He was accustomed to vicious striving and snatching. His compassion had more or less died out long ago. Anyway, even a child knew that most of these beggars pretending to be handicapped were swindlers—this time, he had tragically hit upon the truth—but for some reason, he felt a stinging in his heart. He didn't consider it deeply, only thought that perhaps the old beggar's voice had moved him.

He was a poor wretch anyway, even if he was a swindler, sitting there day after day clasping his hands and kowtowing. He didn't have it so easy—Su Chengde took a handful of change out of his pocket and dropped it into the worn-out bowl, then walked directly home without a sideways glance.

He didn't see the old beggar behind him, like a pious believer crawling on a pilgrimage, dragging one long and one short leg, strenuously reverse

himself and kneel in his direction, his forehead pressed for a long time to the ice-cold ground, as though he had lost the strength to straighten up again.

In that lifetime, I traveled over mountains and rivers and places of worship, not to improve my next life, only to meet you on the way.²⁷

All the field personnel were on holiday, but Hu Bugui hadn't dared to leave. He was carefully following the results coming from the tech department, which had already worked through the night. Xu Ruchong came out to give a report sporting enormous dark circles under his eyes. "Captain Hu, Professor Cheng's guess makes sense. This thing really is something like an external energy crystal.

"There's a probe here that can enter the body—the basic principle of the operation of the energy crystal is the Law of Emotional Attraction, you know that, right?" Seeing Hu Bugui nod, Xu Ruchong rubbed his temples. "This has about the same function. The difference is that the emotions it absorbs are the wearer's own, and it absorbs a tiny amount, then alters the frequency of this tiny amount of emotion, and the high frequency emotional waves appear in the form of energy. But because the amount of emotions absorbed is small, the amount of energy transformed is also small. You guessed right. This thing must still be in its experimental stage."

"You mean that their human experimentation is for the purpose of making an artificial energy crystal?"

Xu Ruchong lowered his voice. "To my knowledge, the only double core in the world is Su Qing. Right now, no one understands exactly how he managed to survive. It seems that 'over there' they've also been attempting quite a bit of research over the last few years, but they couldn't produce another Su Qing. Now, if the human body is unable to withstand a second energy crystal, then it's easy to think that one method would be a manmade transplant."

Hu Bugui was silently for a while. "What stage has this thing reached?"

Xu Ruchong shook his head. "I can't say. The complexity of the energy crystal far surpasses human imagination. Perhaps it's another brain. Perhaps reproducing even a portion of its functions would take a very long time. Up to this point, we haven't been able to completely work out the energy crystal's operating mechanism, or exactly what it does, or why so many blue seals have such different qualities in all aspects."

Xu Ruchong took off his enormous glasses and rubbed his eyes hard. “This project really is too vast, and you can basically eliminate the possibility of animal experimentation. Either you only make inferences from theory, or... Frankly speaking, Captain Hu, I heard before that we also had a research institute that reported to the higher authorities that it wanted to gather volunteers to systematically research this thing, and General Xiong put a stop to it and turned them down.”

Hu Bugui coldly said, “Oh, yeah? If it were me, I would have turned them down, too. They had some nerve coming up with using humans as experimental subjects.”

Xu Ruchong sighed and lowered his voice even further, almost whispering to Hu Bugui: “Don’t say that, Captain Hu. General Xiong can put a stop to it once, but he can’t stop it forever. For depth, research on theory only will never match up to theory tied to experiments. General Xiong holds power now, so he has the final say in what goes and what doesn’t, but if there really comes a day when a complete double core becomes a technology it’s possible to master, what do you think we should do?”

Hu Bugui raised his eyes, looking profoundly at Xu Ruchong. He saw repressed worry appear on this normally brainless nerd’s face. “This brand-new race would inevitably have superiority over ordinary humans and hold this world’s authority and resources. When that time comes, what will our country do, and what will the other countries do? Captain Hu, I don’t understand detective work and field assignments, but I do understand something of this... I said to you long ago, both research and weapons are money sinks. You believe that behind Utopia, there isn’t a...”

He made a gesture, then shook his head with extreme slowness. “I don’t believe it.”

Hu Bugui raised a hand to bring his speech to a halt.

“Do your own work,” Hu Bugui said quietly after a silence. “Whether it comes to interest or authority, I only know one thing. No matter what, people are people—don’t worry.”

He tapped his thumb twice against his own shoulder. “Go on, and don’t talk about these things to a third person.”

That day, Su Qing only returned to headquarters very late at night. The others didn’t know when he had gone or how, and they didn’t know how he suddenly returned. His appearance was a little beleaguered when he re-

turned. Downstairs, he ran into Xue Xiaolu, holding a freshly arranged stack of materials. He nodded, smiled, then went right around her to take the elevator.

For some reason, Xue Xiaolu thought that Su Qing's smile had been a little forced.

During the weekend, there were far fewer people in the headquarters than usual. It was a rest period. The dining hall supplied alcohol, so Su Qing carried in a big crate and said to Tu Tutu, who was sitting on the couch watching TV, "Little devil, go spend the night with your Grandpa Cheng."

Tu Tutu dimly turned his head. There was a potato chip in his mouth, puffing up his cheek. As he chewed, he recited along with the female main character on TV: "You heartless bastard..."

Su Qing coldly said, "If I catch you watching any more soap operas, I'll break your legs."

Without another word, Tu Tutu picked up his chips, ran to his room, picked up his storybook, picture album, and jigsaw puzzle, and obediently trotted away. "You're busy, I'll get out of your way."

Having cleared the area, Su Qing took all the alcohol out of the crate and lined it up on the table—there was baijiu and beer and everything else. He used the edge of the table to open a beer bottle, took a big swig, stared fixedly at the table thinking of something, then suddenly stood back up. Carrying the bottle, he walked out of his room and went to knock next door.

He raised the bottle in his hand at Hu Bugui. "Come out, I'll treat you to drinks."

Hu Bugui: "..."

Everyone on Earth knew that the food and drinks at headquarters were all provided for free. Though Captain Hu was experienced and knowledgeable, he had still never seen an invitation so lacking in good faith.

Su Qing smiled, beckoning as he turned back to his own room. "If you can get me drunk, I'll provide you one-time service in bed."

Hu Bugui: "..."

He stood there dumb as a wooden chicken. After a moment, Su Qing suddenly came back and asked, "That wouldn't count as violating discipline, would it?"

Hu Bugui was dumbfounded. He automatically shook his head. Halfway through shaking it, he caught up. He simply didn't know what to say. He was stuck standing there with his head half-shaken. But Su Qing left the door open and swayed right in without consulting anyone.

NO IMPROPRIETY

THERE WAS ACTUALLY no need for anyone to get Su Qing drunk. He wanted to get himself drunk. He pried off the caps of two beer bottles at once. The caps fell. This gesture was as practiced and familiar as a bartender's—and he had in fact worked in that profession; there weren't many things in this world that he hadn't done—then he stood one bottle in front of Hu Bugui with a *clunk*. Spilled beer poured down from the mouth of the bottle and onto his hand.

Su Qing said, "I'll drink a toast. You do as you like."

Then he gulped down the whole bottle. By his hand was a "dish to go with wine"—a small cup of baijiu. There seemed to be a note stuck to his head that read "drowning my sorrows in drink." Su Qing threw down an empty bottle. In the midst of his pressing affairs, he found time to look at Hu Bugui and saw that Captain Hu really was "doing as he liked." He was only looking at the beer bottle in his hand, not touching a drop.

Su Qing shook his head. He didn't feel like make a fuss about it. Minding his own business, he opened another bottle.

Hu Bugui stood up and took a container of yogurt from the fridge, as well as a bag of Tu Tutu's leftover pastries. He put them on the coffee table. "Eat something. Don't hurt your stomach."

Su Qing nodded obediently. He didn't respond, and he didn't touch the food.

Hu Bugui sighed faintly and bent down to pick up a custard bun, then brought it to Su Qing's mouth. Su Qing made a slight dodge, his forehead furrowing gently. But he still took a bite. "Oh, give me a spiced salt one instead. I don't like this."

Hu Bugui silently pulled apart the few remaining buns he suspected were spiced salt ones, then picked one to give to him. Watching Su Qing eating it

from his hand, he quietly asked, “What’s wrong?”

Su Qing didn’t seem tipsy. Playing stupid, he asked in turn, “Huh? What do you mean?”

There were some people who probably had secret work in their bones. In practice, if they played “Legends of the Three Kingdoms,”²⁸ they would pick enemy agent each time, and when they were so drunk they wouldn’t know their own mothers, they still knew what to say and what not to say. If they really couldn’t keep up, they would simply hold their tongues.

When Su Qing was half drunk, Hu Bugui asked again, and earnestly advised him to stop drinking to avoid a hangover. Su Qing smiled but said nothing.

When he was so drunk it took him an age to understand what was being said to him, Hu Bugui’s forehead was tightly furrowed. Tonight he had said “That’s enough, stop drinking, if there’s something making you unhappy, just say it, why wreck your health” no less than twenty times, but Su Qing had ignored it all as though it was the wind blowing past his ear.

Hu Bugui said one final time, “What the hell is wrong with you?” Su Qing smiled foolishly at him and still didn’t say anything. Hu Bugui couldn’t resist going to grab the bottle in his hand. Su Qing hugged the bottle tightly like a miser, curling into the shape of shrimp in a corner of the couch. Slurring, he shouted, “You...you really are so fucking boring!”

Hu Bugui sternly admonished him: “What is your problem? If there’s something to say, can’t you just say it? Give me that!”

Su Qing continued to shout: “I won’t! Anyone who doesn’t fall over tonight is a rotten egg!”

“*You’re* the rotten egg.” Hu Bugui simply held down his shoulder and snatched the bottle out of his hand. The half-bottle of alcohol inside it spilled all over Su Qing, and his shirt became nearly transparent, revealing the attractive lines of his waist. Hu Bugui averted his gaze and kicked him in the calf. “Get up, get washed, and go get in bed.”

As a man of honor, Captain Hu in fact meant this “get in bed” purely in the literal sense. But Su Qing heard something not safe for children and smiled meaningfully. He sluggishly sat up on the couch and reached out a hand. Hu Bugui pulled him up. But Su Qing bonelessly threw himself at him, his fingers digging under the hem of Hu Bugui’s shirt. His slightly hot

and dry palm slowly began to stroke the firm muscles of Hu Bugui's waist. With his other hand, he stuck up an index finger by his mouth. Grinning, he lowered his voice and said, "Captain Hu, you really...really...have no tact."

Hu Bugui gave a start at his stroking. Grim-faced, he pulled his paw off himself and put it over his shoulder. "Don't fool around."

Su Qing chuckled. "Fine, fine... I won't fool around, you go ahead."

Hu Bugui simply didn't know what to say to this libertine. Half-pulling and half-carrying, he tossed him onto the bed. Then, looking at his soaked shirt, he paused. He hesitated for a long moment, then, keeping his mind as free of distracting thoughts as possible, he bent his head to undo his buttons. But for some reason, his hand was shaking a little.

The outcome of this shaking was that ages later, he had hardly undone any buttons. A drunkard's patience is limited. Su Qing conscientiously lay there for hardly any time, then sat up, swearing, and very rudely caught Hu Bugui around the neck. Hu Bugui was unprepared and nearly got his head held down. Su Qing indistinctly said, "Lao Hu, are you up for it or not?"

Hu Bugui pulled a long face and didn't speak. When he had just pulled Su Qing's arm off his neck, Su Qing plastered himself to him. His body temperature was a little high, and he smelled of alcohol, but it wasn't at all unpleasant. Instead, it was like a small needle faintly stabbing Hu Bugui's nerves.

Su Qing's slightly rapid breaths fell on his neck. His wet shirt was half open. He couldn't quite keep his eyes open, but he still struggled to grip Hu Bugui's collar. He searched for a direction, then began to nibble Hu Bugui's lips.

Hu Bugui had been sitting at the edge of the bed. When Su Qing pounced on him like this, his head buzzed, and he nearly fell to the floor. Finally he came to the end of his endurance, squeezed the back of Su Qing's neck with a bit of force, and finally managed to calm him down slightly.

Hu Bugui quickly pulled off Su Qing's shirt, grabbed a pajama top hanging over the back of a chair, and wrapped it around him. He adjusted the temperature of the air-conditioning, pulled up the covers, then looked at Su Qing's peaceful sleeping face. He couldn't resist curling his fingers and tap-

ping on his forehead, thinking, Fucking hell, do you really take me for Liuxia Hui²⁹?

Then he skittered back to his own room as though running away.

Long after, Su Qing asked him this question: he said, What kind of man of honor were you pretending to be? In the bar at the beginning, you were pretty open to all comers, weren't you?

Hu Bugui was silent, then said, Back then, I didn't know you yet.

A chance meeting followed by a separation. They didn't know each other, they weren't close; naturally there was no need to take special care.

Su Qing slept mightily that night, and when he got up the next morning, his head hurt mightily. Then he saw a hangover remedy on his nightstand and quickly grabbed it and swallowed it at once. He remembered what he had gotten up to the night before, but in view of his shamelessness, he wasn't planning on feeling embarrassed about it.

When he had just washed off the smell of alcohol, Xue Xiaolu came over to pound on his door. As soon as she charged in, she saw the floor littered with bottles and Su Qing's listless appearance. She was startled. "How come you can get drunk, too?"

Su Qing lost his temper. "What, aren't I human?"

Xue Xiaolu's expression changed. "Yes, yes, human! This is serious business, come with me quickly, there was a haunting in the treatment center last night!"

Su Qing allowed her to pull him away. His head was still murky. He didn't know what had happened overnight in the headquarters—after everyone had stopped working for the night, of the bodies delivered to the treatment center, one had somehow gone missing.

The security system showed that "he" had gotten up and walked away.

LIVING DEAD MAN

ALL THE BODIES that had been brought back were neatly laid out in a row. Most of them had already been completely dealt with. They were covered in shrouds. Looking at them, the missing one in the middle was especially striking, like a beautiful woman missing a front tooth. The bed still showed traces of a person having lain there. Lu Qingbai stood by the bed with his arms crossed, the expression on his four-eyed face very grave.

Hu Bugui stood at the door. When he saw Su Qing come in, he even looked a little awkward—as if someone had been having their way with him. Su Qing grinned at him. Fang Xiu wasn't at headquarters, Qin Luo was standing far away, and while Xue Xiaolu had been pulling Su Qing by the arm, she ducked behind him.

Su Qing listened to Xue Xiaolu quietly go over what had happened. As an answer, he gave a rather controlled yawn and rubbed his eyes, feeling that he hadn't woken up yet.

After a while, Xu Ruchong came in leading a big group of people carrying a stretcher. Su Qing craned his neck to look. There was a dead man lying on the stretcher—after careful scrutiny, Su Qing didn't notice anything about this body that made it more unusual than the other bodies. This was just a plain, ordinary square-faced youth, his clouded eyes still open. He didn't look any cleverer than other people, and he didn't seem especially strong and mighty.

Xu Ruchong began snapping pictures of the body with a perverse expression of fanatical novelty-seeking on his face. As he photographed, he pointed here and there, saying, "Last night, after this dear friend stood up, it walked around the halls. The most peculiar thing is that it even knew to avoid all the places with energy detectors and infrared scanners. When the

patrols found it, they warned it loudly and even shot it in the leg. And what do you guys guess happened then?”

Su Qing’s head cleared and he listened with relish as Master Xu told this ghost story. He found that everyone present was looking at Xu Ruchong with a sort of vexed expression, so, finding his conscience, he cheered him on very cooperatively: “What happened?”

“Come here, come over and look!” Xu Ruchong enthusiastically pulled away the sheet covering the body, then rather boldly pulled on the body’s lower leg. Su Qing’s eyes, which hadn’t quite opened, now opened wide—the skin on the lower leg was the same as that of any person who had died a natural death. It was very pale. But there was no foreign matter. There was no trace of a bullet going in.

“Did you get the wrong leg?” was Su Qing’s first reaction.

Xu Ruchong reached out and pulled over a huge instrument, adjusted the lens on it, and aimed at the body’s lower leg. The image clearly showed a bullet hiding its face in the muscle. Xu Ruchong increased the magnification on the screen and tapped out a command. Then the corner of the screen displayed the information from a scan of the damaged bullet—the model was made for special use by the RZ Unit.

Xu Ruchong said in a satisfied, almost flaunting tone, “Pretty strange. A corpse’s calf gets shot with a bullet, and the flesh closes up overnight, and even wraps the bullet up inside!”

Su Qing: “...”

He thought, This multi-functional sexy leg isn’t yours, what are *you* crowing about?

Lu Qingbai cut in: “But this man is definitely already dead, and he’s been dead for over seventy-two hours.”

His voice was a little hoarse, and he seemed as wan as a cabbage. It was evident how violently a walking corpse had overturned his world view.

Hu Bugui asked, “So what happened last night?”

Lu Qingbai didn’t answer, gazing at the unusual corpse with a constipated expression. Hu Bugui turned to Xue Xiaolu and said, “First, tell me who this person is.”

Xue Xiaolu quickly looked down to go through the folder she was holding. “The deceased’s name is Dong Liang... Hm, why does that look so familiar?”

Su Qing lowered his head and looked the square-faced young man up and down. He asked, “What’s his relationship with Dong Jianguo?”

“Oh, right, he’s Dong Jianguo’s son. He dropped out of high school and stayed home working with his dad. Apart from him and Dong Jianguo’s wife, there’s also a daughter named Dong Jing who’s just started high school.”

Su Qing looked back and briefly met Qin Luo’s eyes. Qin Luo frowned and raised a hand to point at her own wrist. “Captain Hu, we saw Dong Jing last time. I think she was wearing something on her arm.”

“Is Dong Jing still alive?” Su Qing asked.

Hu Bugui picked up his coat at once and draped it over himself. Resolutely, he said, “Su Qing, come with me. Xu Ruchong, get the tech department to cooperate with the treatment center, and get this...this...”

Calling it a person would be wrong, and calling it a ghost would also be wrong. So Hu Bugui paused faintly. “Figure out why the hell it got up and walked around.”

Contrary to Su Qing’s expectations, Dong Jing was actually still alive. She had become the sole fish to slip the net in this convoluted human experimentation business. Hu Bugui and Su Qing drove back to the cramped anthill-like residential area. Before they had turned into it, they saw Dong Jing on her way back from school—the little girl still wore her adolescent syndrome expression and a whole stack of things on her wrist, not minding the weight. From her appearance, she must have still have been clueless about the deaths of her father and older brother.

Su Qing went to open the car door, but Hu Bugui held him back. “This time when we’re out in the field, no matter what happens, you can’t act alone, do you hear me?”

Su Qing gave him a very rippling wink, crooked his fingers, and lightly scratched his palm. “Yes, sir!”

Hu Bugui stiffened his face and woodenly got out of the car with him, though looking closely, his movements were a little paralyzed. In view of this person’s prior misdeeds, Hu Bugui believed that he was only feeling uneasy and had decided to get up to some tricks; he wanted to get someone in bed as a diversion and had no other intentions.

It must be said that after countless imaginings and misunderstandings, Captain Hu had for once finally guessed right—after considering, he sud-

denly said out of nowhere, “Su Qing, after you get settled at the RZ Unit, you should think carefully about your future.”

Su Qing paused in his steps and turned to look at him, then asked, “What? You’re even worried about my private life? Captain Hu—are there certain...concrete arrangements that concern you?”

Hu Bugui felt that he had been flirted with, but he couldn’t flirt back—that wasn’t his style, and he thought it would be unsuitable, so he only looked confused.

So that wretched child Su Qing found a new source of entertainment and shamelessly continued: “Look, everyone’s so busy now, and there aren’t many chances to get out. We’re all very lonely. Resolving the problem internally is an efficient use of resources—look, I won’t lie to you, I’ve pursued my studies quite a bit over the last three years. Do you want to try me out again?”

Sternly, Hu Bugui said, “Stop making trouble.”

Su Qing reached out and touched his butt, then rapidly withdrew before Captain Hu could grab his wrist. Lowering his voice, he said with a sly smile, “Captain Hu, do you know what it means when someone’s pupils dilate? Don’t pretend to be a gentleman.”

“You just made me angry,” said Hu Bugui.

“Wow! You’re *very* angry,” said Su Qing.

Hu Bugui felt that there was truly nothing he could say, so he quickly walked past him without a sound. He heard Su Qing behind him give a hypocritical dry cough and cheekily say, “You see, a man gets irritable when he represses himself too long. It’s not beneficial to the harmonious progression of our work.”

Hu Bugui gave him a vicious glare. Su Qing immediately shut his mouth, looking at him innocently. His eyes spun, and, pointing towards Dong Jing, he said, “Ah, Captain Hu, the witness takes priority. You can take care of me when we get back.”

Perhaps Hu Bugui was making something out of nothing, but he felt that when Su Qing said the words “take care of,” they carried a self-evident profound meaning.

Suddenly stopped by two men, Dong Jing froze, then hugged her bag to her chest a little warily and took a step back. Then she saw Su Qing, hesitat-

ed for a moment, and finally said, “You’re...that person who came to our house the other day?”

Su Qing was no longer grinning mischievously. His face grave, he said to her, “Dong Jing, this is very serious. Take off those bracelets you’re wearing right now and let me take a look at them.”

The girl was startled. “Huh?”

Su Qing pointed to Hu Bugui and said, “I told your mom last time that we were planning to sell building materials. You heard, right?”

Dong Jing nodded hesitantly. Su Qing continued: “Some building materials are radioactive, especially ones made of marble and stuff like that. It harms people. This is something we need to understand for our work, you understand?”

He was fabricated, of course, and of course Dong Jing was completely at sea. But an average girl of her age, on seeing a member of the opposite sex, especially a very attractive one, would nod even if she didn’t understand. So Dong Jing nodded.

Having gotten just what he wanted, Su Qing pointed to Hu Bugui and said, “This is the anti-radiation expert we hired. My wife saw your bracelets last time and read up a little after, so our expert heard about it and insisted that I take him to have a look.”

Dong Jing foolishly turned her head to look at Hu Bugui. The latter looked stern and earnest, and, especially with Su Qing next to him for comparison, he looked very reliable. She thought about it, felt that all the stuff on her wrist was worth hardly any money, so she took it all off and gave it to Hu Bugui.

Hu Bugui stealthily pressed down on the new model energy detector that the tech department had worked through the night to update. Supposedly it should at last be able to react to these mysterious bracelets. He checked each of the assorted bracelets one by one, including some with bells hanging off, carefully noting the movement of the energy indicator on his watch.

When he was checking a nearly transparent bracelet with a light blue sheen, the indicator needle suddenly turned at a wide angle. Hu Bugui said heavily, “You can’t wear this thing anymore. Who gave it to you?”

“...My brother,” Dong Jing said. “Why, what’s wrong with it?”

Hu Bugui looked at Su Qing, indicating that he should pick up. When it came to lying through your teeth, Captain Hu really couldn’t manage it.

Su Qing said, “Silly girl, it’s radioactive! The expert confirmed it. Do you still dare to wear it?”

Dong Jing raised her eyebrows. Her originally somewhat uncertain expression suddenly turned cold. She coolly said, “So what if it’s radioactive? An early death means an early reincarnation. I don’t think life is all that interesting anyway.”

Su Qing observed her expression and immediately said, “You don’t get it, little sister. If you’re exposed to radiation, you won’t necessarily die. There was this girl once who wore these things to look good, and all her hair fell out. Her head was as bald as a lightbulb!”

Hu Bugui looked down at him.

As expected, Dong Jing was horrified. Su Qing continued: “There was also a guy who got tricked. They put radioactive flooring in his house. And guess what happened? Less than two months later, his whole body was covered in sores, and his skin fell off piece by piece. You could peel layers off his face with a touch. It was all bloody. Eh, how dreadful...truly dreadful.”

Hu Bugui turned his face away.

Su Qing wasn’t finished yet: “Also, do you know about vitiligo...it’s not like vitiligo. Vitiligo is no big deal, I’ll tell you, this is much more serious than that, I’ve seen someone...”

Dong Jing instantly expressed a desire to draw a line between herself and the bracelet. They could take it wherever they wanted. A teenage girl didn’t have much concept of life and death. She might not be afraid of dying. But she would definitely be afraid of having her hair fall out and turning ugly.

Hu Bugui asked, “Did your brother say where this thing came from?”

Dong Jing shook her head. “He said someone else gave it to him, and that it’s refreshing and slimming.”

Su Qing and Hu Bugui exchanged a look—another pulse from the external energy crystal.

The two of them asked a few more questions and turned to go. Dong Jing suddenly remembered something and said behind them, “Oh, I remember, I think my brother mentioned some kind of blue woman...blue what?”

“Blue seal?” Hu Bugui blurted out.

“Oh, yes, that’s it.” Dong Jing tilted her head slightly. “What’s that?”

Su Qing waved a hand and smoothly said, “Oh, that, just something to do with residence registration.”

DON'T TRUST ANYONE

SU QING, full of curiosity, stole a glance at the light blue bracelet in the evidence bag. He thought that Hu Bugui was concentrating on driving, so he stealthily reached out a paw to try touching it, to see what would happen this time. But before he could touch it, Hu Bugui slapped his hand away.

A very faint redness instantly rose on the back of Su Qing's hand. Seeing that Hu Bugui was still concentrating completely on the road ahead, he rubbed his nose and awkwardly drew his hand back.

A flat voice came from the speaker on the car's ceiling: "Captain Hu, I'm in position."

Hu Bugui said, "Copy."

Su Qing blinked. "You sent someone to keep an eye on Dong Jing's house?"

Hu Bugui confirmed it. Su Qing recalled the mysterious sniper he had encountered the other day and swallowed a question—if that sniper was still there, how many people would you have to send to keep them from killing someone?

He thought that this whole thing was bewildering. He had a faint strange feeling, as though a pair of eyes was constantly watching him from the shadows with menace.

Dong Jianguo's family were all ordinary people. Why would such people be watching his home? Why would there be such an important item on Dong Jing's arm without these people caring about it? Could they be continuing their human experimentation, and could there be something special about it, targeted against the RZ Unit?

Returning to the starting point of the question, Utopia was awesome enough to block any signal, like an unrivaled little magic turtle hiding in its

shell and acting without scruple. How could they reveal such an important and peculiar signal and let them “just happen” to receive it?

And those white coats had always been insufferably full of themselves, with keeping out of sight as their unwavering first principle. Even during a hasty escape, they hadn't forgotten to make sure they weren't leaving their enemy a scrap. Why hadn't they dealt with the bodies?

Human bodies weren't some hard to deal with non-recyclable waste. And anyway, even if they didn't deal with the bodies, couldn't they at least have taken the bracelets off those unlucky “lab mice” and tossed them?

This case had simply been delivered into their hands.

No, Su Qing thought—if he himself hadn't come along that day, Hu Bugui and the others wouldn't have noticed anything special about that thing. The old model energy detector wouldn't have reacted to it, and the bracelet would have been sealed along with the body's cigarettes and wallet and passed on to public security later.

So this case had simply been delivered into *his* hands.

Then there were those emotions that had been communicated to his mind. The previous two times, it had all been fear. Maybe these had been the violent emotional fluctuations of the victims before their deaths. But this time, the bracelet had been worn on the arm of a healthy and active little girl. What would there be in it?

Su Qing stared at the light blue bracelet, his heart practically itching.

But before parking the car, Hu Bugui very uncooperatively picked up the evidence bag with the blue bracelet and tucked it into an inside pocket of his coat.

Su Qing: “...”

Hu Bugui calmly said, “Get out. Call everyone in. We're holding a meeting.”

Su Qing said, “Captain Hu, you're actually trying to get me to take your clothes off, right?”

Without another word, Hu Bugui stiffly got out of the car, then turned and left, trying once again to ignore him.

There was a body lying in the middle of the conference room—Dong Liang. Dong Liang's arm had been dissected, revealing tissues that still made a person slightly sick to look at despite knowing that they had all the same things. Lu Qingbai raised tweezers and pulled out a long, thin thread.

It was clear and looked a little like fishing line. He placed it into a basin Xue Xiaolu was holding.

“This is a particular substance. According to the tech department’s people, it’s a kind of solid-state MTC medium.” Looking exhausted, Lu Qingbai said, “Su Qing must have seen it.”

Su Qing stared fixedly at the fishing line. After a moment, he nodded. “The blue seals used it during their ‘feasts’, with ends attached to the blue seal and the grey seal, to aid in absorbing emotion. The texture was about the same, but it was much thicker than this.”

“Like brick phones turning into pocket-sized cellphones,” Xu Ruchong picked up. “Let me explain it. We currently have no way to deduce the direct relationship between this solid-state medium and a body that had been dead for over forty-eight hours getting up and walking around, but we roughly know what it’s for...”

At this point, he suddenly turned his face away and gave a huge sneeze. He sniffed hard. “Captain Hu, HQ’s heating isn’t doing its job. I was freezing to death in the lab last night.”

Fang Xiu, who was sitting next to him, took off his coat and tossed it to him. “Of course someone with a big brain and skinny legs can’t help freezing.”

The person with a big brain and skinny legs looked at him, opened his mouth to speak, then was interrupted by another sneeze. Hu Bugui waved a hand and said, “Enough, let’s discuss proper business first, and then Xu Ruchong will go rest in the afternoon. No going to the lab.”

“OK.” Xu Ruchong wiped his nose. “This solid-state medium ties the external energy crystal and the human body together, creating a path for one type of emotion. It can block other emotions, only collecting one category. But it can’t block energy. In other words, after the bracelet on the outside has collected a small quantity of emotion from his body and turned it into energy, the energy will be like water. A part will be stored in the energy crystal, while another part will return to this duct.”

“Dong Liang’s body doesn’t have the basic organ of the energy crystal system, so it can’t use that energy, so they have to stuff it into the solid-state medium,” Lu Qingbai picked up. Then he held the bracelet Hu Bugui and Su Qing had brought back up against the light as though determining whether a bill was counterfeit. Narrowing his eyes, he looked at it closely—

there seemed to be some liquid in that bracelet, faintly twinkling in strange patterns. The patterns looked like the ones on a blue seal, slowly flowing through the liquid.

Su Qing frowned, beginning to feel uneasy—these flowing lines were too familiar. There was just such a constantly flowing “tattoo” on his own shoulder. He hadn’t been born with it, but he would carry it to his death, like a stamped experimental pig.

He heard Lu Qingbai continue: “As for this, I have a guess. Xiao Xu, do you think it could be something like an energy hub?”

“Like a remote control that’s doesn’t obey commands. It can remotely control an external energy crystal that has a particular link to it from a long distance. When the body lost the external energy storage, the leftover solid-state medium inside it became another energy crystal and formed a circuit with the remote. The energy in this circuit caused the body to stand up.”

Su Qing said, “So it’s like when I was already dead, and the leftover energy in my energy crystal linked up to something for some reason and was still active, but it could only use the energy to repair my body when the double core was activated?”

He frowned, suddenly feeling that this business sounded a little problematic. He couldn’t resist asking, “I came back from the dead then. According to the traditional definitions of medical science, am I living, or the living dead?”

Hu Bugui’s hand paused lifting his cup. Suddenly he raised a hand and bluntly slapped Su Qing on the back of the head.

This slap came too unexpectedly. Everyone turned into Spartans. Then Hu Bugui asked in a dull voice, “Did that hurt?”

Su Qing held the back of his head.

Hu Bugui lowered his head and put yet another unlit cigarette in his mouth. “You bet it hurt. If that isn’t living, then what is?”

Su Qing stared for a moment, then smiled. “Captain Hu, you truly are a gentle and considerate universal good wife. It would be such a pity not to bring you home.”

“...”

The others had yet to exit the Spartan state when they became Trojan alpacas.

Hu Bugui glanced at him and found that Su Qing still had that falsely smiling, untruthful appearance; he knew that while the words had sounded rather genuine, he was actually still joking. So he irritably delivered a brief comment: “Bullshit.”

Xu Ruchong could only give a dry cough and drag the increasingly libidinous subject back kicking and screaming. “Yes...I also suspect that Utopia’s experiments may be for the purpose of imitating the double core process. An energy crystal that can block other emotions, as well as an externally stimulated circuit... But it currently doesn’t seem to be in an ideal state, because each of the bodies delivered to us here contains a solid-state medium, but none of them managed in the end to stand up and dance in a circle.”

Lu Qingbai gave Su Qing a burning gaze, as though he very much wanted to strip him, put him on a dissection table, and dismember him. He faintly said, “That’s right. Even though this one managed to stand up for some reason, the energy obtained was only enough to repair one leg. It couldn’t repair his already dead brain and other organs.”

He opened up Dong Liang’s arm bare-handed and pushed up his glasses. “The human body has four tissues—epithelial tissue, connective tissue, muscle tissue, and nerve tissue. Epithelial tissue ought to be the easiest to repair. Next are the connectives tissue and muscle tissue. The nerve tissue is the most difficult. It requires an enormous energy that up to the present we have no way to assess, as well some other mechanism.”

“Though it currently seems that the other side has already succeeded in three out of four,” Xu Ruchong summed up sorrowfully. “Sure enough, before the final light comes, the side of right will usually be in a slightly less advantageous place than the side of evil...aaachoo!”

Hu Bugui muttered to himself for a while, then said to Fang Xiu, “In the RZ Unit’s name, request the assistance of the public security department. Get them to help investigate who Dong Jianguo, Dong Liang, and Dong Jing have come in contact with. I want a list of all the names. Our comrades in the tech department and at the treatment center will need to put in some more hard work—not you, Xiao Xu. I’m giving you half a day off. Your health takes priority. Su Qing, stay and hold down the fort at headquarters. Follow the information coming in about Dong Jing.”

So after the meeting broke up, Su Qing sat in front of some communication and projection systems, idly glancing from time to time at the images on the screens, toying with a pack of cigarettes. A long time ago, when he had been trapped in the grey house wearing a communicator, he had felt that the voices coming from the communicator had come and gone like shadows. But when he was the one really sitting here himself, he found that this work was very boring.

Hu Bugui, remembering his hangover from the night before, must have deliberately set aside some time for him to catch up on sleep.

When he was already drifting off to sleep, the door creaked. Su Qing started awake at once. As soon as he turned his head, he saw Tu Tutu tiptoe in. He was holding a paintbrush—when Su Qing noticed him, he quickly put his hand behind his back, his eyes rolling nonstop, looking like he was up to no good.

Su Qing beckoned irritably to him. “Come here, what are you up to now? Why aren’t you studying?”

“Today’s class ended. I was playing with Uncle Cheng Ge.” Tu Tutu shamelessly climbed into his lap. His butt immediately suffered an attack, so he twisted it around, not caring. He even got out a cellphone. “Here, I’ll show you some of Uncle Cheng Ge’s drawings.”

Su Qing absent-mindedly looked where Tu Tutu’s pudgy little paw indicated, thinking that while Cheng Ge wasn’t an easy person to communicate with, his drawings were quite dependable. He innovated where he needed to innovate but didn’t go overboard. Even a layman like Su Qing could tell what he was drawing.

Cheng Ge drew everything—people, scenery, even an ashtray with an apple peel in it. Suddenly, Su Qing gave a start and grabbed Tu Tutu’s wrist. “Wait, don’t move!”

The screen had scrolled to a scenery drawing. In the picture was a little old house and a narrow alley. There was also a chimney. The background was grey, making the viewer feel a little oppressed... No, none of that was important. The important thing was, the things in this drawing were familiar to Su Qing. He had just come back from there—this was Dong Jianguo’s home.

“Have you shown these pictures to anyone else?”

Su Qing's expression must have been too serious. Tu Tutu was a little frightened. He blinked. "N...no."

Su Qing hesitated. "Go, bring me back the original of this drawing. Don't alert anyone."

Tu Tutu obediently slid off his knees and was about to go when Su Qing held him back—Cheng Ge hadn't left the RZ Unit headquarters recently, so how had he drawn this? Was the problem with him, or was it with some person very close to him?

Su Qing held Tu Tutu's arm, bent down, and quietly said, "Don't go, actually. Delete the photo and don't mention this to anyone."

Tu Tutu was young, but he had encountered more danger than the vast majority of people on earth. He had a sort of instinctive caution when it came to danger that transcended his age. He immediately deleted the picture on the phone and eagerly chattered, "Imperial Uncle, don't you worry. Our Imperial Presence's lips are sealed."

Su Qing's expression was a little grave. Patting Tu Tutu on the head, he said, "Then may Your Majesty not forget to keep worthy subjects close and shun vile characters. Apart from this subject, don't trust any other person."

Tu Tutu's eyes spun. "Prince Regent, not even General Hu?"

There was no smile on Su Qing's face. His straight nose cast a shadow on his face. His beautiful eyes were almost sharp. He lowered his voice to the utmost; it was as though his words would be blown away by a slightly deep breath. "No one but me."

BEWILDERMENT

XU RUCHONG didn't return to his room, just lay down in a lounge next to the lab. The RZ Unit's people normally handled minor complaints like this, in case last minute work came up.

After a while, someone opened the door and came in, startling Xu Ruchong. He gave an indistinct "yeah," not opening his eyes.

He heard Fang Xiu's voice say, "Sleep, it's all right, it's me."

So Xu Ruchong drifted murkily back to sleep. Fang Xiu leaned down and felt his forehead to check his temperature. He looked at the water stains on his glass, determined that he had already taken medicine, then quietly walked out. After a moment, he brought in a thick blanket from somewhere and smoothed it over Xu Ruchong.

Perhaps it was heavy and Xu Ruchong was uncomfortable from the weight. He struggled a little. Fang Xiu put a hand on his head, then flattened the corners of the blanket. He quietly said, "Shh, don't move. You're running a slight fever. It'll be good to sweat it out a bit."

Xu Ruchong slowly opened his eyes and glanced at him. Probably from the fever, the corners of his eyes were a little reddened.

Fang Xiu poked him in the forehead. "Isn't that brain of yours any use? Why don't you go back to your own room and sleep? I can keep an eye on things for you here."

Xu Ruchong disdained him in a heavily nasal voice: "Nope, a gorilla like you can't handle work of such high intellectual requirements."

Fang Xiu spat. "Ingrate."

Xu Ruchong asked, "Don't you have an assignment?"

"I came to look in on you first. If Master Xu falls, half the sky will be missing for all of us field personnel."

“I’ll be fine. I just need to lie down.” Xu Ruchong closed his eyes somewhat wearily. “You go ahead.”

Fang Xiu felt that he looked pitiful. He could only sigh. He sat there for a while, then finally got up and left. Not long after he left, someone opened the door again. This time it was Lu Qingbai who came in holding an IV bag. He closed the door with his foot and walked in almost noiselessly. He hung up the IV bag and attached the drip to Xu Ruchong.

Dr. Lu’s skills were excellent. Xu Ruchong didn’t even feel pain. He only felt a tightening and then a loosening on his wrist, and the needle was in. He couldn’t resist forcing his eyelids up once more to look at him. “Why did you come yourself? Aren’t you busy?”

Lu Qingbai said, “I’ll finish with you first, then I’ll see to the rest. They’re all dead, anyway. They can wait a bit. You’re still breathing, so I’m giving you the tie-breaking point.”

He had just spoken when Hu Bugui also opened the door and walked in. He asked, “How is he? I heard Xiao Xu is running a fever.”

At last, Xu Ruchong couldn’t keep lying down any longer. He wanted to get up, but Lu Qingbai held him down and scolded: “Enough, you can’t even balance, don’t thrash around.”

Hu Bugui nodded. “Look after your health. I’ll have the treatment center send a nurse over to help look after you. How about that?”

Xu Ruchong quickly said, “No need, no need.”

When Lu Qingbai and Hu Bugui had also left, Xu Ruchong seemed to sigh in relief as he lay back down. But in no time at all, Qin Luo and Xue Xiaolu also came. The girls quietly put a thermos on the little cabinet at the head of the bed. Xue Xiaolu kept her voice very low and asked, “Do you think he’s awake?”

Qin Luo said in an even quieter voice, “Half-conscious, I think. I’m always like that when I have a fever. He might know if you talk to him.”

So Xue Xiaolu leaned close to Xu Ruchong’s ear. In a quiet, soft voice, she said, “Master Xu, remember to drink the soup when you wake up.”

Then she thought about it and looked back at Qin Luo. She said, “Forget it, let’s leave him a note, or else what if he didn’t hear?”

When the two of them had also left, the door creaked open yet again. A figure like a mouse stealthily slipped in, pen in hand—it was Tu Tutu, up to no good. He tiptoed closer to Xu Ruchong’s bed and opened his mouth in a

silent malicious smile. He pulled off the felt-tip pen's cap and was about to put pen to Xu Ruchong's face when he heard a light cough behind him—Su Qing was the one who could truly come and go without a sound.

Tu Tutu's hand froze at once. Su Qing said in an equally quiet voice, "Little whelp, do you need another pinch?"

He walked over and rubbed his hands together to raise the temperature of the skin. When they weren't so cold, like Fang Xiu, he reached out to check Xu Ruchong's temperature. Then he straightened the blanket he had messed up turning over. Finally, he took Tu Tutu by the hand and proceeded out like a vassal giving orders under the emperor's name.

Tu Tutu quietly cried out in grief: "Our Imperial Presence is a puppet emperor!"

When the final round of visitors had left, Xu Ruchong suddenly opened his eyes. He lay on his side, facing the wall. The rims of his eyes were still red, but there was no sleepiness in them.

He slowly raised his head and looked at the thermos on the nightstand and the paper under it. The paper was light blue with a small decorative border. If his nose hadn't been very congested, he probably would have been able to smell a faint perfume. At a glance it was the sort of thing girls liked.

He wasn't wearing his ridiculously large glasses. His gaze seemed a little weak. The curves at the corners of his eyes were long, giving them something of a profound flavor. Xu Ruchong's expression was a little complicated. He suddenly opened his mouth and silently said to the spotless white wall in front of him, "What are you all so nice to me for?"

When Su Qing came out of Xu Ruchong's lounge, he silently took Tu Tutu towards the sixth floor. There were no clues on his face. Tu Tutu snuck a glance at him and couldn't decide how this puppet master was planning to deal with him. He could only follow, inwardly muttering "Perturbed"³⁰ the whole way. But Su Qing only tossed him towards his room and briefly instructed: "Go in and play. Close the door. If anyone knocks, pretend you aren't here."

Tu Tutu looked at him, blinking his big eyes. Su Qing paused, then stroked his head.

Tu Tutu raised his fist and stood up straight. He said, "Go on, Seiya! Burn your Cosmo!"

Su Qing looked at him for a while, then commented: “Get the hell out. Do Athenas come as short as you?”

Then he gently closed the door and turned towards Cheng Weizhi’s room.

Cheng Weizhi very enthusiastically let him in. When Su Qing walked in, he took a look at Cheng Ge—he looked the same as always, squatting to one side, immersed in his own world. He only took a glance at him, then lost interest and returned to his own business. He was holding coloring materials, which he was daubing onto a landscape painting.

Cheng Weizhi noticed Su Qing’s line of sight and sighed. He said to his son, “Cheng Ge, raise your head, say hello to our guest.”

Cheng Ge had some reaction to his words. He slowly raised his head and shifted his eyes to Su Qing. He raised his hand, still holding a paintbrush, and slowly waved at Su Qing. “Hi.” The brush left a yellow mark on his face.

Su Qing smiled and waved back at him. Cheng Ge looked at Cheng Weizhi like an obedient child waiting for instructions for the next step. Cheng Weizhi softly said, “Will you show us what you’re drawing?”

Cheng Ge reacted half a beat slow, nodded, then clumsily raised the drawing high over his head. The drawing was of a golden field of flowers. Further on was a little house. The chimney smoke and the flowers were both moving with the wind. While Cheng Ge hadn’t studied, he could use distance perspective extremely well. The painting extended into the distance as though it continued to the ends of the earth, boundless, with a background of blue sky and slightly low white clouds.

“Goodness, what a good drawing. You’re a regular living Van Gogh,” Su Qing delivered a line of sweet-talk, then changed the subject. He turned his head and asked Cheng Weizhi, “Does he think up his own drawings, or does he draw places he’s been?”

Cheng Weizhi’s attention was still on his son, so he automatically went along with his subject: “Some are places he’s been to, and some are things he saw in photos or on TV. Things we ordinary people may take a look and then forget, he sometimes draws—Cheng Ge, take out your other works and display them for us.”

Su Qing looked on with the cool eye of a bystander and felt that the old professor was just like an ordinary father, delighted with each of his son’s mi-

nor accomplishments, always wanting to show them off to others.

Cheng Ge brought over a big portfolio and cutely laid it out in front of them. Like a patient preschool teacher, Cheng Weizhi pointed to picture after picture, asking, “Cheng Ge, what is this drawing of? Cheng Ge, what is that drawing of?”

Cheng Ge’s speech wasn’t smooth, as though he was holding a piece of hot tofu in his mouth. He spoke indistinctly and drooled when he spoke too much. He could only get out a couple of words at a time, which were sometimes irrelevant. But the old professor wasn’t in a rush, and neither was Cheng Ge.

Su Qing sat by them in silence, taking note of the interactions between the father and son, and the drawings.

Very soon, they came to the unusual drawing. Su Qing suddenly put in a word: “Cheng Ge, what place is this drawing of?”

Cheng Ge turned to look at him blankly, then repeated his question: “What...place?”

Cheng Weizhi’s notice was also drawn. He gave an “oh!” and asked, “Cheng Ge, why is this drawing so grey? Did you see an old photo?”

Cheng Ge nodded—however, a nod didn’t mean confirmation. When he didn’t understand what someone was saying to him, he would also nod.

“Looking at a grey thing like this puts people in a bad mood,” Cheng Weizhi said to Cheng Ge, enunciating each syllable clearly. “It makes them unhappy.”

“Dad...is unhappy?”

“We should draw things with lots of sunshine and colors,” Cheng Weizhi said, pointing to the brightly colored new work. “We draw like that, not like this.”

It was unclear whether Cheng Ge understood. He looked at one, then at the other, then finally nodded in confusion.

Su Qing took the chance to say, “Then why don’t you just give it to me? I just happen to be missing a couple of paintings in my room.”

Cheng Weizhi, all smiles, said to Cheng Ge, “Can I give Su Qing a few of your drawings?” Seeing that Cheng Ge hadn’t completely understood, he slowed down his speech. Very, very slowly, he picked up a drawing. Passing it to Su Qing, he said, “Give—to—him, all right?”

Cheng Ge nodded again.

Su Qing said, “Then I won’t stand on ceremony.”

Then he picked out a couple of drawings, including the grey one, and put them in his lap. He looked down. After a moment, with a hint of probing undetectable to others, he said, “Uncle Cheng, I don’t know if you’ve heard what happened last night. I still don’t especially understand—why could my double core energy crystal activate when it won’t work for others?”

60

BETRAYAL

CHENG WEIZHI froze, for a time not knowing where to start. Su Qing didn't press him, only sat quietly across from him, like when they had been back at the grey house—Su Qing always curious, always raising questions even if he only half understood, and Cheng Weizhi able to speak on any topic, student and teacher both benefiting.

After waiting for a while, Su Qing took advantage of Cheng Weizhi's pause to organize his words to quietly observe his facial expression while he selectively revealed and concealed what had happened with the living dead man the night before: "We've been investigating a case these past few days. Oh, I mentioned it to you last time. We suspect that Utopia is carrying on human experimentation, researching an external energy crystal. There are many victims involved in this. They're all dead now. All the bodies were delivered to headquarters, and the weird thing is, one of them, who was supposed to have been dead for more than two days, suddenly stood up last night. And when he was shot in the calf by the patrols, the leg's muscles and epithelial tissue healed on their own."

As Su Qing spoke, he took out a cigarette and gestured to Cheng Weizhi, only lighting up after he indicated that he didn't object. He held it between his finger in a practiced gesture, took a long drag and breathed out, then crossed one leg over the other, leaning back in his chair in relaxation, using the smoke to faintly obscure his scrutinizing gaze.

He suddenly felt a little tired and thought somewhat self-mockingly that it was as though because he was a swindler, he thought that no one on earth could be trusted—like the old man sitting across from him. Back when he had been a powerless person with nothing but anger and hot blood, he had been willing to use his life to protect him. But now he was looking at him

with this gaze full of suspicion and scrutiny, leading him bit by bit to tell him the “truth” he wanted.

What *was* the truth?

Was the truth after all that he had rejected that past destitute self, or was it that that past real self had rejected the repulsive professional swindler of the present?

Cheng Weizhi didn’t know about his overcomplicated inner world. He nearly held his breath as he listened, then urgently asked, “And then what? How is that person now?”

Su Qing paused, then said, “He isn’t. He’s still a corpse that couldn’t be more dead. But we followed the clues and found something left out in the cold. Something like an energy hub. It’s likely that the remaining energy in the solid-state medium within the body was activated by the hub and formed a circuit, creating a cycle inside his body analogous to a blue seal.”

Cheng Weizhi frowned. “But his nerve tissue couldn’t be stimulated to repair itself.”

Su Qing nodded and tapped ash out of his cigarette. “Dr. Lu said that nerve tissue is the hardest to repair. Do you think it’s possible that there wasn’t enough energy to activate it?”

Cheng Weizhi nodded very, very slowly.

Su Qing quickly followed up: “In other words, this unknown energy is strong enough to kill a man, but it isn’t sufficient to save his life—so according to this logic, since the energy stored in my double core energy crystal system could stimulate my whole body, then it must have been over the threshold of what could kill me. I think that inference is right?”

Cheng Weizhi looked at him.

Su Qing didn’t speak, either, only silently and took a slightly fierce drag on his cigarette. The only sounds in the room were from Cheng Ge’s paintbrush and the rustling of paper.

“Child, what are you trying to ask?” Cheng Weizhi asked after a long time.

“This is what I don’t understand,” said Su Qing. “Energy can’t vanish out of nowhere. It can only be converted to another form. What is the actual difference between a double core energy crystal system and a single one? Why does one form of energy kill, while the other saves?”

Cheng Weizhi's expression became serious. He slowly shook his head. "No, your line of thought has gone astray—what activates the energy crystal within the human body can be called a certain kind of stress. There must be certain physiological characteristics. But it also needs external factors for activation. However much vitality it has, it may also harm the human body. It can't be compared to the external energy crystal you're talking about. Can you accept that explanation?"

Su Qing shook his head. "It's not just that. Don't fob me off. Everyone had the solid-state medium inside them, and they were all laid out together. Why was he the only one who stood up?"

However little Cheng Weizhi understood worldly wisdom, he could still feel the sense of intimidation Su Qing was gradually revealing. He could only continue: "Do you know about bone transplants? The world's population is so large, but finding a compatible donor is very hard. Naturally the probability will be a little higher between blood relations than between unconnected people."

Su Qing smiled. "So you mean that the carrier of the energy hub formed a 'matched pair' with the emotional type of the deceased?"

Cheng Weizhi frowned. "The energy hub had a carrier? You didn't say so just now..."

Su Qing cut him off: "In other words, I survived back then because there was something like an energy hub near me, and it just happened to match the type of my energy crystal. Actually, the probability of that is even lower than winning the lottery."

Seeing that Cheng Weizhi didn't answer, Su Qing laughed aloud. "What a coincidence—that energy hub was you. Uncle Cheng, I've never believed in coincidence. I know that if you scientists are looking at statistics and detect something of 'low probability,' you'll believe it couldn't happen. That's the way science handles things. I didn't get that wrong, did I?"

"Well, I'm a layman anyway, it doesn't matter if I did get it wrong—but Uncle Cheng, tell me the truth. You didn't end up in the grey house just because of a meal from McDonald's, did you?"

Cheng Weizhi lowered his head. Looking closely, his hands were actually trembling a little. After a long time, he sighed, then quietly and incongruously said, "It's not everyone who can have an energy crystal activated. One

in five people can produce a grey seal, but how many people can produce a blue seal?”

Su Qing remembered a part of the materials he had seen in the RZ Unit’s files, so he said, “The government’s view is one in a hundred thousand.”

“So blue seals are equivalent to a category of people with a genetic mutation—the essential function of genetic mutation is to give a species limitless possibilities for evolution, to increase the likelihood that the species will survive a major change to its environment. But humans, from a certain point of view, can be said to have already escaped their natural environment. They live in a comparatively stable artificial environment. So to borrow a term from topology, the probability of a genetic mutation moving in a positive direction is constantly approaching zero.”

Su Qing digested this for a moment, then asked, “You mean that blue seals are a kind of genetic defect?”

“Supposing that only the double core energy system is stable, that only it can integrate with the human organism, then the single core energy crystal must have a flaw. The more energy circulates through it, the greater a danger it poses. It’s like a ticking time bomb buried in the human body. Don’t you think that a grey seal being unable to automatically absorb emotion and being unable to convert emotion when forced to absorb it is a form of self-protection for the body?”

Su Qing listened quietly, but he knew that for him, none of this was the important point.

Cheng Weizhi buried his face in his hand and wearily said, “Utopia’s research went in the wrong direction. Zheng... *They* denied the existence of the double core energy crystal system. First because a double core theoretically couldn’t exist, and second because the contained nature of the double core system meant that it wouldn’t be stronger than a blue seal. They believed that strength was one of the criteria for whether a species’ evolution was successful. They overemphasized power and overlooked stability.”

The look in Su Qing’s eyes turned cold. He seized the critical term: “Zheng?”

“Zheng Qinghua. A university schoolfellow of mine.” Cheng Weizhi paused. “He’s...a genius.”

Su Qing remembered hearing this name from General Xiong. “He’s at the core of Utopia?”

Cheng Weizhi nodded. “The theory of the Utopia Project is his...no, our product. But later we had a disagreement...”

At this point, like a child who had done something wrong, he looked up in trepidation, checking Su Qing’s expression. But Su Qing avoided his eye. He lowered his head and put another cigarette in his mouth—he simply had no idea what to say. In recent years, he had thought himself halfway clever, but he found that like Nobita, from start to finish, he had been unable to erase his own natural good-for-nothing stupidity. No matter what little gadgets he equipped himself with, he couldn’t make up for it.

It felt like someone had scraped his heart with a blunt knife, sour and sad.

“I only discussed a project with him during the early theoretical stage. I would swear before heaven that I have never in my life done anything to violate the law or morality. I... Trust me.”

Su Qing a little irritably blew out a smoke ring. “So you aren’t a grey seal, either?”

Cheng Weizhi’s cheeks twitched, and he slowly nodded. “My body was in fact forcibly altered by them. I’m a sort of universal energy hub, but not complete. My function isn’t complete—you know that when implants are forced into the human body, the outcome won’t be ideal—Zheng Qinghua was using this method to poke fun at me. He wanted me to personally validate my theory. But...the other requirements for activating a double core are truly too demanding. I wanted to try to rescue those innocent people, but I failed time after time... I really... I really didn’t...”

“Why didn’t you say so before?” Su Qing asked.

Cheng Weizhi suddenly froze. Su Qing seemed to work something out. He flicked his wrist, taking out a handgun. He aimed at Cheng Ge’s forehead. Cheng Weizhi leapt off the couch in fear, not understanding at all why he was suddenly launching an attack. But Cheng Ge was as confused as before.

Su Qing’s expression was calm, but an almost austere chill came off his body. He slowly removed the safety. The muzzle of the gun was pointing at Cheng Ge’s forehead. The bullet slid into the chamber.

“S-s-su Qing, what...what are you *doing*?”

Cheng Ge raised his head and looked at Su Qing. Then he looked at his father. He still couldn't work out what was going on. The changes in his pupils and his pulse all came to Su Qing's eyes and ears. After a moment, Su Qing put the gun down and slightly lowered his head and said to the still shaken Cheng Weizhi, "It seems that it isn't him, either. Then I understand."

Then he stood up and headed out. Cheng Weizhi wanted to stop him and had even extended his hand, but when he opened his mouth, he couldn't say anything.

Su Qing went downstairs with his hands in his pockets. He ran into Hu Bugui coming towards him. Hu Bugui frowned. "Where did you go? Why aren't you in the surveillance room?"

Su Qing stood one step above him and stared into his eyes for a while. Then, with lightning momentum, he took hold of Hu Bugui's chin, leaned down, and covered his mouth, even squeezing his tongue in.

This was going even further than his indecency when he had been drunk. Hu Bugui's mind buzzed. This time, before his intellect could struggle, it was submerged. There really was no comparison between the present Su Qing and the past; who knew how much experience fooling around had led him to develop his current technique. By the time Hu Bugui recovered, he had been unable to help pressing down the back of Su Qing's head, pulling him towards himself.

He gave a start and immediately pushed him away. He took a step back and nearly fell down the stairs.

Su Qing winked at him. "If it feels good, come right out and say it. You're so insincere. If you come to my room tonight, I'll make you feel even better."

Hu Bugui took a deep breath. "Su Qing, we need to have a talk."

"All right, how should we talk? Top or bottom?"

Hu Bugui: "..."

He found that he simply had no way to communicate with this great scoundrel, so he passed by him without a word, inwardly deciding that Su Qing's name would be next on the unit's roster for a Party lecture.

The great scoundrel silently watched Captain Hu's retreating figure, fantasizing for a while. Then he restrained the smile on his face and slowly walked downstairs. He went alone to the lounge where Xu Ruchong was

lying down. He opened the door and took only one look, then gently closed the door from the inside.

The person in the bed had vanished at some point. Half of the soup in the thermos was gone. The note Qin Luo and Xue Xiaolu had left had been turned over, and there was an address written carelessly on the back, as well as the line “Come alone.”

As though he had been certain that Su Qing would be the first to come in.

After Su Qing read it, he rolled the paper up and swallowed it—there was no need for the instruction; he wasn’t planning on taking another person.

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XU RUCHONG

11235 BELIEVED that he performed physical labor—whether he was killing people or singing—so he thought that he should be constantly replenishing his physical strength. Therefore, he looked rather vicious when he was eating, so vicious that if a person eating at the same table as him wanted to be polite and serve him some food, they would have to take advantage of the time before he had picked up his bowl and chopsticks.

His record was eating up a whole bowl of rice in three mouthfuls. Both his mouth and his esophagus seemed to be made out of rubber, able to expand and contract without limit.

An elderly man with a head of silver hair sat at his left hand, pushing a plate of some smoked chicken legs towards him. He was just about to speak when 11235 stuck out a chopstick to block the plate. This non-mainstream killer took a few seconds out of the many pressing affairs of eating to give the man a rather gloomy look. “I don’t eat that, and I don’t capture people.”

Then he put his head down. “When it comes to the living, don’t come to me. And I won’t go out with the stupid cunts.”

The man’s self-restraint was excellent. He said nothing, only lowered his head and smiled. In a low, soft voice, he said, “Don’t keep taking the contrary position to Dr. Zheng...”

“Zheng Qinghua?” 11235 didn’t even raise his head. His mouth was full of rice. He said indistinctly, “He’s the chief of the stupid cunts.”

The man frowned.

11235 glanced at him, then put more rice into his own empty bowl and rudely swept up all the dishes on the table. His bowl was piled high over the brim. Then he set to it again, as though trying to drown himself in food. Even so, it didn’t keep his beak from talking: “Let me tell you, Fei, you pay

for my upkeep and have me kill people for you—that's fine, no problem, that's what we do. But you don't pay me to capture people or say pretty words, right?"

The man sighed, feeling that he had raised a wolf. He had been giving it good food and drink for years, and if he couldn't hope that it would be devoted, at least it should have gotten familiar with him and not bite anymore?

"I'm done." 11235 stood up and wiped his mouth. He very insincerely said, "Thank you, I'll go."

"Slow down." The man took something like a playing card out of his coat pocket. With its reverse side up, he slid it over the table to 11235's hand and said in exasperation, "Go and do your job."

11235 whistled, brought the paper up before his eyes, and glanced at it. He was a little doubtful. "Do you need me for this person? Can't your little whoever-it-is handle it?"

The man laced his fingers together, put his elbows on the table, and quietly said, "Just in case."

11235 took another look at the name, photograph, and serial number on the card. With a forced smile, he commented, "Besides which, you and your little whoever-it-is, sir, you're really, you know."

He made a very obscene hand gesture. As though worried that the man wouldn't understand, he specially explained: "You're real motherfuckers."

Then he fearlessly picked up his big bag containing both a guitar and a gun from the door, and looking pleased with himself, very festively said, "I wouldn't have thought that would be a hereditary trait. What a wonderful world! So wonderful."

The grey-haired man's face was ashen. His hands even began to shake. But what could he do? Years ago, when that damn 11235 had nearly driven him to a heart attack, he had made countless oaths that in the future, when he found someone more capable, the first thing he would do would be to get rid of this thing.

Over a decade later, 11235 was still hopping, whereas he himself...

The man sighed and looked at the backs of his hands, beginning to break out in age spots. His fingers still had a slight uncontrollable tremor. He took a small pill bottle out of his pocket and swallowed a handful of pills. He closed his eyes, took some deep breaths, and finally stabilized.

He felt that he was already old. Zheng Qinghua could turn a man into a monster, but he couldn't turn an old man into a young one.

Time was the only eternal law in this world.

Su Qing spent a long time staring blankly at the little box at his feet. It contained all kinds of bewildering instruments. It included what was supposed to be the most precise, most advanced energy detector and all kinds of protective devices against unusual energy, but when their tags had "Xu Ruchong" printed on them, they were worth great deliberation.

The RZ Unit had simply been letting the fox guard the henhouse. They had hired the cat to watch the fish pond.

He sat in the surveillance room alone, the ashtray next to his hand so full of cigarette butts that it was overflowing. A person could fall over choking when they opened the door to this room. The smoke he had polluted it with made it look like the Southern Gates of Heaven. Xue Xiaolu came in looking for him midway. Before she could finish speaking, she was driven to tears by choking.

Su Qing seemed to be unaware that he was poisoning his lungs. He was thinking, what role did Xu Ruchong play in this whole business, after all?

The cause of this was a case—he had already considered this. There were many strange points, and the strangest of all was that while it simply seemed to be tailor-made for him, the person who had discovered it was Xu Ruchong. Then there had been neither too many nor too few clues left behind, precisely drawing their line of thought to "external energy crystal" and "double core experiment."

There were only two people in the world directly connected to a double core—one was Su Qing himself, and the other was incomparable maker of the double core—Cheng Weizhi. And the opportunity hadn't been lost to use Cheng Ge's drawing to draw his attention to Cheng Weizhi.

Cheng Weizhi was an intellectual. His IQ was high, but he wasn't very canny. It would be easy for Su Qing to get what he wanted out of him.

Around and around—as though someone had made Xu Ruchong mislead him, then finally had pushed Xu Ruchong step by step, making him draw fire onto himself.

There was a problem with Xu Ruchong, that was certain, or else Professor Cheng wouldn't have covered up for him, and he wouldn't have run,

leaving behind a sketchy note. And if Professor Cheng had covered up for him, then he must think that the problem wasn't so serious.

Moreover, Xu Ruchong had been concealed for so many years. Why had he suddenly shown himself so meaninglessly?

Or...did someone in Utopia want to get rid of Xu Ruchong?

Su Qing pinched out his cigarette. His fingertips were starting to yellow. Expressionless, he kicked the little box at his feet with the tip of his foot. He thought, if there was a micro bomb in there, he would never be able to spot it. There would be a *boom*, and he would go from wholesale to retail packaging—wouldn't that be tidy?

If Xu Ruchong wanted to get rid of him, he really wouldn't need to fool around with notes. Wasn't it simply pulling down your pants to fart? He picked up the coat on the back of his chair, checked each of the knives in an inside pocket, casually draped the coat over himself, bent his head to put yet another cigarette in his mouth, curled his other hand in his pocket, then went out with his head down and his eyes narrowed.

Xu Ruchong had arranged to meet him on the city outskirts—over an hour's drive from the city. When you got off the highway, you passed through a wide expanse of farmland and scattered villages. Then you had go on foot for over half an hour on a small, muddy road, and go around a stretch of wilderness. Then at last you would see a small hill.

Behind an uneven row of wild jujube trees, Su Qing saw Xu Ruchong, his cheekbones sticking out a little, looking like a wandering spirit.

Xu Ruchong's glasses were hanging from his collar, revealing the thick dark circles beneath them. He looked so haggard it was spooky.

He nodded. "You came."

Don't move if the enemy doesn't move. Su Qing stood two or three meters away from him with a cigarette in his mouth, silently looking him over.

Xu Ruchong said, "When I saw the drawing that little devil showed you, I understood what they were up to."

Su Qing didn't ask how he had seen it. Every single mechanical component in the RZ Unit could be this genius's eyes. He only asked, "Who are they? And who are you?"

Xu Ruchong slowly breathed out, trembling a little. Quietly, he said, "They're everywhere. I...used to be one of them."

Used to be?

Xu Ruchong continued: “Now that I’m standing here face to face with you... No, maybe before, from the first time I mentioned something I shouldn’t have mentioned to Captain Hu, I wasn’t one of them anymore.”

Su Qing’s impression of Xu Ruchong had always been of a slightly foolish and stubborn bookworm. He had never seen such a mix of despair, fear, solemnity, and something even more complicated in his expression. He breathed out a mouthful of smoke and waited for Xu Ruchong to keep going.

“When I joined Utopia, I was still a student. Like all the members, I was fanatical about its ideals—none of you would understand that kind of fanaticism. We researchers might discover a theorem or two in our lifetimes, standing on the shoulders of giants, adding a brick or a tile to the mansion of learning they’ve already built, and that would already be amazing—but in Utopia, it was different. We were creators.”

Su Qing pinched out his cigarette butt. Taking no care for the environment, he ground it under his foot, thinking, To me, you’re all inhuman.

Xu Ruchong suddenly covered his head and bent down as though in intense pain. Su Qing looked again and found that tears had begun to flow down Xu Ruchong’s face.

Su Qing didn’t speak. He watched as Xu Ruchong went from silent weeping to sobbing wails. Then he coldly said, “Stop crying. What the hell have *you* got to cry about? There are so many people dead who have nowhere to cry. Hey, let me ask you, what’s your relationship with Zheng Qinghua? What’s your position in Utopia?”

Xu Ruchong cried vigorously, not answering.

Su Qing became impatient. “Are you going to talk or not? I’m the one asking you now. When Hu Bugui and the others catch up, you won’t have a chance to talk anymore—what did you call me here for?”

“Zheng Qinghua... Zheng Qinghua is my adoptive father,” Xu Ruchong said. “He was the one who recommended me to study with Teacher Cheng. They hadn’t fallen out yet then.”

Su Qing stared—Zheng Qinghua’s adopted son. This Dr. Zheng, who had up to this point remained hidden behind the scenes, living only in hearsay, had raised himself a child to come out and be a sacrificial victim—what had he meant by it?

Thoughts flew quickly through his mind, but Xu Ruchong was speaking intermittently: “I know, I know... Our ideas were all wrong. All these years, the dreams I’ve clung to, my life, they were all mistaken, even...even evil.

“Captain Hu and the others are so good to me, so good that I...

“What should I do? What the hell should I do?”

Su Qing had a sudden acute sense of being watched. This feeling was too familiar—it was that sniper. All the hair on the back of his neck stood up, and a knife immediately appeared between his fingers. “Xu Ruchong.”

He called, but Xu Ruchong didn’t seem to hear. Xu Ruchong squatted on the ground, his voice falling lower and lower, the look in his eyes growing more and more lost. He seemed to have sunk into his own world, his intense ideals and the drip of reality beginning to collide.

Su Qing realized that something was wrong—he saw blood start to flow from Xu Ruchong’s nostrils, slowly dripping onto the withered grass in front of him. 11235’s gaze was still on him like a bone maggot. Su Qing yelled: “Xu Ruchong!”

The extremely abnormal Xu Ruchong at last reacted to his voice. He sluggishly raised his head, then looked at him extremely slowly. Then he opened his mouth and gave a scream so sharp it simply didn’t seem like it could come from a human being. It was like an awl plunging into Su Qing’s oversensitive ears. Su Qing’s head buzzed, and he nearly lost his footing.

Then a big net, glowing silver, sprang up from the ground. Su Qing reacted at lightning speed, backing away, but he was still caught inside. Su Qing’s knees went weak, and he went to one knee—he felt the same as when he had touched the bracelet on Dong Jianguo’s body, but of course, it was several times more intense than that.

A bullet came just when he was unable to dodge.

THE LIFE-SAVING BULLET

THE RZ UNIT was in a bustle. No one had noticed Su Qing's disappearance. Suddenly, a sharp alarm different from previous ones came from the tech department. Everyone's first assumption was that Xu Ruchong was performing dangerous experiments again. But they waited and didn't hear the familiar sound of an explosion, and the cry of the alarm became sharper and sharper.

Fang Xiu opened the door of the tech department and went in. He found all the members with their heads tilted back, staring blankly at a screen, all with perplexed and vacant expressions. There was nothing that looked especially inhuman on the experiment table. Fang Xiu frowned and, along with all the researchers, looked in bewilderment at the screen where data and grids were constantly appearing. Up, down, left, right—only in a corner was there was string of small warning characters that he understood—*strong unusual energy reaction*.

Fang Xiu turned on the communicator hooked over his ear. "Captain Hu, come over here. It seems like something isn't right."

Hu Bugui hurried over three minutes later with Xue Xiaolu. Miss Xiaolu was hugging a big stack of documents and had trotted the whole way. Gasping for breath, she joined the others in staring blankly at the big screen. With emotion, she said, "Gracious, Master Xu is gone for one day and this thing gets lovesick?"

Hu Bugui asked, "Is it a breakdown or an emergency?"

One of the researchers finally remembered that he was in charge when Xu Ruchong wasn't there. He saluted. "Reporting to Captain Hu, the factors of a breakdown have basically been eliminated, but we've still never received such an explosive energy signal. The database is unable to classify..."

But before he finished speaking, he saw the grids on the big screen slowly take shape and converge into a figure and break free of the background—this was a circle composed of two half-moon shapes, faintly sparkling with a dim luster. The image grew larger and larger, until it filled the whole screen.

Hu Bugui realized something and pressed on the button of his communicator, contacting Su Qing, but the signal was distorted. Xue Xiaolu looked furtively at their Captain Hu and clearly saw the corner of his eye twitch several times. He said, “Locate the site of the unusual energy ASAP!”

Then, ashen-faced, he turned and strode away. He made straight for the surveillance room, kicking open the unlocked door—there was nothing inside but a stack of cigarette butts. By the time Hu Bugui noticed that Su Qing’s defense box was set intact on the floor, he could entirely have gone on stage to substitute for the grim-faced Zhang Fei.

Hu Bugui went right to the sixth floor and pounded on Su Qing’s door several times. No one paid attention. Xue Xiaolu very tactfully said, “I’ll get the tech department to order the fingerprint recognition system to open the...”

She didn’t finish, because she saw Hu Bugui get a fingerprint mold out of his pocket and press it twice to the scanner. A *beep*, and the door opened. Hu Bugui went in.

Xue Xiaolu felt her worldview collapse in that moment—could this... could this be the legendary secretly getting the keys to your house without letting you know in case of emergency, for example in case of an attack at night, all this and that...

Captain Hu, your exterior is virtuous and moral, but inside you’re a beast in human clothes, full of unspeakable things! A beast in human clothes!

Tu Tutu had been playing a game. The moment the door opened, he could tell that the person opening the door at this frequency wasn’t Su Qing, so he did one thing—he quickly plugged his headphones into the headphone port on his laptop and with lightning speed pulled the headphones over his ears.

Hu Bugui opened the door and came in. He saw Tu Tutu sitting in the room alone, his ears covered by the big headphones, the music on them so loud that he could hear it even by the door. It hopped around along with the jumbled little people on the screen. He raised his hand to pat the child on

the shoulder, and Tu Tutu pretended to be extremely startled. He immediately took off the headphones and turned around. Then he patted himself on the chest. "Oh, my goodness, I thought it was the Prince Regent coming back! If he saw me playing games, it would have been another self-criticism service."

There was a fire in Hu Bugui's heart, but he didn't show it in front of Tu Tutu. At least seeming even-tempered, he asked, "Where is Su Qing? I need him for something."

Tu Tutu blinked his big eyes. "I don't know. He usually only comes back at night, doesn't he?"

But the little fox was after all a little fox; his attainments were insufficiently deep. Hu Bugui stared at his little face for a while, then bent down and brought his gaze level with Tu Tutu's. He quietly asked, "Tell uncle the truth, did he tell you something?"

Tu Tutu's eyes turned, and he continued to fight with his back to the wall: "Oh, he tells me so much nonsense every day, what do you want to hear, sir? Our Imperial Presence is busy with affairs of state. There's a lot I don't remember."

"Did he tell you not to open the door to anyone?"

Tu Tutu's eyes flashed.

"He told you not to have contact with anyone until he came back, not to trust anyone, right?"

Tu Tutu slowly extended his hand and made a gesture of zipping his lips.

Hu Bugui's eyes dimmed. He put his hand on the back of Tu Tutu's head and looked straight into Tu Tutu's eyes. Softening his voice, he asked, "Child, do you trust me?"

Tu Tutu immediately nodded rapidly. Hu Bugui's heart felt bitter. He quietly said, "Tell the truth."

So Tu Tutu opened his big, limpid eyes wide and met his gaze fearlessly. He neither nodded nor shook his head.

Hu Bugui sighed. "If I can bring your Uncle Su back this time, then trust me, all right?"

Tu Tutu looked at him uncertainly. However clever and crafty he was, he was still a child barely ten years old. He didn't understand the complicated expression in the man's eyes. Hu Bugui held down his communicator. A

technician's voice came from it: "Captain Hu, the disruption signal is strong, we've basically determined the concrete location."

So he forced out a smile, stood up, and gently patted Tu Tutu on the head. He instructed, "Don't forget to do your homework, and don't strain your eyes."

Su Qing felt an unbearable pain in his thigh. He stumbled and went to one knee. Then something very peculiar happened. The pain seemed to cancel out much of the numbness coming up from the soles of his feet. Blood flowed down his pants, and the double core energy system began to automatically muster a great quantity of energy, gathering it at the wound, actually lightening some of the pressure and inhibition coming from the big net outside.

Su Qing remained on one knee, not moving. Cold sweat trickled down his temples. His senses had just been restored. Following Xu Ruchong's non-stop screaming, he caught his footsteps.

He knew that that bullet just now hadn't been shot by the killer from last time. That shuddering sense of being aimed at was still there.

Then a person appeared in his line of sight—an acquaintance. The square-faced homicidal maniac from back at the grey house, Shi Huizhang. When he saw him, Su Qing simply felt in perfect physical condition. He could have cut down five blue seals in one breath without any effort.

He had thought things through. He had known that Xu Ruchong had no intention of hurting him and had arranged to meet him alone because he perhaps wanted to communicate some things he couldn't say to others. That was why Su Qing had confidently left the RZ Unit headquarters—after all, no risk, no reward.

When Xu Ruchong had revealed that he was this mysterious Dr. Zheng's adopted son and his emotions had suddenly gone bizarrely out of control, Su Qing had understood that this business had turned around; the person to be caught wasn't Xu Ruchong, it was him.

But no pain, no gain—Su Qing still felt confident. He believed that putting his life on the line this time was worth it. Otherwise, what was he supposed to do? Pass up this opportunity for nothing...or get the RZ Unit's Daddy Hu to act as back-up? Su Qing obstinately believed that it was all the same whether Hu Bugui was there or not. If he succeeded, everyone would

win, and if he got in over his head, it was still more free and convenient for one person to retreat than two.

He had been counting on being able to gaze reverently at how many nostrils and eyes this doctor surnamed Zheng had, but it turned out that he continued to reveal himself only in glimpses and had sent this old acquaintance.

As soon as he saw Shi Huizhang, all the anger and memories suppressed in Su Qing's heart struggled to be first to get out—the lightless grey house, the woman tied by a dog collar, the countless dead...

He thought, Enemies truly are destined to meet.

Shi Huizhang looked at him in satisfaction. There was a laser gun against his shoulder. He turned his head and said in another direction, “Jiang Lan, what did you shoot him for? What are we going to tell the doctor?”

Jiang Lan didn't show herself to respond, and Shi Huizhang took no notice. He snorted and spat at Su Qing. “I was wondering who it was—tsk-tsk, you're a lucky one, aren't you? Chen Lin's gone to the labor camp in hell, and here you are still hopping around in the mortal world, and you've become this...what's it called? Well, Su, a good-for nothing like you, what dog's shit did you eat to get this kind of dumb luck?”

Su Qing gave a cold laugh. “Nothing you shat, anyway.”

Shi Huizhang had been insulted, but he didn't take much notice. He gave another very superior laugh from on high, put on gloves, and got out a set of shackles made of some unknown material, flashing with sparks. He raised his hands to put it on Su Qing's neck.

Just then, Su Qing quickly stuck the knife in his hand into his already wounded leg, just as though it didn't hurt, agitating the existing wound. The already stopped blood immediately spurted out, and the binding feeling of the big net instantly broke again. A smile appeared on Su Qing's face. Even more nimbly than usual, he raised his hand and slashed at Shi Huizhang's wrist.

Shi Huizhang was startled, as though he hadn't expected at all that Su Qing could still stand up. But, after all, a blue seal's reflexes were fast. He immediately stepped back and dodged. But just then, another bullet flew from another direction, piercing right through Xu Ruchong's body. Xu Ruchong's voice came to a sudden halt. His eyes slowly opened wide. He shook, then fell over.

As soon as he fell, Su Qing felt that, while the big net was still there, it was no longer restraining him. So he slowly stood up with the most savage smile he could produce on his face. His voice a little hoarse, he enunciated: “Old friend, it’s truly been a long time.”

Shi Huizhang actually took a step back. Even though he knew that Su Qing had been wounded and that the strange net was still enshrouding him, he still couldn’t resist becoming a little fearful—a person who bullies the weak is essentially very weak himself. In a direct confrontation, if you advance a step, he’ll retreat a step. This has been an unchanging law from time immemorial.

A clear female voice spoke behind him. Jiang Lan had finally shown herself. “We’ve detected a large convoy on the way. They’re hostiles. We’re withdrawing.”

This was just what Shi Huizhang had been waiting for. While Su Qing was still tangled up in the big net and couldn’t chase him, he immediately turned and left. At the last moment, he fiercely dropped a classic “parting refrain”: “Just you wait for next time!”

But Jiang Lan looked at Su Qing from far away. For some reason, the look in her eyes didn’t quite seem like herself. She seemed to want to say something to Su Qing but stopped herself.

But at this point Su Qing was too busy to give it much thought. He struggled to take a step forward. The net was no longer making his whole body numb, but, perhaps because he had lost too much blood from his leg, he had the impression that the net was absorbing his life force as though it were a living thing.

Xu Ruchong was looking at him with wide eyes. He stuck out a finger. His expression had finally returned to normal, but his face was turning grey at a speed visible to the naked eye.

Su Qing could already hear the sound of the RZ Unit’s convoy. He quickly asked Xu Ruchong, “What did you want to tell me?”

Xu Ruchong opened his mouth laboriously. “Cheng Ge...Cheng Ge’s drawing...it wasn’t me...I didn’t show him the photo, I...don’t know who it is either...only you...only you’re...”

The sentence caught in his throat. He couldn’t get it out no matter what. But Su Qing understood intuitively: “You can’t be certain who it was and didn’t want to create enmity between the internal personnel. I’m the only

one who's new. I don't have deep connections to everyone, so I can have an objective point of view, right?"

Xu Ruchong gave an extremely faint nod. He looked up at the pale sky. His lips stirred. At a volume others couldn't hear, he said, "I am...the...orphan of Zhao, I have lived...lived a great dream...for thirty years..."³¹

Then his expression froze forever in that moment. Su Qing couldn't hold himself up any longer. His legs went weak, and he went to his knees once more, holding himself up grimly with both hands on the ground.

There was the sound of a car braking sharply, and someone rushed over, gripping the net covering him with both hands. A sharp smell rose. In his haze, Su Qing heard someone scream. Before he could turn his head to look, he lost consciousness.

63

LIFE AND DEATH

THE MOMENT Hu Bugui's hands touched the net covering Su Qing, he felt the energy leaking from the silver arteries—his hands were immediately scorched.

“We can't determine the level of danger, everyone withdraw. Technician, come here!”

The technician who had come with the unit scrambled over, holding up a stack of equipment. When he was nearly there, his near-sighted eyes at last saw clearly that the heap lying at Su Qing's feet was his late superior. He was instantly scared half-paralyzed and fell forward, flying two feet ahead. His glasses even fell off. Blinking his hazy eyes, he shivered as he groped all over the ground for his glasses.

Hu Bugui looked at him, then looked at Xu Ruchong, with blood leaking from his face and his pupils dilated. Nothing showed on his face. He only averted his gaze and pushed the technician's glasses with his foot, pushing them up to his hand. In a heavy voice, he said, “You have thirty seconds. Tell me what that this thing on him is.”

“Oh...yes, sir!” This four-eyed brother scrambled over on hands and knees, then couldn't resist taking another look at Xu Ruchong's corpse. He subconsciously swallowed.

Hu Bugui's voice exploded in his ear: “Don't look, that isn't him.”

His words were like a spell, and perhaps they gave the new technician some hope. His eyes instantly lit up, and his hands stopped shaking. He lowered his head and didn't look anymore. He began to focus single-mindedly on the net covering Su Qing. The blood was slowly leaving Su Qing's face. It was turning grey with extreme speed.

Hu Bugui carelessly wiped his bloody hands on himself and lowered his eyes as much as possible, not displaying his anxious expression—they had

one dead and one wounded. If he as captain let his feelings become unstable, what were the others supposed to do?

“Captain Hu, my initial assessment is that this is a two-directional medium. Evidently the energy source at one end has broken off now, so it has begun to automatically absorb energy from the other end. If this goes on, he’ll be drained dry.”

Now that Su Qing had no more surplus energy to repair his injured leg, the blood was flowing out like a small waterfall. One of his pale fingers was still on the net’s lattice. The knife between his fingers had nicked the edge of his sleeve and caught. The blade was cutting a small wound in his hand.

“Can you block it?” Hu Bugui asked.

“Yes, but...”

“No time?” Not waiting for him to finish, Hu Bugui bent down. He turned his head to the technician and said, “Move away.”

The despondent technician didn’t understand, but he reflexively obeyed the command, obediently standing up and moving away. Then he saw Hu Bugui simply use his bare hands to grab the net covering Su Qing. Su Qing, like a marionette, was lifted along with the net.

All the veins stood out at the edges of Hu Bugui’s forehead. The technician, who was closest to him, opened his mouth wide and didn’t close it. He smelled a scent of barbecue.

Sizzling sounds came from the places where skin touched the net. Some places even stuck. He wanted to free up a hand to hold Su Qing by the shoulder, but he couldn’t tear his hand away at first. Hu Bugui lifted his hand by force, and the technician clearly saw a big piece of flesh tear off his palm. Blood poured from the burned skin.

The technician was only a frail scholar. He had never in his life seen such a bloody scene. He felt his legs turn into noodles. He took two steps back, his eyes rolled up, and he jumped into another dimension.

Hu Bugui ignored him. He grabbed Su Qing by the shoulder, took a deep breath, then gave a yell, tearing the stubbornly clinging net off Su Qing. Su Qing had no strength left, and he had stabbed himself in the leg. He fell right onto Hu Bugui. Hu Bugui wanted to hold him up, but he found that blood and burned skin had stuck his hand to Su Qing’s clothes. He took a step back and tripped over the instrument cover that the technician had tossed aside. The two of them fell heavily to the ground.

Hu Bugui opened his arms, raising his hands, which were a sight too ghastly to behold, to carefully shield Su Qing. Su Qing's chin bumped against his chest. Bone struck bone, extremely painfully.

He sighed in relief, but when he saw Su Qing's face, his breath tensed once more. Just then, the car containing the second wave of the RZ Unit's people arrived. Fang Xiu jumped out before the car had even come to a full stop. He leaned down to pick up an enormous medical kit, then ran over with Lu Qingbai.

Lu Qingbai pried open Su Qing's eyelid. Without another word, he gave him a high energy nutritional injection. Then, directing the others, he said, "Hurry, hurry, hurry, get him up—what? Which one? The dying one first! Let the little four-eyes faint."

Hu Bugui felt his body lighten as Su Qing was lifted up. Only then did Lu Qingbai see Hu Bugui's hand, still stuck to Su Qing's clothes. He gave a miserable shriek. "Who the fuck did this! This chicken leg is obviously overdone! It's sticking to the pot!"

Hu Bugui: "..."

Lu Qingbai gave him a cold look and had the people carrying the stretcher squat down with him. Maintaining his very saddened movements, he carefully began to deal with this instance of a tie as close as bones and flesh.

Hu Bugui wanted to tear his hand off Su Qing just as he had before. Then Lu Qingbai pinched somewhere with his tweezers, causing so much pain he nearly cried. Lu Qingbai said, "If you move again, we'll all have roasted bear paw as a snack tonight."

"But he..."

Lu Qingbai interrupted him: "This brat won't die. I've given him a nutritional injection. With nothing absorbing his energy, he'll recover in a while. The wound to the leg is a bit of a problem. It seems that the bullet is still stuck inside. RZ Unit... Hmph, the Gambling With Your Life Unit. This Su character seems proper enough, but essentially he's still a..."

At this point, for some reason, the word "gorilla" stuck in his throat. Lu Qingbai's gaze froze. He lowered his eyes and didn't speak again.

Hu Bugui looked and found that Su Qing's face was indeed no longer as frighteningly grey as it had been in the beginning. Only then did he recover

from his extreme anxiety and feel the pain—his hands hurt, his ribs hurt, and his chest hurt.

Fang Xiu stood beside him in silence, his eyes aimed directly at Xu Ruchong. Hu Bugui followed his gaze, and a rare confusion appeared on his face. Cause and effect flooded his mind. He had many questions. But for a time he didn't know where to start.

Xu Ruchong—the bookworm who yelled every day that nerds would save the world. While he talked a lot of nonsense and was sometimes unreliable, he was still a very good person, pure and enthusiastic.

Many betrayals were happening in this world, every day, every hour, every moment, but there was nothing more bewildering than this kind—the betrayal that had existed from the beginning.

Fang Xiu slowly walked over and bent down without a word. Then, in a squatting posture, he strained to twist his neck back at an angle—he wanted to see what had been the last sight of this world to enter Xu Ruchong's eyes.

What he saw was the boundless, pale sky.

“There was something I've always wanted to say, and I hadn't said it yet,” Fang Xiu thought. He silently put his hand over Xu Ruchong's face and gently closed his eyelids. He sighed and quietly said to no one, “Don't look anymore.”

Not far away, someone was the first to start crying. Perhaps it was a new recruit who hadn't yet become accustomed to life and death and betrayal.

Fang Xiu lifted Xu Ruchong's body in his arms. “Don't cry,” he said. Then a tear rolled down from the corner of his eye. They passed by Lu Qingbai, but Lu Qingbai still had his head down, as though someone had stuffed lead into it, and it was so heavy that he couldn't lift it.

The little four-eyed technician had at some point woken up. He looked at all of this blankly, then suddenly drew back his lips and began to wail. “Captain Hu...didn't you tell me it wasn't Engineer Xu? Didn't you just say...”

Hu Bugui's voice seemed to be pressed down in his throat. He quietly said, “I was lying to you.”

When Su Qing woke up, he was in his own bed. The wound on his leg was bandaged, and there was an IV in his arm. Clear liquid was flowing steadily into his body.

Light footsteps approached. Su Qing raised his eyes and saw Tu Tutu carrying a towel that hadn't been wrung out. He twisted it clumsily, and

right under Su Qing's eyes, he went on tiptoe to put the towel on Su Qing's forehead.

Then, as though he had completed a sacred act, he let out a long breath and quietly said, "Imperial Uncle, you're usurping the emperor's authority, and you're a good-for-nothing, but don't die."

Su Qing smiled faintly.

Like a little grown-up, Tu Tutu brought over a chair and sat by his bed. His feet didn't quite touch the floor, hanging a little over it. Unusually serious, he said, "Listen, why do people die?"

Su Qing thought about it for a while, then quietly said, "If a person is alive, he has to die sometime. There's nothing anyone can do about it."

Tu Tutu nodded earnestly, an apathy that didn't agree with his age appearing on his face with its baby fat. "That's true. My mom and dad just croaked all of a sudden one day. What can you do about it?"

Su Qing looked at him and suddenly asked, "Do you still remember your mom? Before, you always used to imitate what your mom said. Why don't you do it anymore?"

Tu Tutu gently kick a corner of the bedding hanging off the bed. "Oh, I don't remember so clearly anymore."

Su Qing suddenly didn't know what he should say. In the grey house, Tu Tutu had been only six. Then he had grown older, and his memories had become vague. In the end, time had wiped everything away. He couldn't even remember his parents' faces.

What could you do about it?

While you couldn't hide from life and death, if a person was sufficiently powerful, he could perhaps decide how he would live and how he would die. But the vast majority of people couldn't even accomplish this little bit. They only spent a whole lifetime drifting in confusion through the sea of people, now pushed this way, now pushed that way. Then one day a wave would hit them, their eyes would roll up, and they would bite the dust.

Sometimes, the only wish a person had in life was in fact to live according to his wishes, or to die according to them.

These words stuck in his chest, but he couldn't say them in front of Tu Tutu.

Just then, the door opened. Hu Bugui, his hands thickly wrapped in bandages, walked in. He stood in the doorway and said to Tu Tutu, "Come

here, child. Go play with your Grandpa Cheng for a while. We have some things to talk about.”

Contrary to Su Qing’s expectations, Tu Tutu immediately jumped off his chair without a word of protest and ran off.

Hu Bugui closed the door, pulled up the chair, and sat at his bedside. “Su Qing, I need to have a talk with you.”

UNSPEAKABLE

SU QING nodded cooperatively. He was always very adaptable. Each time Hu Bugui's face became stern, he would bring out his "everything the leader says is right, everything is my mistake, I've made trouble for the organization" expression, the expression of a nice young man who had recognized the error of his ways. Hu Bugui had tried trusting him time after time, but each time he had found that while ideals were well-rounded, reality was bony.

Since he was little, Hu Bugui had believed that as a man, you should say what ought to be said and not say what ought not to be said; that promises couldn't be made lightly, that words had to be turned into actions; that what you said was binding. Of course, in all his years of striving through the elements, it wasn't as if he hadn't encountered glib-tongued people. But they at least tried, at least had objectives. They weren't like this person, who would make a promise to your face, then turn around and do what he was going to do anyway.

What was he trying to do by fooling people like this?

He had walked in keeping down his anger. When he saw this expression of Su Qing's, he couldn't resist letting his anger rise again—Hu Bugui thought that if this went on, that little shit Su Qing would certainly one day make him so angry he would turn into a firecracker.

Su Qing's eyes paused on Hu Bugui's hands wrapped in gauze. His eyes flashed. In a feeble voice, he for once hemmed and hawed: "Captain Hu, I am really quite sorry..."

Hu Bugui waved a hand to put a stop to his words. He looked straight into his eyes, the corners of his mouth tightening into a fierce arc. His features seemed to be carved out of stone. There seemed to be two fires burning faintly in his jet-black eyes. He often wore a long face, but Su Qing had

never seen a Hu Bugui with his face pulled so taut. He weighed his expression and rather tactfully shut his mouth, waiting to be reprimanded.

After a long moment, Hu Bugui at last took a deep breath and began to speak heavily: “Su Qing, you have demonstrated extreme mistrust towards your teammates time after time. Not only do you attach no importance to discipline, you also attach no importance to us.”

His voice wasn’t loud, and he wasn’t being very harsh, but each word he spoke seemed to carry a certain unspeakable force, densely pressing on his listener’s head.

Su Qing thought, This time I’ve stepped on a mine.

He had just woken up. His face was as white as plaster, and there was an IV in his arm. The skin on his arm even seemed transparent. His soft hair fell messily on the pillow. He looked a little pitiful, so Hu Bugui didn’t look at him, only stared into his eyes—it was as if he could only harden his heart when he looked into those eyes. Su Qing’s eyes were very cool. Even if they curved in a friendly arc when he smiled, there was still that thin film over them; behind the warm-seeming film was stone.

When Hu Bugui met his eyes, he nearly felt that even his gaze was like stone. It wasn’t that it was very cold, but there was still no warmth there. Even when he put on a fake smile, there would be unspeakable stiffness and cunning hidden in his eyes. He suddenly felt a suspicion, wondering whether this person could be as lost as himself, only a walking corpse, able to eat and drink, talk and laugh, but with blood that had already chilled, unable to be warmed.

“The reason that the RZ Unit exists is that we are a whole. Comrades-in-arms are people you can trust to have your back. If you can’t trust us, then we can’t trust you.” Hu Bugui paused, then continued. The room was extremely quiet. Su Qing listened without making a sound. “You don’t acknowledge this team, so no matter how great your abilities, I still believe that it’s unsuitable for you to continue to work with the unit. Is there anything you want to say?”

Su Qing slowly closed his eyes. There were faint dark blue circles under his eyes. He looked a little weary. He shook his head in a very small arc.

Hu Bugui, a little irritably, wanted to put a cigarette in his mouth, but he found that he simply couldn’t work his fingers, so he frowned and had to let it go. He continued: “You don’t consider yourself a part of the RZ Unit. It’s

only that you had nowhere else to go and took headquarters as a temporary stopover. Whenever you want to leave, you pick up and leave. You're only temporarily collaborating with us. You can disregard all the unit's orders and arrangements..."

Hu Bugui laughed grimly. "It seems that our little shrine truly can't contain a great deity like you."

Hu Bugui realized that his words had become a little heavy, but he didn't regret it very much. He only shut his mouth, sighed, and leaned back in the chair with his head tipped back, looking at the lamp hanging tranquilly from the ceiling.

"Three years ago..." Hu Bugui felt his throat tighten a little, so he cleared it forcefully and continued: "I was in the wrong. I overestimated your endurance. I should never have let you return. Later, when you were crushed under the ruins, I wronged you again."

Su Qing hadn't expected him to bring this up, so he opened his eyes and looked at his hands, which looked just like two big zongzi³². He thought that Captain Hu's appearance was a little ridiculous, but he couldn't laugh at it. There were some words, some things, that were like "you have a spinach leaf stuck between your teeth"—even though everyone knew, you couldn't bring them out into the open and say them.

It would mean there would be nowhere to hide.

"All these years, I've always wanted to make it up to you, but you don't appreciate the gesture," Hu Bugui said. "I've been perplexed for a long time, because I didn't know what benefit this could have for you. Why weren't you willing to accept others being good to you?"

He didn't wait for Su Qing to answer. He went on himself: "Now I understand. It's because you don't accept my apology. You're never planning to forgive me. This way, until the day I die, I'll always remember this, and when I do die, I won't be able to close my eyes.

"But that's nothing," Hu Bugui said. "It's nothing. It doesn't matter very much whether I can close my eyes or not—but have I overestimated you again? I thought that you could separate your personal feelings from work. I thought that you were like General Xiong said, not like some...like some offended lady in a huff, hung up every day about petty remarks!

“Su Qing, a person lives so many years. He needs to have something to look forward to. He can’t keep going it alone relying on anger and hatred. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Su Qing was silent for a moment, then slowly nodded. He paused for a while, then opened his mouth as though to say something. But he was stopped by Hu Bugui’s raised hand. Hu Bugui said, “It’s enough that you know how things stand. You don’t need to say anything to me. Making up lies tires the brain.”

Su Qing readily accepted this and closed his mouth. He suddenly found that while Hu Bugui was honest and kind, he was a person who kept accounts. He had very quickly figured out how to deal with Su Qing.

Hu Bugui gave him a profound look, then stood up and said, “You rest up. In the evening, the medical treatment center is preparing to deal with... Xu Ruchong’s body. If you’re feeling up to it, you can come have a look.”

“Captain Hu,” Su Qing suddenly called to stop him, “your hands...”

“Flesh wounds.” Hu Bugui’s steps paused. He looked down on him from on high. “Actually, if you just say the word, dying for you would be nothing serious, either.”

Su Qing’s heart skipped. He suddenly couldn’t figure out what these words meant. He raised his head and met Hu Bugui’s eyes, but before he could distinguish his expression, Hu Bugui turned around and softly said, “But I’m afraid that you...”

Afraid that he what, Hu Bugui didn’t finish saying. His words became a sigh. He closed the door and walked out.

Su Qing’s energy was actually insufficient. His physical condition was very average. He relied entirely on the double core energy crystal as an external plug-in. When that plug-in suddenly failed him, he became befuddled. One wild dream followed another. He felt as though something was pressing on his chest a little painfully.

In his daze, he seemed to hear a voice speaking into his ear, scathingly criticizing him: “You were disappointed a few times, so now you won’t trust anyone again—are you a stupid cunt? Who the fuck *hasn’t* been disappointed a few times? What makes *you* so valuable, Young Master Su?”

He couldn’t tell whose voice was speaking, but for some reason, he felt a little like he wanted to smile.

Only after night had fallen did Su Qing wake again. The IV in his arm had been removed, and medicine seemed to have been reapplied to the wound on his leg. It still hurt a little, but it wasn't very serious anymore. Someone had left a glass of water at the head of the bed for him, and also a crutch.

When Su Qing came downstairs with the crutch under his arm, he was in time to see many people crowding around outside the treatment center. Even Cheng Weizhi had come out. Finally, the door to the treatment center was aggressively kicked open from inside. Lu Qingbai walked out with a hostile look on his face. His eyes glanced around. "What are you all crowding around here for? You think this is a movie theater?"

"Dr. Lu, we wanted to...say goodbye to..."

"Say goodbye?" Lu Qingbai gave a cold laugh. "When you're the one lying on the slab, you'll know whether you can hear others saying goodbye to you or not..."

He seemed not to be in a very good mood and therefore rampantly venting his anger on others. Hu Bugui walked out from behind him, patted Lu Qingbai on the shoulder, and quietly said, "Everyone go ahead and disperse. We're going to give everyone an outcome concerning this. When all of this has been thoroughly investigated we'll...hold a proper funeral. I guarantee it."

Only then, after a moment, did everyone's frozen steps begin to move away. Lu Qingbai saw Su Qing and beckoned to him as though to a dog: "That cripple over there, come here."

Su Qing: "...". He felt that Dr. Lu seemed to have some objection to him.

When he had just taken a step inside, Lu Qingbai pulled the door heavily shut behind him. Xue Xiaolu, Qin Luo, and Fang Xiu were all there. Xue Xiaolu and Qin Luo were red-eyed. They nodded to him. Fang Xiu didn't seem to have seen him come in. He only stood there with his arms crossed and his head lowered, staring blankly at Xu Ruchong's quiet, pale face.

Lu Qingbai took a deep breath, put on gloves, and quietly spoke into a recorder: "Xu Ruchong of the RZ Unit's technological department. Died in the line of duty. Time of death...time of death 12 PM, November 15, 2034. Autopsy performed by Lu Qingbai of the medical treatment center."

There seemed to be a layer of mist reflected in Lu Qingbai's thin lenses, hiding his eyes. He leaned down, holding a scalpel, and made the first cut on Xu Ruchong's body. Apart from Su Qing, everyone simultaneously averted their gazes at that moment.

Lu Qingbai had no assistant. Alone, he silently sliced, tested, examined, and recorded. He was expressionless and precise, as though lying on the autopsy table wasn't his former colleague and comrade-in-arms, only the body of a stranger.

It was extremely tranquil inside the room. Qin Luo didn't dare to sob aloud, only silently wept. Xue Xiaolu furtively held her wrist. Fang Xiu looked at the two of them and ferreted out a bag of tissues and passed it over. He seemed a little stupefied, and a little weary. Su Qing stood his crutch aside, held his injured leg slightly off the ground, and leaned against the wall. He suddenly thought, When I die, will there be someone to cry for me?

They stayed with Lu Qingbai as he worked through the night. When day had already broken, Lu Qingbai finally sewed Xu Ruchong's body back up, peeled off his gloves, then took off his glasses and fiercely rubbed his bloodshot eyes. He signed his name on the autopsy report and gave it to Hu Bugui. "He was killed by an unknown poison. There's no relevant information in the database. At the moment, I can only make a preliminary assessment of the poison's function."

"What is it?"

"It operates on the nervous system, amplifying a person's emotions countless times." Lu Qingbai picked up a metal basin. There were two small, bloody microchips in it. "I also found these in his body. Preliminary analysis shows that one monitors the strength and category of emotions, and the other is an energy output device. The latter needs to be given to the tech department. I think it may be related to that net tying Su Qing in the end."

Fang Xiu then quietly asked, "Why would there be an emotional monitor in his...in his body? What was it for?"

Lu Qingbai said, "Those bodies we found also had these things in them. Xu Ruchong told me then that he believed they were an experiment."

Fang Xiu quickly raised his head to look at him. His lips were a little white.

Lu Qingbai continued: “His own words were, ‘You see that it can’t self-destruct or influence people’s thoughts. Its only function is to transmit a signal out, and the signal is only in the form of data. In other words, the person who receives the signal will only receive data about the general category, intensity, and wave frequency of the experimental target’s emotions. They won’t really be able to know the specific contents of the experimental subject’s thoughts. The only explanation is that this thing is like the monitors on the white mice and rabbits in a lab, for monitoring some index of the experimental target...’”

Fang Xiu didn’t wait for him to finish speaking. He ran out in large strides. Xue Xiaolu looked from one to the next in confusion. Hu Bugui nodded to her, and she quickly followed.

Su Qing looked at Xu Ruchong, lying on the dissection table covered by a white sheet with only his face, which had long ceased to say anything, revealed. He thought that this mysterious Dr. Zheng’s adopted son, a planted agent who had made it into the core department, had after all turned out to be...only an experiment.

He thought that autumn had come. Otherwise, how could it be so cold?

65

CHANG DOU AND THE ST TRAINING COURSE

ON THE DAY of Xu Ruchong's funeral, General Xiong attended in person. That day, before the RZ Unit had set out to look for Su Qing, Hu Bugui had already gone to Cheng Weizhi. With things at that stage, they couldn't be covered up, and there wasn't anything worth covering up anymore. In the end, Cheng Weizhi only sighed. "I always knew that he was a good child."

Hu Bugui said, "Me, too."

They had both known. Only Xu Ruchong himself hadn't known.

With the affair of the mysterious external energy crystal bracelet having reached this point, all the clues at last broke off. The whole headquarters was shrouded in an atmosphere of unspeakable stress. Even Tu Tutu felt it and restrained himself considerably, no longer going around everywhere annoying people.

Taking over Xu Ruchong's work was the technician who had run after Hu Bugui that day. His name was Chang Dou, the "dou" in "to amuse." He had eyes twice as large as other people's, and his eyeballs seemed to rotate several times faster than other people's. He only looked quick-witted; he was actually a little foolish—Su Qing, looking down at his pant legs hanging a full five centimeters over his shoes and the obviously unmatched socks under them, came out with this conclusion.

Chang Dou felt some trepidation about replacing Xu Ruchong. When he began to work, he was even more flustered. The first time he took part in a meeting of the core members, he knocked over a cup. He saluted everyone and huddled in a corner, seeming like a mouse that had walked into a cat's lair—when Fang Xiu looked at him with a gaze of scrutinizing severity, it seemed even more like that.

As soon as General Xiong walked into the conference room, he frowned—Qin Luo had her head down; Lu Qingbai was poking the conference table with a pen, destroying public property; Xue Xiaolu made no sound, either, picking at a bag of tissues. Chang Dou was at a total loss. Fang Xiu glanced at him and turned his head away impatiently. His stubble looked like he hadn't shaved in several days. Su Qing was supporting himself on a crutch, leaning by the window and smoking, cigarette after cigarette, non-stop. Hu Bugui had his fingers laced together, his elbows on the table; he was staring blankly at Su Qing's shadow stretched out on the floor.

General Xiong, standing at the door, cleared his throat heavily. Only then did everyone look up at him without interest. Then those who had their heads down kept their heads down, and those who were smoking continued to smoke. Only Captain Hu seemed a little better. He thought that neglecting their superior like this was no good, so he stood up and went to lead General Xiong in. He quietly said, "Everyone, we're starting the meeting."

General Xiong patted Chang Dou on the shoulder, smiling widely. It was as though Chang Dou had a spring under his ass. As soon as he was patted, he sprang right up. He tugged his clothes and wiped his nose. His face became red enough to heat an iron. Sweat even came up on his forehead. He stammered: "G-general Xiong, h-hello, sir."

Fang Xiu lowered his eyes. There was a bit of coldness at the corners of his eyes and the tips of his brows. He thought, This newbie really is a waste of space.

Beaming, General Xiong patted him on the shoulder two more times. "Young man, do your job well, and your prospects are boundless."—These were his regular lines. He had said them to the majority of the people sitting here.

Then he shifted his attention to Su Qing and walked towards him. "Xiao Su, how's the leg?"

Su Qing turned his head and smiled. Before he could speak, General Xiong rudely pinched the cigarette out from between his fingers, put it out, and threw it out the window. He educated him: "Little comrade, your living habits are really no good. Smell that smoke on you—you smell like grilled squid. If you indulge when you're young, what will happen when you're old-

er? Look at me. I'm still hale and hearty, making contributions to my native land. That's because when I was young..."

Hu Bugui simply took the lighter and the half pack of cigarettes out of Su Qing's shirt pocket and put them into his own pocket, confiscating them. He interrupted General Xiong's lofty recollections of past events and pulled up a chair. "Sit here, sir."

General Xiong smacked his lips. He felt that he hadn't scratched the itch, so he glared at Hu Bugui and ignored him, plopping down right between Fang Xiu and Qin Luo. Only then did Fang Xiu finally spare him a bit of attention. He nodded and quietly said, "General."

General Xiong sighed. "Everyone's morale is low. I feel that this is very bad."

The room was so quiet that you might have heard a pin drop. General Xiong continued: "If some emergency happened now, what would you do? Go out into the field drooping like this? Never mind the blue seals, you wouldn't even be able to catch a blue cat."

Hu Bugui stiffly said, "Reporting to the general—at present we have no mission to catch a blue cat."

Out of sympathy for his suffering, General Xiong held back his anger and only glared at this blockhead, then tolerantly patted Fang Xiu on the shoulder, patting so hard that Fang Xiu swayed. Then he opened his chat-terbox. From personal convictions, he passed on to the organization's collec-tive view, then finally ascended to the altitude of service to the nation and the people, discoursing for over half an hour. But now, no one had the ener-gy even to listen half-heartedly. Only Su Qing walked over, holding his crutch, and in something like a show of deference offered a sentence: "Yes, General Xiong, your words truly touch the bottom of the human heart. You truly are an expert in performing ideological work, sir."

General Xiong looked at his rosy-lipped, white-toothed appearance and began to feel a little gloomy. He thought, They already had Hu Bugui, who never said an unnecessary or an empty word, and now there was this Su Qing, whose every word was artificial. They were simply a natural pair; what could be done?

General Xiong shook his head. "I came today in order to bid farewell to Comrade Xiao Xu and to have a look at everyone's moods. Secondly, it was to announce a piece of news."

Hearing that he had at last finished talking nonsense and come to the main matter, everyone finally raised their heads. They heard General Xiong say, "We've added a new team member, and the RZ Unit's composition has had a bit of a change. There have also been a great many things happening lately. I've been thinking of sending everyone to go out and relax. It can also be regarded as a change of scenery, and as raising the cohesiveness of the team. So I've fought to get you all into this year's year-end ST Training Course, lasting one week."

Su Qing had been influenced by Su Chengde and believed that ST meant short-term junk bonds. Then he swept his eyes over the circle of sitting people, remembered what Xu Ruchong had said to him before he died, and thought that this RZ Unit was in fact ST.

Hu Bugui refused automatically: "General Xiong, if all the RZ Unit's core members leave for a whole week, if there should be some emergency..."

General Xiong waved a hand. "You alone will be specially permitted to carry a cellphone turned on twenty-four hours a day, maintaining constant contact with headquarters. If there's an emergency, you'll be notified. That's all right, isn't it?"

So Hu Bugui fell silent. General Xiong swept a meaningful gaze over everyone's faces. "None of you have ever participated in this special training, because it involves a question of expenditure. The number of personnel who participate in this training each year is very limited. I hope that everyone can approach this seriously. If that's all right, then get ready. You set out the day after tomorrow."

Hu Bugui stared. "The day after tomorrow? Won't we get any time to prepare? Look at what we're dealing with, sir..."

General Xiong raised his head and looked at him. For some reason, the look in his eyes made Hu Bugui automatically shut up. Then General Xiong stretched, stood up, paced two steps in place, and beckoned. A soldier came over immediately and passed him a document with both hands. General Xiong handed the document to Hu Bugui. It said: "ST Training Course Training Qualifications and Points for Attention."

"Sharpening the axe won't interfere with chopping the firewood." Leaving this sentence behind, General Xiong got back into his military jeep and floated away.

This quaint junk bond training course's first requirement was that a whole team participate. No one could temporarily absent themselves without special approval. Otherwise, everyone's training qualifications would be canceled.

All personnel participating in the training wore civilian clothes and were not allowed to carry weapons or communication equipment—in consideration of the special nature of the RZ Unit's work, Hu Bugui himself was permitted to carry a communicator, and it was shut down so that it only had one frequency that could communicate with headquarters.

Energy detectors, all types of defensive equipment, and other such high-tech articles were entirely forbidden. There was no need to take along any luggage. Everything the students required would be supplied by the training base.

The day they set out was the first day that the cast and bandages on Su Qing's leg came off, and he touched the ground with both feet. They left headquarters together and found that a helicopter was waiting for them. Before boarding, a person with the look of an officer, after producing the relevant credentials, took out some strips of cloth and requested that they come blindfolded.

The others were all right, but Su Qing had already begun to frown. This made him remember the circumstances in which he was taken away from the grey house. But he had been unequivocally told that he couldn't withdraw. The moment the black cloth came down, Su Qing's hand tightened, subconsciously reaching towards the pocket containing his knives. Only then did he remember that the things inside had all been removed when he had gone through the security check.

There was chaos all around. He stood in front of the helicopter preparing to take off, nearly deafened by the whirring of that enormous housefly. His vision was blocked, so his other senses became unusually sensitive. Su Qing was dazed, feeling his heart beat faster and faster, as if he had returned to that time when he had been alone and helpless. Someone gave his shoulder a light push, intending to direct him to board the helicopter, but Su Qing instantly blocked the person's wrist automatically and then felt embroidery on the person's sleeve cuff.

His mind buzzed. All the veins stood out on the backs of his hands. He attacked almost instinctively. Someone yelled something that he didn't hear

clearly. He swept out a kick swift as fierce as the wind. Just then, all of a sudden something tightened on his waist. Someone had pounced from beside him, dragging him over a meter to the side.

Hu Bugui pulled off Su Qing's blindfold and said loudly into his ear: "Enough, it's me!"

Su Qing saw the light of day once more. He shook fiercely, then finally came around and looked at the dumbfounded officer who had just wanted to lead the way for him—there really was something embroidered on his cuff, but it wasn't "Utopia"; it was a national emblem. He had just been too tense, unable to even distinguish the round national emblem from Utopia's flashy writing.

Su Qing forced a smile. "I'm sorry, conditioned reflex, I may be a little afraid of the dark, I let my mind wander..."

The officer seemed to view this as a common occurrence. After he recovered, he very calmly gave him a salute. "Please put on the blindfold and board the helicopter, sir."

The person behind him immediately stepped up and once again put the blindfold on him. Su Qing was a little frustrated, gently stabbing his nails into his palm. Just then, Hu Bugui's hand reached out to uncurl his fingers and hold them. Not loudly, he said, "You follow them. I'm behind you. It's all right."

AN UNUSUAL TRIP

THEY GOT OFF the helicopter and got into a military vehicle with their eyes still blindfolded. It had taken over an hour in all. Hu Bugui paid no attention to how the others were doing. He, at any rate, hadn't let go of Su Qing. At first the car went smoothly, but as it went on, it began to shake. An officer in the passenger seat turned back and notified them in a flat voice: "The road up ahead isn't very good. Everyone please fasten your seatbelts."

The people in the back were very unaware. If he hadn't said this, none of them were in the habit of fastening their seatbelts—apart from Chang Dou, who was too nervous and had forgotten, the others were to varying extents accustomed to encountering emergencies, especially the field personnel. For the sake of a quick reaction, none of them fastened their seatbelts.

Right after the officer spoke, the car shook, and everyone's butts temporarily left their seats. Chang Dou's balance wasn't good, and he toppled sideways, his head colliding directly with Fang Xiu's. There was a dull thump and two pained cries.

Chang Dou covered his head, not knowing whom he had bumped. He looked panicked and stammered an apology. Fang Xiu didn't feel like paying attention to him. He only grunted. Su Qing felt around beside him for the seatbelt with his free hand as he commented: "The watermelons sound ripe."

Lu Qingbai picked up: "Hey, the comrade driving this car, couldn't we find a better road? Our brains are going to shake out of our heads."

The officer in the passenger seat laughed. "The base is in a somewhat remote location. Everyone will have to bear with it."

Fang Xiu heard their voices and knew that they were smoothing things over. Though he found Chang Dou displeasing in every way, he couldn't

very well embarrass the others, so he could only sit back down, grope around to buckle his seatbelt, and say nothing.

Su Qing's eyes were blindfolded. He couldn't see anything. He felt around next to him and touched something very hard. He thought, why was the back of the seat so far forward? So he poked twice and unexpectedly had his fingers caught. Hu Bugui said, "Don't move, I'll find this end and give it to you."

When he spoke, the "back of the seat" undulated with the rise and fall of his breathing. Su Qing only then realized that he had just poked Hu Bugui's chest muscles. With an evil smile, he poked two more times with a bit of malice and acutely heard Hu Bugui's breathing pause unnaturally for a moment. Then his fingers were gripped tightly and rigidly held down. After a good while, Hu Bugui finally put the other end of the seatbelt into his hand. "Fasten it."

Su Qing laughed quietly and whispered, "Captain Hu, you have a good figure."

The car was driving on the road, and there was a lot of noise. This sentence of his was spoken almost into Hu Bugui's ear, but that didn't keep a pair of ears specially waiting there from hearing. Xue Xiaolu's ears were usually very ordinary, but they could be selectively sensitive to certain comments. Deliberately or not, she asked from beside them: "Su Qing, you just said Captain Hu has a good what?"

Su Qing twisted his head and smiled even more happily. Hu Bugui smacked him on the lower abdomen with the back of his hand and stiffly said, "You heard wrong."

Then, avoiding the subject, he raised his voice and asked the driver, "How much longer until we get there?"

The answer from the front was: "Probably about two hours. Everyone can rest for now."

The inside of the car quickly fell silent. Ordinarily, this bit of road was nothing to these well-trained elites. With their eyes blindfolded, unable to even see the scenery, they ought to have been chatting freely, but Xu Ruchong was missing, Lu Qingbai and Fang Xiu were both suddenly unwilling to speak, Su Qing had a strong aversion to the experience of riding blindfolded in a car and didn't feel like talking, Chang Dou didn't dare to talk, Qin Luo and Hu Bugui rarely said much, and Xue Xiaolu couldn't keep up

a conversation on her own. So instead of seeming like a team that had worked together for many years, they were even more cheerless than a group of strangers temporarily brought together in a tour group.

In the silence, they each closed their eyes. The driver and the officer in the passenger's seat exchanged a look. They seemed to be used to this—not many people knew about the existence of the ST Training Course, and very few could say what the letters “ST” had stood for at the beginning. Though the popular story among internal personnel was that it was the “Special Touch” Training Course. Each team that had been “fortunate” enough to study this course had come to some degree of grief.

Comparatively speaking, this team wasn't so bad. The atmosphere was gloomy, but at least no one had come to blows yet.

Su Qing didn't sleep. In unknown surroundings, his mind was always tense—though the warmth coming from Hu Bugui's palm made him feel a little better, with so much unfamiliar breathing and so many unfamiliar heartbeats next to him, it was still hard for him to close his eyes. He could only sit there and endure as time crawled by.

After a long time, the car finally stopped. As soon as he heard someone say “Everyone can get out of the car and move around, and take off your blindfolds,” he impatiently tore the blindfold away and breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Hu Bugui also pulled off his own blindfold and turned his head to look at him. Quietly, he said, “Are you all right now?”

Su Qing closed his eyes. “Back to life again.” Then he let go of Hu Bugui's hand. He felt that there was a faint trace of sweat where their hands had been pressed together, so he lowered his voice and said into Hu Bugui's ear, “Captain Hu is so considerate. How about I repay you with my body?”

Hu Bugui froze. Before he could respond, Su Qing laughed lightly, pushed awake Xue Xiaolu and Lu Qingbai beside him, who were slightly dazed, and got out of the car.

The sun was already sinking into the west. They didn't know where the ST Training Course's car had taken them. Wherever they looked, there were mountains all around. There was only a little road of piled rocks in front of them. Further on, it narrowed even more. The car wouldn't be able to get through. Su Qing had heard that the armed forces sometimes made soldiers go through the mountains carrying heavy loads on their backs, but

he hadn't expected it to happen to him. But he glanced around, his eyes moving over the shoes they were all wearing, and felt that this was wrong—no one had said there would be stamina training, and they had been told to dress in casual clothes; there was everything from leather shoes to tennis shoes among them, and the shoes on Xue Xiaolu's feet were even high heels.

Just as he was feeling misgivings, he heard a shout from far away. Su Qing narrowed his eyes and looked over. He saw an old man driving an oxcart, coming towards them.

His eyes opened wide—in this era where science and technology had engulfed the whole globe, this was his very first time seeing an animal pulling a cart. For a moment he felt that he had time-traveled.

Chang Dou pushed up his glasses. Dumbfounded, he said, "A-a hoofed animal!"

The big ox mooed, drawing a clear line between itself and pigs.

Lu Qingbai stared at the line of dung openly left on the road behind the ox's butt. His facial muscles began to experience unnatural distortions.

The two officers who had brought them stood sharply at attention and saluted. "Reporting to Captain Hu, our mission has been completed. Following the training course lasting one week, we will be waiting here to be responsible for taking you all home."

The oxcart had already rolled up and stopped in front of them. The ox pulling the cart gave another "moo." Its big, wide open, limpid-eyes met the eyes of Qin Luo, who was nearest to it. Xue Xiaolu couldn't resist pointing to it and asking, "Are we going to travel in that?"

The answer was definite. Five minutes later, the RZ Unit's core members, each with a peculiar expression, got into the oxcart, and, listening to the old fellow driving the cart crying out, swaying left and right amid the sound of rolling, they got under way.

The old man driving the cart gave a "hey," readied his throat, and began to sing a very rustic folk song wildly off-key: "Here I'm driving my big cart—yi-hey-yo! The mountain sun is burning me—yi-hey-yo! Old ox, old ox, hurry up—yi-hey-yo! Take me to my father-in-law—yi-hey-yo! Pretty as a flower is my wife—yi-hey-yo! Her father says that I'm too poor—yi-hey-yo! Pulling my cart full of yams—yi-hey-yo! Roly-poly and golden..."

Each of the roly-poly and golden yams sitting in the cart behind him wore a peculiar expression.

Su Qing crawled to the front and patted the man on the shoulder, interrupting his impromptu performance: “Uncle, uncle!”

The man turned his head towards him, beaming. Qin Luo, sitting in the front, automatically gave up her place to this imperial diplomat, so Su Qing plopped right down and began to ask, “Uncle, are you with the ST Training Course, too?”

The man waved a hand. “No, no, I’m not part of your ‘Easy’ Training Course, I’m the one they hire to pick people up.”

Su Qing asked, “How many people come in all?”

The uncle was choked for a moment. He waved his hand. “Hey, this thing can’t be said, it can’t be said. You’re with the liberation army, aren’t you? The liberation army has discipline, and I have discipline, too. I can’t speak indiscreetly.”

Su Qing gave an “oh” and turned his head to look at Hu Bugui. Hu Bugui nodded, indicating for him to continue the conversation—strictly speaking, the RZ Unit had separated from the military long ago. It didn’t matter to them whether it had discipline or not.

Su Qing continued to ask: “Uncle, do you come to pick them up alone every time?”

The old man gave an “ah” and rather contentedly said, “But of course! I’m an old hand. I have a steady hand driving a cart!”

He had hardly finished speaking when the whole oxcart jolted violently. Qin Luo’s head bumped into Lu Qingbai’s back. Lu Qingbai raised an arm to keep his balance and swiped Fang Xiu on the chin.

Su Qing gave a dry laugh and grabbed the cart’s wooden edge. Shakily, he asked, “So...is there money in picking people up?”

The man grinned and said, “I would pick up the liberation army’s people even if they didn’t pay me—but there is a bit of a subsidy, this much for each round trip.”

He stuck up four fingers. Su Qing deliberately asked, “Forty?”

The man gave a “hey,” then quietly boasted: “Over four-hundred for each round trip, and I get free meals when I get there.”

Su Qing’s eyes spun, and he began to chit-chat at random with him. Every line out of his mouth that could trick a dead man began and ended

with “uncle this, uncle that.” He said whatever the fellow wanted to hear, entertaining the old man driving the cart until he was grinning from ear to ear. In no time at all, he had handed over where he lived, how many acres and family members he had, how many daughters, how many were married and unmarried. Then he looked Su Qing up and down. “Young fellow, are you single? My second girl is about the same age as you...”

Hu Bugui gave a heavy dry cough from the back, and Su Qing quickly interrupted, asking, “Is your family’s economic situation good?”

“Yes, of course it’s good!” The man’s thoughts were still in picking out a son-in-law mode. He followed along with his subject, talking all about how much money the children working away from home sent back every year, how much money he got from farming, how much he got from driving the cart, and finally, he added in some self-satisfaction, “Never mind the rest, each year, just from driving you people, I make two or three thousand.”

Su Qing nodded to Hu Bugui—so each year about five to eight teams came to the ST Training Course. There were so many military areas and armed services in the country. Even if this wasn’t the only training base, it seemed that this honor was scarce.

There were other considerations on Hu Bugui’s mind. Before leaving, General Xiong had said “Sharpening the axe won’t interfere with chopping the firewood.” What did that mean?

There was in fact some turbulence among the RZ Unit’s core members, but they hadn’t reached the stage of being unable to act in coordination. Why had General Xiong been in such a hurry to send them into exile?

What great firewood was there to be chopped?

The warning Xu Ruchong had given him suddenly surfaced. Hu Bugui frowned, feeling a sense of great events to come.

When Su Qing had chatted with the cart driver for over an hour, they finally reached their destination—the ST Training Course base. It was already dark. Someone came to receive them. After quickly eating and regrouping, they were informed that the training formally began today, and the first contents of the training were sleep.

Apart from the two female members, who received preferential treatment—a curtain was drawn for them, creating a separate room smaller than a chicken coop—the others all stood helplessly facing a big multi-person bed.

After a long moment, Lu Qingbai said, “I...I have this feeling of having worked hard for decades and then in one day suddenly being transported back to the times before the liberation...”

That night, more than one person lost sleep.

THE IMPASSABLE FOREST

“EVERYONE, PLEASE SLEEP PEACEFULLY.” This was what the officer who took them inside said. “Learning to rest is another important aspect of training. I know that you are all elites. It’s nothing to you to hold out for a couple of days without sleeping. Our training period isn’t long, so in order to prevent this circumstance, I’m going to announce a rule—each night from 12 midnight until 6 AM the next morning, apart from using the toilet, you aren’t permitted to leave your room. Of course, you don’t need to worry that there will be a problem with your quality of sleep. Our rooms are all equipped with enforced sleep devices.”

Then he saluted efficiently, turned, and left, leaving behind a roomful of RZ Unit members staring blankly at each other.

“What’s an...enforced sleep device?” Su Qing felt like he was bungee jumping between AD 1850 and AD 2100; he was getting a little oxygen-deprived from it.

“A newly invented intervention therapy for insomnia,” Lu Qingbai said. He plopped down on the bed and felt that the bed under his ass didn’t feel especially sturdy. “It causes a powerful feeling of exhaustion and helps relax the mind. I’ve heard that the clinical results have been quite good. It’s ready to go into production, except that the production costs are too high, so it can’t be circulated on the market.”

Chang Dou gave a timely yawn. Lu Qingbai glanced at him and sighed. “Comrade Xiao Chang, the enforced sleep device in this room clearly hasn’t been activated yet. You’re early for your role.”

Chang Dou got halfway through his yawn, then forced it back. Blinking his watery eyes, he looked at him pathetically.

Before nightfall, Xue Xiaolu and Qin Luo went into the little compartment partitioned off by the curtain, and the others for the first time lay in

this sort of multi-person bed. Before sleeping, they held a brief meeting concerning the question of “should we have our heads out or our feet out.” Before they had reached a conclusion, the lights in the room suddenly went out, and all the windows shut automatically. High intensity light-blocking shutters came down, and the room immediately became so dark you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face.

Su Qing, just drinking out of an enamel cup with a red star drawn on it and “Serve the People” written on it, nearly poured the water into his windpipe.

Lu Qingbai said, “*Now* the enforced sleep device has been activated.”

Just as he finished speaking, there was another yawn from beside him. Lu Qingbai: “...”

Fang Xiu coldly said, “Chang Dou, move over that way, I’m not used to being so close to others when I’m asleep.”

Chang Dou immediately obeyed his orders reverently, striving to shift sideways. Lu Qingbai was just bending down to get into the covers, so his chin bumped right into Chang Dou’s head. Lu Qingbai hissed. After a long time, he said indistinctly, “Chang Dou, is there something wrong with your balance? You’re always bumping into things left and right. Aren’t you worried about getting a concussion?”

“I’m...I’m sorry!”

“You knocked my glasses off.” Lu Qingbai began to grope around wildly. “Don’t sit down, Captain Hu, my glasses will break if you sit on them.”

“I’m already sitting down,” Hu Bugui said. “And you’re lying crooked, Dr. Lu. You’re kicking me.”

As he spoke, Hu Bugui felt a faint buzzing drilling into his ears, as though it was drilling directly into his brain. This sound was bizarre and extremely subtle; when you listened closely, it wasn’t there. It wasn’t irritating. Instead, it made you feel relaxed. After a moment’s daze, you felt as though you were immersed in warm water.

Suddenly, there was a *click* behind him, and the small flame of a lighter appeared. Hu Bugui’s head cleared instantly. He turned and saw Su Qing standing up and feeling for the table. “I hadn’t even put down my damn cup, and they turned the lights out just like that. They ought to at least give us some notice, no?”

Hu Bugui frowned. In a low voice, he asked, “Didn’t I confiscate that? Where did you scare up a new one from?”

Su Qing pulled a face at him. When he had just found a place to put his cup, the shoddy one-yuan-a-piece lighter in his hand emitted two sparks and wouldn’t light anymore. Su Qing cursed quietly. Hu Bugui knocked on the side of the bed. “Over here.”

Su Qing felt through the dark, following his voice. He felt around on the side of the bed for a long while before finding Hu Bugui’s arm lying there. Then he gently pinched that beautifully muscled arm. Hu Bugui sucked in a breath. “What are you up to now?”

“I pinched it to see whether it was your arm,” Su Qing said matter-of-factly. He unhurriedly climbed in bed and got under the covers, bringing a cool draft with him.

None of them knew what tricks this ST Training Course involved, and they weren’t used to sleeping in company with so many people, so they all went to sleep in their clothes. It may have been a figment of his imagination, but Hu Bugui felt that he could sense Su Qing’s body heat through his sweater. The frequency of his heartbeat quivered twice, and he woke up entirely.

Meanwhile, Lu Qingbai was no longer moving, and Chang Dou also seemed to be sound asleep. But Su Qing didn’t seem sleepy in the least. He raised a hand to rub his ear and quietly asked, “What’s that’s noise?”

“It must be the enforced sleep device.” When Su Qing spoke, a slight breath puffed directly into his ear. Hu Bugui trembled imperceptibly and somewhat unnaturally turned his head away. “Stop talking and go to sleep. We have training tomorrow.”

Su Qing’s ears were too good. He could even hear the sounds of Xue Xiaolu and Qin Luo breathing in the partition. He had slept very little over the last few years, and he had a bad habit—he could only sleep when he was alone in the room. Even Tu Tutu slept apart from him.

The tiny sound emitted by the enforced sleep device did indeed have a powerful soporific effect. After a while, Su Qing’s body and limbs felt as heavy as though lead had been poured into them, just as though he were extremely tired.

But tired was one thing. When some sleepiness had just welled up, the next moment he would be startled awake by the sound of someone breath-

ing or turning over. After a while, in the dark, it felt as though even time had slowed down. Next to him, Hu Bugui's breathing was very steady, but Su Qing still had his eyes open, lying face up on the painfully hard bed, his nerves becoming more and more tense.

Not sleeping for one night was nothing. He could also bear not sleeping for a week. But this enforced sleep device really was a racket. For some reason, Su Qing slowly began to feel a pain in his chest—just as if something were slowly blocking the operation of his energy crystal.

Su Qing had lived for years with the double core energy crystal system supplying him with power. When his supply chain suddenly broke off, it was like an ordinary person being injected with a muscle relaxant. He felt as though he hardly had the strength to open his eyes or breathe. But his tensed nerves wouldn't be influenced by this thing. They remained as tense as before.

Su Qing closed his eyes and began to silently count sheep. As he counted, he desperately repeated to himself what Hu Bugui had said to him the other day—the people in this room were all his colleagues, people he worked with and risked his life with. He had to trust them. It was only closing his eyes and sleeping, it was only...

But the more he thought this, the more uneasy he felt. When he had counted enough sheep to eat mutton for the rest of his life, Su Qing still couldn't get to sleep. The longer he couldn't get to sleep, the more irritable he became. It was as though this enforced sleep device could only make his body enter hibernation. The supposed calming function had no effect on him.

After another while, Su Qing heard the sound of some gas leaking out by his ear. He laboriously opened his dry and heavy eyes and saw that at some point a blinking little red light had appeared next to the pillow, as though some instrument had been activated. Then a tube came out of the little red light and sprayed white smoke.

Su Qing wanted to sit up immediately, but his body wouldn't move no matter what. He held his breath and used all his strength to raise one hand. He grabbed Hu Bugui's wrist. But perhaps Hu Bugui was sleeping too soundly, or perhaps his grip was too light—Hu Bugui didn't react. He only turned over and put an arm on Su Qing's waist, very naturally embracing him.

The movement was natural, but its strength was considerable. Su Qing had been barely holding his breath to start with. Strapped down like this, the breath came choking out. He thought indignantly, Why can other people move?!

A moment's carelessness, and Su Qing breathed in quite a lot of the smoke. The stuff was visible but tasteless. When he breathed it in, there was no obvious unpleasant sensation. But as it permeated further and further around, the whole room seemed to become encircled in white smoke.

At first, Su Qing felt a slight pressure pressing down on his temples. Slowly, the pressure increased. In the end, it simply felt like a hoop binding his head. Sweat came up on Su Qing's temples. He wanted to struggle, but he had entirely lost control of his body. There was nothing but whiteness before his eyes. He bit through the tip of his tongue and drew blood. Finally, all sensation disappeared entirely. All that remained was that enormous pressure that seemed about to crush his head.

Su Qing felt that his head was about to explode. Then his vision blurred, his body relaxed, and all the pressure disappeared. He opened his eyes and found that the people next to him were all gone. He was alone, lying in an enormous forest. Above his head were leaves blotting out the sky. Light leaked in through the gaps between the leaves, falling on his skin. He could feel a slight warm itch. The undissipated white smoke filled the air.

"This isn't right," he thought. Then he tried to get up, but the next moment, he fell back. Su Qing looked at his own arms and legs in astonishment. They felt as flabby as though someone had pulled out his bones. There was still a faint taste of blood at the tip of his tongue, reminding him of that strong pain he had just experienced.

He struggled where he was for ages, then finally stood up, swaying and supporting himself against a big tree. He flexed his hand. The feeling of his fingertips touching his palm was very authentic. This truly didn't seem fake, but it also didn't seem real. Otherwise, Su Qing simply couldn't think of how he had instantly gone from a carefully sealed room to a forest.

Just then, through some low bushes, Su Qing saw someone sit up not far from him and look up to meet his eyes. It was Hu Bugui.

Hu Bugui still seemed a little confused. As soon as he saw him, he automatically asked, "Su Qing? What are you doing there?"

So Su Qing walked over, half-paralyzed, his knees shaking like stalks of wheat. He had only gone two steps when they finally couldn't support his weight anymore. They went weak, and he went to one knee on the ground. Hu Bugui, to his extreme envy, vigorously leapt up from the ground and ran over to him. "What happened? What's the matter?"

The moment Hu Bugui's hand touched him, the white smoke suddenly cleared from in front of Su Qing's eyes.

68

FLEEING

SU QING was basically entirely resting against Hu Bugui. This time he couldn't tease. His chest still hurt, as though something heavy were pressing down on it. Everything looked a little blurry, and there seemed to be some membrane over his ears, impacting even his hearing.

Hu Bugui squatted down and looked at his pale fingers pressing his chest. Anxiously, he asked, "Do you want me to carry you on my back? Where does it hurt?"

Su Qing feebly waved a hand. "I can't even see very clearly right now. Captain Hu, is this ST Training Course thing harmful?"

Hu Bugui frowned. He hadn't noticed anything wrong—until Su Qing had reminded him, he had entirely forgotten that he was at the ST Training Course. Hu Bugui raised a hand and waved it in front of Su Qing's eyes. "Like this...can you see?"

Su Qing gasped twice, then quietly said, "Not that kind of not seeing clearly. It's further away. Everything is a little blurry."

Hu Bugui rubbed his palm to warm it up and lightly put it over his eyelids. "Does this hurt?"

Su Qing shook his head. After a while, Hu Bugui lowered his hand and asked, "Is it still blurry?"

Su Qing nodded. Hu Bugui pointed to a nearby tree and asked, "Do you see that tree? Can you see the branches and leaves clearly? Is there double vision... Oh, you can still see it. Where can't you see clearly?"

Su Qing squinted. "Around...the fifth or sixth tree is a little blurry."

Hu Bugui glanced in the direction he was looking, paused, then said, "Actually, I can only see up to around the seventh tree."

Su Qing instantly realized what Hu Bugui meant. "You mean that...my physical condition now is what it was before I had the two grey seals?"

Before Hu Bugui could nod, Su Qing continued, “But I could still walk upright before.”

It was easy to go from frugality to luxury, but hard to go from luxury to frugality—Hu Bugui sighed, pulled over Su Qing’s arm and put it around his neck, put his other arm around Su Qing’s waist, and lifted, half supporting and half carrying him. He thought that the weight he was holding wasn’t quite right, so he said, “Are there some heavy objects on you that you haven’t removed? Take them out right now.”

Only then did Su Qing remember that he still had some mystical stones of the Ji clan on him. He quickly turned these things up from his pant legs, collar, and various other nooks and crannies. While his legs still felt weak, he breathed a big sigh of relief. He could more or less walk. Hu Bugui felt the weight he was holding suddenly decrease by more than half. His fingertips seemed to touch Su Qing’s ribs. He frowned. After a long moment, he said, “...Don’t stress yourself out so much. You should look after your health.”

Su Qing curved his eyes in a smile. “Captain Hu, it’s because I treasure my life and fear death.”

The two of them didn’t know where they had ended up. There had been no hints from the ST Training Course, and there was absolutely no word from the others. Beneath their feet was spongy earth and fallen leaves. It didn’t take too much effort for Hu Bugui to support Su Qing, but so that he could gradually get accustomed, he walked very slowly. Beside them was the whispering sound of wind blowing through the thick forest, occasionally bringing a faint fragrance of flowers from some unknown place. The atmosphere was extremely tranquil and relaxed.

Hu Bugui turned his head and saw Su Qing’s profile within reach. He dully said, “Forgive me for my poor eyesight, but I hadn’t noticed that.”

Having passed through a period of understanding, in Hu Bugui’s mind, this Su character was simply a death-seeker.

He didn’t believe it, and Su Qing didn’t say anything further about it. He airily changed the subject. “Captain Hu, where do you think we are?”

This was just where Hu Bugui thought the strangeness was, because he absolutely couldn’t remember how he had gotten here. Seeing his reaction, Su Qing understood somewhat—they had indeed been moved in their sleep by some means. He didn’t know whether standing here was his conscious-

ness or his real body. So he briefly explained his experience, from seeing the white smoke to suddenly being dropped into the forest, to Hu Bugui.

After pondering for a long time, Hu Bugui asked, “So you mean that we might still be dreaming now? Or we’ve entered a cyberspace without being aware of it, like those...holographic games? But if this space is simulated, it wouldn’t simulate those weights on you as well, would it? Anyway, why would they drop us into this forest?”

“Captain Hu, have you noticed that the trees here are getting closer and closer together?”

Hu Bugui paused in his steps. If you said that at first the path they were walking on could be called pleasing, the place they found themselves now wasn’t especially calculated to put people in a good mood. The leaves were so dense that not a drop of sunlight could squeeze in, and the path was becoming narrower and narrower. This way, it looked like in the cracks between the vast, ancient trees, there was an enormous black hole waiting to consume them. It actually appeared a little sinister.

“There’s another problem.” Su Qing’s voice was even softer. “All this time we’ve been walking, have you heard the sounds of birds or insects?”

As soon as he spoke this question, he nearly broke out in gooseflesh himself. He increasingly felt that this place was like an enormous tomb. Apart from himself and Hu Bugui, there were simply no other living beings.

Hu Bugui didn’t respond. He was looking in the direction they had come. Su Qing turned his head to look, too, and immediately felt a chill evil wind blowing over his back—the irregular, sun-scattered pleasing path they had come by was gone. The trees behind them had become as dense as those in front. The branches and twigs of the greenery waved slowly in the wind as though they were alive. But the strange thing was that Su Qing didn’t feel the air moving at all.

“Let’s get out of here.” Hu Bugui spoke in a whisper, but this place was truly too quiet. His whisper sounded unusually clear. An echo even came from some unknown place. The tone of the echo had changed somehow. It sounded as if something in the depths of the thick forest was imitating him in an affected voice.

“How are you feeling now, recovered a little?” Hu Bugui asked softly.

Su Qing stretched out his fingers, then clenched his fist. He shook his head slowly. This ST place seemed to have thoroughly broken off his plug-

in. Su Qing took a deep breath, a thread pulling taut in his mind—he had sniffed out the danger in this place, but he was completely powerless.

Just then, Hu Bugui removed Su Qing's arm from around his neck and simply pulled him into his embrace. "We can't exactly retreat. Should we rest here or continue on ahead?"

Like this, Su Qing's sensations were a little strange. Hu Bugui's arms had reached out and gathered his whole back against him. His shoulder blades were even pressed against Hu Bugui's chest, as if he was surrounding him with his body. But he couldn't say anything like "I can walk for myself"—he might be able to walk, but he was certain not to be able to walk fast or jump high. With things at this stage, it would be unreasonable to quibble. So he took a look back over Hu Bugui's shoulder. "To tell you the truth, Captain Hu, it's all right as long as you're stopped here. If we go in a few more circles, I'm afraid that right now I won't know which way is 'ahead.'"

He raised his head and looked up. "Neither of us has a compass, and we can't see daylight. We can't even distinguish direction. Which way should we go?"

Hu Bugui's eyes lit up as he followed his gaze. "You mean that we should climb a tree?"

But this strategy was clearly forbidden, because no sooner had he said this than a tragedy occurred—they heard a fierce wind. Hu Bugui dodged automatically, holding Su Qing. He turned to look. A big vine as thick as a man's waist had crashed directly into the place where they had just been standing, making a hole half a meter deep.

Before they could catch their breaths, the big vine suddenly twitched, as though shuddering. Then it charged murderously towards them. Hu Bugui chose his moment precisely, stamping on the vine. His skills after all were the result of sure and steady training, entirely living up to the name of "field personnel gorilla." Even holding someone, he could still jump around unhindered.

Su Qing suddenly said, "Behind you, get down."

Hu Bugui threw himself forward without even thinking and felt another enormous shadow brush over his scalp.

Su Qing looked up and found that the surrounding air space was a flailing chaos. He opened his mouth and patted Hu Bugui on the shoulder. "Captain Hu, I think we'd better run."

There was no need for him to say this. Hu Bugui was already putting it into practice—this time, there was at last no need to discuss which direction to go in or how to determine direction. They were entirely chased by an awakened tree demon's vines.

Even the bushes around them became denser and denser. Often a sharp branch swept by. Su Qing was all right with Hu Bugui protecting him, but Captain Hu's appearance became rather cutting edge during this run.

Just then, a light flashed in Su Qing's eyes. But it was only once. Before he could find the source of the light, a club-like vine once again blocked his line of sight. So in that instant, he only had time to say, "Careful, up ahead, there's..."

Hu Bugui took a step into emptiness—he had originally been stepping on the exposed root of an ancient tree, but somehow, the moment his foot touched the root, the big trees, as densely packed as shoppers lining up for a weekend sale, instantly separated. Hu Bugui missed his step. There was no path up ahead. The two of them were simultaneously thrown forward. A vine came sweeping over. Hu Bugui held Su Qing tightly in his arms and turned, using his back to take the hit. His vision blacked out, and he nearly fainted.

At their feet was a pit of unknown depth. In an instant, Su Qing chose his time precisely and extended a hand, tightly grasping a branch within his reach. He struggled to get his other hand free and caught Hu Bugui under the armpit—the lucky thing was that his desperate attempt succeeded; the unlucky thing was that the branch he had grabbed was covered in thorns.

The thorns stabbed fiercely into Su Qing's palm, and blood immediately flowed down his wrist—never mind that his arm was weak to start with, he was also holding a person the size of Hu Bugui. At that moment, only one sentence was left in Su Qing's mind: That old fart Xiong tricked me!

69

PRECIPICE

How MUCH strength could one person have?

Su Qing couldn't say. At any rate, he hadn't even been able to walk steadily before, but now he could use one hand that was slashed bloody to hold up two people.

From pain or for some other reason, his whole body was trembling. Having reached this stage, his mind was a blank. There was nothing left. It seemed that only one thought remained in his heart and soul—I can't let go.

The hit had practically set all of Hu Bugui's organs shaking. He nearly spat out a mouthful of blood. After a long moment, he unevenly said, "Let...go..."

Su Qing ignored him. It wasn't that he was so dedicated; it was that he really didn't have any surplus strength to spare to react to this instruction.

The blood flowing from his hand had already soaked his sleeve. It fell drop by drop like rain. Their surroundings began to shake violently. The great incline that it might have killed them to fall down suddenly collapsed—they had fallen into some kind of world where it seemed that mountains collapsing and the earth cracking came as readily as wind and rain.

The thorny branch Su Qing was holding began to grow at a speed visible to the naked eye, like some fearsome monster. It opened into a large net. The more blood there was in a spot, the faster it grew. When it touched a wound, it bore inward. Soon, Su Qing's whole arm was wrapped up. Then it quickly wrapped around both their bodies, like a suspended death of a thousand cuts.

He only then found that the huge earthquake just now had shaken the slope into a precipice. For some reason, in that moment, Su Qing thought that this place was very familiar, as if he had been here before.

Just then, Hu Bugui took a deep breath and firmly clenched his teeth. He desperately spread his shoulders and arms. The thorny branches binding his body immediately bit into his flesh. The thorny branches were like animals; when you advanced a step, they retreated a step. They matched their strength against Hu Bugui's. Sweat trickled from his forehead down his cheeks, dripping onto Su Qing's neck. Sweat and blood mixed. Su Qing heard him quietly say, "Just hold on a little. The pain will be gone soon."

From an extremely close distance, Su Qing looked at him in astonishment. "What...are you going to do?"

Hu Bugui laboriously reached out a hand and gripped a thorny branch hanging down above him. The thorns slashed his wrist. They caught a vein or an artery, immediately cutting through. A large quantity of blood spurted out. The thorny branches wrapped around Su Qing's wrist were stimulated. They immediately released him and threw themselves on Hu Bugui's wrist like mad.

Hu Bugui firmly put his other arm around Su Qing's waist. Su Qing's chin bumped into his shoulder. Hu Bugui's breathing became more and more strenuous and slowly began to tremble a little. Then his teeth began to chatter. He desperately spread his body again, using it to create a space inside this cage made of thorns.

"Don't be scared. This time I'm here." Su Qing could clearly sense that Hu Bugui's gaze was a little slack, but it still fell on him with a slight smile. The blood was quickly leaving his lips and cheeks.

"Captain..." Su Qing's throat moved with difficulty. For some reason, he suddenly began to tremble even more fiercely.

Hu Bugui seemed to be covered in blood, but there was a smile on his face that looked slightly relieved. He said, "This time I'll finally..."

In an instant, Su Qing remembered where this very familiar-looking precipice was. The sound of a bird's wings beating came to his ears. A bird of some unknown breed suddenly flew out of the precipice. As though it was just starting to learn to fly, it doddered a little at first; but it strove very, very hard to flap its wings, its head raised from beginning to end.

Su Qing felt that the light stabbing his eyes was a little painful. Three years ago, in that grey house, when he had just woken from the dream of becoming a bird, he had used the same posture as Hu Bugui's to hold up a fallen wall—covered in blood, listening to the little devil's thin weeping.

Hu Bugui seemed to be having trouble even opening his eyes. He was blinking less and less often, as though the blood sticking to his eyelashes had already glued his eyelids together—his eyelashes were still very long, so long that they were too heavy.

Su Qing suddenly asked, “Captain Hu, do you like me?”

Hu Bugui’s slightly slack gaze focused and slowly fell on Su Qing’s face. Birdsong seemed to come from the horizon, so far, yet also so near. Hu Bugui seemed to smile. Then he lowered his head. His lips fell lightly on the tip of Su Qing’s nose, the corner of his mouth. Finally, as though finding a haven, they pressed gently against Su Qing’s lips.

But there was no next step. He only closed his eyes and left a fleeting kiss.

“...No,” he said into Su Qing’s ear in a voice as thin as gossamer, “I think I love you.”

Su Qing was looking past his shoulder at the boundlessly vast sky. His eyes suddenly opened wide.

“But that...isn’t connected to me protecting you.” Hu Bugui’s voice was becoming quieter and quieter. Su Qing thought that even his breath was weakening and would cut off at any moment. “I’m protecting you because you’re...my team...”

Then his voice vanished. In that moment, Su Qing felt his heartbeat come to a heavy stop. Hu Bugui’s arm confining him suddenly turned limp and powerless, and the net of thorns immediately began to contract, binding Hu Bugui’s entirely unconscious flesh as though trying to jostle him awake.

Just then, Su Qing felt his stagnating double core system suddenly begin to flow once more.

A strong light flashed in his eyes, forcing Su Qing to close them. Then his whole body relaxed, and he fell down heavily. The last thing in his line of sight was that flying bird and that boundless white smoke.

There seemed to be some irresistible power pulling his consciousness down. At last, he knew nothing more.

When Fang Xiu woke up, he found that he had fallen into a maze. He got up in some astonishment, quickly adjusted his mental state, and found that all around him were walls fashioned out of reinforced concrete and the narrow paths they created.

Fang Xiu took some steps along the wall, turned down some intersections, then found himself at a dead end. He frowned and carefully considered how he had ended up in this place, but no matter what, he couldn't remember. He felt up and down his own body. Somehow, he found a pen in his pocket.

It was a very old, very used pen with dark blue ink.

At a glance, Fang Xiu knew whose this was. He smiled wryly and drew a mark at the corner, indicating which direction he had gone when he had passed by this place and where he had come from. Then he switched to another path and groped along.

He didn't know how big this maze was. Slowly, Fang Xiu found that he had lost his sense of time. All that remained was constantly walking and constantly drawing marks. The strange thing was, no matter how far he walked, no matter how many marks he drew, there was always ink in the pen he was holding.

The maze had day and night, and whenever it came time to eat, food and drink would suddenly appear at a corner, so he wouldn't die of hunger inside. At first Fang Xiu suspected that someone was watching him, but each time he gave chase, he came up empty-handed. He only walked into another path with a dead end.

Sunrise and sunset, day and night alternating—slowly, Fang Xiu began to become numb. He thought that he had entered a closed loop. Time and life had both been frozen in this endless, unceasing maze. He was all alone.

He began to draw marks on his coat to keep track of time.

He had begun to search for the exit to the maze as soon as he had woken up. Later, he became unwilling to walk anymore. Still later, he spent all day sitting in place with less than two meters of sky above him, leaning on the huge stone wall, staring blankly at Xu Ruchong's pen.

One day, he saw that one of his coat sleeves was drawn full of marks and realized in surprise that he had been trapped in this bizarre maze for ten years.

There were still many things he couldn't remember, and the things he could remember seemed to have faded in his memory. Even that person in his memories, even who he himself was, whether he was still alive... Until the twelfth year, when he heard another person's footsteps.

Fang Xiu raised his head almost woodenly and saw someone wildly coming towards him from the other end of the maze. He had a paper covered with drawings in his hand. He had one long pant leg and one short pant leg, and he was wearing unmatched socks under them. His hair stuck up all over the place like a bird's nest, and he occasionally grabbed it in bewilderment, making it stick up even more.

Fang Xiu thought that he ought to recognize this person, but no matter what, he couldn't remember what his name was.

But that person looked down and saw him. He stared blankly for a moment, then opened his mouth wide—Fang Xiu thought, He still looks clumsy and idiotic with his mouth open wide enough to shove an egg in.

The person dropped the paper in his hand and came towards him, yelling loudly, like a twitching, skinny frog. He grabbed Fang Xiu by the shoulder. Then, like a child, he unexpectedly began to wail.

In that instant, Fang Xiu remembered his name. He said to himself, Isn't this that dim-witted good-for-nothing Chang Dou?

Then he remembered that he was still alive.

When Lu Qingbai woke up, he found that he had returned to the RZ Unit headquarters. He had been woken by Qin Luo. Next to them was Xue Xiaolu, just opening her eyes in confusion.

Headquarters was completely empty. There wasn't a sound. As the only field agent present, Qin Luo scouted around. She even lifted a chair and smashed a surveillance camera, but the familiar alarm didn't sound. Everywhere was extremely quiet—apart from some bodies on display in the treatment center, there were only the three of them left.

Qin Luo went out to have a look. She harvested three guns and brought them back.

The guns had been inexplicably blocking her path. From a field agent's instincts, Qin Luo picked them up, took them back, and distributed them to the other two.

Just then, a sharp alarm rang in the treatment center. All three of them were startled.

ANOTHER LIFETIME

XUE XIAOLU suddenly let out a shriek. Qin Luo was all right, but Lu Qingbai wasn't a field agent to begin with. His psychological quality wasn't up to the mark. He was so startled by her shriek that he nearly fired accidentally. Then he followed Xue Xiaolu's gaze, and his face turned white—a body on a dissection table was swayingly standing up. Its skin was dull grey.

Then Lu Qingbai's gun really did go off accidentally. A bullet hit the edge of the dissection table with a *bang*. Sparks flew in all directions.

Qin Luo's hand was much steadier than his. She raised her hand, and a bullet entered the center of the standing corpse's forehead.

Then this dear friend, with its belly that still hadn't been sewn up, fell straight down, the back of its head knocking against the dissection table with a loud and clear sound.

Xue Xiaolu, her eyes open wide, shakily said after a long time, "What... what the hell is that? Dr. Lu, are you sure he's dead?"

Lu Qingbai's hand holding the gun wasn't calm, but his brain was very calm. He turned and beckoned to the other two. "Headquarters is unsafe. Let's get out of here."

He hesitated, then picked up a box of scalpels. With both hands on his gun, he walked in front, with Xue Xiaolu in the center and Qin Luo with her back to the two of them bringing up the rear. Incomparably nervous, the three of them left the treatment center. The moment they stepped out, Qin Luo thought that she clearly heard a low roar that definitely didn't belong to a human. She gave a start and glanced at Xue Xiaolu and Lu Qingbai in front of her out of the corner of her eye. She thought that the two of them were already nervous enough and didn't dare to say anything.

Their footsteps echoed emptily in the corridor. This passage seemed to be boundless. Each time they passed a fork in the road, the surveillance sys-

tem camera over their heads would slowly turn as though it were alive, “watching” them walk by.

Dim cold light flashed over the mechanical screens.

The three of them were all very familiar with the headquarters. They went right downstairs, cautiously passing the lobby, heading for the main doors. Suddenly, Lu Qingbai stopped. Xue Xiaolu’s attention was concentrated on either side of her. Seeing him suddenly stop, she couldn’t resist turning slightly, too, and looking past Lu Qingbai. With just one look, she felt a chill go up her spine—the place where the main doors should have been had become a blank wall. All the doors and windows were tightly sealed. A clownish face hung where the doors should have been, malicious light flashing in its eyes. With her own eyes, she saw the corners of the bizarre clown’s mouth slowly turn up.

Typical amusement park music suddenly sounded all around. There was even a sound of gusting wind mixed in, just as if there really was a merry-go-round next to them.

Then, as the smile of the clown on the wall became wider and wider, the music became slower and slower. The tempo stuck. Like a funeral dirge, each beat was heavier than the one before, and there was a faint strangeness in it.

The three of them stood together back to back. Footsteps sounded all around. Qin Luo turned her head and saw countless “people” swaying towards them. Each one had ashen skin. She saw the one in the lead clearly. It was sporting a bullet hole in its forehead!

Gunshots sounded. The front ranks of the zombies fell, only to be replaced by stronger waves coming towards them.

They shot and shot, and Lu Qingbai felt that there was something off. He felt a chill at his back and quickly turned his head. He found that Qin Luo and Xue Xiaolu were both gone—no, it wasn’t that they were gone, it was that they had suddenly multiplied. At some point, all the zombies in the room had turned into countless Xue Xiaolus, countless Qin Luos, even... countless versions of himself.

Each of them had a gun and faced the others with a blank expression.

Lu Qingbai had never been so horrified in his life.

Then daylight came at last, the white smoke slowly dissipated from before their eyes, and each person woke as if from a marrow-chilling dream,

either life-or-death peril, or being abandoned for years in an endless maze, or dodging and gunning down themselves and their teammates. They were mentally and physically exhausted.

Chang Dou suddenly began to cry, breaking all the clear morning stillness. He said, "Where am I? Where is this?"

The enforced sleep device had been turned off, and the tightly sealed windows had been opened. Sunlight was pouring in. The others listened silently to Chang Dou's crying. They felt as though a lifetime had passed, or perhaps...a lifetime *had* passed.

There was a reveille outside—it had been many years since any of them had heard such an ancient thing. They all stared. The reveille was extremely penetrating. It was like a signal, digging them out from the trap of previous incarnations and present lives.

Hu Bugui only then found that he was still in the posture of holding Su Qing entirely in his arms. Fortunately, everyone was currently absent-minded, and no one noticed. He lowered his head just in time to meet Su Qing's eyes. After a moment, the two of them simultaneously averted their eyes, and each got out of bed.

Hu Bugui efficiently said, "Chang Dou, don't cry. Everyone, get cleaned up and out of bed. This is the first day of training. Don't be late."

It had clearly only been one night, but they seemed to have gone through a whole lifetime. Fang Xiu silently touched his face, then glanced at the embarrassing Chang Dou next to him. He picked up Chang Dou's coat and dropped it onto his face. He whispered, "Keep bawling and I'll sell you." Then he got out of bed.

The officer who had received them the night before quickly appeared. This middle-aged man's attitude was excellent. Under seven gazes that wanted to peel off his skin and rip out his tendons, he still gave a calm and composed salute, then turned to lead the way. "Please come this way with me to have breakfast."

Just as if he wasn't worried that someone behind him would pick up a brick and brain him with it.

The officer took them to a big dining hall, one of the old style dining halls with a serving hatch and a big, uneven wooden table in the middle with a ring of benches next to it. Each bench could seat two people. There

were seven place settings on the table with mantou, pastries, and youtiao next to them, as well as a big pot with oil floating on the surface.

The people who had just escaped from an “impassable forest,” a “grey maze,” and a “zombie battle” exchanged looks and found that this time they had traveled to a scene of city intellectuals having an enforced agricultural experience.

Lu Qingbai laughed grimly and poked a mantou on the table with chopsticks. He looked up and asked, “Comrade, there aren’t hallucinogens in these, are there?”

The officer gave a friendly smile. “The training course’s circumstances are very limited. It’s all homely fare. Please don’t take offense. You’ve had a tiring night, so you should eat a little more.”

Lu Qingbai’s temper rose, and he was about to pursue the question doggedly. Su Qing held him back, putting on a careless smile. “It’s very hard on you to have to get up first thing in the morning, and there’s so much food here. It would be a waste not to finish all of it. Why don’t you eat with us?”

—Now *this* was hiding a dagger behind a smile.

The officer glanced at them and understood what the problem was. The ST Training Course had a tradition of employing potent drugs on the first night, so all kinds of things could happen the next morning. He looked at Su Qing and knew that if he didn’t sit down, not one of this group would move a single chopstick. So he went to the serving hatch, got a set of tableware, and sat down with them. He served himself a big bowl of noodles and ate it in big mouthfuls.

Only then did Hu Bugui lower his eyes and make a gesture towards the others. They picked up their chopsticks one after another. Only Su Qing wasn’t in a hurry. He had a nutritional injection in his pocket and didn’t need to worry about eating. As he used his chopsticks to toy with some noodles, he sized up the officer sitting across from him and began to question him: “What should we call you, comrade?”

“My surname is Zhong. Zhong Shiliang.”

“Oh...so is it all right if I call you Zhong-da-ge?”

Zhong Shiliang looked at him and smiled. “You can also call me Lao Zhong.”

Su Qing curved his eyes in a smile and poked his own wrist a few times with his chopsticks. “We’re taking part in this training on arrangement from

above. Reasonably speaking, whatever the organization tells us to do, we ought to do it, and we shouldn't ask too many questions. You think so, sir, don't you?"

Hu Bugui didn't hold him back, allowing this imperial diplomat to act for himself. He heard him sigh as though it were the real thing. "But, you see, sir, our unit is newly organized. Under normal circumstances, we're still just starting to learn all over again how to get along when we're at headquarters and going out on missions. There are a lot of things we can't coordinate well over. So I have a concern—what happens if we disappoint the organization?"

Zhong Shiliang put down his bowl and looked calmly at Su Qing. He thought, This little comrade may be young, but he's a true disciple in the tradition of General Xiong. He said, "There's no need to be concerned about that. Our training center will exert our greatest efforts to assist you all in successfully completing this training."

"Yes, yes, we'll have to ask you to take the trouble, sir." Su Qing casually served Zhong Shiliang a piece of meat, putting it into his bowl. Sadly, they were restricted by discipline, and there was no alcohol on the table, or else he probably would have stood up to propose a toast. "I'm very worried. Ah, I don't mind telling you, I personally haven't undergone regular military training, so I always feel like I'm missing something. It makes me very apprehensive. Yes, I feel rather lacking in self-confidence."

Fang Xiu nearly choked on a mouthful of noodle broth. Hu Bugui picked up his bowl to cover up a trace of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

There was silence at the table. The others were responsible for stuffing themselves, while Su Qing was responsible for trying to get chummy with Zhong Shiliang. At the end of this meal, anyone who didn't know better would have thought that Su Qing had known Zhong Shiliang for a very long time, and that they were old friends and comrades-in-arms.

They talked and talked, and the subject turned back. Su Qing, with sincere anxiety on his face, said, "I was already uncertain, and now that I'm taking part in a training course with such high standards, I feel scared witless."

Zhong Shiliang asked him, "What are you uncertain about?"

"I don't even know the contents of the training. Look, Lao Zhong, I've been passing physical education exams based on sympathy since I was little.

If it comes to running five kilometers cross-country carrying weights, I'll go straight to see Karl Marx," Su Qing said, lying through his teeth. "Also, I heard that the army has psychological training as well. My psychological quality...well, don't mention it!"

As he spoke, he took a cigarette from his pocket out of habit and familiarly offered another one to Zhong Shiliang. After Zhong Shiliang waved a hand and refused, he narrowed his eyes and felt around for a lighter to light it with. Before he could shake the crappy lighter that had given out last night into lighting up, Hu Bugui reached out a hand from beside him and snatched his cigarette away. "It's first thing in the morning. No smoking."

Su Qing turned his head to look at him, pursed his lips, then, unexpectedly, for once didn't voice any objection. He obediently put the pack of cigarettes back in his pocket. He turned his head and continued speaking to Zhong Shiliang. "You know, sir, I also have trouble sleeping in a bed that isn't my own. Last night I didn't sleep well and had a dream. In my dream, I saw lots of trees coming to life and chasing after me for all they were worth. I was scared enough to piss my pants. My legs are still weak."

Zhong Shiliang looked at him and smiled. "You weren't dreaming last night. You entered the training course's Multi-Frequency Dimension-Changing Space."

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SICKLY VS. SULTRY

“MULTI...” Su Qing felt like he was tripping over his own tongue. “Multi what in the hell?”

He thought, could this ignorance be because he was relatively uncultured? So he surreptitiously glanced at the supposedly most cultured Chang Dou and found that Chang Dou was also looking at Zhong Shiliang idiotically—OK, Su Qing thought silently, this Comrade Chang Dou is overeducated to the point of looking stupid. The expressions his face can display are approximately as follows: stupid smiling, stupid crying, stupid staring, stupid blankness...

Zhong Shiliang, beaming, explained: “You must all have had disturbing and very memorable experiences last night. As for how you ought to look upon this night...—of course, for some of you, the time that passed may have been longer than one night—my suggestion is, if you believe that it was real, then it was real, and if you believe that it was fake, then it was fake.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than several murderous gazes locked onto Zhong Shiliang from various directions. Su Qing shut his mouth, vaguely thinking that there were two words written on this Comrade Lao Zhong’s face: “hit” on the left side, “me” on the right.

Zhong Shiliang’s psychological quality was indeed above average. Remaining composed, he accepted everyone’s admiration, dipped his remaining mantou in broth, and ate it. “We can’t waste food.

“Simply put, this space doesn’t function through the operation of some hallucinogen. It wasn’t something that you all imagined out of nowhere, it was something that existed to begin with—it was the room you were staying in itself. The geographical position of that room is fairly special. Adding man-made technological arrangements, the space produces different dimensions. After it has been activated, the chronological and spatial coordinates

can change at will. Meanwhile, the coordinates you end up in after activation depend on you.”

“Depend on our what?” Fang Xiu asked.

Zhong Shiliang pointed to his own head. “Brainwaves. To be a little more refined about it, your own heart will take you to a suitable space and coordinate point. And the consciousness of the enterer will superimpose itself on the space they have entered, each influencing the other, creating some scenes that you yourself can’t understand but secretly feel ought to be thus—oh, of course, some spaces aren’t very steady, because the dimension is too high. Some of you may have encountered circumstances such as closed loops and earthquakes.”

Su Qing frowned, then asked, “Why would I have a very bad headache while entering this space of yours?”

Zhong Shiliang glanced at him. “I suppose you weren’t asleep at the time, Xiao Su?”

This was a slightly awkward question. Su Qing paused, then breezily said, “No, I’d been asleep and just been woken up then. One of the guys was grinding his teeth, and it gave me a bit of a pain in my teeth.”

While everyone knew based on experience that the credibility of what he said wasn’t high, all the living beings present that could be termed “guys” couldn’t resist subconsciously touching their cheeks—some people are just born with the sort of face that makes others trust them.

Zhong Shiliang no longer pursued the question of whether Su Qing had been asleep. He explained: “A person’s brainwave frequencies are different depending on whether he’s awake or asleep. You were forced into the space while awake, so there was some pain. But there won’t be any negative side effects afterwards, I can guarantee that.—If two, or more than two, people get drawn into the same space, then the composition of that space becomes more complex, because it becomes the outcome of the counteractive combination of the space’s installations and the consciousnesses of a few different people. You may experience some very unbelievable, perhaps even illogical things. Of course, this is also a good channel for understanding your teammates.”

“And...if you ‘died’ in the space?” Su Qing asked.

A secretive smile appeared on Zhong Shiliang’s face. “If you died, then take it as having come back to life. Isn’t that pretty good?”

They all frowned and began to think about what things had to be weighing on their minds to make them experience the things they had experienced when pulled into that space. They heard Zhong Shiliang say, “There’s no need for you to worry. The Multi-Frequency Dimension-Changing Space and the enforced sleep device won’t be activated again tonight. I trust that everyone here is an elite and has a strong adaptive ability. You’ll be able to adjust considerably today, so there won’t be any more use for those things.”

Xue Xiaolu couldn’t resist asking, “So what are the contents of our training today?”

“Only some conventional training.”

Zhong Shiliang hadn’t been lying. The contents of the day’s training were indeed conventional. In the morning, there was some common physical training, and the intensity level wasn’t very high. At any rate, even Lu Qingbai and Chang Dou, as nonmilitary personnel, could get accustomed to it. The contents of the afternoon were a very thin, very tall old soldier coming over to deliver an ideological lecture to everyone. It was about the same as attending a Party class, nothing but raising political consciousness, expounding on some glorious history, and discussing personal convictions. There were slightly higher requirements for sitting posture.

No one was in any mood to listen. They were already used to General Xiong’s brainwashing and could recite the whole routine by heart. Most of their thoughts were still stuck in that special space.

Su Qing sat bolt upright, but the look in his eyes was obviously vague. It was as if there was a film projector in his head, replaying the previous night’s experiences over and over.

He found that the thing he feared most was in fact losing his strength. There was a line that went, “The socio-economic foundation determines the building above it.” Without the foundation of formidable strength as a support, he found that his heart couldn’t be strong. Su Qing thought perhaps it was that he himself wasn’t any kind of awesome badass; he had been born to the life of an ordinary commoner. But unexpectedly, he had been pushed beyond his limits; the more he had grown, the more he had had grown astray.

The classroom was bright and clean. The afternoon sun fell on him snugly. Su Qing suddenly thought, it was because of that fear he couldn’t get rid

of that, like Hu Bugui said, he subconsciously didn't trust others. It was why he hid himself behind countless lies, as though he would be safe that way.

A powerful person wouldn't fear betrayal, wouldn't fear injury, because he would know that as long as he still had a breath remaining, he could survive and smooth out the bumpy road; or if even that one breath no longer remained, he would still think it was worth it; anyway, he would be fine again in another twenty years.

He inhaled deeply, then exhaled extremely softly, glancing at Hu Bugui sitting in front of him. Hu Bugui's back muscles were very impressive, his shoulders straight and broad. Even sitting there unmoving, it was very hard to ignore his presence.

Su Qing remembered in vexation the last words Hu Bugui had said into his ear in that strange space. He simply felt a little overwhelmed by flattery, beginning to feel at a loss—he absolutely didn't think there was anything lovable about him, and he couldn't think of anyone apart from his parents, who had treated him as a treasure under the influence of hormones and the instinct of living things to propagate, who had taken him into their heart.

Hooking up with others to mutually resolve physiological problems was one thing, but when it came to emotion, that was another thing—when he had been fooling around with Guo Julin, he had still been a confused youth, wasting food and killing time. There was no comparison to that kiss gently falling on his lips in a life-or-death moment.

So it must have been that from the start, Guo Julin had coveted his looks, so he had been good to him in every way, but later he had gotten tired of him?

“What does he like about me?” Su Qing stared in confusion at Hu Bugui's back and couldn't understand no matter how he thought about it. He was like a child who had always tested last in his class, suddenly notified that he had been granted the only triple A student certificate of merit in the whole class. He was simply amazed, then suspicious. As he considered the problem without being able to resolve it, he also felt extremely apologetic, as though he had colossally taken advantage of someone.

This apologetic feeling practically made him dread Hu Bugui. Even when it was necessary to speak to him, he couldn't help being somewhat cautious, not daring to carelessly flirt with him or tease him anymore. Su Qing had always been the type to feign compliance while doing what he

wanted in secret, but today, he nearly took Hu Bugui's words as golden rules, orders to be obeyed to the letter. When Hu Bugui told him to sit, he sat. Hu Bugui had snatched away his cigarette, so he held back and didn't smoke for half the day. When the nicotine craving was making him uncomfortable, he used the free activity time after lunch to stealthily hide in the bathroom and quickly smoked one cigarette, relieving the urgency.

To his bad luck, he even ran into Lu Qingbai and spent ages being observed and studied by this wicked four-eyes, who was blindly astute just when he shouldn't be.

Su Qing was preoccupied all afternoon, to the point that after class, he only blankly raised his head when others called to him twice. Lu Qingbai patted him on the shoulder with an odd expression. "Listen, Comrade Xiao Su, I spent all last night killing zombies along with two girls. I nearly threw out my back. But now I've come back to life. Why are *you* still in a trance?"

Entirely insincere, Su Qing said, "Must be that my psychological quality is too poor."

Lu Qingbai crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked him over for a while. "I sense something fishy."

Fang Xiu seemed to be feeling lively, so he chipped in to ask, "What's fishy?"

Lu Qingbai looked at Fang Xiu, then looked at Su Qing, comparing the two of them. Then he passed judgment: "Look, we all went through that last night, so today we all look sickly. But why does it seem to me that...only this young comrade is looking sultry?"

Su Qing calmly said, "Dr. Lu, your glasses prescription isn't strong enough."

Lu Qingbai stared at him, not letting him off, still trying to use his X-ray eyes to pierce Su Qing's face and witness his inner world to catch a glimpse of some illicit romance.

Hu Bugui looked at Su Qing and wanted to say something. Just then, that plague god Zhong Shiliang walked in with the look of a suspicious stranger bearing gifts. He proclaimed a piece of news, the general idea of which was: everyone was tired after the day's work, so they should relax in the evening. Everyone was asked to come out to the training course's grounds and forage for their own food—they could pick some of the vegetables from the training course's private plot or shoot some game, go up some trees to find birds'

eggs, or go down into the little pond to catch fish; they could hold a big barbecue.

After saying this, Zhong Shiliang left. Chang Dou stared dumbfounded at his receding figure. “I...I finally understand why General Xiong said that the training course’s funds were tight. It turns out that the installations here are too advanced. Even headquarters can’t compare. They’ve used up all their funds, and now they even have to save on money for food!”

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PICNIC

XUE XIAOLU and Qin Luo were looking on as Fang Xiu picked radishes.

The strange thing was, wherever this mountain top that could cause any species constipation was located, it actually had a climate of year-round spring. To one side were simple farmers and bronzed guards, to another was the well-informed but pretending not to be Zhong Shiliang, to another were the mountain and the farm lands with spring year-around, to yet another was the little dark room full of all kinds of bizarre high-tech products.

The ST Training Course amply demonstrated to numerous training participants what it meant to spend money on a knife's edge.

Waking after that one night, Fang Xiu's spirits seemed to have improved considerably. Though he still now and then took a dig at Chang Dou, there was no more malice in his words or intentions. Perhaps time really could draw a life out very, very long. The originally deep marks, when stretched out too far, became shallow.

In twelve years of a closed loop, he hadn't gone mad, so he must have been a formidable person—Fang Xiu was, so presumably in some aspect, Chang Dou was also formidable.

The farmers who were there specifically to help take care of the training course's private plot watched them flail around with expressions of concern for the fate of the country. Fang Xiu bore it for a while, felt that he was pretty stressed, and finally fumbled his way to a radish so long that it was a little deformed. He quickly pulled it out of the ground, setting Xue Xiaolu twittering, and went to the creek to wash the dirt off the radish. There was sunlight shining on the water, gleaming. The creek was clear enough to see to the bottom. There were tiny fish unhurriedly swimming beneath the surface.

Fang Xiu rolled up his pant legs and sleeves and stood right in the water, stepping on the pebbles inside it. He narrowed his eyes with a slightly contented expression, looking like a vulgar old man who had been through all the vicissitudes of life. Chang Dou was on the bank helping to wash the vegetables. There was no saying what he was thinking. In that moment, he definitely wasn't a human; he had certainly been possessed by a bold leopard. Looking at Fang Xiu's back against the light, he scooped up a small handful of water and splashed him.

When Fang Xiu turned his head and gave him a sideways look, Chang Dou finally realized what he had done. He looked like a mouse that had just pulled a cat's whiskers. His face turned white from fear. He even forgot how to speak. After a long moment, with his lips trembling and his tongue short-circuiting, he finally said, "I...I...I did it on purpose."

Fang Xiu: "..."

Chang Dou realized that he had once again said the wrong thing. So he trembled even more. "I...I really did it on purpose!"

Lu Qingbai laughed so much he couldn't even keep hold of the firewood. Fang Xiu hurled the disfigured radish he was holding at Lu Qingbai. It brought a string of translucent water droplets with it. Then he bent down, scooped up a big handful of water, and splashed Chang Dou right in the face with it.

Chang Dou gave an "Oh!" and plopped onto the ground, covering his head as he flailed his legs to scoot backwards. There was a tearing sound, and even Xue Xiaolu and Qin Luo, picking vegetables not far away, both turned their heads. Chang Dou bounced off the ground like a ping-pong ball, his face as red as a monkey's butt. Covering his pants and bending over, he ducked behind Lu Qingbai, using Dr. Lu's not remotely stalwart figure to block the girls' sight lines.

Lu Qingbai looked at the big hole in his pants and laughed so hard he choked on his own spit and swayed unsteadily, coughing. Chang Dou used his fingers to pinch the very inconveniently placed hole and haltingly said, "S-stop looking."

Fang Xiu looked down with his face contorted and his shoulders shaking—he had just seen with his own eyes that on the revealed bit of Chang Dou's underwear was a bright yellow little duck.

A...little...duck...

At this time, Su Qing was in the woods, shouldering the most glorious and most arduous task of providing meat for everyone to eat tonight. He had his eye on a fat rabbit with its belly hanging down almost past its legs. The fat rabbit was squatting there eating grass, entirely unstressed. Su Qing hid behind a big tree.

Suddenly, the rabbit's ears moved. It sprang up with a speed entirely at odds with its fleshy stature.

Su Qing quickly leapt out from behind the tree. He had a few little rocks in his hands. Sadly, these things weren't like knives. They were irregularly shaped. He couldn't be too sure of his strength and angle. Though his movements were very graceful, very much like someone filming an exterior scene in a wuxia film, the outcome wasn't ideal. He came up entirely empty, and one rock even hit a tree and bounced back. Since he didn't have much control over his grip, this thing was simply like a bullet. It whizzed towards his shoulder.

Su Qing drew back his shoulder, then jumped up, hooking a branch hanging down from a tree. When Hu Bugui came looking for him, he saw him swinging himself forward like Tarzan. When he landed, he had gone a full ten meters forward, landing right in front of the rabbit. The big rabbit didn't put on the brakes. It ran headfirst into Su Qing's leg and was stunned.

Su Qing grabbed the rabbit by the ears and picked it up. He flexed his lower leg a few times—getting bumped by this fat-ass rabbit was pretty painful. It had definitely left a bruise.

Hu Bugui was watching him from not far away. He smiled slightly, making his whole face seem softer. "Nicely done."

For some reason, as soon as Su Qing raised his head and saw him, he suddenly felt a little awkward. He gave a dry laugh, scratched his ear, then swung the rabbit's heavy body by its ears so he had an excuse to lower his head a little. "So-so."

The smile on Hu Bugui's face became a little wider. He beckoned to him. "We have enough stuff. I think they managed to get a few fish over there. You should come back."

Su Qing agreed and took a step, then hissed, frowning.

Hu Bugui immediately asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, the rabbit bumped..."

Before Su Qing could finish speaking, Hu Bugui had walked over and squatted down. He lightly rolled up his pang leg. Su Qing turned to stone. Even his words froze on his lips. He watched blankly as Hu Bugui extended his somewhat rough fingers to rub a spot slightly above his ankle. He raised his head and said, "There's a bit of a bruise. Move it a little so I can have a look. Don't twist it."

Maybe it was because he was raising his head, but when Su Qing met Hu Bugui's particularly gentle-looking eyes, there was a lingering quiver in his heart, like someone had dropped a cotton ball on it from a height. It was extremely soft, neither stinging nor itching, but the ripples from it spread in circle after circle.

His mind in confusion, Su Qing quickly shook his head, subconsciously taking a step back. Quietly, he said, "It doesn't hurt."

Hu Bugui thought that this was because he didn't like being touched by others, so he slowly lowered his eyes and stood up. The two of them were silent for a while. The atmosphere became a little awkward. After a good while, Hu Bugui finally said, "What I said over the precipice last night, if you don't want to hear it, then you can take it that you didn't hear it. You don't need to feel any responsibility."

Su Qing felt even more apologetic, so he acted on impulse, rambling out, "I heard."

Hu Bugui raised his eyes to look at him. His eyes were pitch-black. The fingers hanging at his sides curled slightly, seeming very nervous, as though automatically forming into a fist.

Su Qing opened his mouth. He knew he ought to say something, but this imperial diplomat dropped the ball at the critical moment. Inexplicably, he became speechless.

Just then, there was a heaviness in his hand. Su Qing gave a start and found that the fat rabbit had woken up and was flopping around in midair, struggling for its life. He automatically formed a blade with his hand and struck. The rabbit didn't move anymore. This time he didn't know whether it had fainted or had simply been struck dead.

"I heard. Well...thank you."

Then Hu Bugui fell silent along with him, because he absolutely didn't know what Su Qing meant, and he couldn't think of how he should respond to these words. Su Qing looked at him furtively and found that Hu Bugui's

expression was a little confused in its blankness. After a long time, he said a muffled “You’re welcome.”

A chilly breeze blew by. Presumably if the fat rabbit had been aware in the underworld, it would have twitched.

The evening’s campfire party was actually very delicious. While the ST Training Course didn’t provide meals, it still wasn’t completely stingy—at least it supplied them with seasonings. Of course, in reciprocation, they had also sent Zhong Shiliang to scrounge a meal.

Barbecue was patience-trying work, especially when it was half-cooked. When the fragrance began to spread to all sides, Hu Bugui squatted single-heartedly in front of the open fire, entirely concentrated on roasting the rabbit that was slowly beginning to emit grease. The others, whether man or woman, all looking like hungry ghosts, squatted in a circle around him, ready to pounce at any moment to begin the struggle.

Just as Captain Hu said “it’s done,” the group threw themselves forward at once, their snatching hands tangling together. Hu Bugui quickly withdrew from the ring of encirclement. Holding up two rabbit legs, he naturally gave the best roasted one to Su Qing at his left hand. “Try it.”

Xue Xiaolu had gotten the tip of her nose blackened in the struggle. She didn’t forget to widen her eyes, which were always ready to see things others didn’t see. She loudly heckled, “Captain Hu, why don’t I get any?!”

Lu Qingbai said, “Hmph, Comrade Xue Xiaolu, let’s talk again when the vegetables you dig up aren’t all so malnourished—Captain Hu, why don’t I get any?”

Hu Bugui glanced at him, then frankly and honestly said, “I don’t want to give you any.”

Lu Qingbai clutched his chest and fell to the ground.

Suddenly, a hand holding a little brush reached over, quickly brushing a few times over the rabbit meat in Hu Bugui’s hand. The golden flesh took on a thin layer of honey. Hu Bugui turned his head to look at Su Qing and saw him stealthily holding out a little jar, saying like a thief, “Honey. I tricked it out of the dining hall worker.”

This person really would pull tricks wherever he went. He would even wipe oil from a tiger’s butt.

Hu Bugui began to eat, his emotions complex. He ate a sweet, fragrant, scalding mouthful, silently helping him dispose of the stolen goods.

They ate a noisy meal full of snatching and play. Zhong Shiliang watched in satisfaction as the crowd of people who had showed up silent as anything finally broke the ice.

So while everyone was sitting by the campfire and digesting, Zhong Shiliang, like a conjurer, took a metal instrument out of a big sack. Under Chang Dou's gaze, as passionate as though looking at his first love, he set it up on the ground, then connected it to a laptop, which he put on his knees. He turned the screen towards the RZ Unit group and said in self-satisfaction: "Barbecue is a little greasy. We'll have a bit of an activity to help everyone digest."

MIRROR IMAGE

As soon as these words came out of Zhong Shiliang's mouth, the unusually relaxed group immediately felt heaviness in their stomachs, their digestion becoming poor. But Zhong Shiliang seemed entirely unaware of his own lowering popularity. Beaming, he got out a walkie-talkie. "Dr. Kou, Xiao Kou, are you here?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

There was a bit of an echo on the second "I'm coming." Dr. Lu, for once seeing a fellow member of his profession, sat up straight and looked over. He saw a young man run over gasping for breath. This Dr. Kou was very skinny and looked like a moving bamboo pole when he ran, swaying in the wind as though beset by perils. His hair had been blown into a mess. There was a very retro little satchel under his arm.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I was out paying a house call. I hurried over as soon as I received the training base's notification."

Zhong Shiliang pointed to him and introduced: "This is our base's specially employed outside expert, Dr. Kou Tong."

Kou Tong smiled very amiably. This young man's appearance couldn't be called very remarkable, but his features looked particularly tidy, especially when he smiled. It seemed as though spring had come and flowers were blooming. He seemed to have flapping wings and the radiance of a halo over his head, like the Holy Father.

He truly was the type to make a favorable impression on people at first sight—especially when he was sitting with Zhong Shiliang.

Then Zhong Shiliang continued: "Dr. Kou took part in planning the construction of the Multi-Frequency Dimension-Changing Space."

Everyone: "..."

Dr. Kou, finding that everyone's expressions were very stiff, took no notice. He dredged up a wire from his retro bag. He connected one end to Zhong Shiliang's laptop, then took out the other end and held it in both hands. Everyone's eyeballs immediately fell all over the ground—the beaming Dr. Kou, smiling like a lucky cat, was holding out a furry ball!

Xue Xiaolu swallowed and pointed shakily, saying, “Did the base...send this to be cute?”

Dr. Kou brought the furry ball to her hands. Xue Xiaolu made contact with his mild eyes, and her face inexplicably turned red. She accepted with both hands, holding the furry ball as though it were a pearl from the East Sea. A coordinate grid appeared at once on the laptop's screen. It had two lines on it, a fluctuating red line and a practically motionless white line.

Lu Qingbai gave an “ah.” “This is a mirror image projector. I know about it. Are you a psychologist of the Ding school?”

Kou Tong lowered his head slightly. His brows were particularly long. When he lowered his head, he gave off a slight sense of still waters running deep. “Only an itinerant doctor. I'm here to give you all a simple mirror image appraisal.”

Kou Tong took a notebook out of his bag and flipped to Xue Xiaolu's page, comparing her to her photo. Then he said in quiet reassurance, “Don't be nervous. I'm only going to do a simple test using emotional simulation. Just follow my instructions. Take a deep breath. Relax.”

Tears nearly came to Xue Xiaolu's eyes. She thought, they were both white coats, so why was there such a difference between them? Kou Tong was like a living Buddha helping the dying and healing the injured, while Lu Qingbai was like a malevolent spirit of vivisection.

Kou Tong said, “Everyone, please remain quiet. Miss Xue, close your eyes.”

There seemed to be magic in his voice. Xue Xiaolu, red-faced, closed her eyes. The red line on the screen began to move more energetically. Kou Tong laughed softly. “Take some deep breaths. Try to calm down. Feel what the mirror image terminal in your hand is conveying to you.”

Then Kou Tong didn't speak again. Everyone followed him in staring at the two moving lines on the screen. After around five minutes, the wavering red line slowly calmed, overlapping with the subdued white line. A small window appeared in a corner of the screen. A circling chrysanthemum

popped up, like the kind when a website gets stuck while opening: *Imprinting, please wait.*

After about another five minutes, a little light appeared on top of the furry ball in Xue Xiaolu's hand, and it gave a *beep*—. In the little window on the lower right hand side of the computer screen appeared the text: *Imprinting complete.*

Then it automatically minimized itself.

Kou Tong snapped his fingers. "How do you feel?"

Xue Xiaolu opened her eyes. Her gaze didn't seem especially clear yet. She was a little distracted. Kou Tong rather patiently asked again: "How do you feel?"

Xue Xiaolu was silent for a long time, then quietly said, "I...I feel like I've seen the big tree in my yard back home when I was little. My grandma was sitting on a stool under the tree and giving me a bag of chestnuts to eat..."

She tilted her head slightly, the expression on her face seeming even more confused. But after a moment, she smiled and returned the furry ball to Kou Tong. "Thank you, Dr. Kou."

Su Qing exchanged a look with Lu Qingbai. Lu Qingbai explained: "I know a bit of the general working principle of the mirror image projector. The white line is adjusted by the doctor beforehand. It's usually a fairly steady but rather happy emotion. Through microwaves transmitted by the terminal, it slowly adjusts the body's emotional indexes to the same frequency. The projector automatically records mental activity at that time in order to provide an assessment."

Then Su Qing understood that, under the name of an assessment, the base was getting someone to treat the psychological trauma they had experienced in their night of untold danger. It was a typical case of a slap followed by a sweet.

The furry ball went around the circle and at last came to Su Qing's hands. His senses were several times more acute than an ordinary person's. As soon as the "furry ball" passed into his hands, Su Qing felt the faint vibrations coming from it. Kou Tong had him close his eyes and concentrate on feeling what the "furry ball" was conveying to him.

But perhaps because of the double core grey seal's emotional consumption ability, Su Qing could only very faintly feel a weak emotion, similar to

“fellow feeling,” coming from the furry ball. He couldn’t follow along no matter what. He instinctively separated external emotions from his own. The others saw the red line on the screen maintaining a deep-rooted distance from the white line, not budging, as though there was a border between rival powers between them.

Fifteen minutes passed, and the two lines were still deadlocked. Several times, Su Qing hadn’t been able to resist wanting to open his eyes to glance at the situation. Even Kou Tong was frowning. Zhong Shiliang, looking at Su Qing, sighed inwardly, thinking, It’s this brat again. Everything has to go wrong with him.

Kou Tong said, “Mr. Su, relax a little.”

“If I relax any more, I’ll be horizontal,” Su Qing said. The red thread on the screen only showed a sliver of sluggish movement while they were talking.

Kou Tong said, “Take a deep breath.”

So Su Qing took a deep breath. The red line trembled into a sine wave during his slow breathing. Kou Tong softly said, “Concentrate your attention in your hands and keep recollecting, think of happy things, a year, two years ago...”

The red line fluctuated violently—because Su Qing had suddenly opened his eyes, startling Kou Tong. “What’s wrong?”

Su Qing felt uncomfortable saying that his illusory voice had made him break out in gooseflesh. He could only shake his head. He suddenly felt a little irritable. He deliberated. “Doctor, I think you’d better not lead me into it slowly. What kind of compulsive measures does this thing have?”

Zhong Shiliang interrupted: “When his consciousness was drawn into the space last night, he was forcefully pulled inside in a waking state.”

Kou Tong’s eyes opened wide. He looked Su Qing over with the expression of someone studying an alien monster. “The enforced sleep device failed? Have you felt that there was something wrong with you? Do you have a history of mental illness?”

“I...don’t think so?” Su Qing looked at Lu Qingbai uncertainly.

Lu Qingbai hesitated, then nodded. “He previously had a negative reaction to implanted emotions and showed slight symptoms of manic depression. But he later digested the implanted emotions himself, so reasonably

speaking there shouldn't be a problem—unless there's something weighing on his mind.”

Kou Tong looked at Su Qing. “There are some things I may need to say to you alone. Do you think we should have the others withdraw?”

Su Qing automatically glanced at Hu Bugui, just in time to meet his eyes as he looked over. Hu Bugui was tense all over, as if a doctor had announced that he had a terminal illness. Captain Hu would worry himself to death, Su Qing thought. Then he paused and shook his head. “No need, there's nothing to avoid. Go ahead and ask.”

Dr. Kou asked, “Apart from last night, have you had insomnia?”

Su Qing shook his head. “I don't sleep a lot, but I can usually sleep when I want to. I don't have trouble sleeping.”

“How is your food intake?”

Su Qing pointed to his own shoulder. “I'm...not very much like others on that front.”

Kou Tong nodded understandingly, considered, then asked, “Have you had any suicidal thoughts recently?”

“What?” Su Qing stared. Then he quickly shook his head. “I really am afraid of death.”

Kou Tong nodded, lowered his head, and scanned Su Qing's file. The more he read, the more baffled he became. Suddenly, his eyebrows rose, and he lifted his head. He asked Su Qing, “I'll ask you a question, and you answer me at once—who are you?”

Su Qing stared and said in some bewilderment: “I'm...”

Then his voice suddenly caught. For some reason, the words “Su Qing” wouldn't come out. He felt that he actually knew the answer very well in his heart, but when the words came to his lips, it was as if something was blocking them. Countless faces, countless IDs with different names written on them flashed through his mind. For a time, he couldn't respond.

Kou Tong put on a slightly understanding expression and slowly said, “It's all right. That question is too broad. We'll take it apart. First question, what kind of person do you think you are? What is your name? Where is your home?”

These were precisely the three questions that General Xiong had asked him.

“From the standpoint of physiological structure, I can be called human, and the rest is not to be considered. My name is Ji Pengcheng. Wherever I am is my home.”

And this was the note that the old conman who had wandered to who knew where had sent back to him with Tu Tutu. It had perfectly answered the three questions.

But Su Qing remained speechless.

Just then, the white line that seemed to have grown on the screen unexpectedly began to move, slowly approaching the slightly fluctuating red line. Then the imprinting notice in the corner of the screen appeared once more. Kou Tong waited until the imprinting had finished, then took the mirror image terminal back from Su Qing’s hands. He smiled. “I’ll send the concrete results to you all within two working days. There’s no need to worry.”

Then he looked deliberately at Su Qing and repeated to him specifically, “There’s no need to worry.”

Then Kou Tong packed up his things and left. At this time, stars had already risen to cover the sky. Zhong Shiliang at last bid farewell. Just before leaving, he pulled out a big chest. “There are tents inside. The weather is good today, so if you’re unwilling to return to the room, you can camp.”

Xue Xiaolu was the first to cheer and throw herself at the tents.

It was midnight, and everyone was tired, but Su Qing once again couldn’t sleep.

Without consulting anyone, he climbed out of his tent and lay face up in the grass, listening to the creek quietly trickling by. Holding a cigarette in his mouth, he stared blankly up at the Milky Way.

Just then, he heard a rustling sound beside him. Su Qing turned his head and saw Hu Bugui also climbing out of his tent. His first reaction was to immediately spit out the cigarette in his mouth and extinguish it. Then he froze, thinking, I’m smoking, not doing drugs. Why am I being so sneaky about it?

Hu Bugui slowly walked over to him and quietly asked, “Can’t sleep again?”

Su Qing nodded.

“Come here,” Hu Bugui said.

Su Qing blinked, thinking, Are you moving right to the visit to the Imperial bedchamber stage, Captain Hu? He unhurriedly got up off the ground

and followed Hu Bugui into his tent. With two men in there, the space immediately seemed narrow.

Hu Bugui turned and lay down, leaving him a not very large space. When he found that after lying down, Su Qing's eyes were still open, looking up and down cunningly, he very naturally put his arm around his back and quietly said, "Close your eyes."

Su Qing closed his eyes. Hu Bugui looked down at him, then also slowly closed his eyes. Like when Su Qing had been alone, isolated and cut off from help in the grey house, he slowly began to tell a nursery story.

For some reason, this move was unusually effective against Su Qing. Not long after, his breathing became even. Hu Bugui stopped and opened his eyes in the darkness. By the weak radiance, he looked at Su Qing's peaceful sleeping face, then slowly lowered his head and gently kissed the tip of his nose.

Then Su Qing curled up and buried his face in the space between Hu Bugui's neck and shoulder, his breath gently brushing against the side of Hu Bugui's neck.

Hu Bugui stiffened. He took in a breath and only shakily let it out after a long time. He felt a certain...very delicate change occur to his body.

So that night, Hu Bugui sacrificed his own interests for the sake of another's—he became the one who couldn't sleep.

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DEPARTURE

SU QING woke very early in the morning. However tired he was, he would still open his eyes around 4 AM. He had slept unusually deeply this time. He was still a little confused when he woke up, having nearly forgotten where he was. Beside his ear was the sound of someone else's breathing. Su Qing was startled at first. Before he could wake up fully, he was on the alert, as if a bucket of cold water had been poured into his paste-like brain.

He opened his eyes at once and saw the arm laying over him. He stared for a moment, then slightly let out a breath, remembering that this was Hu Bugui's tent.

Su Qing carefully turned over, wanting to remove Hu Bugui's arm from his body. He tossed around quietly for a moment without success, so he lay there face up, looking at the ceiling of the tent, and somehow, sleepiness snuck up on him again.

Su Qing blinked hard twice, feeling as though someone had given him a sleeping pill. How many years had it been since he had felt like dozing back off after waking up?

Then he turned his head and looked at Hu Bugui, extremely close to him. He began to feel perplexed once more. He thought, why had he relaxed when he had realized that the person next to him was Hu Bugui? Su Qing raised his hand and lightly moved aside a lock of hair on Hu Bugui's forehead. He found that Hu Bugui seemed to have a trace of dark circles under his eyes.

Su Qing had always thought that "love" was an extremely potent word. Even if you felt it, there were many circumstances in which you couldn't say it aloud, or else it was like a hedgehog rolling over and exposing its soft belly, like a wild wolf raising its head and putting its throat into another's hands. It was a word so heavy that it was frightening.

But Hu Bugui had said it into his ear without reservation, as if...as if adding a safety bolt to his floating body.

Su Qing turned it over in his mind for a while and suddenly thought that it was miraculous. He had thought that he had never left any marks on this world, like a bird flying through the sky, with only himself to know about it—the little whelp Tu Tutu didn't count, the little thing's circumstances were special, he still relied on him for support—but now, he had suddenly been notified that there was a certain singular link between himself and another person, invisible and untouchable; traces of it could only be made out with careful observation.

“Su Qing...” He silently pronounced this name in his mind. “My name is Su Qing. I'm a person named Su Qing. My home is in B City. I'm temporarily residing with the RZ Unit.”

He slowly extended a hand and found Hu Bugui's hand laying over him. He cautiously used his fingertips to touch his skin, feeling the body heat coming from it. Like a curious little animal, he touched and poked.

Suddenly, Hu Bugui's hand, obediently lying there letting him fiddle, opened and seized Su Qing's fingers. Su Qing stared and found that at some point he had poked Hu Bugui awake. He was watching him with open pitch-black eyes.

Neither of them spoke. After a moment, Hu Bugui seemed to feel something. He went rigid, then let go of Su Qing's fingers, turned over, and put a bit of distance between himself and Su Qing. He quietly said, “Go back to sleep.” Then he closed his eyes and wouldn't look at him.

Su Qing sensed that there was something off about Hu Bugui—Captain Hu's eyelids were still trembling faintly, and his facial muscles looked tensed. This wasn't the appearance of someone who wanted to get some more sleep. His eyes made a circle of Hu Bugui's face. Then, as if he had suddenly thought of something, his fundamental nature was revealed in a leer. He reached out a hand at lightning speed to grope downward along Hu Bugui's chest and abdomen. Hu Bugui nearly bounced up. He grabbed Su Qing's wrist and stopped pretending to be asleep. His breathing became noticeably rapid. He half sat up. “Su Qing!”

The temperature of Hu Bugui's palm was scalding. Su Qing winked at him, looking like a ruffian. “Hey, I'm a man, I understand.”

Hu Bugui fumed. He was tongue-tied, unable to say a word.

Su Qing sighed, bent his knees, and lightly rubbed Hu Bugui's calf with the tips of his feet. "Captain Hu, holding this back is like holding back piss. It's bad for your health."

Hu Bugui looked at him silently for a while, his somewhat rapid breathing slowly calming. He let go of Su Qing's wrist. "You haven't made up your mind yet, so don't pester me."

Su Qing stared. "It's not like we haven't..."

Hu Bugui sat up, wanting to climb past him out of the tent, quietly saying, "I didn't know you yet back then. When you've...thought it over, if you really do decide that you want to be with me..."

The last few words were practically forced down into his throat. Su Qing was silent for a moment. Then, the instant that Hu Bugui was about to pass him and squeeze out, he suddenly grabbed Hu Bugui's arm, deftly turned over, and knocked his shoulder into his chest, knocking Hu Bugui backwards. His fingers nimbly dug into Hu Bugui's pants.

Hu Bugui groaned. He wanted to push him away, but Su Qing was half kneeling in front of him, his head slightly lowered, his slightly messy hair covering his whole forehead so that only a pair of eyes that shone in the dark showed, staring at his face without blinking.

Hu Bugui looked into those eyes, and it was as if some thread in his mind collapsed. He was actually a little bewildered. He thought that in those eyes was a sea of stars that he could never hope to reach but would pursue until the end of his life. But it was so far away that when he thought back, he would have the feeling that he was covered in rags after walking that road for a whole lifetime; a backwards look, and it turned out that it had been hundreds of millions of years.

He was nearly dizzy. His spine straightened unnaturally. Hu Bugui even felt that he was floating up. His hands, which had been pushing away, tightly gripped Su Qing's shoulders.

Su Qing gave a mischievous laugh and stroked the sheets. "I told you that my technique is good..."

Hu Bugui suddenly held him down, one hand pressed beside his ear. The confusion in his eyes dispersed, and the look in them seemed to become a little dangerous. Enunciating precisely from between his teeth, he asked, "Where did you learn all these things?"

Su Qing blinked. "I'm naturally gifted."

The look in Hu Bugui's eyes deepened a little more. He grasped the nape of Su Qing's neck. This kiss bore down menacingly, not like the almost restrained gentleness before; it was nearly biting. Su Qing, however, thought that *this* was scratching the itch, so he caught Hu Bugui around the neck and cooperated entirely—anyway, he was a scoundrel by habit; he wasn't afraid at all of a minor incident sparking a war.

Only when there was a sudden rustling in the quiet morning, followed by someone giving an enormous yawn, did Hu Bugui finally come around. Panting, he straightened up and looked a little awkwardly at Su Qing's shirt, which he had torn two buttons off of, and his exposed collarbones.

Su Qing, rather unsatisfied, quietly cursed: "Shit, what bastard is getting up so early?"

Hu Bugui turned his face away and seemed to laugh lightly. Only when he smiled did he seem not so stern. His face with its suddenly softened edges seemed particular warm. Then he reached out to gather up Su Qing's shirt and rummaged among the rolled up covers, finding the two buttons from Su Qing's shirt in the nooks and crannies. Under Su Qing's stupefied gaze, he picked up his jacket from beside him and pulled out a little bag. Inside, it had everything—tweezers, little mini pliers, scissors, an awl, and—most unbelievable of all—there were also a spool of thread and a needle.

Hu Bugui quietly said, "Don't move, I'll sew them on for you."

Su Qing didn't move—not from obedience, but because he was still in complete disarray.

After a long time, when Hu Bugui had sewn one button on, he finally shakily said, "You...you're sewing my buttons on for me?"

"Yeah, don't fidget. Look out so I don't prick you."

"You...you sew buttons?" Su Qing felt that his brain had turned into a broken sound recorder. It could only repeat these three words. "You can sew buttons? No...you..."

"Shut up," Hu Bugui said.

Su Qing really did shut up. He felt that he was a little short on oxygen.

When the two of them came out of the same tent one after another, Chang Dou, standing outside stretching, turned to stone. With his mouth open, he looked at them foolishly—Su Qing's lips were so gaudily colored they were a little swollen, and his shirt, with one button undone at the collar, faintly revealed a shallow mark.

Su Qing shouldered the heavy burden himself. He very naturally went to start morning exercises according to habit. When he passed by Chang Dou, he calmly said, “Morning, Engineer Chang.”

Chang Dou, his mouth open, watched as his receding figure went far away.

Hu Bugui said heavily behind him, “If you open it a little more, even the bedbugs will be able to fly in.”

Chang Dou kept his mouth open, watching him also pass by him and go far away. Then he stood where he was for a while and tossed his head hard. Feeling that he wasn’t especially awake yet, he crawled back into his tent looking sickly, planning to go back to sleep.

The ST Training Course’s events were oddities of all kinds. Apart from the mystical little dark room and the mirror image projector, they also became acquainted with quite a few other strange objects emerging in an endless stream. There was a large-scale emulator that could emulate all kinds of scenes, from Roman coliseums to the Trojan War up to classic World War II battles; its data was all extremely accurate. There was a sensory deprivation device that, when you put it on, only left one sense out of vision, taste, hearing, smell, and touch. Barely able to communicate, you had to cooperate with your partner to struggle to accomplish an assignment, “one without eyes, one without ears.” If it was too much, you took off the sensory deprivation device, then found that the background music really was “Two Tigers³³.”

There were also some unexpected trainings and exercises. On the fourth day, they were even scooped up and taken to the border to provide aid to special forces dealing with drug traffickers.

When they were starting to get used to the ST Training Course and even feeling faintly expectant about what training events it would turn up next, Hu Bugui’s long-silent communicator suddenly gave a sharp sound.

Headquarters had sent an urgent notice: enormous concentration of energy detected, return at once.

This time they couldn’t ride in the old man’s oxcart again. A helicopter landed directly at the training base and picked them up. Just before their departure, Kou Tong at last reappeared with the results of the mirror image projection tests. He came trotting over and distributed the results by name.

No one blindfolded them this time. Amid a huge roaring, the helicopter left this most mysterious base.

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PREMONITION

MEANWHILE, headquarters wasn't especially chaotic. Though the whole core group had been absent, everything was still proceeding methodically. When each of them had hastily changed clothes and rushed to the conference room, they found that this was because General Xiong was there personally overseeing things.

General Xiong sat on the little couch with one leg crossed over the other, a pot of tea at his hand, looking rather leisurely. Smiling, he greeted them: "You're all back! Hey, you're looking better. You were all looking wilting when you left. I'm telling you, our ST Training Course gives extreme VIP treatment. Ordinary people couldn't get in."

The men remembered the big multi-person bed in the little dark room, the women remembered the ragged curtain, unwashed for years, that made your hand come away covered in dust when you touched it, and each inwardly thrashed around.

Hu Bugui sat down, opened the report from the tech department, and scanned it. Fang Xiu asked, "General, what's going on?"

"A major event." General Xiong slowly drank tea and smacked his lips, looking like an old dandy who had just strolled back from the opera. Nothing about him said that a major event had taken place. "We just detected a possible blue seal base. It's located very close to a densely populated city. The reason it was found was that it suddenly displayed an unusual large-scale concentration of energy. If this continues, there may be a large explosion."

General Xiong put down his teacup, paused, then slowly added: "According to the conservative estimates of our comrades in the technological department, who have been working through the night, if the energy continues

to amass like this, the destructive force of the base exploding may impact a hundred kilometers of the surrounding area.”

The others were silent for a moment. Chang Dou looked at General Xiong’s expression, then looked down at the tech department’s report—if not for the astonishing data in it, he practically would have suspected that General Xiong was playing a joke to tease them. He asked, “General Xiong, why aren’t you worried at all?”

General Xiong sighed. “Ah, however worried I ‘seemed,’ what use would it be? The more critical a situation is, the slower we should talk it over.”

Hu Bugui looked at him and closed the tech department’s report. “Chang Dou, put in a little work on the technological front. Continue to monitor. Meanwhile, I want a plan for resolution ASAP.”

Chang Dou was a reliable person where it counted. He gave an affirmative, stood up, and ran off at top speed. Hu Bugui paused, then continued: “Everyone split up and prepare. We’re setting out at once to the scene. Dr. Lu will accompany us. This thing is fishy. Everyone maintain an open channel of communication.”

General Xiong said nothing. Hu Bugui was an old hand when it came to dealing with emergencies. What needed to be prepared, how to divide the work—he could issue the orders even with his eyes closed. Only when everyone had dispersed did Hu Bugui stand up and say to him, “Sir, you stay at headquarters and continue...”

General Xiong finally put down his teacup. “Wait a moment. I have something to say to you.”

Hu Bugui’s steps paused. General Xiong waved a hand, and the bodyguards next to him retreated. He nodded and said to Hu Bugui, “Sit.”

So Hu Bugui sat across from General Xiong, waiting for him to speak.

But General Xiong didn’t say a word for ages. He only slightly relaxed his back, leaning against the little couch. He took out a pack of cigarettes from his military jacket, which was a little pale from washing, put a cigarette in his mouth, and lowered his eyes to light it. The flame leaping up cast shadows on his face. The bridge of his nose was still straight, but there were faint age spots on his cheeks. Combined with the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and on his forehead and the grey hair at his temples, everything publicly declared the fact that he was already old.

In that moment, Hu Bugui thought that the smile that always hung on his face as if it had grown that way disappeared. But it was only the blink of an eye. General Xiong was still General Xiong. Not even the curvature of the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had changed.

After a long time, General Xiong slowly breathed out a smoke ring and quietly said, “I may as well give you a heads-up. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Hu Bugui’s eyebrows raised slightly.

General Xiong said, “Xiao Hu, do you know what it means to always be prepared for the worst?”

Hu Bugui paused, then asked, “How bad is the ‘worst’ you’re talking about, sir?”

General Xiong raised his eyes and looked him. “What Xu Ruchong obscurely warned you about.”

Hu Bugui was about to speak, but General Xiong raised a hand to stop him. “You don’t say it, but you know how things stand. I know that, but there are some things that even if you know how they stand, you still can’t do anything—I started preparing to build the RZ Unit many years ago, but it’s been hard. It’s hard to find suitable people, and it’s hard for the suitable people to be sufficiently loyal. It’s only just now taken shape, and before it’s had a chance to stabilize, it’s going to be pushed to the very front line.”

For some reason, Hu Bugui faintly sensed something inauspicious in General Xiong’s words.

The two of them fell silent. After a long moment, General Xiong raised his head. Hu Bugui didn’t make a sound, waiting to listen respectfully to his brilliant views. But when General Xiong changed subjects, it was like turning the page of a book. His eyes rotated, and his expression immediately became a little lewd. “Oh, right, how is your relationship with Su Qing now?”

Hu Bugui’s expression turned blank.

General Xiong laughed aloud. “Hey, I get it, I get it, we’ve all been young. I wasn’t always such a wrinkled piece of stuffing myself.”

Hu Bugui’s expression was no longer blank. He frowned, looking closely at General Xiong’s smiling countenance, feeling that something was very off—though General Xiong had always been an old lech, he had stopped at the level of a beast in human clothes, and his speech had basically main-

tained the appearance of decency. He very rarely blabbed and used such terms to make jokes.

But he couldn't read any clues from General Xiong's old face. Before he could ask anything, General Xiong waved a hand. "Go on, go on, see to your business. I think Su Qing is a pretty good kid, only he overthinks things and sometimes easily gets caught up bashing his head against a brick wall. Though he's still much more reliable than I was as a young man."

Hu Bugui: "..."

He really didn't feel like this amounted to praise for Su Qing.

General Xiong lowered his eyes and fixedly watched his cigarette slowly burning down. "You think further than he does, but he sees more clearly than you do. Perhaps one day..."

What would happen one day, General Xiong didn't say. He only waved a hand again to send Hu Bugui out.

They quickly came to the scene of the energy concentration. The naked eye couldn't see anything unusual about this area, but the screen displayed the enormous power constantly sweeping in like a vortex, absorbing more and more energy, and the vortex was like a black hole, constantly expanding.

As soon as Su Qing got out of the car, he subconsciously made a gesture of covering his ears. But after keeping his hands raised for a while, he frowned and lowered them again.

Lu Qingbai pushed up his glasses. "What, can you sense something else?"

"Yeah." Su Qing stuck his hands in his pockets and stared around the area that the others couldn't see any clues in. "There's a lot of noise over there. If I 'listen' closely, most of it is people screaming and crying. It's...how should I explain it? It's a lot like hearing it with your ears, but when you cover your ears, you find that it's actually digging directly into your brain."

Lu Qingbai nodded wildly. "I know, I know, it's the double core's distinctive 'fellow feeling' phenomenon. Your brain automatically concretizes the unusual emotional waves your energy crystal receives. For example, fear automatically creates a 'screaming' reaction when it comes to your brain. Well, how strong is the feeling? Will it impact your hearing?"

Su Qing sensed attentively. "The 'voices' are getting louder and louder, but there shouldn't be an impact on my hearing. It's like..."

“Like tinnitus. I think it must be a little irritating,” Lu Qingbai picked up.

Fang Xiu stared at the vortex on the screen growing larger and larger and cut in: “The voices are getting louder and louder—so is the energy getting sucked in emotional energy?”

The communicator was switched over to the technological department, and Chang Dou’s face appeared on video. He quickly said, “It’s not emotional energy. We’ve been monitoring the emotional wave frequencies for a hundred kilometers around. There are currently no unusual fluctuations. There must be something at the center of the vortex that’s madly consuming energy.”

“Does the tech department have a rough plan of action?” Hu Bugui asked.

“We do.” Chang Dou pushed up his glasses and scrambled to pick up a laptop computer from beside him. “Captain Hu, this thing is rather problematic. No matter what measures we adopt, we must find out what’s at the center of this energy vortex. I’ve already urgently dispatched the monitor projection. It must have passed the ionosphere of the energy vortex by now, heading towards the central location. The video function isn’t ideal, but you can still make something out. I can send it to you in a while. When we find what’s at the center, we may be faced with two types of circumstances. One is the type that can be quickly resolved. That would of course be better. The other is the type that we can’t resolve before the explosion. With such a large base, if energy increasing exponentially like this really does explode, I’m afraid that we’ll have to find a way to isolate it.”

Chang Dou normally seemed like he had a head full of paste, but when he got to work, his thoughts were clear, not muddled at all. Fang Xiu thoughtfully looked at his face and stroked his chin, lowered his eyes, then raised them again, as if lightly nodding his head. After Chang Dou finished speaking, he quickly added, “It will be hard to isolate an explosion of such great intensity. I’m afraid headquarters’ installations aren’t...”

Hu Bugui interrupted: “Write up a list of everything necessary and hand it over to General Xiong. He’ll take care of it.”

“Yes, sir!”

As Chang Dou finished speaking, the image came over from the probe that had penetrated the center of the energy vortex. Everyone gathered

around the screen at once. Perhaps because of influence from the unknown energy, the picture wasn't very clear. There was frequent faint interference flashing over it. The camera lens shook slightly as the probe moved. The whole base seemed like a depopulated area, without the shadow of a single human being.

Chang Dou said, "It'll be at the heart of the vortex soon."

Then a white building appeared on the screen. It was round and seemed to have only one floor, but it was very large. They noticed that the frequency of the flashing red light on top of the probe became higher and higher.

The probe entered the lobby. The screen dimmed. Then the picture gradually began to clear. Everyone watching sucked in a breath.

There was a very high chair in the center of the hall, with a small, skinny man sitting in it, dead or alive. At any rate, his eyes were closed, and they couldn't see any undulation in his chest at first. The upper half of the man's body was bare, with a clear blue seal mark on the collarbone. Countless clear wires were linked to his body. These wires spread out, covering the whole hall, connected to over a hundred brains.

Human ones.

TWENTY-ONE GRAMS

FANG XIU said, “I feel...a little sick.”

Behind him, a member of the armed team simply vomited. Su Qing crossed his arms in front of his chest and drew slightly closer. He said to Chang Dou, “Can the probe change its angle? A little closer. This person looks a little familiar to me.”

Chang Dou felt acid rising up to his throat, so he was profoundly worshipful towards these field personnel who could trek through garbage and brains, feeling that they were standing firm and upright on the very front line as though facing an army of zombies, unblinking like a Wall-nut³⁴. He slowly altered the angle of the probe.

This time Su Qing saw clearly. The half-dead, half-naked man *was* someone he knew—it was Shi Huizhang’s eternal footman from the grey house, Gui Song.

Qin Luo quietly asked, “Has this blue seal been abandoned?”

“This isn’t the first.” Su Qing frowned. “When Zhao Yifei died, the blue seal you captured in the coffee shop had also been abandoned—there was a Utopia member sitting in the corner watching.”

Qin Luo looked at him, suddenly seeing the light. “So it was you who sent us that information!”

Su Qing glanced at her and didn’t speak. He sighed inwardly—this young lady was truly extremely nimble, but her reactions were extremely slow.

Hu Bugui asked, “How about it, can we destroy the heart of the vortex?”

“Well...” Chang Dou gave a long, drawn-out response, then fell silent. The sound of quiet discussion came over the communicator. After a good while, Chang Dou extremely cautiously said, “We’ve assessed it. There are about a hundred fifty human brains inside, directly linked to the energy

crystal of the blue seal in the center, forming a field. It's that field that's absorbing all the energy around for all it's worth."

Fang Xiu chipped in: "Can't we kill the person in the middle, or break off the wires..."

"You can't do that," Chang Dou quickly interrupted. "The scale of the energy vortex outside has already grown enormous, and all of it is drawn by the center. If you break the central field by force, the energy will immediately rapidly leak out. In other words, it'll explode on the spot."

Fang Xiu stared. In his impressions, Chang Dou always spoke carefully and fearfully to them. This person was like a steamed bun, a little easily bullied, without any self-confidence. This was his first time rudely interrupting him.

Hu Bugui made a prompt decision: "Tech department, make preparations to isolate, and hurry it up. Can we detonate it before it explodes on its own?"

"Yes," Chang Dou answered.

This young man wearing big glasses was like a king who had at last returned to his own territory. When he solemnly answered the question, even his bird's nest-like head and uneven pant legs didn't seem so ridiculous.

Just then, the probe slowly changed its angle. Xue Xiaolu, who was staring at the screen, suddenly said, "Slow down, what's that?"

Everyone's eyes once again focused on the screen. They saw that the probe had gone behind Gui Song and discovered that there was an enormous "chrysalis" stuck to his back. Su Qing had seen this thing. Outside Dong Jianguo's door, the mysterious Utopia watcher had also been wearing such a thing on his back.

"Is that...the supposed 'life chrysalis'?" Lu Qingbai pushed up his glasses, practically sticking to the screen. "Some years ago, someone put out an article that made a great disturbance in the world of medical science. It discussed the origin of life. That article mentioned the possible existence of the 'life chrysalis,' but the author later disappeared from public view. I didn't expect them to have made it."

Looking closely, this chrysalis wasn't the same as the one Su Qing had seen. It was considerably larger, and it didn't stand alone. There was a half-transparent tube the thickness of a thumb attached to it, and something

seemed to be flowing through it. The tube passed through the floor, attached to something underground.

Hu Bugui said, “Chang Dou.”

Without waiting for him to speak, Chang Dou immediately responded: “I know, there’s something under the floor, the probe is using infrared. The data and image will be completed within three minutes. I’ll convert it to projection mode and send it to you.”

Hu Bugui nodded and looked at Chang Dou over the communicator—strictly speaking, this was the first time since Xu Ruchong’s death that Chang Dou was taking charge of leading the high-speed operating tech department in backing up the field personnel’s operation. Hu Bugui paused, then, treasuring words like gold, said, “Your work ability is good.”

Chang Dou gave a start. His eyes opened wide. He subconsciously straightened his spine, his doll’s face tensing. In his agitation, he actually gave a salute, and cried out towards the communicator: “Serve the People!”

Though there was an extremely nauseating image next to them, Su Qing still couldn’t keep a straight face. He lowered his head in amusement. Xue Xiaolu and Lu Qingbai exchanged a look. Lu Qingbai sighed, feeling that this new technician could make even more of a fool of himself than the previous one.

But Fang Xiu lowered his eyes slightly. He recalled Xu Ruchong. Each time he encountered a field assignment, he had also stood on the screen as if galvanized, ready to use inhuman language to explain all kinds of phenomena.

He had originally thought that there was no replacing this person, but now he found that he had been wrong. Time was pushing everyone forward at all costs, and in the blink of an eye, another person was standing in that empty space, each of his movements so alike, yet also so unlike.

For a time, Fang Xiu couldn’t say what he was feeling. It was as though someone had stabbed the pit of his stomach with a fine needle. It couldn’t be called very painful, but after it was pulled out, it stung for a long time.

The probe shot an infrared image, and it was indeed handled with utmost speed on headquarters’ main computer, then converted to projection mode and conveyed in front of the field personnel—they had thought that the pile of brains already tested human psychology to the limit; they hadn’t expected that the limit would soon once again be surpassed.

The thumb-thick tube passed through the floor and attached to a big, clear globe—you couldn't actually call it a globe, since its shape was irregular—it was expanding and contracting extremely slowly, like a human heart. From the bottom of the big globe, about ten very thin tubes extended, each tube attached to a person.

These people were lying there entirely unconscious inside covers, drawn out long and slender, wrapped around in clear threads like the feathery leaves of asparagus. The ends of the threads pierced the space between their brows, showing a faint fluorescence at the place where they met the skin. It made the expressions on the faces of these people with their closed eyes look almost serene.

Hu Bugui immediately stood up. "Are they alive or dead?"

"They must be alive." Lu Qingbai came closer. "Looking closely, their chests are still moving up and down.—After death, a person weighs twenty-one grams less than when alive, have you heard that?"

"I've heard that twenty-one grams is the weight of the soul," said Xue Xiaolu.

Lu Qingbai slapped her forehead. "Be more professional.

"The author of that article proposed that the 'twenty-one grams' that disappeared for no reason was the fundamental difference between the living and the dead. A sort of substance, and the origin of life. He called it the 'life substance.' He proposed a plan for this 'life chrysalis.' If you could use some means to obtain this 'life substance,' wouldn't it really be able to be used to bring back the dead? Could it restore vigor to a person on the verge of death?"

"You're saying that what those tubes are conveying is those people's 'life substance.'" Hu Bugui's expression became grim. He quietly asked, "Dr. Lu, can you be sure?"

Lu Qingbai hesitated, then nodded confidently. "The blue seal's energy crystal is still active, but as for the blue seal himself, in the middle of such a large-scale energy field, he couldn't hold out so long. I suspect that the blue seal in that chair is already dead, and the energy crystal's life force is being entirely supported by the 'twenty-one grams of life substance' of those people in the basement."

"Captain Hu, what do we do?" Chang Dou asked.

Hu Bugui was silent for two seconds. “Urgently transfer me a vehicle with a large-scale isolation device, protective clothing, and energy detectors. I’m going in.”

“I’m going, too,” Su Qing said immediately.

Hu Bugui looked at him and frowned. Before he could say anything, Qin Luo and Fang Xiu said simultaneously, “Captain Hu, I’m going, too.”

Though Lu Qingbai knew that, as non-field staff, he would be in the way if he went in, looking at the picture of the “life chrysalis” on the screen, it was as though a cat was scratching his heart, itching enough to make him feel unwell. His eyes spun. “How about...you simply add me in, too. After all, I’m a specialist, I can help you deal with the technological problems of that life chrysalis.”

Xue Xiaolu looked from one to the next and felt that it wouldn’t be very good not to follow along with this style, so she followed suit: “Well...how about you add me in, too?”

Chang Dou was driven mad. “Comrades, that thing is about to explode, going in there isn’t taking an outing to the suburbs!”

Someone had already sent over what Hu Bugui wanted at top speed. He muttered silently to himself for a moment. “Su Qing and Dr. Lu will go in with me. Xiaolu, you’ll be responsible for following the installations for isolating the explosion, as well as getting in contact with the nearby city. You know what to reveal and what not to reveal. Just in case. Qin Luo and Fang Xiu, take a special police team and spread out to guard the perimeter.”

The three of them jumped into the car equipped with a large-scale isolation device. Hu Bugui slammed on the gas pedal and charged right into the energy vortex. While they had an isolation device equipped, when they passed through the ionosphere, the people in the car could still hear the crackling of static.

Hu Bugui glanced at Su Qing—taking Su Qing in was primarily because he felt unsteady if he wasn’t in his line of sight. Su Qing had a considerable record; gambling with his life was second nature for him.

But Su Qing was leaning against the car window, frowning faintly, as though concentrating on listening to something.

Hu Bugui asked, “What is it?”

“I can’t hear it anymore,” Su Qing whispered. “As soon as we went in, the voices of the fellow feeling were gone.”

Lu Qingbai suddenly marveled. He crawled forward from the backseat and asked, “Su Qing, when we get back, let us get a projection of your brainwaves. The double core’s ‘fellow feeling’ really is magical.”

“All right.”

“No.”

The generous “All right” was Su Qing’s, and the flat refusal was Hu Bugui’s. Hu Bugui glanced coldly at Lu Qingbai in the rearview mirror. “Don’t you know that brainwave projections are private? He isn’t a mental patient, why should he let you take one just like that?”

“Tsk.” Lu Qingbai awkwardly rubbed his nose. “The family doesn’t agree.”

Su Qing shrugged and pulled a face at Lu Qingbai, indicating that he would comply with the organization’s arrangements, rather with the look of a henpecked husband.

Just then, the car stopped at the center of the energy vortex. Chang Dou’s somewhat unclear voice came: “You must put on your protective clothing. As soon as the energy indicator nears critical values, withdraw at once!”

The three of them got out of the car armed to the teeth, and the energy indicators inside their protective clothing began to *beep-beep* at once. The indicator needles moved. Hu Bugui made a gesture, telling Lu Qingbai to walk in the middle and Su Qing to bring up the rear. They entered the building.

Carefully avoiding the floor covered in brains and wires, Lu Qingbai walked over to Gui Song—the blue seal on his shoulder was still moving, but as soon as he pulled up Gui Song’s eyelid, he found that he had already been dead for an unknown length of time. Lu Qingbai looked back and shook his head towards Su Qing and Hu Bugui. By this time, Su Qing had already pried up several floor tiles surrounding Gui Song. He jumped down into a passage so narrow that only one person could pass through it.

EXPLOSION

HU BUGUI followed closely after him as though unwilling to waste a single glance on the dead blue seal. He jumped right down, leaving Lu Qingbai alone, cut off from the mortal world in his protective clothing, planted in the middle of hundreds of brains with a corpse beside him—an extremely hardcore scene.

“Wait for me, you assholes!” Lu Qingbai only caught up after a long time and clumsily crawled over to the hole. He raised his butt and stuck his head in downward. He found that there wasn’t a single underground floor underneath. Looking down, it was pitch-black, of unknown depth. The big life chrysalis globe hung in midair, and the transparent covers holding people next to it were all mounted on the walls around it. Su Qing and Hu Bugui were clinging to the wall like geckoes. Dr. Lu felt instant acrophobia, so he yelled, “Hey, how am I going to get down?”

“Jump!” Hu Bugui said concisely.

“Bastard! I’m not a gorilla like you. If I jump from here, I’ll end up missing body parts!”

“Oh,” Su Qing’s slightly smiling voice came up from below, “then we’ll trouble you to keep guard up above.”

Lu Qingbai, grinding his teeth, looked at the brain nearest to him. All the folds and blood vessels on it were crystal clear, and never mind how sickening it was. He thought, You two had better not get injured in the line of duty after this, or else you’ll fall into my hands.

The indicator needle of the energy detector curved at a bigger and bigger angle. Hu Bugui pulled a steel rod out from the items he was carrying along and pressed the on/off switch. It immediately produced a laser chain, catching the edge of the hole with a *bang*. Lu Qingbai’s startled cursing

came from above. Hu Bugui said, “Shut up. Dr. Lu, reinforce us from above. We don’t have much time left.”

Then a long hook extended from the other end of the steel rod. Su Qing understood. He immediately caught the hook and tossed it with extreme accuracy, hooking onto a cover. There was a light click, and the hook automatically locked onto the thing it had hooked on. Hu Bugui pulled, found that it was firmly hooked, then pressed a button on the steel rod. The laser chain automatically hauled up the cover, along with the person inside it.

In no time at all, Lu Qingbai unhooked the cover up above and tossed back the chain. The technological content of this process wasn’t high, but time was limited. It had to be done as quickly as possible. While waiting for Lu Qingbai’s chain, Su Qing suddenly spoke softly: “Captain Hu, there’s something that I haven’t had a chance to tell you yet.”

Hu Bugui stared, turning his head to look at him.

“Before Xu Ruchong died, he actually said some things to me...” Having said this much, Su Qing’s words paused involuntarily. He looked at Hu Bugui, frowning. He didn’t know why he suddenly wanted to say this to him, and he didn’t know whether he should continue to speak. He began to waver.

Hu Bugui’s gaze burned on Su Qing’s face as though it could pierce through the thick protective clothing. His scorching expectation was palpable—what was he awaiting? Xu Ruchong’s dying words?

When the words came to Su Qing’s lips, he evaded practically out of instinct. “He told me that he was actually that Dr. Zheng’s adopted son, that he had always been wavering. That was the hand he was dealt. He...had no way out. You shouldn’t blame him.”

Hu Bugui was bound to have already confirmed this information with Professor Cheng. As dying words went, this sounded right, but Hu Bugui and Su Qing were both well aware that before his death, Xu Ruchong had certainly revealed some other more important information.

Su Qing caught the hook Lu Qingbai had tossed and took the opportunity to avoid Hu Bugui’s gaze.

After a long moment, Hu Bugui finally gave a dull “OK.” As Su Qing pulled back on the hook after throwing it into position, he couldn’t resist glancing at him.

Hu Bugui wasn't looking at him. He only had his head down and his eyes lowered. The life chrysalis's globe gave off a soft light that passed through the protective shield over his face and fell on his eyes. They looked inexpressibly dim.

It seemed that there was once again something cutting the two of them off. Neither spoke. Both sides were silent for a long time before Su Qing pressed the button and quietly said, "This is the last one. We should prepare to go up."

Hu Bugui nodded. Su Qing felt that he could see Hu Bugui's disappointment on the exposed half of his face. He even felt that he was pitiable. His heart suddenly softened.

Hu Bugui turned. "You go up first."

There was a colossal war being waged in Su Qing's heart. He didn't politely decline. He stepped carefully on the cracks in the irregular wall. When he passed by Hu Bugui, Hu Bugui automatically reached out a hand to support his waist in a protective gesture. Before Su Qing's raised foot could fall, it stopped in midair. At a very close distance, he raised his head to look at Hu Bugui for a while.

The scrutiny in his gaze was too heavy. Hu Bugui couldn't resist asking, "What's wrong?"

Su Qing pursed his lips, then finally quietly said, "When I went to see Professor Cheng that day, I had actually seen a drawing of Cheng Ge's that Tutu brought me."

Hu Bugui's eyes suddenly widened. He looked at him as though he didn't quite dare to believe it and also as though he was wild with joy. Su Qing avoided his gaze. The two of them were standing in an especially dangerous place. Their chests were pressed together. One of Hu Bugui's hands was supporting Su Qing's waist, and the other was holding the cable on his protective clothing. Between them was the bulky protective clothing. Even their heads were surrounded in ridiculous shields like pictures of American astronauts from the last century. But Hu Bugui felt that he had never before been so close to Su Qing.

Su Qing lowered his voice and quickly explained everything clearly. "In the end, Xu Ruchong told me that Cheng Ge's drawing wasn't related to him."

They both knew what this meant. Hu Bugui's little heart, blown upwards by spring breezes, finally landed on the ground. His breath caught. "That's what Xu Ruchong told you?"

Su Qing nodded.

Just then, Lu Qingbai's voice came from above. "Hey, you two, stop billing and cooing down there, hurry up!"

Hu Bugui gave him a profound look, and Su Qing finally put his foot down and grabbed the protective cable, planning to climb up. But Hu Bugui grabbed his wrist. "Telling me this, aren't you afraid that I'm the person he was hinting about? If I am...then what?"

Su Qing looked at him fixedly, drew his hand out of Hu Bugui's palm, and lightly swiped across Hu Bugui's neck with his glove. A smile slowly developed on his face. He said, "Then I'll slaughter you."

These words obviously weren't any kind of declaration of love, but when the two of them had climbed up, Lu Qingbai still somehow sniffed out a tiny hint of pink from Hu Bugui. He looked suspiciously at Hu Bugui's always expressionless face and shook his head with a shudder.

From the basement, they had pulled up altogether around ten people in clear covers. There were still wires attached to them. Lu Qingbai laid them out, carefully avoiding the brains and wires on the ground. Hu Bugui asked, "How do we handle them?"

Lu Qingbai hadn't been slacking off. He had pretty much worked out a rough understanding of the wires connected to the life chrysalis. He held his chin and thought for a while. He got out a little clip and clipped it to a wire on the life chrysalis connected to Gui Song's corpse. Blue numbers jumped up on it. He began to direct Su Qing and Hu Bugui. "First, carefully sever the wire on the first person and see what happens."

Su Qing brought down a knife, immediately cutting off the first filament.

The blue numbers obviously decreased a little. Lu Qingbai frowned. "Bring this person to the car."

Then he turned on the communicator linked to headquarters. "Chang Dou, calculate this for me, what's the critical threshold for support from conveying the twenty-one grams of substance?"

Chang Dou's voice was even more strongly distorted. He said intermittently, "If you break off about half, it should just about reach the critical threshold. Though the life chrysalis will probably have after-effects. After

you pass the threshold, you'll have about ten minutes to withdraw. The defense platform has already been established. As soon as you withdraw from inside, I'll detonate immediately."

Su Qing said, "Let's move the first half of the people out. Give priority to the heavier-looking ones. For the remaining half, I can sever the connections in one cut, and we'll take them out as quickly as possible."

Lu Qingbai said, "Quickly, quickly. When the time comes, each of you gorillas can be responsible for two, and in my capacity and a gentle and frail doctor, I'll undertake to carry one. Perfect."

The three of them quickly handled these half-dead unlucky devils. Just as Su Qing had arranged one of them in the car and was heading back, a sudden tremor nailed him in place.

This was his third time being shrouded by this gaze.

Only the most acute senses could perceive the finest sniper's all-encompassing line of sight. When that gaze swept over, there were no blind spots. He would kill with one shot, leaving his prey with nowhere to run.

A thin layer of cold sweat instantly came up on Su Qing's back.

Lu Qingbai turned his head. "What are you doing? Hurry up!"

"The sniper," Su Qing said quietly, not moving half a step. All his muscles tensed.

He couldn't understand this elusive sniper no matter how much he pondered. The time with Xu Ruchong, there had been two bullets in all, and you could say that they had both helped him—the first bullet seemed to have been shot by Jiang Lan; it had simply seemed to be telling him how to escape the big net's control. The second bullet had been even more bizarre. It had killed Xu Ruchong, breaking off the net's energy system and restoring his freedom.

Of course, Su Qing didn't have any direct notion of the fact that after the net's energy source had been cut off, it had nearly drained him into a mummy.

Almost immediately after he spoke, Hu Bugui held down Lu Qingbai next to him. "Get down!"

A bullet burst through the air, hitting Gui Song. Unerringly, it bored directly into the blue seal on his shoulder.

A small tuft of sparks suddenly spurted out of the life chrysalis. The clip Lu Qingbai had put on it exploded.

A sharp alarm rang. The indicator needle on the energy detector went right over the critical threshold.

Chang Dou screamed: "Someone's broken the heart of the energy vortex, three minute countdown to the explosion beginning, get out of there now!"

Lu Qingbai looked at Hu Bugui in shocked indecision. Hu Bugui shouted to him: "Get out, at once!"

"You..."

"Two minutes fifty seconds!"

"Hurry, don't stand there getting in the way!"

There were five or six people on the ground with their filaments still uncut. Hu Bugui crouched back down. Suddenly, a hand reached out and uncompromisingly hauled him up by the shoulder, dragging him away against his will.

"Two minutes thirty...two minutes twenty-nine..."

This time, no one paid attention to the ground littered with brains and wires. No one had time to care about the soft and hard things they were stepping on. Naturally, the only person who would have the audacity to abduct Captain Hu was Su Qing. Hu Bugui struggled to throw him off. "There's..."

Before he could finish, the wires on the ground connected to countless brains turned into a flaming dragon. The chair Gui Song was sitting in was blown sky high. Small-scale explosions were already beginning. Su Qing shoved Hu Bugui into the car. "Shut up! Dr. Lu, drive!"

"Two minutes, one minute fifty-nine, one minute fifty-eight..."

Before the car door had closed, Lu Qingbai slammed on the gas pedal. The car leapt up at lightning speed. Soon after, there was an enormous sound behind them. The heart of the energy vortex had exploded.

"One minute. Fifty-nine seconds..."

Lu Qingbai didn't dare to turn his head. He pressed the gas pedal to the floor, driving the automobile like an airplane.

"Thirty-second countdown!"

"Eight, seven, six..."

Jolting and bumping the whole way, they crashed out of the ionosphere. Before they could leave altogether, the whole energy vortex at last collapsed five seconds ahead of schedule. Though they had already driven to the edge

and had entered halfway into the defense platform, the enormous energy still threw the whole car up.

Lu Qingbai's head hit the front windshield. If not for his protective clothing, his brain probably would have been knocked flat.

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CRISIS LIFTED

THOUGH THE EXPERIENCE was hair-raising, the three of them still climbed out alive. The receiving rescue workers immediately took away the half-dead people in the car to conduct further monitoring and treatment. His first time taking charge, Chang Dou had succeeded in keeping the impact of the explosion to within the limits of the ionosphere. Apart from a single 4.0 magnitude earthquake that occurred on the spot, from which the surrounding cities felt a slight tremor, after intense observation for seventy-two hours, there were for the moment no more serious events.

It seemed that they had...succeeded.

Though to Hu Bugui's eyes, the outcome wasn't so ideal.

After returning from the ST Training Course, everyone had rushed right to the scene. Time had been so tight that they had not even had time to eat or sleep. So after they returned to headquarters, they didn't even hold a wrap-up meeting. Hu Bugui gave a brief five-minute report, and the RZ Unit dispersed on the spot, each going to rest.

Su Qing considered, then first went to see Qin Luo.

In eight hundred years, Qin Luo had had no experience in receiving guests. As soon as she saw Su Qing, she froze. After working together for so long and spending over half a week being tormented at the ST Training Course together, in Qin Luo's eyes, Su Qing had finally lost the dangerous label of "strange member of the opposite sex" and become an acquaintance in front of whom she could speak fluently.

But though he was an acquaintance, Qin Luo still didn't know how to receive a guest who came to her door. She stood bolt upright in the doorway looking helplessly at Su Qing for a long while. Then she finally asked, "Should I let you in?"

Su Qing: "..."

Qin Luo scrambled to let him in, then furtively fished a little notebook out of her pocket. Su Qing just caught a glance and saw what was written on it: “Step two, have the guest sit down and inquire whether they want a drink.”

He simply didn't know what to say.

Qin Luo mechanically pointed to the couch and said, “Sit down, what are you drinking?”

A pause, and she herself felt that that her tone was a little stiff, so she asked a little uncertainly, “Is that the right thing to say? If I get it wrong...if I get it wrong, don't take it to heart.”

Su Qing waved a hand to keep her from bustling. “I came to ask you for something.”

Qin Luo considered. This social interaction wasn't written down in the notebook. So she nodded foolishly. “OK.”

Su Qing: “...”

He sighed. “Such a grown-up young lady. Don't be so earnest. Don't be so quick to agree before the other person's even said what he wants.”

“Oh, OK.” Qin Luo nodded. “So what do you want?”

“When we went to Dong Jianguo's house, I ran into a sniper. Do you recall?”

Qin Luo's expression became proper. She switched right over from air-head girl mode to sharpshooting female bruiser. She frowned, a bit of viciousness appearing on her delicate features. “I know of him. I've heard that he has a code name, 11235. I don't know what his name is. He holds first place in the circle of assassins. There are those who say that when it comes to using a gun, no one can beat him.”

As Qin Luo spoke, she looked eager to have a go. “Actually, I've always wanted to go up against him, but I haven't had the chance.”

Su Qing hesitated. “I've heard that your marksmanship is the best in the unit.”

Qin Luo first nodded candidly. She said, “Yeah.”

Then she felt that wasn't right. This didn't seem to be what the little book said. So she flipped back two pages and saw that, as expected, she had said the wrong thing. A little strained, she clutched her hair, and her cheeks flushed slightly. She said, “Oh...actually, I'm not all that good, everyone is exaggerating.”

Su Qing laughed aloud and yanked away the little notebook on her knees. “Enough, just say what you want to say. There aren’t any outsiders, there’s no need to be modest—who gave you this rotten thing?”

Qin Luo whispered, “Chang Dou.”

Su Qing: “...”

No wonder.

Su Qing gave a dry cough and changed the subject back. “I want to ask you to help me out doing some special training.”

Qin Luo looked at him doubtfully.

“I’ll request a training field in a bit, and you’ll be responsible for shooting at me with guns of different range...”

“With live ammo?” Qin Luo was startled.

Su Qing nodded, his expression serious. “With live ammo. Just treat me like your enemy.”

Qin Luo’s eyes opened wide. “I’ll hurt you.”

“No problem. As long as you don’t kill me, it’s fine.” Su Qing was very unperturbed when it came to wounds—since having the double core system, he really had felt impervious. He could get shot five times at once and come back fine in a week.

Qin Luo considered. “Are you planning to deal with 11235?”

Su Qing lowered his eyes. The expression on his face was very natural. There was still a faint mild smile on it, like when he had been casually chatting with Qin Luo before. There were no pulsing veins and no malice in his eyes.

He softly said, “Once or twice is one thing, but there can’t be a third time. I’ve already put up with him three times. The next time we meet, I have to...”

He twitched the corners of his lips, feeling his expression for once getting a little out of control. “Kill him.”

Qin Luo blinked. She saw that the moment Su Qing stood up, clarity returned to his attractive eyes. She hesitated, then said, “I also think he’s very dangerous. As long as you aren’t afraid of being injured, I’ll help you.”

Su Qing nodded and said goodbye to her. Just before leaving, he remembered something and leaned against the doorframe. He said to Qin Luo, “Don’t learn from Chang Dou. Look at how silly Chang Dou looks. Does he look like a master of socialization?”

Qin Luo looked helplessly at the secret book given to her by “Chang the Pseudo-socialite.” Su Qing sighed. “Well, if you get the time, play some more with our money-squandering whelp. There may some use in it for you.”

Tu Tutu had long ago tempered his ability to speak to everyone in their own language to the highest degree, and he instinctively knew who the boss was. He had flattered Hu Bugui into oblivion. Su Qing felt that if this continued, Tu Tutu would one day become a second Ji Pengcheng, so he wanted to let these two people neutralize each other a little.

Su Qing found Tu Tutu in Hu Bugui’s room. Hu Bugui had nothing to entertain a child with, so he had taken out pictures of all the cats he had had before and given them to him to look at. Tu Tutu eagerly hung around him acting adorable, now “ah”ing, now “ooh”ing, playing naïve and innocent.

When Su Qing arrived, Tu Tutu was just shamelessly hanging off Hu Bugui’s arm, chirping like a dolphin: “Our teacher says, uncles who like little animals are all caring, good uncles. Uncle Hu is the best, number one out of everyone.”

Su Qing stood at the door with his arms crossed. Hu Bugui raised his head and looked at him. Then, smiling, he asked, “So what number is Uncle Su?”

Tu Tutu blurted out, “Oh, the prince regent is treacherous and savage. He harbors evil intentions. He regularly deceives his sovereign and spansks Our Imperial Presence. He won’t give up on usurping the throne. Of course he’s number...”

Su Qing gave a sinister, quiet laugh, and all the hair stood up on the back of Tu Tutu’s neck. His round little body rolled behind Hu Bugui with matchless speed. He shakily stuck out his head and looked towards the door. “Number...number... Of course you’re tied for number one!”

Su Qing raised his eyelids. “Get the hell over here.”

Emperor Tu looked longingly at the enormous shelter of General Hu, then tearfully found that he occupied the same bench as the great traitor. As expected—every threatened majesty had behind him a useless loyal official whose head had been turned by a fox demon.

But he took this quite philosophically, only indulging in a bit of self-pity. Then he put on a fawning smile and obediently “got the hell over,” surrendering to the traitor.

Su Qing took Tu Tutu away, and the smile on Hu Bugui's face faded bit by bit. He sank onto the couch, took out a cigarette, put it in his mouth, pulled out the tobacco shreds, and fiddled with them.

They had been forced to withdraw midway through the rescue operation, and the abandoned blue seal base had blown up in the end. General Xiong had simply found a room to stay in at headquarters. He currently had no intention of leaving. If before you could have said that the old superior had come to substitute while the core personnel were absent, what was happening now?

Even the tech department's Chang Dou had perfectly demonstrated that he could undertake Xu Ruchong's workload. What else was General Xiong uneasy about?

He could faintly sniff out the scent of great events to come. And then there was what Su Qing had said.

Hu Bugui sighed, sincerely wishing to light the cigarette in his hand. But bringing his formidable willpower to bear, he managed to resist. He sat on the couch staring blankly for a long time. Then someone knocked on the door again.

Hu Bugui stared. He stood up and opened the door and to his astonishment found Su Qing standing outside, hugging a giant Garfield body pillow.

Su Qing stuffed the pillow into Hu Bugui's arms and rudely shuffled inside in his slippers. "I came over to comfort you so you won't lose sleep—I'll go shower first."

All of his actions were incomparably natural. By the time Hu Bugui caught up, he had already closed the bathroom door.

Hu Bugui lowered his head and exchanged a look with Garfield's big fat unfathomable face. He couldn't suppress a smile. When he noticed it, probably feeling that this smile was rather lewd and not very in keeping with Captain Hu's always decent and steady image, he forced it away. His face seemed a little twitchy, as if he were having a stroke.

After Su Qing finished showering, he didn't tie the belt on his pajamas, only draped them carelessly over himself, revealing a white chest and a faint underbelly. He ran a hand alluringly through his soaking wet hair. "How's my figure?"

Hu Bugui hugged his pillow and earnestly said, "Pretty good."

“Heh-heh-heh,” Su Qing said, “then hurry and get cleaned up so you can provide this king with bedchamber service.”

Hu Bugui raised his eyes with a *swish*. “Have you really made up your mind?”

Su Qing said, “Damn, aren’t you finished yet?”

He had hardly finished speaking when Hu Bugui disappeared before his eyes at light speed, charging into the bathroom.

Su Qing leaned down and picked up the big pillow he had scared up from somewhere, then sprawled on the bed in the bedroom, rolling around hugging it. For some reason, when he recalled that this was Hu Bugui’s territory, he suddenly felt sleepy. For years he had been unable to distinguish whether he didn’t need more sleep or actually had trouble sleeping. Only that night in the little tent had he experienced the difference between “sleep” and “dozing.”

When Hu Bugui walked into the bedroom, all the lights in the room had been turned very dim by Su Qing. He was lying on the body pillow with the quilt half covering him, revealing a section of his lower leg. With his eyes half lowered, he was indolently looking at the pictures of the little cats at the head of the bed. He seemed a little drowsy.

Hu Bugui’s throat bobbed unnaturally. He subconsciously walked over and straightened the quilt over him. He quietly asked, “What are you looking at?”

“What happened to all your cats?”

“A friend took them and gave them to his retired parents to keep them company.”

“Oh? Why?”

A little tentatively, Hu Bugui put his arms around him. “I think you’re actually a little allergic to small animals. At the beginning, you were always sneezing when you got close to me. I thought it may have been because there was some cat hair on me.”

Su Qing stared for a moment. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, looking at him with a leer. “Because I’m—allergic to small animals? Captain Hu, what were you thinking of then?”

This time, Hu Bugui didn’t speak. He used his actions to answer.

SCIENTIFIC TERRORISM

HU BUGUI seemed like a grim-faced Justice Bao, always making people nervous, but he was actually a very gentle person. Even when it meant making himself uncomfortable, he would still be considerate of another's experience—especially in bed, his patience index was simply infuriating.

Without warning, Su Qing bit the side of Hu Bugui's neck. Hu Bugui groaned. In the dimness, Su Qing laughed softly and licked the toothmarks he had made, groping down along the side of Hu Bugui's waist. As he lit fires, he quietly asked, "Hey, are you up for it? What are you waiting for?"

Hu Bugui clenched his teeth and smacked him. "Bastard. What am I going to do if I hurt you?"

Su Qing took absolutely no notice, doing everything in his power to provoke him, expending all his efforts to burn up Hu Bugui's intellect. If it didn't come to tears, it wouldn't scratch the itch.

Hu Bugui was angered to the point that the roots of his teeth itched. At last, he fiercely pressed his two groping paws to the pillow and raised a hand to turn off the lights.

The next day, Su Qing once again got out of bed at a time that broke his personal record.

Only when Hu Bugui quietly got up to dress was he disturbed. Su Qing opened his eyes in slight bewilderment and stared blankly at the hem of Hu Bugui's shirt. Hu Bugui found that his cheeks were a little flushed and was concerned that he was running a fever, so he reached out to feel his forehead to check. Then he held his face, pressing his hand to the warm skin. "Are you feeling unwell today?"

Su Qing stared blankly for a long time, then sluggishly shook his head. In a slightly hoarse voice, he said, "I'm fine."

“Lie down a little longer,” Hu Bugui said. After a moment, he added, “In the future, don’t be so wild. You should...treasure yourself a little more.”

Su Qing looked at him in stupefaction, reached out a hand from the under the covers, seized the pillow he had been lying on, covered his face, then sorrowfully cried, “Uncle Hu, Lord Hu...”

A trace of exasperation appeared on Hu Bugui’s face. He pulled up the quilt that he had messed up by rolling here and there, then smacked him through the quilt. “There’s nothing to do today. We’ll just have a review meeting after noon. Go back to sleep. I’ll bring some things up, you can get up and eat in a while.”

Su Qing said: “Grandpa Hu.”

Then he nimbly bounced out of bed and picked up the clothes Hu Bugui had folded for him at the head of the bed, dressing efficiently. “I’m not going back to sleep, I arranged to have special training with Qin Luo.”

When he jumped out of bed, his movements paused. His posture was a little awkward. He frowned, pulled up the hem of his shirt, and took a glance. He found that last night in the dark, Hu Bugui had left some very clear fingerprints on his waist. Hu Bugui caught sight of them and immediately became nervous. “Come here and let me take a look—did I do that?”

Su Qing raised his arms and allowed him to carefully rub the bruised places with his fingertips. Leering, he said, “I sure didn’t do it myself...”

At this point, his words stopped, and he shivered. Hu Bugui had lowered his head and gently licked the skin where he had left bruised fingerprints. There was nothing sexual about it. It was as if he was carefully touching a precious treasure. Su Qing, who had just been completely unashamed, suddenly felt ill at ease. He couldn’t resist dodging backwards. Quietly, he said, “It doesn’t hurt.”

Then he slightly turned his head away, jumped into the bathroom, hastily cleaned up, said goodbye, and made himself scarce.

He didn’t care whom he went to bed with, didn’t care about the position. His face was thicker than a city wall. An awl wouldn’t have drawn blood. Only he wasn’t used to people being too good to him. He was used to being left to his own devices to grow up malnourished among the weeds. Suddenly receiving too much sunlight and too much love, he wasn’t used to it.

Of course, compared to his special training with Qin Luo, Hu Bugui getting excited and leaving a few handprints on him didn’t amount to anything.

Su Qing had gone directly to General Xiong to request the space. Hu Bugui was busy listening to the tech department's report and didn't have time to inquire about the contents of the training. When he didn't see Su Qing at dinner, he finally learned that a very violent and very inharmonious bloody business had occurred.

He hurriedly rushed to the treatment center and saw Su Qing with his upper body bare, a pile of bandages tied from his shoulders to his underbelly, and Lu Qingbai swearing as he picked out a bullet embedded in his arm.

Su Qing listened indifferently to Dr. Lu's creative scolding. Though he was in so much pain that his head was covered in cold sweat, he was still holding a cigarette with his other hand, puffing away in carefree contentment. When Hu Bugui kicked open the treatment center's door, Su Qing subconsciously crushed the cigarette end against the basin Xue Xiaolu was holding. Then he also received a slap in the head from Dr. Lu. "Where are you tossing that?!"

Xue Xiaolu looked at Hu Bugui and rotated her eyes, her gaze circling some no longer very obvious marks on Su Qing. Then, as though she had seen nothing, very properly, like a well-bred lady, she calmly averted her gaze and looked with admiration directly at a corner of the treatment center.

Lu Qingbai wrapped up the last wound and had Hu Bugui, who was ready to eat someone, take this wretch of theirs away. That night Imperial Uncle Su received a scolding. He attempted a seduction midway, which failed due to General Hu's formidable willpower.

Su Qing, having endured mental torment, hugged the Garfield pillow, his head drooping from the lecture, feeling that Chief Hu truly was unthreatened by might and incorruptible by riches or rank.

So the next day, his training partner for the "special training" changed, and for the next month, Su Qing really didn't make another appearance at the treatment center.

Also during this month, all over the world, other countries and other regions separately discovered planned explosions at seventeen blue seal bases. Ten of them were successfully isolated by technical personnel in the other countries. The remaining explosions that couldn't be protected against in time caused at least several thousand immediate deaths.

As soon as you turned on the morning news, there was simply nothing else. It was all explosions or explosions. The explanation given to the public was that these large-scale explosions all over the world had been plotted by a secret terrorist organization that had yet to step forward to take responsibility. Overnight, countless front page headlines began to read: “New Terrorists’ Political Position”, “How Far Are We From World War III?”, “Has Humanity Entered a New Anti-Terrorist Era?”, “The Creation of Scientific Terrorism.”

General Xiong was so busy his feet didn’t touch the ground. As soon as you walked into his office, you would be knocked flat by the cigarette smoke inside.

Several countries’ governments joined together to issue a statement, swearing up and down that they would fight the war against terror to the end. Whether it was coincidence or not, after the joint statement was issued, the constant explosions suddenly disappeared.

Heated discussion began in the mass media. Fear of the unknown and the temporary calm that seemed to be concealing something were even more frightening than the explosions. Rumors flew everywhere. All over the world people rushed to stock up on food. In some areas, there were even runs on banks.

Today, General Xiong came alone to Cheng Weizhi’s room, using a backup key to open the door.

Cheng Ge was immersed in his own world as before, entirely unmoved by the current political situation. Cheng Weizhi was watching TV. His expression was very grave. When he looked up and saw General Xiong, he stared, but there was no look of surprise on his face. He didn’t even stand up.

General Xiong walked right in and sat next to him, loosening his body and leaning back against the couch. He let out a long breath.

Cheng Weizhi quietly said, “What’s happening now?”

General Xiong shook his head. “It was you people who brought the demonic box into the human world in the first place. Now pestilence and calamity have erupted at last, and you’re asking me?”

Cheng Weizhi lowered his head, making no comment.

General Xiong looked at Cheng Ge’s silhouette and felt that this old friend whom he hadn’t spoken to in years had a very bitter life. Seeing the

life he and his son had led over the last few years, you knew he had received retribution.

General Xiong said, “Professor Cheng, when the Utopia Project was just starting and I was dispatched to work security, I couldn’t understand what you people were thinking—of course, I’m not very cultured. I can’t match up to you with all your learning. But couldn’t you have developed medical science and learned how to cure illness and save the dying, researched some new crops and let everyone eat better, or made some practical technology to make people’s lives more convenient? What did you mean by doing this? If people in the future can all jump three meters high, what benefit does it have for ordinary daily life? I thought then that the project would be stopped by the government sooner or later, and then, as expected, well!”

Cheng Weizhi shook his head. “You don’t understand.”

“Yes, I don’t understand.” General Xiong lit a cigarette. “I can’t work out what you were all trying to do with your lives. Didn’t Zheng Qinghua go off the rails?”

A group of “experts” on TV were just voicing differing opinions on the explosions. Cheng Weizhi was silent for a while. He said, “That’s not important. The important thing is, what do we do now?”

General Xiong sighed. “This Dr. Zheng, we all understand it—he’s a science nut. He would do deranged things for research. I believe that. But I don’t believe that he alone could kick up such a big fuss. The people or organization behind the Utopia Project supporting its operations are the truly frightening ones.”

Cheng Weizhi raised his head and looked at him.

General Xiong stared blankly with his eyes fixed on the TV screen. After a long while, he quietly said, “I have a very bad feeling. The explosions have suddenly stopped for no reason and I can only think of one explanation. That the truly horrifying things are yet to come.”

His words were a prophecy.

Some days after the explosions stopped, in China’s Z City, located near the earliest explosion, a peculiar infectious disease began to spread. The first patient, after being dazed for some days, suddenly fainted by the side of the road and was taken to a hospital. Some days later, his reactions became slower and slower, and his wakeful periods became shorter and shorter. Then he just “fell asleep.” The hospital acted as though it was facing a great

enemy, but no matter what, they couldn't find what was actually wrong with the patient. A week after being taken to the hospital, this patient no longer had any wakeful periods. His mental activity became weaker and weaker, and all his organs began to fail. Eighteen days later, he died "in his sleep."

In Z City people were taken to the hospital in quick succession. Within a brief half a month, there were over twenty examples of suspected cases in a row. There was no medicine that had proved effective against this sickness. The mortality rate approached 100%. The most horrifying thing was that the medical world couldn't find this illness's means of propagation or onset mechanism.

Meanwhile, the same circumstances began to erupt all over the world. Within a brief couple of weeks, the number of suspected patients had risen to the triple digits.

Final Volume
DAY WILL BREAK

THE TOP FLOOR of the RZ Unit was an infrequently used activity space. It had been a very long time since anyone had been there. As soon as you opened the door, you could smell the dust inside. The arched ceiling hung high above, and at your feet was a scarlet carpet that was soft to step on. You could walk on it in silence. All around were enormous floor-to-ceiling windows. The somewhat old-fashioned pale gold curtains fluttered noisily in the wind blown in at this high altitude.

When Hu Bugui walked in, General Xiong had his back to him, standing in front of an open window and looking out. He had no bodyguards with him.

“Close the door,” General Xiong said.

Hu Bugui subconsciously raised his head to look at the surveillance camera in a corner of the hall. General Xiong didn’t look back, but as if he had seen his movement, he quietly said, “It’s already off. Relax.”

“It’s already off” was precisely what meant Hu Bugui couldn’t relax. He thought, what did General Xiong have to say that he couldn’t say in the conference room or his office but had to come here for?

General Xiong turned his head and beckoned to him. “Come here and look.”

Look at what?

Hu Bugui followed his gaze—the RZ Unit headquarters was at a certain distance from the city center. Its elevation was very high, and the place where they were standing was practically the tallest building around. Looking into the distance, the city, the roads, and the overpasses appeared in a nearly panoramic view.

It was drawing near to twilight. The sun had already sunk below the horizon. The city lights were beginning to light up bit by bit.

In heaven and on earth, all the colors faded, leaving only man-made lights.

Hu Bugui glanced a little suspiciously at General Xiong. “General, what’s wrong?”

“Sometimes, when you look out like this, you find that there is nothing in the world that can’t happen,” General Xiong said irrelevantly. “One man can at most lift something weighing a few hundred pounds and run a few dozen kilometers. He can’t live much more than a hundred years eating all the crops of the world. Looking from this far away, even an ant seems larger than a man.”

The old general leaned against the railing, narrowing his eyes, pointing towards the distant city. “But, look, that’s all man-made. We all live like this, day after day. At a glance, decades and centuries all pass in the same way. There are so many people in the world, so many powers that are so mysterious that you can’t even imagine them. You think that there can’t be any hiccups.”

Hu Bugui didn’t know why General Xiong suddenly tilted his head forty-five degrees up to look at the sky. He thought, Could it be that he’s feeling the melancholy of old age?

General Xiong was silent for a long moment, then lowered his head, seeming to finally come around. He looked at him and asked, “How is it now?”

“Each country and each region has established a link. All scientific research institutions that can be utilized are being urgently brought in. Currently there are no places reporting continued explosions, but we still have no hold on the ‘sleeping sickness.’” Hu Bugui paused. “According to internal data, the number of people diagnosed worldwide has exceeded five-hundred cases. Our country currently has ninety-something cases. The patients are basically concentrated near Z City. With Z City as the center, it radiates out a hundred twenty kilometers, still expanding outwards.”

General Xiong made no comment when he had heard this. He nodded. After a moment, he asked, “And the public opinion aspect?”

Hu Bugui said, “It hasn’t gone out of control yet. Martial law has temporarily been imposed in Z City. They’ve announced that this is a highly infectious flu. The death toll and the true number of diagnosed individuals haven’t leaked out.”

“And concerning the new terrorists and the rumors of war?”

“It’s not bad. The mainstream media and the internet have all invited experts one after another to appear to deny the rumors. At present, we haven’t heard of any domestic incidents caused by runs on banks or panic buying.”

General Xiong reached out and gripped the railing. Veins faintly rose on his aged skin. He softly said, “That’s good, that’s good.”

Hu Bugui’s brows moved. “Sir, do you...want to tell me something?”

General Xiong looked at him in silence for a long moment, then slowly said, “Twenty-five years ago, I was still a young man and had only recently enlisted. At the time, two scholars took the lead in setting up a research project. This was the Utopia Project. It was itemized as a military project. Funding was supplied by the government. When the first base was established, the person responsible for the base’s security was me.”

Hu Bugui listened without a word. No one had systematically told him about Utopia’s dark history before.

“I suppose you’re aware of who these two scholars were. One was Professor Cheng, who’s living on the sixth floor now, and the other was surnamed Zheng, full name Zheng Qinghua, a first-rate doctor of anthropology. From the beginning, this project was concerned with power and the limitless possibilities of human evolution.” General Xiong paused. “But the irony was that Professor Cheng had a son like Cheng Ge, and Dr. Zheng himself had albinism.”

“And they were the ones who later made the blue seals?” Hu Bugui said.

General Xiong nodded. “This project went on for a full ten years before the first blue seal in human history successfully emerged—Zheng Qinghua himself. The energy crystal system restored the deficiency in his genes. And his opposite grey seal was his own little sister. It was then that Professor Cheng and Dr. Zheng had a difference of opinion about the unnatural product of the ‘blue seals.’”

“Zheng Qinghua used his own little sister...” When he had said this much, Hu Bugui suddenly came to a halt. He remembered that Xu Ruchong was supposedly Zheng Qinghua’s adopted son. Hadn’t he also been abandoned?

“Before they could resolve their difference of opinion, the Utopia Project was called to halt,” General Xiong said. “Zheng Wan, that grey seal, com-

mitted an intentional killing due to an emotional breakdown, then committed suicide to escape punishment.

“This research was too dangerous in itself. Orders came down from above, requesting that all research material be destroyed and the base sealed. But the day before the materials were destroyed, Zheng Qinghua disappeared.” General Xiong paused, then added, “He was a blue seal. At the time, no one but him understood how great the difference between a blue seal and an ordinary person actually was. Later, as you know, having received some unknown aid, Zheng Qinghua didn’t abandon his experiments while he was on the run. I received a secret order and established the RZ Unit, specially responsible for dealing with blue seals. But apart from that, no one knew whom Zheng Qinghua was collaborating with that allowed him to make such a big stir, nor where his armed power came from. How large the Utopia organization is now, what stage Zheng Qinghua’s research has reached after so many years of lying low...”

General Xiong shook his head. “There’s only one thing I can understand. For over a decade, this mysterious Utopia organization always kept itself hidden, but now it’s tantamount to loudly announcing itself in front of the whole world. This is a declaration of war. It means that they finally have enough bargaining chips.”

Hu Bugui looked at him, frowning.

“Never mind the blue seals...who are countless times more powerful than an ordinary person in terms of physical constitution and agility. The threat we can’t ignore is the technology these people possess that we don’t have.” General Xiong’s words paused. He became serious. “Have you ever thought that there would be a day when everyone would bend their heads to these so-called ‘scientific terrorists,’ and what would become of this world?”

Hu Bugui wanted to blurt out “there won’t be such a day,” but the words stuck in his throat. Looking at General Xiong’s face, for once grave, he couldn’t get them out.

“You come from the regular army. You’re one of the country’s elites, upholding the safety of society, with the authority to punish terrorists at any time.” General Xiong smiled. “But, Xiao Hu, if one day, your position switches with that of the blues seals, what will you do?”

“What’s happened?”

But General Xiong didn't respond. He only stared fixedly into his eyes. "Tell me. If there really is such a day, what will you do?"

"What I believe to be right is right, and what's wrong is wrong," Hu Bugui said after considering for a while. "I'm not one of those particularly astute, calculating people who can hear one thing and know ten. If I don't know something, then never mind, but if I do know, then I won't act against my convictions to do something I'm unwilling to do."

General Xiong looked at him with a burning gaze for a moment. Then he fished out a ring of keys and put it into his hand.

Hu Bugui stared. "This is..."

"Remember what you've said today. There will come a day when you'll have a use for this thing." General Xiong wasn't planning to say any more to him. He waved a hand. "Go, get to work."

Hu Bugui thought that perhaps he really wasn't one of those astute people. He had many questions, but he didn't know where to start asking. General Xiong turned around, leaving him with only a rear view. He seemed not to want to reveal anything else. Hu Bugui hesitated for a moment, said "Yes, sir," and left the eighth floor hall, closing the door on his way out.

About an hour after he left, a bodyguard came over, carrying General Xiong's phone. General Xiong took the phone, looked at the "bodyguard" whose face was obviously a stranger's, picked up the call, and put the phone by his ear, listening without saying a word.

It was already completely dark. Looking into the distance, the city's neon lights were like a Milky Way that had descended to earth. If you closed your eyes, you could still hear the racket and clamor of voices.

The flickering lights were reflected in General Xiong's eyes, which seemed murky from age, as if there was a membrane of light and color covering them. His face was no longer full of smiles. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened, and his lips were tightly pursed, the corners of his mouth turned slightly down. He looked like a statue carved out of marble.

At last, General Xiong spoke. He quietly said, "I know... Yes, I've been ready for this day."

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if a smile were flashing across them. He hung up the phone and gave it to the strange "bodyguard."

"Let's go." Then he turned easily and walked on ahead in large strides, not looking back, like a duty-bound hero, like...a martyr.

That night, unusually, General Xiong suddenly left the RZ Unit headquarters without a word. Hu Bugui clutched the ring of keys and felt that something was off, but he couldn't say where the problem lay.

Three days later, Fang Xiu, holding a newspaper, charged into Hu Bugui's office without even knocking. "Captain Hu, take a look at this."

Hu Bugui glanced at the headline—"Launching the God-making Plan."

He nodded. He had clearly already seen it. He didn't have any major reaction. Fang Xiu lowered his voice. "Read this. 'Thirteen countries have united to launch the Utopia Research Project. The world is entering an age of miracles.' Isn't this the various nations' governments making a joint statement acknowledging the legitimacy of Utopia? I've looked, and our country hasn't signed on, but from the media's attitude, it seems that the countries that haven't signed are only ambivalent, not opposed."

Hu Bugui took a document out of a drawer and pushed it in front of Fang Xiu. "I was just about to tell you. People are coming from above tomorrow to conduct a political investigation of headquarters. There's a political investigation each year, but it's usually at the end or the beginning of the year. No one ever comes at such an irregular time. Pass on the notice so everyone knows where we stand."

Fang Xiu held his breath, looking at him. "This is...this is...but what about General Xiong? Why isn't General Xiong standing up to say something? What the hell is going on up above? Why would they suddenly..."

"I've attempted to contact General Xiong. All of his numbers have been disconnected overnight." Hu Bugui tapped on the keyboard on his desk a few times, then turned the monitor to let him see.

He had searched for "Xiong Maolin," General Xiong's full name. The search engine turned up a blank page, with the suggestion: "Did you mean: Linlin the panda?"

Fang Xiu instantly felt as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over his head. He stared blankly. After a long time, he finally lowered his head slightly and met Hu Bugui's deep gaze. He opened his mouth, but he couldn't say a single word.

Hu Bugui softly said, "Go ahead. There's no need to worry. The sky won't fall, and if it does fall, I'll be here to hold it up."

The darkest age had descended at last.

SU QING wasn't at headquarters now. Everyone was already used to his unseen comings and goings. If they couldn't find him, they would call him or shout over the comms. If there was nothing urgent, they would write a note and put it on his door. Anyway, no matter what he was doing, he had his own judgement. He wouldn't hold things up.

This was the first time he couldn't be found when it was time to hold a meeting. All of the RZ Unit's core members assembled in the conference room. Only he was missing.

Hu Bugui looked at his watch. Su Qing's communicator was turned off, so he called his phone. This time, Su Qing actually picked up. Wherever he was, there was a lot of noise. He said a few words, indicating that he wouldn't be back very soon.

"Then we won't wait for you. We'll hold the meeting now. Turn on your communicator and listen in." Hu Bugui paused, then raised his head and glanced at everyone with their varying expressions. "Sit down, everyone.

"I trust that everyone is aware of the current circumstances," Hu Bugui said quietly after being silent for a long while.

Lu Qingbai looked infuriated. "What the fuck! Is there anything to fucking say about this? Is there? We'll see who dares to come tomorrow. Political investigation? I do what I should and stand upright. There isn't a single shameful deed in three generations of my family. What is there to investigate? Any thug that dares to walk through our door, I'll make sure he'll be eating through a tube for the rest of his life!"

Hu Bugui didn't speak. Xue Xiaolu tugged at Lu Qingbai's clothes. "Dr. Lu..."

Lu Qingbai smacked the table and stood up, paced two steps in place, then forced himself to lower his head slightly and take two deep breaths. He waved a hand towards Hu Bugui. "Fine, I won't make trouble, you go on."

“General Xiong can’t be contacted now.” Hu Bugui left out the subtext. He lowered his head and looked at the pale blue tablecloth on the conference table. He laced his fingers together and put them on the table. He sounded very even-tempered. He knew that General Xiong had been ready for this. It was even likely that he himself had chosen this road. “There’s no use in anger or analysis. The most important thing is what we should do now.”

Lu Qingbai folded his arms. He said, “The people we rescued from the exploding blue seal base didn’t die on the spot, but a couple of weeks later, they all manifested typical symptoms of the ‘sleeping sickness.’ This infectious disease’s rate of spread is very fast. You may all have noticed—recently the number of cases has been rising at a terrifying rate, but after those thirteen countries issued their joint statement, from yesterday to today, I’ve checked, and apart from a few individual locations, the various countries haven’t added a single case.”

“I’ve also noticed that,” Hu Bugui said. “The countries that still had additional cases are those where the media has stood up to unequivocally question the statement concerning the ‘god-making project.’”

“But it’s only a public opinion trend. No one’s said what the ‘god-making project’ actually is.” Xue Xiaolu pointed at the newspaper on the table. “This opposition is too weak, isn’t it? If this goes on, I think they’ll also compromise within a week.”

“If you said it, many people wouldn’t believe it, anyway. The ‘officials’ of the world’s other countries have all acknowledged Utopia’s legitimacy.” Fang Xiu frowned. “This is a hijacking.”

It truly was a hijacking.

They weren’t invaders of some country or some race. They were hidden among all kinds of ordinary people. They couldn’t be guarded against. Even if you wanted to pick up a gun and resist, you would be at a loss for what to do.

They had used certain means to spread an illness called “sleeping sickness” through all of humanity at an unbelievable speed. At present no one knew what its mechanism was or how it should be treated. They could research, but there was no time. By the time they had worked it out, everyone in the world, like in Sleeping Beauty’s castle, would have keeled over and died in this muddleheaded way.

There wasn't a single government that could watch the death toll being submitted each day without feeling enormous stress, never mind that politicians were also people, and would also worry about their own safety and the safety of their families.

Hu Bugui thought that perhaps when the explosions had happened—no, even earlier than that—Utopia had made private arrangements with each nation's government. Otherwise, why would General Xiong have begun nervously remaining at headquarters from that time on?

General Xiong had built the RZ Unit on his own. It had been too hurried. There were many questions there hadn't been time to resolve. Even if he hadn't seen it, thinking back, even Hu Bugui had been able to sense the old man's anxiety when he had been staying at headquarters.

But he hadn't been able to say it.

So many people couldn't be permitted to die. Moreover, if the truth got out, there would be social upheaval. The Utopia Project had originated in this country. More than the governments of those thirteen nations that had had no alternative but to take the lead, this country's government should understand the situation better. An ambivalent attitude at this time was likely because they hadn't yet found a means for resistance or resolution and were too hard pressed. But the other side wouldn't be easy to fool, so some people had to be sacrificed to make their standpoint clear.

Hu Bugui knocked on the table. "For what I'm going to say now, don't interrupt me, just listen—Chang Dou, where are the things I asked you to prepare?"

Chang Dou gave an "oh" and picked up a bag from beside him. He turned it over and slipped out a pile of varied-looking pocket watches. One was a very simple disk, one looked like a human skull. There was one in the shape of a cartoon animal, and a lady's pocket watch with a lacy border. The edges of all the covers had names carved on them.

Chang Dou distributed the pocket watches by name, leaving behind Su Qing's, which Hu Bugui took. Chang Dou clutched his hair. "These were made in a rush, they might not be ideal. I did my best to decorate them according to everyone's usual casual clothes. It's best for them not to be too obvious when you wear them.

"This is a life-reaction communicator, already set up ahead of time. You hold it in your hand and press a button on it."

After pressing that button, the pocket watch's three hands began to tick like an ordinary watch's. Chang Dou said, "After the life-reaction communicator is activated, don't take it off yourself. When the carrier is near death, their location will automatically appear on the others' watches through the positioning system. The positioning system won't be displayed ordinarily. Apart from that, the pocket watch contains a communicator with anti-interference and anti-tracking functions. It can avoid headquarters' inspections. There's an energy detector, an emotion blocker...I was in too much of a rush, that was all I could do. I'm sorry, I couldn't make anything better."

He lowered his head as though he had failed to live up to the organization's trust.

"Thank you," Hu Bugui said, trying to smile, but sadly he failed somewhat. "Professor Cheng and his son have already been sent away in advance. Tonight, I need you all to leave headquarters..."

"Captain Hu!"

Hu Bugui made a gesture, indicating that they shouldn't interrupt him. "Leave for the nominal purpose of investigating the 'sleeping sickness.' Take your personal belongings. Then don't come back. Su Qing, did you hear that, too? I'm afraid you'll have to come back tonight to take the child."

Su Qing had been silent from the start. Only now did he put in a word: "The child is out here with me."

Hu Bugui nodded. General Xiong had said that Su Qing was an extremely sharp person. There were many things he might notice at the faintest hint. So he said, "Then just don't come back. You can report your address to me individually, and I'll think of a way to send you the new communicator."

Su Qing didn't speak again. Not only that, he once again unilaterally turned off his communicator.

Qin Luo suddenly asked, "If we all go, what will happen when people come for the political investigation tomorrow?"

"I'll stay," Hu Bugui said matter-of-factly.

Lu Qingbai pointed at his own nose and asked, "Do I look to you like an asshole who would abandon a teammate and run away?"

Fang Xiu immediately added, "Do you think that's what I look like?"

Qin Luo shook her head. "I'm not going, anyway."

Xue Xiaolu said, "Captain Hu, this idea of yours is rotten."

At last, Chang Dou wasn't confused anymore. He understood what Hu Bugui was saying and immediately flushed red. "I...I also won't..."

Hu Bugui waved a hand. "Don't worry. Listen to me. The higher authorities don't necessarily want to do anything to the RZ Unit, or else they wouldn't have sent notice in advance this time. Don't overthink it. This is a mere formality. It would be indiscreet not to leave at this time."

"But..." Lu Qingbai frowned.

"Dr. Lu, I hope that as a member of the armed forces, you're able to obey orders." Hu Bugui's glanced around at all of them. "Go and collect your things. In twenty minutes, I'll see you out of headquarters."

Su Qing was very busy at this time. He had basically understood what Hu Bugui was going to say, so he hadn't listened with much attention.

Before leaving, General Xiong had given him a folder. Inside were a check and the personal files of all the RZ Unit's core members. As soon as he opened it, Su Qing understood what General Xiong meant.

When General Xiong had called Hu Bugui up to the eighth floor to chat about philosophy, Su Qing had shut himself up in his room and quickly read about all his teammates' backgrounds and families.

Fang Xiu's father had passed on, and his mother was a retired professor. Hu Bugui's home was in the countryside, parents still in good health. Chang Dou's parents and older brother were all travelers, regularly scattered all over the world, their whereabouts uncertain. Lu Qingbai's father had been hired to teach at a medical school after retirement. Qin Luo's parents were local. Xue Xiaolu had grown up with her grandmother, and the old lady had passed away; she had no connections.

Su Qing understood what General Xiong meant. While there was still time, he wanted to resolve everyone's worries about their families.

He was a practiced hand at this—assigning fake identities, handling residences and new accounts, creating people out of thin air, dealing with these people individually, and coaxing them into doing what he said.

When he received Hu Bugui's phone call, in a few short days, he had already basically completed all of the above. He was standing alone in B City's bustling street—he had come to his final stop.

With his head down, he stared at the watch on his wrist. He wasn't wearing any disguise this time. Wearing a black trench coat with a straight collar,

he was leaning in an unobtrusive corner. The setting sun stretched his shadow out long. There was a pile of cigarette butts at his feet.

Suddenly, a trembling voice said, “You...you’re...”

Su Qing slowly raised his head and saw the person getting out of the car stopped at the gate. Little by little, his eyes met Su Chengde’s.

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IN THAT INSTANT, Su Qing began to hate his above average vision. Su Chengde was about three meters away from him. That was close enough for him to clearly see every faint expression on Su Chengde's face, the flickering movements at the corners of his mouth and eyes as though he was desperately trying to cover something up, and the small and numerous agitated wrinkles.

He saw Su Chengde's eyebrows drooping from age, saw the marks of time carved on his face, saw the khaki coat he was wearing and the untied checked scarf around his neck, and the edges of a shirt and vest exposed under it.

So familiar, yet so strange.

The two of them stared at each other for a full five minutes. During that time, Su Chengde opened his mouth over and over, but from beginning to end, he couldn't say a word. His chest rose and fell violently. The setting sun seemed to be stabbing his eyes; all of a sudden, Su Chengde fiercely closed his eyes, as though they had been hit by something. He took a slight step back.

Su Qing straightened up and said "dad," but only his lips moved. He couldn't make a sound.

At last, this elderly successful businessman succeeded in controlling his emotions. He slowly waved a hand, then silently turned, parked the car and locked it, paused, then beckoned to Su Qing. "Come in and talk."

Su Qing's glib tongue seemed to have gone mute. There was something blocking his chest, blocking it so firmly he could barely catch his breath.

He followed Su Chengde inside. The housekeeper came out to welcome them and couldn't resist staring when she saw Su Qing. Her eyes traveled over his always appealing face. Even her voice lowered a little. "Uncle, you're back."

Su Chengde pointed to Su Qing as though nothing were the matter. “This is my son. He’s staying for dinner today. Go out and buy some more food.”

Xiao Wu agreed. When she passed by Su Qing, she couldn’t resist lowering her head slightly. She nimbly changed her shoes. In the whole enormous house, only father and son remained.

Su Qing looked the place over and found that the furnishings were no different from what they had been many years ago. Since the time father and son had fallen out over his troublemaking and he had moved out, up to now, counting it all up, nearly seven years had passed—it was like another lifetime. Truly like another lifetime.

“Where did you go?” Su Chengde asked quietly when Xiao Wu left. He had just taken off his coat and hung it over the back of the couch, but his hand hadn’t moved. His fingers tightly clutched the couch, too tightly, so much so that his hand seemed to be trembling.

This question was too hard to answer. Su Qing stared blankly. For a time, he didn’t know where to start.

Su Chengde suddenly stepped up and fiercely slapped Su Qing. The hit nearly turned his head. Su Qing was taken unawares. His mind buzzed. That slap of Su Chengde’s fell hard. The imprints of five fingers immediately rose up on his white skin. Su Qing’s ears were ringing. He closed his eyes and slowly raised his hand to hold his cheek, belatedly feeling the stinging pain... It really hurt.

“How many years? Where did you go?” Su Chengde yelled this. Su Qing could almost hear a sob in his voice. “Well? Where the hell did you go?”

“Dad...” he stammered almost inaudibly.

“Don’t call me dad! You aren’t my son!” Su Chengde’s eyes were open very wide, the rims of his eyes as red as burning iron. He suddenly exploded into roaring: “Count it up for yourself, how many years has it been? How many years without even a phone call from you, not one glimpse of you? You might have left an address! Even if you didn’t want to see me, couldn’t you have left an address with those useless friends of yours, huh? Why didn’t you take pity on an old man, at least let me know whether you were dead or still living?”

Su Qing closed his eyes. He forgot where he had heard why the ancients spoke of “tears traveling from aged eyes”—because a person’s wrinkles ex-

tended horizontally, when clouded tears flowed, they would stick in those deep wrinkles, as though they didn't even have the strength to roll. One look, and it was as if someone had fiercely stabbed a knife into his heart.

He felt a chill on his face. He didn't know what to say, only kept repeating, "I'm back, dad...I'm back."

"Dad...I was wrong."

On hearing these words, the almost hysterical Su Chengde suddenly quieted down. He stared blankly for a moment and irresistibly raised his head, staring at the lamp hanging off the ceiling with all sorts of feelings in his heart. He found that in all these years—when he was angry, when he was regretful—searching all over the world for this child as though he had gone mad, all he had been looking forward to and all he had been unable to say, added up together all came to these three words. Now Su Qing had said them first. He had finally waited long enough.

Then his nose stung unbearably. This man of iron, who had struggled in society and gambled with his life for many years, felt a melancholy down to the bottom of his heart. He simply couldn't tell whether he wanted to have a good cry or laugh aloud.

But in the end, Su Chengde didn't do anything—he was old. He didn't have the strength.

After standing there rigidly for a long time, he at last slowly raised his arms and put them around Su Qing's shoulders. This child had at some point grown taller than him, but, like when he had been small, Su Qing still curled up in his arms.

This was the person he had respected throughout his childhood, the target of his hatred throughout his adolescence, and the man he had most wanted to see but had found it hardest to see as an adult.

He had been a hero, a monster, a dictator, but now, Su Qing found that he was only an ordinary old man, only...an ordinary father.

Even before being executed, a man still had to be given a last meal. When he had unilaterally hung up the communicator on Hu Bugui, Su Qing had known that he would be free for tonight. He felt very steady, steadier than any person on earth, because he had found that there was actually nothing on earth to dread. To use Hu Bugui's words—the sky won't fall, and if it does fall, I'll hold it up.

It was the people who depended on others to hold it up who didn't feel steady. That was why they would be scared and uneasy.

Su Qing was very calm now—If I can hold it up, then everyone will be safe and sound. If I can't hold it up...then that will be my fault for lacking the ability. I won't blame others. If the floodwaters rise to the sky later, that will be after my death.

Xiao Wu came back from buying groceries. Su Qing had taken off his coat and gone into the kitchen. Then Su Chengde told her he was giving her the day off. She could go do what she wanted. There was no need for her to be responsible for anything.

Having calmed down, Su Chengde finally sensed that his son was different. It wasn't that he had changed, or that he had become more sensible—of course he would become a little more sensible after getting a few years older. It was the quality of each of his movements. Su Chengde leaned against the kitchen door, watching Su Qing's back. He suddenly found that his son's back was particularly straight. When he lowered his head, his thin profile naturally displayed a kind of certainty.

The look in his eyes had changed in particular. He couldn't say precisely how. But he could sense that during these years, he had experienced many things...that perhaps others couldn't imagine.

“Dad, there's no more chicken stock in the pot.”

“There's some in the cabinet. Open a bag.”

Su Qing gave an affirmative and reached out to pull open the little cabinet's door. The wooden door gently touched his lower leg and seemed to knock against something. Su Chengde was currently very sensitive towards everything having to do with Su Qing. His eyes immediately moved to a spot on Su Qing's lower leg close to his ankle. He felt that the slightly wide pant leg was hiding something. He frowned and couldn't resist asking, “Su Qing, what do you have there? Why have you stuffed it in your pant leg?”

Su Qing paused in the middle of serving food. After a moment, he turned his head. “I'll explain it to you in a while, sir.”

Then he handed a serving plate to Su Chengde. “Eat it while it's hot. I'll make another.”

Su Chengde's heart stung—this was that darling son of his who before hadn't even known to pick up a bottle of soy sauce when it fell.

He took the things from Su Qing and suddenly noticed that there were many calluses on his hands. The others, he couldn't say how they had been made, but the thin calluses on the palm and the places where fingers and palm met, Su Chengde knew about those. He had a childhood friend who had gone into the military and had these calluses. They came from holding a gun.

Su Chengde immediately raised his head to look at Su Qing, suddenly understanding that indescribable feeling about him—this was a powerful calm that came of being tempered by great danger.

Father and son sat at the dining table. This time, there was at last only one set of unused tableware left on the table. They spoke at great length—how these years had been, how their health was.

But only when the meal ended and Su Qing automatically stood up to pick up the dishes did Su Chengde realize that during all this time, he had been speaking a lot, while the little whelp had only occasionally chipped in, turning the subject away from himself each time and returning it to Su Chengde.

Good child. He had turned sly.

Only when he had sent Su Qing off to take a shower did Su Chengde get a chance to gently go through the coat Su Qing had left on the couch.

When Su Qing walked out drying his hair, he saw laid out on the coffee table a handgun, his credentials, and a small knife. His dad was sitting on the couch with a cigarette in his mouth, his expression very grave.

Su Qing wasn't at all ruffled. At any rate, he had to lay these things out sooner or later. Not only did he have to lay them out, he also had to think of a way to get Su Chengde to leave. So he plopped down across from him.

Hu Bugui waited all day, but Su Qing's communicator didn't turn on again. He had even turned off his phone. But he wasn't especially worried—since Tu Tutu had already been taken away, that clearly showed that Su Qing understood what was happening. Speaking purely from selfishness, Hu Bugui even hoped that he would never come back.

That night, Hu Bugui saw off all his teammates, who wanted to speak but held themselves back. He ate and slept as usual, without any difference—oh, except going back to an empty room.

The next morning, he greeted the so-called “political investigation.”

The person who came was a stranger. He bluntly told Hu Bugui that during the period of the political investigation, all of the RZ Unit's activities were to cease. All members who remained at headquarters would stay put and await orders. They couldn't leave at will. As for those who had already left, conforming to Hu Bugui's expectations, this person didn't ask too many questions about them.

His area of activity was confined to a line between a single office and bedroom. He noticed at once that this place had no surveillance system. The examiner didn't inconvenience him too much, only asked some routine ambiguous questions, gave him a stack of materials, and told him to write.

On the first day of house arrest, while Hu Bugui wrote his materials, there were two people next to him watching. On the second day of house arrest, Hu Bugui was still writing materials, and the two people had become one. On the third day of house arrest, the materials had only increased, but the person watching him had gone from sitting there watching all day to occasionally coming in to take a look at him.

Hu Bugui finally found an opportunity. While no one was paying attention, he stealthily felt for the locked cabinet under the simple desk. He took out General Xiong's keys and tried each in turn. When he tried the fourth one, it opened for him.

HU BUGUI unhurriedly looked at the door. In fact, this was only an automatic gesture. He believed that even if the person who had been instructed to watch him suddenly walked in and saw what he was furtively doing right now, he would most likely pretend not to have seen, walk right out, and close the door.

There was a file pouch in the cabinet, yellowed with age. Hu Bugui wiped the dust off of it and opened it. Inside he found a map densely marked with different colors of pen, a list of names—Hu Bugui glanced at it briefly and knew that everyone on this list was using an assumed name—with contact information and locations after them, as well as a check, a little notebook, and a hard disk.

The little notebook was actually a diary, a research journal kept by an unknown person back when the Utopia Project had still been legitimate. Hu Bugui flipped through it, then put it away, figuring that the things on the hard disk were likely also inextricably linked with the Utopia Project.

When the worst had happened, General Xiong had taken on the non-existent blame for everyone, laying a road for the RZ Unit to continue in the dark.

Just as Hu Bugui was about to put the things away, there was a faint movement behind him. Hu Bugui quickly turned his head. His hand had already subconsciously reached for his waist when he saw a human figure flash and a person jump inside.

He opened his mouth. Rather dumbfounded, he said, “Su...Qing?”

Su Qing winked at him, patted dirt off himself, put his index finger up to his lips, and shushed him. He openly walked over and sat on his desk—he seemed very sure of his own safety. He must already have noticed that there was no surveillance system here.

Hu Bugui kept his voice low. “How did you get in? Didn’t I tell you not to come back?”

Su Qing seized Hu Bugui by the front of his shirt and, *smack*, kissed him firmly on the lips. His eyes curved in a smile. Somehow, Hu Bugui felt that he was in an especially good mood—his mood was better than it had ever been before. It wasn't that Su Qing was normally very gloomy. It was that he very rarely displayed any particular emotions in front of others.

Hu Bugui couldn't maintain his frown. His expression softened involuntarily. Looking at Su Qing, he sighed very helplessly.

"I get in by every opening," Su Qing said, smiling. "Headquarters has lots of defensive gaps. When I snuck in without ever having been here, you still couldn't catch me, never mind now when I'm so familiar with the place."

Hu Bugui found that he had suddenly become younger, very obviously using his expression to hint "Aren't I awesome? Hurry up and praise me." There seemed to be a fluffy tail wagging behind him. So while Hu Bugui was still as care-laden and heavy-hearted as before, he couldn't resist smiling and reaching out to stroke Su Qing's soft hair.

"Do you have anything else to do at headquarters? If not, I'll think of a way to get you out of here." Su Qing considered. After a moment, he asked, "Have they all gone?"

Hu Bugui nodded and tucked the file pouch away. "Where's Tutu?"

"I handed him over to my dad," Su Qing said briskly, the corners of his eyes and the tips of his brows rising. He seemed a little like a youngster. He even couldn't resist complaining, "That dad of mine, he's really hard to sway, and he's a grouchy old man. If I had told him to leave B City, then even if I had laid everything out, he still wouldn't have gone. But if I asked for his help with something, he definitely wouldn't refuse."

He took out an iron hook and flashed it in front of Hu Bugui. "There's a fifteen-second blindspot when the surveillance camera on the roof turns in the other direction. Climbing three floors—can you do it?"

Hu Bugui nodded. Seeing Su Qing standing by the window, looking rather eager to have a go as he looked fixedly at his watch to calculate the time, he couldn't help asking, "Your family... Have proper arrangements been made?"

"Everyone's relatives have been fixed up." Su Qing turned his head and smiled at him. "I even went to your house for a free meal. Captain Hu, your mom makes delicious meat pies."

Watching his silhouette, Hu Bugui's heart suddenly felt very soft. He quietly said, "When all this is over, we'll go home and have my mom make them for you every day."

Su Qing casually teased, "How are you going to introduce me to your mom then?"

Hu Bugui looked at him and said in total earnestness, "I'll say you're my lover. Can I?"

Su Qing paused, quickly glanced at him, then averted his eyes and a little unnaturally said, "You're so mushy... I'll count down. Five, four, three, two, one, come on!"

He had hardly finished speaking before he nimbly ducked out. Following closely, Hu Bugui leapt out the window. Su Qing tossed him a safety rope. Hu Bugui caught it precisely, then fell directly downward with the acceleration of gravity. The safety rope pulled tight, stretching a little with perfect resilience, then contracting again, tossing him into the air in an arc and precisely into an open window. Hu Bugui landed and loosened his grip, rolling aside to get rid of inertia. Then he instinctively clung to the base of the wall to avoid being caught by the surveillance system.

Then he heard a slight sound. The red light on the surveillance monitor at the end of the corridor flashed twice, then dimmed. At the same time, Su Qing nimbly jumped in through the window, then hauled back the hook and the rope. He pulled Hu Bugui up. "Come this way—I blew up the surveillance room while I was hanging outside. It's three more minutes before the backup generator kicks in."

The route had evidently been planned by Su Qing ahead of time—the inexplicably loosened ceiling, the opened lock on a side door, and the unconscious patrolmen on the way.

Hu Bugui witnessed with his own eyes that it took Su Qing only eighteen seconds to break into a car. Hu Bugui, a person who all his life had obeyed the law and served the nation, didn't even have time to see his movements clearly before the car door opened. Su Qing whistled and returned the criminal tools to his pocket. "Get in, we're withdrawing!"

He drove unhurriedly to the main gate and was stopped for inspection. Su Qing wasn't flustered. He only rolled the window down a little and presented an ID through the crack without even showing his face. As Hu Bugui looked on in stupefaction, the guard actually let them by.

Only when they had snuck out of the headquarters he had believed to be tightly guarded with strict security did he feel a faint cold sweat rise on his back. He couldn't resist asking, "What did you give him? Where did it come from?"

Su Qing grinned. "A useful ID. I pinched it on my way to get you."

Hu Bugui hadn't yet had time to leave the frame of mind of the master of headquarters. "I...never thought that headquarters had so many security loopholes."

"There's no wall in the world that doesn't let the air in," Su Qing said, smiling. He raised a hand and rather carelessly put on music. "Should we contact them?"

"There's no rush." Hu Bugui relaxed along with him. He rolled down the window. The wind of the outskirts blew in through the cracked window. He suddenly felt that he didn't seem to be running away. He simply seemed a little like he was going on an outing in the suburbs. Su Qing drove at lightning speed, humming along with the song. Hu Bugui watched him swaying his head, opened up the little notebook and the map from the file pouch, and slowly began to investigate them.

Only when Hu Bugui had basically worked out the story behind the research journal did Su Qing finally stop the car. Wherever this was, the geographical location was rather complex. After turning a corner, they entered a rather irregular-looking auto repair shop.

He very casually drove the car in. Some men at work raised their heads to look at him. A hefty, fierce-looking fellow covered in machine oil, narrowing his eyes, looked their car up and down.

Su Qing rolled down the window and pulled out a handful of bills from his wallet without even looking—as though it wasn't cash he was pulling out but napkins. "A private job. Can you convert it?"

The hefty fellow looked at the car they were in rather fussily—Su Qing had chosen a half-antiquated hatchback, not one of the vehicles they used for going out into the field, quite ordinary from its performance to its external appearance. "This car of yours...won't be easy to deal with. This is the kind of car that's only good for driving through morning and evening rush hour in the city. Trying to compete with this...huh!"

So Hu Bugui understood that this was the sort of illegal, unlicensed car refitting criminal den that the rich kids went to when they wanted to play

with their lives racing cars.

“What the fuck are you babbling about? If it was good to drive, would I have any use for you?” Su Qing rolled his eyes at him, looking every inch a rich kid. “Are you taking the job or not?”

“Well, I *can* take it, actually...”

Su Qing put a cigarette in his mouth and got out of the car, pulled the guy over and talked a lot of this and that, only making the guy’s expression look stranger and stranger as he spoke. After a long moment, he finally put in: “Buddy, what crime did you commit? You’ve been put on a wanted list, no?”

The look in Su Qing’s eyes was somewhat dangerous. His trench coat was deliberately wide open to display one side of a gun holster. The hefty fellow glimpsed it and gulped. Su Qing lowered his voice. “Neither of us has any room to talk. If you dare to take this private job, as none of us are law-abiding citizens, as long as you don’t ask what shouldn’t be asked and do your work well, you’ll be paid what you deserve for it.”

The hefty fellow looked at the cash in his hand and silently considered.

Su Qing clicked his tongue, rolled his eyes, and leaned down to take a small satchel from the car, dropping it right into the man’s arms. The hefty fellow was tall, broad, and savage-looking, but when he opened the satchel, he immediately went from grey wolf to little sheep. Su Qing said, “It’s all cash. Take it as advance payment. If you do well, there’ll be more profits for you.”

The hefty fellow looked at him, then turned his head and beckoned to a group of his subordinates. “There’s work! There’s work!”

Su Qing turned his head and smiled at Hu Bugui. He knocked on the window. “Get out, I’ll take you to get something to eat.”

Picking locks, coming to a criminal den to get a car refitted, booking a room with false IDs—before nightfall, Su Qing had also scared up a computer from somewhere. Hu Bugui was already numb. He felt that he hadn’t done so many illegal things in his life as in this one day.

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THE PHONE RANG three times. It was an unfamiliar number. Su Chengde didn't pick up. After three rings, the caller hung up.

So Su Chengde could relax for today. This was the secret signal Su Qing had arranged. No matter where Su Qing was, no matter what means of contact he had, he would dial this number at 7 AM every day and hang up after three rings. Su Chengde would know that the call came from him; it amounted to reporting that he was safe and sound.

In the end, Su Chengde hadn't been able to entirely work out what it was his wastrel son did. Su Qing had sworn two things up and down. First, that he wasn't doing anything bad. Second, that he would come back alive.

Behind him came the sound of kicking and clattering. Su Chengde turned his head and saw Tu Tutu hugging a big Garfield pillow nearly taller than he was. He ran over wearing pajamas. "Grandpa, grandpa, was that my Imperial Uncle calling?"

The call of "grandpa" made Su Chengde's heart go soft. He opened his arms and picked Tu Tutu up, putting the pudgy child on his knees. Tu Tutu rubbed his head against Su Chengde's shoulder. "When will my Imperial Uncle come back?"

Su Chengde slapped his chubby butt. "What, do you miss him? You don't like living with Grandpa?"

Tu Tutu was much more astute than Su Qing had been at his age. He knew very well how to flatter. He had cut a swath through the RZ Unit headquarters before, taking everyone down. He immediately blinked his big, shining, dark eyes. "Grandpa is good. Yeah...it's much better living with Grandpa than with my Imperial Uncle. Grandpa has a good temper and never gets angry or spanks me, and he buys me tasty snacks. Grandpa is the best."

Su Chengde was over the moon. He immediately thought that compared to Tu Tutu, his own home-abandoning son was nothing.

Tu Tutu observed his expression and continued, “But, still, even though my Imperial Uncle has no patience, and he’s a dictator, it’s been days since I last saw him, so I miss him.”

Moved, Su Chengde thought, Such a young child, and he has so much conscience. Truly a rare treasure. He said, “Tutu, you can be my very own grandson.”

Tu Tutu immediately beamed with joy. “All right, so I’ll have an uncle and a grandpa!”

Su Chengde was getting on in years and was susceptible to melancholy. Seeing the kid’s joyful look, his heart began to sting—the first time Tu Tutu had seen Su Chengde and been asked “Where are your parents?”, he had surreptitiously pinched himself on the thigh, forcing out two tears. Howling, he had begun to cry, “Bad guys killed my mom and dad!”—so Su Chengde had taken him for an unloved little cabbage, doting on him to no end.

Tu Tutu continued to exert himself. He climbed out of Su Chengde’s lap and very properly said, “Grandpa, I’ll go read! My Imperial Uncle stipulates that every day I have to read for two hours, do math problems for two hours, draw for one hour, memorize words for one hour, then...”

As soon as Su Chengde heard this, his eyebrows went up—what? A child barely ten years old, just at the age when he wants to play, and he isn’t even allowed to rest for a moment? What’s the meaning of making him study this and study that? Trying to work the child to death? Why didn’t I push *you* like that when you were little, brat?

So he pulled Tu Tutu back. “We won’t listen to him. It’s Sunday today. Why should you read first thing in the morning? Grandpa doesn’t need you to study so hard. Come on, we’ll go out and play.”

Tu Tutu raised his head pitifully. “But my Imperial Uncle will thrash me...”

“Would he dare? If he dares to thrash you, I’ll thrash him.” This was how Su Qing, out risking life and limb, got shot lying down.

Tu Tutu tearfully said, “Grandpa, you’re so nice.”

Inwardly he thought, Oh, yeah! After all these years, I’ve finally found a solid backer. Our Imperial Presence has made it this far. It’s time to sing the song of the emancipated serfs!

Thousands of miles away, Su Qing and Hu Bugui were just finishing breakfast. A small listening device’s terminal lay on the dining table. The

two of them were listening attentively to Tu Tutu and Su Chengde's dialogue as if it were the morning news. Su Qing, his face turning all colors, gnawed on his chopsticks, making crunching sounds.

A trace of a smile crossed Hu Bugui's face. He didn't want to be too obvious, worried about provoking him. So he lowered his head slightly, pulled open the outside of a jianbing, carefully picked out the green onions that had accidentally gotten mixed in, then pushed it in front of Su Qing. "Eat up. Don't chew your chopsticks."

Su Qing bit off a quarter of the jianbing in one bite and resentfully said, "The little ingrate. When I get back, if I don't beat his ass black and blue, I'll change my surname to his."

Get back—wonderful words.

There were so many things to do after "getting back." He had to go eat Hu Bugui's mom's meat pies, he had to thrash Tu Tutu, he had to figure out how to talk around Hu Bugui's simple and honest parents and his own old-fashioned dad.

Hu Bugui's gaze fell on a morning paper. His eyes flashed. The man on the front page was in his fifties, but he didn't look elderly at all. His eyes were bright. Facing the camera, he had a natural composed ease. Three whole pages were dedicated to praising this Dr. Zheng.

"There are a few things we have to do now," Hu Bugui said. "First of all we have to work out what this 'sleeping sickness' is, find an effective means of blocking the explosions, and get materials from Utopia. If we act rashly without knowing what cards they have in their hands, I'm afraid that the first to come for us won't be Zheng Qinghua, it'll be..."

His words paused. He didn't continue. Su Qing nodded, indicating that he understood.

"That's our primary goal. The corresponding secondary goal is to get a trustworthy technological and medical staff."

"And the tertiary goal is to work out who it was who showed Cheng Ge that drawing and used me to get rid of Xu Ruchong." Su Qing finished off breakfast in a few bites and wiped his mouth.

Hu Bugui pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. "I really can't think of who it could be..."

"I'm afraid there's no good in thinking." Su Qing paused. "I also can't think of who it could be. Whenever I think of anyone, I can't resist moving

on, as if it would be wronging them to keep considering it. It would be for the best if we could...make this person show themselves.”

“So we first need a big enough lure,” Hu Bugui picked up. “How much longer do you think we have?”

Su Qing shook his head. “Zheng Qinghua and the person behind him aren’t idiots. They can stand firm now because they’ve hijacked all of humanity with the sole bargaining chip of the ‘sleeping sickness.’ That’s too weak. Anyone with a brain knows that even if we’re a step behind, it isn’t as though we don’t have technicians and medical experts. So they’re sure to find a more...”

His speech paused. He frowned as though annoyed with himself for coming to a loose end. He continued, “...indiscriminate means of consolidating their own legitimate position—or else to turn themselves into the law.”

Even across the narrow table, at an extremely close distance, Su Qing’s features were still flawless. Hu Bugui suddenly thought that his frown was very offensive to the eye, so he couldn’t resist reaching out his finger to tap the center of his brow, gently smoothing. “Don’t frown.”

Su Qing grabbed his finger, brought it to his lips, and licked it. The fingers are linked to the heart. Hu Bugui instantly felt that his heart had been electrocuted. He shuddered faintly. Su Qing provokingly asked, “Got goosebumps?”

Hu Bugui nodded silently.

“Then could I ask you not to be so romantic? I’ve also got goosebumps.” Su Qing, having used sex to respond to romance, let go of his hand, stood up, picked up his coat, and draped it over himself. “I’ll go pick up the car.”

Hu Bugui watched his retreating figure and silently thought, My goosebumps didn’t come from being sickened. They’re obviously of a different sort.

Two hours later, Su Qing brought the car back. Hu Bugui had already settled the account and packed up their stuff. They hopped on to the next place at once. Su Qing cut up the used fake IDs and got rid of them, then got two new ones from somewhere. Hu Bugui glanced into the backseat and found that the space under the seat was crammed full of weapons. He couldn’t resist asking, “Where did you get that?”

“Smuggling,” Su Qing said, not turning a hair. Seeing that the expression on Hu Bugui’s face was peculiar, he added, “Time is tight, I couldn’t get

anything very high-grade. First we'll use these things to get by for a while. When everyone's assembled, I'll scare up some more proper things for you all."

Hu Bugui silently turned his head away and thought that when he had used General Xiong's momentum to force Su Qing to stay at the RZ Unit, it had really been a waste of his talents.

Ten hours later, the two of them arrived at the first stop on their path in exile—General Xiong had noted it on the map as the former location of the Utopia Project.

At a certain distance from the former Utopia location, Su Qing picked up a pair of binoculars and looked for a while, then passed them to Hu Bugui. "Zheng Qinghua moves pretty fast. There are already people there."

"As expected." Hu Bugui looked for a while. "We'll go according to plan. Be careful."

Su Qing laughed. "You're the one who should be careful."

The former Utopia location currently still had sentry posts. The outermost sentry saw what seemed to be a freight-hauling truck driving towards them. He wasn't very vigilant. Though this place was out of the way, there were still some trucks passing by every day.

But as this truck drove closer, the sentry couldn't resist getting a little nervous. He raised his gun slightly, making a gesture of preparing to aim. Just then, a car suddenly came out of nowhere and crashed right into the truck. Neither vehicle was moving slowly. The scene of the crash instantly became a tragedy.

The sentry couldn't resist opening his mouth, looking blankly at the truck's front windshield shattered all over the ground. He didn't know whether the person inside had been flattened.

He reached out a hand to feel for his communicator. "0152 at Gate 1, reporting..." Right now, his eyes were still glued to the crash site. For some reason, his vision suddenly went dark, and he fell straight down.

A hand quickly caught him and pulled him aside without anyone being the wiser.

Someone answered from the communicator: "0152, please continue. What's wrong?"

A man with his cap brim pulled very low changed into the sentry's clothes. Meanwhile, he pinched the communicator, opened his mouth, and spoke in a voice exactly the same as the sentry's. In a slightly urgent tone, he said, "There's been an accident fifty to a hundred meters from Gate 1. Requesting support."

AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM ran out from inside at once. As soon as they came out of the gate, their eyes were drawn by the very striking crash site. In well-trained fashion, the small team inspected the scene, put out the fire, and checked the vehicles. Meanwhile, “0152,” who had originally been guarding the gate with his cap brim pulled a little low, at some point went missing.

In less than five minutes, the scene had been completely cleared. Someone pulled open the car door and quickly felt around inside, then suddenly sensed that something was off and called out, “No, this is wrong, there’s no one in...” Before the “side” could leave his mouth, his expression suddenly froze. He pitched forward and lay unmoving.

The person closest to him froze. Then his eyes suddenly opened wide, and he raised a communicator. “There’s...”

Again, he had only gotten one word out when a bullet came out of nowhere and passed precisely through his head. Before this person could fall, the third bullet came out of thin air, this time hitting the car’s fuel tank. There was an enormous sound. An explosion took place at the crash site. The people on the perimeter who hadn’t worked out what was going on stepped back. While they were stepping back, Hu Bugui shot three times in a row. The remaining three people also went down.

It turned out that when he got to work, Hu Bugui was no slower than the legendary sniper 11235.

Just then, a Utopia member who seemed to have heard the explosion and come out to see what was happening came out of the gate. He immediately saw his companions, who had become horizontal within a few minutes. He was startled. His reaction wasn’t slow, immediately taking a big step back. A bullet brushed past the bridge of his nose and hit the wall, nearly bursting his head in one shot. This person broke out in cold sweat on the spot. His

face turned white. He took three steps back in a row and loudly said, “There’s a sniper, someone’s breaking...”

Then he was shot in the leg and fell forward onto the ground. Next, a shadow fell on him. The Utopia member raised his head in alarm and saw a black gun muzzle. Before another word could leave his mouth, his head turned into a burst watermelon.

Hu Bugui had sunglasses on and wore the casual clothes that Su Qing had scared up from somewhere—a jacket on the outside and a solid black tank top underneath. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing the lines of hard, stylish muscles. He had a machine gun on his back and another in his hands, as well as a pair of handguns at his waist. He looked like an arms dealer, really something like an antisocial insurrectionist.

With the boldness that comes of great skill, he openly jumped off the wall. He knew that the more of a fuss he made over here, the better. That was how he could draw the other side’s attention and let Su Qing succeed in getting what they had come for.

Since the Utopia Project had been banned, the majority of the materials concerning it had been destroyed and the old base sealed. No one had been permitted to enter for many years. Su Qing and Hu Bugui had run the risk of coming here for one thing—Zheng Wan’s body.

After Zheng Wan’s suicide, it was said that her body hadn’t been buried. Instead, it had been preserved through special anti-rotting means by Zheng Qinghua and later deposited in the basement with three layers of protective locks around it. Supposedly, unless you blew up the basement, you wouldn’t be able to get in.

Zheng Wan’s body had undergone round upon round of examination by forensic experts who would have loved nothing better than to put each of her cells under a microscope and inspect it. There was nothing the matter with it. It seemed that Zheng Qinghua had gone to all this trouble to preserve her body only for the sake of sentiment—if he had such a thing as sentiment.

For many years, the old base had been forbidden territory. Now that Utopia had at last been restored to legitimacy, Zheng Qinghua had expressed his regrets in the papers that the last research project had fallen through “for certain particular reasons,” and he had taken over the research project’s old base at the first opportunity.

When Su Qing had taken down the first sentry, he had seen the Utopia logo on his sleeve.

Utopia had gone public. They had an unknown number of secret bases, hidden all over the world, with all kinds of equipment. So why were they interested in this old base that had been abandoned for many years, where all the materials had been destroyed?

Su Qing and Hu Bugui had simultaneously thought that someone like Zheng Qinghua, who was so busy conquering the world, wouldn't have time to indulge in nostalgia when the situation was still unstable.

So the only thing left in this base was Zheng Wan's body. Their "fishing plan" would begin with this mysterious grey seal's corpse.

Hu Bugui kicked aside the body of the person he had shot dead, then turned and walked around a corner. The miserable devil Su Qing had knocked out and stripped hadn't woken up yet. Hu Bugui shot him in the head without hesitation. Then he heard urgent footsteps coming. He took two steps forward, pulled the body inside, and hid with it in a corner, his fingers reloading the gun in his hands with extreme steadiness.

Su Qing, who had come to this profession late in life, still didn't dare to casually kill people. It wasn't that he was irresolute or hesitant. It was just that unless he was forced to the extreme of it's you or me, then it instinctively wouldn't occur to him to kill.

Hu Bugui was much more straightforward than him. He was a professional soldier. He had served in the armed police and been assigned to the special forces for his outstanding performance. He had fought drug traffickers at the border and hunted multinational spies. Then he had once again been reassigned to the RZ Unit and crossed swords more than once with blue seals.

For him, during the performance of a task, there were only two types of people: those who had to be protected, and enemies.

Hu Bugui adjusted his breathing so it was neither hurried nor slow. When he glimpsed the first person out of the corner of his eye, he resolutely raised his gun and shot, hitting right in the forehead. The person fell back without making a sound. While the second person, nervously holding up a gun, was wildly pointing this way and that, he had already switched to the other side following his planned retreat. Then he got out a hand grenade.

The moment he tossed it, he quickly jumped up, curling himself up as small as possible.

Gunshots immediately sounded behind him. Hu Bugui threw himself forward, nimbly rolling away, silently counting—three, two, one.

An explosion. There was clamor behind him. He didn't look back, charging in according to what he remembered of the map General Xiong had given him.

Compared to his hair-raising experience, Su Qing was having a much easier time. Wearing Utopia clothes, impersonating someone else, he walked around inside easy and carefree. Occasionally he even stopped and properly said hi to others—if someone had looked at him now, they would have found that Su Qing's face had altered. His cheekbones had become much wider, his chin had changed shape, his eyes had become twice as small, and something had been stuck to his nostrils, making them considerably wider. He had applied special powder that even made the bridge of his nose look like it had sunk considerably.

He had carried out all of these actions while the others had been distracted by the crash site. It had been accomplished practically within ten steps, natural and flowing.

But it was still only enough to say hi from afar, using people's wrong first impressions to fool his way in. He would still be seen through close up.

He wasn't worried at all—three years ago, Su Qing had already understood the mode of interaction between Utopia personnel.

Between them there was both tacit understanding and indifference, like a group of collectively brainwashed robots. After their code had been written, they unfailingly carried out their assignments. There was little communication between them. Without any unusual circumstances that needed to be dealt with, even if they ran into each other, they would only nod at each other from afar.

He encountered practically no obstacles sneaking in.

But after about two minutes, Su Qing found that the atmosphere was getting strained. From the communicator's earpiece came the flat, mechanical voice of the dispatcher giving orders. The personnel inside began to converge in one direction.

He knew that this was Hu Bugui's doing. Just then, a man who was directing others to go forward suddenly noticed Su Qing. Pointing at him, he

asked, “0152, why have you left your post?”

Su Qing brought out 0152’s voice. Deliberately speaking quietly, he said, “I have a special circumstance to report.”

He spoke too quietly. The man couldn’t hear him clearly. He took two steps forward. “What did you say?”

Su Qing displayed some timely urgency on his face. “It’s like this, I just saw...”

Just then, the man got close enough to him. Close enough to see that he wasn’t 0152 at all.

But it was too late. He felt his body go numb and fell down limp with his eyes wide open. He knew nothing more. Su Qing propped up his shoulders in a natural way. Holding him up, he leaned close to his ear as though saying something to him. In the gap between two teams of people running by, he dragged the man away.

In under thirty seconds, “0152” was gone. A squad captain with the serial number “036,” dressed in Utopia clothes, walked out as though nothing had happened. He seemed to have some urgent business. Not looking around, he hurriedly walked inward against the current of people.

MANY YEARS AGO, when Su Qing had had no sense of direction, he had gone traveling with his parents. Sometimes he would look down and let his mind wander for a moment, then find that he didn't know where he had gotten to. Each time he would squat in a corner, waiting for someone to come claim him.

In B City, leaving the neighborhood where his house was, he had been unable to find his way around. So he had come up with a reason why he couldn't learn high school solid geometry—his sense of direction and spatial awareness were too poor. He was just born that way. There was nothing to be done.

But later, he had been forced by circumstances and had unexpectedly become a human GPS—any time and any place, he could accurately reckon his location and direction. When he walked a path, it would automatically turn into a map stored in his mind. Next time, he could walk it even with his eyes closed. He had some understanding of all forms of terrain and building complexes. Even in an unfamiliar little alley, he wouldn't easily get lost upon stepping in. Whenever he arrived somewhere, he could become a local power with the greatest speed.

In the future, even if he couldn't make it in his current profession, with this skill added to his glib tongue, he would still be able to get by as a tour guide. He really had been forced to go all out.

As soon as he had walked into the interior of the old base, combined with having seen General Xiong's map, he had already more or less had his bearings. Su Qing took only a glance and knew that all the Utopia bases they had gone to later had been built according to this pattern.

As he planned his route, he walked forward without a sideways glance. Inside the base, alarms rang more and more fiercely. But Su Qing's footsteps weren't at all uneasy.

More and more people passed by Su Qing, pouring outwards. Though outside there was only Hu Bugui by himself, he knew how to follow through. Before doing something, he wouldn't overlook any cautious preparations, but as soon as he acted, there was no sense in being half-hearted. Neither worried how the other was doing. Doing your own business well and getting out alive was victory.

Suddenly, Su Qing's steps paused slightly. He calmly took half a step aside to make way, avoiding the line of sight of a woman heading towards him—it was Jiang Lan.

Enemies truly were destined to meet.

He frowned. Compared to the last time he had seen her, Jiang Lan seemed to have gained some weight, but her face wasn't looking good at all. Her originally pitch-black glossy hair was looking a little dry and yellowed, loosely tied, actually giving this bizarrely powerful psycho tomboy something of a demure air.

Jiang Lan wasn't carrying her signature handgun. She was only standing in a corner with a jacket with the Utopia logo embroidered on it draped over her shoulders, arms crossed over her chest, thoughtfully looking outside.

Everyone was coming and going in a hurry. Su Qing couldn't stop where he was. He hesitated for a moment, then walked on as though nothing were the matter, boldly brushing shoulders with Jiang Lan.

The woman's faint body odor came to his oversensitive nose. Su Qing knew that he couldn't be nervous. Jiang Lan wasn't an ordinary person. She was a blue seal. At such a close distance, she would even be able to notice a change in his heart rate. Then he saw Jiang Lan slightly turn her head in his direction. Su Qing raised his hand, his fingers brushing the spot at his waist where a gun was hidden.

Jiang Lan seemed to sense something. She looked around the crowd of people passing by her, didn't see any clues, then somewhat doubtfully turned her head again. Su Qing's raised hand seemed never to have stopped at all. It brushed past the gun and went up, very naturally straightening his cap.

Then he saw the famous mysterious underground area. Very good, there were eighteen guards standing at the door. If he couldn't get around them without anyone knowing, he would have to do some fixing up.

Su Qing took a deep breath and dodged into some nook. In a moment, he had changed his face, put on casual clothes, somehow managed to get himself covered in blood, messed up his hair, and put a pair of glasses on his nose. The glasses were broken on one side. He held an old handgun with only two bullets left in it... The face, however you looked at it, rather resembled the RZ Unit's rogue doctor Lu Qingbai.

As soon as he made an appearance in this form, he immediately drew a strong reaction from his spectators—eighteen black gun muzzles simultaneously took aim at him.

Su Qing slowly raised his hands, pointing the mouth of his worn-out gun heavenward. Then, as though he had thrown out his back, he squatted down extremely slowly, then put the gun on the ground.

The two guards standing at the very front exchanged a look. One walked over, and the other kept his gun aimed at Su Qing, providing cover for his companion. After confirming that there was no danger, he kicked the gun away and picked Su Qing up off the ground and searched him roughly.

Su Qing breathed violently a few times. His lips were even shaking, as though he had been terrified. His eyes spun very quickly. Cold sweat appeared in layer after layer on his forehead as the guard's gun brushed against him. Using an alarmed voice of altered pitch, he said, "I...I want to see Dr. Zheng, I have very important business with him!"

He seemed not quite able to catch his breath. If someone had put a hand on him now, they would have found that he was constantly trembling all over. The guard searching him felt him over from head to toe without finding any dangerous articles, then looked at his companion. He asked, "Who are you?"

"My...my name..." Su Qing's throat bobbed visibly. "My name is Lu Qingbai, my credentials are in...my left-hand shirt pocket. You can take a look...take a look."

Actually, it wasn't only Lu Qingbai. Su Qing had a bit of a habit of storing up fake IDs. Anyone who was reasonably familiar to him was unfortunately entered into this stash of his that didn't see the light of day. The more familiar, the more there were—for example, he had several fake IDs for Captain Hu. He could take one of these realistic things out any time and walk out the door to do a bit of something inharmonious and illegal.

His disguise conceived on the fly wasn't at all perfect. Someone who wasn't familiar with the original might not be able to tell the difference when comparing against a seriously distorted ID photo, but an acquaintance would have seen at a glance that he was a knockoff.

Su Qing had gambled on the fact that Lu Qingbai wasn't the traitor—if both their technological and medical staff had been in the other side's hands, then that really would have been hilarious. Everyone would long ago have gone home, gotten cleaned up, then lain down and died.

The guard took the ID out of his shirt pocket. Seeing the "RZ Unit" printed on it, his expression altered at once. He kicked the back of Su Qing's knee and watched him fall forward without any means of resistance. Then he put his gun to Su Qing's temple. "You'd better not be playing any tricks."

Su Qing pushed up the crooked and half-broken glasses. The broken lens made a small cut on his cheek. The blood flowed from his cheek down to his chin. His face looked mottled with bruises and half covered in dirt. The original color of his skin was simply invisible. His body wasn't moving at all, but the veins in his forehead were pulsing. "Can't you read? I'm only logistical technical staff! Technical staff!"

His chest went up and down fiercely. He looked like he was putting on a show of bravery while terrified inside. Hoarsely, he continued, "A friend got me in here, I can't tell you who it is. They wanted to take me directly to see Dr. Zheng, but there were suddenly...suddenly gunshots outside... ahem..."

He raised a trembling hand and gripped the gun pointing at his head. "I'm telling you, I have very important business with Dr. Zheng. Do you want to be responsible for holding up important matters?"

Though this young man in glasses was in a sorry state, his hand clutching the gun shaking like a stalk of wheat, when he said these words, there was something unexpectedly strange and fierce in his eyes that made the guard sway in spite of himself.

Su Qing frowned inwardly. He knew that he was rushing a little, but with matters at this stage, he had to fight a quick battle. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the other guards all focused on him, calculating how well he would be able to charge out of here if he was seen through.

Just then, a female voice suddenly came from behind him. It gloomily said, "Let him go. I was the one who brought him in."

Su Qing stared, his spine stiffening imperceptibly. He recognized this voice. It was Jiang Lan. Evidently Jiang Lan's words still held some power. The guards surrounding Su Qing simultaneously stepped back. Su Qing lowered his head slightly, avoiding Jiang Lan's eyes, and totteringly got to his feet. He took a step forward and deliberately stumbled, seeming so scared he couldn't even get his footing.

Fortunately, Jiang Lan only took one look at him, then flashed her own credentials. She took Su Qing by the shoulder and briefly said, "Let us pass."

The guards didn't dare to stop her. They turned and made a passage to let the two of them in. Jiang Lan's seemingly soft and slender hand was like a vice, firmly gripping Su Qing's shoulder as though about to embed itself in his bones. Su Qing couldn't help frowning, but he didn't dare to avoid it. He didn't know what this psycho woman was thinking.

Come to think of it, it was a strange thing. Utopia's research had produced many blue seals, including the already dead Chen Lin, that abandoned lunatic Hu Bugui and the others had caught, and Gui Song, who had mysteriously died at the heart of the explosion. They all seemed like cheap experiments that could be discarded at will. It made Su Qing not quite able to work out the relationship between the blue seals and Utopia. But when he had seen Shi Huizhang and Jiang Lan last time, he had sensed that there was a class problem among the blue seals.

Even Shi Huizhang had had to give way to Jiang Lan to some extent, and now she could approach the very heart of the base without any obstruction.

This tigress was a blue seal. Su Qing calculated, how could he get her...

Jiang Lan, holding onto him, walked faster and faster. Su Qing noticed that she was avoiding the surveillance installations. Fortunately, this base had been constructed a very long time ago. The surveillance installations weren't very complete. When they came to an abandoned building, Jiang Lan suddenly pushed him into a corner. Su Qing stumbled two steps and stood firm, his back lightly pressed to the wall, silently looking at the woman in front of him with none of the discomfort he had shown before.

Jiang Lan lowered her voice, but her tone was urgent. "Who are you?"

Su Qing relaxed his shoulders and laughed softly. The broken glasses on his nose slid down. “Miss Jiang, weren’t you the one who brought me in? How can you not know who I am?”

Jiang Lan stared at him without blinking. Her appearance had changed considerably. Only those eyes were the same as before. Su Qing had once despised that look in her eyes most of all. He thought that there was a kind of beastliness in her eyes, like a spotted leopard. It was blunt and powerfully aggressive, with a kind of indifference that seemed to come from the jungle. She didn’t see human lives as lives and did whatever she pleased.

But now he suddenly found that Jiang Lan wasn’t actually all that frightening a person. She really was a beast. But however powerful a beast was, couldn’t humans still put it in a zoo?

“You said you’re with the RZ Unit.” Jiang Lan’s eyes were fixed on the half-exposed credentials hanging off his collar.

Su Qing raised his eyebrows and unhurriedly said, “What, do you want to check my credentials?”

“What did you come here for?”

Su Qing became less and less nervous, because he had found that this woman he had felt rage and terror towards didn’t have a very quick mind. She asked her questions so directly. So he smiled widely and perfunctorily said, “Our superiors have frozen all the RZ Unit’s activities. I’m still young. Naturally I have to consider my future. Don’t you think so, Miss Jiang?”

Jiang Lan stared.

But Su Qing narrowed his eyes slightly. “On the other hand, why would *you* so indiscriminately bring an unknown individual into...such an important area of your base?”

Jiang Lan instantly raised her head, staring at him ferociously.

Su Qing lowered his voice even further, almost whispering. “If I have the opportunity, do you think that I need to consult with Dr. Zheng...”

Before he had finished saying this, Jiang Lan’s fingers flashed out like a knife, stabbing towards his underbelly. Su Qing dodged and saw her fingers leave fine lines on the wall—it looked like she had meant to disembowel him.

The two of them began to fight within a tiny range. The space was limited, and neither of them dared to make noise. It was like they were putting on a pantomime. It was a rather intense back and forth. Jiang Lan quickly

grabbed Su Qing by the shoulder, her sharp nails cutting into his flesh like knives. Su Qing turned and aimed a kick at her underbelly.

Just then, Jiang Lan took a very big step back, carefully guarding her underbelly, glaring at him vigilantly.

After staring blankly, Su Qing's gaze followed her tightly clutched hands and fell on her underbelly. After a moment, a meaningful roguish expression appeared on his face.

"Oh," he said quietly, "I think I understand a little. What, Miss Jiang, are you bringing in outside aid so urgently because you've recently encountered a little problem?"

Jiang Lan bit her lip.

Su Qing thought that after so many years of vice, the god of moral character had at last recalled that there had once been a pious version of himself who had spent all day worshipping Chun-ge³⁵. He considered for a while, then took a tissue from his pocket and wiped his face. The bruises, like dirt on his face, were all rubbed off. Then he removed something from the corners of his eyes, and his eyes, pulled long and narrow, resumed their original appearance.

Jiang Lan stared dumbfounded at the person who had changed in front of her eyes...and the person he had changed into was someone she knew. She couldn't resist raising a hand and covering her mouth.

"You..." she said. "It's you?"

Su Qing saw her expression that looked as if she had seen a ghost and thought in some satisfaction, Oh, how times fucking change!

But time was tight. He didn't have time to play around scaring her. He only threw down what he was holding and quietly and succinctly said to Jiang Lan: "Take me in to see Zheng Wan's body. After that, I can listen to your request."

Jiang Lan stared. "Zheng Wan?"

"That precious body your old sugar daddy Zheng is hiding in the basement." Su Qing turned and listened. He found that the gunshots in the distance seemed to have weakened and couldn't resist starting to worry. Rapidly, he said, "Zheng Qinghua must have been here. I'm asking you, did he take Zheng Wan's body away?"

“That woman’s body can’t be moved,” Jiang Lan said. “It’s still in the basement, but the basement is forbidden, I can’t just...”

—As expected. It was no wonder that Zheng Wan’s body had been sealed up all these years.

“Take me as far as you can. The rest doesn’t concern you.”

Jiang Lan clenched her teeth. “Can you guarantee...”

Su Qing laughed grimly. “You’re welcome not to agree.”

This sentence choked Jiang Lan. She looked at this man and thought that she didn’t recognize him anymore. Many years had passed. It was very hard for her to recall how that young man shaking with fear in the grey house had looked. She only vaguely remembered his attractive features that made people passing him in the street want to have another look at him. But inside he had been a useless pretty boy who couldn’t do anything and was afraid of everything he saw.

But now, Su Qing was dressed in rags, covered in blood and dirt, with an already dry little cut on his cheek. Looking closely...this was still the same person, but it was as if his inner core had changed. He was powerful, composed, even...a little frightening.

“Come with me.” At last, Jiang Lan clenched her teeth, turned, and ran in a certain direction.

Blue seals moved extremely fast. It was very hard for the old base’s ordinary surveillance installations to catch their figures. Following her, Su Qing even felt he was having some difficulty.

Jiang Lan was moving through a little path in the abandoned building. She turned and ducked into a half-closed door, then approached the elevator, sticking to the wall. She pried open the doors, jumped, and grabbed the cables. She climbed two lengths down and looked back to ask Su Qing, “Are you up for it?”

Su Qing laughed derisively and nimbly climbed onto the cable. The two of them climbed to the third underground floor like monkeys. When they landed, they hardly made a sound.

Jiang Lan said, “The first underground floor’s alarm system is very complete. You can’t charge in. But now it’s different. There are some researchers down here. They have IDs that can open the barrier. If you can get one of them, you can go in. I’ll wait for you here. If you can get out, I’ll take you back up.”

Su Qing looked at her and curved his eyes in a smile. “Thank you.” Then he jumped down.

Three minutes later, a “researcher” with a slightly stiff expression unlocked the third underground floor’s barrier. An enormous movement of mechanical springs sounded in his ears. Layer after layer of metal door pulled open in turn. He raised a foot and walked in, but when his foot touched the floor, it didn’t make any sound.

TO THE VERY END, General Xiong hadn't mentioned what was actually in this abandoned, never opened basement, nor why, after so many years, there had never been an order to thoroughly destroy it or force it open. Su Qing figured that he himself likely hadn't known.

When he walked into the basement, the very first thing he saw was a hall. In the center of the hall was a woman. She seemed very young, wearing only a wide white nightgown that revealed half of a grey seal stamped on her collarbone.

This was Zheng Wan.

Su Qing frowned, but he didn't immediately go over. He cautiously took out the pocket watch Chang Dou had made for them. Before he could bring out the energy detector inside it, Su Qing went blank—he had found that in this place, the watch's hands ran backwards.

In that instant, Su Qing suspected that he had picked up the pocket watch the wrong way around. Considering that the pocket watch Chang Dou had given him was truly too round, he carefully checked the markings and rubbed his eyes. There was no mistake. The watch hands were running backwards.

Had Chang Dou messed something up? Su Qing quickly got out his phone. The phone had a digital clock on it. When he opened it up, he found that the phone's screen had gone black. It didn't show anything.

Suddenly, Su Qing couldn't keep his composure. A horrifying feeling climbed up his spine. This fear was hard to describe. He abruptly had the impression that he was no longer in the world but alone in some bizarre crevice. Time and space seemed to have abandoned him. All people and all time had gone away from him.

Standing outside the time pool, everything was moving forward, while the place he was in was lying in waste... That kind of feeling.

This hall was too tranquil. There was only a monotonous *tick-tock* sound. Su Qing suddenly raised his head and saw an enormous clock suspended from the ceiling. Even the most slender second hand was a foot wide. Each of its movements seemed extremely heavy, with an aged odor of decay—the strangest thing was that this big clock was also running backwards.

Su Qing took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He gently bit the tip of his tongue and pulled out the energy detector from the pocket watch. But an even stranger thing happened. As he looked on, the needle on the indicator slowly began to move—in the negative direction.

Negative energy—what was that?

Next to the platform was a thick stack of research materials. Su Qing flipped through them, then stared. He found that they were full of equations he didn't understand, densely packed. There were also occasional annotations in a mixture of some language he didn't know and Chinese, as well as numbers and letters. The things in this hall had already completely surpassed the scope of his personal knowledge.

There's no time to sigh about not having applied myself more. I can't stay here long—this was the only thought that came up in his brain. In reality, his instinct to seek advantage and avoid harm was already urging him outwards. Zheng Wan's body was laid out flat on a platform. The body was unbelievably well-preserved. Not even the flush in her face had receded. Looking at her, Su Qing practically had the impression that she was about to sit up.

There were four indicator lights near the platform, lighting up in turn. The antiquated little signs under them were numbered one through four. Su Qing cautiously went around the bed, holding the energy detector. The energy detector still gave him no reaction. The indicator needle frustratingly and cheerfully turned backwards at a uniform speed, circle after circle.

In complete exasperation, Su Qing closed the pocket watch. He stood there for a moment and thought. Then he clenched his teeth and extended a hand. Through his gloves, he extremely cautiously touched Zheng Wan. Nothing happened. Then he got up his nerve and pushed her by the shoulder, turning her over. Only then did Su Qing see that Zheng Wan's back was entirely bare. There was an enormous grey tattoo on it, an incomprehensible design that made all the hair on the back of his neck stand up. This grey tattoo was like a living person's grey seal—it was moving!

The instant that part of Zheng Wan's body left the platform, two lights suddenly went out. Su Qing was alarmed, but it was already too late. A mechanical female voice sounded: "Time link has been forcefully severed—time link has been forcefully severed—"

At the same time, the main door he had opened began to close slowly.

Su Qing decisively snapped a few pictures, stuffed the thick stack of research materials into his clothes, took a look at Zheng Wan's body, then yanked, breaking off the link between two of the lights by the bed and tying it onto Zheng Wan.

Zheng Wan wasn't short. Though she was a woman, she still weighed over a hundred pounds. Luckily the double core energy crystal system didn't let him down at the critical moment. Su Qing put her over his shoulder as though lifting a sack. Carrying this woman's corpse that seemed like a living person, he had no time to be cautious or panicked. Before the main door could close, he ran over in a scramble, nearly getting a foot pinched off on the way. The sheet-like gown on Zheng Wan's body ripped, a length of it tearing. From a female corpse she turned into an exposed female corpse.

Hurried footsteps sounded at once. Su Qing was just standing at an intersection. Focusing, he clung to the wall, sweat slowly coming up on his temples. Zheng Wan's body's hands and feet were constantly hitting him as he moved, the sharp chin knocking against his shoulder like an awl. The poking was actually pretty painful.

Not good, he thought. The footsteps were coming from two directions, catching him between them.

Just then, a skylight opened over his head. Jiang Lan reached down a hand from above. "Hurry, get up!"

Without any hesitation, Su Qing launched off the opposite wall, jumped up high, caught her hand, and hung in the air three or four meters up. He was also carrying a person on his back, but the woman still yanked him up with one hand. The moment Jiang Lan lowered the little window, the first patrolman reached the place where Su Qing had been standing.

The space above was very narrow. The two people and one corpse were crowded together. Zheng Wan's body unavoidably brushed against Jiang Lan. Jiang Lan's eyes opened wide. She was almost face to face with this rosy, blushing corpse. Her fingers rather nervily clutched Su Qing's sleeve.

She laboriously raised her hand and pointed at Zheng Wan, then pointed at Su Qing. There was shock on her face.

Su Qing was tense. He slapped away her fingers.

After a moment, the crisis passed, and Jiang Lan gently opened the cover of the skylight. Softly, she said, "Come with me. Be careful, don't make a sound."

With a traitor like this helping him, Su Qing's journey out was frightening but not dangerous. Jiang Lan took him all the way to the place where he had arranged to meet with Hu Bugui. There was a hidden car waiting there.

First Su Qing let out a sigh of relief. Just then, a human figure came hurtling over. He pulled Su Qing behind himself. Then came the sound of a bullet entering the chamber. It was as if Hu Bugui had suddenly come charging out having yet to shed his murderous aura. This made something of a difference from his usual appearance, which was severe but always made people feel that he was harmless. At the same time, the muzzle of his gun was already pointing at Jiang Lan's chest.

Jiang Lan didn't move, only slowly raised her empty hands.

Hu Bugui coldly asked, "What is she doing here?"

Su Qing gave a dry cough, put down the body he was carrying and got a better grip on it, then tugged at Hu Bugui. "She brought me out. I made a bit too much of a fuss. It isn't safe here. Let's go. I'll explain in the car."

Hu Bugui's gaze swept over Jiang Lan's face like a knife. He still had his back to Su Qing, but his voice was no longer as stiff. He quietly said, "You drive."

Su Qing put Zheng Wan's body away and drove the car over. Only then did Hu Bugui raise his chin towards Jiang Lan and briefly order, "Get in."

Then, as though strictly watching her every move, he got into the car after her. Though he lowered the muzzle of his gun, his finger remained on the trigger.

Su Qing quickly drove out along their pre-planned route of retreat. Only when they figured that they were pretty much safe did Hu Bugui quietly question Jiang Lan: "What's your goal? Talk."

Su Qing looked in the rearview mirror and saw Jiang Lan press her hands to her underbelly. But she didn't look at Hu Bugui. Her gaze met his

in the rearview mirror. “You promised me that if I helped you get that thing, you would let me get what I wanted.”

Su Qing smiled slyly. “Well, now, that will depend on what you want.”

Once out of the trap, his scoundrel’s aura once again showed its head.

Jiang Lan bit her lip. “Don’t worry, I don’t have any excessive requests. I just wanted to borrow your strength to...escape from there, so I could give birth to this child. After, I don’t care whether I live or die.”

“Child?” Hu Bugui stared, glancing at Su Qing.

“Does the child’s father agree?” Su Qing asked.

Jiang Lan’s voice was a little sharp. “This child has no relationship to anyone else.”

Hu Bugui suddenly frowned. “This child...was it of your own free will?”

Red suddenly emerged on the rims of Jiang Lan’s eyes, but she was silent. Hu Bugui understood. But Su Qing couldn’t resist asking, “This child of yours...when it’s born, will it be an ordinary person, or a blue seal?”

Jiang Lan laughed grimly. “That’s what Zheng Qinghua wants to know, too.”

Perhaps to this Dr. Zheng, the whole world—including himself—could be experiments. Hu Bugui’s fingers holding the machine gun slowly relaxed. After a moment, he asked, “The kid’s father is also a blue seal?”

Jiang Lan nodded slowly. She suddenly leaned forward, put her elbows on her knees, and covered her face with her hands. After a long moment, when the redness around her eyes had receded a little, Jiang Lan took a deep breath and raised her head again. “Blue seals have a flaw. I think you must already know that. But apart from that, we also have another problem. It’s especially hard for blue seals to become pregnant.”

Neither Hu Bugui nor Su Qing interrupted her. They listened without saying a word.

Jiang Lan continued: “Chen Lin was right. Blue seals aren’t natural. We have to pay for all the power we use. This might be one price. Zheng Qinghua’s research came to a point where all the females of the right age among the blue seals were forced by him to...go through the process, but up to this point, I’ve been the only successful case.”

“How long?” Hu Bugui asked quietly.

“A little more than three months,” Jiang Lan said. Her own figure was very thin, and the clothes she was wearing were wide. It wasn’t very obvious.

“Scans already show that the child is different from an ordinary embryo. I heard them say that it seems that...there’s an eighty-percent chance the child will be born a blue seal.”

“So you’re an endangered species now?” Su Qing glanced at her.

Jiang Lan laughed grimly. “That’s right. So Zheng Qinghua has to take me along wherever he goes. You could say you’ve had good luck. He’s been hanging around the old base lately. Today he went out for an interview.”

Su Qing couldn’t resist asking, “That woman... What is she?”

Jiang Lan shook her head. “I don’t know, either. I didn’t even know that there was a woman’s body in the basement. Aside from a few mysterious technicians who are always on the third underground floor, no one knew what was inside.”

Su Qing was silent for a moment. Then he briefly described what he had seen in that enormous basement room. Hu Bugui brought over Zheng Wan’s body. “Are you certain that the thing on her back was moving?”

Su Qing stared. He heard Hu Bugui say, “It’s stopped now.”

That night, Lu Qingbai became the first of the RZ Unit’s core members to be contacted.

The person who contacted him was Su Qing. After understanding his precise location, he very meticulously told him step by step what to do, where to get in a car, where to change cars, even where to jump out of the car, and how to get in contact at each point.

Lu Qingbai had never in his life experienced such a stimulating journey. For some reason, he heard a particular caution in Su Qing’s voice. It was different from Hu Bugui’s confident “the authorities don’t want to touch the RZ Unit.”

He didn’t dare to put a foot out of place. He followed the itinerary almost precisely to the second. He had only walked a few steps on his own, but he was still soaked in cold sweat.

When he walked behind a run-down little hotel, he finally reached the designated place. Lu Qingbai turned his collar up a little. He crouched down by the side of the road, pretending to tie his shoelaces, while carefully looking all around.

Then a car suddenly drove out of the little alley behind him. Su Qing’s face appeared in the driver’s seat. He briefly raised his chin at him. A car door immediately opened on one side, and Hu Bugui reached out a hand,

pulling him in. Lu Qingbai nearly cried from happiness. “Oh, my goodness, I’ve finally found the organization...”

Before he had finished talking, he saw Jiang Lan curled up in a corner and stopped. Lu Qingbai pointed at Jiang Lan in some astonishment. “She... Isn’t she that...that...”

Jiang Lan responded to his fussing with a cold laugh. Hu Bugui shushed him. “Shut up. Su Qing, drive to the place I told you about.”

Su Qing’s eyes flashed. “Are you sure that person is trustworthy?”

Hu Bugui didn’t answer him at once. He hesitated for a moment, then said, “Do you think that General Xiong is trustworthy? If you trust him, then drive where I said.”

Su Qing was silent for a moment, then turned the steering wheel and drove away.

Lu Qingbai looked from one to the next. Then his eyes were drawn by the “fifth person” in the car. Hu Bugui pointed at Zheng Wan’s body and briefly explained the whole story. Lu Qingbai’s eyes simply glowed with a faint green light. Like a lecher, he deftly tore away the remaining few scraps barely covering Zheng Wan. He wanted nothing better than to take a microscope and observe each one of her cells.

Hu Bugui asked, “What do you think about that thing on her back?”

Lu Qingbai’s fingers stroked inch by inch over the tattoo that seemed to have grown on her body, turning a deaf ear. Hu Bugui was silent. He passed Lu Qingbai the research materials Su Qing had brought. Lu Qingbai devoted himself whole-heartedly to the body and the equations, instantly becoming deaf to the outside world.

A long time later, Su Qing braked sharply, making Lu Qingbai’s forehead bump right into the seat in front of him. He gave a yelp and covered his forehead. “Su...”

Su Qing shushed him, then looked up at a sign—this place turned out to be an orphanage.

“It’s here,” Hu Bugui said.

Su Qing backed up the car and drove to the orphanage’s back gate. He stopped in a little alley and turned to say to Hu Bugui, “I’ll go in and take a look first to see what’s going on. We’ll talk when I come out.”

Hu Bugui held down his shoulder. “You stay. I’ll go in.”

Then he uncompromisingly opened the door and went inside.

Su Qing's gaze was a little heavy. He opened the driver's side window and lit a cigarette. His brows drew tightly together. He seemed a little gloomy. Lu Qingbai looked at Hu Bugui's retreating figure, looked at Su Qing's grave expression, and opened his mouth to ask something. But when he remembered that there was still such a personage as Jiang Lan next to them, he managed to hold back.

He had a faint ominous premonition.

After about twenty minutes, the orphanage's back gate was opened from inside. It seemed that people rarely went in by this gate. It was rusted, and creaked when pushed open. Su Qing's gaze turned fierce at once. He raised a hand from his side. Lu Qingbai saw that he was gripping a pocket-sized handgun. He couldn't resist swallowing.

Only when he saw clearly that the person who had opened the gate was Hu Bugui, and that he was standing there completely intact beckoning to them, did Su Qing relax and start the car. Directed by Hu Bugui and a strange man, he slowly drove the car into the orphanage's backyard.

The strange man circled the gate, locking it up again. Then he knocked on the car window, nodded to Su Qing, and said, "You can get out."

Su Qing jumped out of the car. Behind him, Hu Bugui helped Lu Qingbai unload Zheng Wan's body. Just then, Su Qing casually raised his head and saw a person sitting on a stone bench in the backyard, calmly looking at them and smiling.

He froze—he knew this person. It was the old swindler, Ji Pengcheng.

SU QING was only frozen for a moment. Then he lowered his head. Seeming methodical, he locked the car, then leaned against the car door and put a cigarette in his mouth. He was spotted by Hu Bugui, who took the cigarette as he passed by him and quietly said, "How many have you smoked today? Aren't you finished?"

Su Qing smacked his lips, looked at him a little gloomily, and reached out to fish around in his pocket, but in the end he didn't dare to take out a second cigarette. Ji Pengcheng laughed silently as he looked at him. Su Qing glanced at him expressionlessly, and the old swindler couldn't keep laughing. He thought that there was hidden murderousness in the little fox demon's eyes.

Jiang Lan didn't want to say anything else to them. She went right in after the man who had met them to find somewhere to rest. Hu Bugui and Lu Qingbai carried Zheng Wan's body inside. Su Qing craned his neck and looked on. Seeing them go in, he immediately turned around and deftly lit a cigarette. Then he grabbed Ji Pengcheng by the collar and laughed nastily. "Come on, old man. The two of us are going to have a chat."

Ji Pengcheng struggled, fiercely hitting him over the head with the fan in his hand. "Respect the elderly! Respect the elderly, don't you understand?!"

Su Qing said, "Hmph."

He hauled Ji Pengcheng to a small pond in a corner. Two children were squatting there playing with rubber ducks. They simultaneously raised their heads and gave the two of them strange looks. Su Qing beamed and took some candy from his pocket. "Here, have some candy, kids. Uncle has some things to say to grandpa, you two go play somewhere else, all right?"

A prickly-headed little sprout stood up and looked at him disdainfully. "What candy? Are you humoring minors?"

The other one, a little girl with a long braid, rubbed two fingers together, putting on a vulgar expression inconsistent with her age. "Uncle, I can see

that you're loaded. Put it here."

These tones very familiar. These two were simply Tu Tutu Number 2 and Tu Tutu Number 3. At a glance, it was obvious which scourge had taught them. Su Qing glared at the jeering Ji Pengcheng and silently took twenty yuan out of his pocket, putting ten into each child's hand. Only then did the two kids pick up their rubber ducks and bounce off happily.

Ji Pengcheng fixed his collar, which Su Qing had wrinkled, then sat down by the pond, shaking his head. "Well, brat? You don't seem especially surprised to see me."

Su Qing crossed his arms over his chest. With a cigarette in his mouth, he leaned back against a tree and looked at him coldly.

Ji Pengcheng waved a hand. "Hey, don't be like that. An old swindler can have something of a passionate youth, too—here, light shifu a cigarette."

Su Qing tossed a pack of cigarettes and a lighter at him. Ji Pengcheng clicked his tongue and slowly put a cigarette in his mouth, then rather pleasurably took a big drag.

"I've gotten old." He tilted his head up at a forty-five degree angle to look at the sky. Rather melancholically, he said, "When you ran away from the RZ Unit back then, Lao Xiong gave me a call and told me to find you."

Su Qing looked at him suspiciously.

Ji Pengcheng laughed mockingly. "Lao Xiong and those others, they spend their lives hemmed in by rules and regulations. They couldn't find you, but how could *I* not find you? They have people above. I have people below. There's no comparison."

"In other words...in those three years, when I thought I'd run pretty far, I was actually right under General Xiong's nose?"

"No, no." Feeling that there seemed to be shards of ice mixed into Su Qing's voice, Ji Pengcheng quickly denied it. "How could that be? He only told me to find you, then look after you when I'd found you. Anyway, I don't think you actually need anyone to look after you."

He blissfully breathed in a mouthful of smoke, then continued: "Lao Xiong knew me from way back. When I was young, I acted as his informer. I did quite a few things in defense of the nation that make my blood run hot up to this day. Then we both got old. I retreated to the jianghu, and he was basically ready to retire. Who knew that this would happen?"

Su Qing didn't believe half a word of it. He had studied under Ji Pengcheng. Of course he knew that if you could count on a professional swindler to speak the truth, all hoofed animals would climb trees.

"You've been waiting for us?" He looked all around the orphanage's surroundings. Behind it was a small wholesale market and a street. The place was something like quiet in the midst of noise. "This place is..."

"This was a connection Lao Xiong and the others left behind." Ji Pengcheng crushed the cigarette and stood up. When he narrowed his aged eyes and looked at Su Qing, Su Qing suddenly felt that some unspeakable light seemed to flash in those eyes. The old swindler quietly said, "Don't blame him. He was only a man. This was all he could do. Of the people from back then who knew the circumstances...not many managed to survive."

Su Qing's brow furrowed. Ji Pengcheng sighed. "Do you think it was so easy to build the RZ Unit? Look at the RZ Unit's structure. Awkward, no? It's nominally under the military, but to which military district does it concretely belong? Who's responsible for it? Could you say?"

Su Qing stared.

The corners of the old swindler's mouth turned down slightly. This pulled his whole wrinkled face taut, squeezing out some sharpness by force. Though Su Qing knew that any movement of this face's facial muscles consisted to some extent of playacting, he still couldn't resist becoming serious and letting his train of thought follow him.

"You think that Utopia shouldn't exist. You think that the blue seals are all bad, right?" Ji Pengcheng glanced at him.

Su Qing frowned. "Bad?"

He thought that this word was a little strange. Normally only children said it, calling things bad. Having gone through the experience of university entrance exams, no matter whether you were a top student or a failure, a liberal arts major or a science major, you still learned how to regard questions dialectically.

After a long moment, Su Qing finally shook his head. "Actually...you couldn't say that, could you? I've always thought that blue seals were a different kind of living creature from human beings. They're like vampires, you know? They were originally human, but later, through some process, they reached the top of the food chain."

“Vampires.” Ji Pengcheng considered for a moment, then denied it: “No, no, no, you’re wrong. Vampires are a type of creature that could never occupy a large place on Earth. They’re solitary and think themselves great, living in their own era—the most important thing is that Earth’s environment is unsuitable for them to live in.”

Su Qing couldn’t resist laughing quietly.

Ji Pengcheng waved a hand. “Don’t laugh, what I’m saying is true. Vampires can only be monsters, a source of contagion, but they’re not a race. Do you understand? The blue seals are different. The blue seals are a tool. It’s Utopia that is the new race. They will develop a new civilization.”

“Scientific terrorism?” Su Qing asked.

“Only the minority calls it scientific terrorism.” Ji Pengcheng looked at him. “You’ve seen Utopia’s methods. You think that that base was very drab—you’re even one of their victims yourself. You think that they have no regard for the laws, that they don’t see people as people. They’re a pack of scum, barbarians wearing the skin of technology and civilization.”

Su Qing thought about it, then nodded.

“But if all the world’s governments were controlled by Utopia, then what do you think would happen?”

Su Qing stared.

Ji Pengcheng laughed quietly. “Then there wouldn’t be any more terrorism. Everything they’re doing now, they might still keep doing it, but everything will go underground. It won’t impact the lives of the vast majority of common people in the world. If the RZ Unit still exists then, what name do you think the masses and public opinion will give you? Violent terrorists? If you’re shot dead one day, many people who have nothing to do with it will observe online, and after observing, everyone will go back to their own business. Maybe a little girl or two will write a story called ‘Su Qing died and he wasn’t with Zheng Qinghua, I don’t believe in love anymore!’”

Su Qing’s expression simply couldn’t be described as constipated anymore.

“I think that you’ve already seen what these two sides are striving for,” Ji Pengcheng said.

Su Qing frowned. “When we left headquarters, there were people above making it easy for us. Captain Hu thought then that the authorities didn’t necessarily want to touch us, as though...”

He hesitated. "I'll make an unsuitable comparison. It's like when the Eight-Nation Alliance entered China. At the start, wasn't the Qing government's attitude towards the Yihetuan Movement also ambivalent³⁶? But later I found that that wasn't what we should be afraid of. The people who made it easy for us and the contact receiving us now must all have been organized by General Xiong. We've been moving from light to shadow only because we're riding his wind."

Ji Pengcheng looked at him. "If you know that, then you're better off than that big idiot."

Su Qing immediately answered, "Scram. Don't talk about my man that way."

Ji Pengcheng was horrified. Even he hadn't expected Su Qing's face to be so thick. It completely shut him up so he couldn't say a single word.

Su Qing glanced at him and gave a very evil smile. He pinched out his cigarette and stood where the wind was blowing. When he felt that the smell of smoke on him had mostly dispersed, he turned to go inside.

Enormous matters still had to be talked about after resting and regrouping, never mind that they had had a rather hair-raising day.

As soon as Su Qing opened the door, a hand immediately pressed him against the wall. He just had time to laugh. "Hey, how come you're so forward today..."

He had hardly spoken before his lips were stopped.

Getting exactly what he wanted, Su Qing put his arms around Hu Bugui's shoulders and turned the tables. After clinging together inseparably for a long time, Hu Bugui finally let him go and inhaled deeply to calm his breathing. He looked at Su Qing, his expression grave. "You snuck off to smoke!"

Su Qing: "..."

"I can smell the smoke."

Su Qing: "..."

Then, very practiced and boundlessly natural, Hu Bugui reached into his pocket and pulled out a half-crumpled pack of cigarettes. He glanced at it. "There are two missing. What happened?"

Su Qing stared at him blankly. He really didn't know what to say.

Hu Bugui's expression was stern, seeming prepared to make him account for himself in front of the "organization." But Su Qing took a step back and began to laugh breathlessly. "You've actually been counting the cigarettes in my pack...you've actually...hahaha!"

Hu Bugui looked at him, grim-faced, then suddenly put Su Qing over his shoulder and threw him on the bed, then raised a hand to slap his ass.

Su Qing gave an "ow," but considering how hardy he was, he didn't actually feel it much. He only kept laughing until he was on the verge of tears. Hu Bugui was planning to give him another, but Su Qing hauled on his belt, suddenly throwing himself forward. The two of them rolled onto the bed together.

Su Qing lowered his eyes and looked at him. He grabbed Hu Bugui's collar and bent his head, but he covered his mouth with unusual gentleness.

He was thinking, apart from his dad counting the candy in the candy box when he was little, no one else in his life had ever done such a thing for him... Well, really! He was feeling a mix of all kinds of emotions.

DON'T BE SCARED

WHEN SU QING got out of bed the next day, his walking posture, owing to certain reasons everyone has a tacit understanding of, was...just slightly awkward.

Hu Bugui watched him in silence for a while. When he stuck his arms into his shirtsleeves and frowned slightly as he twisted around, Hu Bugui, feeling boundless guilt, got up and carefully gathered together the front of his shirt. Focusing his attention on the clothing as much as possible, he did up his buttons for him with no indecent assault.

Su Qing sat there obediently with his arms open, letting him fiddle as he liked.

Hu Bugui actually very much wanted to control himself every time. He didn't want to put a great burden on Su Qing's body. But every time he was teased into losing control by a certain bastard who didn't appreciate the kindness.

In fact, Su Qing was very well-behaved the majority of the time. After all this time, Hu Bugui felt that Su Qing had been "domesticated." Only when there were important matters during work would he put forward some views. As for ordinary trivialities, he would basically go with whatever Hu Bugui said.

Tell him not to smoke, and he would do his best to resist. When he really couldn't resist, he would only smoke furtively. Even when to go to sleep and when to wake up, not staying up late, not eating only capsules and not food, how much to eat at each meal—if you only said something to him, however unwilling he was, he would still wrinkle his nose in exasperation and comply without another word.

Apart from not being very obedient in bed—he didn't seem to especially like Hu Bugui's constant, almost masochistic self-control.

A person who had been so good at agreeing to your face then disobeying in private had suddenly become so well-behaved. Sometimes when he thought of it, Hu Bugui felt very unused to it. He was always apprehensive, thinking that this was the calm before the storm, afraid that he was so well-behaved because he was brewing a big piece of troublemaking for some day in the future.

After buttoning his shirt for him, Hu Bugui found that his expression still seemed to be a little confused. So he put his arms around Su Qing's neck and gently kissed him on the forehead. He gave his shoulder a shove. "Go wash your face."—Hu Bugui had also found that if you kissed him on the forehead, Su Qing would automatically close his eyes. If the atmosphere was good, he would agree to basically anything you said to him at this time.

Su Qing obediently went to wash his face. Hu Bugui considered, then directly left the room and went downstairs.

It was still early. Only Ji Pengcheng was sitting alone downstairs, holding a bowl of soy milk and slowly drinking it. Hu Bugui sat down across from him. Ji Pengcheng gave him a slightly scrutinizing look. He asked, "Where's that little whelp Su Qing?"

"He'll be down in a while." Hu Bugui approximately knew Ji Pengcheng's relationship to Su Qing and was also looking with faint curiosity at this old fellow who could turn trickery into an art.

Ji Pengcheng heard him and narrowed his eyes. He smiled meaningfully. "Strange. Since I've known that little whelp, he's always gotten up earlier than the chickens to go out and cause chaos before daybreak every day."

Hu Bugui thought that there seemed to be some subtext in his words. He answered, "He doesn't sleep very well, so normally I let him get some more sleep when he can."

Then he frowned and stared blankly with his eyes fixed on a corner of the table for a moment. He seemed like he wanted to say something but was holding himself back. Ji Pengcheng looked at him intelligently. "What is it? What do you want to say?"

Hu Bugui wasn't very good at talking to start with, and he thought that he might be worried over nothing. When Ji Pengcheng asked him, he stared, then had even less of an idea of what to say.

Ji Pengcheng raised the soy milk to cover his mouth, but he couldn't cover the laugh lines at the corners of his curving eyes. This made his eyes

seem especially bright, flashing like gloss.

“That little whelp. He really is a rabbit. Cowardly,” Ji Pengcheng said.

Hu Bugui stared, looking at him a little uncomprehendingly. He thought, how could Su Qing be cowardly?

Ji Pengcheng paused, then continued: “He’s the sort of person that each time he meets a disaster, he gets more cautious. He’s seen the worst of things, suffered things others haven’t, so he thinks about everything more than others. That what-do-you-call-it...Utopia, didn’t they make him a carrier for absorbing others’ emotions? He lived through that, and now he’s neither insane nor an idiot. He seems to be doing fine. But it’s left him with this bad habit of needing to get to the bottom of everything.”

Hu Bugui didn’t let a word of this go by. “What do you mean...get to the bottom of everything?”

“When others encounter something, they mostly take it on its own merits. But he can’t. He can only relax if he works everything about the thing out from start to finish.” Ji Pengcheng picked up a youtiao. He was missing a front tooth, so there was a bit of a gap. When he ate, he unconsciously shifted the food sideways to avoid his front teeth, seeming to do most of the work with his cheeks. He slowly chewed two mouthfuls, then finally continued: “But there are some things that, even though they don’t happen out of nowhere, even though they have their reasons, they aren’t something that you can understand by relying only on your own thinking. He can’t see that.”

Hu Bugui frowned, considering these words.

Ji Pengcheng looked at him and said, “Let’s say for instance—you’ve gotten close to that silly boy, haven’t you? Just because of that, he’s all muddled.”

Hu Bugui’s heart moved. “What is he muddled about?”

“The better you are to him, the more muddled he gets,” Ji Pengcheng said, hitting the nail on the head. “You like someone, you want to be with him, you want to treat him well, why is that? No one can explain these things clearly. But as long as you’re sure that everyone is in earnest, no one would keep picking at it for no reason. Each vegetable suits someone’s tastes. I like potatoes—there’s no law against it. If this were some years ago, he also wouldn’t have thought about it. He would have been as matter-of-fact as an ordinary person. But now he’s cowardly. He doesn’t dare to.

“You’re good to him, and he can’t think of why, so he stubbornly keeps thinking he owes you a favor, but he doesn’t know what to pay you back with. So he feels at a loss, and also like he has nothing to give you in return. He’s afraid that there will be a day when you won’t care for him anymore, so he must be a little fearful.” Ji Pengcheng smiled. “You can see he’s gotten complicated over the last few years. He doesn’t show anything on his face. Not a word of truth comes out of his mouth. But actually, it’s very simple. When he thinks of anything, there’s a line in his mind.

“This, therefore that.” Finally, Ji Pengcheng, rather moved, and also extremely succinct, summed up the whole course of Su Qing’s life with these words.

Then footsteps came from upstairs. Hu Bugui raised his head and found that Su Qing had “gotten rid of” one of his legs using some arts. One of his pant legs looked empty, with a small piece of wood showing under it. He limped downstairs, perfectly covering up that bit of awkwardness in his walking posture that morning.

As he limped down, he held a little chest in one hand, filled with all his assorted little props. In his other hand, he held a wig and false whiskers. When he noticed Hu Bugui’s gaze, he immediately explained, as though delivering a report: “Oh, I’m going to take a turn outside in a while, buy some newspapers, get up to date with the current situation—we made a mess in the old base, and we still haven’t found out what Zheng Qinghua’s reaction is.”

Ji Pengcheng furtively winked at Hu Bugui, clearly saying “You see? What did I say?”

Hu Bugui felt as though his heart was immersed in salt water, crashing and heaving, and also unspeakably sad.

Ji Pengcheng pretended to suddenly remember something. He gave an “ah” and insincerely said, “Oh, right, that boy in glasses must have been up all night staring at that corpse. I’ll go have a look and get that young man something to eat. You two chat, haha, you two chat.”

Su Qing looked at him suspiciously. Though he had always thought that the old swindler was very vulgar, for some reason, he thought he seemed to have become even more vulgar.

When he sat down and found that Hu Bugui was still staring at him without blinking, he couldn’t resist feeling his face. Finding that there was noth-

ing stuck to it, he asked in some bewilderment, “What?”

Hu Bugui hesitated for a moment. Then he suddenly gripped Su Qing’s hand lying on the table. He held it very tightly—a little too tightly. Su Qing couldn’t resist struggling. Hu Bugui said, “I don’t know how to say this to you.”

Su Qing still looked completely at a loss. Hu Bugui felt that the emotions were sticking in his chest, but he had no ability to turn them into language that humans could understand and communicate.

He had been taught since he was little to “say little and do much.” When he had grown up, he had gone into the military. He had gotten used to excelling. As time went on, he had thought that it was all right if he wasn’t very good at talking. But now he suddenly began to envy Su Qing for his glib tongue that could talk the dead back to life.

He thought for ages but still didn’t know how he should express himself. He seemed like a child who had been called on by a teacher and didn’t know how to answer the question. The more he thought, the more anxious he became. So, without explanation, he pressed Su Qing’s hand to his own chest.

Su Qing was startled and opened his already large eyes wide to look at him. His fingers pressed to Hu Bugui’s chest felt a slightly rapid heartbeat that made you feel there was some unspeakable worry and emotion hidden there.

Su Qing’s eyes slowly fell on their entwined fingers. After a long time, Hu Bugui quietly said, “Do you hear that?”

Su Qing nodded.

Hu Bugui looked straight into his eyes. “Then...do you understand?”

This time Su Qing hesitated.

Hu Bugui slowly removed his hand from his chest, brought his own his hands together, and held Su Qing’s hand in his palms. The slightly high temperature of his hands came through the skin.

“Don’t be scared,” he said gently, so soft that it was almost stiff but unspeakably tender. After a moment, he almost piously lowered his head and kissed the back of Su Qing’s hand. He repeated, “Don’t be scared.”

“HELLO, THIS IS Cheng...” The words changed as they came to Cheng Weizhi’s lips. “This is Chen Zhu.”

There was silence on the other end for a moment. Then came a deliberately lowered, very pleasant male voice: “Mr. Chen, did you order take-out an hour and four minutes ago?”

Cheng Weizhi’s psychological quality really wasn’t up to this. As soon as he heard these words, sweat came up on his palms. As he clutched the telephone cord, he mumbled an agreement, stammering, “I... Yes, I ordered milk tea, mousse, two plates of ice cream, and six servings of starch jelly... for my son.”

“I see. We’re out of the mango-flavored ice cream you ordered, sir. Could we exchange it for another one?”

As Cheng Weizhi agreed, he picked up the address book next to the phone upside down in a fluster. He flipped to a page in the middle. There were symbols written on it that no one but him could understand. “What do you have? Go...go ahead.”

“We have nectarine, mint, coffee, chocolate, strawberry, pineapple, and rum...”

He hadn’t finished speaking when Cheng Weizhi let out a breath and interrupted: “Fine, I’ve got it, are you...Su Qing?”

These were the signals they had arranged. It wasn’t enough for the other party to get the correct sense. Cheng Weizhi had to determine that the person was with the RZ Unit, including precisely saying “an hour and four minutes,” then reporting the ice cream flavors in correct order without a word out of place. Cheng Weizhi, meanwhile, apart from reporting the types of food in order without altering the sequence, also had to stress the words “for my son.”

Su Qing gave an affirmative and softly said, “I’m outside now. Can I come up?”

Cheng Weizhi looked out from the very antiquated little two-story house and found that apart from a window lattice covered in ivy, he couldn't catch a glimpse of a single shadow. He couldn't help asking, "Where are you?"

"Already at your door," Su Qing said, then hung up the phone.

At the same time, there was a knock at the door. This means of appearance like a scene out of a ghost movie made Cheng Weizhi even more nervous. The old professor put down the phone. While passing Cheng Ge's bedroom, he looked inside. Cheng Ge was taking an afternoon nap. Perhaps it was a little warm. He had kicked the covers aside and was sleeping in a very wild posture, like a child—he truly was a child who would never grow up.

Cheng Weizhi sighed, shook his head, and closed the door. He hesitated, then opened the house's front door.

Standing at the door was a humpbacked middle-aged man who had a missing leg and a small wooden prosthetic sticking out of one pant leg. He stared. "You are..."

The middle-aged man raised his head. Unexpectedly, he had a pair of very bright, very attractive eyes. Raising the whiskers around his mouth, he smiled at Cheng Weizhi. "It's me."

The familiar voice startled Cheng Weizhi. He subconsciously grabbed the man's shoulder and whispered, "Come in quick." Then he furtively looked around outside and closed the door.

Su Qing meanwhile had already straightened up and torn the whiskers off his face. This made a clear boundary between the color of the upper and lower halves of his face. It was a little comical. He self-assuredly sat down on the couch. "Uncle Cheng, pour me a glass of water."

Cheng Weizhi ignored him. He was simply like a startled bird, standing sideways by the window, looking out in all directions, repeatedly making sure that no one had followed Su Qing. He was about to draw the curtains closed when Su Qing firmly stopped him. "Enough, uncle. If you close the curtains in the middle of the day, what will people think you're up to? Relax, the person who can follow me is still unborn in their mom's belly. Don't worry, we're very safe now."

"I'm afraid if someone walks by outside and sees..."

"The place I'm sitting in is a blind spot. You can't see it from outside." Su Qing calmly got a single-use cup out from under the coffee table, poured

himself a cup of cool water, and drank it in one gulp.

“How do you know?” Cheng Weizhi suddenly became wary.

Su Qing put on a smile, took a small grey microchip from his pocket, and flashed it around. Cheng Weizhi’s gaze drew back. He couldn’t help feeling some bile turning over in his stomach. “You...you planted a monitor here...”

Thirty-six in all, inside and out, Su Qing thought, but he didn’t say it to avoid breaking the old professor’s glass heart from fear. He only lightly said, “It’s so that I can get here quickly if there’s any threat to you and your son—Cheng Ge’s situation is a little eye-catching. It’s very easy for you two to be discovered.”

Cheng Weizhi sat down across from him. He suddenly took a deep breath, bent over, and buried his entire face in his hands.

Su Qing looked at him, then casually lit a cigarette sitting across from him. After a long moment, he heard Cheng Weizhi say dully, “It’s not that I won’t help you. Su Qing, you’re a good child. You know me, I really...”

At this point, his voice became a little choked with sobs. Su Qing didn’t say anything, quietly waiting for him to speak. He still remembered, in the grey house, how the old professor, alone and without help, had confronted Chen Lin for his sake, had used his not remotely strapping body to protect him, had even taken Zhao Yifei and Tu Tutu through a hail of bullets, boldly run back to the grey house, and saved his life when he had been on the point of death. He actually...wasn’t this sort of foolish, cowardly person who clung to life.

But that was when he was alone. If you had told him then to shoulder a gun and charge towards enemy lines, it would have been all right. But not now. He had Cheng Ge. After leaving the grey house, Cheng Weizhi had refused the RZ Unit over and over. Su Qing thought, after all, he was a person who had once been involved with Utopia. Could it be that he had known then that it would in the end come to this fierce fight, so he had avoided it from the start?

Cheng Ge—starting from his birth, he had been Cheng Weizhi’s debt.

Su Qing lowered his eyes and tapped cigarette ash into an ashtray. His fingers unconsciously moved around the edge of the paper cup. “Zheng Qinghua has put out a wanted notice for me. I’ve done something that’s a little wicked. Yeah, you could call it about the same as digging up his ances-

tral tomb—I know it’s not suitable for me to come looking for you. You may not be very willing to see me now.”

Cheng Weizhi was silent, to some extent tacitly acknowledging this.

“Professor Cheng.” Su Qing smiled, changing his form of address. “I know what you’re worried about. But with things at this stage, how can you still not understand this saying—a blessing won’t bring calamity, a calamity can’t be escaped. Are you really going to hide with Cheng Ge for the rest of your life?”

Cheng Weizhi said nothing. Su Qing relaxed his body, in a highly difficult move crossing his magical wooden leg over the other one. He sighed. “Yes, you think that you just have to not annoy anyone or provoke anyone. That you can rely entirely on hiding, watching our two sides fighting to the death, and that whoever lives or dies in the future, you can carry on struggling. But even while others don’t understand, do you also not understand the principle? You’re a person who knows the ins and outs of Utopia, professor. You tell me, if one day the blue seals control the whole world, control our government, our laws, even if they suddenly change overnight, whitewashing themselves into first-rate civilized people, would you dare to believe in it?”

“Do you believe in the mercy of lions? In the previous world order, there was graft, corruption, second-generations and third-generations, all kinds of demons and monsters, but at least none of them had humans in their cookbooks, right?”

Cheng Weizhi’s lips moved. He seemed to want to say something, but he swallowed it back.

Su Qing shook his head. “I don’t want to say that you’re a cynic. Everyone is selfish. You’re not wrong to think that this has nothing to do with you. In the future, no matter what, even if they form a class, in their own interests, Utopia will render the right to become a blue seal to a small number of people. At that point, the billions of people in this world will be enough to feed them. You only want to live your quiet life. You don’t want to concern yourself with human dignity or the course of the world. You aren’t even interested in gold or cash. But, professor, don’t forget your identity—you aren’t only a grey seal. You have a deep understanding of Utopia’s core principles. You yourself even had an incomplete energy hub system forcefully implanted.

“If I were Zheng Qinghua, I definitely wouldn’t abandon creating a complete double core system. What he most wants to find now, apart from Zheng Wan’s body, is probably you, an ‘incomplete’ energy hub that has nonetheless proven functional in reality. What do you think?”

All the blood drained out of Cheng Weizhi’s cheeks.

Su Qing said, “An old man living with an adult son, and the son never comes into contact with the masses. Sooner or later, one day, your gossipy neighbors will find out about your family business and chat about it over tea. And what about Utopia, which can get in at every opening? It will hardly take a few months for them to be able to find you two. At that point, you’ll be a precious experiment, but what about your son?”

“I also don’t want to say that we’re acting for the dignity of all humanity or anything. Personally, I just find them offensive and want to add a hole to that Zheng character’s head—I also know that the RZ Unit is currently a pirate ship that may sink any day.” Su Qing put out his cigarette butt and summed up, “But while others don’t have to get on board, you already have a foot on the deck. There’s no point in hiding.”

Su Qing had been sent off scampering like a frightened rat by Hu Bugui’s deeply felt confession first thing in the morning. Only when everyone had begun to worry about his safety did he unhurriedly return—with a fruitful harvest. He had basically sussed out the situation outside, and he had picked up Professor Cheng and his son on the way.

There were quite a few people like Cheng Ge in the orphanage. The middle-aged man who had gotten them settled in once again made an appearance. Later, Su Qing learned that his name was Sun Mingyun. On the surface, he was this orphanage’s director. In secret, he did some other unknown work.

Director Sun took Cheng Ge away to go through some formalities, registering him using his false name and fake ID. This way, the orphanage’s employees could be responsible for looking after him, and Cheng Weizhi could make some time to do a bit of something else. Even if someone came to make a sudden inspection, the whole thing would still be seamless.

“This is...Zheng Wan?!”

Since Zheng Wan’s body had been removed from that mysterious basement, her strange tattoo had stopped moving. And, like an ordinary corpse, she had gradually begun to show lividity, and had even begun to rot.

Lu Qingbai had worked for a day and a night straight without discovering what was going on with Zheng Wan's tattoo. His temper was as irascible as a mad dog's. He bit anyone he saw. Only when he saw Professor Cheng did he force himself to make his expression a little milder. He nodded. "Yes. Look at this, sir."

He cleaned up the rather blurry pictures Su Qing had taken, enlarged them, and brought them over to show Cheng Weizhi. "We can't exactly go back now. It's a pity I couldn't have seen it with my own eyes. This platform is very strange. I investigated the log in Su Qing's energy detector. The energy field in that basement at the time was of a type we've never seen before. I understand a little, but we don't have our full complement now..."

Cheng Weizhi accepted the log of the energy field, put on reading glasses, and bent over the table carefully looking at it.

Just then, Director Sun came back from getting Cheng Ge settled in. A good-natured smile appeared on his honest face. He said to Hu Bugui, "I've already contacted *that person*."

Apart from Hu Bugui, Su Qing, who was just unloading items from himself, Lu Qingbai, who was rattling on about all the peculiarities about Zheng Wan to Cheng Weizhi, and Cheng Weizhi himself all raised their heads. Lu Qingbai asked in bewilderment, "That person? Who is 'that person'?"

Beaming, Director Sun explained: "A person who has worked within Utopia for many years...and one of our people."

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THOSE PRESENT were obviously struck by lightning. They hadn't expected that their own faction could have such a brutal presence. Su Qing's wooden leg had been half-dismantled. He let it hang suspended in midair, forgetting to even put it down. He couldn't resist asking, "So...what does this deity do?"

Director Sun shrugged. "Sorry, for their safety, all of our contacts are unidirectional. I can only request their assistance when they voluntarily contact me, and they hold the initiative to arrange the next contact time and method. Furthermore, I can't know who they actually are or what position they hold in Utopia, unless they expose themselves. I've already told them about this matter. Your current most urgent task is to assemble the RZ Unit, especially the technicians and the well-matched field personnel..."

As he said this, his phone suddenly rang. Director Sun picked up. After a moment, he smiled. "Everyone, good news. Our first expert special assistant has arrived. I'll go get him."

In a moment, Director Sun came back with a young man—the newcomer was someone they all knew. It was the mysterious itinerant doctor Kou Tong, who had performed mirror image appraisals at the "ST" Training Camp.

This Dr. Kou seemed to be in a hurry as before, sporting a head of messy hair, his overly thin body seeming to sway even without a wind. He had a little retro satchel under his arm and wore a sparkling smile. He made his appearance in front of everyone as though nothing was happening outside—as though the people in front of him were a harmonious and fine party gathered at a spring barbecue, not wanted criminals surrounding a weird corpse.

"Good afternoon, everyone!" he said vigorously.

Apart from Su Qing's normal response of "Hello, Dr. Kou," the others were all astonished.

Cheng Weizhi said, "Who is this?"

Lu Qingbai said, "Shit, why do I feel like I've traveled in time?"

Hu Bugui immediately asked Director Sun, "Isn't Dr. Kou an external employee? How can he participate in our operations at a time like this? The danger and..."

"You can give me a lie detector test. I'm absolutely loyal to the organization," Dr. Kou said, still giving off spring sunshine. "Or you could interrogate me. Really, I'll answer any question."

Su Qing, beaming, asked, "Please provide your bank card account number and PIN as well as your bust, waist, and hip measurements, accurate to the millimeter."

"My personal bank card has been canceled. I have to depend on all of you for support now. Isn't the money General Xiong left enough?" Kou Tong winked at him. "If it isn't enough, that's all right. There are so many anti-government organizations in the world. Utopia aren't the only ones with sponsors. As for the measurements..."

He very boldly opened his arms. "Come on, you can come take a look."

Su Qing stood up, eager to have a go. Then Hu Bugui glared at him. Su Qing rubbed his nose, wilted, and sat back down in defeat. As though nothing were the matter, he smiled at Kou Tong. "Well, I was joking."

Kou Tong openly walked over and glanced at Zheng Wan's body. Very insincerely, he said, "Oh, a dead person!"

Then he took a stack of documents from his bag, pushed Zheng Wan's body aside, and put the document down. He drew everyone's gazes, then said, "These are duplicates of the results of your mirror image test appraisals from last time at the training camp. I used the mirror image results and the synthesized manifestations when you were drawn into the multidimensional space under the influence of the enforced sleep device to make these hasty assessments. I'm very sorry. According to convention, I would keep these results confidential. In principle, apart from yourselves, no one should be able to see the appraisal results. They belong to the category of strictly confidential documents. But this is a time of emergency. I hope you can understand."

If they didn't understand, there was still nothing to be done. Kou Tong looked at Hu Bugui. He knew that he was the boss, so he was planning to open fire with him. "Captain Hu, first is your appraisal result."

Hu Bugui paused. Understandingly, he didn't protest and very conscientiously picked up the appraisal result. He opened it up and spread it out in front of everyone. "When I was little, I lived in a village. In order to make a living, my parents normally didn't pay much attention to me. Later I went to school in the city. I didn't actually know how to speak very well at school. I was always rather solitary. But at home, my parents would still always brag about me. There were many things I couldn't ask for their help with. Their education level wasn't high. Sometimes if I said something, they wouldn't understand, so I would bear it on my own. Dr. Kou says I have a slightly perfectionist personality. Though it's very restrained, not on the level of a personality disorder, still...sometimes when I encounter a thing, I may be excessively autocratic. Sometimes I think a lot of things, but I'm not used to saying them aloud. My communication ability isn't very up to standard. Though I know it's bad, I've always thought highly of myself. Even when I know I'm going to offend someone, if I can't think of another way to express myself, I'll still say it.

"My hang-up is that impassable forest I went through with Su Qing." Hu Bugui looked at Su Qing and found that he was also looking at him. His speech stopped for a moment. His throat tightened a little. Hu Bugui cleared his throat. "Dr. Kou is right. I've always wished that what happened in the grey house had never happened. I wished to go back to that time, and if I couldn't go back, I even wished that it would happen again.

"The danger level of that forest we were in was all related to that idea of mine, even the thistles at the end. All of it was my subconsciousness imitating the collapsed walls in the grey house that day." At this point, Hu Bugui paused. Then he shook his head. "But I found that there was no going back."

It seemed that he had never made such a lengthy speech, slicing himself open entirely, revealing his thoughts wholly unguarded, revealing his own heart that even he didn't dare to face directly.

"I remembered you countless times before. I thought that everything that had happened to you was my fault. I wanted to make up for it. I thought that if only I could make it up to you, then that feeling like having a fishbone caught in my throat would disappear, and then I could continue doing this job without any ill feeling, pretend that I was still the best. I would have the right to love you. I could be with you." Hu Bugui was facing Su Qing.

Everyone listened silently as he spoke. No one made a sound. “But I found that I couldn’t make up for it. Because three years later, you didn’t need me anymore.”

Su Qing remembered how in the impassable forest, his energy system had suddenly gone out of control, how he had even had trouble walking—it turned out that this had been Hu Bugui’s subconscious wish.

“I’m finished.” Hu Bugui kept looking directly at him for a while. Then, as if suddenly letting out a sigh of relief, he looked at Kou Tong.

Kou Tong didn’t comment. There was no need for a psychologist to comment. A psychologist didn’t even need to know anything. He only needed to evaluate what a person knew. If the person understood himself, that was enough.

Once you had named the cage in your own heart, it could no longer hold you.

“Su Qing,” Kou Tong prompted softly.

But Su Qing’s reaction wasn’t nearly as forthright as Hu Bugui’s. He automatically brought his hand down on the assessment. He stared at the document’s white cover page. After a long time, he said, “What you gave me was incomplete.”

Kou Tong didn’t deny it. “Time was short then. I couldn’t perform a deeper assessment of you. Your...experiences have given you very powerful concealment skills. The mirror image instrument’s frequency was even influenced by you—or, from a certain point of view, you’re very steady, harder to influence than anyone else.”

“Because I don’t trust in emotion, I only trust in logic.” Su Qing smiled and looked back at Cheng Weizhi. The old professor was startled. He hadn’t expected him to remember these words of his.

“I survived relying on these words. Now, the few times I’ve been able to feel others’ emotions, I’ve been able to perfectly separate external ones from my own.” Su Qing paused. “The assessment you gave me had a line about not being able to find my place, because I had lost the coordinates—”

Kou Tong softly interrupted him: “There’s no need to talk about that. I know you’re found it now, and that’s enough.”

Su Qing stared. Then he looked into Kou Tong’s eyes and suddenly felt that he was like an enlightened demon. He knew everything. After a moment, Su Qing smiled, nodded, and removed his hand from the file of his

unopened assessment. Kou Tong didn't follow up, amounting to showing consideration for a certain person's professional peculiarities. The others didn't have the good fortune of being able to have a close-up glimpse of what was in this professional swindler's inner being.

“Lu...”

Lu Qingbai opened the file on the table and pushed it towards the people next to him. “I have nothing to say. You can read it yourselves. That's the kind of person I am—a weakling who's dissected more people than he's saved. Do you think it's possible for a person like me not to be sarcastic?”

He laughed a little self-mockingly. “Actually, I'm pretty confused.”

Confused about whether the work he did was right or wrong, whether it lived up to his oath to practice medicine for the benefit of the public, to aid the dying and heal the injured. Confused about the enormous psychological stress this position caused him—not daring to think about the path he was walking, afraid that he would flinch. He was scared of others, and more afraid of what he knew—that Lu Qingbai was a weak person.

He had always secretly questioned himself, questioned the RZ Unit, especially after Xu Ruchong's betrayal. The closest teammate to him had suddenly turned into someone he didn't know...

Kou Tong closed the appraisal, waited half a minute for them all to raise their heads from their own stories and put their armor back on, face the world without distractions.

Then he successively opened the appraisal files of the absent Xue Xiaolu, Qin Luo, Chang Dou, and Fang Xiu.

“I heard Director Sun mention your circumstances and plans—Captain Hu, don't be anxious. If this person really is one of your core personnel, then their psychological quality over all these years must have been absolutely expert. From my appraisals, you won't be able to see their betrayal or any hint that they're holding back,” Kou Tong said. “Now I hope to adjust your rather...dispiriting plan for a trap—Director Sun, is everything I asked for ready?”

This man had both hands propped on the table, the clothes he was wearing seeming to sway around him; he put on his signature smile like a world full of springtime. “Let's see who they are after all.”

Fang Xiu, Qin Luo, Xue Xiaolu, and Chang Dou's long-silent special communicators at last called out after being unidirectionally activated.

THE PERSON who made contact was Su Qing. Contacting the others had gone pretty smoothly, but when it came to Chang Dou, his reaction was truly major. He hugged the communicator and wept with joy, like a poor motherless child at last finding a home.

Su Qing's repeated attempts to speak were all cut off by the unceasing torrent and sobbing declarations of longing. So he passed the communicator to Hu Bugui. "Here."

Hu Bugui looked perplexed.

"Hurry up and tell him a story to calm him down."

Hu Bugui looked at him in some exasperation. Then he accepted the communicator. Stiffly and sternly, he said, "Chang Dou, shut up."

The unlucky child didn't dare to say another word. He even held back his hiccups.

Hu Bugui brought the communicator to Su Qing's ear. Su Qing was awed by their captain's "domineering air" and didn't dare to go on disrespecting his superior. With no nonsense, he quickly told Chang Dou what he was supposed to do, the next means of communication, and points for attention. Before he could take a breath, Hu Bugui broke off the connection without so much as a by-your-leave, not letting Chang Dou of the overabundant emotions say another word.

It was a very...resolute and effective approach.

Kou Tong laughed and stroked his chin. "That technician of yours—he's such an interesting person."

Hu Bugui nodded. "His work ability is good."

Kou Tong said, "I don't know about his work ability, but his character is very interesting. Ordinarily speaking, a person, especially a man who has reached adulthood, owing to something like self-respect, as well as our country's societal characteristics, will tend to have reserved feelings and not display his own emotions very warmly, and especially not be very willing to cry

in front of others. But crying is itself a release of psychological stress. Psychological stress is sometimes like water in a dyke. You either siphon it off or release it. Otherwise, there will always be stress. It won't disappear on its own with time."

Lu Qingbai laughed and rather cuttingly said, "That's right, Chang Dou definitely isn't stressed."

Kou Tong looked at him with a broad smile. "Dr. Lu, you actually aren't stressed, either. Sometimes taking digs at people is also a way of letting off emotion."

Lu Qingbai glared at him, but the smile on Dr. Kou's face truly was too likable. You simply couldn't say a bad word about him. So Dr. Lu silently turned his face away and earnestly went to dance cheek-to-cheek with the female corpse.

But Hu Bugui frowned. He thought that there was some subtext in Kou Tong's words. He couldn't resist asking, "What do you mean, Dr. Kou?"

What did he mean by stressing that Chang Dou frequently used this kind of rather "shameful" means to relieve his stress? Did it mean that Chang Dou was normally under some kind of unspeakable stress?

"No, no, no." Kou Tong quickly waved a hand. "I didn't say anything, really. That's not what I meant. I was purely moved. I meant to say, Captain Hu, that you can also occasionally relax a little. You don't have to keep yourself so strained and maintain such a high level of vigilance all the time."

Hu Bugui looked at this itinerant doctor who was all skin and bones and from the bottom of his heart felt that he was unreliable.

That evening's meeting turned into a general session. All the communicators were turned on. The meeting wasn't held at the orphanage. Instead, they drove a vehicle to a suburb on the outskirts of a neighboring city.

Director Sun and Cheng Weizhi weren't present. There was no noise at the scene of the meeting. Kou Tong also wasn't planning to make an appearance. He withdrew into a corner that the communicator couldn't catch and hid himself in the shadows, holding a notebook and beginning to take notes—even though as high-tech a thing as the mirror image projector had been developed by him, Dr. Kou himself was unusually old-fashioned. He didn't like to use electronic equipment.

Lu Qingbai, Su Qing, and Hu Bugui stood around a dissection table with Zheng Wan's body on it. Her back was facing up and her face was turned aside. The communicator's camera precisely caught her deathly pale profile and the tattoo covering her whole back. Chang Dou was the first to react. He couldn't resist crying out in alarm: "What is that? Her back... There's a circuit on her back!"

"Yes, you've seen right." Lu Qingbai pushed up his glasses. "All the fuss that's suddenly started up outside is mainly because of her."

"Who is she?" Fang Xiu couldn't resist asking.

"Zheng Qinghua's little sister, Zheng Wan." Lu Qingbai cut into the skin of Zheng Wan's back with a scalpel. His movements were extremely cautious, not daring to cut the energy channel on Zheng Wan's back the least bit. "This energy channel pattern ultimately reaches her energy crystal. Look."

Then even Su Qing for the first time saw an energy crystal in the human body. In fact, it was only the size of a soybean. For some reason, its projection on the skin seemed to be magnified twice. There were unspeakably complicated channels linked to it—very thin, neither blood vessels nor lymphatic vessels. They were transport passageways of emotional neurotransmitters.

It was this system that transformed a human body into an entirely different miraculous thing.

"Su Qing, help me out," Lu Qingbai said.

Su Qing picked up white gloves and put them on. Lu Qingbai brought over a little basin with an inch-long silvery-white little hook in it. Lu Qingbai attached one end of the hook to the energy crystal taken from Zheng Wan's body. He raised an energy detector next to it, as well as one of Chang Dou's pocket watches.

"This hook was made to imitate the seized 'energy hub.' I added a current limiter to it. Zheng Wan's energy crystal is no longer alive now. We need to stimulate it and have to rely on this 'energy hub' to 'short circuit' Su Qing's energy crystal system. Only by simulating the energy field Zheng Wan's energy crystal produces with micro-stimulation will we know what happened to her in that basement."

Su Qing's face made a somewhat convoluted expression. "Why is it me *again?*"

Lu Qingbai said, "Hurry up, less nonsense. I've limited the current. Last time you basically touched an electric switch, this time you're going to be a battery. Anyway, Captain Hu will catch you. I guarantee it won't kill you."

Hu Bugui, who had at some point also stood up, fixed a very stern look on Lu Qingbai.

"Get ready. Three, two, one!"

Su Qing's fingers touched the energy hub hook. A faint electric current flowed up his arm. It was only numb for a moment, but Hu Bugui, seeming more nervous than the interested party, had already grabbed his arm and pulled him away. Just that moment was enough.

As the stagnant channels on Zheng Wan's back began to flow once more, the needle on the energy indicator traveled a wide arc towards zero. Everyone's digital watches simultaneously went black, and the pocket watch hanging next to the energy indicator began to run backwards. An energy field no one had seen before appeared on the communicator's screen.

Apart from Su Qing, everyone present was dumbfounded.

After a long moment, Xue Xiaolu falteringly said, "Time... Is time going backwards?"

Could the unusual channels on Zheng Wan's back increase energy to the point that it could tear through space, move the chronological coordinates backwards?

"That's not possible," Chang Dou burst out.

No one answered him. Chang Dou instantly stood up. His face disappeared from the communicator screen, leaving only his violently heaving chest. "Time can't go backwards, that's a paradox! If time went backwards, all the laws of space would be broken. It's a unidirectional coordinate axis. If this point on the axis changed, all points would change correspondingly because of it... In that moment, you wouldn't be able to act for yourselves, the laws...the laws would restrict your speech, your actions, make you step for a second time into that river³⁷. Right, right, there's also the communicators. Waves are the same... Emotions can adhere to waves. Waves would also return to their original coordinates. That's illogical, it's self-contradictory!"

Chang Dou was obviously babbling.

"What is that energy field?" Qin Luo brought up the heart of the matter.

Lu Qingbai shook his head. Chang Dou shook his head, too.

“Zheng Wan’s body was in that basement for over twenty years.” Su Qing picked up the subject. “When I found Zheng Wan’s body, she was like someone who had just died. Obviously, she was already dead then, but the system in her body was still living. There was external energy input, keeping her body fresh—and now, look, the body is already showing signs of rotting.”

“So you mean that Zheng Wan’s body was ‘operating’ for over twenty years?” Fang Xiu asked.

“Until not long ago, when I stole her.” Su Qing laughed. “Right, my guess is that the energy system must have been maintaining something, something of vital importance to Zheng Qinghua. He’s turning over heaven and earth now to dig up Zheng Wan’s body.”

“Just now we attempted to reactivate Zheng Wan’s system.” Chang Dou caught up at once to things within his area of expertise. “There’s no way to judge this field’s scope of radiation, nor whether it can be detected by some instrument. Leave that place at once.”

Without Su Qing’s energy support, Zheng Wan’s energy crystal went deathly still once more. The energy indicator gradually stopped reacting.

“We’re in a vehicle,” Hu Bugui said, tapping a few times on a keyboard. A picture of an ordinary truck was sent over. At this time, Su Qing had left the scope of the communicator’s camera. The people on the screen and Zheng Wan’s body began to move. It seemed that the truck had been started.

Hu Bugui typed out another string. Coordinates and a place name appeared on the screen. “I need each of you to get in position as quickly as possible. Go to this place and meet up with us.”

“Yes, sir!”

At this moment, someone was inwardly becoming nervous. They had just received a phone call from “that person,” telling them that no matter what, they had to get Zheng Wan’s body back quickly. Zheng Wan’s body was crucial. The RZ Unit’s technician hadn’t gotten into position yet. They were relying only on a medical worker. While he would be able to tell some things, it would still be very hard to touch on the real secret of Zheng Wan’s body.

This had to be taken care of before they assembled, or else the consequences didn’t bear thinking about.

The RZ Unit's general meeting communication system dimmed. On the face of the pocket watch were only an address and coordinates traced in fluorescence. The person clutched the other communication device in their hand—should they report at once and request support? No, that was no good, too sloppy. It would be easy for that idiot to disturb their operations and alert the enemy.

They hesitated for a moment, then dialed a number. A man's voice answered: "Hello. Speak."

"It's me." They paused for a moment. "I currently have some clues that Dr. Zheng wants."

"What aid do you need?"

"I need that gun."

There was silence on the other side for a moment. "11235's regulations are very strict. He only accepts assignments from him and me."

"It's an emergency. You know the outcome of losing Zheng Wan!" Their tone irresistibly became heavy. "Without a core support point, that energy system can only operate for a week. What then? As soon as this business is revealed, those... You understand?"

"Watch your tone."

"I'm sorry, dad."

"...Fine, I'll tell 11235 to contact you." He paused for a moment. "You had better not disappoint me."

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FANG XIU stopped the car, looked all around, and frowned. There was no one there.

He was wearing a dark jacket and a slightly old-fashioned pair of sunglasses. As low-key as possible, he parked the car by the side of the road and rolled down the window. His eyes glanced over the crowd hurriedly coming and going. He saw nothing unusual.

The communication from headquarters had been cut off for unknown reasons, so he had a bad feeling. He put a cigarette in his mouth and touched the guns hidden at his waist and under his pant leg. He opened the car door and got out. He walked into a newsstand and pretended to flip through a magazine, glancing out of the corner of his eye from behind the sunglasses, sizing up the crowd.

Just then, a payphone next to him rang. Fang Xiu stared. He didn't move.

The phone rang for a moment, and then the caller hung up. He deliberately lingered for a while longer, flipping through a military magazine and beginning to chat with the proprietor. After a moment, the payphone rang again. He closed his eyes, got out his wallet, and bought a newspaper. He turned and squeezed between two people who were also buying newspapers and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"It's me," Hu Bugui's voice came from the phone. "The plan has changed. Is there anyone following you?"

Fang Xiu paused. "I haven't found anyone at present."

"Did you drive?"

"Yeah."

"Leave the car. You have a single-use phone card on you right now. Change to it and give me the number. Then go to the nearest subway station. I'll tell you where to go."

A field agent was always prepared for this kind of thing. Fang Xiu didn't waste words. He immediately gave him the number. He didn't ask why they had suddenly changed places or broken off the connection. No communication equipment was completely hidden. They could be overheard anytime by the other side using all kinds of means.

As he transferred from one means of transport to another, Fang Xiu kept his phone in his pocket and didn't take it out. He had his earbuds in his ears. He didn't need to respond; he only needed to act according to orders.

Fang Xiu could sense that though Hu Bugui's voice sounded pretty calm, it was graver than at any time before. He couldn't resist being a little perturbed. What was going on? Had the communication equipment from headquarters been bugged? What had they been doing all this time?

The omnipresent wanted notices in the papers the last few days hadn't had specific photos of the RZ Unit's members, but Zheng Wan's photo had been published. The claim was that they were a criminal gang roaming over the whole country, illegally selling human organs. Zheng Wan meanwhile had been called a missing person. Why not directly mention the RZ Unit by name? Was it because people above were protecting the RZ Unit, or was it because Zheng Qinghua knew that he couldn't appear in public view?

If they couldn't appear in public view, what was it that had made all the countries' governments shut their eyes and stop their ears? What benefits had Utopia given them?

"Leave the station," Hu Bugui's voice came over the earbuds.

Fang Xiu turned and left the subway, finally picking up the phone. "What's going on? Have you been spotted? Has the new comms system been tapped?"

Hu Bugui gave an affirmative and didn't explain.

Next, Fang Xiu asked, "What's your situation now? Are you safe?"

"Don't worry," said Hu Bugui.

Fang Xiu nodded and left the station as he had said. When he had reached the entrance, he seemed to remember something. He resisted, but after a while he couldn't resist anymore. He asked, "How is Chang Dou? I saw that he wasn't with you then... Of course I don't mean anything by it, just that that brat's experience is limited. I'm afraid he won't even know to have a backup phone ready..."

Fang Xiu's speech paused. He had heard a laugh come from the other end. For a moment, he couldn't tell whose it was. There was no one but Su Qing who could be so improper when it was time to be serious, but...Su Qing was already standing in front of him.

Su Qing was thickly bundled up, seeming not to find it too warm. He hadn't made any adjustments to his face, and he was standing in a particularly noticeable place. He looked like he was waiting for someone and refused to be distracted. But the clothes he was wearing, the high collar turned up to his chin, and the rose earrings in his earlobes visible under his soft hair all unfailingly gave off a heavily alluring air.

Fang Xiu found that it wasn't that he hadn't made adjustments to his outward appearance, it was that he had adjusted it in the direction of a peacock—many people passing by took another look at him. As though he was afraid of not attracting an audience, he even smiled at everyone who looked at him, as though he had simply gone out on purpose to flirt.

Fang Xiu's steps paused. Then he walked over to him. Su Qing didn't look at him, only pretended to pick up a phone call. He brought his phone to his ear, then turned around and crossed the street. Fang Xiu didn't speak to him. He followed about ten meters behind him.

Only when the two of them had walked into a little alley did Su Qing take off his coat as he walked, revealing a form-fitting cropped jacket underneath. He picked up a parcel by his feet and tossed it to Fang Xiu. Fang Xiu reached out to catch it and found that there were clothes inside. He understood what Su Qing meant and quickly changed. The two of them made countless turns in the little alleys. When they came out again, they had completely changed their appearances.

Only then did Fang Xiu see that vehicle at the corner—the vehicle Hu Bugui had sent a photo of over the communicator. It had a huge freight carriage behind it. Then, as if finally relaxing, Su Qing walked up beside him and put an arm around his shoulder, very forcefully slapping him twice. “You're back.”

Fang Xiu also relaxed. “Fuck, you people, carting around a corpse and fleeing all over, that's really something.”

Su Qing smiled.

Fang Xiu punched him in the chest. “Fine, that's enough affection. It won't be good if Captain Hu sees. You're a family man, restrain yourself a

little.”

When he followed Su Qing into the truck, he found that there was no one inside but the two of them. He couldn't resist turning to look at him. He asked, “Are they in the carriage behind?”

Su Qing had already slowly driven the truck away. He shook his head. “No.”

Fang Xiu stared. Su Qing looked at him in the rearview mirror and quietly said, “Our comms system is being monitored. We have to be a little more careful.”

“What's going on?”

“We're investigating it now.” Su Qing didn't go on to explain. He picked up a phone and dialed a number. “We've passed Area 1.”

“OK, I've got it,” Fang Xiu heard Hu Bugui say. “I've picked up Chang Dou.”

At this point, 11235 had already scoured the whole city proper following a signal. He couldn't resist displaying a trace of interest on his face. He said over the comms, “Hey, it seems you've been suspected.”

The other person didn't answer. It seemed that they were still acting according to instructions.

After a moment, he received a text message: “I've seen the truck.”

“The one that bowl woman's body is in³⁸?” 11235 raised his eyebrows and suddenly asked, “Are your people all there? When you get in the truck, find an opportunity to tell me. It's fine, I have a way to follow your signal.”

Three minutes later came a third text message. “Strange, there's only me and the person picking me up in the truck.”

11235 gave an “ah” and laughed quietly. “What's strange about that? They're dealing with all of you separately, testing which one of you is the traitor.”

The fourth text message said: “Follow. Don't alert them.”

11235 laughed inscrutably and put a gun on his back. He cut off the communication and dialed another number on his phone. “Old swine, it's me.”

An aged voice came from the phone: “What is it?”

“A spot of trouble. The other side has a master. They suspect your little swine.”

“That’s not important, the important thing is Zheng Wan’s body. When you’re sure of the location, deploy personnel. No matter what, we need to get Zheng Wan’s body.”

“Not important?” 11235 smiled grimly. “Old man, do you mean that if your little swine is found out, I don’t have to report, I can just execute on the spot?”

The other person paused. The smile on 11235’s face grew larger and larger. After a while, the person quietly said, “You settle the matter as you see fit.”

“Ah,” 11235 gave a short, emotional sigh and efficiently hung up the phone. A map popped up on the sunglasses on the bridge of his nose. A point of light was quickly moving forward along a highway.

“There’s always a price to be paid.” 11235 sighed with the weariness of experience and shook his head. As though feeling that this still wasn’t enough, he added, “This is called, climb a thousand walls and you’ll fall off of one.”

Meanwhile, after going through countless twists and turns, the RZ Unit’s core members had at last gathered together. Who knew how many of these huge trucks Hu Bugui and the others had prepared. As more people came, they weren’t allowed to sit in the cockpit. They got into the truck’s carriage. As soon as they walked in, they knew that this was the location that had been transmitted in the video in everyone’s collective recollections.

There was a woman on a dissection table with a white sheet over her. Only her face was revealed—close up, everyone could see that this was Zheng Wan.

Chang Dou was squatting to one side, staring at Zheng Wan’s body as though staring at a dream partner, nearly salivating. If the occasion hadn’t been wrong, he really would have wanted to go over and start feeling around.

Hu Bugui’s gaze swept over them. He quietly said, “We’re leaving here quickly. Su Qing, put up the shielding net.”

The shielding net was a very crude, very powerful thing. Simply put, it was a pocket-sized edition of the shielding tool the blue seal base had used before. As soon as this thing was put up, all known communications signals would basically be cut off.

That person tensed. They knew that their own communicator wasn't turned off. 11235 must have heard these words. The shielding net would block the tracking signal. It would be for the best if he was fast enough...

Just when the vehicle had started, the people in the carriage suddenly shook. Apart from Zheng Wan, whose body was fastened to the dissection table, everyone bumped together.

“Get out!”

Apart from Chang Dou, none of them were unfamiliar with these circumstances. The others reacted quickly, each picking up weapons and hiding. Fang Xiu, apart from reacting quickly and picking up a weapon, also quickly picked up Chang Dou and, holding down his head, dragged him behind the truck's carriage.

One of the truck's tires was shot.

At the same time, the shielding net production device inside the carriage cried out sharply. Chang Dou whispered, “They've torn through the shielding net! They have a pulse disrupter!”

Fang Xiu coldly said, “Shut up!”

Just then, he at last understood what Su Qing had meant by their “comms system” being monitored. He had meant that one of the people who had taken part in the meeting that day had sold them out.

But Su Qing began to laugh. He pressed a button on a remote in his hand. The truck's covering suddenly folded down. The instruments inside, the dissection platform, and the corpse were all revealed before the eyes of all the others, as well as a big group of armed people not far away wearing Utopia uniforms.

He crushed the remote in his hand. Its microchip had a tiny energy hub hook on it. Su Qing's fingers touched the silvery-white hook, and an enormous light leapt out from the truck's carriage. A faint grid seemed to rise in the air, rising to the sky with the truck as the center, sweeping outwards.

The Utopia personnel at the front of the group bore the brunt and overturned. There was a hail of gunshots. The RZ Unit really was going for no risk, no reward, and no pain, no gain this time.

“That person” suddenly felt an unspeakable delight—they were only three steps away from Zheng Wan's body. An opportunity like this wouldn't come again. So they immediately took a step to the left, pressing the button of an air storage locker in their hand, which would make it convenient for

them to carry away Zheng Wan's body. Then they smoothly pressed down on the fasteners on the dissection table and pulled the sheet off her body...

But there was only Zhen Wan's head on the dissection table. Beneath it was a plastic mannequin body.

11235's lenses recorded this image with importance. A slightly strange smile appeared at the corners of his lips. "Ah, as expected, you've been duped."

Then a bullet broke through the air, passing right through the back of that person's head to the forehead.

Dead in one shot.

The last expression on Xue Xiaolu's face was disbelieving astonishment.

The other remote in Hu Bugui's hand was also crushed. Everything around them began to shake violently. It seemed they had been prepared—meanwhile, a truck quickly drove up from behind them. Kou Tong looked out the window and glanced expressionlessly at Xue Xiaolu and Zheng Wan's head fallen to the ground. "Get in, we're withdrawing."

WHEN SU QING squeezed the energy hub hook, it amounted to “short circuiting” his energy crystal system again. While the impact wasn’t large, he still swayed slightly in place. Hu Bugui had been ready and quickly put a hand on his waist, letting him lean on his shoulder. While changing positions, he helped him get his footing and quietly asked, “Are you all right?”

Su Qing was distracted for no more than five seconds, or else they wouldn’t have dared to borrow his energy in such a dangerous situation to break the protective net by force. But before he could say anything, a hair-raising feeling of being watched suddenly climbed up his spine.

Su Qing immediately pushed Hu Bugui. Meanwhile, he himself backed up three or four steps at an unbelievable speed. The two of them parted quickly, and between them, in the place where they had just been standing, a bullet raised a small handful of dust.

Just then, in the sniper’s scope, Su Qing quickly raised his head and met 11235’s gaze. At that moment, the two of them were very far away, but it was as though they were face to face.

11235 whistled and said to himself, “Pretty proper-looking.”

As he delivered this praise, he took aim again, right at Su Qing’s head, which he thought was “proper.”

The RZ Unit withdrew quickly under cover of the explosion, but while the explosion could block others’ lines of sight, it couldn’t block 11235’s—he was called the best gun; he was a legendary...assassin.

And right now, this magical human-shaped weapon was for some reason aimed at Su Qing.

Before, when Su Qing had been a newbie, his shooting had been fairly forgiving, suitable to a newbie level, like a cat teasing a mouse. Now that Su Qing had passed through a series of specialized training at the RZ Unit and wasn’t such a newbie anymore, 11235’s angle of aim had also become trickier.

Over and over, bullets nearly brushed past the tip of Su Qing's nose.

Hu Bugui turned and got a sniper rifle out of the truck Kou Tong had driven over. He aimed in the direction the bullets were coming from, searching for 11235's position. At this point, the bullets had forced Su Qing into a dead end.

Su Qing suddenly gave a grim laugh and grabbed the metal pole of a broken streetlamp—when other people dodged bullets, they ducked, but he was going up, as though afraid the other side wouldn't see him and couldn't hit him.

Chang Dou saw this and couldn't resist crying out in alarm. The bullets followed Su Qing up, hitting the lamppost with non-stop *ping-pong* sounds. Further up, Chang Dou couldn't clearly see where Su Qing had gone—he seemed to have turned into a shadow.

Then an extremely bright light came from Su Qing's hand, even brighter than the light in the truck's carriage just now that had come from borrowing his energy. It made people unable to open their eyes. Even the distant sniper's pupils contracted at this light, and he lost track of Su Qing for a moment.

At some point, Su Qing had hidden another energy hub hook and an amplifier in his hand. He clenched his teeth and didn't hesitate. His hand trembled slightly from touching the energy hub. The next instant, he took off another layer of coat—who knew how many layers he was wearing. A sniper rifle was revealed on his back.

“It's finally time for me to pay you back.”

Su Qing's vision had in fact already seen 11235's position. Despite going through a period of training, his long-distance marksmanship didn't come near to matching up to that of people like Qin Luo and Hu Bugui. So he didn't aim. Relying entirely on feeling, he caught 11235's extremely concealed figure and immediately shot a clip of bullets.

11235 quickly rolled aside. In rolling like this, he couldn't avoid revealing himself. Hu Bugui's bullets followed closely after.

The powerful light from the amplifier slowly dimmed. Before the vision of the people who had been staring at the strong light could recover, Su Qing quickly slid down the pole and grabbed Hu Bugui, who was still aiming at 11235 with indescribable rage. “Come on!”

When they had just gotten into the truck one after the other, before they could close the door, Kou Tong slammed the gas pedal to the floor.

Then, like Al-Qaeda terrorists, this group sorrowfully made their exit amidst explosions and gunfire.

Su Qing was wearing only a single remaining layer of shirt. His back was soaked with cold sweat. He took no notice, plopping down in a corner of the echoing carriage that contained weapons and people. He loosened a collar button and gently let out a breath.

No one spoke. The truck jolted as it drove. In the carriage, they could feel the ferocity as Kou Tong drove the automobile like a rocket. None of them had recovered yet from the profoundly affecting events just now.

After a long time, when the jolting truck's motion had smoothed out, a light sound came from outside. Looking out through the cracks, it was a layer of skin falling off the outside of the truck, revealing a completely different carriage and shape inside. It seemed that they had thrown off Utopia's pursuit.

At last, Fang Xiu was the first to react. He raised his head and looked at Hu Bugui silently wiping his gun. "Captain Hu, Xue...she was..."

Lu Qingbai brought over a little thing that looked something like a radio and pressed a button. A red light on it flashed twice. Then a small screen popped up. There was no sound, only wave after wave of different frequency. After passing through through a line, they were decoded into crooked writing.

11235's dialogue with Xue Xiaolu and Xue Xiaolu's dialogue with that unknown individual played in front of everyone like subtitles.

"She had a grandmother," Su Qing suddenly said after looking down and reading for a while. "Before, I received General Xiong's order to get all your families settled. I received your personal backgrounds and materials about your families. It only said that she grew up with her grandmother. The records were vague about her parents."

"Is her father..." Chang Dou pointed at the screen the size of a radio. At this point, he foolishly clutched his hair. "Is... Who is it?"

Fang Xiu rather crossly smacked him on the head. "Shut up, listen."

Chang Dou felt the back of his head, gave an "oh," and didn't speak.

"I don't think this person seems like Zheng Qinghua," said Su Qing.

"Why?" asked Lu Qingbai.

Su Qing frowned and thought for a long moment without coming up with anything. He could only say, "It's a feeling."

"It's not just a feeling. I also think this person isn't Zheng Qinghua." Hu Bugui looked at Su Qing and picked up the subject. "Before, Su Qing saw a drawing Cheng Ge had done. It was the place where the victim lived, when they were doing human experimentation. Before Xu Ruchong's death he said...to us that he wasn't the one who gave Cheng Ge that picture."

"So we had another..."

"Right." Hu Bugui nodded. "At the time, our team was in a very unstable condition. I didn't dare to pursue this. It's obvious that Xu Ruchong didn't know this person, or else he wouldn't only have given this vague hint. His death was peculiar. What happened then definitely wasn't what he originally intended. Su Qing said that he had a period of mental breakdown before his death. It was that breakdown that activated the microchip in his body and supplied the net that trapped Su Qing with energy. I suspect that his mental breakdown was caused by some drug."

Su Qing's seemed to have thought of something, but Qin Luo quickly covered her mouth. "A drug!"

"When he was running a fever, Xue Xiaolu and I brought him a flask of soup... That was..." Qin Luo's eyes opened very wide. She had suddenly realized that perhaps Xu Ruchong's death had to do with her. She had watched with her own eyes as the soup that had killed him had been placed at his bedside.

Fang Xiu sighed and lowered his head. A sliver of unspeakable emotion crossed his face, which was blocked by hair. Lu Qingbai patted Qin Luo on the shoulder.

"Professor Cheng said that Xu Ruchong was Zheng Qinghua's adopted son. If Xue Xiaolu was also an adopted child, why didn't Xu Ruchong tell us before his death?"

Of course Su Qing had also thought of this reasoning. He had just been unwilling to say it aloud. He thought that in this situation, when they could die on the road at any time, talking about the seeds of suspicion Xu Ruchong had planted was truly too hurtful.

He hadn't thought that Hu Bugui would pick it up so directly.

So he interrupted Hu Bugui: "As the only other person in Utopia who can mobilize 11235, his identity must be very remarkable. His position is at

least equal to Zheng Qinghua's. What do you think, could he be the backer behind all of Utopia's operations?"

The others looked at each other. Just then, the truck stopped. Acting driver Kou Tong jumped out and opened the carriage in the back. Beaming, he said, "We've reached our base camp. Everyone, welcome back."

Too many things had happened that day, so much so that the three people who had just returned didn't display too much surprise about Kou Tong's appearance.

Su Qing was the last to jump out of the truck. Kou Tong very naturally followed alongside him and quietly asked, "Did you...suspect her before?"

Su Qing glanced at him, then shook his head in silence.

Kou Tong smiled understandingly. "In terms of sentiment, you didn't want to suspect her, but you must have analyzed it subconsciously. You just suppressed it. In reality, before I came, you had decided to run the risk of going for Utopia's core secrets to expose this 'Judas.' What were you thinking?"

"Give up a pawn to protect the chief." Su Qing laughed briefly. "My thinking was simple. Those people, as soon as they get nervous, they lose sight of everything. If there was an opportunity, for example just now...as soon as they discovered that we suspected Xue Xiaolu, that she might not be able to accomplish their mission, they would..."

He lowered his head slightly. Coldness appeared in his eyes.

"Did you already know that that mysterious sniper would come?"

Su Qing nodded. "When Xu Ruchong died, he was also there to mop up."

"...Awesome," Kou Tong commented after a while. "You couldn't bear to point out who the traitor was, so you wanted to find some means to use the other side's hand to find them. That's really...very atypical."

"Not as perfect as your way. The other side couldn't have gotten involved so quickly." Su Qing paused. Then he suddenly laughed wryly. "Enough, let's not flatter each other anymore. Reasonably speaking, we've succeeded, pulled out the nail that's been stuck in the RZ Unit all these years, but why do I feel like I've lost?"

The two of them were silent for a while.

"That's right." After a long time, Kou Tong nodded. He also sighed. "We have lost."

The RZ Unit, which had gathered once more, had lost a person, but for a long time, it also seemed that they had lost all their cheer.

Chang Dou, Cheng Weizhi, and Lu Qingbai desperately matched their strength against Zheng Wan's body, while the others were responsible for gathering all kinds of intelligence from outside and maintaining battle-readiness.

At last, half a month later, during dinner, Lu Qingbai and the other two charged in like victims of an African famine. "The secret! We've found the secret of Zheng Wan's body!"

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AT THIS TIME, Hu Bugui and Kou Tong had their heads buried in a big stack of materials. Fang Xiu and Qin Luo were limbering up, and Su Qing had gone out—Su Qing spent all day hanging around outside. His network had reached an unbelievable extent.

In this aspect, Ji Pengcheng praised him unreservedly. The student had not only completed his apprenticeship, he had also rather surpassed his master—Su Qing had probably been born with a few more trickster cells than others. He had everything a professional swindler needed. Extremely powerful discernment, and the ability to change his identity in a short time—like a chameleon, he had “changed” into countless people. The roads he had walked and the things he had done added together surpassed what others had done in a whole lifetime.

In very hardcore style, the three of them had taken Zheng Wan’s body apart and put it back together. Lu Qingbai pushed the mobile dissection table in, picked up a scalpel, and rapped on the dissection table’s stainless steel instruments. As though serving food in a dining hall, he yelled: “Ladies and fellow villagers, come quick, come quick, everyone over here!”

Kou Tong glanced beside him. “Where’s Su Qing?”

Hu Bugui pressed on a communicator on the table. At this time, the other side’s communicator would sound, notifying him that a request had been received. Almost at once, like a summoned creature, Su Qing linked up his communicator. His voice came: “I’m here. What is it?”

“Lu Qingbai and the others have found something. Where are you now? Can you listen?”

The communicator’s speaker was on. Where Su Qing was, there was a clamor of voices and all kinds of noises. Hu Bugui heard QQ beeps and a crowd of people who were doing something loudly crying out: “Chop!”, “Hurry, hurry, show me the blood!”, “Oh, fuck! Does it have to be so sav-

age? Are there such psycho bosses?”, “Support me, brothers! Stop screwing around!”

The sounds echoed throughout the room, instantly dissipating the atmosphere of cutting-edge science.

Fang Xiu couldn't resist laughing. He picked up a towel to wipe away sweat. “Where are you?”

“An internet cafe. I asked a friend to do something for me.” Su Qing seemed to have walked out. All the background noise of the internet cafe was gone. “What did they find?”

“We found out the nature of this field,” Chang Dou said, his eyes glowing. He paused deliberately and looked expectantly at Hu Bugui, then turned his head and looked at Fang Xiu. From his pointed chin to his messy hair, from his round eyes to his little glasses, each cell was twinkling a blinding light of “Praise me, praise me now.”

Fang Xiu said, “What's so magical that it took you guys this long?”

Hu Bugui said, “Pick out the important things to say. You can omit expounding on the process.”

Su Qing wasn't present, but he still couldn't resist chipping in over the communicator: “Use language that humans can understand.”

“Oh...” Chang Dou lowered his head like a frosted eggplant. Aggrieved, he looked helplessly at Zheng Wan's headless body for a second. Then he pulled up a whiteboard beside the mobile dissection table. It was covered in all kinds of bizarre equations.

“This field requires Zheng Wan's energy crystal to be in an active state. She isn't a grey seal in the ordinary sense. She must be another half-successful experiment,” Chang Dou explained.

“Like me,” Cheng Weizhi picked up. Pointing at the complicated tattoo on Zheng Wan's back, he said, “These channels were manmade, like the way I was made into an ‘energy hub.’ But Zheng Wan is an energy field activator. This thing is very complicated. Dr. Lu has already found that its energy source material is emotional energy. Su Qing mentioned that in the basement, he saw four lights. If I've reckoned correctly, those lights were four input channels for emotional energy.”

“Four?” Su Qing reacted at once. “I can leverage two types of emotional energy at most.”

“That’s why we only barely activated the field last time but couldn’t touch its true secret.” As Lu Qingbai spoke, he arranged four small instruments at the four corners of the dissection table. “Through our indefatigable efforts, we’ve assembled all four types of emotional energy. Su Qing supplied two, we went to Jiang Lan for one type, and for the remaining anger emotional energy, the corresponding frequencies are comparatively low, so Chang Dou and I tried to artificially synthesize it...”

“This can be artificially synthesized?” Qin Luo couldn’t resist asking.

“Do you remember when we captured the waveband that surpassed the frequency of ordinary emotional waves by dozens of times?” Chang Dou pushed up his glasses. At the time, he had still been Xu Ruchong’s assistant. “We guessed then that when the frequency of emotional waves was amplified by some means, they became energy in themselves. At the time, we raised the frequency by five times, leading to the instrument exploding. After that, we put in further efforts, and now we can raise the waveband by about fifteen times, so we can attain something like anger emotional energy.”

“But it’s not stable. We can only use it briefly,” Cheng Weizhi added. “Even if this artificially synthesized thing is amplified another dozen times, it still won’t be as stable as emotional waves produced in the human body, able to be used for a long period by the energy crystal. So as far as Utopia and the blue seals are concerned, their nature can’t change.”

“Are we ready?” Lu Qingbai asked.

The three of them wore very solemn expressions, causing the others to involuntarily start feeling nervous as well. When four ends of wires met different points on Zheng Wan’s body, the headless corpse suddenly bounced, and the tattoo on its back began to move once more. Her deathly pale skin rapidly became fresh and lively, as though she could stand up off the dissection table at any moment—if only her head had still been in good condition.

Their eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the dissection table. Next, that impression of time running backwards happened again. Everyone’s analog watches began to run backwards, while the digital ones went on the fritz. Su Qing was rather unlucky. He heard a sharp drone coming over the communicator. His ears were sensitive to start with. The unusually unpleasant noise shook him so much that it took him a while to come around.

“What’s going on?” he asked. There was no answer. The signal had cut off.

Even Jiang Lan, who hadn’t set foot outside her own door and had been focused on her pregnancy, felt the strange energy field and stuck her head out at the top of the stairs, watching what was happening downstairs.

Those present saw the dissection platform change in appearance. If Su Qing had been there, he would have recognized this. The simple, mobile dissection platform had taken on the appearance of the platform he had seen in the basement.

Qin Luo was standing next to it. She couldn’t resist reaching out to touch it. She found to her astonishment that the platform wasn’t an illusion. It had really turned into a different “substance” under her very eyes.

“What...is this?” Qin Luo couldn’t help asking.

“It’s a spatial field.” Cheng Weizhi pushed up his glasses and sighed. “This is a very special spatial field. At first we thought it was a time field, but later Chang Dou inferred that a time field couldn’t exist, so we had to change our line of thinking. Finally, we discovered that when the four energies are activated, it actually opens a spatial field.”

The three of them were talking, but their actions didn’t stop. The artificially synthesized energy was unstable and might malfunction at any time. Chang Dou carefully maintained contact between the energy supply lines and Zheng Wan. Some helping hands slowly reached over to the dissection table to lift Zheng Wan’s body thirty centimeters up.

Cheng Weizhi’s fingers, as though playing a piano, quickly undid some screws on the altered dissection table. Lu Qingbai cooperated with him from the other side. Just then, one of the four lights flashed. Chang Dou said, “Hurry, the artificial frequency is unsteady, it’s about to go out.”

Bang. Lu Qingbai and Cheng Weizhi opened up the dissection table Zheng Wan was lying on. “Take them out, take them out! Come and help!”

Qin Luo was the first to react. She looked inside and saw that inside was a full layer of black boxes holding something unknown.

Everyone got busy moving the black boxes out without touching the fragile wires on Zheng Wan’s body. When they had moved only half, there was a *pop*, and one light went out. The four energies were no longer balanced, which set off a chain reaction. There was a small-scale explosion among the three remaining lights. The four leads snapped simultaneously. There was a

light, and then, before they could react, the platform under her body disappeared. Fortunately, Lu Qingbai drew his hand back quickly, or else half of his arm would have been left inside.

In front of them, apart from some black boxes, there was only the original cold and crude mobile dissection table.

They looked at each other in shock. Lu Qingbai breathed a sigh of relief. “Ah, forget it, at least we got this much out, and we had good luck with the Type 4 emotional energy. We don’t know when we’ll be able to produce this space again next time. We can talk when we’ve seen what they’ve hidden.”

“Where did those things go?” Kou Tong couldn’t resist asking.

“The spatial field has closed, and those things are sealed inside,” Chang Dou said. “The field is static. We have no record, because the dimension it exists in is different from the dimension of the space we live in. Simply put, it’s not in any point in this world, but each point can open it, as long as you have the appropriate key.”

“Zheng Wan is that key.”

“Four balanced emotional energies, plus Zheng Wan as an activator. We’ve found what’s been making Zheng Qinghua so wild.” Lu Qingbai carefully picked up a black box and ran a scan of the things inside it. After a moment, he frowned. “Hey...why does this seem so familiar? They seem like old-fashioned storage chips.”

“Open it and read them. I need to know what’s on them at once,” Hu Bugui said. “Everyone work separately.”

But Kou Tong approached Hu Bugui’s set-aside communicator. It had returned to normal. The faint noise from where Su Qing was came over it again. Dr. Kou laughed quietly. “In your view...what’s inside those things?”

For some reason, Su Qing knew that these words were addressed to him. He turned and went back into the noisy internet cafe and quietly said, “I don’t know that. But I’m thinking, some people, why would they be so quick to acknowledge Utopia’s legitimacy?”

Kou Tong raised his head and looked at the RZ Unit, whose members had all separately started busying themselves. He turned off the communicator’s speaker function and brought it to his mouth. He quietly said, “I’ve found that the two of us really make a good fit. Ah...what a pity that I was too slow. The early bird catches the worm. Oh, well!”

Su Qing said, “You still have a chance.”

“Really?” said Kou Tong.

“Brother, don’t make trouble for me... I’m obviously joking,” said Su Qing.

Kou Tong laughed. Then the two of them simultaneously cut off the communication in tacit understanding.

Su Qing took turn after turn and walked into a private room. He patted the shoulder of a fat guy sitting in front of a computer and tossed a little bag in front of him. “I have to go. What I just said, investigate it, then send it to me.”

The fat guy looked at him, opened the bag, found that it was full of cash, then immediately smiled so widely that his eyes vanished. He waved a hand at him. “Go on, go on. May the Party and the people trust in me. I pledge to fulfill my mission!”

“If you do well, I’ll put the rest of the money into your account.”

THE FIRST DAY Su Qing hurriedly came back, he found a crowd of people gathered together, dithering over a stack of microchips. There were over a hundred microchips in each black box, and each box had the name of a country stuck to it. They had only had time to grab seven or eight.

At first Chang Dou hadn't given up. He had wanted to take along Cheng Weizhi, again synthesize the strange frequency that could nonetheless perfectly correspond to Type 4 emotional energy, and again open that space. But this was unsuccessful. He was sent off by their grim-faced Captain Hu to break the cypher on the microchips.

Su Qing didn't know a single thing about this, so he went to do his own business.

When Su Qing wasn't courting death, he was very reliable and very aware of boundaries. Hu Bugui knew that there were many things that even if he himself had gone into the field, he couldn't necessarily have been able to do as well as Su Qing. Among people...there were always specialties. Each one had the edge in something. That was what gave a team value.

But that didn't mean that Captain Hu could be overly indulgent towards a certain person's staying out all night problem.

Hu Bugui stuck his communicator in his pocket. He had sent hundreds of communication requests, but they had sunk like stones into the sea. There had been no response from Su Qing. So tonight, the people continuing to work through the night saw that their Captain Hu's thoughts evidently weren't on the microchips. Every five minutes, he stood up and walked around, then came back looking even more unhappy.

Around three in the morning, Cheng Weizhi, at his age, couldn't stand staying up any longer. He was asleep. Lu Qingbai had taken over his work, using a program to sort out the cypher on the microchips according to what Cheng Weizhi had said. Qin Luo had already slept. She had gotten back up and was ready to wash her face with cold water, then come back to work

some more. But when she passed by Hu Bugui, with one look at the ice-cold aura of gloom he was wrapped in, her head immediately cleared. So she turned around and silently returned to her original position.

Fang Xiu heard the movement and turned to glance at Hu Bugui, meanwhile fiercely slapping the back of Chang Dou's head, which was starting to droop bit by bit. Chang Dou gave a start and raised his head in confusion, blinking tearful, bleary eyes and looking foolishly at Fang Xiu.

Fang Xiu raised his chin. "If you can't hold out, then say so. Go over to the couch if you want to sleep." Then he once again focused his attention on the screen, ignoring him.

But Chang Dou seemed to have been galvanized. He shook his head and was suddenly in high spirits. Even his eyes seemed to light up. Flexing his arms and rolling up his sleeves, he once again shone with vitality, his fingers *click-clacking* over the keyboard.

"I have to work harder," Chang Dou very foolishly and naïvely imagined, "to prove my capability to Fang Xiu. Then he won't look down on me anymore."

The poor technician. He didn't know that Mr. Fang in fact didn't mean anything by this; he was only having an endocrine imbalance from staying up late, and the unusual jitteriness was coming out as habitual nitpicking.

Kou Tong had been lying on the table sleeping. He was woken by their movements, straightened up, and stretched. He rubbed his eyes, then raised his head and glanced at Hu Bugui. Seeing Captain Hu's grim face, Dr. Kou explicably became clear-headed. He was not only clear-headed, he even seemed a little cheerful.

Probably because...facing a stack of unintelligible microchips every day was truly too dull.

So Dr. Kou yawned and very obnoxiously asked the question that everyone wanted to ask but hadn't dared to ask in view of their superior's dignity: "Huh? Where's Su Qing? Why hasn't he come back yet when it's so late?"

Lu Qingbai kept up a gentlemanly appearance, not raising his head, but his ears pricked up. Qin Luo surreptitiously exchanged a look with Fang Xiu. Only Chang Dou, who didn't quite understand the situation, grabbed his already bird's-nest-like hair and said in confusion, "Oh, that's right, why isn't Su Qing here?"

He got his head held down to the keyboard by Fang Xiu's hand.

Then, ignoring Hu Bugui's even grimmer face, Kou Tong took his phone from his pocket and called Su Qing. He picked up after three rings. Kou Tong, beaming, said, "Hi, Xiao Su, yep, it's me."

Crack. The pen in Hu Bugui's hand snapped in two.

Then the smile on Kou Tong's face became even more springlike. In a soft voice, he said, "When are you coming back... No, there's nothing going on here, it's just that you're out on your own in the middle of the night and won't answer the comms or pick up the phone. It really makes people worry."

...Actually, he only hadn't returned Captain Hu's signals, hadn't picked up Captain Hu's calls...

The volume on Kou Tong's phone wasn't loud. The others stretched their ears and could only hear that Su Qing seemed to laugh and say something. Kou Tong gave two "yeah"s and nodded. "OK, stay safe, all right, all right, see you soon."

Then he put the phone down and with softness in his expression and tone said to Hu Bugui, "It's fine, he says he's already on the way. He'll be here soon."

Then Kou Tong headed out. As though afraid they wouldn't know what he was up to, he added, "I'm going to see whether there's anything left to eat and heat it up for him."

"There's no need to go to the trouble." Hu Bugui stood up and stiffly said, "You don't know what he likes to eat."

Then he walked out without a look back.

The remaining people exchanged helpless looks. When Hu Bugui's footsteps had vanished entirely, Lu Qingbai glanced around like a thief, then gave Kou Tong a thumbs up. "Nice one, comrade."

Kou Tong waved a hand, feigning modesty. "You're too kind. In front of elites like all of you, I'm really nothing."

Fang Xiu, with rather gossipy interest, beckoned to Kou Tong and quietly said, "Dr. Kou, what are you planning? Do you really want to undermine our chief's interests?"

Playing both sides, entirely unmoved, Kou Tong very cheerfully said as though answering a reporter's question: "At present I do have some plans on that front."

Lu Qingbai and Fang Xiu took the lead in a round of applause. Even Qin Luo came over to get in on the fun. While Chang Dou hadn't worked out what was going on, seeing everyone's expressions, he thought that something good must have happened.

Kou Tong thought he looked entertaining and couldn't resist teasing him. "What do you think, Xiao Chang, do I have a better chance of success, or does your Captain Hu?"

"Huh?" Chang Dou opened his big, clueless eyes wide, his glasses slipping off half his face.

Kou Tong patted him on the head and thought that this technological elite with his extremely high IQ in some aspects resembled Professor Cheng's son. So he even more patiently asked, "Do you think I'm better, or that your Captain Hu is better?"

First Chang Dou thought this question was rather awkward. Dr. Kou stood in front of him, leaning down slightly, with a dizzying smile on his face—in fact, Dr. Kou wasn't especially good-looking, at best on the upper end of average, but when he smiled he seemed particularly amiable, as though that smile could soften your heart.

Chang Dou was knocked giddy by that smile of his, so without taking the time to think about it, he blurted out, "Captain Hu is a very good person, more suited to being a captain, but Dr. Kou is gentler and more comfortable to be around?"

Kou Tong asked, "Do you mean that I'm more likable than your Captain Hu?"

Chang Dou was confused for a moment, but he couldn't resist the allure of sex appeal, so he nodded.

His line of sight was blocked by Dr. Kou, so he didn't notice the others' expressions change from "sparkling with the light of gossip" to "grief-stricken" in an instant.

Kou Tong stood up in satisfaction, then turned his head and, pretending to have just noticed him, asked, "Captain Hu, did you forgot something?"

Hu Bugui stood at the door expressionlessly, staring at Kou Tong for a while. Then he moved his gaze to Chang Dou, who was about to shrink into his chair. He went to the couch and picked up the communicator he had forgotten there. Chang Dou felt that each of Captain Hu's steps seemed to be falling on the pit of his stomach.

When he saw Hu Bugui turn and walk out, he was about to breathe a sigh of relief, but Hu Bugui, as though having remembered something else, looked back. “Chang Dou, it’s been three days already, and you still haven’t broken the cypher. What’s wrong with your technology?”

Chang Dou shrunk again.

Captain Hu’s gaze was incisive. “Is this all you’re capable of?”

This sentence struck Chang Dou in his weak spot. He opened his mouth, and the rims of his eyes turned red. Hu Bugui glanced coldly at Kou Tong, then turned and went out.

This time the conscienceless Dr. Kou even felt apologetic. He patted Chang Dou on the shoulder. “Well, actually...”

Chang Dou seemed to have found an objective. He suddenly sat up straight and glared at the computer screen as though glaring at a deadly rival. “I’ll definitely crack this before tomorrow!”

Kou Tong gave a dry cough. “Your Captain Hu is worried that a teammate hasn’t come back so late, his mood isn’t very good...”

The rest of his speech was automatically silenced, because he found that Chang Dou had already entered some frightening working state. It seemed that pitch-black flames were rising behind him.

“I’m not gentle enough.” After leaving, Hu Bugui remembered Chang Dou’s assessment and immediately felt vast upheavals in his heart.

In fact, Su Qing hadn’t deliberately been missing Hu Bugui’s calls. He had been running around all over outside, getting in contact with some extremely vigilant people, so he couldn’t make the least trace of extraneous movement. And by coincidence, when Kou Tong had called, he had already been heading back... In fact, this business could only be put down to Captain Hu’s bad karma.

Half an hour later, dressed all in black, with a file pouch under his arm, Su Qing strode in, even carrying some morning dew. “Everyone come over here and look at this, I found someone to investigate...”

Apart from the distant and already fast asleep Cheng Weizhi, and Chang Dou, who was burning his Cosmo, the others gave him a certain meaningful look. Su Qing stared, his steps pausing at the door, unable to resist lowering his head to look at himself, then uncomprehendingly touching his face. “What is it?”

“You’re back! You’ve been working hard.” This was Lu Qingbai, smiling falsely and obviously waiting to watch the fun.

“...” This was Fang Xiu, quickly turning his head and pretending nothing had happened.

“Nothing, nothing, there’s nothing wrong.” This was the rather honest Qin Luo.

“What did you investigate?” Kou Tong very naturally took the things out of his hands and pulled out a tissue to give him. “Here, your hair is covered in dew. Is it cold outside?”

Su Qing gave him a strange look.

Hu Bugui had opened his mouth to ask where he had gone and why he hadn’t picked up the phone, but he suddenly remembered what had just happened and fiercely warned himself twice, silently reciting “Be gentle, be gentle.” Then he forced out a stiff smile and put an arm around his shoulders, softening his voice like Kou Tong’s. “There’s no rush to talk about it. Are you tired? Do you want to eat something? There’s some stuff in the kitchen...”

Sadly, Captain Hu imitating Dr. Kou produced some horrifying results. Su Qing shuddered and broke out in gooseflesh, then touched the back of his hand to Hu Bugui’s forehead in astonishment. “Captain Hu, are you sick?”

Hu Bugui: “...”

Fang Xiu accidentally snorted out a laugh and got kicked under the table by both Lu Qingbai and Qin Luo.

“I went to investigate Xue Xiaolu’s materials,” Su Qing, having come back from taking a hot shower, said twenty minutes later, pointing at a spread out pile of materials. “Her background and life have all been altered. Someone went to a lot of trouble. Though luckily, if you don’t want anyone to know what you’ve done, it’s better not to have done it in the first place. Everything that’s been done leaves traces that can be followed.”

He picked a photograph out of the document pouch. “Finally, the investigation came to this person.”

They all looked at each other and simultaneously frowned. “*Him?*”

Fei Zhe, fifty-three years old, one of the most active politicians in the political world at present.

“I think that the person speaking on the phone with her that day was probably him.”

“FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, a little girl was secretly brought to the home of a solitary old woman living off social insurance in the countryside. The old woman’s surname was Xue. To outsiders, she said that this was a relative’s child, of the generation of her grandchildren, named Xue Xiaolu. This girl was brought by a man. Someone said that at the time, the man called her ‘Xiao Zheng.’

“It was too long ago. It’s hard for the people who were there to describe the man’s appearance. Though there’s a photograph left behind that coincidentally caught this person’s profile.”

Su Qing took a mobile hard disk out of his pocket and stuck it into a computer.

The person who had taken the photograph obviously hadn’t meant to get the man in the frame. They were aiming at a lake in the village. There was only half of the man’s body. He had just taken off his sunglasses and was frowning slightly, staring at some place not far away. Su Qing enlarged his face. The man’s profile filled the whole screen. His expression looked a little complicated.

“Does Fei Zhe have other children?” A voice suddenly came from behind Su Qing. Ji Pengcheng had appeared at some point.

“I haven’t been able to find out for the moment...” At this point, Su Qing looked back and glared at him. “Why can I never find you when it’s time to work?”

Ji Pengcheng gave a “haha.” “I’m old. I can’t match up to you young people.”

Kou Tong frowned. “Why did he send his child away then?”

Su Qing flipped through a stack of materials and passed them to him. Midway, they were seized by Hu Bugui, who pretended to sternly and very earnestly look down and read them.

Su Qing had to explain verbally: “Fifteen years ago, Fei Zhe was involved in a lawsuit. There was a fire at a trade center that caused a stampede, killing over a hundred people. Later the story broke that the trade center’s construction was slipshod, and that its fire safety system had serious problems. It was connected to Fei Zhe. People called him out online, and some of the more intrepid relatives of victims wanted to get justice from him. Finally, it seems that it came to hiring a contract killer, though in the end it came to nothing.”

Ji Pengcheng slowly picked up the subject: “According to what you’ve said, at the time, Fei Zhe sent the child away to protect her. But if that’s true, why would he allow someone to kill her?”

“Fifteen years. People change,” Su Qing said.

“Change so much that he doesn’t love his child anymore?” Lu Qingbai frowned, then continued: “Or rather, is the current Fei Zhe still the same person as the one from before? Given his connection to Utopia, could some unbelievable physiological change have taken place in his body? Thinking about it from another point of view, why didn’t he need this child anymore?”

“Children are regarded as extensions of their parents’ lives,” Kou Tong said suddenly.

“Don’t talk about that.” Hu Bugui pinched the center of his brow, curbing their increasingly strange discussion. “What I most want to know now is, what power is it that’s supporting Utopia? Giving them large quantities of capital and weaponry?”

Su Qing suddenly remembered something Chen Lin had said to him—that Utopia’s essence was related to energy.

“Utopia’s essence is related to energy...” He couldn’t resist reciting these words aloud.

Fang Xiu was startled. “You’re saying that it may be a country?”

Ji Pengcheng smiled. “What, does this Fei Zhe also have foreign connections?”

“Wait.” Su Qing quickly flipped open another file. “Fei Zhe previously studied abroad in N Country and worked there for some years after taking his doctorate.”

“Oh...” Kou Tong smiled meaningfully.

Hu Bugui suddenly thought that Kou Tong's smile was annoying. However you looked at it, this person seemed dishonest, with his face full of hidden meaning. He silently thought, We're already wanted criminals, who are you showing off for?

"What is it?" Su Qing asked.

"N Country is very interesting," Kou Tong said. "A country or a region has many people, men and women, old and young, of all social classes and all levels of education. There are good people and bad people. Individually speaking, the differences are enormous. But despite that, these people inevitably have some commonality. It comes from geography, history, and blood line..."

"Could you get to the point, Dr. Kou?" Hu Bugui stiffly interrupted him.

Kou Tong rubbed his nose and smiled very good-naturedly. On paper, he drew an ordinary coordinate plane and a curve. "Supposing that these two axes are abstract representations of all kinds of means of production, and this curve represents the production possibility curve... Well, what I mean is..."

"I know about this, it means that all of this country's means of production distributed according to a certain scale can achieve this amount of production. No matter how they allocate their means of production, they can't produce anything beyond that line." Chang Dou had at some point come over.

"So you know about it." Fang Xiu pushed his head aside.

Chang Dou pushed up his crooked glasses and covered his mouth, shifting his eyes around and not daring to make another sound.

"N Country's resources are very limited, and its geographical position is poor, with frequent natural disasters. You could say it's unsuitable for human occupation." Kou Tong didn't talk anymore nonsense. He restrained his smile and casually drew on the paper. "But both in terms of population and technological level, they're very high in ranking in the whole world. Their population density is extremely high, and their material requirements are becoming greater and greater. Meanwhile, the nation's own energy sources are becoming increasingly burdened. If they want to expand the production possibility curve, there are normally only two methods. One is to find some way to add to their energy sources, and one is to rely on technology.

“N Country’s technological level is already fairly developed. If you’ll notice, this country’s economic growth has been at a standstill for many years. What do you think they’ll do?”

“They’ll think of a way to add to their resources.” Qin Luo frowned. “So...they could steal from other countries, go to war, or...develop some kind of energy source and natural resource that they can possess.”

“Hasn’t N Country been performing land reclamation to make farmland?” Lu Qingbai asked.

“Yes, so now they’re developing human petroleum.” Su Qing laughed grimly, took a cigarette from his pack, and felt around in his pocket for a lighter. A hand holding a lighter immediately reached out from beside him. Kou Tong very naturally lit the cigarette for him. Su Qing stared. Though in certain circumstances, his nerves were very crude, he wasn’t a careless person. He had noticed that there was something not quite right between Hu Bugui and Kou Tong.

Hu Bugui was immediately at a loss. With Kou Tong there, he didn’t know whether he should put Su Qing’s cigarette out. Then his gaze fell on the pack of cigarettes half sticking out of Su Qing’s pocket and found that it was already very flat. Three seconds later, Captain Hu decided not to match Dr. Kou for integrity or virtue. He reached out and pinched out Su Qing’s cigarette. “We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

Su Qing was used to this. He only rolled his eyes at him and didn’t argue.

Kou Tong very considerately turned the subject away. “Listen...in the second wave of countries that just acknowledged Utopia’s legitimacy, was N Country included?”

Su Qing stared. Then he laughed. The two of them exchanged looks like two fox demons. Su Qing said, “I have some very patriotic hacker friends. I can go get in touch with them tomorrow.”

AT FIRST, N Country had in fact staunchly opposed the Utopia Project. Later they had gradually changed to tacitly acknowledging it.

The opposition was actually easy to understand. Utopia was like a precious treasure that N Country had invested a great deal of time into carefully cultivating. When at last it was about to ripen, before they could take a bite, the treasure had spread its wings and run off on its own.

Their attitude changing later was very delicate. Utopia must have had something on them to force N Country's government to come to terms.

The next day, Su Qing came back very early. Presumably Hu Bugui's wild reaction to his late return the night before had scared him. But while he came back, his expression wasn't very pleased. He stopped the car at the orphanage's back gate and was just about to go in. But as soon as he raised his head, he found that there was already someone waiting for him at the door.

There was always a smiling look on Kou Tong's face, as though nothing worried him. Su Qing always thought that this itinerant doctor with his mysterious comings and goings had some means of his own, some perhaps limitless means, for getting close to others. He could never resist judging others according to his own level. He thought, what was Kou Tong scheming?

In this era, after constant reforms, the medical treatment and sanitation systems were maturing day by day. Whether public or private, everything had been brought under the scope of medical insurance. Even village medicine, like country clinics, had its position. The term "itinerant doctor" practically belonged to lexicons in history textbooks.

Never mind that this Dr. Kou was a psychologist.

If someone else had claimed this identity of his, they most likely would have been taken for a swindler. But in fact his prestige in his profession was very high. He had actually become the specially invited expert of a secret

organization like the ST Training Course. An expert like this had given up on readily obtained fame and fortune and was living as rough as a barefoot doctor. Why?

As his thoughts roamed, his face displayed a smile that showed no impression of them. “Dr. Kou, why are you standing here?”

“Waiting for you,” Kou Tong said.

Su Qing automatically looked somewhere else. Then Kou Tong unhurriedly said, “Don’t search. Captain Hu isn’t here.”

Su Qing rubbed the bridge of his nose, looking at him in some exasperation. He lowered his voice. “Why do you keep antagonizing him? Nothing better to do?”

Kou Tong smiled, showing a mouthful of small white teeth. “I want to pursue you. It’s normal to have a rival in love.”

Bullshit, Su Qing thought, but he very politely said, “How kind of you.”

Kou Tong said, “No need to be modest.”

“My stomach is used to eating noodles and can’t digest shark’s fin,” Su Qing continued politely.

“You flatter me.” It was as though Kou Tong couldn’t tell what he meant.

Su Qing paused. He found that there was nothing he could do with this guy who kept pushing his luck. So he bluntly said, “All right, Dr. Kou. From substance to exterior, you don’t especially suit my tastes. You would give me the runs.”

This time Dr. Kou was grieved. “Others turn people down nicely, but you’re turning me down with the runs!”

Su Qing: “...”

This was clearly because the enemy’s defensive index was too high and turning him down nicely hadn’t had enough destructive power. It had all bounced back!

Kou Tong restrained the slightly improper smile on his face. “Fine, no more nonsense. With you investigating Xue Xiaolu’s background, aren’t you a little uneasy and planning to make everyone change to another base of operations?”

Su Qing stared. After a moment, he smiled wryly. “...In all honesty.”

Kou Tong looked at him and slowly nodded. “They can plant people in the RZ Unit, so you suspect that the connections General Xiong left you

will also have problems. That's normal—Utopia... If one day you find that the people you buy breakfast with, clock in and go to work with, are likely the chief culprits in secretly draining your energy, making you turn bit by bit into a lunatic, are the source of infection for a most horrifying plague, that's the most horrifying thing. The most basic sense of trust between people, based on the foundation of 'similarity,' will collapse. Without trust, what will this world turn into?"

Su Qing looked at him, head covered in sweat. "...Brother, could we leave the hipster literature and art discussion for a better occasion?"

Kou Tong's words paused. His eyes swept over his face. He shook his head with a smile that wasn't quite a smile. "Actually, for both gay and straight people, you really are a very fascinating person. I truly mean that."

Su Qing felt sweat dripping down. "Could we not move on to seduction after the literature and art?"

Kou Tong obligingly changed the subject. "Where are you planning to move? Do you have any ideas?"

Su Qing shook his head.

Kou Tong suggested, "What do you think of...the ST Training Base?"

Su Qing stared.

Kou Tong laughed. "Hiding in plain sight. The most dangerous place is the safest. Anyway, Zhong Shiliang is a good comrade."

Su Qing frowned.

Kou Tong continued: "It's only a suggestion. You still need to get Captain Hu's view on this. I think that the ST base has weapons and equipment. It's rather suitable for rebellion... Oh, no, I mean, for defending world peace. You can mention it to him. I figure that he won't take the time to listen to me now."

"Thank you."

"Actually, you don't need to be too worried," Kou Tong said suddenly.

Su Qing looked at him a little uncomprehendingly.

"I have a premonition." One of Kou Tong's long, slim fingers tapped against his own temple. "The noon sun must sink, and the full moon must wane. Utopia has reached its summit. It's time for its decline. Its establishment is improper, full of all kinds of selfish desires. Its fall will also be quick."

Su Qing thought that he was truly too optimistic.

Kou Tong laughed softly and patted the back of his hand. “Really. The reason this world exists is that the sun will always rise. So I believe that night isn’t eternal. Of course, if it is eternal, then there’s still nothing to fear. Your family, friends, and loved ones are all here. Later, everyone will fade away together. It’s not like you’ll leave this world all on your own. It’s not mournful.”

For some reason, Su Qing thought that out of everything he had said, these words were somewhat reliable. So he nodded and laughed. “OK, I’ll rely on your good wishes.”

Then he made to go inside, but Kou Tong was still leaning by the door. He drew back his arms and crossed them over his chest. When he looked sidelong at Su Qing, the corner of his eye looked a little long, revealing a slightly less steady appearance than usual. He suddenly said, “You know, if you want to maintain a relationship between two people, one of them inevitably has to take some initiative.”

Su Qing stared.

Kou Tong continued: “Actually, you and Captain Hu complement each other very well when it comes to work, but your dispositions aren’t very complementary.”

Su Qing laughed, his expression relaxing slightly. “I feel like I already take enough initiative.”

Kou Tong waved a hand. “Then you’re wrong. I’ve seen it. I think that when it comes to maintaining a relationship, Captain Hu is the one who takes the initiative, right? But he’s too clumsy. Either he has the intention but not the ability, or he overdoes it. He wants to do his utmost to express his feelings, but he doesn’t know how to express them. He doesn’t understand spicing things up, and he can’t use sweet talk. He doesn’t know how to entertain someone. You don’t need any of the ordinary mutual care and protection between lovers. Even your work surpasses the scope of his jurisdiction. He’s searched all over, and all he can find is making you stop smoking. Over time, it’s nearly become a conditioned reflex for him, as though not letting you smoke is the same as saying ‘I love you.’”

Finding joy in sorrow, Su Qing thought that it turned out that Captain Hu said “I love you” to him so many times every day.

Kou Tong said, “Between longterm partners, there has to be accommodation, there has to be conflict. Each person has a shell over them that sepa-

rates them from others, only some people's are rather stiff, and it's hard to get close to them, while other people's are rather soft, so it's easier to compromise. The process of breaking through that shell and composing a new one will certainly be somewhat painful, but if you don't go through that step, then you aren't really together. At most you're only very close.

"You're always feeling that he's too good to you. You feel apologetic, so in small matters you always give way to anything he says. But do you listen to him when it comes to major matters?" Kou Tong reached out a hand and poked Su Qing in the chest. "Your shell is made of rubber. If others use too much force, it bounces off you. Your Captain Hu has already tried and failed. Now he's in a terrible fix. He doesn't know what to do."

Su Qing's heart moved.

Kou Tong grinned cheekily and added just as cheekily, "So, since he's so clumsy, why not choose me?"

Su Qing conveyed his general gist with a roll of his eyes.

Kou Tong shook his head. "Ah, you really do care for him. If you really care for him, then you can't count on Lao Hu's IQ. You should take the initiative a bit."

Su Qing raised his eyes and looked at him. But before he could say anything, Kou Tong forestalled him: "You don't know how to take the initiative? Refer to how I've been pursuing you."

That holy smile once again appeared on Dr. Kou's face. For a moment, Su Qing wanted to ask, so you've been deliberately stirring up trouble for the last few days for the sake of saying this?

But before he could feel moved, Kou Tong took his hand, stroked it suggestively, and added, "Of course, if you find that you can't manage it, either, you'd be better off turning yourself towards my embrace. I'm actually much better than him."

"I've been wanting to say for a while—you think too well of yourself, doctor." Su Qing knocked away Kou Tong's groping paw. Then his steps paused again, and he quietly said, "Thank you."

Su Qing and Kou Tong walked in one after the other, and Kou Tong had a very thought-provoking, meaningful smile on his face. The anger Captain Hu had been keeping down all day immediately flared up. He jumped out of his chair with a clatter, grabbed Su Qing by the wrist, and pulled him out of the room.

Dr. Kou unhurriedly sat down in the chair Hu Bugui had just been sitting in. Qin Luo thought about how she still needed to practice her ability to communicate with outsiders, so she thought for a long time and finally worked up her nerve, deciding to make Dr. Kou her first practical test subject. Quietly, she said, "So...your secret is out?"

Kou Tong raised his eyes and looked at her. His pupils were considerably larger than other peoples'. When he wasn't smiling, they looked unusually profound, giving people a feeling that his emotions were particularly deep. Qin Luo immediately found that she had chosen the wrong practice subject. His class was too high. She quickly averted her gaze, avoiding instant death.

Dr. Kou sighed gloomily. "A person like me, who spends all his time matchmaking for others, is truly too noble."

He paused for a moment, then very shamelessly added, "Really. I feel like I'm about to be moved to tears."

Then he looked at Qin Luo again with his profound eyes. Miss Qin bolted.

Hu Bugui pulled Su Qing all the way to their room and slammed the door shut. His expression was very displeased, but he pursed his lips and didn't say anything. He seemed to be suppressing his anger with all his might. He attempted to find some dignified reason to start flaring up, but sadly he failed. In his whole life, he had very rarely fought for anything for himself. He had too little experience. So the flames of his fury were stifled inside. They wouldn't come out no matter what, nearly blocking his chest.

At last, before Captain Hu, who was truly too inarticulate, could think of what to say, anger burned away the very last thread of his reason, and he inarticulately chose the most heart-baring words: "If...if you carry on with Kou Tong again, I'll shoot him."

Su Qing was a clever hand at dealing with this sort of situation to start with, but when Hu Bugui suddenly came up with this sentence, he at last had nothing to say in the face of this comrade who wouldn't rest until he had said something shocking.

The two of them stared at each other helplessly for a moment. Then Hu Bugui suddenly pressed him against the wall. His breathing was a little urgent. His eyes, whether from anger or from sleeping badly, were a little bloodshot. He seemed rather frightening. He tightly caught Su Qing under the ribs and viciously covered Su Qing's lips.

This was rather rash. The taste of blood quickly spread.

Su Qing sighed inwardly, thinking, Some initiative it is, then. So he hooked his arms around Hu Bugui's neck and raised a knee to rub his leg a little fawningly. Hu Bugui firmly bit his neck.

Su Qing hissed and covered the place where the skin had broken where he had bit it. Not quite smiling, he asked, "Chief, are you jealous?"

Hu Bugui's answer was to pull open his pants.

Su Qing moved very cooperatively, making it more convenient for him to pull. "Actually, I'm pretty pleased. Really. This is the first time in my life anyone's been jealous over me."

Hu Bugui froze. He raised his head just in time to meet Su Qing's eyes. There seemed to be unspeakable tenderness in Su Qing's eyes. He extended a hand and lightly grabbed Hu Bugui's hair. His fine breath sprayed on the side of Hu Bugui's face and neck, so he could clearly feel the sigh Su Qing breathed out. "Actually..."

Actually what, Su Qing didn't have time to say, because just then, someone outside banged on the door. Chang Dou shouted by the door as if galvanized: "Captain Hu! Captain Hu! I've cracked the cypher on the microchips! Ahahaha, you'll never guess what they are, even Dr. Lu is astonished! It's a genetic database! There's a genetic database on the microchips!"

Chang—Dou!

Hu Bugui thought he really did want to fucking shoot this little whelp.

HU BUGUI kicked the door open, nearly flattening Chang Dou's nose.

Chang Dou felt murderous energy hit him in the face. He blinked and foolishly watched Hu Bugui storm off, having no idea how he had offended this great Buddha.

I've cracked the cypher..., Chang Dou thought, feeling wronged.

Then the slammed door once again opened from inside. This time it was the smiling Su Qing who came out. Chang Dou's head had been hanging down dejectedly. He absent-mindedly said hi to him, then casually raised his head to look at Su Qing. Just one look, and Chang Dou's eyes were glued to the spot.

Two buttons had been torn off Su Qing's shirt collar, revealing the flowing full moon-shaped grey seal under his collarbone...and a big bite mark on his neck that obviously hadn't been left by a mosquito.

As a qualified nerd, whose breeding grounds were text and 2D, what little boy going through porn looking for seeds hasn't mixed in some calcium pills?

So Chang Dou was shaken, feeling that he had been struck by lightning. Under Su Qing's unfathomable gaze, his throat bobbed with difficulty, and he quiveringly said, "Did...did I..."

He pointed at Su Qing, then pointed in the direction of Hu Bugui's distant receding figure, suddenly feeling a bitterly cold desolation rising unbidden. He tearfully asked, "You two...well...well...did I..."

Su Qing's smile became brighter and brighter, its brightness index approaching Dr. Kou's.

Chang Dou quickly covered his mouth, his fingers squeezing out the bit of baby fat in his cheeks. His eyes nearly popped out from behind his glasses. It was as if he had seen a ghost.

Hu Bugui's thunderous roar suddenly came from up ahead: "Chang Dou! You've rounded everyone up like you were sending them off to rein-

carnate, so what are you still dawdling for?!”

Chang Dou raised his foot as though sleepwalking, shaking three times with each step, walking out as though malnourished—in his head, all the cyphers, DNA, genetic databases, and theories of time and space had turned into paste. An invisible hand had scrawled the cruel and aggressive words “you’re dead meat” in the paste.

Even Jiang Lan had been alerted. Everyone gathered around Zheng Wan, awaiting Chang Dou’s final unmasking of the secret.

Chang Dou quickly gave a cough and adjusted his psychological state. Along with Cheng Weizhi, he put a bunch of symbols incomprehensible to others up on the slide projector. He tossed his head to clear it a little, then cleared his throat and did his best to speak in language that humans could understand: “Teacher Cheng and I have roughly deciphered what is contained in the black boxes. The majority of the contents must be databases of each country’s major political leaders.”

Several photos appeared on the screen. Pointing at one of them, Fang Xiu said, “Hey, isn’t this old man with a face like a shoehorn the president of F Country?”

“There’s also their Secretary of State and Minister of Public Health,” Cheng Weizhi added. “This black box is F Country’s.”

“F Country was on the list of of the first wave to acknowledge Utopia’s legitimacy.” Hu Bugui flipped through the materials and frowned. “What’s going on with this genetic database? Are you telling me they’re worried about someone cloning their president?”

“That’s one aspect of it.” As Chang Dou spoke, he opened a picture. Looking from far away, you could still just see the double helix structure of the DNA strands. He enlarged it again and again. After it had been enlarged over a hundred thousand times, everyone at last found that it was thickly marked with characters. In the end, it was impossible to tell what it had been originally. There was only a screen full of writing.

“*This* is the genetic database in the black box,” Chang Dou said. “The information it contains isn’t only the sequences of purines and pyrimidines. Most importantly, it contains the ‘activating spatial coefficients.’”

“What’s that?” Su Qing asked.

The specialist Cheng Weizhi picked up the subject. He looked at the dense rows of formulas on the screen almost with infatuation. Quietly, he

said, “Each substance has its own activating spatial coefficient. It includes all the necessary energy, the energy linking method, the activating method, and so on—it’s extremely complex. As soon as you’ve succeeded in activating it, then another point in space in this world will be brought into synchronization, like the black box storage compartment under Zheng Wan.”

“They...Utopia has made a program. If you input the coefficients into the program, a space can be activated at any point using emotional waves as a means,” Chang Dou said. “And the genetic database in the black box records the ‘activating spatial coefficients’ of the genes of these major political leaders. As long as the program is completely established, this thing, making use of any passerby around, can transmit emotional energy by means of an energy hub, and they can put anything into that space.”

Lu Qingbai whispered, “In other words...they can implant anything into that person’s genes.”

Maybe they would die, but the more frightening possibility was a life worse than death.

“They can turn a person into a monster, make it so that you can’t even explain the truth. If you said you were some important personage, who would know? Given our current technological level, our technique for identifying a person is genetic identification. If a person’s DNA has changed, are they still the same person?” Lu Qingbai suddenly became agitated. “No wonder...no wonder...”

“How many black boxes were there in all in Zheng Wan’s space?” Fang Xiu asked.

“Judging from the quantity of the data in the genetic database, it’s likely that it wasn’t complete,” Chang Dou said.

A horrifying silence.

“Don’t start thinking about how to cure the symptoms but not the disease,” Ji Pengcheng opened after a long time. “A strand of hair, a vial of blood can let them get your genetic information. The most important thing now is that this is something Utopia has cooked up. It’s their own patent technique. Others can’t guard against it.”

Kou Tong looked at him and picked up the subject. “Either we destroy their core technology, or we come up with a way to unravel it.”

When the words “a way to unravel it” were spoken, Lu Qingbai, Chang Dou, and Cheng Weizhi all simultaneously took on fanatical expressions.

Hu Bugui frowned. “There’s no time. That won’t work. Since the people in the highest positions have been threatened by this thing, they must know about the existence of the genetic database. They would be idiots not to get people in to research how to unravel it. We don’t need to get mixed in. Anyway, Utopia cooked this thing up, and they definitely aren’t going to make it easy on anyone to unravel it. We’ll think of another way.”

Chang Dou hesitated. He raised his head and looked at the dense formulas on the slide. “Captain Hu...

“I have an idea. When this kind of space is activated, the data is so immense you can’t imagine it, and the program is so large you also can’t imagine it. But the amount of energy it needs is extremely precise, and once a result has been calculated, it’s comparatively easy to realize. It was already so hard for us to open Zheng Wan’s space, so never mind a tightly-knit space like in DNA.”

“And so?”

“So my guess is that they must have a super-grade core processor.”

Another awkward silence... The problem was, where *was* this super core processor?

Kou Tong paused, then candidly said, “We don’t have enough people.” He looked at Su Qing.

Su Qing immediately understood. “Captain Hu, as an anti-government force, I believe that a group of wanted criminals like us needs capital and weaponry.”

“You mean...”

“Let’s go to the ST Training Camp.”

Hu Bugui frowned. Zhong Shiliang hadn’t been included in the connections General Xiong had left him. He couldn’t resist looking at Kou Tong a little distrustfully. “What kind of a place *is* the ST Training Camp?”

“It used to be a base.” Kou Tong smiled. “One of the secret bases that could be rapidly activated when our country was faced with a crisis. It has special contact mechanisms with several large military regions. There’s a weapons factory fifty kilometers from the training camp, focusing on heavy-duty weaponry.

“With this bargaining chip, I think that the time is ripe for us to go to the ST Training Camp,” Kou Tong finally summed up.

“How will we get there?” Hu Bugui asked.

Kou Tong pointed at himself. "We have a mole."

The mole stood up to the test. Three days later, having undergone tense preparations, they quickly reached the ST Base by a route that probably only "internal personnel" would know. Su Qing and Fang Xiu, both itching to have a go, simultaneously asked Hu Bugui for permission: "Chief, can I hang my gun on that Zhong character's head?"

...Then these two people who, with wanted notices out for them, had really taken themselves for drug traffickers, were sorted out by Captain Hu. Kou Tong's privileges within the ST Base were rather high. With him bringing them, they went to practically no effort and arrived at the training camp base where they had previously had an experience of life worse than death.

Zhong Shiliang looked calmly at the crowd of gate crashers in his office, put down the enamel "Serve the People" mug in his hand, and, unmoved, looked at Kou Tong. "I figured you should be showing up around now."

Kou Tong raised his hands and affectedly said, "I was under duress."

Zhong Shiliang shook his head. "What poor vision these bandits have—everyone sit."

Chang Dou looked at him and suddenly thought that Zhong Shiliang seemed to be a little different from last time. He couldn't resist lightly tugging at the person next to him without even getting a clear look at who this was. He asked, "Why does this person..."

"Hm?"

"Smell like a final boss?"

Fang Xiu looked at him and coldly said, "You've caught a cold."

But Zhong Shiliang seemed to have heard. He smiled at Chang Dou, laced his fingers together, and leaned back in his chair. The feeling was that *he* was the bandit and would have the final word. "I hope that you came prepared, or else...military affairs are important and shouldn't be casually disturbed."

His gaze suddenly turned sharp. All the doors and windows in the room close from outside. Small red lights lit up in the corners and along the walls. Su Qing tensed all over—he remembered these lights. He had seen these lights that night when he had been pulled into the dreamland.

Hu Bugui at last understood why Kou Tong had only now told them about the secret of the ST Base.

The ST Base was only a tool, and not a reliable one. If you touched it casually without being completely prepared, it would backfire.

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“You!” Only when Kou Tong and Zhong Shiliang were left alone in the office did Zhong...we should call him General Zhong now, smack the table and stand up, glaring with displeasure at Kou Tong, sitting across from him slowly drinking tea and smiling. “You really are...really are...fearless!”

Kou Tong blinked and shamelessly said, “Don’t be so adoring. You’re embarrassing me.”

Zhong Shiliang raised a hand and smacked him on the head with a document. Almost flustered, he said, “Look for yourself!”

Kou Tong rubbed his forehead indifferently, took the document, and read through it quickly. He lowered his eyes and laughed. “Fine, army headquarters really does have some of their people. They’ve stretched their hand out a little too far, getting in everywhere they can.”

Zhong Shiliang glanced at him irritably.

Kou Tong met his eyes and very insincerely said, “Wow, I’m scared to death. Comrade Lao Zhong, as a frail and gentle mountebank, reading this really has me so scared my heart is fluttering.”

Zhong Shiliang sighed and put his hands on the desk. “You tell me. I’ve received orders from above freezing all transfers between military regions in the near future. How am I supposed to get people?”

“Implement a state of emergency,” Kou Tong said unblushingly.

“Bullshit! You’re talking crap.”

Kou Tong restrained his smile. His skinny body leaned slightly forward in his chair. He extended a finger and tapped on the document. “It’s not crap. Look at this. Isn’t this critical enough? Instructor, don’t play dumb with me. I know that sitting in your position, even though the inside story about Utopia isn’t very clear, you still know how things stand.”

When he called out “instructor,” Zhong Shiliang stopped dead, but his eyes softened slightly. Kou Tong lowered his voice. “This world is already beyond cure. Haven’t you seen it? Even if it takes chemo, even if it’s a life-

and-death struggle and we have to die taking them with us, we still have to get rid of these ‘cancer cells,’ or else in the future, a person won’t even be in control of their own emotions. Will there still be any need to live?”

“I know some things, and even if I didn’t know them, Su Qing was clear enough just now.” Zhong Shiliang slowly shook his head after looking at him for a while. “You can call it a life-and-death struggle, and I can call it dying and taking them with us. Even if you ask for my life, make me come die with you, I still won’t say a word of protest. But while I can give my life, I can’t give you the authority in my hands. If I make an exception, if there’s some unforeseen incident, I couldn’t make up for it if I had a hundred lives or a thousand lives. I can’t undertake that responsibility.”

“I know.” A long time later, Kou Tong finally nodded. As he looked over, his eyes seemed extremely clear. Dr. Kou seemed to let his mind wander for a moment. Then he very quickly came around and sighed. “Instructor, this is a bad position to be in.”

Zhong Shiliang laughed bitterly.

“And what if we could strike the snake at its critical point all at once?” Kou Tong suddenly said. “If we really could plan a Normandy landing?”

“We? You and...?”

Kou Tong laughed noiselessly. “This country, when it’s in danger, always needs homeless, jobless hoodlums to stand forth.”

Zhong Shiliang looked at him without speaking. Kou Tong stood up and stretched, then yawned. “I’ve always thought that if a person is unhappy living, it’s better not to live. What do you think, instructor?—You’re busy, I’ll go talk over proper business with Su Qing and the others.”

So the whole crowd of wanted individuals, with Zhong Shiliang’s tacit approval and sheltering, openly stayed on at the ST Base, eating all-natural organic vegetables every day. Though they were still tired as dogs, at any rate they had improved their dogs’ lives.

The field personnel didn’t dare to investigate out in the open. They could only make secret inquiries, immersing themselves in the voluminous but now seemingly insubstantial and uninformed materials General Xiong had left behind concerning Utopia, searching for the heart of Utopia’s secrets like fishing for a needle in the big sea.

The happiest of them was Chang Dou. For him, the ST Base’s equipment was truly like replacing a shotgun with a cannon. Everything here was

better than what they had had at the RZ Unit headquarters.

Kou Tong meanwhile devoted himself to digging up Zheng Qinghua's whole life. He didn't leave his room for three days and two nights. Apart from receiving materials prepared by the RZ Unit, he didn't let himself be interrupted for a moment. They didn't know what he was fiddling with. Su Qing had been led off by Ji Pengcheng, who said he wanted to teach him something. It was hard for even Hu Bugui to see him.

Right now, one old man and one young one were sitting inside a little room. Ji Pengcheng was sitting across from Su Qing with big headphones over his ears. The headphone cord was connected to a silver box next to him that looked rather incongruous.

Su Qing had his eyes closed and wires attached to his temples, but the indicator needle wasn't fluctuating at all. After a moment, he opened his eyes as though giving up. He rubbed the sides of his forehead. "Old man, it won't work."

"Calm yourself. I told you, the essential thing is to be single-minded." Ji Pengcheng was looking like a great immortal.

Su Qing's shoulders fell. "Old man, why don't you have me go out to investigate Fei Zhe? Don't keep trying to get blood from a stone, making me sit here all day like I'm meditating. It's not like I'm planning to be a monk. Even the thought annoys me."

Ji Pengcheng opened his eyes and looked at him without speaking or smiling.

Su Qing met his eyes, then sat back down. "Fine, I'll treat it like resting my eyes."

"Do you still remember the first time I met you, that dead Utopia person?"

"Oh...that..." Su Qing stared. In fact, he had already forgotten. "I think I vaguely recall..."

"You had just left the RZ Unit and were running around outside with the little bastard, living in a worker's house. You were still a clumsy newbie. Their man got his eye on you," Ji Pengcheng said unhurriedly. "You had been shot in the leg and couldn't get up off the ground. Do you remember what you were thinking then?"

Su Qing thought for a while, then sincerely shook his head. After another moment, suddenly seeing the light, he said, "Oh...oh, that person! I re-

member, right, I've never been able to understand how he died. I thought that he was running and running, and then he suddenly fell forward, right? It felt like I'd killed him with a look."

"That's about right," Ji Pengcheng said.

He leaned forward slightly and grabbed Su Qing's wrist. "Try now to see whether you can feel my emotions, like that blue seal you knew before."

Su Qing frowned and carefully sensed. He shook his head. "I can only faintly feel intense emotions. I can't feel ordinary ones. Other people's emotions are like low-decibel everyday background noise for me. I'm so used to it that I don't feel like I'm 'hearing' anything in particular."

Ji Pengcheng didn't let go of his wrist. "When you saw that Utopia member shoot you and then run away, what did you feel?"

Su Qing hesitated. A little uncertainly, he said, "I must have been... scared?"

"Recall what you were feeling then."

Su Qing tried to recall, but all that came to mind was that abstract word "scared." After a long moment, he finally shook his head—this was like forcing a grown-up person to recall the feeling of being a child scared of thunder, scared of the dark, scared of insects. They were things that had been sincerely frightening back then, but afterward you couldn't remember what it was like to be afraid of them no matter what.

Ji Pengcheng sighed. "That person back then was simply scared to death. If you want to understand the single-minded condition you need, then understand this. Do you remember the Law of Emotional Attraction? It's a wave. If the emotions you release can make others fall into the same frequency as you, then you can control their emotions. He didn't have as resilient a body as you. He couldn't endure the attack of strong external emotions. So he died."

Su Qing looked at him with the expression of someone looking at a conman.

Ji Pengcheng ignored it. He continued: "These last few years, I've wanted to explain to you how human emotions work, but your thoughts have been too complicated. And now you've made it big and your guts have grown big enough to crush someone. You rarely have such strong emotions as back then, and sometimes when others are thinking something, you can see it at a glance, so you think there's no need to listen to the voice in their hearts."

Just then, someone gently knocked on the door twice. Hu Bugui's voice came: "Come out for a moment, you two. Dr. Kou seems to have made some progress."

Ji Pengcheng gave an affirmative and suddenly looked at Su Qing with a strange smile. He stroked his chin, his expression rather lewd. "Although...if you can't feel Type 3 emotions, I suppose Type 1 will do?"

"Huh?"

"Just think of some nice things while looking at him. Try it." The old swindler patted him on the shoulder, grinning. Then he turned, and his expression became foul. He whispered, "There's no carving rotten wood."

I can still hear you..., Su Qing thought in exasperation.

Hu Bugui waited less than a minute before he saw Su Qing walk out of the room behind Ji Pengcheng. He saw that the old man's expression looked unhappy and waited for him to leave. Then he couldn't resist reaching out to lightly touch Su Qing's forehead. "Isn't he your shifu? He's getting on in years. Don't keep making him angry on purpose."

Su Qing remembered what Ji Pengcheng had said. He didn't speak, only looked fixedly at Hu Bugui with a trace of a smile.

Hu Bugui was a little bewildered at his look. There was no one present, so he softened his voice a little and quietly asked, "What is it?"

"Oh, do you feel..." Su Qing suddenly thought that he had definitely been taken in by believing what Ji Pengcheng had said. His words paused there. He rolled his eyes, not planning to say the rest.

"Feel what?"

"OK, do you feel a bit happy?"

Hu Bugui stared. Su Qing sighed. "It seems that you don't."

Hu Bugui laughed quietly and put his arms around Su Qing's back. "I feel it."

Then he added, "Not just a bit."

Damn. This outwardly reserved, inwardly mushy man.

Kou Tong looked like he had just been through an African famine and only had a single breath left. He was sitting there very feebly, practically without even the energy to entice Su Qing or tease Hu Bugui. He fell over onto the couch and said, "You can look for yourselves."

Then he buried his head and didn't speak.

“Zheng Qinghua never mentioned this kind of thing to me,” Cheng Weizhi said. Then he paused and frowned. As though suddenly remembering something, he added, “But...I remember when we were young, I think he said to me that he hoped to be able to attain freedom. If he could build a world that would let him be free—if there was such a thing that could open a space whose natural laws only he could control, he would call it Genesis 1.”

Su Qing picked up a coat and put it over Kou Tong. Before Hu Bugui’s expression could turn unpleasant, he drew everyone’s attention to a thick stack of reports Kou Tong had taken out. He flipped them open. Inside, first came Zheng Qinghua’s life story, what he had done and at what age, an analysis of psychological factors, including the relevant personnel whom he had crossed paths with. After that was a pile of terminology, as well as a map that had so many annotations on it that you couldn’t see anything.

Su Qing: “...”

He awkwardly put it down. “Why can’t Dr. Kou use human speech when he’s writing his reports?”

From this report, the majority of people could only extract two pieces of information—that Zheng Qinghua was a nasty piece of work, and that Dr. Kou had used his magic powers to calculate the location of this Genesis 1 that Professor Cheng had mentioned.

Finally, Hu Bugui took the report and went once more to Zhong Shiliang’s office. Zhong Shiliang flipped from the beginning of Kou Tong’s report to the end, page by page. He spent over two hours reading. Then he raised his head and nodded to Hu Bugui, closed the report, then took a document out of a drawer next to him and put it into the shredder.

“We’ve entered a state of emergency. The base can give you all the support you need.”

Then came assembling equipment from the weapons factory and, at the base, with the cooperation of the technicians, scanning the location pointed out on Dr. Kou’s map.

Chang Dou’s frequently addled-looking expression became serious. “Under ordinary circumstances...this would have been overlooked. This blocker is very special.”

“What’s the situation?” Lu Qingbai asked.

Chang Dou thought about it, then explained: "It's like...it's like some decades ago, someone proposed an original idea similar to a cloaking garment, using a material like a screen to make the clothing, and putting a camera system on the person's back projecting the images onto the front, so that looking head on, it would be like the covered part of the person's body didn't exist.

"This blocker is like that cloaking garment." Chang Dou clutched his hair. "And, looking at the map, this area is under a lake. It's really hard to find. If Dr. Kou hadn't been certain that it had to be near this area, no one would have noticed a trace of it."

"That seamless?" Qin Luo asked.

"Well...there is a bit of a seam." Chang Dou typed a string of commands on the keyboard of the ST Base's processor. An enormous map with contour lines appeared on the big screen in front of everyone. "It's a location about three hundred meters under the water, around four hundred square meters large. The probe signal was disturbed by a powerful energy field when it went underwater. We couldn't scan the precise circumstances."

"Don't alert the enemy. First we need someone to have a look at the situation," Hu Bugui finally said.

Su Qing was already standing up. He also pulled Ji Pengcheng up. "Shifu and I will go over and have a look."

Ji Pengcheng: "..."

The little whelp only called him "shifu" when he was pressing him to get to work!

Zhong Shiliang followed along in silence, looking at Chang Dou's map. A bodyguard ran in and said something into his ear. Zhong Shiliang nodded. He was currently not accepting any military orders from the outside. No matter who called to question him, he ignored them without exception. Even when the higher authorities had sent two people over, without another word and without showing himself, he had simply had them held by force.

The bodyguard left, and Kou Tong came over. Peering at his expression, he asked, "What is it?"

"It seems that you've done the right thing this time," Zhong Shiliang commented after thinking for a long moment. "But...how will we resolve what comes after?"

"After?"

“The centipede dies but doesn’t stiffen.” If they got rid of this base or killed Zheng Qinghua, would that resolve the matter of Utopia?

“Well...” Kou Tong thought about it, then suddenly laughed in spite of himself. “When the revolution has yet to succeed, the comrades must continue to strive. Leading a vagrant’s life in the open for close to a year, gambling with our lives, was also for the sake of taking back the RZ Unit’s ‘right of legitimate resistance.’”

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“SU QING, Su Qing, you guys, stop, don’t go any further!”

This was a narrow road in the countryside, not much wider than a one-way street. To either side were sparse trees, farmland, and wilderness.

Su Qing very naturally let the car slide a dozen meters, then stop. Then he jumped out and rolled his sleeves up high, revealing forearms with well-proportioned muscles. He had a cap gone pale from washing on his head. There were two buttons open on his dark blue shirt. Somehow the color of his skin had become very dark, and in a very natural way. He really looked like someone who was always out on the road.

“Why would it break?” he said, pretending to wildly rummage around under the car, pounding and clanking.

Just then, Chang Dou said into his ear over the communicator, “We’ve detected an enormous spatial field over there. You’ve already reached its edge. This spatial field is very strange. Ordinarily speaking, forcibly manufactured spatial fields are all unstable, for example, the one we tested with Zheng Wan. But this one is actually a stable field. The two spaces are merged. I have no way to determine what will happen if you two go in.”

Su Qing’s hand paused. He stuck his head out from under the car and yelled to Ji Pengcheng inside: “Hey, old man, how much farther is it?”

Chang Dou stared. Hu Bugui quietly explained: “He’s asking how far they are from our target area right now.”

“Oh...oh!” Chang Dou caught up, thinking that going out in the field was too stimulating. You had to have a quick brain. “Rough estimate, you’re still around twenty kilometers from our target area.”

Ji Pengcheng cooperatively stuck out his head. He had a cigarette in his mouth. He slowly said, “Huh? It’s still early, why are you in a rush? Listen, kid, are you doing all right?”

Su Qing cursed and got up off the ground, then went to open the trunk, saying as though talking to himself, “Is the toolbox here?”

Chang Dou absolutely couldn't tell whom Su Qing was talking to. He went blank again. Hu Bugui had to stand next to him and translate: "He's asking whether you have some tool that can probe the spatial field."

Chang Dou was reverent. "Oh, there are some plans. Try setting off a gravitational probe and see what happens, it's in the pocket watch I gave you. Pick the gravitational probe release program, then you won't have to mind it anymore. If an unusual space or field appears, it will automatically roll over."

Under cover of the car, Su Qing quickly pulled out the pocket watch and pressed it a few times. An "oil droplet" as clear as water rolled off the side off the watch and fell on the ground, quickly breaking into several small granules almost invisible to the naked eye. They stopped for a moment, then simultaneously rolled forward.

Su Qing waited for the results of the analysis while wasting time tinkering in the back. Ji Pengcheng, who might have been incredibly idle, stuck his head out to tease him. "Listen, kid, have you found the toolbox yet? Or can't you fix it? If you can't, then say so. I won't make fun of you for being an inexperienced man too young to grow a beard. I won't tell your wife."

As Su Qing listened to reports of all kinds of data from the outside of the space coming over the communicator from the main engine, he took some time out of his busy schedule to stick his head out and raise his middle finger at him.

Chang Dou looked nervously at Hu Bugui. "Captain Hu, what kind of secret signal is that?"

Hu Bugui: "..."

From a neighboring field, a somewhat aged man with the look of a farmer walked out. He seemed to want to rest nearby. Ji Pengcheng shot Su Qing a look. Su Qing pushed his cap brim up and walked over carrying a wrench, familiarly putting on a brilliant smile. "Brother, let me ask you something, how far is the nearest place that can repair a car?"

The old villager looked at him. "What, did your car break down?"

"It won't go." Su Qing shrugged.

The old villager smilingly suggested, "Give it a kick!"

"Oh, all right." Su Qing raised his foot and gave it a kick. Then...it bounced back. He clutched his hair and twisted his head back with a simple-minded look. "Brother, it didn't help!"

The others were watching the performance. Lu Qingbai couldn't resist laughing. Smacking Chang Dou on the back of the head, he said, "He's imitating you. He's so good at using local materials."

Just then, Su Qing's gaze fell on the old villager's wrist. His gaze suddenly paused, and his pupils contracted. He made a hair-clutching gesture, his fingers brushing against the communicator. Lu Qingbai said, "I saw it, that bracelet he's wearing is very much like the ones the Dong family had. Don't touch it."

The old farmer put down his farm tool and came over to look with an affected air but didn't see anything. He assessed: "This car...is kind of lousy."

Su Qing: "Heh-heh."

"Well, that's trouble," said the old farmer. "Do you have a what-do-you-call-it...a phone? My son says if you use the phone, you can call people to tow your car away."

"Oh, that's right!" said Su Qing, who was being possessed by Chang Dou. He reached his hand into his pants pocket to fish for his phone. When he had it, he found a precise spot on it and pressed lightly—when he took it out, it was a phone with a black screen. Tilting his head, he knocked the phone against the automobile, looking astonished. "Huh? Why won't it light up?"

The battery had been hit by an energy blast and roasted—

Su Qing and the farmer stared at each other in dismay. Finally, the warm-hearted village uncle promised to think of a way to help them when his son got back. So the two of them squatted by the road side by side, chatting back and forth. After a moment, Ji Pengcheng also got out of the car, ostensibly to scold Su Qing, but he seeded a lot of tricks into his language. In hardly any time, the old villager had cheerfully handed over eighteen generations of his ancestors.

Fang Xiu sighed. He looked at Su Qing on the screen playing dumb, then looked at the truly dumb Chang Dou, and thought that the latter was after all more pleasing to the eye.—This Su Qing, he thought, really is too hard to handle. Captain Hu truly is worthy of his rank. He has to choose a high difficulty level even in romance.

Su Qing pretended to only just now notice the bracelet on the old villager's arm. He blinked and said in surprise, "Uncle, a grown man like you,

why would you be wearing a bracelet?”

The old villager gave a cough, took the half-transparent bracelet off his arm, and offered it to Su Qing. It was naturally picked up for observation by Ji Pengcheng.

“This is medicine,” the old villager said shockingly. “Before, we had some of that what-do-you-call-it...sleeping sickness, right, that’s it, that sickness where you fall asleep and won’t wake up. Everyone was in a panic, and later the government sent a medical team and gave this to everyone, one for each person. If you wear this, you can avoid getting the sleeping sickness. And afterwards, it’s true that it didn’t happen again.”

“Everyone has one?”

“That’s right.”

“Copy,” Chang Dou said over the communicator. “This kind of external energy crystal that passes through a unified hub can prevent sleeping sickness—wait a minute, you two be careful. A gravitational probe has already entered the target area, and we’ve lost contact now.”

“I think I understand the basic reasoning behind this bracelet,” Cheng Weizhi said, pushing up his glasses. “At heart, the sleeping sickness is caused by the large-scale absorption of the patient’s emotions, exceeding the limits of human tolerance. With this thing like an external energy crystal, you can create something like a ‘static screen’ to counteract the emotional ‘field.’”

“The car you drove in there is also on the same prin...” Before Chang Dou could finish his sentence, the computer in front of him suddenly sounded a sharp alarm.

Everyone was startled. On the big screen, they saw the area not far from Su Qing where the two spaces were folded together suddenly surge towards them like a tide.

“What’s happening?” Zhong Shiliang pushed aside a few people blocking his way and came to stand at the front, frowning. “Have they disturbed something?”

“I don’t know whether it was the energy blast he just used to stimulate the battery or the gravitational probe.” Chang Dou grabbed the communicator. “Su Qing, Su Qing, listen to me, withdraw from there at once, the spatial field has just been disturbed, I didn’t expect it to be so sensitive, it’s coming towards you as though it’s been activated.”

Su Qing stared. Ji Pengcheng had also heard. The two of them quickly exchanged a look. How to withdraw? Get in the car now? Too phony, no?

Su Qing suddenly asked, “Brother, how much longer will it be before your son comes back?”

This time, before Chang Dou could ask, Hu Bugui quickly said, “He’s asking you how long before the field spreads to him. What’s the speed?”

“Very fast. A conservative estimate is within ten minutes,” Chang Dou said.

But the old farmer didn’t know of their private anxieties. He unhurriedly answered, “Are you in a rush? It’s early for him, he won’t be here before dark.”

Ji Pengcheng’s face immediately took on a look of reluctance. In deadly earnest, he said, “Oh, that won’t do—kid, give me the toolbox, I’ll get out and have a look.”

Then the old man took the toolbox and squeezed under the car with extremely expert movements, holding a flashlight in his mouth. Three minutes later, Ji Pengcheng’s furious scolding came from under the car: “Do you have any brains in your head, kid? You can’t fix this? Here I thought it was some major fucking breakdown. Honestly, you’re... The wheel’s still turning, but the hamster’s dead.”

Su Qing grinned “simple-mindedly” and thought, Just you wait, old fart.

Ji Pengcheng displayed seemingly expert care repair skills, deftly resolving the “problem.” He climbed into the driver’s seat with a foul look, and the car quickly started.

Though it was very phony, the sole member of the audience still applauded.

The old villager even commented, “If you’d known before, you could have done that earlier. One veteran really is worth two novices!”

Su Qing said goodbye to him and opened the passenger’s side door. Just then, he suddenly raised his head and looked to the side. There was an ear-splitting alarm coming over the communicator in his ear with Chang Dou’s voice mixed in: “Ahhh, why would such a stable field suddenly revolt! Su Qing, you inhuman, how does something always go wrong with you?!”

Su Qing ignored him. He had “seen” that thing—it didn’t look like a tornado, and it didn’t look like the tide. He could see the place not far away

where there seemed to be a line no one could detect. He couldn't "hear" any noise from beyond the line. It was...a place in another world.

Su Qing quickly got the car moving and locked the doors. A transparent control panel popped up in front of the seat. He quickly tapped on it a few times. Just as the space quickly flowed over the whole car, the highest level protective system came into being.

The communicator signal cut off amid the sounds of rustling and static.

For a moment, the ST Base was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop. Chang Dou had gone completely blank. He had his mouth open for a long moment, forgetting to close it. He was pushed aside by Zhong Shiliang, then quickly pulled up a map of the whole area. The coordinate point belonging to Su Qing had disappeared.

"We alter the plan according the worst calculations," Zhong Shiliang ordered. "Maintain a protective umbrella to guard against explosions. Squad One will enter the target area to clear out the residents. Everyone wear protective clothes. The others, surround the area. Don't act rashly without my orders, and don't activate any energy equipment!"

"Also, deploy helicopters with sufficient demolition tools," Kou Tong added, his face grave.

Hu Bugui's hands clenched, nails digging into his flesh. His whole face was tense, drawing out a fierce arc.

But in the end, he didn't say anything.

Su Qing and Ji Pengcheng sat in the car. For a full half a minute, no one said anything. Fortunately, after half a minute, nothing had happened. Ji Pengcheng slowly stepped on the gas pedal and drove the car away. "The highest level protective system held... Now what?"

Su Qing didn't speak. He pointed to the boxes of light and heavy weaponry in the backseat. "The connection is broken, and we don't know what this damn thing's principle is, don't know how it was disturbed, and don't know whether we've alerted the enemy already. Captain Hu and the others will probably act according to the worst calculations—drive forward—this time...we have to stake it all on one throw."

Ji Pengcheng glanced at him.

With his voice low and his expression steady, Su Qing said, "They'll likely think of a way to invade or blow up the whole area. It's dangerous on the

outside, too. It's better to cooperate with them and go have a look at what kind of demon this amazing thing that's hijacked the world is."

Ji Pengcheng laughed softly. "What, you think that he'll disregard where you live or die?"

"Nonsense. There's no need for him to attend to whether I live or die." Su Qing raised the thin membrane over his cap and face, revealing the pale skin underneath. He briskly rubbed a few times, and the "simple-minded" face from before was all gone, revealing a slightly arrogant smile. "The people inside receive more blessings if they save themselves."

"Hey!" Ji Pengcheng sighed with emotion. "The little whelp has grown up. You've grown some guts."

102

“WHAT...is that thing?”

In the ST Base’s control room, everyone was staring dumbfounded at the slowly expanding scope of the map on the screen.

It embraced the whole world. Dozens of points seemed to throw out countless rays. They linked together like an enormous and malicious spider’s web.

“What is this?” Fang Xiu asked.

At the same time, another person asked exactly the same question as Fang Xiu. This person seemed very old—though his true age might perhaps not have been nearly as old and decayed as it seemed, it was as though he had begun to rot at the soul. He sat on a couch, leaning forward, a feverish look on his age-spotted face, looking obsessively at those linked-together points.

Even 11235 standing next to him couldn’t resist sticking his head out and looking rather curiously.

“They’re seeds.” There was a communicator arranged on the table. The upper half of man’s body appeared in front of the two of them. This man had a full head of white hair, but he seemed very energetic. He had a pair of rimless glasses on his nose. His eyes were very cold; a layer of glass seemed to be floating on top of them, faintly reflecting light, like the eyes of some cold-blooded animal.

“Dr. Zheng.” The man turned his head eagerly.

But Zheng Qinghua turned his head away, looking at the web that was gradually encircling the whole world. He frowned. “I didn’t want to make Utopia appear so quickly. The time may not be entirely ripe. But the area of the central processor has been invaded...”

Then he laughed. There was a certain unspeakable childishness about Zheng Qinghua’s laugh. “Though I was forced to it, it seems now that making the seeds sprout and blossom ahead of time is no bad thing.”

The man's voice trembled a little. "This is...Utopia?"

"Yes." Zheng Qinghua's voice unexpectedly sounded somewhat tender. He extended slender, attractive fingers and brushed the electronic screen, following the threads of the "web." "These are the seeds that we have buried throughout the world. This may be illusory, and it may be real. When the central processor's energy field has been radiated out, the 'seeds' will grow up rapidly. Different spaces will overlap outside the real space and replace the dimension of reality, and Utopia will be born, relying on the emotional energy of all the humans in the world. This will be a completely different world..."

"So...will time run backwards?" The man straightened up, his features so excited that they were a little warped. His face was nearly pressed to the communicator's screen, making him look increasingly ugly. "Will I return to the age of my prime? You can do that, can't you, Dr. Zheng?"

The childlike smile on Zheng Qinghua's face gradually cooled, returning it to an expressionless appearance. He looked coldly at Fei Zhe and indifferently said, "Of course."

The man seemed too excited. He suddenly began to tremble all over, his lips turning pale, his whole body stiffening, clutching his collar tightly, his eyes rolling up.

"Wow," said 11235.

Only then did Zheng Qinghua see 11235 standing there like an invisible man. He quietly said, "It's you? I rarely see you. I guess you had better... find some medicine for him."

11235 slowly went up in leisurely fashion and fished a little pill bottle out of a jacket lying on the couch. He roughly opened the man's mouth. Rather than calling his action "feeding medicine," it would be more accurate to say that he "stuffed" the medicine in. Then he raised his head and laughed towards Zheng Qinghua. "You're wrong, I actually haven't seen a single glimpse of you, Mr. Beast in Human Clothing Doctor. Aren't you the one who's as cowardly as a rabbit, hiding yourself all day, only contacting others over communicators?"

Zheng Qinghua frowned. He wasn't very accustomed to bantering with crude people like 11235. So he said, "Don't let him die." Then he unilaterally turned off the communicator.

11235 squatted on the floor, watching the man's face slowly recover as he gasped for breath. He gave a grim laugh and stood back up, picked up his gun, and went back to standing in the corner.

The man lying on the floor gasping recovered at last. He gradually opened the hand tightly clutching his collar and raised his head to look at the ceiling. His eyes were a little clouded, a little blank. Then he slowly turned his head and looked woodenly towards 11235, his eyes meeting those of the fierce young man. He opened his mouth and whispered, "You wouldn't betray me. You're the only one who won't betray me..."

11235 looked at him with a trace of a cold smile, like an indifferent audience member. The man shook his head nervily. "No...no, you're different. You aren't a man, you're a gun. A gun won't betray you, as long as you keep it in good repair, give it bullets. So as long as I give you money, you'll kill anyone I want you to kill. Yes...as long as I give you money, as long as I have money..."

11235 didn't respond. He gradually restrained the smile on his face and tilted his head slightly, looking the man over. He suddenly thought this man was a little pitiful. He seemed to have everything—money, fame, power—and soon, the whole world would be controlled and influenced by him, but he was still afraid.

Because all the things he relied on weren't his.

All these bright and shiny things hadn't come with him at birth and couldn't be taken along after death. He could be stripped of them at any time. In fact, when you thought about it, this old man had nothing but a decaying, deteriorating body.

At this time, after going through a brief period of disorder, the situation at the ST Base had been stabilized by Zhong Shiliang and Hu Bugui.

"Chang Dou, explain this to us."

Chang Dou's lips were a little pale. He turned a deaf ear to this sentence of Hu Bugui's. Sometimes, when people reached a certain degree of anxiety, their minds would go blank and only focus on one thing. Chang Dou took no notice of the other people present. He smoothly changed the page on the big screen, and a string of formulas incomprehensible to others blinded their eyes at a brutal speed. Only Cheng Weizhi could still contribute to the discussion.

Suddenly, Chang Dou furrowed his brow tightly. This made his profile seem considerably less childish, making him suddenly look like being called an elite was starting to turn into reality.

“This is insane.” Cheng Weizhi shook his head.

“What’s the current situation?” Zhong Shiliang asked again.

Chang Dou changed the screen back to the original page. The web on the map was constantly taking shape. At the points of overlap, something was slowly widening its scope. “An unknown, different space. Like the place Su Qing and Ji Pengcheng fell into. According to my calculations, it will spread over the whole globe within four hours. This is an alternate space, sustained by some kind of energy...”

“It’s likely to be emotional energy,” Cheng Weizhi put in.

“Right, it’s likely to be emotional energy. Then it will overlap with the real world. I understand what Utopia is doing—their blue seals are like motors, maintaining the stability of this space. It must have a central processor, and the person who controls this central processor controls the laws of this whole space. It...”

Kou Tong abruptly turned his head and looked at Zhong Shiliang. “Instructor!”

Zhong Shiliang waved a hand. “You don’t need to say it, I understand.

“I understand.” This officer with an ordinary face in the crowd raised his head. His eyes seemed to pierce through the huge screen. Then he quietly said, “I’m a soldier. I’m loyal to this country and this country’s people—the whole country, and the whole world, has many people like me.”

He seemed to sigh quietly. “Regardless of that...no matter what Utopia is thinking, people like us can’t let this world be controlled by some person. The alternative is horrifying. There will inevitably come a day when we’re forced to do things that go against our consciences.”

Zhong Shiliang turned his head and looked at Hu Bugui. “There are only four hours. Come up with a plan. No matter what price must be paid, I can match it—Captain Hu, you have full authority to direct this operation. If...”

He gave a low, cold laugh. There was a bloodthirstiness in his smile that was completely different from his usual correctness. “Then let’s all shoot each other, die together, and go ask for forgiveness.”

Hu Bugui neither nodded nor shook his head. He only immediately turned to Kou Tong. “Dr. Kou, please prepare to send a document to all internal personnel, then draft another document to pass on to the public through the media.

“Qin Luo, go find Fei Zhe.” Hu Bugui paused for a while. Qin Luo’s heels were already coming together out of habit as she planned to follow his order. Her eyes were still clear. Though she was an adult, her world was still so simple that it seemed to contain only two points and a line. There was only aiming and shooting, and obeying orders, doing the right thing according to her simple worldview. She still didn’t know how to speak and didn’t know how to get along with strangers.

Just then, a person standing in a corner walked over to pass Qin Luo a yellowing, old-fashioned folder, then salute her and turn to go. Zhong Shiliang said, “Fei Zhe’s information is inside. You can use it as reference.”

“Reference?” Qin Luo stared blankly. She suddenly turned to look at Hu Bugui. “Are you sending me to monitor this person?”

“Take some people along,” Hu Bugui said, “as well as a sniper rifle. If necessary, you decide for yourself how to act. Don’t go out of contact. If you run into the abnormal space areas, Chang Dou will tell you how to avoid them.”

“Yes, sir.” Qin Luo didn’t hesitate. She turned and left. She understood that Hu Bugui’s order to her had been “assassinate.”

Many bad guys had died by her gun—murderers, robbers, drug traffickers. This was her first time going to assassinate a politician—but she thought that there was no difference. Could a man who could casually kill even his own daughter be any good?

“Chang Dou, will you and Professor Cheng consult over how to deal with this thing?” Hu Bugui reminded him, “We only have four hours.”

“I know...I...” Chang Dou desperately clutched his hair.

“I can help with this.” A female voice suddenly came from the door. Hu Bugui turned to look and saw two guards escorting a person inside—it was Jiang Lan. In order to prove her harmlessness, Jiang Lan had been led the whole way at gunpoint with her hands raised over her head. Only when Hu Bugui waved a hand did the guards lower their guns.

“How did you find this place?” Lu Qingbai couldn’t resist asking.

“You didn’t usually take much care to avoid me when you discussed things,” Jiang Lan said lightly. She had already given birth. Her figure seemed slightly more plump than before. Her slightly harsh features had also become considerably more pleasing because the contours of her cheeks had rounded out.

Hu Bugui frowned. They hadn’t avoided her when discussing the basic trivialities of life, but she definitely couldn’t have overheard the proper business.

But Zhong Shiliang shook his head. “Was it Kou Tong?”

Jiang Lan froze and looked at this stranger. Zhong Shiliang smiled grimly. “Enough, don’t cover up for him, he’s...eh.”

Jiang Lan lowered her head slightly. “I just want to...let my child live in a normal society.”

In the end, being a blue seal had turned out to be hereditary. That adorable little kid that seemed no different from other chubby babies had been born with a stamp.

Jiang Lan unbuttoned her collar and revealed the half-moon-shaped blue seal under her collarbone. Lu Qingbai took a glance and couldn’t resist going over like a lecher—the designs on her blue seal had changed entirely, turning into the form of a whirlpool, revolving rapidly.

“I think you must have known for a long time that the blue seal energy crystal system is incomplete. The energy absorption is passive and needs external interference, so now all the blue seals in the world are like me, unable to control their energy crystal system. As soon as that...space that you’re talking about spreads out, we’ll turn into human motors, imprisoned forever in a half-living state,” Jiang Lan said calmly. “It doesn’t matter either way for me, but my child has just been born. He’s just become a person and doesn’t know yet what that’s like. I can’t let him...”

Hu Bugui immediately stood up. “So Su Qing...”

“Su Qing is fine.” Cheng Weizhi held down his shoulder and explained, “Su Qing’s energy crystal system is complete. It forms its own circuit. It won’t be compelled by the intervention of external forces.”

Chang Dou quickly asked, “Can the link be broken? Do the other blue seals know? Are they willing for it to be like this?”

Jiang Lan laughed. “The blue seals were made by Zheng Qinghua. Of course he has ways of controlling us. Do you still remember the microchips

Dr. Lu helped me remove?”

At the time, in order to prevent Utopia’s people from tracking the microchips on Jiang Lan, Lu Qingbai had in fact spent three or four days removing over sixty big and small microchips from her before she was finally “clean.”

“This link was created at the same time as the blue seal. There’s no way to break it—unless you dig out every blue seal’s energy crystal,” Jiang Lan said. “But I’ve heard some things. I know that there are two ways to make this space collapse. One is to destroy their central processor. I’m afraid that won’t be easy. There’s another way—if you can get an equally great energy, you may be able to cancel out the impact of the blue seals’ emotional energy.”

“Young lady, what do you mean by an equally great energy? Would nuclear energy do, for example?” Zhong Shiliang asked.

Before Jiang Lan could speak, Cheng Weizhi picked up.

“No good,” Cheng Weizhi said. “The principles by which the space is constituted are very complicated. It would be hard to use energy that doesn’t come from the same source...”

“If we need such a great quantity of emotional energy, where would we go to find that many blue seals?” Fang Xiu asked.

“Emotional energy, emotional energy...oh!” Chang Dou suddenly leapt up. “The life chrysalis! The life chrysalis would work!”

Fang Xiu’s expression changed. He slapped him on the back of the head. “What are you babbling about?!”

Chang Dou seemed to remember something. He went blank. “Oh, right...”

But Zhong Shiliang put in a question: “Chang Dou, what you talking about?”

“It’s...a thing we encountered before. Utopia was using them to detonate the blue seal bases. They made an enormous life chrysalis system that could absorb the ‘twenty-one grams’ of substance from the human body. It only needed one blue seal’s energy crystal to convert a large quantity of emotional energy.”

“Are you sure that energy would be enough?” Zhong Shiliang’s expression became grave.

“This...probably wouldn’t hinge on the energy crystal. Dr. Lu and I researched it. It must depend on the ‘twenty-one grams.’ This is the most mystical thing about the human body, so...”

This time, Zhong Shiliang interrupted him: “Can you get this life chrysalis system?”

“The RZ Unit headquarters has...some things.” Hu Bugui muttered silently for a moment. “We seized them before. Dr. Lu and I have both seen the life chrysalis system.”

“I can reconstruct it,” Lu Qingbai said, “but where will we get the energy crystal?”

“Here.” Jiang Lan suddenly laughed.

“You’ll die!” Chang Dou almost screamed.

But Jiang Lan only looked at him calmly. For some reason, Chang Dou understood what she meant—death...was actually nothing serious.

“Then there’s the ‘twenty-one grams.’ This the human body’s substance of life. No one knows how much it’s fatal to lose, and no one knows what after-effects it will have, and...”

But Zhong Shiliang didn’t listen to the rest. He only turned around and strode out in big steps. Lu Qingbai couldn’t resist calling him back. “What are you going to do?”

“Assemble a suicide squad.” General Zhong didn’t look back.

“Dr. Lu, we only have four hours. Transfer an armed team to the RZ Unit headquarters and take what you need. I want you to simulate that life chrysalis system immediately.” Hu Bugui stood up.

“I’m a fucking doctor! I don’t kill people!”

Hu Bugui looked at him. The originally seething Lu Qingbai saw the look in his eyes and suddenly couldn’t say anything else. After a long time, Hu Bugui at last quietly said, “We may only die in another way.

“We’ll set about it from two sides. Fang Xiu and Professor Cheng, come with me. We’re going to their so-called ‘central processor.’ Maintain contact. Chang Dou, you’ll oversee things here at the base. I need firsthand data—no matter what happens.” Standing, his broad shoulders seemed able to hold up the sun and bring daybreak to the black sky. “Shall we go and have a meeting with that lunatic who’s planning to create a new world, see what right he has to take away all the world’s emotions?”

Less than two hours later, an enormous life chrysalis took shape.

Of course this hadn't been accomplished by Lu Qingbai alone. The RZ Unit's entire medical team, as well as countless high-level experts who had faintly known the inside story about the RZ Unit and voluntarily assembled after a message that went out at light-speed over the whole globe, added to the framework of the life chrysalis.

In the ST Base, in the RZ Unit headquarters, in Africa, the Americas, Europe, in every corner of the whole world.

Jiang Lan removed her jacket and walked onto the high platform. She looked like a martyred saint. Her eyes calmly swept the people below with their heads tilted up to look at her. Then she sat down. Countless tubes and wires connected to her body, as though trying to fill up every inch of her skin.

Kou Tong watched as Zhong Shiliang was the first to stand beside a simple "chrysalis." The signature sunshine smile suddenly vanished from his face.

"Instructor," he called quietly, feeling as though something was blocking his chest. His glib tongue seemed to turn mute.

Zhong Shiliang only looked at him, smiled, and crouched to squeeze into the "chrysalis."

He lay down flat with his arms crossed over his abdomen. His gaze swept over Kou Tong's face. Then he closed his eyes as though preparing to sleep.

FINAL CHAPTER

AFTER SU QING and Ji Pengcheng were drawn in, the central area of the abnormal space didn't act up again. It returned to its slowly expanding pattern. Meanwhile the confused special forces encircling the periphery of the space could only retreat as it expanded. It was like a big mouth. No one knew what was going to come out from it. Orders hadn't come down. They couldn't act rashly without authorization.

But Ji Pengcheng, caught inside, found that the communication lines inside still worked—at least phone calls could be made. But the calls were limited to within the space. He couldn't call out. There was a lot of static over the phone, the signal going in and out.

So Ji Pengcheng did something—he started a rumor.

“A relative at the national earthquake bureau secretly sent me some news. There's going to be an earthquake in an hour, and the epicenter is this area. It may be a magnitude 7 or 8!”

Starting a rumor like this was particularly wicked, because unfortunately the place where Su Qing and Ji Pengcheng found themselves had had an enormous earthquake within the last twenty years. The impression it had made on the locals still remained. After going through such a catastrophe, they were especially sensitive towards the word “earthquake.”

Moreover, Ji Pengcheng was a practiced hand at spreading rumors—how to pretend to be an acquaintance, how to publicize inside information, how to seem convincing, how to hint skillfully, how to find seemingly real evidence. He had even developed a very systematic set of principles. Even the not very clear telephone line helped him construct a slightly frightening atmosphere of tension.

A true example of there being a master for every trade.

Su Qing had gone by a different path. Ji Pengcheng knew that he had an ordinary mortal body and couldn't keep up with the little beast of burden Su's light wave-like speed. He could only do such things as were in his pow-

er. The others couldn't contact them now. The people acting on both sides were like headless flies. But there was one thing—if they wanted a way to destroy this so-called “central processor,” they would certainly first have to evacuate all the residents from the area.

This old swindler Ji Pengcheng was like a source of infection. You couldn't go to him for good things, but he was an absolute expert at bad things. In not too much time, quite a few people carrying luggage and bringing along their families began to assemble in the main street.

Ji Pengcheng's gaze passed through the vast uneasy crowd. He got out a cigarette, thinking that the “experts” had better not come out to deny the rumor. If they denied it, then even those who hadn't believed it originally would believe it.

He raised his head and looked at the horizon, where the evening sun was beginning to sink. He didn't find anything different from before. He coughed quietly twice, suddenly feeling a little joyous. He thought that doing this kind of thing at his age was simply more exciting than a second spring.

Su Qing wasn't as cheerful as him. A faint signal was coming from his watch. This was the position of the gravitational probe that had rolled into the space. Su Qing didn't know about other things, but he had earnestly read the instructions for the various kinds of equipment used by field personnel. The probes Chang Dou had given them were basically the same but for some small points. Chang Dou called it the “eye of the hurricane effect.” The core areas of all energy fields would have an extraordinary attraction for these probes.

Su Qing didn't know what the essential difference between this “abnormal energy field” and normal energy fields was, but he had no direction now. The automatic directional device Chang Dou couldn't be depended on anymore. He could only try a last ditch effort and follow the intermittent weak signal on the indicator.

Then he came to the shores of a lake. He considered it. Chang Dou had said that the “processor” was likely at the bottom of a lake. Could it be here? When he was just about to go over, he suddenly heard an enormous droning. Su Qing quickly turned and jumped into an empty little boat tied up by the shore and carefully looked out to scout around—he found that several helicopters were arriving.

On them were drawn enormous, not remotely low-key Utopia logos. When he saw this, his initial uncertainty changed to certainty. He saw team after team of white coats who looked like they had been rolled out by a rolling pin and deliberated whether Zheng Qinghua could also be planning to show up at such a stirring time.

But he was disappointed. Zheng Qinghua really didn't show himself. Su Qing lay in the little boat for a long moment. Suddenly, many submarines suddenly floated up onto the surface of the lake from below, like one little capsule after another. They packaged up all the Utopia people and retreated into the water like boiling dumplings.

Su Qing's eyes spun. He found that this was an opportunity.

Meanwhile, Hu Bugui, who had already arrived at the periphery of the abnormal space, received Qin Luo's report. Qin Luo quietly said, "Captain Hu, mission accomplished, but it was done in a bit of a rush. I didn't expect it to be so hard to get around Fei Zhe's place. The security was very strict. We forced our way in. We've lost two people."

She suddenly sucked in a breath. Hu Bugui asked, "What is it? Were you injured?"

"That 'gun' was with Fei Zhe. I wasn't paying attention and got shot by him. It's fine, just a scrape."

"How is it now?"

"The 'gun' seems to have suddenly received other orders. He stopped acting."

"Fei Zhe must have something important over there. The things that 'gun' did must have to do with that... No, don't follow, withdraw."

"OK... Captain Hu, actually, I think that..." Qin Luo hesitated for a moment, remembered the current emergency, then shut her mouth. "Forget it, I'll report when I return."

She thought that the legendary Serial Number 11235 shouldn't have accepted others' orders so easily and abandoned his prey.

Hu Bugui cut the connection with Qin Luo and contacted the ST Base instead. "Chang Dou, how are you doing with the spatial field?"

Chang Dou said, "The life chrysalis's energy is already beginning to spread, and part of the spatial field is starting to become unsteady. I've thought of a way to amplify the energy."

A mechanical female voice came from his end: "Amplification count-down started. Seven, six, five..."

"Is Dr. Kou with you?"

Kou Tong picked up: "I'm here."

Then, not waiting for Hu Bugui to finish speaking, he continued, "I'm thinking of a way to draw out the spot where Zheng Qinghua may be hiding."

"Do you think he might come here to the central processor?" Hu Bugui asked.

"He won't," Kou Tong said immediately without a bit of hesitation. "In certain aspects, Zheng Qinghua is audacious in the extreme, but at the same time, his paranoia is very serious, and his desire for control is very strong. He takes himself very seriously. He'll definitely add guards to the 'central processor,' but he won't personally go there himself."

"I'll have Qin Luo contact you. There may be clues at Fei Zhe's place. You can think of the rest yourself," Hu Bugui said efficiently.

"All right." This was Kou Tong, even more efficient than him.

Captain Hu cut off all connections and turned to say to Fang Xiu, "You keep watch from here. If there are any problems, contact Kou Tong and Chang Dou."

Fang Xiu stared. "Captain, what are you going to do?"

"I'm taking people in." Hu Bugui began to name people. He uncompromisingly laid down several orders in a row. In hardly any time, the orderly and well-trained soldiers had completely assembled. "Don't split up. We won't necessarily be able to contact others inside. I need each of you to carry an energy hub hook and a medium-sized energy bomb."

"I'm going, too," Cheng Weizhi said. "I'm an expert. If you lose contact with Chang Dou inside, I'll still be there."

Hu Bugui looked at him and nodded.

Fang Xiu said, "Then I'm also going."

"You stay behind and look after things." Following the trend, was he? Hu Bugui glared at him. "Though Chang Dou says that this whatever processor is at the bottom of a lake, no one knows whether it really is. Su Qing and Ji Pengcheng will probably think of a way to evacuate the residents. We'll go in and do that, as well. You stay here and receive them."

In the ST Base, the orphanage director suddenly contacted Kou Tong. There was only one line: “*They* contacted me. Zheng Qinghua told them to go to a place. How likely is it that *they* can see Zheng Qinghua now?”

“No chance,” Kou Tong said without even raising an eyelid.

Just then it seemed that the communicator changed to another frequency. An unfamiliar man’s voice came from it. This person’s voice was very pleasant, seeming to carry a sort of low and hoarse eroticism. He asked, “How do you know?”

Kou Tong said, “Before the final victory, he won’t show himself in front of anyone. Even if in the end the abnormal space does envelop the whole world, he’s still likely to find a body double to appear in his place. This person is an out-and-out loner.”

“Oh...” The man seemed to be smiling. “He told me to go to a little villa in the countryside with nice scenery to bring him something very important. Who do you think will receive me?”

“The person who’s going to dispose of you.” Having arrived at this stage, Kou Tong didn’t mince words. He answered without any hesitation. Then he paused and added, “Friend, give me the address.”

The man cheerfully reported the address to him. Kou Tong hesitated, then opened a stack of materials by his hand. “Shuiyu County... I think I’ve heard of it. Oh, it’s the old fart’s former residence, isn’t it... Wait, it’s not certain that he won’t show himself...”

The man patiently waited for his answer.

“Can you think of a way to give me a video communication? Lend me your eyes?” Kou Tong asked.

“Sure. I’m nearly there.” As soon as he spoke, a somewhat dim, somewhat shaky image appeared in front of Kou Tong.

“What should I call you, friend?”

“My surname is Huang,” the man said after seeming to hesitate, “Huang Jinchun.”

“Fine, don’t worry. This time you won’t be out on your mission alone. I’ll be here the whole time and do my best to protect you.”

The man didn’t answer. He only seemed to laugh softly.

Su Qing successfully replaced a white coat and entered a submarine. Fortunately, everyone only sat quietly in their seats, not making a sound. These people were practically like a group of professional soldiers—but even pro-

fessional soldiers, as long as they weren't in actual combat, would still chat a little with their comrades-in-arms. These each seemed like wooden puppets, only looking straight ahead with blank expressions.

Su Qing's hand suddenly itched. He wanted to turn them over and see whether there were springs on their backs.

He mixed in among them and went down in the submarine. Not letting any expression show on his face, he was stupefied by the thing before his eyes—it was an enormous transparent cover, like an aquarium he had gone to when he was little—though at the aquarium, the fish had been inside and the people outside, the air outside and the water inside. Here, it was the reverse.

The transparent cover quivered slightly as the water rippled. Su Qing only then noticed that it was actually many layers, with one support in the middle and soft layers on either side, like an enormous piece of jello.

Though this piece of jello contained many Utopia white coats that would upset your stomach.

In the middle of the jello was a “tower,” a tower built under water. Su Qing thought, Could this be the enormous spatial field's processor? He stealthily looked around and still didn't find any signs of Zheng Qinghua. It seemed that he wasn't here. Was he scared of danger? Or was he so sure of himself that he had no need to come?

The whole tower was sealed. Looking inward, it was made entirely of layer after layer of half-transparent microchips. Though they were half-transparent, the number of layers was too great. You couldn't clearly see what was inside. The material on the outside of the tower, meanwhile, seemed to be a transparent glass cover.

It would be better if Chang Dou were here, Su Qing couldn't resist thinking.

Just then, light began to emit from the tip of the tower. First it was red. Then it changed to orange, changed to yellow, changing bit by bit according to the sequence of the rainbow that all elementary school students know. At last it changed to violet and disappeared in front of everyone's eyes. Though Su Qing was comparatively lacking in general knowledge, he still knew that these visible light frequencies went from low to high. In the end, when it had become invisible, it must have left the range of visible light.

Vibration came from underground. For a moment, the communicator hidden in his hair crackled into his ear. There seemed to be a voice coming from it. Before he could tell who it was, it vanished again, and static like a radio that couldn't find a station came from the long-silent communicator. He didn't know whether this was a positive phenomenon. There were too many people around, and he didn't dare to make any movement different from the others. He could only follow the large force like a puppet.

In the ST Base, Chang Dou seemed to want to stuff his whole head into the narrow communicator. He desperately pressed himself to it, listening. He quietly said, "The energy amplification is completed. The life chrysalis's energy has been expanded twentyfold. A crack has been cut into the space. Communications have been restored to 3%."

Kou Tong folded his arms over his chest. Through the eyes of the mysterious spy Huang Jinchun, he went through a desolate courtyard and a long corridor. He was met by a middle-aged woman.

"The abnormal space's speed of spread has been reduced by sixteen times. Communications have been restored to 10%—Su Qing, Captain Hu, can you hear me talking?"

Kou Tong said, "The life chrysalis is attacking the energy field. Zheng Qinghua must not have expected this."

Huang Jinchun didn't answer him. There wasn't even any change in the frequency of the extremely fine, extremely low breathing coming over the communicator. This person had been concealed within Utopia for years. His psychological quality was already good enough to arouse the indignation of both men and gods. Even if the Earth had turned into a hot air balloon with a hole right in front of him, he probably still would have conscientiously gone about his business.

"I said before that Zheng Qinghua's desire for control is very strong. He has to be in a place that he's especially familiar with. He won't show himself in front of others. But he'll definitely attend to important things in person, and he'll definitely be using some means to monitor you." Kou Tong paused. "Don't casually give anything to others, insist on hiding them, ask to see Zheng Qinghua."

Chang Dou was staring at the degree of restored communications, jumping up and down like stock indexes but overall jolting upwards, chipping

away, attempting to get in touch with the RZ Unit's mainstay Hu Bugui, and the mainstay's mainstay Su Qing.

He didn't know whether Su Qing had heard. Anyway, he wasn't in very friendly surroundings right now and had no way to answer. But there were intermittent sounds coming back from Hu Bugui—Chang Dou could hear that they had opened fire. Chang Dou was unusually speechless, feeling that the situation was so chaotic that he didn't know what to do. Clutching his hair, he yelled wildly into the communicator, "Captain Hu, what's your situation? Who's fighting whom?"

Fang Xiu's voice came in: "What does it have to do with you who's fighting with whom? Look after your own set-up, don't go blundering around talking nonsense."

Chang Dou heard his voice mobilizing reinforcements and relaxed slightly.

When communications were restored to 30%, Su Qing could basically hear Chang Dou clearly, and Chang Dou had at last found his coordinates. Chang Dou cried out, "Great master, where are you now? Don't tell me you've already reached the core location of the central processor."

All the people in the "bubble" went inside in order, team after team very precise. Su Qing's gaze swept over the weapons they had on them. He knew that if he so much as sneezed now, he would probably be surrounded, never mind any other movement. He raised his eyes slightly to glance at the nearby microchip tower, feeling rather gloomy.

The establishment of the life chrysalises hadn't stopped. More and more energy sources were added. Chang Dou watched the communications restoration value rise to 50% and couldn't resist stamping on the floor. "Ah, ah, we have video support, we've broken through the critical value, their energy has been controlled, the abnormal space has stopped expanding—wow! Su Qing, what is that?!"

Su Qing relaxed enormously, thinking that the external plug-in had finally turned back on. Otherwise, wearing a white coat, mixed unworthily among these high-level intellectuals, he was really under too much stress.

The moment that video communications were restored, Fang Xiu, guarding the perimeter, immediately gave an order for comprehensive reinforcements. Chang Dou sent Su Qing's coordinates and video images to Hu

Bugui right away. The computer quickly scanned information from the microchip tower.

“How is it?” Cheng Weizhi asked against a background full of gunfire.

“...It isn’t,” Chang Dou said after a long moment. “Professor Cheng, this can’t go on. The heart of the abnormal spatial field is inside that microchip tower. Relying solely on energy, we currently have the upper hand, but as time goes on...”

His eyes swept over the place not far away where the life chrysalises were quietly laid out. “Our energy sources here are currently very dense, but the twenty-one grams of substance is a consumable. Consumables run out. Though their number of blue seals is limited, and they currently don’t have enough energy, their energy source is inexhaustible. As long as all the people in the world haven’t died out, they can supply them with emotional energy.”

“Helicopter reinforcements. Have Fang Xiu move faster. Chang Dou, continue to transfer people over through the ST Base, including from allies.” Fiercely, Hu Bugui said, “Use people to force a way inside. Since we already have the position, even if we boil dumplings in the lake, we can still smash it.”

At this point, the results of the analysis came back. Chang Dou’s brow furrowed. “No, it’s not so simple. Even if you blow up that whole city, I’m afraid you still won’t destroy the microchip tower.”

Cheng Weizhi asked, “What is it?”

“The analysis results say show that it’s C substance.”

“Oh...” Cheng Weizhi froze. “You mean ‘outside the coordinate system’ substance?”

“C substance is something completely seamless, with absolutely no place to fill up. It can be anything, a piece of paper, a pane of glass—it’s all the same. It’s said to be ‘outside the coordinate system’ because it isn’t in this space, and it isn’t in a space that coincides with this space. It forms its own system. Those microchips have tens of thousands of rules. Never mind blowing it up, we can’t even touch it,” Chang Dou explained, speaking rapidly.

Seriously?

As Su Qing thought this, a small sphere extremely inconspicuously ran out from his pant leg and rolled directly towards the microchip tower...and passed right through the microchip tower.

Su Qing's pupil's contracted. He thought, Holy shit, no wonder that Zheng character is so calm.

“Su Qing, at your three o'clock, around fifty meters away, do you see that door? Examining the energy activity, the analysis results say that the bubble you're in ought to be the energy source. In a while, we'll first act from inside and outside in concert to get rid of these ants, then we'll think of another way to fix up the microchip tower.”

Just then, the water around the “bubble” he was in began to vibrate violently.

“We're already in the lake,” Captain Hu said calmly. “Su Qing, see if you can think of a way to cut off energy support to that thing's defense system.”

There was no need for this instruction. Su Qing was already in action. He caught the throat of the white coat nearest to him and dragged him in front of himself. For him, a distance of fifty meters only took a moment. Dense gunshots rang out. Su Qing let go of his “hostage” and simply broke off the handle of the energy source's no admittance door and casually stuck a small bomb inside. The unlucky white coat was shot into a sieve and slowly fell down. Su Qing rolled aside. Then, when the explosion came the next moment, without even looking, he dropped the second bomb. Before anyone else could see what exactly he had blown up, all the lights inside the “bubble” went out in an instant—apart from the microchip tower standing there still flashing milky white radiance like the Virgin Mary.

Because of the pressure, the water broke right through the “bubble.” Ice-cold lake water instantly poured in like a water dragon. There was chaos in the darkness. A hand suddenly caught Su Qing by the shoulder. Then he was lifted out of the water's surface. He wiped the water from his face and saw Hu Bugui visibly breathe out a sigh of relief.

While no one was watching, Su Qing kissed two of his fingers and pressed them to Hu Bugui's forehead.

Not dodging, Hu Bugui smiled softly at him. Then Su Qing jumped up and stripped off his dripping wet coat. “Uncle Cheng, have you two talked it over?”

Cheng Weizhi was just talking to Chang Dou. The two of them were quickly saying terms that others couldn't understand or contribute to like “homologous energy” and “extrusion.” When Su Qing walked over, he saw

the expression on Chang Dou's somewhat blurred face become grave. Cheng Weizhi said, "Su Qing can do it."

"What can I do?" Su Qing asked.

"Do you remember what I told you? Don't trust in emotion, trust in logic," Cheng Weizhi said seriously, turning his head and ignoring Chang Dou holding him back from the other end.

Su Qing nodded.

"Forget about it," Cheng Weizhi said.

"Huh?"

"Don't be afraid of emotion. A person who can't even control his own emotions is a weak person." As Cheng Weizhi spoke, he took Su Qing's hand and pressed it to his own chest. "I know about the fellow feeling function of the double core energy crystal. Can you feel my emotions?"

Su Qing frowned and shook his head.

"Pay attention!" Cheng Weizhi almost yelled. Then his voice lowered again. "This must be the emotion most familiar to you. Look at me and feel carefully."

"Professor Cheng, what's wrong?" Hu Bugui walked over to ask. Through a window, they could now see the base of the microchip tower. Others were clearing up the remaining Utopia members, but when their submarine "bumped" into the microchip tower, like the little sphere, it passed through easily.

"Homologous energy can extrude the C substance's space into changing position. Chang Dou and I have discussed it. If we find that frequency, if we only..."

"Professor, don't you care about your son?!" Chang Dou suddenly cried out.

"Uncle Cheng, you..."

"He's doing quite well with the orphanage director. I looked in on him before we left. If I'm gone, there will still be someone to take good care of him." Cheng Weizhi turned his head and said to Su Qing, "Chang Dou will use certain means to assist your fellow feeling capability. We need to rely on you to seize that frequency."

"And...then what?" Su Qing asked.

"Then you need to convert the energy the base supplies you with to that frequency and extrude the C substance. There's no need to worry, Chang

Dou will assist you with the concrete operations.”

“I’m a double core. I don’t absorb external emotions.”

“No problem, you have the world’s earliest and most complete energy hub.” Cheng Weizhi smiled at him.

In that moment, Su Qing’s fingertips trembled. He had at last felt what Cheng Weizhi had spoken of, that emotion that was extremely familiar to him—it was sadness.

“Captain Hu,” said Cheng Weizhi.

“Captain Hu!” said Chang Dou.

Hu Bugui was chewing on an unlit cigarette. There was a hastily tied bandage on his exposed arm. He must have been wounded during the fire-fight earlier. He said, “We have energy hub equipment.”

“Those simple things can’t change frequencies,” Cheng Weizhi said.

Hu Bugui looked up at the ceiling of the submarine. He knew that there was no one who could take his place in making this decision. This order, no one could give in his place.

“Captain Hu, no one knows what the consumable threshold of the twenty-one grams is. The faster you make a decision, the greater the likelihood that those comrades-in-arms all over the world who are offering up the most precious energy of their lives for the sake of their friends, family, and country will be safe and sound,” Cheng Weizhi said softly. “Anyway, I had a hand in Utopia. It’s only fair for me to repay this debt.”

Hu Bugui looked fixedly into his eyes for a moment, then nodded and quietly said to Chang Dou, “Let’s do as Professor Cheng says.”

Chang Dou took off his glasses and wiped his red eyes. He took a deep breath. His voice shaking slightly, he said, “Yes, sir.”

Su Qing lay down in a brainwave amplifying module, his whole body covered in wires.

Hu Bugui held one of his hands. Mechanical buzzing sounded in his ears. Slowly, his consciousness began to blur. He couldn’t quite tell who was speaking to him. He kept thinking that it seemed like Ji Pengcheng, but also like Professor Cheng. In his daze, it also seemed a little like General Xiong.

“People have happiness, anger, grief, and joy. This is a grand thing,” this voice was saying to him. “Relax.

“As you hold your lover’s hand and walk along a boulevard in the evening, you see some children running after a little dog. There are people

playing chess in the park, there are people doing a folk dance. There are no more terrorists in this world, no more Utopia, no more blue seals. When you open your eyes, you find that you've returned to when you were just over twenty years old, naïve and confused as you were when you had just graduated university. That is happiness..."

This voice explained at length the subtle differences in each emotion. But as Su Qing listened, he couldn't hold back tears. A hand reached over and gently wiped them for him. Then, he felt all sounds disappear. There was only a certain sensation that he had encountered before, anxiously wavering in his chest.

"Su Qing, catch that frequency, catch it!"

As the energy hub system slowly linked up, Cheng Weizhi, with his whole body caught in another module, suddenly spasmed violently. At this time, the energy saturation level of the hub system reached 100%. Cheng Weizhi could no longer feel his body.

"I'm going to die," Cheng Weizhi thought with his whole body trembling. Fear swallowed him up whole. "I actually..."

Don't want to die.

Cheng Weizhi desperately twisted his head and looked at the length of transparent pole in his hand. I only have to let this go, he thought. If I let this go, I can still survive. If I only... He tried with all the strength in his body to open his hand. He felt his skin slowly leaving the ice-cold instrument. His mind was entirely dazed now. The survival instinct of a living being was gradually gaining the upper hand—it hurts too much, save me!

"Warning! Warning! Hub system is unstable! Hub system is unstable!"

Ear-piercing warnings cleared Cheng Weizhi's head. He took a deep breath, but the breath couldn't pass into his chest. Like a dying fish, his sightless eyes were open wide, his chest heaving violently but briefly. Then he once again took hold of the linking pole, unwaveringly. For a moment, Su Qing felt something match up. He suddenly opened his eyes, and his body bounced up, but he was pressed back down by Hu Bugui, protected in his arms. The sound of a violent explosion rang out, so loud that he couldn't hear anything afterwards.

Did it blow up? Holding onto this thought, Su Qing's consciousness sank once more into the darkness.

Meanwhile, with Kou Tong's help in cheating and Huang Jinchen's flawless cooperation on the scene, he was at last taken to see Zheng Qinghua. Kou Tong watched as Huang Jinchen walked into a room. The middle-aged man who had brought him seemed not to dare to go further forward. He only pushed him from behind, then took two steps back, hiding in the darkness.

Huang Jinchen opened the door. There was a white-haired man sitting at a table, perfectly matching the photo stored at the base, and identical to his impressions of the man who appeared occasionally on the other end of the communicator.

"He isn't Zheng Qinghua, he absolutely can't be Zheng Qinghua," Kou Tong decided. "Technicians, help me scan the surveillance installations, at once!"

"There aren't surveillance installations? How could that be?" Huang Jinchen had already begun to speak to "Zheng Qinghua," who poured out his heart, asking him where the things were. Kou Tong was holding a thick stack of materials in his hand, but his eyes were glued to the screen that trembled faintly along with this legendary spy's steady breathing. He suddenly cried out, "I've got it! It's that person! The one who brought you there! It must be him!"

Huang Jinchen leaned forward and suddenly flipped over the table in front of the middle-aged man. The surveillance image on the screen in front of Kou Tong shook violently. He couldn't see anything anymore. Then came dense gunshots. Suddenly, the link to Huang Jinchen cut off altogether. Kou Tong's fingers tightly gripped the edges of the screen.

After a long time, the ST Base's phone rang. Kou Tong gave a start and scooped up the phone. "Hello?"

The voice of the man on the phone was a little breathless, but his tone was very relaxed.

"I got rid of the old man. How could the most consummate gun in the world slip up? Oh, right, I scraped the shoulder of a lovely lady at Fei Zhe's place, please pass on my apologies to her." He whistled happily. "Let me just ask, handsome, can you tell me your personal contact information?"

Later...

"Oh, General Zhong is out of the hospital already?" On a sunny afternoon, Su Qing was in a coffee shop, holding a phone in his hand, though

his eyes were floating towards a man and a woman on a blind date at the next table. The woman was Qin Luo, so uncomfortable that she simply couldn't get a single sentence out. But the man was like a machine gun. From the three great masterpieces of ancient Chinese literature, he had rambled on to Russian's big-nosed "drivers" circle, then incessantly ran on to France's literary and artistic hoodlums. Su Qing smiled and unhurriedly said into the phone, "Oh, good, ask after his health for me. I'll go see him on vacation."

The other person said something, and Su Qing's smile became even more brilliant. The passing waitresses kept sneaking looks at him. Then he said, "Fine, I have something to convey to you from my man—if you deliberately meddle in other people's relationships again, he'll castrate you... What, me? Yeah, I endorse that."

Then he hung up, stood, and went over to the man and woman at the other table. The man had the look of a superior white-collar intellectual. The parading and disdain on his face were becoming more and more obvious, but his eyes kept worming their way into the collar of the young lady across from him. "Have you read Duras?"

"What? You haven't read Duras, either? Well, that won't do, how could a girl not read her books?"

Su Qing stood there looking as pleasing as though he had come out of a magazine. He blocked his line of sight, putting on a very attractive smile. "Sir, I've already paid for your coffee. No need to thank me, just hand this girl over to me."

As the man stared dumbfounded, he turned to say to Qin Luo, "Beauty, I have money and a house, and I'm handsome. I have steady work, and my family is rich. My only shortcoming is that I'm fairly uncultured. I didn't even finish middle school. I don't know about Duras either, but the two of us could have a chat about Durex. Coming with me?"

Qin Luo cheerfully took his hand. The two of them swaggered off.

Qin Luo's bright red face only recovered when they reached the door. She patted herself on the chest and breathed a sigh of relief. As Su Qing opened the car door for her, he said, "How the fuck can Chang Dou be so unreliable? What's he doing introducing you to all these blind dates? That one just now must have sprayed you in the face with spit, right?"

Qin Luo was amused. Su Qing lightly rubbed her face with his sleeve and commented, "Like a plant mister. It's good for watering flowers, so let's leave him to the fatherland's flowers and plants. Next time we'll go to my dad. He knows a lot of youthful geniuses."

Qin Luo lowered her head. "Uncle Su keeps hoping I'll get together with you."

Su Qing sighed sorrowfully and raised his head to look at the sky.

Just then, all of a sudden, a voice called to stop him: "Su...Qing? Are you Su Qing?"

Su Qing turned his head and a man in a suit and leather shoes standing not far from him. He looked familiar, but he couldn't recognize him. Out of habit, as he desperately tried to recall his identity, he smiled and said, "Hey, long time no see, hello, hello!"

The man's gaze looking him over seemed to hold delight. He quickly walked over and, almost babbling, said, "Yes...yes, I haven't seen you for many years. I went to look for you, but... How have you been the last few years?"

Brother, who the hell are you? Su Qing perfunctorily said, "Pretty good, pretty good. I've scrambled my way into a bit of a job with the government. The benefits are good, though I'm a little busy. Where are you working now?"—Zheng Qinghua was dead and the microchip tower had been blown up, but many Utopia extremists were still everywhere causing trouble. The RZ Unit finally had a serious establishment and could openly jump around like peacekeeping police all over the world.

The man stared and looked at him somewhat hesitantly. "What, Su Qing, don't you recognize me?"

"How could that be? Didn't we meet up that last time?" Su Qing continued to fabricate unblushingly. "At the time you..."

But before he could finish, the man interrupted him. "I'm Guo Julin. After we separated, I was very concerned about you, but I could never find you... It's been seven or eight years, hasn't it?"

Guo Julin laughed bitterly. "I've gotten old. It's normal for you not to recognize me. I didn't expect you to change so much. I saw you from afar just now and thought it looked like you, but I didn't dare to be sure of it until you smiled... Su Qing, I've missed you very much."

Su Qing stared blankly for a moment.

Guo Julin looked at him and suddenly thought that the bewilderingly beautiful youth in his memories seemed to be a fake. There was a certain indescribable maturity about the man in front of him, not the wear of age, but the certainty and composure of having experienced great storms.

“You...” His voice suddenly stopped. His eyes fell on Qin Luo, who had gotten out of the car when she heard what was happening. After a moment, he finally forced a smile and asked, “Is this your girlfriend? Why don’t you introduce me?”

Qin Luo had listened to their conversation just now without missing a word and had instantly felt a sense of danger on behalf of their Captain Hu. She may have been a little naïve, but at any rate she was a woman. She had something more mystical than Utopia, called a sixth sense.

“I am.” Qin Luo, with her phobia of strangers, threw caution to the wind. She hugged Su Qing’s arm, her fingers trembling spasmodically. She managed to force out this one sentence.

Su Qing, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, peeled her off and pushed her back into the car. “She’s joking. This is a friend of mine.”

Guo Julin caught up and displayed the charming smile peculiar to successful people. “Oh? You...”

But before that smile of his could fully blossom, Su Qing’s phone rang. Su Qing looked at the incoming caller display and quickly apologized. He turned away to pick up. The smooth and polite expression on his face vanished. Guo Julin watched his profile in a daze, feeling that when the corners of this person’s eyes and the tips of his brow’s softened, it was very... attractive.

It was like a coarse piece of stone having been polished for years, revealing the clear and glistening jade within.

Qin Luo stuck her head out again and deliberately asked, “Does the chief want you to hurry up?”

“Yeah, I’ll be back right away.” Su Qing hung up and turned to smile at Guo Julin. “We’ll chat another day if there’s time. I’m needed at home.”

Guo Julin’s expression stiffened for a moment. Then he nodded his head politely, pulled out a business card, and passed it over. “This is my contact information. When you have time, we can reminisce about old times.”

Su Qing took it casually. “Thank you, it was very nice seeing you today.”

He smoothly drove the car away. After making a turn, he rolled up the business card and stuck it into the ashtray. He suddenly smiled to himself.

Qin Luo was looking at him, blinking big eyes. Su Qing quietly said, "It's nothing, an ex-boyfriend."

Oh? Major gossip! Qin Luo continued to blink.

"When I saw him, I suddenly found..." Su Qing paused, then shook his head. He didn't say anything else, only narrowed his eyes and smiled.

He had suddenly found that the once bone-deep love and hate, grief and joy, had all been light enough to be blown out of his memories. And how minor was the pain he had once thought he couldn't live through?

The past was as fleeting as clouds.

EXTRA 1

THE SKY was dark and gloomy, full of snow. The northwest wind, like a wounded beast, wailed incessantly.

The standing people had red at the corners of their eyes from being blown by the wind. Over seventy percent of the world's nations had lowered their flags on this day. Funeral bells seemed to reverberate in the air above the whole world, floating incessantly.

This was...the first snow of winter this year.

The truth about Utopia had been “selectively” publicized. The list of martyrs killed in action during this war was regularly broadcast by all the major TV stations. It was already over. There was no sense in pursuing the truth. For the vast majority of people, all they needed was to remember the names of these heroes and use the power of their grief to continue being easy, breezy, and beautiful.

The news was broadcasting this incomparably high-standard funeral. Su Chengde sat on the couch holding Tu Tutu. The living room was well-heated. Snowflakes hit the window lattice, which kept the wind and snow outside. The warm people were nearly falling asleep.

Tu Tutu became unusually silent. One of Su Chengde's hands was on his back, patting him as though petting a small animal.

Tu Tutu climbed up Su Chengde's arm and rubbed it with his little head. Like a little grown-up, he said, “Oh, my goodness, now I can stop worrying.—Right, Grandpa, my Imperial Uncle called this morning to say he was coming back for dinner tonight.”

Su Chengde asked, “What can you stop worrying about?”

Tu Tutu said, “We don't have to run and hide everywhere anymore. After this, when someone asks me where my parents are, I can seriously tell them that they gave their lives for the cause of antiterrorism. If you ask me something, I won't have to dodge and avoid anymore.”

The spot where the microchip tower had blown up had been very close to Su Qing and the others. They had all been somewhat affected and taken to the hospital for a period of observation. Su Qing had long ago forgotten the word “obey.” The very first day he had been brought to the hospital, he had snuck off that same night for a trip home, and Su Chengde had at last been able to set his worries to rest.

The days of being sealed off, the urgent public notices, and the rolling news broadcasts afterwards had made the old man very uneasy. He had faintly felt that these people had something to do with him hearing no news of Su Qing after he had left. But when Su Qing had come home that time, before he had said two sentences, he had been found at home by a crowd of people who looked like military surgeons and taken away.

Then a few people had hastily come by with him, left some things he normally used, and said he would be back home on the weekend. Before the tea had cooled, he had been called away again by a phone call.

A couple of days ago, another group of people had come over, left a stack of commendations, and expressed regards for the hero’s relatives. There had even been reporters.

Su Chengde had found to his astonishment that he had at some point become “the hero’s relative.”

So Su Chengde had asked unflappably, “What...is all of this?”

Su Chengde had attempted many times to start a conversation with this little devil, but he had found that this little whelp who hadn’t even started middle school yet truly was shrewd. Each time, he fobbed him off with shameless antics. Su Qing was the only child Su Chengde had ever raised, so he had always thought that children normally had intellects like his idiot son when he was little. Comparatively speaking, he found to his amazement that Tu Tutu’s IQ really was above average for his age.

Tu Tutu sat crosslegged on the couch. Looking wearied by experience, he began to recount in an incoherent way. He told of the grey house, of his suddenly vanished parents, of that strange uncle who had hanged himself like a rat, of how he had been entrusted to Su Qing, how they had run away from that tall building, how they had met Grandpa Ji, how they had drifted around changing names again and again.

As he listened, Su Chengde felt that he had traveled to another world. Dumbfounded, he looked at this round-headed little boy and suddenly

found that his son really had been missing for so many years...that he had nearly not come back.

Just then, Tu Tutu suddenly tugged at Su Chengde. “Grandpa, Grandpa, look, quick, it’s my Imperial Uncle and the others!”

On the TV, the image had changed. The crowd became agitated. The reporters came over like a swarm of bees. Several camera lenses flashed. Not far away, an off-road car stopped.

Tu Tutu jubilantly said, “I know that car. I even rode in it.”

Before Su Chengde could come around, he looked at the screen along with Tu Tutu and saw the car door open. Five men and one woman jumped out. The excited voice of the host said something. Su Chengde thought that he hadn’t heard a single word clearly. He was only watching them get out of the car. The crowd cleared a path for them. There were people saluting. Su Qing was all wrapped up in a trim, well-fitted coat and wearing a very large pair of sunglasses, but Su Chengde still had no trouble recognizing him.

His spine didn’t bend in the least. He returned the salutes crisply. He was extremely steady. Only when he lowered his eyes did he reveal a trace of fierceness.

That’s my son—Su Chengde felt that his eyes were a little blurry and couldn’t resist furtively wiping away tears. Then he rather awkwardly glanced at Tu Tutu and found that the kid was still worked up and hadn’t noticed at all. Then he relaxed.

“The brat has made something of himself,” Su Chengde said in an indifferent tone. Then he began to feel gloomy again, thinking that he was still an unfilial thing. So many major events had happened, and he hadn’t revealed a trace of it to him. He simply didn’t attach any importance to this father of his.

Qin Luo was holding a bouquet in her arms. She took two steps forward and leaned down to place it in front of the enormous monument. Then the RZ Unit saluted the brand-new monument in unison.

As they made their exit, the reporters who had been waiting for a long time rushed up in a crowd. Su Chengde found that his son, who hadn’t been able to speak properly, naturally stepped up to receive the bombardment of this crowd’s questions. He spoke very aptly, simply like a government spokesman.

“Looks proper enough—though still a little lacking in maturity,” Su Chengde evaluated, looking like it was beneath his dignity. Then, after a while, he asked Tu Tutu, “Tutu, does this news station rebroadcast in the evening? Remember to remind Grandpa to record it.”

Tu Tutu nodded obediently. When Su Chengde had turned around in satisfaction, he pulled his lips back in a silent, stealthy laugh.

In fact, Su Qing hadn't stepped up on his own. He had been caught off guard and pushed from behind by those two bastards Lu Qingbai and Fang Xiu. Then he could only keep up a proper-looking smile for over an hour while being requested to strike all kinds of poses for photos, feeling that his face was about to stiffen into a mummy's. When he finally got out and was prepared to settle the accounts, he found that the crowd of scoundrels had already fled.

As he turned a corner, a car honked its horn. Su Qing turned his head and saw Hu Bugui sticking his head out of a car window, waving to him. Su Qing climbed in furiously. “At least *you* have some conscience.”

Hu Bugui stroked his hair, which was damp from the snow, and carefully drove the car away. “Will you come have dinner with me tonight?”

“Um...” Su Qing paused. “I may have to go home.”

He looked at Hu Bugui in nameless guilt. After a long silence, he finally explained, “Back then, I had a falling out with my dad because of...so...”

“I know.” Hu Bugui nodded. “Then I'll drive you.”

Su Qing lowered his head, rather feeling that he was being unfair to him.

What made him feel most apologetic was that Hu Bugui very considerately didn't stop the car at the door to his house but stopped two streets away instead. “You can get out here. You can buy some stuff to bring home on your way. I'll go back now.”

“To headquarters?”

“Yeah.”

The snow outside seemed to have gotten heavier. Su Qing took a look. His line of sight was practically blocked. There was a layer of white mist on the car window. But inside the car it was very warm. Hu Bugui's sleeves were slightly rolled up, revealing the edge of a bandage. Su Qing didn't get out of the car. He drew close and tugged on Hu Bugui's collar, lowering his head to kiss him.

Hu Bugui understood this perfectly well. While he wasn't very good at talking, he had still learned how to handle Su Qing—basically, the more “understanding” and considerate he was, the guiltier Su Qing would feel. So he readily accepted Su Qing's body pressing down on him with great enjoyment, wrapping one arm around his waist and putting the other on his back, clinging sweetly for a long time.

The slightly sharp tip of Su Qing's nose was pressed to his cheek. He sighed quietly. “I'm sorry, I'll explain it to him over time.”

Hu Bugui silently patted him on the back. “It's fine, go ahead.”

Su Qing got up and looked at him with a complicated expression. Hu Bugui pulled a thicker padded overcoat from the backseat and wrapped it around him.

Su Qing put on a hat and got out of the car. He dashed towards the nearby supermarket. When he had nearly reached the door of the supermarket, he serendipitously looked back and found that Hu Bugui hadn't left yet. The windshield wipers made a small clear spot on the car window. Hu Bugui was sitting in the driver's seat with his elbow propped up, watching him go without moving. When he saw him turn back, a faint, slightly blurred smile appeared on his face.

Su Qing's footsteps paused. He suddenly took a deep breath and strode back. He pulled open the car door and grabbed Hu Bugui by the hand. “Come on. Come to the supermarket with me. Don't go back. Stay at my house tonight.”

EXTRA 2

AS SOON AS the door opened, Tu Tutu threw himself into Su Qing's arms. Though he was already over ten years old, Su Qing still tossed him up without any effort. "Have you been making trouble for Grandpa?"

"How could that be?" Tu Tutu said brazenly. "Our Imperial Presence understands basic principles."

He got his butt slapped.

Su Chengde found to his surprise that Su Qing had brought someone along. When Hu Bugui had come in carrying bags of all sizes and greeted him politely, he at last nodded a little disappointedly. Looking at Su Qing playing around with Tu Tutu without any care for his image, he thought, When will this little whelp bring home a girl?

How the fuck was it that he scared up a guy every time?

Su Qing took one glance and knew what his dad was hung up over. He gave a dry cough and put an arm around Hu Bugui's shoulder in a companionable way and made introductions: "This old man is my dad. Dad, this is our chief."

Hu Bugui said, "Hello, uncle. My name is Hu Bugui."

"Oh!" His boss? A boss was all right. Su Chengde put on a smile. "Oh, Captain Hu, I've heard of you. Don't stand on ceremony, sit down, sit down."

Hu Bugui sat bolt upright. Su Qing cheekily said, "It's snowing so much outside, and I didn't have my car, so I had Captain Hu drive me. Headquarters is too far, so I told him to come over and stay the night."

Su Chengde hastily expressed warm welcome.

Tu Tutu took part in the fun: "Grandpa, Chief Hu is a big hero."

Captain Hu, immovable as a mountain, actually blushed.

"That's right, that's right," Su Qing said. "Dad, we can sleep with the door open tonight. He can ward off evil spirits."

“Get out! Can you speak like a normal person? If you can’t, then shut up!” Su Chengde’s expression was absolutely foul while scolding his son. When he turned to Hu Bugui afterwards, the yaksha’s face immediately turned into a face smiling like a chrysanthemum. “Don’t be shy, Captain Hu, treat this like your own house. I expect my whelp has been giving you quite a bit of trouble out there?”

“Su Qing is pretty good,” Hu Bugui said. Then he glanced at Su Qing and added, “Though sometimes he doesn’t quite observe discipline.”

“What? Doesn’t observe discipline?!” Su Chengde furiously slapped the back of Su Qing’s head and scolded him: “How can you be a soldier and not observe discipline? Obeying orders is your duty. Do you understand what duty is?”

Su Qing pursed his lips, indicating that he wouldn’t speak.

So Su Chengde sat face to face with Hu Bugui. Su Qing occupied a corner of the couch and played on his phone with his head down. Tu Tutu looked from one to the next and felt that General Hu and Grandpa Su were successfully playing out a “naughty student’s teacher comes to pay a home visit to lodge a complaint” plot. This was his first time seeing the tyrannical prince regent so sullen. He was so delighted he was about to forget his own name.

Then, at last, his wishes were fulfilled as he heard the most classic of lines. Su Chengde very boldly said to Hu Bugui, “This son of mine, I was busy when he was little and didn’t have time to discipline him properly on my own, and the housekeeper spoiled him. He’s grown up entirely unpresentable now. If he doesn’t behave, you just go ahead and teach him a lesson. Give him a couple of slaps or kicks, it’s no problem.”

Hu Bugui looked at Su Qing with a slightly peculiar expression. Su Qing seemed to know what he was thinking. He looked up from busily playing Fruit Ninja and pulled a funny face. Hu Bugui laughed softly.

Su Chengde thought that he was being a little oversensitive. He suddenly felt that his wastrel son and this Captain Hu were kind of...making eyes at each other. He began to be fearful.

As soon as he had this suspicion, added to Su Qing’s prior record, Su Chengde began to pay attention and felt more and more that something was off.

For example, he found that while Hu Bugui and Su Qing didn't communicate much verbally, they had a particular tacit understanding. With practically nothing but a look and a tiny gesture no one else would notice, it was as though the two of them had had a conversation—of course, that was nothing, Su Chengde consoled himself. They were comrades-in-arms. They had carried guns and risked their lives together. How could they not have a bit of tacit understanding?

But why do they have to be so close to each other when they speak? Su Qing, what do you have to say that can't be said out in the open? You've got your mouth stuck to the man's ear! And you're smiling! And it's such a suggestive smile!

Then, when the two of them went into the kitchen to help serve food, Su Chengde saw with perfect clarity how a bit of vegetable soup accidentally splashed onto Su Qing's fingers, and Hu Bugui wiped it off for him... These comrades-in-arms really were on good terms, but if he was going to wipe, then he could wipe properly. There were so many towels and napkins in the kitchen and dining room that he didn't use; he actually used his tongue to lick it clean!

Su Chengde saw Su Qing raise his head and look his way a little guiltily, then immediately pretend to be counting chopsticks and not have seen anything. He felt his head turning into a big teapot, steam puffing out from the top of it.

His son was no longer extravagant, no longer wasteful. He didn't count grains of rice when he ate and wasn't totally incompetent anymore. Now, like the return of the prodigal, he had appeared before him in a new form as though reborn, and Su Chengde had thought that there could be nothing more perfectly satisfying in the world.

But it turned out that while all his various bad habits had changed, the only one that remained unchanged...was the one it was hardest for Su Chengde to accept!

So the "naughty student's home visit" atmosphere began to move quickly in a certain awkward direction. Throughout the evening, Su Chengde appeared absent-minded. On the surface, he pretended to be a fairly up to standard host, but he couldn't resist furtively looking back and forth between Su Qing and Hu Bugui. When no one else could see, the expression

on his face was now troubled, now relieved, oscillating like a sine wave, going on without end.

Tu Tutu's good days unfortunately ended after the prince regent's glorious return. Before, he had been able to push the retired emperor forward as a target, but now, while the retired emperor was speaking rather convincingly, he was inwardly busy to distraction. He had no time to discuss the problems of the child's education with his son. So His Majesty was sent off to his room to do his homework.

The TV in the living room was on and making a racket. After the news, it began to play TV dramas. Each of the three people sitting on the couch had his own thoughts. No one saw what was on the TV. Suddenly, Hu Bugui spoke softly: "It's a good thing Su Qing has come home today. His personal materials and family background still need to be completed. There are some places where you can help take a look, Uncle Su, and fill it in for him. That will save trouble later."

Su Chengde came around and nodded. He took a pen out from under the coffee table.

Su Qing didn't know what Hu Bugui's plan was. He saw Hu Bugui take a big stack of documents from his bag. This was a very thick stack. He had said it would only be filling in a form, but he laid papers out all over the table without finding that form. Hu Bugui had used a clip to clip together a whole lot of things. Su Qing couldn't resist coming forward to help him arrange them, thinking, He's a rather neat, rather careful person. How could he let his stuff get into such a mess?

But Hu Bugui avoided his hands. "It's fine. Many things have been set up anew lately. It's a bit chaotic. It'll be all right in a while."

When he dodged, the clip didn't hold. Some pieces of paper floated out, falling right at Su Chengde's feet.

Su Chengde naturally bent down to pick them up for him. At a glance, the dropped items didn't belong to a single person. There were unfilled forms, some with pictures stuck onto them. Then he flipped to the final page and froze.

This was a final testament, written by hand, signed by Su Qing.

Su Qing took a glance and immediately felt something was wrong. He snatched it back at lightning speed and hurriedly stuck it back in the clip. He glared at Hu Bugui, faintly understanding what he was up to.

Su Chengde had taken too great a hit. Before he could catch up, he exploded. He scowled immediately. “Why did you snatch that? Take it out, let me have a look!”

“No, no, that thing is unlucky. Listen, dad, you can’t take it seriously. Everyone at headquarters has one, it’s convention, it doesn’t mean anything. Right, Captain Hu?” Su Qing touched Hu Bugui with his knee. This was actually true.

Hu Bugui nodded to show agreement, but he didn’t raise his head to look at anyone when he nodded, a clear display of “I can’t say the truth in front of the family, I’ll just go along to save others worry.” Su Qing stamped on his foot under the table, thinking, Who taught you this? Even making progress when my back is turned doesn’t fucking explain this.

Hu Bugui accepted the stamp expressionlessly. Then he turned up the portion that he needed Su Chengde to fill in. With the speed of a strong wind, he swept the whole stack of documents off the table, just as though... he really hadn’t done it on purpose.

So Su Chengde became even more absent-minded. That night, he had Hu Bugui stay in the guest room. He washed up and lay down in bed, but he couldn’t fall asleep no matter what. As soon as he closed his eyes, he seemed to see that slightly sloppy line of Su Qing’s writing: “If I really do meet with misfortune, please look after my father for me. It hasn’t been easy for him having such an unfilial son. Thank you.”

Perhaps because he had gotten old, Su Chengde no longer had the ability he had had when he was young to cool his heart. His heart stung so that he felt bewildered. He was so upset he nearly cried.

So he sat up and turned on a reading lamp. He picked up a photo frame from the nightstand and looked at the three person family in it. This was from back when Su Qing had still been an ignorant little brat. Su Chengde sat at the bedside with his back hunched, and his tears really did fall on the frame, landing on the face of the woman with her fixed smile.

“Bijun, let me tell you, our son’s come back.” As he spoke to himself, he carefully wiped the tears from the frame with his fingers. He felt the eternally young woman’s gaze pass through the clear frame and radiate all the way to his heart. She was sitting beside him, like many years before, not saying much but knowing everything, understanding everything.

“What should I do? You’re the child’s mother. What do you think I should do?”

Su Chengde sat in the dim light of the bedside lamp for a long time. Then he wiped his face, stood up, and went to the bathroom attached to his bedroom to look in the mirror. He straightened his back, arranged a solemn expression, then silently walked out of the room and knocked on the door of the guest room.

When Su Qing got up the next morning, he acutely felt that something wasn’t right—Su Chengde’s expression looking at him was even more complicated. He thought a little fearfully, Lao Hu couldn’t have said something to him last night, could he? Su Qing began to slightly regret deciding to take Hu Bugui home in a moment of soft-heartedness. He thought it really was a lousy idea.

When they had eaten breakfast and were preparing to leave, at the front door of the Su house, Hu Bugui brazenly pulled a scarf off the clothes rack and, right under the old man’s nose, carefully tied it around Su Qing’s neck, then pulled his coat closed. Su Qing was startled and quickly took a big step back, turning to look at Su Chengde as though he had been exposed. But he found that while the old man looked grim, he saw them out as though nothing were the matter.

Su Qing couldn’t come around until they were sitting in the car. He couldn’t resist asking, “So...the old man, he...”

“Oh,” Hu Bugui said very lightly, “when you were asleep last night, I had a talk with him.”

Su Qing feared neither heaven nor earth, but his expression abundantly told Hu Bugui that he had been frightened.

“Did you...tell him everything?”

Hu Bugui looked at him in the mirror, saw his expression, and suddenly felt a strange sense of achievement.

“It’s fine. He’s your dad. The rest doesn’t matter. His greatest wish is for you to be safe and sound,” Hu Bugui said. “I just made him believe that I’m a fairly reliable person, and that I can just about live up to the requirements and fulfill that greatest wish of his.”

EXTRA 3

THE DRIZZLE fell endlessly, and the sky was overcast. The ground was wet. A man with a hood over his head passed quickly through the little alley, tightly clutching a parcel hidden under his arm. His other hand was hidden in his pocket, the fingers tightly clutching a gun, but his hand was trembling.

Suddenly, a person's footsteps came from the other end of the little alley. The man froze, his chest heaving rapidly, his whole body tensed. He stopped.

It can't be, the man thought. He was well-concealed and hadn't slipped up in his actions. The people pursuing him couldn't be walking so steadily and carelessly. It was normal for people to come and go here. There was no need to be nervous. It was only a passerby...

Then he saw the man coming from the other end of the little alley. This person was very tall. He had an umbrella in his hand, held very low. His face couldn't be seen. His pant legs and the hem of his trench coat were a little wet. Only the hand holding the handle of the umbrella was visible. The fingers were long and slender, the nails very clean.

The man watched him unhurriedly walk over step by step. His heart rate nearly reached its limit. The person was already in front of him. He quietly said, "Please make way."

The man turned, pressing his spine to the damp wall, freeing half the space for the other person to pass by. The moment they brushed shoulders, the person with the big umbrella at last raised the umbrella slightly, letting the man see his face clearly, as well as the smile on that face.

There was a gunshot in the little alley.

Five minutes later, both ends of the alley were blocked by cars. A team of armed RZ Unit personnel charged in. The rain had stopped entirely. Su Qing folded up the black umbrella and held it. He pressed on the communicator in his ear and rather helplessly said, "Hey, haven't you two had enough..."

In headquarters' observation room, Chang Dou and Lu Qingbai were as thrilled as a cheerleading squad. Lu Qingbai said, "Did you see that? After he said that, without warning, he shot that person in the arm right here, precisely so he wouldn't be able to move the hand holding his gun. He had to judge which hand was holding the gun and which was holding something else. He also had to aim and choose his time right."

"Cool!" Chang Dou's eyes were glistening.

"Cough up, cough up!" Lu Qingbai said. "Who said just now that that brat would turn and run when he heard footsteps? Hurry and cough up the money!"

Chang Dou and the other technicians each helplessly pulled out a red Grandpa Mao and offered it up to Dr. Lu.

Su Qing put in an appearance on the communicator: "Lao Lu, give me half when I see you."

Lu Qingbai stuck the money in his pocket. "On what grounds?"

"Nonsense," Su Qing said. "Just try that with Captain Hu coming from the other direction. Never mind this little rabbit, a big wolf would have been scared off. I made at least a three-quarters contribution to winning the money. It's putting myself at a disadvantage to ask for half."

Hu Bugui's voice also came from the communicator. He very strictly condemned this conduct of gambling in headquarters and indicated that as a disciplinary action, all illicit funds given to the participants would be confiscated.

Everyone had been in a very good mood lately, especially Su Qing. Co-operating with Tu Tutu, the big and little scourge together had fixed up Hu Bugui's old mother with every sort of slick talk, getting her to the point of acknowledging Su Qing as a godson. After consolidating the sentiment, he had immediately pressed his advantage, to the point that Hu Bugui's lips had loosened, and he had confessed everything. They had actually gotten through it without mishap.

Anyway, Lao Hu wasn't the only son in his family. They weren't afraid of breaking the family line.

Fang Xiu had had a moment's carelessness in a recent action pursuing a Utopia extremist. He had been slightly wounded. One of his feet was lamed. He temporarily couldn't walk on it and belonged within Dr. Lu's jurisdic-

tion. So he hadn't participated in the field activity. He had only been given the right to observe.

Su Qing and the others over there had obviously called it a day, so headquarters also became noisy and relaxed. A group of young people from logistics began to fool around. Someone knocked off Chang Dou's glasses, revealing a pair of extremely confused eyes that couldn't seem to focus. But his expression was still as burning and excited as before.

"One of these days, I also want to go out into the field once!" Fang Xiu watched Chang Dou with his head of bristling bird's nest short hair passionately say, "Holding a gun, keeping an eye on everything, listening in all directions, 'ha' and you catch a bad guy, then everyone pals around and leaves. Like being a superhero!"

Fang Xiu was suddenly a little dazed. He remembered another person also raising his fist like this, entirely unreconciled, saying a similar line: "One day, I'll become a superhero!"

Was it that every nerd's shriveled chest hid a heart that wished to save the world?

Fang Xiu stared at an empty corner, thinking that there seemed to be someone standing there. He looked very frail and was dressed more ostentatiously than anyone else in the room, more like a mad scientist. He always talked a lot of nonsense and was bad at organizing his words. No one could ever understand what he meant. But under his scatter-brained exterior, he was actually more preoccupied than anyone else, bearing a heavier burden than anyone else.

Fang Xiu felt that the person standing in the corner seemed to be smiling at him. He couldn't resist laboriously shifting over a step. He even forgot his inconvenient foot, didn't keep his balance, and got tripped by something. There was a fairly loud sound, and he went sprawling. He startled a nurse who had followed him over. Chang Dou, who was fairly close to him, also cried out and threw himself over. "Hey, why did you fall? Does your foot hurt?"

But Fang Xiu didn't hear anything. He ignored the sounds around him and raised his head to look into the corner, but it was empty. There was nothing there.

In that moment, Fang Xiu felt that his heart was also empty.

He suddenly became agitated and pushed Chang Dou's hand away. He said a little roughly, "Get out of my way, don't mind me." Then he picked up his crutch, stood up with difficulty, and walked away, having absolutely no qualms about the startled and slightly hurt expression of the person behind him.

In the maze at the ST Base, he had been trapped for years. Each day, he counted each second of sunlight and shadow passing. Each day, he fumbled. Each day, he was confused. Fang Xiu faintly knew what he was waiting for. He was waiting for a pair of hands that could pull him back.

Xu Ruchong was gone, he told himself, but he didn't believe it. Was he really gone? Had he really died so abruptly? Could fate really not give a bit of a hint before a major tragedy or major joy? Even...just a little bit?

A feeling of unease, or...a slight ominous premonition.

But it had all seemed to happen in an instant, so fast that he still thought it was a joke—Xu Ruchong sometimes liked to play all kinds of irresponsible jokes. When others had been really scared, he would jump out to hurriedly apologize and explain.

He was waiting for that person to come explain, but he didn't come. He never came.

Fang Xiu even childishly thought that this wasn't his fault. It was all Xu Ruchong's fault. Those words he hadn't had time to say—he had lost the chance forever. But they wouldn't disappear. They only stuck in his chest, not coming up and not going down, as if caught in that maze like a fragment of time.

Fang Xiu returned to his room, lit a cigarette, and quietly sat on the couch.

After a while, there was a knock on the door. Fang Xiu knew who was knocking as soon as he heard—Hu Bugui knocked very heavily, time after time. Su Qing was indolent, and his knocking sounded dragged out. Lu Qingbai liked to bang on people's doors like playing ping-pong. Qin Luo knocked three times with a very long pause between knocks. Only Chang Dou would first lightly touch a door like this, then only slowly gather the nerve to increase his strength on the second knock, as though he was lacking in self-confidence.

He was always trembling—at least in front of him, Fang Xiu thought. Chang Dou was probably the only person in the unit who thought that Fang

Xiu was an even scarier person than Captain Hu.

There were three timid knocks. Fang Xiu closed his eyes. He didn't want to pay attention. After a moment, the knocking came again. Fang Xiu sighed and thought that he had probably gone a little too far in his treatment of Chang Dou.

At first, he had thought that Chang Dou was an inferior replacement, until his reason had returned and he had remembered that this "replacement" wasn't doing it of his own accord, and furthermore...it seemed that he wasn't very inferior.

Chang Dou sometimes liked watching people's expressions. He wasn't as self-confident as Xu Ruchong. He needed the certainty of many people. But sometimes he was also very stubborn, with a childlike stubbornness that came from who knew where, like a...little mouse that had run all the way into the darkness but wouldn't turn back.

Chang Dou was only Chang Dou. He wasn't anyone's replacement.

The person outside the door at last couldn't hold back. He softly asked, "Well...are you there?"

Fang Xiu sighed, put out his cigarette, stood up limping, and opened the door. Chang Dou still had his hand raised to knock and was very startled.

Fang Xiu looked at him and quietly said, "Come in, then."

Then, supporting himself on the wall, he slowly walked back to the couch. He walked very laboriously. Chang Dou couldn't resist wanting to reach out to support him, but he raised a hand and hesitated for a long moment, then quietly drew it back.

"Sit," Fang Xiu said. Before Chang Dou could speak, he began, "I let my mind wander a little just now. My manner wasn't good. I wasn't aiming at you. Don't take it to heart."

Chang Dou was surprised. He opened his eyes wide and looked at him, his face slowly reddening.

Fang Xiu paused, then squeezed out another sentence: "I'm sorry."

Chang Dou quickly waved a hand. "No...no, it's all right."

The two of them were silent. Fang Xiu lit another cigarette. He closed the lighter with a *click*. The atmosphere became a little awkward. Chang Dou asked, "Well...does your foot still hurt? I saw you fall pretty badly just now."

"It's fine, I just missed my footing."

“...Oh.”

Chang Dou had his head down, looking at his own fingers. He thought dejectedly, it would be better if Su Qing were here. No matter who you saw him with, they were all very relaxed. He could even make Qin Luo laugh... Why couldn't he be like that? He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to lead a conversation.

He spent too much time looking at machines. He had long ago forgotten what he was supposed to say in front of people.

“What else did you need?”

Fang Xiu tapped out cigarette ash. The practiced motion of his slender fingers made Chang Dou stare. He heard his question, then came around. “Oh...Captain Hu said that the time for yearly general comments is coming. This is actually my first year taking part in this, I heard...I heard that apart from the captain's general comments, everyone gives each other comments. I don't quite know where I stand. I wanted to come ask everyone how my work has been. Well...”

“Pretty good,” Fang Xiu said.

“I know I don't do well, and that I'm immature. Sometime I hold everyone back. You must often feel impatient looking at me, right? I know that... In the future, I'll work hard to improve...” Chang Dou still hadn't caught up. He was continuing on his own.

“I said, pretty good.” Fang Xiu couldn't resist smiling. The very tense lines of his face softened. “Everyone approves of your working ability.”

“Huh?” Chang Dou looked at him stupidly.

When he smiled, his pale lips took on a bit of color. Chang Dou blankly thought, He's really good-looking when he smiles.

Fang Xiu continued: “You hold up pretty well at the critical moment. When it came to a crisis last time, you didn't drop the ball. Everyone is even discussing given you a special merit.”

“R...really?!”

“Yeah.”

“Oh! Thank you! Thanks to all of you! You're really too nice!” Chang Dou babbled thanks.

“So you can stop worrying.”

“Oh...” Chang Dou suddenly thought of something, and the happiness on his face slowly fell away. He began to waver again.

Normally, Fang Xiu wouldn't have had so much patience, but he had just lost his temper with Chang Dou for no reason. He felt that he had been a little unfair to him. So he restrained himself and asked, "What else is there?"

"Right...I..." Chang Dou suddenly seemed to become a stutterer. He dodged Fang Xiu's gaze, so nervous that he even started rubbing his sleeve with his fingers. "I..."

"What's the matter with you?" Fang Xiu frowned.

"I...I...I..." Chang Dou's face began to turn red, but he couldn't get anything out after the "I."

"You what?"

"I..." Pink turned into bright red, then turned to reddish-purple.

"..."

"I..." At last, after saying a truckload of "I"s, Chang Dou got up his courage, suddenly stood up off the couch, overbearingly put both hands on the coffee table, then quickly drew close and kissed Fang Xiu on the lips. His action was too abrupt. The knock hurt both of them a little.

Fang Xiu: "..."

Chang Dou's head was about to turn into a tea kettle. Steam was coming out of his ears. He stood there as though he had broken a pot. "I...really like you."

He spoke like a mosquito. But Chang Dou waited for a long moment, and Fang Xiu still didn't react. He snuck a look at Fang Xiu. He saw that he had forgotten to put the cigarette he was holding in his mouth. He was looking at Chang Dou with a complicated expression. So he determined that his confession had been inadequate. He took a deep breath. Something in his mind twitched, and he yelled at Fang Xiu: "Requesting to be kept! I can warm your bed!"

Fang Xiu's expression became even more marvelous. Chang Dou took another deep breath. "I know you have someone else in your heart, but I'm going to work very hard! I'll work hard to make everyone think that my work achievements are good, and I'll work hard to make you like me!"

He shouted like a hot-blooded teenager, as though he wasn't confessing his feelings but stating his position before making a difficult sacrifice for the sake of survival. When he had said these words, he at last became weakened

and demoralized. He snuck another glance at Fang Xiu's expression. He found that Fang Xiu's expression was even more complicated.

Fang Xiu sighed. "Chang..."

"Ah!" Chang Dou covered his ears and shouted, "Don't say it! I won't listen! I...I'm going, this is it for today, I'll work hard in the future, I'll really work hard! Don't refuse me, I won't listen if you refuse me!"

Then he really did charge out, forgetting to even close the door.

Fang Xiu stared blankly for a moment. He stuck the remaining half of his cigarette into his mouth. He suddenly felt that...the flavor was a little wrong. He couldn't resist rubbing his lips. Then he considered and rubbed them again.

He really was...a silly child.

¹ 胡狼 (hulang) - the first character is the same as Hu Bugui's surname

² 爆SEED - Cantonese slang meaning to suddenly become motivated/ reach your full potential as in a fight; the capitals are because the term originates from the anime Gundam SEED.

³ 归零队 - 归零 (gui ling), return-to-zero, is a form of data transmission in which the signal returns to zero between pulses; I'm translating it with the acronym because it's snappier.

⁴ Originally “整个人蜷成一团，正式升级'团长'，” a pun I have slightly tormented to keep in the text. 团 (tuan) means “group” or “circle”, and 团长 (tuanzhang) is a military rank—“group commander”, while the set phrase 蜷成一团 translates to “curl up into a ball.”

⁵ The Sanlu Group (三鹿集团) was a Chinese dairy company that shut down in 2008 after a contaminated products scandal. Assuming the novel is set around when written—2010—that milk is ancient. Assuming it's set any later, it's time to bring in the HAZ-MAT squad.

⁶ 望夫石, lit. "the stone gazing out for her husband," a natural rock formation in Hong Kong.

⁷ Reference to Yu Zecheng, main character of novel and TV series 潜伏 (English title: Lurk); Yu Zecheng is a Communist Party spy within the Kuomintang.

⁸ Hu Hansan is a villainous landlord from the propaganda film 闪闪的红星 (Sparkling Red Star); his life motto is that villains live long lives. He constantly tries to return to torment the people and says, “I, Hu Hansan, have returned once again.” More relevantly, this is used online for returning to comment on the same discussion multiple times.

⁹ Like many Chinese words, made up of the two opposing parts of the meaning, 轻 (qing, light) and 重 (zhong, heavy).

¹⁰ Chen Shimei is a Chinese opera character who represents a heartless and unfaithful man; he deserted his wife and tried to kill her. The story is one of Bao Zheng's, Justice Bao's, who is approached by the wife seeking justice.

¹¹ Heaven's One Holy Water (天一神水) is a deadly poison in the first novel of a series of wuxia novels from the 70s by writer Gu Long.

¹² Unsurprisingly, this is 聪明 (congming, “smart/ clever”) and 大葱 (da cong, “big onion”) originally.

¹³ Probably a reference to “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl,” the story of two lovers separated by a heavenly river (the Milky Way), who meet once a year when magpies form a bridge over it.

¹⁴ Lei Feng, soldier in the People's Liberation Army circa the 1960s, in propaganda portrayed as a model citizen after an early death.

¹⁵ From 登幽州台歌/“Song of Climbing the You Zhou Building” by Tang Dynasty poet Chen Zi'ang 陈子昂. Original text: 念天地之悠悠，独怆然而涕下。

¹⁶ A very common corruption of a going to school song (it's originally a backpack on the singer's back, but you know kids...). Lyrics: 太阳当空照 / 花儿对我笑 / 小鸟说早早早 / 你为什么背上炸药包 / 我去上学校。

¹⁷ 马王爷, a folk religion god with three eyes.

¹⁸ Famous lines from 诗经, the Book of Songs, a collection of ancient Chinese poetry. Original lines given: 昔我往矣，杨柳依依；今我来思，雨雪霏霏。

¹⁹ New Oriental Education & Technology Group, a private education company focusing on language learning.

²⁰ A little sleight of hand—the general's surname, 熊, means “bear,” making the panda, 熊猫 (xiongmao), literally “bear-cat,” a relative of his.

²¹ Eponymous child main character of a slice-of-life anime with distinctive eyebrows.

²² Nicknames for female singers Zeng Yike and Li Yuchun. The nicknames refer to the fact that they have androgynous styles and are regarded as mannish.

²³ Both personages from Journey to the West: Baigujing (白骨精) is a shape-shifting demon whose true form is a skeleton; Zhu Bajie (猪八戒) is one the main characters, a former heavenly commander banished for misbehavior and reincarnated as a pig monster.

²⁴ 爱情买卖, a rather cynical 2009 pop song: <https://youtu.be/O4dph6kLy2w>

²⁵ 老鼠爱大米, a notably less cynical 2004 pop song:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6v46GsYf3Q>

²⁶ Singer Liu Huan (刘欢)'s 1996 song 去者 (Departed). Original lines: 人鬼天地 / 万金似慷慨 / 浮生若梦安载道 / 唯苦心良在.

²⁷ Quote from a poem by the 6th Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso.

²⁸ Popular card game from 2008 based on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms; players take on various roles, including enemy agent.

²⁹ 柳下惠, common appellation of Zhan Huo, an ancient politician known for his virtue.

³⁰ 忐忑, a memetic song from early 2010. No lyrics, expresses the notion of perturbation quite well: <https://youtu.be/QDzP6bCgoHE>

³¹ Reference to The Orphan of Zhao (赵氏孤儿), a 13th century play about an orphan who gets adopted by the person who murdered his family, eventually discovers this, gets revenge, and lives happily ever after.

³² Zongzi (粽子) are stuffed glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves; they are traditionally eaten during the Duanwu/Dragon Boat Festival.

³³ The localized version of Frère Jacques. The line “one without eyes, one without ears” comes from it.

³⁴ From the Plants vs. Zombies franchise; this is a plant that blocks zombies.

³⁵ As mentioned in an earlier note, nickname of Li Yuchun, AKA Chris Lee, a singer remarkable for her androgynous style who became a sort of “true man” meme on the internet because of it.

³⁶ The Yihetuan Movement (义和团运动) was an anti-imperialist, anti-foreign uprising between 1899 and 1901, known in the West as the Boxer Rebellion. When the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded, the initially ambivalent Qing government supported the Yihetuan and formally declared war on the invading powers.

³⁷ Reference to an aphorism based on Heraclitus’s philosophy of constant flux, in English rendered as “No man ever steps in the same river twice.”

³⁸ The character for Zheng Wan’s given name is 婉, “mild,” while the character 碗, pronounced the same, means “bowl.”