

陳詞懶調 × PieroRabu

回到過去

BACK TO THE PAST
TO BECOME A CAT NO.1

變成貓

01 我們是
東區四賤客！

楚
華
大
學

Strange Life of a Cat

– 回到过去变成猫 –

**- Part 1 -
(Chapter 1-30)**

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Lazy Cliché**

[Qidian International]

- STORY -

Zheng Tan somehow returns to the year 2003, turning into a black cat. Picked up from a rubbish heap by the Jiao family, he is given the name "Charcoal", and so begins the life inside Professor Jiao's family. Zheng Tan remembers that he was once a person, but currently his body is that of a cat. He has no way of speaking the human language, but can understand it, and even retains the thinking and IQ of a young 20 year old youth. Read along as he adapts to this new world, and somehow tumbles from a group brawl to catching a thief.

Chapter 1

Everything Happens for the Best

Zheng Tan hopped onto a branch of the Chinese Parasol tree. He squinted at the sunlight leaking between the leaves and scratched his ears with his now furry paws. He managed to find a comfortable position and yawned.

A sunny September afternoon; it was just the perfect time for a nap.

Zheng Tan was a cat, now. But once, not long ago, he had been 100% human. He didn't know what spawned the transformation; he woke up one day and just like that, he had whiskers.

There he was, in an unfamiliar city with unfamiliar rooms filled with strangers. He had an unfamiliar, but more importantly, a devastating new identity. What's more, his now magnified world was that of 2003.

Zheng Tan had to confess, he did not like cats, hated them even. He always felt that cats were a species closer to the insane. Now, he himself had become such an animal.

Maybe this was the universe's idea of retribution?

Zheng Tan admitted that he was, by all means, not a very good person. He bullied the weak and may have set a few not-too-big fires. He idled about without any decent work and once lived way too extravagantly. But at least he never murdered.

Judging by his left-unchecked-for-too-long moral compass, there were more than enough bastards out there who were way worse than him. So why was he suffering from the universe's vengeance?

Did he feel lost? Did he feel powerless? Did he feel angry? Did he feel hopeless?

In the face of stone cold reality, everything seemed to be of no avail. Remembering his past luxurious life, Zheng Tan sighed and told himself, ["Everything happens for the best."]

Up to now, he had spent three months in the past. That was one season, a quarter of a year, ninety degrees on the wheel of nature. Despite his initial disbelief and despair, he had slowly grown comfortable in his new surroundings.

Sometimes, giving up one's ambition and settling for whatever one had was not too bad.

So here he was, in one of the top universities in central China. Being an elite 100-year-old college, Chuhua university had a large campus filled with green spaces. Under his tree, students came and went, walking briskly past Zheng Hua. The atmosphere here was peaceful but full of youthful spirit.

Zheng Tan settled down and managed to almost doze off until he was jerked back into reality by a burst of dog barks. Without even opening his eyes, Zheng Tan knew perfectly well who was causing the ruckus.

About a hundred feet from where he was resting, a brown Chihuahua was barking at a camphor tree and on the branches stood a cat with a black and white coat. The cat was swaying its tail while barking at the creature under the tree. That's right, barking.

This situation might seem like a common occurrence. Indeed, any pet owner could testify to seeing this situation countless times. However, there was one little thing here that was different from your everyday cat-dog standoff. Both the dog and the cat were barking.

This cat was named "Sheriff". Now eight months old and slightly smaller than Zheng Tan, Sheriff's coat had an uncanny resemblance to the black cat in the popular children's cartoon 'Sheriff Black Cat', hence his name. Sheriff was one of Zheng Tan's closest friends since he became a cat.

Now there were two things one needed to know about Sheriff. Number one, he was aggressive. He fought with absolutely no regard for his life. Second, he knew how to bark. He was a dog-like cat.

Zheng Tan first met Sheriff when the guy was squatting on a landscape stone barking at the same Chihuahua. It was only when he saw Zheng Tan, did he sheepishly switch to meowing.

At that time, Sheriff had not yet mastered the canine language. But those days were gone. Now his barks were 'dog' enough to fool any listener. Zheng Tan even caught him

panting with his tongue out like a dog on a few occasions.

Zheng Tan secretly suspected there was a dog's soul inside that cat's body.

No longer paying attention to that side, Zheng Tan yawned and curled up to sleep again. He was not even a little bit worried about Sheriff. Sheriff and that Chihuahua had been fighting since he was a kitten.

Sheriff has a simple reason for why he always gave the Chihuahua a hard time. The Chihuahua was the smallest of all the pet dogs in the Eastern Quarters of the Faculty Residence. Always pick on the weakling. Even cats knew that.

Zheng Tan slept until the bell rang, signaling the end of third period. He got up, stretched lazily, then slid down from his tree. He trotted down the trail through a patch of peach trees to a wall. Behind the wall was the primary school affiliated to Chuhua university, a school for the children of the faculty.

Zheng Tan hopped onto the wall, took a glance at two classrooms on the second floor and sixth floor and walked towards the school gate, where he sat and waited. Seven or eight minutes later, the school bell rang. It was a merry little melody instead of the usual sharp shrill. Very humane, Zheng Tan noted.

A little girl, wearing a floral dress and carrying a Hello Kitty backpack walked out of the building. The moment she came out the door, she started searching for Zheng Tan. When she saw him sitting on the wall near the gate, her normally emotionless eyes shone with excitement and she ran towards him.

"Yuan said he had a quiz in the last period, we may have to wait a while..."

Before the little girl could finish, Zheng Tan saw a boy shoot out the building, dragging his backpack behind him like a sack, his hair a tousled mess. He ran straight toward them, a bragging grin on his face, gesturing towards them a "V" for victory. Seemed like the rascal did quite well on the quiz.

The boy was Jiao Yuan, a sixth grader, the single child of the family that had adopted Zheng Tan. The little girl, Gu Youzi, was his cousin. Her parents were divorced and for some reason, her mother took her back from abroad and sent her to live with the Jiao family. She was in second grade.

Jiao Yuan took Gu Youzi's backpack and slung it over his shoulder, then the pair and

their cat set off towards the Eastern Quarters.

"Look, the Jiao family's cat went to pick up the kids again!" some passerby exclaimed.

Most people they passed on their way home, however, were used to the scene. This had been going on for three weeks now, after all. Originally though, it caused quite a stir.

The faculty residence was not far from the school. They were there in under ten minutes. The Jiao Family lived on the fifth floor of Building B in the Eastern Quarters. Jiao Yuan swiped his key chain across the security sensor and the iron door sprang open.

There was a small round tag on Jiao Yuan's key chain, which was a security access key. Everyone living in the quarters had one. Even Zheng Tan had one hanging from the collar. But his was special. It had his picture, the current cat version of course, on one side and the Jiao family's contact information on the other. It was a security access key and a pet tag all in one.

Papa Jiao had it specially made.

Zheng Tan took a peek at the balcony of an apartment on the first floor. He didn't see Fatty. He must have been taken along to visit relatives again.

Around dinner time, the Jiao family usually left the front door open. The little trio could hear Mama Jiao cooking in the kitchen and someone chatting in the living room. The faculty residences had excellent security. There were security cameras in the lobby as well as the security door outside.

"It's a deal then. So I can count on you for the advertisement, Professor Jiao."

Zheng Tan paused before entering the door. He knew that voice, it was the owner of the pet supplies store near Chuhua University. His last name was Guo and his brother was a veterinarian. Zheng Tan had gotten his vaccine from the guy.

Last week, Zheng Tan had overheard Mama Jiao saying that Mr. Guo wanted him to pose in an ad for canned cat food. Was that what this visit was about?

Chapter 2

Can I Borrow Your Cat

Mr.Guo's customers were basically people related to Chuhua University in one capacity or another, and doing business with the university folks was not easy. For one thing, food safety and quality problems had absolutely nowhere to hide.

People who spent all their time in the lab, with nothing but science equipments and experimental data to look at, needed to have fun somehow.

They would sometimes take a bus to a back alley to buy a bowl of noodles to take back to the lab and test it for Naphthalene. They would test sesame sauce from the little convenience store nearby for aflatoxin or check it to see if the E. coli contained was above approved levels.

So, to do business with college teachers and students and maintain a good reputation, good quality products were the key.

Mr. Guo's store withstood the test of time and labs; it grew popular and funds started to pour in. He had rented the few neighboring stores and merged with his brother's pet clinic to set up a pet center.

From what Zheng Tan knew, the guy was decent fellow. He had a mind for money-making ideas but his heart was in the right place. At least he treated the animals well.

After Mr.Guo left, there was no mention of the cat food ad in the Jiao family. After dinner, Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi retreated to their room to write homework. Mama Jiao went to the gym to learn dancing with a few friends.

Zheng Tan went into the master bedroom. He nudged the door closed before and pawed the latch, locking the door. In the bedroom, Papa Jiao was already waiting behind his desk.

Papa Jiao didn't even bat an eye at Zheng Tan's actions after he entered the room, for he had seen it too many times. Zheng Tan jumped on the table and Papa Jiao closed the folder he was reading.

"Today, Mr. Guo came to talk about the cat food ads. I haven't given him my word yet; I wanted to get your thoughts first," Papa Jiao said while placing a document in front of Zheng Tan.

The document contained the details of the cat food campaign and a list of pros and cons, drafted up by Papa Jiao.

Mr. Guo's shop made a store brand cat food that was quite popular with cat owners on campus since the price was cheap and the quality was good. Mr. Guo had long been ready to promote this cat food, but the outbreak of "SARS" had put a stop to his original plans.

Now he was ready to start over again. Also, he was short on cash due to the costs of setting up his pet center. He needed the possible sales from the cat food more than ever.

Although there were few pet food ads on Chinese television, Zheng Tan found out after coming here that there was an expanding market for it. The economy was booming, and the pace of life in the city was faster than ever. People had no time to take care of themselves, even if they wanted a pet, they needed to figure out how to feed it first.

Zheng Tan never had a knack for making money and he still didn't. However, even he could tell they would make a small fortune if this thing went well.

Zheng Tan did not eat cat food; he ate whatever the Jiao family ate. Since becoming a cat, he was most grateful that his digestive system was strong enough to handle human food. But he wouldn't need to eat cat food for the ad.

Zheng Tan thought in all seriousness that doing this ad was really not a big deal. After all, it was just for pet food. According to the file, the initial distribution would be solely internet based. If the public responded well, there would be more to follow.

Mr. Guo was simply testing the waters with this first ad. His financial constraints were probably the reason he had his eye on Zheng Tan. Foreigners were willing to spend a few tons of food to shoot a scene for a pet food ad. If Mr. Guo used a different cat, a few tons of food might be excessive, but he definitely couldn't shy away from throwing in some food.

Zheng sighed while looking at the document and was thinking hard about the pros and cons when Papa Jiao patted him and said: "You don't have to make a decision

immediately. I told Xiao Guo I'd give him an answer in three days."

Zheng Tan was not in a hurry anymore, now knowing that he had three days to think it over. He had to be careful being in his current state.

Zheng Tan heard a knock at the front door.

Papa Jiao left to open the door, Zheng Tan did not follow him, though his ears perked up.

The visitor was the otaku who lived with his parents across the hall. Both his parents worked at the university.

The guy usually stayed at home all day. He had a predilection for StarCraft, Spider-Man, Star Wars and Spongebob-themed T-shirt, but did his laundry once a week at most. Even in the summer.

Zheng Tan wondered if mushrooms grew in his neglected heap of laundry in summer.

He sounded embarrassed when he spoke.

"Brother Jiao, It's like the mice over at my place have superpowers or something. The mouse trap I bought didn't manage to catch anything. They are driving me crazy. If... um... it's ever convenient, you know, maybe I could... uh... borrow your cat?"

Zheng Tan jumped off desk and stuck his head out the door to have a look. The guy had a lunch box in one hand and was frantically scratching his head with the other.

Zheng Tan rolled his eyes. He clearly remembered this guy boasting to Jiao Yuan about not ever having mice in his place. The next day he was complaining about mice chewing apart his internet line.

He tried everything short of poison. However, none of the mouse stickers and mouse traps did a thing. Zheng Tan was beginning to think that being in a university had raised the IQ of the mice somehow.

Now that he thought about it, he never once tried to catch a mouse after becoming a cat. For some unknown reason, the Jiao family never had got any mice. Maybe it was because of him. Anyhow, he would really be clueless if he was tasked with catching mice now.

Not that he was afraid of them. Zheng Tan used to catch mice in middle school to scare the girls in his class. But it was different being a human being.

Zheng Tan looked down woefully at his furry paws. He was officially annoyed.

Papa Jiao finished his conversation and went back into the room. He waved Zheng Tan over. "Do you know how to catch a mouse?"

He sat still and stared back blankly.

Papa Jiao broke the silence. "Well, let's give it a try."

Try? Where? How?

Zheng Tan was confused.

Papa Jiao grabbed his keys and a bag, then motioned for Zheng Tan to follow him.

Zheng Tan sat in the back of Papa Jiao's scooter and watched him take a familiar route out of the residential quarters. He was starting to get an idea of where they were going.

He still had no idea how Papa Jiao was going to let him 'try' to catch a mouse, and he was getting anxious. He was stronger than the average cat. He felt he could still get stronger, maybe even reach the level of an average adult in a year or two.

However, having strength did not mean he could catch a mouse. He never used to like cats, so he never took the time to find out how a normal cat did it.

While he was thinking, the scooter pulled in front of their destination - the College of Life Sciences building.

As an assistant professor, this was where Papa Jiao spent most of his waking moments.

After properly parking the small scooter, Papa Jiao shook open the bag he carried and motioned to Zheng Tan. His lips twitched, if such a thing was possible for cats, and he grudgingly jumped into the bag. The bio building was not a place where cats would wander. It was best to not be seen.

Papa Jiao then walked toward the main entrance of building, calmly greeting people going in and out.

They were alone by the time he reached the stairs. Most people chose the elevator.

Zheng Tan stuck his head out from the bag and looked around. Even at 7pm, there were still a lot of people around. Laboratory lights were all still on and he could see the UV lamp of the sterile rooms from the other side from the staircase windows.

He was quite nervous the first time Jiao Yuan brought him here, but now he was getting used to it. Though, Zheng Tan still felt fortunate that this family who had adopted him were not science freaks.

Papa Jiao's office was on the second floor. He was the one of the few assistant professors who had an independent office. Sometimes when Mama Jiao was too busy, Jiao Yuan would come here to do homework or take a nap. Once in while, Zheng Tan would follow him, always wrapped in a bag or hidden under clothes.

Papa Jiao found some keys in his office, then carried Zheng Tan up to the fourth floor. The rooms up here were seldom used. This was Zheng Tan's first time up here.

Papa Jiao's footsteps were abnormally loud in the quiet corridor. The sound-controlled lights lit up allowing Zheng Tan a glimpse at the door tags. No wonder no one was here. This was where they stored unused equipment and chemicals. But... Wait a minute...

Zheng Tan twitched his nose. He caught a whiff of a certain creature.

Papa Jiao stopped in front of a room on the far end of the hall and took out his keys.

The door squeaked as it opened.

Even in the dim lighting, Zheng Tan could see clearly the layout of the room.

Cages of little white mice were stacked in a room inside. A table and some shelves were put near the door.

Papa Jiao switched on the light and set the bag with Zheng Tan down on the experiment table. "Wait here and don't run around. There are lots of chemicals here, so you could get hurt."

Papa Jiao threw on a lab coat and took out some gloves from a drawer. He went into the inner room and soon came out with a cage in his hand. In it, were five white mice.

Chapter 3

This Is How You Teach a Cat

Laboratory mice were calm and gentle, which was the nice way of saying they were slow and stupid. Maybe it was due to inbreeding.

Recently, Zheng Tan often saw Papa Jiao mention them in PowerPoint slides for his course on genetics. Now looking at the five mice in the cage, he couldn't help but think that Papa Jiao was not lying. He did not see any hint of fear in the eyes of those mice. Instead, they begged for food as if the feeder was here.

Papa Jiao took a mouse out of the cage and said to Zheng Tan, "Watch it; don't let it run around."

Zheng Tan and looked at the mouse that had no idea what it was about to face and lifted a paw to pin the mouse by the tail. The mouse did not struggle too much, but it did try to crawl forward.

Here, you had the difference between the wild and the domestic. If a mouse in the wild was pinned at the tail, it would either struggle as hard as it could to break free or turn around and fight back.

Papa Jiao put the other four mice into a cardboard box so they couldn't see what was going on outside.

"I don't know how your kind catch or kill mice, but I'm going to tell you how we usually do it here in the lab," Papa Jiao said as he took the mouse from Zheng Tan.

"Well, here we go. In any lab in China, the basic method is to break its neck. It's probably the method that causes least pain for the animal. If carried out precisely, the mouse doesn't feel a thing. It's somewhat aligned with the whole animal welfare thing foreigners talk about. "

Zheng Tan sat on the side and watched quietly. Papa Jiao was in his lecturing mode. Sometimes at home, after Papa Jiao made his lecture PowerPoint, he would do a run through of what he was going to say in class. His subject was usually Zheng Tan.

He knew exactly what was coming when he heard the words 'here we go'.

"Breaking the neck is really dislocating the cervical spine, which breaks off the spine and brain stem. One way to do it is to hold the mouse by the neck with one hand and hold his tail with the other. Tug to opposite directions in one swift but fierce movement and voila. There's another way we often use; it might be easier for you. Watch carefully."

Papa Jiao seized the tail and grabbed either sides of the mouse's neck and pressed down hard.

The mouse shuddered. Then, it was motionless.

Zheng Tan watched the limp body of the mouse lying still on the desktop. Then he looked back up to Papa Jiao who had a hopeful 'I have faith in you'. His ears twitched.

"Look, the operation is actually very simple. Even if you never did it before, you'll be fine. I've seen the speed at which you beat up Tiger; catching a mouse certainly is no problem.

The Tiger that Papa Jiao mentioned was a yellow Tabby cat. He was another one of Zheng Tan's cat buddies. Unlike Sheriff, Tiger always managed to get himself in some fiasco. Zheng Tan always had to suppress the urge to physically knock some sense into him. Somehow though, Tiger was never around these days.

Papa Jiao took out another mouse and motioned for Zheng Tan to give it a try.

It took Zheng Tan three presses before he could kill this first mouse. He used too much force killing the second one, but at least this one did not suffer.

Zheng Tan felt fortunate that he became a cat. The further down on the food chain, the harder life would be.

"Cervical dislocation is easy, the mouse's cervical spine is very fragile. You just need more practice." Papa Jiao pointed out.

"Don't hesitate next time. Try to break the spinal cord and the brain marrow, instead of pulling off the head. You need to control your force to do this. I had some students use too much pressure resulting in the mouse's eyeballs exploding."

Zheng Tan was speechless.

That was f-ing horrifying.

Papa Jiao seemed so calm while he said those things. In that moment, Zheng Tan felt as if he saw a cold gleam in the man's eyes.

Zheng Tan suddenly remembered chatting about this with his clubbing buddies back in the day. One of them had commented that in fact, the scariest killers were not those who appeared vicious. It wasn't the people who carried knives and had big tattoos with rings in their nose. It was those people who could kill easily but managed to remain cool and calm all the way through it.

Now that he thought about it, experienced lab technicians had a surprising amount of similarities with killers.

Zheng Tan thought about it again and realized Papa Jiao was probably the only person in the world who taught his cat how to kill mice using lab methods.

He got better killing the third and the fourth. At least these two had a more decent death, if that was possible. Soon five mice corpses lay on the lab table. One killed by Papa Jiao the other four by Zheng Tan.

Cleaning up the five mice, Papa Jiao went back into the inner room and came back with a slightly larger cage. In it were five mice again. This time, however, they were much larger.

"These are the bigger albino house rats. You can kill them using the same method. Do you need me to show you how it's done again?"

Zheng Tan shook his head.

"Good boy."

"..."

Like Papa Jiao said, killing the rats was harder but after getting through them, Zheng Tan considered himself a pro.

"Do you want more practice?" Papa Jiao asked.

Zheng Tan shook his head.

"Well, Then that's it for killing rats. Here we go, let me just say..."

And Papa Jiao was in professor mode again.

"In our laboratory, in addition to the using cervical dislocation, there are other execution methods. For instance we kill frogs with just a needle. Next week, in my anatomy class, we are dissecting a bullfrog. I'll bring one home to show you." Papa Jiao waved his hand.

"Anyway, what I really want you to pay attention to is death by air embolization. That's how we kill dogs and cats in the lab. "He paused and looked at Zheng Tan:"Do you know what it is?"

Zheng Tan shook his head. His muscles were stiff, and the furs on his back and tail were still sticking up. He was starting to feel a tad cold.

"Basically it is pumping air into the veins."

Zheng Tan shuddered. This he understood. Even without much prior knowledge in biology, he knew what would result from that.

"When air gets into the blood circulation system and enter the lungs, it will end up blocking the pulmonary artery and causing a temporary shock or even death."

"For example, when you swim upwards from somewhere deep under water, the pressure change could lead to gas expanding in the lungs, which could lead to expansion of the lungs themselves. It is quite dangerous if the excess gas is not removed in time. Some of the passengers on the Titanic died this way."

Papa Jiao realized that talking to a cat about the Titanic was probably of no use, so he went back to what he was saying before and came to a conclusion. "You must be careful. Stay away from possible danger and learn self-help."

Now that Zheng Tan had mastered the art of mice killing, they had achieved what they came for. Zheng Tan still loathed the idea of having to catch mice, but that was expected of a cat. Even that moron Tiger could do it. Zheng Tan felt he would be alright.

Back at the eastern quarters, Zheng Tan saw a car with familiar army license plates

parked in the empty lot. So fatty was back.

While Papa Jiao went to park his scooter in the shed, Zheng Tan jumped onto the first floor balcony and peeked inside.

There was a bag of instant noodles on the desk near the window. On it sat a chubby Chinese Li Hua Cat.

Chapter 4

You Can Do It, Charcoal

Three months ago, when Zheng Tan first met Fatty, he was small and thin. Now, he was starting to look like his name. Zheng Tan admired the old lady, who named him, for her foresight.

As if he felt movement on the balcony, Fatty turned to look outside. This, however, was slightly too much for the instant noodles he was sitting on. The noodles broke with a crisp “snap”.

Hearing the sound, Fatty froze immediately, his ears drooped and he turned back to his original position, his figure exuding a sense of desolation.

Zheng Tan felt a pang of guilt. Looks like Fatty’s midnight snack was gone.

The old lady who owned Fatty had a son working in the military. Once a while, she would bring Fatty to visit him at the military camp. Sometimes, he would come over to visit her here. Those days were Fatty’s worst nightmare.

Zheng Tan remembered doing military training in his freshman year in college. Whenever he made a mistake, his platoon officer would make him stand at attention for hours. That was not realistic for a cat. So instead, whenever Fatty did something wrong, the old lady’s son would make him squat on a pack of instant noodles. The quality and quantity of his snacks depended on how intact the crispy noodles were after he was done.

Papa Jiao was done parking his scooter, so Zheng Tan jumped off the balcony railing and followed him home.

Mama Jiao was already home when they entered the house. She was giving Zheng Tan a funny look that he did not like. He escaped hurriedly into Gu Youzi’s room and eavesdropped from behind the door.

"What's the matter?" Asked Papa Jiao.

Mama Jiao sighed. "Well, Tiger is dead."

Zheng Tan froze in surprise. Tiger was jumping up and down just a few days ago with all the energy in the world. How could he be dead?

He listened on and realized that by 'qushi' they meant neutered^[1]. So Tiger was a eunuch now?!

"I heard from Ling that this would help Tiger quit some of his bad habits. Since Tiger recently turned eight-month-old, they took him to get the surgery done." There was a long pause.

"Today Ling asked me if we were going to take Coal to Mr. Guo's place as well, to do the procedure. I said no." Mama Jiao said.

Zheng Tan felt a chill go down his spine. He didn't let out his breath until hearing her last sentence. By the way, Charcoal was his cat name. He was a black cat, of course. It was typical, he knew.

"Our cat doesn't need that surgery," Papa Jiao said emphatically. "Cats are not all the same. Her family's cat needed to be neutered. Ours doesn't. Just straight out refuse if Ling ever brings it up again."

"That's what I thought." Seeing that her decision was supported by her husband, Mama Jiao smiled in relief.

And so did Zheng Tan. He did not want to lose his manhood. He would rather run away if he had to undergo that surgery. His soul, after all, was still human.

He did feel bad for Tiger, but just for a minute. He always knew Tiger peed everywhere. Even if he was at home, he would manage to pee outside his litter box every single time. His family had to find him a double layered litter box. He was even worse when he was outside. You could smell cat pee all around the residence quarter. Zheng Tan had to teach him lesson on multiple occasions. The guy just did not learn.

Since Tiger was not in a life-threatening situation, Zheng Tan decided not to worry. Cats had their own destinies. Ever since he came into this life, he had been telling himself to get used to it.

The next day, the otaku across the hall came knocking on the door. The dark circles

around his eyes were the only color left on his face.

It was a Saturday. The kids were home and enjoying a peaceful breakfast.

“Oh, aren’t you early!” Mama Jiao exclaimed in surprise when she opened the door.

It was nine already. How was it early?

Gu Youzi looked out at the bright sunshine and exchanged a glance with Jiao Yuan. The two kept their heads down and decided to pretend to focus on their noodles and eggs.

It was, however, very early for Qu, and Mama Jiao knew this. The boy seldom got up before noon.

Qu forced a smile and looked around the living room. “Um... Is Brother Jiao here?”

“He has lab sessions today and left early in the morning. If it’s urgent I can call him.” Mama Jiao offered.

“Well... you know... it’s nothing that important.” Qu’s eyes were set on a stool near the dining table. More specifically, the cat eating noodles on it. “Say, Miss. Gu, can I... maybe... like borrow your cat?”

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi looked up from their bowls in unison. They stared at Qu who was standing awkwardly at the door. They too remembered a certain someone bragging last month about not having rats in his home.

Seeing the children stare at him, Qu was even more embarrassed. He fake coughed. “I mentioned his to Brother Jiao yesterday.”

Mama Jiao did not give him a hard time. To her, people wanting to borrow her cat just meant that her cat was talented. This filled her with pride.

So she waved her hand. “That’s no big deal. Just come get him when you want him.”

Zheng Tan and the children were speechless. Mama Jiao was always quite dictatorial when Papa Jiao wasn’t home.

“Oh, thank you so much. I’ll come get Coal after dinner today. Gosh, you have no idea. The rat in my place is driving me nuts.” Qu seemed so relieved now that he got the cat.

He returned to his place in full triumph.

Mama Jiao's face broke into a huge smile. "That's what's good about having a cat."

Jiao Yuan poked at his noodles and tried to imitate Qu. "No rats at my place, not even one."

Mama Jiao gave him a light smack on the back of the head. "Eat your food."

Gu Youzi pursed her lips. She did not look happy.

Around eight that day, Qu came to pick up the cat. Mama Jiao did not have to urge. Zheng Tan picked himself up and walked across the hall, shrouded by a sense of purpose. He had to do his sooner or later. Might as well get it over with. Or else what was yesterday's practice for?

Jiao Yuan cheered him on at the door. "Go Charcoal! Show them how it's done!"

Mama Jiao was not impressed. "Homework. Now. Careful or I'm cutting your pocket money."

Zheng Tan followed Qu inside.

At first glance, the room felt familiar. It was a mess. Just like his room back in the day.

On second glance, he noticed some familiar creatures.

He saw the cockroaches the moment he walked in. One just went into the bathroom, one escaped under the cabinet and the one closest to him saw him, paused, shook its tentacles and dived under a pile of magazines.

As the oldest living insects on earth, these little crawlers that once lived with the dinosaurs were famous for their ability to survive. Apparently, it was still evolving. God knew what it could become.

Footnotes:

[1]:Died and neutered sound the same in Chinese

Chapter 5

Fantasuperaculous

Qu saw the cockroaches too, of course. An image of a black cat springing into the air and catching the cockroach with great ease formed in his mind. The reality, however, couldn't be more different. The said black cat merely glanced at the little pests before hopping onto a relatively clean chair to take a nap. He didn't even notice the ribs and sweet and sour pork on the table nearby.

Qu felt like he swallowed a fly. He looked at the food on the table and the cat resting on the chair, took a deep breath and decided to let it be. He turned off the living room lights and went into his bedroom.

He sat down in front of his computer and opened the thread he started on a internet forum a few days ago. He found a certain comment and clicked reply. "Nonsense. The rat in my house doesn't eat cockroaches. Neither does the cat."

Qu went on the forum for help when his mousetraps failed. It was because of it that he knew to buy a mousetrap in the first place. Someone even commented in his thread that the reason behind the increased intelligence of rats was due to the fact that they had survived SARS. Any weaklings would have been killed by humans as an aftermath of SARS. It was Darwinism at its finest. It was survival of the fittest.

When mouse traps turned out to be a disappointment, the most common suggestion he got was to find a cat. Hence, he went and borrowed Charcoal.

Among those who supported finding a mouse, one person boasted that his pet cat not only caught mice, it was a predator for cockroaches as well.

"Well, if your cat doesn't even budge at the sight of a cockroach, it won't catch a mouse either. Even if it wanted to, it wouldn't know how," The guy replied.

"Let's see about that!" Qu typed at if he wasn't pressing on keys on the keyboard but rather poking the person arguing with him.

Zheng Tan opened his eyes in the other room. He flexed his paws and looked at the

sharp nails that peeked out.

He was not nervous at the task he was about to face. Instead, he was excited. It was impossible to explain.

Killing mice yesterday did not make him nauseous like he thought it would. Instead, he felt bloodthirsty. It was an unusual feeling that he did not get often. Maybe he just didn't notice it normally. Yesterday was only a trigger that brought out the animal instincts in him.

Even the cutest, cuddliest and calmest cats were predators after all. They hunted even when they were full. It was their instinct.

It was like what the documentary Jiao Yuan watched recently said: "Inside every kitty, lying lazily by the fire, is a tiger ready to pounce."

He took a long breath and relaxed his paws. He closed his eyes but perked up his ears and listened. He listened carefully to the light rustles that once in a while disturbed the peace of the room. That was not the sound a mouse would make. So Zheng Tan remained still and waited.

Time passed slowly, the night was growing late. Zheng Tan did not hear or smell the rat, but he could sense its presence in the room. He knew it recently came out, so he was patient. He quietly waited some more in the dark and messy living room.

The light from the bedroom allowed him to see the living room clearly.

He knew most of the people living in the Eastern Quarters were asleep. The Jiao family was past bedtime as well. It was quiet all around. The only sound was the clicking of keyboards and swears coming from Qu's bedroom.

What was that?

Zheng Tan's ears twitched. His eyes shot open, pupils enlarged in the dark. He silently hopped off the chair and crouched low. He moved fast, using the dark as a cover. Soon he was beside the stack of magazines. He learned these moves from Sheriff.

Qu took off his headphones after finishing a game. He turned his stiff neck just in time to see Zheng Tan slide off the chair.

Could it be?

Qu got up hurriedly and took out a digital camera from his desk drawer. He paused, then put it back. He found a video camera instead. Turning it on, Qu inched outside on tip toes. His phone rang at that very moment, making him jump. He hastily took it out and whispered something.

Zheng Tan was waiting in the dark. The rat came from the study. It didn't head off into the kitchen. Apparently, it had grown familiar to the house and its inhabitant. Qu never cooked. He got take-out or ate at the cafeteria. Anything to eat would either be in his bedroom or in the living room.

The mouse was crawling at the foot of the wall towards this way. It stopped and looked around for danger every few steps.

This mouse was no larger than the rats Zheng Tan killed last night. However, it was far more alert.

When it reached the bedroom door, the mouse noticed the person on the phone inside. In a split of a second, Zheng Tan pounced.

Like an arrow leaving the bow, he shot directly at his prey.

The mouse only noticed that there was a lurking hunter the moment Zheng Tan leapt.

The study was too far. It would be caught before it got there. The mouse darted towards the bedroom.

Qu's room was not much of an improvement compared to the living room. It was messy and provided too many hiding spots for pests. If the mouse got in, Zheng Tan wasn't sure he could still catch.

But it wasn't going to get in.

A black paw, nail sharp and extended, stepped and pinned down the tail. The other furry paw was already on the mouse's neck before it could react.

Snap.

The sound was so soft it was barely noticeable.

The mouse lay limp on the ground. It didn't even let out a squeak.

Qu was at the door when he saw a shadow flash by. He looked down, there it was, the black cat. Under its paw was a motionless rat.

"Oh..... F*ck!"

Qu almost dropped the video camera and the phone he had in his hand.

He looked at the cat, then back to the mouse, then to the video camera he didn't get a chance to use.

"F*ck!" He cursed again.

That's it?

Wasn't the cat supposed to do a big chase around the house, toy with the mouse a bit after it caught it, then end its misery when the cat finally felt like it?

Hell, he didn't even finish his phone conversation and the cat was done?

What was that clean and crisp kill?

This... this was... absolutely fantասuperaculous!

He was going to tell the guy who told him cats that don't catch cockroaches can't catch rats to shut it.

"Hey, Cricket. What's going on? Why did you go quiet?" The guy at the other end of the phone was confused.

"Oh, to hell with you. I'm busy." Qu hung up and turned on the living room lights.

He took a pair of used disposable chopsticks and poked the rat.

It didn't move.

So it was really dead, huh?

Chopsticks were not enough. Qu found a set of tongs he never used before in the

kitchen. He picked up the rat with the tongs and dangled it a bit to see if it was really dead. Then he took pictures from all angles before dashing back to his computer. He was too triumphant to game anymore. He couldn't wait to upload the pictures on to the forum. His vivid descriptions of the events that had just transpired were met with wide disbelief.

An experienced cat owner replied with some pictures of his own. The rats in his pictures were covered with bite marks. Some were missing body parts; some didn't even resemble a rat anymore.

Qu looked at the cat stretching lazily in the living room. It didn't show the remotest interest in the prey it just caught. He went back to argue some more online, before his phone rang again.

Zheng Tan inspected the rest of the house. There didn't seem to be another rat. His work here was done.

When he was ready to jump back onto the chair to go back to sleep, he heard a faint sound. Someone was singing downstairs.

Zheng Tan was annoyed. He went on the balcony to listen a bit closer, whilst ignoring the sounds of the keyboard in Qu's room.

"Last night, ~ the stars last night, ~ has fallen ~ down, ~ ~ disappeared~ in the distant Galaxy. ~~~"

Zheng Tan: "....."

The unique tone that was unmistakable even when hushed; the quivering voice that was an attempt to show emotion; the song that was older than Zheng Tan.

What the hell! The bitchy bird downstairs had decided to stay awake to sing nostalgic old songs again.

Chapter 6

The Four Musketeers and the Parrot with Everything

The inhabitants of the apartment below Qu's place stood out because of their pet. They owned a parrot and not just any plain parrot. It was a very rare blue and purple macaw.

This bird was named "General", and it was the rich and handsome of the parrot world. The price of such a pet was enough to cover a 100 square meter apartment in downtown Chuhua and was still rising.

He was smart, had the ability to learn several languages, not to mention, very eye-catching. Combine that with the fact its species was near extinct, it was no wonder that the bird was expensive.

Unlike most people living in the building, the fourth floor residents had thick wires all around their balcony in order to keep it from getting out. Not that they were afraid he would fly away, but rather, he might cause trouble for other animals or even people. The bird seemed harmless, but in truth, he was a wicked bastard.

General had a nickname; he was known as "the cat bully". The name was self-explanatory. General loved tormenting cats, especially nipping at their ears. Quite a few strays in the school were made victims.

Papa Jiao mentioned these stories a lot when Zheng Tan first got here. They were meant as cautionary tales to make sure he understood to be careful of fire, careful of theft and careful of parrot.

Just looking at his size and thinking about the power of a macaw's bite, it was easy to imagine how deadly he could be when he was infuriated.

However, Zheng Tan later found out General picked his victims. The eastern quarters cats were fine as long as they don't initiate a fight. But a western quarters cat was not that lucky.

Influenced by his owner, the bird especially liked to sing old songs. There were some songs on his repertoire that Zheng Tan knew only from documentaries about the past. For others, he had no idea what they were, just that they were old. The song he was singing earlier, which dated back to the eighties, was one of the newer works he liked.

What amazed Zheng Tan the most was that while most parrots might had the intelligence of a four or five year old, General was the brain equivalent of a grown-up human being.

Downstairs, the parrot was still humming. Zheng Tan lost his patience. He looked up at the stars and sighed before looking around the balcony and finding a mosquito coil holder. He nudged it close to the railing and tapped on it with his claws.

"Clang clank, clang clang, clang clank clang clank....." That meant 'you're too noisy'.

The singing stopped abruptly. Immediately, Zheng Tan heard the sound of wings fluttering and nails hitting the wires. The parrot didn't expect to hear such noises at this time of the day; he was excited. Soon came the sound of the bird pecking on some box.

"Tack Tick, Tick Tick, Tick Tack Tack Tack, Tick Tick Tack....." That meant 'you're up'!

Who would have known that at this hour, in building B of the Eastern residential quarters, a cat on the fifth floor and a parrot on the fourth were communicating in Morse code.

Zheng Tan didn't know Morse code that well. In fact, he hadn't learned until recently. The master of the language was the plain looking Fatty.

His owner in the military would test him on all sorts of code games whenever he saw Fatty. Just the easier ones, like Morse code or Rail Fence Ciphers and basic card games. If Fatty didn't do well, the instant noodles would be waiting.

General was a big fan of puzzle games. When Fatty was home, he would always carry cards over in his beak to engage in some friendly games. When he couldn't find Fatty, he would chat in Morse code with his owner or Zheng Tan. However, his owner was usually busy, so Zheng Tan typically drew the short straw. Last week, General was brought to a nature reserve, much to Zheng Tan's relief.

Now realizing the guy was back, Zheng Tan was starting to feel depressed.

[I heard that Tiger was neutered? I saw him today with the cone of shame] General was so psyched to find someone to chat with at midnight to really feel sympathy.

[I have not seen him for days] Zheng Tan continued to knock out messages on the mosquito coil holder.

[Alas, such is the fate of you pet cats. How sad. To think that the Eastern quarter four musketeers is going to become the Eastern quarter four eunuchs.]

[Not every cat undergoes that surgery.]

[Stop lying to yourself.]

[What's it got to do with you? I'm leaving.]

[Don't go. Let's chat. Aren't cats nocturnal?]

[That's none of your business. I'm going to bed and can't you sing something newer?]

Half a minute later, the singing resumed.

"You are like ~ a fire! Your flames ~ warming me. ~ ~"

Zheng Tan was speechless. One of these days, he was going to strangle the thing.

Ignoring the hyperactive bird, Zheng Tan curled up in a ball on the living room chair and hid his ears under his paws.

Early next morning, Qu was awakened by a loud and screeching meow. He mustered up some energy and climbed out of bed in his SpongeBob pajamas to let Zheng Tan out.

He knew how to open doors by himself, but this was someone else's place, and he wanted to be careful. Besides, he decided to give Qu a hard time. The guy was not sleeping in if he could help it.

Qu yawned and opened his front door, only to find the Jiao family had theirs open as well. Apparently, they heard the noise too. The who family was gathering towards the hallway.

He rubbed his eyes and greeted them semi-cheerfully.

Zheng Tan went straight over to the breakfast table. Mama Jiao had already set out his food. Outside, Qu was showing Papa Jiao the dead mouse. "Not bad." Papa Jiao nodded, "a bit too much force, but not bad at all."

Zheng Tan pretended not to hear him and focused on his breakfast.

Mama Jiao invited Qu in for some vegetable congee, while he recounted last night's events in excruciating detail to the great enthusiasm of the whole family. Mama Jiao was especially proud. She managed to mention it to everyone she met that day.

At noon, Tiger was brought over by his owner. The cone of shame was already gone.

Tiger seemed to have lost some weight and was looking a bit weary. In all the time Zheng Tan had known him, he'd never seen him like this.

Mama Jiao chatted with his owner.

"Ling, has Tiger not recovered from surgery?" She sounded worried.

"I don't think so. Other cats that got the procedure were back to normal the very next day. He did behave better after the surgery though. At least he doesn't pee everywhere anymore."

Zheng Tan went into Jiao Yuan's room and rolled out a giant glass marble.

Tiger's ears twitched at the sound of the marble rolling. He looked up.

Well, at least that got a reaction. Zheng Tan was worried the surgery was too much for Tiger and that he had just lost it. He rolled the marble across the floor to Tiger.

The yellow cat lying listlessly on the floor caught it with his paw.

Five minutes later, it was business as usual for Tiger.

Zheng Tan looked at him running around the house playing with a glass ball and felt exasperated. The idiot was not devastated; he was just bored from being kept indoors.

Finally, under Mama Jiao's suggestion, Zheng Tan and Tiger were let out to play.

Tiger was so excited, he ran down the hallway, half meowing, half howling.

The two women standing on the balcony were perplexed. Cats supposedly became mellow after being neutered.

Knowing Tiger, Zheng Tan understood that he was just being excited to be free from the cone of shame and be out of the house. At the same time, he was calling out to his buddies.

They turned a corner and came face to face with the elderly Mrs. Di from third floor. All the cats knew her.

"Could this be... Tiger!" Zhai old lady cried.

Hearing his name, the howling maniac suddenly stopped. He squinted and sat down. Tilting his head towards her and letting out a very soft, very dainty meow.

Zheng Tan swore it was like watching Arnold Schwarzenegger suddenly turn into Marilyn Monroe.

Along the familiar path they trotted forward, until they came to the edge of the woods near the residential quarters. There, waiting for them, were Fatty and Sheriff, summoned by Tiger's meowing.

Fatty seemed only half awake, while Sheriff was chewing something. An insect, perhaps.

The four cats walked together into the woods. Suddenly, Zheng Tan's ears twitched. He heard something; they had company.

Sure enough, looking up, there was the familiar flash of blue. It was General with his curved yellow beak somewhat akin to a naughty grin.

Tiger saw General too and greeted him with another meow.

The parrot looked down. His yellow rimmed eyes gave the four cats a once-over before he raised the foot without the GPS tracking device and told them to shush.

Zheng Tan was once again left speechless.

What was he up to, and what was he looking at?

Chapter 7

Can't Eat the Guinea Pig

Zheng Tan climbed up the tree to look for the source of the voices he heard.

It wasn't long before he understood roughly that a real-life episode of those soap operas Mama Jiao loved so much was playing out in the open. The only difference was that the woman did not cry.

Zheng Tan lost interest. The bored parrot could watch it by himself, at least it would keep him busy so he couldn't bother Zheng Tan. For that reason alone, Zheng Tan hoped whoever was putting on the "show" would have enough problems so they could air it here for the whole day. Maybe even turn it into a series.

It wasn't a kind thought. But then again, Zheng Tan was not kind. He had turned his back on the idea of morals and shame for as long as he could remember. He left those useless things forgotten as long as his self-interests were not harmed.

Under the tree, Fatty was curled up in a comfortable position looking like he was falling asleep. Sheriff and Tiger were gone, but Zheng Tan assumed they wandered off somewhere to play.

There were only a few places around here that cats frequented. Zheng Tan wasn't worried about losing the two.

He brushed Fatty with his tail to motion him to follow. The guy seemed to lack sleep 24/7. At first, Zheng Tan thought it was because he used his brain too much. Later, he realized Fatty was like this even when he did nothing. It was hard to imagine that a sleepy chubby cat was a specialist of Morse code.

'Don't judge a book by its cover' applied to cats as well.

There was a small supermarket called "Dongyuan supermarket" near the residential quarters. Recently, the place was undergoing some renovations. Heaps of gravel were left near the back door. Even better, the workers were taking a day off today.

Sure enough, Zheng Tan found Tiger squatting on a pile of gravel at the back door. He had a solemn look on his face while he took a dump. Afterwards, he covered up the evidence with some sand, jumped off the gravel, shook his fur and left as if nothing had happened.

Tiger did, in fact, stop peeing everywhere after his surgery, but he was still him. Now he was causing trouble in a different way.

Zheng Tan wondered how the workers would react when they found the cat poop tomorrow. Worse yet, if they didn't find it and it ended up on the wall of the supermarket.

Zheng Tan decided he would strangle Tiger if he became the owner of the place.

There was a big patch of grass near the supermarket. Zheng Tan and co. did not go there normally. There were always hordes of people, both adults and kids, there. It was just a breeding ground for trouble. Young kids who didn't yet know better were the arch enemies of cats. They couldn't fight back when the children grabbed their tails or played too rough. Even when the children were at fault, the cats were punished.

So, for the most part, the four musketeers played in the woods.

Tiger was scratching trees. He would do his work on one and move on to the next. Sheriff was looking for insects to snack on. As for Fatty, his front paws were tucked under him, making him look like a meatloaf, and he was resting, completely uninterested in anything.

Zheng Tan looked around to check for people. When he saw no one, he found a spot under the sun and settled down.

The wind brought the sweet scent of may flowers. Apart from the occasional sound of cat claws, the hustle and bustle from the lawn did not affect the peace and quiet of the woods.

The warm afternoon sunshine was starting to make Zheng Tan drowsy.

Suddenly, there was a strange cry, similar to the cry of a bird but not quite it. It was the first time Zheng Tan had heard such a sound.

He opened his eyes. Tiger was standing at the source of the sound, holding up a front

paw, turning his head left and right, as if deciding where to strike.

Sheriff heard the sound too and rushed towards that direction. The next minute, a fur ball appeared out of the bushes.

A guinea pig?

This one was a bit different from the usual guinea pigs. Its hair was relatively long and had a long strand of white fur dangling down from the top of its head like bangs. Compared to the guinea pigs locked in cages all day that Zheng Tan had seen before, this one moved a lot faster.

It was, however, no match for two energetic cats.

Sheriff and Tiger blocked the guinea pig from two sides to corner it between them. Whenever it tried to run away, they would force it back in place.

Zheng Tan considered it, then stopped the two just when they were about to feast. Most of the guinea pigs on campus were pets. They weren't like rats and could not be treated as such. Not to mention this one seemed to be special.

Zheng Tan observed that its fur was very clean and carefully combed. It was obviously very dear to its owner. There was no guarantee that they wouldn't leave a trace after eating it. If the owner found out, trouble, no, big trouble was ensured to take place.

The guinea pig did not take the chance to run away when Zheng Tan stopped Tiger. Instead, it looked cautiously around, then inched towards Zheng Tan.

Did it know he wouldn't eat it?

Have to admit, animals sometimes have surprisingly accurate sixth senses.

Zheng Tan wagged his tail while walking away from the guinea pig, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone. A stranger.

If it was just a stranger, he wouldn't be this shocked. But, this stranger managed to come this close without four cats noticing. They had no idea how long he was there for or if he was hiding close by.

Zheng Tan's eyes fell on the guy's hand. His palm was faced inwards and his right hand

was hidden partially by his body.

When their eyes crossed, Zheng Tan was suddenly reminded of the look Papa Jiao had when he was killing mice in the lab that night. Papa Jiao had that look only when dealing with lab rats. This man, though... This man sent chills down Zheng Tan's spine. Something told him, this man killed more than lab rats.

Tiger jumped when spotting the intruder too. However, he cared more about the fur ball beside Zheng Tan. He raised his paw attempting to have another go at it.

Zheng Tan couldn't help but give Tiger a hard slap. Couldn't this idiot tell there was a dangerous person around?

Zheng Tan didn't let the guy out of his sights even when dealing with Tiger. This guy felt too threatening. He and his buddies were like the lab rats from the other night. They were somehow pinned down, unable to move and helplessly waiting to have their necks broken.

Fatty was no longer lying in the grass. He jumped up, arched his back and pulled back his ears. All his fur were standing on end. He no longer had his usual sleepy look but was staring at the intruder fiercely while hissing out his warning. This was the first time Zheng Tan had ever seen him like this.

The other two realized something was wrong when they saw Zheng Tan and Fatty. They too now looked alert. Although they were a bit off-putting at times, Tiger and Sheriff did not run away when it mattered. That was loyalty right there.

In fact, Sheriff was prepared to run away, but when he found the others standing still, he immediately turned around and stiffened up like his buddies.

What should we do?

Zheng Tan was furiously racking his brain for solutions.

Immediately escaping would be one of the better ways. It was also the most common. But Zheng Tan was not sure they could escape in one piece. The guy was still looking at them; it was as if any move could set him off. His half hidden hand worried Zheng Tan greatly.

The two sides stood in confrontation for two minutes. Then, the man laughed. The

atmosphere seemed to loosen with his laughter. The man shook his arm then raised both hands and said, "Here kitties. I mean you no harm. I just came to look for my pet."

The man pointed guinea pig hiding behind Zheng Tan. The guinea pig did not play along. It scooped closer to Zheng Tan as if hiding from the guy.

Zheng Tan let out a sigh of relief, but he did not dare to completely relax. He felt that the stranger had something in his hand, perhaps a blade or something else, that he hid when he shook his hand.

Who was this man? Zheng Tan thought.

"Chestnuts, come. Hurry. Your owner would be worried." The man called out to the guinea pig huddled behind Zheng Tan.

The pig did not budge, or even let out a squeak.

"Oh Chestnut-" the man squatted down and summoned the stubborn fur ball again.

Zheng Tan cursed the thing. He moved over, exposing the guinea pig. He didn't want to put his little group in danger because of this thing.

Seeing that it still wasn't moving, Zheng Tan nudged it forward with his tail. 'Just go away for god's sake!' he thought.

Finally, it reluctantly and begrudgingly went over to the guy. Thankfully, he did not stay after he snatched up his pet.

Zheng Tan held his breath until the guy was completely out of sight. He made a mental note to avoid this area from now on.

On the other hand, the guy, who was just treated to a stand-off by cats, ignored the protesting sound of the guinea pig in his arms. He looked back into the woods as he walked. He couldn't help but feel that the two cats he saw in there were very special..... especially the black one.

Chapter 8

Be a Good Boy When Home Alone

Because of the encounter with the stranger, Tiger and Sheriff obediently remained home for a few days, and Fatty never left the house on his own anyways. As for Zheng Tan, he agreed to do the cat food ad for Mr. Guo and was brought to 'Clearly So' pet center for a two-day photo shoot.

The first ad was not in video form as he had expected, but it was a story told by a series of pictures.

Zheng Tan had forgotten that online videos were not a common thing in 2003. Many people were not optimistic about the future of online videos. Some even predicted it was doomed for failure.

However, Guo thought otherwise.

When discussing the issue with Papa Jiao, he mentioned that the charm of the internet was its ability to change and evolve as technology upgraded. This insight greatly raised Zheng Tan's opinion of him. As someone from the future, Zheng Tan knew exactly what the internet would develop into in the next ten years.

Unlike other companies that used a simple poster ad, Guo decided to make his ads a series of pictures that could tell a story. It would be interesting even for families without pets. It would improve the brand's visibility.

With Zheng Tan's help, shooting such a story was easy. He didn't even need to waste any cat food, which made him very happy. It was very difficult to force cats to do the perfect expression. The limitations of the time deterred most businesses from spending too much energy in pursuit of similar ads.

The ad would be distributed on a pet forum; at the same time, it would also be published on a magazine. That was the reason behind Guo's urgency to do the photo shoot right away. One of his friends recently started a new pet magazine. Guo wanted to hatch a ride.

Before Zheng Tan, Guo had attempted to use a few other cats, but the photo shoot process and the final effect was... Let's just say it gave Guo ulcers.

After Zheng Tan came aboard, the photo shoot was smooth sailing. He didn't need to be told twice about what to do. Just like that, the ulcers in Guo's stomach healed, and he couldn't wait to sign a contract with Papa Jiao.

The 'Beloved' magazine was a monthly. So, Zheng Tan had to go in every month for some new pictures. It was a piece of cake. Besides earning him a quick buck, Zheng Tan saw it as a fun thing to do. The most interesting thing about the ads was that at the end of the story, in small print, was the name of the actor: BlackC.

Guo insisted on adding the name of the animal actors but this name "BlackC" was entirely Papa Jiao's idea. It was a form of protection for Zheng Tan that his real name was not used.

When Guo inquired about it, Papa Jiao explained that black was black and "C" represented carbon in the periodic table. Together, BlackC implied Charcoal.

His first paycheck wired over by Guo was a whopping sum of 1000 yuan. It was much more than what Mama Jiao expected. Back in the day, 1000 yuan was really nothing to Zheng Tan. Now, it was a considerable amount of compensation.

Papa Jiao applied for a bank account for Zheng Tan, specifically for saving his advertising income.

In fact, not only Zheng Tan, Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi both had their own bank accounts. Their red packets from Chinese New Year and do-well-at-school rewards were saved in them. It was where their pocket money came from, though Papa Jiao temporarily managed the accounts for them to prevent them from blowing it all away.

This was money education, Papa Jiao-style.

It puzzled Zheng Tan that he would do this even for the family cat.

Sometimes, Zheng Tan had trouble understanding Professor Jiao. But in the end, after more three months, Zheng Tan knew enough to be sure that he would never harm him. Maybe scientists always accepted weird events with more ease than others.

Most people would be utterly shocked if they saw how Papa Jiao and his cat interacted

with one another. No one, including Mama Jiao and the kids, knew that they acted like equals when they were alone.

After completing his acting stint, Zheng Tan stayed home idly for a few days before getting restless. He couldn't resist taking a stroll outside. He did a search of the lawn but did not find the stranger from last time. He did see that guinea pig with a little girl around Gu Youzi's age and her mother. Zheng Tan vowed to stay away from the pair to avoid the stranger.

One day, Zheng Tan returned home from his daily walk and immediately sensed someone unfamiliar.

A guest?

The atmosphere in the living room was solemn. Mama Jiao was cooking in the kitchen like usual but she seemed absent-minded. Papa Jiao and someone were seated on the sofa, smoking without exchanging a word.

The guest was about the same age as Papa Jiao but looked like he was going through some rough times. His doleful eyes were bloodshot like someone who had been up all night. Papa Jiao addressed the guy as "Yuan Zi"; it was clear that they were close. So why were they sitting in heavy silence?

There was a small table in Jiao Yuan's room. It was a wooden table with chess patterns Mama Jiao always set out, when guests were here, and the conversation topic was not suitable for children.

Zheng Tan was even more curious.

What was happening that must be discussed with the children out of earshot?

Zheng Tan jumped onto his chair and quietly assessed the situation. Papa Jiao looked up at him but acquiesced in his presence.

Three glasses of alcohol down, the two finally opened up. Zheng Tan managed to piece together the full story through bits and pieces of their tear-filled conversation.

Papa Jiao's graduate school supervisor, who also happened to be Yuan Zi's father, Professor Yuan had fourth stage lung cancer. The doctor gave him approximately two more months.

When Papa Jiao graduated from Nanhua University, Professor Yuan was abroad. Papa Jiao did not see a reason to remain at Nanhua University, so he took a job teaching at Chuhua University which was in his home province of Xinhan.

Nanhua University was to southern China what Chuhua University was to the central region. Both were top schools.

Mama and Papa Jiao were both close with this Yuan Zi and had a good relationship with the professor when they were at Nanhua. Naturally, they were both upset to know that the old professor was ill.

Yuan Zi didn't choose to follow his father's footsteps. He had no interest in academia, or rather, he never even liked school. Like Zheng Tan, he was a rascal.

Zheng Tan didn't know what Yuan Zi went through after graduation. From what he gathered, he had changed a lot. He was a playboy turned good, according to Papa Jiao.

People say that a fault confessed is half addressed. However, often the fault was best left untouched. The cost of confessing a fault was so great that it was sometimes best to leave it be to avoid that cost.

"So, if it was not for Fei Hang informing me that you were in Chuhua, you were going to go through this all by yourself? You were really going to keep everyone in the dark forever?!"

Papa Jiao's voice was low but strained; the rims of his eyes were turning red. He was fighting desperately to control his emotions. Mama Jiao sat beside him, quietly wiping away tears.

"The old man he did not want people to know about his condition. After all, he's no longer accepting treatment. He wanted to pass away in peace back home." Yuan Zi sniffed.

Back in the day, Papa Jiao was Professor Yuan's trump card. Everyone at the College of Life Sciences in Nanhua University envied Professor Yuan for having such a student. Seeing that his own son was wasting away his life, Professor Yuan always treated Papa Jiao like a son. Papa Jiao owed most of his achievements to him.

Since the old professor returned from abroad, the two kept in contact through the occasional email or chat online. It didn't happen a lot since the professor always

seemed to have something on his hands.

Last week, Papa Jiao had received an email from Professor Yuan saying that he wouldn't be able to access the computer for a long time. It seemed that he had his mind set on keeping his illness to himself.

Papa Jiao composed himself and asked, "What were your plans in Chuhua? Fei Hang mentioned you were here to inspect something. If there's anything you need, just say the word."

"I'm thinking of opening a biological company. I'm aiming to go big or go home," Yuan Zi answered.

Papa Jiao nodded, "Chuhua is a good location to do that. There's too many companies opening up on the south coast, both domestic and foreign. There's Southern Gene Bio Base in Mingzhu City in the East and Huada Bio in the capital. The companies over there have formed oligopolies^[1]. Trying to break into those markets isn't impossible but it will be tough. "

"In contrast, there is much less competition here. Areas around here are developing rapidly and I can also be of some help."

Papa Jiao and Yuan Zi were discussing stuff Zheng Tan did not understand. He didn't know what kind of a company they were planning and lost interest after listening for a while, so he went into Jiao Yuan's room.

A few days later, Zheng Tan was told by Papa Jiao that the entire Jiao family was taking a trip to Northeast China.

Professor Yuan's hometown was in the northeast, so it was an understandable decision. But... did that mean he was going to be home alone?

Papa Jiao asked if he wanted to come along. If he did, Papa Jiao would rent a car and the family would drive to the Northeast.

Zheng Tan considered but refused. He would tag along if they were going down south. He was curious if he, the person that is, still existed in this universe. But they were going up North, so he respectfully declined the offer.

Zheng Tan didn't want to be sent to a pet hotel nor did he want to stay at someone

else's place. So Papa Jiao left him a key.

The family had all sorts of cautions for Zheng Tan, which eventually summarized to "be a good boy and don't open the door for strangers".

Zheng Tan wanted to roll his eyes. Did they really think he was a child?

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi had a hard time leaving him. They left all their snacks on the sofa for him out of fear that their cat was going to starve.

But when the family of four finally left, Zheng Tan looked around the now empty house and suddenly felt it was much larger than usual.

Well, this was going to be f*cking boring.

Zheng Tan rolled from one end of the sofa to the other. He hung upside down on the armrest to get an inverted view of the house. He focused on the calendar in the living room.

It was Wednesday. Papa Jiao said they would be gone for a week. That meant they would return next Wednesday.

Wait.

Wednesday?!

Zheng Tan sat up straight.

Every Wednesday was the delivery day for Dongyuan supermarket. The delivery truck would arrive around four or five in the afternoon and leave somewhere between six and seven.

It was now 4:30 pm.

Zheng Tan hung the keys Papa Jiao left on his neck and left the house.

So, three hours after being told to stay home and be a good boy, Zheng Tan decided to take a road trip.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]:Oligopoly: a state of limited competition, in which a market is shared by a small number of producers or sellers.

Chapter 9

Boss, Did Your Cat Run Away?

Zheng Tan found a little note on the stairs leading to the fourth floor. It was stuck right at his eye level.

"When leaving the house, turn off all unnecessary electronics to avoid a safety risk. Draw the curtains after closing the windows to avoid dust storms. Remember to bring food... For specifics please see the detailed description on the desk."

It was in Papa Jiao's handwriting.

Zheng Tan sighed. With some difficulty, he opened the front door using the keys on his neck, then went into the master bedroom. Sure enough, spread out on the desk was a notebook with instructions on things he must do before leaving the house.

Zheng Tan obediently followed the steps while going around the house, switching off electronics and drawing curtains.

He snatched up a pack of crackers before finally leaving the house again.

He let himself out the building door after swiping his security access card.

He climbed up a parasol tree on the side of the main road. There, beside a branch was a hole the size of a fist. Zheng Tan hid the key and access card inside, before covering it up with leaves.

There were very few birds near the residential quarters. As for the other cats, they preferred to play in the grove and generally left the trees near the road alone. So Zheng Tan knew his stuff would be safe here.

After all, it would be highly inconvenient for him to take his pet identity card and home key on a long road trip. If he was caught for any misdeeds, there would be a lot of trouble.

After settling that business, Zheng Tan went to Dongyuan supermarket to wait for an

opportunity to get on the truck.

The driver was busy unloading. When he was done, he was leaning on the truck door for a cigarette when he saw Zheng Tan sitting in a bush nearby with a pack of finger crackers beside him.

"Yo, Charcoal. Going out to play today?"

The delivery driver knew Zheng Tan and was familiar with his antics. He had done this before, except this time he had a bag of biscuits. Maybe it was a long trip?

He had already taken the truck twice. At first, the driver was not happy at all with his passenger. However, after receiving a bottle of alcohol and two cartons of cigarettes from Papa Jiao, he was mighty pleased to see Zheng Tan.

As long as the cat still rode his truck, he would continue to receive gifts. The cigarettes and wine were good stuff. They would cost over 100 yuan at the department store downtown.

Zheng Tan stretched lazily. He picked up the biscuits and went into the back of the truck to wait for the driver to settle his accounts with the supermarket manager.

The truck compartment was empty today.

"Hey Charcoal, I'm done with all my deliveries today so I'm not going to the department store. We'll leave through the gate on the North, instead of the East gate. I'm going home directly this time."

The last two times, Zheng Tan went to check out the department store. It was about a 20-minute walk from the residential quarters. From there, he could clearly see all the tall buildings belonging to Chuhua University. The school campus was huge. One end was several bus stops away from the other.

The truck driver did not expect a cat to understand what he just said. His job was just to give the black cat a ride. Where the cat was riding to was none of his business.

It was almost six when his work here at Dongyuan Supermarket was completed, and off they went toward the North gate.

The sun was setting on the horizon. It was spectacular sight of orange and red.

Students were coming in and out of the North end cafeteria. The last period just ended. They were chatting excitedly about their days.

Squatting in the shadow of the truck, Zheng Tan looked at the students passing by. They reminded him of himself. He was suddenly sad. Before coming here, he was a junior in college.

When the trucked reached a fork in the road near the cafeteria, Zheng Tan saw a young man wearing a white uniform riding an old bicycle that creaked everywhere but the bell. If you didn't see 'Chuhua University North end Canteen' printed on his chest, you would think he just came out of a laboratory.

Surrounded by the future elites, this young man on the old bike did not show any envy nor any self-consciousness. He rode his bike into the sunset, humming, with a grin on his face. The wind was blowing gently on his face. His canteen uniform suddenly seemed like high end fashion.

From the north gate of Chuhua University, Zheng Tan could see the lights from the central department store even though it was nowhere close. These were familiar sights. The huge LED screens were lit; neon lights were blazing everywhere. This was a metropolitan city.

Zheng Tan looked at the scenery back away from the car window. He felt like an outsider looking in; not knowing where he fit. He saw a lot, but his mind was oddly blank. It was as if he entered a trance.

The truck left city center and took the Third Ring Road to the suburbs. The night was growing dark and the wind was growing cold.

The small truck suddenly came to a halt. Still in a daze, Zheng Tan slid and banged into the side of the compartment.

He combed the fur on the top of his head with his paw.

From the conversation outside, he could tell that the driver was home. So, he got up and shook the dust off himself. He snatched up his crackers and jumped off the truck. He decided to look around for a place to sleep first. He could do the sightseeing in the morning.

He was a cat now. But, he was still a morning person.

As Zheng Tan was looking for accommodations, the phone rang in a certain room in the graduate student dormitory in Chuhua University.

The guy closest to the phone picked it up. He exchanged a few words of pleasantries before respectfully replying: "I'll go get him. He should be done showering by now. Please hold."

He put the phone down on the table before walking towards the bunk bed across from him.

The person on the bed was fast asleep. He was somehow grinding his teeth while laughing at the same time. After the initial scare, the other three people living in the dorm learned to ignore this creepy behavior.

The man who had just answered the phone whispered to the guy asleep: "Yi Xin, your boss is on the phone! I told him you were taking a shower."

The words 'your boss' worked like a charm. The guy sobered up immediately. He jumped up and ran into the washroom to clear his throat.

He didn't want his voice to be hoarse, betraying the fact he just woke up. Yi Xin did not want his academic mentor to know he was sleeping at this golden hour for memorization.

"Professor Jiao, you were looking for me? Sorry I was showering earlier." Yi Xin picked up the phone. He felt he was doing a good job pretending.

His gaming roommates were even in on the act and stopped using the keyboard. They even started a fake conversation on nutrition, specifically why it was necessary to consume meat with garlic.

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. "Sorry to wake you up," said Papa Jiao.

'Damn it,' thought Yi Xin, 'what were Professor Jiao's ears made of?'

Luckily for Yi Xin, Papa Jiao decided to let it go.

"Are you free right now?"

"Yes!" Yi Xin replied hurriedly. Even if that was not true, he would find time.

So twenty minutes later, there he was, with the key he got from his professor's office drawer, standing in the professor's living room.

This was Yi Xin's second time in his mentor's home. The first time was when he first got accepted into the program early this year. He was professor Jiao's first graduate student, plus he was quite capable. Professor Jiao valued him greatly, therefore he was invited to dinner.

Yi Xin had never met Zheng Tan. No one other than the family knew about Zheng Tan's occasional visits to the Bio Building. So the boy had yet to find out his mentor's cat was a bit special.

He didn't see the cat after searching the apartment. He looked inside the bedroom and called Papa Jiao back from the landline.

"Hey Boss, did your cat run away from home? I don't see him." Yi Xin wanted to bite his tongue after he said those words. What was that familiarity? Who did he think he was talking to?

"Is the air conditioner unplugged?"

"Yes. So is the stove," Yi Xin answered eagerly. He quickly described the situation inside the place.

"Professor, should I go get a bag of cat food?"

"No, that's unnecessary, as long as the fridge is full and the snacks on the sofa are still there."

Yi Xin was at a loss for words. Could you raise a cat like that?

"Come and check every day. Call me from my landline. Don't worry about your work report this week."

Hearing that he didn't have to report his experiment progress this week was a huge relief for Yi Xin. The experiment had not been going well these past few days. He really didn't have anything to report.

"Rest assured. I will come here to check on him every day at this time."

On a train somewhere, Papa Jiao pocketed his cell phone after his call and looked out into the night.

Darn it! That rascal ran out again!

Chapter 10

Hey! Hey... F*ck

Zheng Tan squatted on a tree. It was the only suitable accommodation he could find.

There were several houses 200 meters away, two of which still had their lights on, and he could occasionally hear voices chatting.

The area was surrounded by fields, but under the dim starlight, he could see that there were hardly any crops. The area would probably be demolished soon.

Zheng Tan settled down in a comfortable position. He closed his eyes, but his ears were on alert. It paid to be vigilant outdoors.

Lights in homes switched off, one by one. Once in awhile, he could hear cats meowing in the distance, answered only by the occasional dog barks from the households. It was finally dark.

The temperature in the suburbs was lower compared to downtown. The wind was chilly, blowing away the last of his haziness.

Just when he was debating whether to get up and find something to do, he heard footsteps. They were light, but cats had good hearing.

Zheng Tan peeked out from the leaves. A man wearing a loose hoodie was walking towards this direction. He had one hand in his pocket holding something while the other was carrying a small shovel.

The man wore a hat. Zheng Tan could not see his face, nor was he sure this person was indeed a man. But girls didn't usually wander around alone at this hour, did they?

Guessing from his appearance... was he preparing to bury something? A corpse, maybe? Zheng Tan was letting his imagination run wild. He was curious, but didn't dare to follow the person. Who knew. Even a cat could be eliminated.

The person walked toward some dilapidated brick houses. From the look of them, they

had been deserted for a long time. Weeds were growing wild all around.

The man stopped in front of a half collapsed house. Zheng Tan decided to watch from his tree; after all, it wasn't far away.

The man squatted down in a corner. He had his back to Zheng Tan doing who knows what. Zheng Tan heard not the sound of bricks but light clanging of glassware colliding.

The person didn't leave until daybreak. Zheng Tan went to check out the brick house, but did not go too close. He smelled the unpleasant scent of pesticides.

Zheng Tan was curious, but he also valued his life. Even if it was the life of a cat, it was his.

The families around the area were still asleep. Zheng Tan jumped into one yard and found a faucet to clean his paws off the pesticides. The water was too cold with no tissues nearby to dry off. Zheng Tan didn't want to lick his paws, so he looked around.

He saw some clothes the family hung outside to dry and picked a long dress with the best material to wipe his paws, leaving behind a string of gray marks. He then stole a persimmon from the fruit tree in the yard before leaving.

A dog barked next door. It had probably heard Zheng Tan moving about. The barks were soft; it was probably a puppy.

It was morning when Zheng Tan returned to his tree.

Not before long, swearing could be heard from the house. The dress Zheng Tan had used to rub his paws was found.

With the sun rising, the temperature gradually rose as well.

Zheng Tan felt the warmth of the sun on his back. He yawned and stretched lazily, opening the bag of crackers. This was his breakfast. He had the persimmon if it got too dry.

A small, brown dog ran out of a yard, jumping around merrily. This was probably the puppy he heard earlier.

No one managed the fields. There were a few hens there pecking around for food. The little dog ran over to chase the hens.

There was a fat hen among the group that stayed still when the small dog charged at it. The puppy paused near it, gave a few symbolic bites without even touching the hen, then ran off chasing other birds. The more they ran, the more he chased.

The fat hen, however, managed to avoid being chased every time by remaining still. The fatties sometimes were the wisest.

The small dog was tired of chasing chickens. It panted while jotting down the road. Suddenly, its ears moved. It stopped and looked around, then ran straight over to the tree.

Zheng Tan chewed the crackers loudly while looking down at the dog barking and running in circles at the foot of the tree. He threw the remaining bit of cracker down. The pup paused, walked over, sniffed it, then ate the cracker.

After it was done, the small dog looked back up at Zheng Tan eating his biscuits, wagging his tail happily.

Zheng Tan left a bit of cracker to throw down to the dog every time. Then he watched amused as the dog looked for the leftover in the bushes or jumped up to catch it in the air.

Zheng Tan was having fun. The bag of biscuits emptied out soon. He was just about to let out a sigh when he heard a lighter.

There's someone around? Zheng Tan was surprised.

He traced the sound to the source. A man dressed like a migrant worker was nearby. But Zheng Tan recognized the guy immediately despite his different clothes.

It was the guy looking for the guinea pig.

The small dog also saw the stranger. He started barking.

Zheng Tan rolled his eyes. Stupid foodie. What good was barking now?

The small dog did not last long under the threatening gaze of the man. It soon gave up

and ran away with its tail between its legs.

Zheng Tan did not run. Rather, he was not sure if he could run away.

Should he wait to see what the guy wanted or pretend to not know him? After all, there were a lot of black cats around.

The man puffed out some smoke: "Even without your pet identity card, I recognize you. You're a wicked one, aren't you? Teasing a dog, eh?"

Damn. The guy was not easy to fool.

Zheng Tan felt himself stiffen up. Although the guy seemed amiable now, but their first encounter was too unpleasant. He couldn't let his guard down.

The man smoked while spitting out nonsense. Then suddenly, he looked up and asked, "Were you here last night? Did you see anyone strange?"

Strange? Did he mean the guy in the hoodie?

"You did!"

Wei Ling could tell from the subtle changes in the cat's expression and the look in its eyes that it knew what he was talking about.

He had asked the question expecting nothing. Who knew the cat really did see something.

"Look, I'm not going to ask too many questions. I just want to know what the guy was doing. Or rather, what was he hiding?" Wei Ling spread out his hands and shrugged, with his cigarette dangling from his mouth. He wanted to show that he meant to harm.

Zheng Tan thought about it. Eventually, he raised his chin to point to the brick house.

"Thank you!"

Wei Ling walked towards the house. Zheng Tan decided to use this opportunity to run away, but was stopped.

"Don't go. I have something to ask you. I will catch you again if you slip away. Trust

me."

Zheng Tan saw a flash of silver then a thin metal sheet sticking out of the dirt road appeared in front of him.

Zheng Tan stared at the metal piece. His whiskers trembled. He squatted down, carefully poking the metal with his paw. He was surprised. He looked over to the guy over at the brick house. The man in the hoodie took so long to hide this thing, it would take this guy some time to find it.

Five minutes later, Wei Ling reappeared with a brown jar in a gloved hand and a cell phone in the other.

"Hey, good new... I said, there is good news... can you hear me? Hey... Hey... I said... F*ck!"

The phone rang right away after he hung up.

"Hey... yes, I said I have a clue here... Hey..."

The location and a brief description of the events took ten minutes, and it was repeated over and over again. Zheng Tan grew tired of listening to it.

Zheng Tan roughly estimated that out of the ten minutes, that person spent half the time saying "Hey... Hey", then "f*ck".

Wei Ling finally finished the call. He pocketed the phone looking relieved. "Damn, broken PHS^[1]!"

Wei Lin nodded towards Zheng Tan, who was waiting patiently. "You're coming with me. Don't even think about running away, or I will wait for you at Chuhua University. You actually live there, right? You have to return there sometime. "

"..." This trip was turning into a nightmare.

"Wait here. I'm going to get my ride." Having said that, Wei Ling hurried off with the jar.

After two of three minutes, the man appeared, riding a pink women's bike on the bumpy road.

This was this dude's "ride"?

Footnotes:

[1] PHS: A Chinese phone brand popular in the early 2000s.

Chapter 11

Act cute? Hell no!

His ride in the front basket of the bike along the dirt road was a trip Zheng Tan preferred to forget.

He couldn't wait to get out when they arrived at Wei Ling's destination. He felt dizzy and almost couldn't land on his feet.

They arrived at a small two-story building in a mostly residential neighborhood. This place seemed to be within the demolition area. Many houses were empty, with 'DEMOLISH' spray painted on the walls. The area was surrounded by huge billboards of the building that had been planned to be built.

The high-tech business area was expanding. The demolition of this piece was inevitable. In the next ten years, high-tech enterprises would slowly take over this entire area.

Wei Ling opened the door; pushed his bike inside the house, opened the refrigerator and grabbed a handful of beef jerky. Then he sat on the sofa and started watching TV. He paid no attention to Zheng Tan.

Zheng Tan looked around, jumped on the coffee table and started to eat Wei Ling's jerky. Wei Ling told him on the way here that he would drop him off at Chuhua University after he finished his business. So he was in no hurry to leave... not that he could leave anyways.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang. A man in a police uniform came in.

Seeing Zheng Tan, the man was surprised. "Where did you get the cat? I am not keeping it! You know I prefer dogs!"

"It's not yours to keep. It belongs to some other people. I'm sending it back tomorrow." Wei Ling threw some jerky into his mouth, then took out the glass jar.

The man did not say anything more. He held the jar in a gloved hand and took it into

the bathroom, reemerging later with a small bag.

The bag was transparent, and the contents could be seen clearly.

Jade, diamonds, a gold ring...

The bag was small, but the value of its contents was anything but.

"Did you see the person?" asked the man.

Wei Ling shook his head and pointed to the Zheng Tan. "The cat found it."

"Bullshit!" The man obviously did not believe him, but changed the topic: "What else did you find? I couldn't hear clearly over the phone..... you really need to give up that PHS. You don't have coverage whenever you leave downtown."

Wei Ling described the situation over at the brick house.

"The guy deliberately sprayed the area with pesticides to ward off livestock, but not kill the weeds. The residents nearby were busy moving. No one will sniff around those abandoned houses. The bag was well hidden, and the tracks were carefully cleaned. Be careful, this was not the work of a newbie."

"Of course this wasn't his first time. That guy is responsible for several murders. He has this stuff down as a science. Only you could find it. If it was one of my men, they would come back with weeds. "

The guy in the police uniforms shook the little bag. He considered it for a moment then handed Wei Ling a folder.

"A man?" Wei Ling frowned. This had contradicted his guess. He had always thought that the culprit was the only female suspect.

"The bureau got new equipment, the results can't be wrong." The man in the police uniform patted Wei Ling on the shoulder. "OK bro. I really owe you one for finding this evidence. I got men on the ground over at the brick house."

He paused. "I gotta say. You retired from the army three years ago. Now that your wounds have all healed, why don't you find something to do? Whether it be joining the force or starting a company you have the connections and the skills."

Wei Ling lit a cigarette and laid back on the couch. "I'm lazy."

"Bullshit!" The guy in the police uniform took the folder and smacked him but did not say anything more.

He turned to look at Zheng Tan pawing open the packaging of the beef jerky on the coffee table. "You don't say. This cat is smart. But it's nothing compared to the master's bobcat..."

The guy stopped himself mid-sentence.

"Why did I mention it!"

"Why did you mention it!"

They said simultaneously.

The thought of the Bobcat looking at them, with the exact look their master had, gave the two chills. It was why Wei Ling was not that surprised by Zheng Tan.

Rubbing away the goosebumps on his arm, Wei Ling kicked the uniform. "Bro, you should go back to the office. These cases would keep you busy."

"You're right." The guy gathered his stuff, then bragged with a straight face: "I can't possibly accept another promotion without solving these."

"Narcissism is an illness and needs to be cured."

"Didn't you read that article on the paper? Napoleon, Roosevelt, Stalin, Edison, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford and Hitler were all narcissists. It's a necessary trait for a leader."

Having said that, the policeman left while whistling. He stopped at the door and added: "You can keep my daughter's bike; just get her a new one. Her birthday is coming up. You know, just get her one of those that could be folded up."

Zheng Tan was eating the whole time but his attention was on the conversation between the two men. It seemed that neither were ordinary and both had the same master.

After the police officer left, Wei Ling had some instant noodles then threw some more beef jerky on the table.

“I need a nap. Eat the beef if you are hungry. I don’t have anything else. I strongly advise you to stay put. This place isn’t like anywhere you are used to. Wanna know why there aren’t any strays around?? They all became stew for the construction workers nearby. Lots of people want to eat 'dragon and tiger'^[1]. You should stick to bullying puppies.”

Zheng Tan: "...”

The next day, Wei Ling picked up a bag of clothing and rode his bike to Chuhua University. Once again, Zheng Tan sat in the basket of the pink women’s bike. The roads were much better near the city. Other than the wind blowing hard on his face, he didn’t have any complaints. That was if he ignored a certain someone’s wordiness.

Ever since they set off and all the way till they reached the university, Wei Ling recounted Zheng Tan’s flaws.

"You can’t jump; Your reflexes are slow, and your hearing is probably on par with a pig. You can’t even tell when someone is beside you.”

Zheng Tan wanted to refute. Unfortunately, when he opened his mouth, only cat sounds came out. To the pedestrians, this was an odd sight. A man was on a girls’ bike, talking nonstop. After every few sentences, he was answered by a ‘meow’ from the cat in the basket. It was as if the man and the animal were quarrelling.

It was two-hour bike ride to the university, but Wei Ling showed no signs of being tired.

Wei Ling rented an apartment near the school. He had bought a house not far from the university but it was being renovated. He couldn’t move in for at least another six months.

The mother and daughter Zheng Tan saw last time at the lawn were the family of one of Wei Ling’s comrades. The man had died in service. Wei Ling had been helping them out ever since he left the army.

The place he rented was near the Eastern quarters and about a five-minute walk from the school gates. Students often rented there.

Wei Ling let Zheng Tan off. "When you go back, take time to exercise. As a cat that likes to wander, you would turn into stew sooner or later if you stay weak."

"I will be jogging on campus everyday around six or seven. You are free to join me."

Having said that, he locked his bike and went upstairs. He was not worried about the cat getting caught. Wei Ling felt that the cat wouldn't be worth training if it was so easily snatched away.

Zheng Tan was familiar with the area. He ignored the cooing of students and walked directly towards the east gates.

"That cat is so unfriendly."

"Exactly. It's not like that spotted cat the other day that rolled around."

"Are all black cats like that?"

"No. My aunt has a black cat. It's so cute, not at all like this one..."

Zheng Tan heard the girls chatting behind him and twitched his ears. He was annoyed right now. Roll around? Act cute? Hell no!

He had to admit that after entering the Eastern quarters, he suddenly felt at peace. He was calmer. Maybe, this was what it felt like to belong?

But before he could relish in his new-found peace, a bark made him annoyed again.

He knew the bark. He hadn't heard it for over a month now, and the Eastern quarters had been relatively peaceful for over a month.

Zheng Tan looked around. A dog with a plastic bottle in his mouth was running towards Zheng Tan, his owner chasing along behind him.

This dog was called Sahara. It had nothing to do with the famous desert but was named as such because he was a Samoyed, Husky and Labrador mix [2].

Sahara had the serious look of a Husky but also the grin of a Samoyed. That made for a very odd combo. He also inherited a Labrador's intelligence. But he never used this intelligence on anything good.

For example, now, Sahara was running around with a bottle of water that his owner had just purchased. He just liked to be chased.

Xiu---

Sahara's sharp teeth punctured a hole on the plastic bottle. Water shot out and hit Zheng Tan right on the face when Sahara ran past him.

Maybe his reflexes were too slow.

The culprit was already far way with the water bottle still in his mouth. Zheng Tan shook off the water. Before he could sigh, he heard the sound of flapping wings.

On the courtyard walls behind him, a blue figure landed.

"Yesterday I passed your door ~ you were pouring out water onto the road, ~ it splashed on my shoes ~ and the pedestrians walking by ~ Oh, what a laugh~ what a laugh we had."

Zheng Tan: "..."

'Just kill me now.'

Footnotes:

[1] Dragon and Tiger is a famous Chinese dish, traditionally made from eel and pork. Urban legends have it that it could be made proper with snakes and cats.

[2]Sahara is 'Sa Ha La' is Chinese. The three breeds of dogs are 'Sa Mo Ye', " Ha Shi Qi' and " La Bu La Duo' in Chinese. So Sahara is simply the first syllable of each breed put together.

Chapter 12

Fleas are the Worst

Zheng Tan shook off the water and shooed the parrot away. He found his hidden access card and key from the hiding spot on the tree, then trotted down the road toward the Jiao house.

He jumped up and swiped his access card before running all the way up to the fifth floor.

Because it was an old building, many households still had security doors. The Jiao family was one of them. It was just that their door was broken. The building had good security, and they lived on a higher floor, so they never bothered to fix the door. They were satisfied with just a simple wooden door.

The metal security door was left wide open so as to not block the corridor. It was old and slightly rusty.

Zheng Tan jumped on a grid of the metal door. He held on tight to side and kicked the wall. The metal door carried him towards the actual door, its rusty hinges creaking all the way.

When Zheng Tan was close enough to insert the key, the door swung open from the inside.

Last night, Yi Xin was using Professor Jiao's computer to write his paper. He fell asleep on the sofa at dawn and only woke up to use the washroom. When he was stumbling back to the sofa, he heard a sound at the door. He was immediately wide awake. He rushed to open the door without even putting on his shoes. The boss mentioned the door creaking whenever his cat returned.

Yi Xin hadn't yet figured out the link between the boss's cat coming back and the security door creaking, so he was in for a surprise when he opened the door. Right in front of him, a black cat was dangling from the metal door by a leg and a paw, with a key in its mouth. He froze.

Zheng Tan did not expect to find anyone here either. The person looked familiar, too.

Zheng Tan was trying to remember who this person was, and Yi Xin was still too shocked to move. For a moment, a person and a cat just kept staring at each other.

Finally, Zheng Tan remembered. During one of his secret visits to the office, Papa Jiao had mentioned to him that this person was Yi Xin. At the time, he was overseeing a lab session for some undergrads. He was with a few grad students, carrying boxes of chemicals to the public laboratory, while Papa Jiao and Zheng Tan watched him through the office window.

Since the identity of this person was now confirmed, Zheng Tan didn't care about him appearing here anymore. He certainly had Papa Jiao's approval, and that was trustworthy enough for Zheng Tan.

He hopped down from the door and headed straight to the sofa.

Yi Xin had moved all the snacks to a nearby chair. Zheng Tan counted the items, feeling satisfied that nothing was missing.

Yi Xin was still standing at the door. Although he was starting to recover from the scene he saw after opening the door, but what he was about to witness sent him into shock once again.

When he had called Papa Jiao yesterday, he was told not to touch the food on the couch. If he was hungry, he could have the snacks kept in the second cupboard in the kitchen. But the ones on the sofa were to be left untouched.

He didn't quite understand on the phone. Now he did. The cat was nodding at the packs of snacks. That was him counting them, right?

Zheng Tan ignored Yi Xin. He was hungry. He bit off the packaging of a pack of pudding and started eating.

Yi Xin felt his face twitching in disbelief as he watched a cat lay on the sofa, eating pudding. He nudged into the bedroom to call the boss.

Zheng Tan listened to the sounds coming from the bedroom.

"Oh... oh..." Yi Xin agreed and nodded twice then he switched on speaker. Papa Jiao's

voice came through the telephone: "Charcoal! Make a sound."

Zheng Tan: "Wa woo!"

Yi Xin: "... That was a unique answer.

"You sound well." Papa Jiao was satisfied. He told Yi Xin to put him off speaker to make a few more requirements.

Yi Xin was answering the phone respectfully, but he was, in truth, feeling like there was nothing he could do. After the phone call, he went into the kitchen to boil some water. He then took out a white, plastic basin.

In the past, Yi Xin heard that it was best to pick a mentor with older children and no pets. Or else, he would be tasked with occasionally taking care of the kid or the pet. At the time, he thought people were only joking. Now, he realized that they were spelling out his fate. He hadn't had to take care of the kids yet, but the pet...

He rinsed the basin. As he was adjusting the water temperature, he wondered that he was going to be pet-sitting a lot in the future. Maybe he should ask for a raise when the boss returned.

Zheng Tan went into the bathroom; looked at the basin of water then delicately tested the water with a paw. It was just right. Just what he would expect from someone in academia.

Zheng Tan inspected the shampoo, the towels folded nicely next to the basin and the hairdryer, then happily jumped into the basin. He ruffled the fur on the top of his head, then closed his eyes enjoying this bath with his chin on the edge of the basin.

Yi Xin felt like his world was turning upside down. He had seen relatives attempting to bathe their pet cats before. It always ended with their arms being scratched bloody. This was his first time seeing a cat enjoy a bath.

No wonder this was... boss Jiao's cat.

Zheng Tan felt the water cool down. He was ready to get out when he saw a bug the size of a sesame seed floating in the water. Its legs were still moving.

Against the white plastic, the small insect was quite eye-catching.

Outside by the door, Yi Xin was looking at the time. He could guess the water temperature without a thermometer. He was wondering why the cat wasn't coming out so he took a peek. The cat was staring at the basin with wide eyes.

What was the matter now? Yi Xin recalled Papa Jiao's instructions. He did everything he was told to do. He went over timidly to have a closer look. The bug in the water soon caught his eye.

Yi Xin was an expert at picking out bacterial colonies. This was naturally not going to escape his eyes.

Damn! Fleas!

What were you supposed to do with fleas?

Kill them!

Then what?

No idea.

Yi Xin was out of ideas, so he decided to call Professor Jiao. Five minutes later, Yi Xin opened a cabinet. Inside it were some household chemicals, including two bottles of pesticides. One was a bottle of a well-known brand of parathyroid insecticide; the other was unlabeled.

The latter was what he wanted. This was probably the product of a pesticide research program led by the bio and the chemistry department. At this stage, only some insiders had access to it.

Yi Xin sprayed some around the house like he was told. As for the cat, another bath was unavoidable.

Catching fleas was the worst. There were some in the grass around the residential quarter, but Zheng Tan had managed to avoid getting infected so far. Who knew that he would get fleas from his trip? Must have been the thick shrubs in the suburbs.

Whenever a flea appeared in the water, Zheng Tan squashed it with his claws. He was not letting go even those that appeared to have drowned already. It took him two hours before he could come out. He dried off by rolling on a towel.

Yi Xin helped blow-dry the cat.

"Charcoal, Papa Jiao said we would be out of insecticide soon. He told you... told you to find some and to get some ointment for yourself while you were on your way."

Yi Xin didn't know why the boss had said that. He was told to just follow the cat.

He wept a little inside for himself. Who knew taking care of a pet was harder than writing a paper.

After he was dried off, Zheng Tan shook his fur. He went to the door and looked back at Yi Xin.

Yi Xin remembered his instructions. He quickly put down the hair dryer, picked up his keys and opened the door.

Zheng Tan lead the way in front, Yi Xin followed behind.

Yi Xin was full of doubt but there was no point in asking a cat. So he kept his discomfort to himself.

Zheng Tan went down two floors, stopping in front of an apartment on the third floor.

"Here? I'll ask... I suppose"

Before Yi Xin could muster up the courage to knock, Zheng Tan jumped up. He slammed the door like smashing a volleyball.

"Bang!"

Yi Xin felt his hair stand on end. He didn't know who lived here, but knew well enough that people living in the eastern quarter were mostly faculty with seniority—otherwise known as people he could not afford to offend.

Yi Xin started drawing up a list in his mind. He only hoped that the resident of this place was not someone on this list!

Zheng Tan paid no regard to Yi Xin's fears. He smacked the door two more times. Every time louder than the last.

Someone finally answered.

"Coming! Do you think I'm deaf? Why knock three times?"

The voice belonged to an old man and was familiar. Yi Xin was getting nervous.

The door opened, revealing a harsh face covered in wrinkles.

Yi Xin's heart sank.

"Pro... Professor La... La... Lan!"

Yi Xin stared at the man at the door with the stern look. His first instinct was to run.

Unfortunately, Zheng Tan once again ignored Yi Xin. He marched right in. He was not afraid of this old man, he owed him a favor.

The house was sparsely furnished. The floor still had water stains.

Zheng Tan had just had a bath. Though his body was blow-dried, the fur on his paws was still damp. His paws were muddy after coming down the stairs, leaving little paw prints on the floor as he walked in.

"Little bastard! I just mopped!" Professor Lan cursed.

Zheng Tan pretended not to hear him.

Professor Lan stared at the cat waltzing into his house, then looked down at the paw prints on his floor. Eventually, he turned to Yi Xin: "You'll wipe this clean!"

Yi Xin: "..."

God, he hated cats.

Chapter 13

Kids These Days

Yi Xin timidly explained the purpose of this visit. Professor Lan scoffed when he heard Zheng Tan had fleas. He gave the cat a harsh look: "You deserved it!"

With that said, Professor Lan still went to fetch Zheng Tan the medicine, with the cat trailing behind him.

As for Yi Xin, he was faithfully mopping the living room.

Professor Lan was a retired faculty of the College of Life Sciences at Chuhua University. Although he didn't teach anymore, he still held considerable influence in the department. He was an advisor to many companies in town. Though his apartment had little furnishing, his net worth was anything but.

Professor Lan rarely, if ever, smiled; giving off the impression that he was ill-tempered and too serious. He would go visit the bio department from time to time. He once decided to make himself the auditor of a botany course. The young lecturers often lacked the confidence to speak up in front of him, let alone the students.

It was no wonder that Yi Xin stuttered when he saw the man. He had completed his undergraduate studies here as well. The botany class left him scared. He was curious, though. Professor Lan was not someone who followed the rules, not even the dean of the department could make him do something he did not want to do.

So why was he tolerating the cat? Certainly not because its owner.

Zheng Tan earned this tolerance through a random act of kindness. More than a month ago, Zheng Tan ran into Professor Lan's wife, Madam Di, during one of his strolls. The old lady suffered from heart problems and was on a verge of a heart attack when she was helping some other lady from a different building carry some stuff.

Professor Lan was out of town and most people living in the residential quarter were at work at the university. Madam Di's hand shook, dropping her medicine bottle, and it rolled down the stairs. At the time, Madam Di could hardly walk. It was Zheng Tan

who ran downstairs and brought her back the bottle.

She was able to take her medicine in time, and all was well.

Since then, Madam Di always greeted Zheng Tan with a smile. If she was home today, Professor surely wouldn't have scolded Zheng Tan. To other people, he had quite the temper. But at home, Madam Di called the shots. Of course, she never gave him a hard time in public.

So, with Madam Di as his supporter, Zheng Tan was not at all afraid of the professor.

Professor Lan took out two bottles; one was a liquid, the other was a powder.

The liquid medicine was to be used in baths, so as to avoid catching fleas outside. Zheng Tan had used it before, but he had run out of it and always thought it was too much trouble to ask for more.

The bottle of powder was to be sprinkled on, after finding fleas. These things were not sold anywhere. They were all the old man's own configuration, consisting of purely natural elements. Even if it was consumed accidentally when cats licked their fur, it wouldn't do any damage. Not that Zheng Tan ever licked his fur.

The old man poured out some powder on the palm of his hand and rubbed it all over Zheng Tan.

Zheng Tan looked back at his messy fur, then looked back up at the professor disapprovingly.

The professor didn't say anything, but gently put the cap back on the bottle and returned the bottle to its cupboard. He slowly combed through Zheng Tan's ruffled fur. After the cat looked good again, he gave it a pat, which almost sent Zheng Tan to the ground.

"I could buy a house of cats if I sold this medicine. Seeing that you got such a great deal, maybe come help me in the garden someday?"

The professor did not expect the cat to understand. He was just voicing out his annoyance and using the time to pat Zheng Tan a few more times as retaliation.

Zheng Tan twitched his ears, shook his fur and ignored the old man talking to himself.

He left the room, ready to go home.

Outside, Yi Xin had finished mopping. He was sitting stiffly on the edge of the sofa. Even a fool could see that he was nervous.

Professor Lan handed Yi Xin the two bottles, then went back into the room and brought out a small glass bottle.

"Those two bottles are to be used on the cat. Ask your mentor for the specific instructions. The glass bottle contains pesticides. It is 10 times concentrated. Remember to dilute it first."

Professor Lan then opened the front door, signaling to the cat and the student that their stay here was over.

"Thank... thank you so much. Sorry for the trouble!"

Yi Xin squeezed out a thanks, then followed Zheng Tan out.

Only when they were back on the fifth floor did he let out a sigh of relief

Zheng Tan was feeling more at ease as well. Now that he knew the problem of fleas was solved, he felt like he was floating on clouds. He tore open a bag of grilled fish to snack on to pass some time.

However, before the pair could get too comfortable, the doorbell rang.

Listening to the frequency of knocks and the commotion outside, Zheng Tan could guess the identity of the visitors. He looked up at the ceiling and rolled his eyes.

'I just cannot catch a break.'

Yi Xin opened the door.

Outside were three little boys, all about Jiao Yuan's age. All of them were in sixth grade at the same affiliated elementary school and lived in the quarter. They were playmates of Jiao Yuan. Zheng Tan knew them, but Yi Xin did not.

Before he could ask, a child beat him to it: "Who are you?"

The question was filled of righteousness. One of the taller children even brought out a rolling pin covered in rat bite marks.

Looking at three kids with vigilance and suspicion in their eyes, Yi Xin could feel his face stiffen.

He then spent the next five minutes trying to explain his identity. He even pulled out his student ID.

Three boys gathered around to look at the photo on the ID then looked back at Yi Xin.

"The man in the picture is your brother, isn't he? He looks like he has been through the vicissitudes of life," The child with the rolling pin said, then paused. Suddenly pleased, he added: "I actually used the 'vicissitudes of life' in a sentence!"

"Remember to use it in your next essay, maybe you'll score a 90," Another child said, finally giving back Yi Xin his student ID.

The trio walked into the living room. They felt reassured when they saw Zheng Tan lying on the sofa in one piece. If the cat was well, the person must be an acquaintance. They sat down on the sofa.

Yi Xin saw that the sofa was taken, so he went and brought a chair from the dining table.

As he was about to sit down, he caught the three kids staring at him. He stared back blankly. They were looking at him as if he did something wrong.

Zheng Tan looked at them and sighed. He went to the fridge, then jumped up and opened the door.

"Oh. ~ ~"

"Charcoal is a much better host."

"This is the basics of hospitality. Mr. Yi, even a cat knows it."

Yi Xin managed to hold his tongue under the criticism. 'F*ck, if this were my place, I'd know it too. But this is Professor Jiao's house. I'm scared to eat a bag of snacks. I'm a guest too!'

The strongest kid was the fastest. He was in front of the fridge in no time, rummaging through it like this was his own home.

"Xiong Xiong, I want mango. Last time, I saw Jiao Yuan hide it. Look in the drawer."

"I want apple!"

Yi Xin felt his face twitch. Were the Viking pillaging a village?

Xiong Xiong returned with three popsicles.

Looking at the three kids slurping their popsicles, Yi Xin asked: "So you three are here... because?"

"My granddaddy said that someone was here. We haven't seen Jiao Yuan for a few days, so we came to ask why he wasn't coming to school." The child who had chastised Yi Xin for poor hospitality answered.

"Uh, and your grandfather is...?"

"My granddad is a Lan Tiesu."

Yi Xin could barely maintain his smile.

Lan Tiesu was Professor Lan's name.

The kids were — Professor Lan's grandson Lan Tianzhu, the son of a chemistry professor named Su An and Xiong Xiong. Zheng Tan did not know the specifics of Xiong Xiong's background, but he had heard that the family was well connected, with ties to the headmaster.

Yi Xin knew his boss was in another province, but didn't know the specifics. So he told the kids something had come up and the Jiao family had to leave for a week.

"Oh....." Xiong Xiong was not satisfied with this explanation. They were already here and his mother, who forbid him from eating ice cream, was sure to scold him if he went home like this. Might as well finish the popsicle before leaving.

Xiong Xiong asked Yi Xin: "You are the Department of Health Sciences, right? I have a question."

Yi Xin sat up, "Speak."

"I heard that if you don't eat breakfast, your body will eat feces. Is that true?"

Zheng Tan, who was pretending to be asleep on the couch, was listening intently.

Su An and Lan Tianzhu also looked over to Yi Xin.

Yi Xin's smile stiffened. He decided to answer this question in academic terms: "Strictly speaking, it is not correct. Food enters the small intestine, where nutrients are digested and absorbed, then the remaining residue enter the large intestine. It will then leave the body in the form of feces and urine. The large intestine is not like the small intestine, it does not absorb anything except water and inorganic salts. So even if you do not eat breakfast, the large intestine will not absorb any... eh... 'residual residue'."

"My mom lied to me again!" Xiong Xiong complained.

"You can argue with your mother."

"No. She'll punish me by making me kneel on the wash board."

"That's not bad at all. I had to kneel on the keyboard two days ago. My mom said I can't get up until the space bar falls off." Su An said while nibbling on his popsicle.

"Why?"

"In order to verify that aqua regia can indeed dissolve gold, I threw my mom's golden leaf earrings into the mixture. Turns out, it can dissolve gold."

Zheng Tan and Yi Xin were both speechless. This wasteful kid.

"My dad banned me from his lab, and my mom took away my pocket money." Su An went on.

"Actually..." Lan Tianzhu wiped his mouth, "corporal punishment is illegal, isn't it? You can call 110."

"It's useless, I tried." Xiong Xiong said, "After that, my mother switched to a larger washboard."

Once again Zheng Tan and Yi Xin were speechless.

"F*ck, kids don't have human rights!" Xiong Xiong exclaimed.

Lan Tianzhu glanced at him: "Language!"

"F*ck, kids don't have human rights!" Xiong Xiong re-exclaimed.

Zheng Tan and Yi Xin gave up.

Xiong Xiong rolled up his trousers to show them red marks on his leg from being pinched.

That surprised the adults.

"Wow. Your mother is really ruthless!" Lan Tianzhu and Su An swallowed nervously.

"No!" Xiong Xiong looked proud. "I pinched myself really hard to cry! My mom felt bad and changed the original one hour kneeling into kneeling for fifteen minutes."

Zheng Tan: "..."

Yi Xin: "..."

Why was he looking so triumphant! What was he proud of!

Listening to the conversation between the three children, Zheng Tan realized that when he was a kid, he was really, really, really f*cking naive.

Yi Xin was swearing inside as well. 'Kids these days! How did they become this way!'

The three kids finished the popsicles. They reluctantly put on the backpacks and left. Before leaving, though, they remembered to remind Yi Xin and Zheng Tan that recently there were thieves in the area. Apparently, several families had already been robbed, so they shouldn't lend out their access cards nor let strangers into the building.

After three kids left, Zheng Tan and Yi Xin finally felt the world was at peace again.

Boiling bath water for the cat, drying its fur, applying medicine and entertaining children... all in one day. Yi Xin was physically and mentally exhausted. He decided

that when the boss came back, he was going to ask for a raise. Without a doubt!

Zheng Tan didn't care about what Yi Xin was thinking. He was tired as well. These two days had been like a roller coaster ride. Remembering what Wei Lin said, Zheng Tan decided to go out for a run tomorrow.

So, he went to bed early and was asleep before 8.

Yi Xin was modifying his essay using Papa Jiao's computer. When he was done, it was already 2 in the morning. He stretched and turned off the computer before getting up to go outside to sleep on the couch.

Walking pass Gu Youzi's room, he looked inside. With the light coming from the living room, he could see a large stuffed Garfield in the middle of the bed. The black cat was lying on the toy with one leg curled up, the other leg on Garfield's fat smiling face. It was fast asleep.

Yi Xin curled his lips. Such a bad posture!

In his dream, Zheng Tan became strong and he caught the thief.

Chapter 14

So Nepenthe is Daylily?

Yi Xin was awakened by the alarm clock early in the morning. He had a report to make, for which he needed to prepare some slides in advance.

Zheng Tan and Yi Xin left the house together.

Yi Xin went to the east cafeteria to buy two bags of buns and after some consideration, two cups of soy milk. He brought it to the grove in the woods, where Zheng Tan was waiting for him on the stone table.

Yi Xin laid down a bag of buns and a cup of soy milk. He wasn't sure if cats could have soy milk, but Papa Jiao had mentioned on the phone that this cat had a strong stomach. Yi Xin thought buns were too dry, so he got the cat a drink as well.

He threw a straw into the disposable cup before realizing that cats probably couldn't use straws.

By this time, Zheng Tan had finished a bun. He brushed away Yi Xin's hand and started drinking from the straw.

If he wasn't in a rush to go prepare for the report, Yi Xin would definitely stay here to study how Professor Jiao's cat managed to defy the structure of a cat's mouth and suck on a straw.

Zheng Tan paid no attention to what Yi Xin was thinking. He was famished. He wanted to finish the food as quickly as possible, then rest for a while before going for a run. He wouldn't have the strength to run if he didn't eat.

When he was about to start the sixth bun, Tiger and Sheriff appeared. They got the remaining food. They didn't bother saving anything for Fatty. He was like Zheng Tan. The guy didn't eat other people's leftovers.

As always, Tiger howled first to signal the location so the others should come quickly, then went straight to scratching trees.

Zheng Tan threw the plastic bags and soy milk cup into the trash then calmly walked around the stone table to help digestion.

When Fatty showed up, Tiger was starting on his third tree.

Zheng Tan felt he was ready. So he called out to his buddies before leading the way towards campus. Tiger quickly followed, though he stopped occasionally to chew grass.

Zheng Tan thought he would run on his own if he didn't see Wei Ling. After all, it was just running, and he had three other cats to accompany him.

However, he ran into Wei Ling before he even left the quarters. The man was doing pull-ups on the lawn.

Tiger had the strongest reaction to seeing Wei Ling again. He crouched up immediately, and all the fur on his body stood on end. In contrast, Fatty was vigilant, but calm.

Wei Ling stood up straight and looked at the four cats, focusing again on Fatty and Zheng Tan. He followed them without saying much.

"How about we jog first? Doesn't the school have a running track that circles the whole campus? Let's start with a lap."

Zheng Tan: "... 'A full lap?!"

Chuhua University had a huge campus. During his limited time here, Zheng Tan mostly stayed near the eastern quarter, only coming on campus to pick up the kids from school or visit the department of health sciences. He had also been to Professor Lan's garden a few times, but that was about it. He had never seen the majority of the university before.

A lap around the school might not be too bad. It would give him a chance to grow familiar with the campus.

Twenty meters into his run, Zheng Tan looked back. Fatty was yawning without moving a step, Tiger was playing dead in the grass, and Sheriff was licking his lip while looking up at a sparrow on the tree.

Well, they couldn't be counted on.

He was better off running on his own.

Wei Ling began running right away without waiting for him. He wasn't fast but his speed was steady. Zheng Tan followed along behind him.

In the morning, students were walking or riding their bikes to class from the cafeteria, dormitories and public squares. Students in the opera club or glee club were practicing their vocals under the patch of peach trees.

The may flowers had been blooming for some time. Their scent was growing faint. The flowers were about to wither. The season was almost over.

Zheng Tan saw Madam Di and her friends waving bright red fans, dancing some sort of fan dance. Their dance class was about to end. They typically stopped half an hour before first period classes so as to not disturb the students.

Madam Di was doing a swirl when she saw Zheng Tan panting and jogging. She almost dropped her fan. She had been dancing here for a long time, but this was the first time she had seen him. She didn't think he would stray so far away from the residential area. After all, this place was close to the classroom buildings. In general, cats rarely came to this area at this time.

Zheng Tan did not see the old lady's expression. They were only jogging, that was true. But he was so tired he could faint. He had never exercised like this, so no wonder it was so painful.

The first half of the lap was not too bad; he still had enough energy to look around at the scenery. This second half, however, was just pure torture.

Wei Ling slowed down slightly, but Zheng Tan didn't stop.

He wanted to exercise; he wanted to become stronger; he wanted to go further. He had to keep going.

He was doing this for his life, after all.

After he finished the lap, Zheng Tan dropped to the ground and rolled around in the grass. He knew there was a water fountain on the other side of the lawn, so he got up

to go have a drink of water.

Wei Ling did not idle around. He had run a lap like Zheng Tan but was acting like it was just a simple warm up. He immediately started doing pull ups after they reached the lawn.

Zheng Tan stood next to the fountain to rest. He tilted his head to take a drink of water. When he looked back up, Wei Ling was running again. He was running faster this time.

Zheng Tan took a few deep breathes and set off again. He was, however, no match for Wei Ling's speed. The man was out of sight in an instant, so Zheng Tan decided to called it a day. He turned around at a fork road to head over to Professor Lan's flower garden.

As usual, Zheng Tan chose to jump over the wall. The actual entrance was still some distance away, and he was lazy. Except, he forgot he had just finished a run. He almost didn't make the leap up.

It was said to be a small flower garden, but in reality it was not small at all. A few greenhouses filled the space, inside of which grew all kinds of plants.

Zheng Tan did not jump in right away, but walked along the wall until he came to a specific greenhouse. He hopped and landed on top of it with a 'bang'.

Inside, Professor Lan looked up from his work and waved his shovel emphatically. "Can't you jump somewhere else! You are going to break my shed."

Zheng Tan ignored him. He went to the other side of the greenhouse, where several wooden boxes were stacked to form a staircase. He walked down with ease and elegance. The greenhouse was transparent, so he could see inside quite clearly.

Lilies, eh?

Yellow ones too!

Zheng Tan had never seen yellow lilies before. Other than the color, the flowers inside look exactly like the lilies he used to buy to woo girls.

What was that old geezer doing, planting yellow lilies? Wouldn't the white ones sell better?

Zheng Tan walked in. There was a wooden box filled with brown stuff in front of the greenhouse, but Zheng Tan did not pay it any attention. He was fixated on the yellow flowers.

Professor Lan was holding a small shovel and busily at work. He did, though, find time to yell at the cat: "Careful! Don't harm my day lilies."

Day lilies?

So these were not actual lilies?

Zheng Tan twitched his ears in confusion. He was an idiot in this area. He couldn't figure out anything even if it was put right under his eyes. He barely remembered what lilies looked like but remotely recalled that they looked something like these flowers in front of him.

While Zheng Tan was contemplating his lack of knowledge in botany, people started to walk in.

It was a few students, who came to get a sample.

Like most people, the students were very timid when approaching Professor Lan.

"Professor Lan, we made an appointment earlier to come get some samples for the antioxidant research."

Lan did not stand up. He raised his hand and pointed to a corner in the greenhouse: "You can take anything from the area I have marked. Don't touch anything else."

"We'll be careful." A student hastily agreed.

The students went to the appointed space. Clearly new to this school, one of them asked in hushed tones: "So this is *Nepenthes*^[1]? Why do they look like lilies?"

Another student was prepared to answer, but Professor Lan beat him to it.

"Day lilies belong to the Angiosperms^[2] clade; Asparagales^[3] order; Asphodelaceae^[4] family; Hemerocallidoideae^[5] subfamily. Did your teachers not teach you this? Why is it strange that they look similar to lilies? They belong to the same family."

Professor Lan's voice was gentle, but it was clear he was far from pleased.

The students worked without another word. They were terrified to say something else that the old professor found offensive. They left as soon as they were done.

Zheng Tan squatted beside the old man. He was rethinking what the students just said. So Nepenthe was just day lilies? The first name sounded much better. In comparison, 'day lily' was too plain. Zheng Tan had never linked the two together.

Professor Lan stood up straight after the students left. He massaged his back while walking out of the greenhouse. He didn't forget to take his wooden box with him.

"Fresh day lilies have higher fat and vitamin C content compared to dried ones. But the latter contains more proteins and trace elements. I prefer it to fresh ones. There are lots of it back where I grew up, but here in the city it's hard to find. Charcoal, let me tell you..."

Bla Bla Bla Bla Bla.

These retired profs still liked to lecture. They managed to go on and on and on even if the only listener was a cat that barely understood anything.

From the moment he heard 'let me tell you', Zheng Tan knew that like Papa Jiao, Professor Lan was entering teaching mode.

Zheng Tan spent the rest of the morning in the garden before leaving at noon.

It was sunny when Zheng Tan reached the Eastern quarters. Tiger was lying in the grass, half hidden in the shade, half basking in the sun light. What surprised Zheng Tan was the fact that there was an animal lying next to Tiger. It whined until Tiger started to lick its fur.

What the f*ck! When did this thing with the odd face come to the eastern quarters? Why hadn't he seen it before?

Before Zheng Tan could recover from the surprise, out came another one.

What the hell was this deformed thing that looked it was once punched in face?!

FOOTNOTES:

[1]: *Nepenthes*: a plant of a genus that comprises the Old World pitcher plants

[2]: Angiosperms: a plant that has flowers and produces seeds enclosed within a carpel. The angiosperms are a large group and include herbaceous plants, shrubs, grasses, and most trees.

[3]: Asparagales: an order of plants in modern classification systems

[4]: Asphodelaceae: a family of flowering plants in the order Asparagales

[5]: Hemerocallidoideae: botanical name of a subfamily of flowering plants, part of the family Asphodelaceae

Chapter 15

What Did You Do Now, Charcoal?

In front of Zheng Tan were two puppies.

One nestled against Tiger. The other one, that just came running over, began to bite Tiger's ear after a few barks. From the look of it, he was just play biting or else Tiger wouldn't be taking it so calmly.

The three of them seem familiar enough that they must have met before. These two puppies must have arrived in those two days he was gone.

Zheng Tan jumped on a nearby tree. The owner of the two pups should be in the vicinity; he was prepared to find out who they were.

Half an hour later, several old men slowly walked over; two of them had dog leashes in their hands.

Listening to their conversation, Zheng Tan figured out the reason behind the appearance of the puppies.

The first of the two men, Mr. Li, was also a retired biology professor. He specialized in botany and often went on walks to Professor Lan's garden. He lived on the first floor of Tiger's building. Tiger often went in through his place when he couldn't open the front door. Zheng Tan was familiar with him.

The second man, Mr. Yan, did not belong to the department of health sciences. Zheng Tan had seen him around the Eastern quarters a few times but didn't know much about him.

According to them, several cases of theft had happened last week in the quarters, so the two men decided to raise dogs to guard their homes.

Mr. Li's building hadn't been robbed so far, but he lived on the first floor and decided to take precautions. He called his son to get him a large dog. He said he didn't have any requirements except that the dog had to be large. He wanted something that looked

imposing. He didn't want anything like a Chihuahua. They didn't look they were capable of much.

His son thought about it then contacted some friends. City bylaws had restrictions on large dogs, which made pet registrations extremely difficult. It wasn't like he could get his father an aggressive dog anyways. What if it harmed someone living in the faculty residence? But it wasn't like he could refuse his father's request.

Eventually, he bought a St. Bernard from a friend. It was big enough and relatively gentle. Though the drooling could become a problem.

Mr. Li studied plants, so dogs weren't his specialty. He decided that as long as it was a large dog, he would be happy. So when he saw the dog, he immediately decided he was going to take it.

"This is a nice pup. I'll call him Daisy."

Zheng Tan pictured a full grown St. Bernard, with its droopy face, being called Daisy. It was awful.

Mr. Yan lived in the building where the theft happened. His home was untouched but he too was worried. So he rang up his daughter, who was abroad, for some advice. His standards for a dog were different from Mr. Li. He didn't care about its size, as long as it bit.

Of course the dog wasn't supposed to bite anyone living in the quarter, but it needed to be able to protect its owner if someone dangerous came near. Some dogs only looked scary, but wouldn't even bark when thieves break in.

So his daughter had a friend bring him this bull terrier. It was the somewhat deformed looking puppy that just ran over. It was white with black circles around its eyes, like it was punched in the face. The puppy looked somewhat funny with its small beady eyes.

Mr. Yan had named the bull terrier Mighty. After learning that the breed was aggressive to other animals, he decided to let it familiarize itself with the animals in the quarter. Even if it was going to grow up into a mean little thing, it shouldn't be mean to its neighbors

It appeared that this bull terrier, like the noisy parrot, liked to bite on cat ears. It was also a tad too energetic. It had been jerking around this whole time. It was probably

not going to calm down after it grew up. In contrast, Daisy, who was larger than both Tiger and Mighty, was much quieter. After whining a bit, she was falling asleep after being licked by Tiger.

The three were getting along well, but who knew what would happen after the puppies grew up?

In any case, Zheng Tan could foresee peace forever leaving the Eastern quarters.

Zheng Tan went back home to have lunch. Yi Xin had brought back some food. It was cold by the time he got home, but he had to live with it.

Yi Xin had fallen asleep on the couch after lunch. He still had to work on his thesis later.

Zheng Tan grew bored, so he went out again. Basking in the warm afternoon sun, he was growing sleepy. He didn't see the other cats around, so he decided to go to the lake. At this hour, the area was usually deserted. Zheng Tan jumped on a willow tree.

Since he became a cat, Zheng Tan developed a habit of lying on high places. It was strange that he was not afraid of the height, nor was he afraid of falling off in his dreams. He always slept peacefully on trees.

He heard someone approaching, Zheng Tan opened his eyes. A young woman holding a stack of books sat down on a bench near his tree.

The woman looked familiar. He searched his memory. It was the "actress" from the "soap opera" that parrot was watching the other day.

Zheng Tan looked at her belly. Perhaps it was because she was wearing loose fitting clothes, she didn't look three months pregnant. Zheng Tan had left early that day and missed the rest of the "show". He didn't know much about her, but from the looks of things, she was close to her due date.

He twitched his ears. Zheng Tan didn't try to figure out the plot of that day's events. It had nothing to do with him. Besides, "soap operas" like that one happened every day in this country.

He closed his eyes, ready to fall back asleep, when he heard approaching footsteps again. This time, it seemed like a man.

But it wasn't a man. Zheng Tan saw a woman, around 50, walking towards them. She had a stern look that was comparable only to that of Professor Lan's. She had the aura of someone in high places, who was used to commandeering those around her.

The woman deliberately looked around to check that they were alone, before walking up to the younger woman.

"Zhuo."

The lady's expression softened, and her voice was gentle. Zheng Tan felt she was using hushed tones so as to avoid being overheard.

Was something shady going on?

Zheng Tan stuck up his ears.

"Professor Ye."

"Sit. Sit. Don't get up."

She sat down next to the young woman, but for a while, the two did not speak.

The atmosphere felt heavy.

Finally, the older woman sighed and asked: "You really decided?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"We're talking about project A!"

She lowered her voice even more when she said "project A". Zheng Tan could barely hear them with his hearing.

"I know Professor Ye. I have decided."

They talked for a while. Zheng Tan attempted to figure out what this "project A" was, but the rest of their conversation was all about physics and so technical that he barely understood a word. This project A was never mentioned again.

The willow branches hid Zheng Tan. The lady only checked for people but not animals.

So she never caught Zheng Tan eavesdropping.

The woman, Zhuo, didn't leave until last period.

Zheng Tan, too, went back home. All night long, he couldn't take his mind off that project A. It was so very mysterious.

The next day, Zheng Tan finished his daily run with Wei Ling, went home for lunch, then strolled over to the lake again. Sure enough, Zhuo was at the exact same spot reading a book with a pen in her hand, jotting down something in her notebook.

Zheng Tan considered it, then walked over and hopped on the same bench.

Zhuo looked up and saw a black cat with round eyes staring at her. She smiled at it, then resumed what she was doing.

Zheng Tan saw she didn't mind, so he inched closer to look at what she was writing.

He saw a series of abstruse formulae made up of symbols he never seen before and etc. In short, it was stuff he didn't understand.

As for the book, it was in English and consisted entirely of professional vocabulary and terms. Zheng Tan thought he knew some English, but this was way beyond his level.

How frustrating!

Zheng Tan didn't understand the book or her notes, but he did not leave immediately. He was really curious about the so-called "project A". He figured if that he stuck around long enough, he should be able to find a chance to figure out what it was.

So, Zheng Tan spent the afternoon on the bench. The other woman came by. She checked his pet ID after seeing him, then left without saying anything.

The next few days, Zheng Tan settled into a routine. He would train in the morning, then sleep on the bench by the lake in the afternoon. The older woman would come by every day. She would stay for a few minutes, sometimes saying a few words before she left again. If Zhuo was doing calculations, she would stand and watch quietly.

One day, Zheng Tan went home straight after his run. He had nothing planned for the rest of the day and waited on the sofa. It was Wednesday again. A week had gone by

and the Jiao family was coming home.

Yi Xin had to spend his day in the lab so he wouldn't be bringing lunch. Zheng Tan ate snacks instead.

Checking the clock on the wall every few minutes, Zheng Tan felt that time had never passed slower.

Finally, at three in the afternoon, Zheng Tan heard Jiao Yuan's voice downstairs. He rushed onto the balcony.

Mama Jiao, Gu Youzi and Jiao Yu were downstairs each holding a bag. They saw Zheng Tan's head poke out from the balcony railing and all smiled. After they entered the building, Zheng Tan opened the front door and waited.

Back at home, the three look tired and somewhat sad. But being home, the kids were much more relaxed. After a bath, Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi went back into their rooms to take a nap. Kids got tired easily and they had not been able to get a good night's sleep since they left. They weren't used to sleeping elsewhere.

Mama Jiao was preparing to make dumplings. She would wake the kids after dinner was ready.

Zheng Tan laid on the couch watching TV. He was in a good mood, and for the moment, he couldn't care less about project A or Daisy and Mighty or whatever.

The Jiao family returning meant he wouldn't have to eat cafeteria food and snacks anymore. Life was beautiful.

Papa Jiao came home at five. He had to take care of some business. Yi Xin needed to borrow lab equipment from the physics department, some of which required his mentor to be present to vouch for him.

Papa Jiao looked confused when he came through the door. He saw Zheng Tan on the couch and asked: "Did you do something, Charcoal?"

Mama Jiao, who was testing her cooking, was displeased at what he said. "Charcoal is a good boy. What on earth can he do to anger you? You are a scientist. You need to present proof before you make accusations."

"I just went to the physics department to borrow equipments and ran into 'the Buddha'. She actually smiled at me!" Papa Jiao frowned in confusion.

"Do you mean sneered?" Mama Jiao asked.

It was a fair assumption. Every time Papa Jiao went to borrow equipment, 'the Buddha' always treated him like he owed her a billion dollars.

"No, she actually smiled."

Smiling like a normal human was not normal for 'the Buddha'.

Mama Jiao frowned. She came out the kitchen, still holding a spoon in hand, and looked at Zheng Tan, who was lying innocently on the couch.

"Charcoal, what did you do now?"

Zheng Tan: "..."

Chapter 16

The Fat Cat Can Jump

Zheng Tan felt lost; he didn't even know "the Buddha". Originally, he thought Papa Jiao was going to talk about him running away, but not only did he not mention it, he was talking about some "Buddha".

"Forget it. He doesn't look like he knows anything." Mama Jiao returned to the kitchen. She didn't think a cat could make Chuhua's famous "Buddha" change her attitude.

Papa Jiao sat down on the sofa and described "the Buddha" to Zheng Tan.

When he heard Papa Jiao say she was a woman in her fifties with a stern look, he immediately thought of the lady who came by the lake every day.

"Buddha" was actually Ye He. She was the dean of the Faculty of Physics. Because she was so serious and demanding all the time and her name happened to be part of the name of that famous Qing Dynasty Buddha Yehe Nala ^[1], she was nicknamed "the Buddha". Her department was part terrified and part in awe by her. It didn't help that her husband was now the headmaster.

Zheng Tan recalled Dean Ye's look and her leadership style. The nickname was really quite fitting.

Papa Jiao did not ask about him running away nor did he say anything more about "the Buddha" smiling. It didn't seem like a bad thing.

The kids woke up at dinner time. Jiao Yuan went immediately to the fridge to check on his "treasures".

"Oh, sh*t!"

Mama Jiao, who was carrying out dishes of food, caught him the moment he started swearing. She laid down the plate and gave his ear a hard tug.

"Foul language. That's one buck deducted from your pocket money!"

"Hey, don't. I was in the moment. I couldn't control myself. Have mercy." Jiao Yuan begged while rubbing his ear.

But Mama Jiao's heart was set and Jiao Yuan was out of a buck. Zheng Tan could tell from his gritted teeth, those three boys were going to get a tongue lashing from him tomorrow.

After being deserted for seven days, the Jiao household was lively again.

After dinner, the two children watched a bit of TV, then obediently went back to their rooms to study. After missing school for a week, they had quite a bit of catching up to do.

Mama Jiao cleaned up the dishes, then left to visit her colleagues.

Mama Jiao taught junior high English at a school near Chuhua University. Her co-workers had to sub in for her when she was gone. Now that she was back, she bought some fruits and went over to their place to thank them.

As for Papa Jiao, he was now sitting at the desk with a book.

Zheng Tan went over to see the cover. It was a collection of essays by Lu Xun. This meant Papa Jiao was not in a very good mood.

People unavoidably suffered from negative emotions from time to time, but each had their own way of dealing with it. For some people, it was alcoholism; for others, it was fighting or extreme sports. Papa Jiao never swore or did intense stuff to vent. Because there were children at home, he rarely smoked or drank.

So, when Papa Jiao was frustrated, he read the works of Lu Xun.

Zheng Tan remembered in August, when Papa Jiao was waiting for the National Natural Science Foundation to announce the list of scientists receiving funding this year, he started reading Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q".

A few days later, the National Natural Science Foundation contacted him to notify him he was on the list.

As for today...

Zheng Tan jumped on the desk to take a closer look. Papa Jiao was reading "Some Thoughts on 'F*ck' ".

...times were progressing; it couldn't possibly regress to the age of 'f*ck'. After deep thought, coupled with our long history of cultural heritage, we finally found a word that was "more elegant", "more civilized" and more exhilarating than "cool" - "Ass". "My ass" was now said out loud with ease... [2]

Zheng Tan read the paragraph, then looked back at Papa Jiao, who was reading on with a straight face. Well, everyone had to vent somehow. Sometimes, he really didn't understand Papa Jiao.

Zheng Tan went to the balcony to get some fresh air. The night air was cool with the slight sweetness of flowers. Before he could take a deep breath, unique singing from the fourth floor disrupted his peace.

"I plant~ a mellow at the foot of a wall, watering it every day ~ visiting it every day ~ it sprouted ~ flowers bloomed~ and it became ~ a big watermelon ~, big watermelon oh big watermelon, ~ I can't even hold it ~ "

Zheng Tan: "..."

Hold a melon your as*.

The parrot was watering a pot. During summer, he spat a watermelon seed into the flower pot on the balcony. When he found out it had sprouted a stem, he was exhilarated. Each time he watered the pot, he sang this song.

It was a miracle that this melon actually survived. The parrot and its owner sometimes went away for weeks on end, with no one here to water the plant. It was left entirely to nature. If it rained, the plant got some water.

As for fertilizer, there was plenty of bird poop.

Zheng Tan looked down. The melon seedlings had grown quite a bit. Only God knew how much longer it could survive in this habitat.

Zheng Tan went back inside, before the parrot realized he was there. He rolled around on the sofa for a bit, before falling asleep.

He had to get up early tomorrow. He was informed that Wei Lin was increasing the intensity of his training since he didn't feel that tired anymore after running a lap. He was to practice climbing trees too. It was going to be a long day.

The night passed in peace.

The next day, Zheng Tan felt he was going to cry over his eggs and pork noodles at breakfast. It was great to have people at home. No more cafeteria food.

Zheng Tan took his time eating his noodles and strolled slowly to the lawn. Wei Ling was warming up.

"You are fifteen minutes late."

Zheng Tan ignored him. He rested for a while, digesting his food. Then after a quick warm up on the lawn, he began his daily run. His paws were rougher due to his daily runs. At first, it hurt quite a bit. Now, he was used to it.

They took a slightly different route today. It was filled with slopes and stairs. The distance was longer too. It was supposed to be more tiring and it was.

Afterwards, Zheng Tan felt as if his limbs were made from noodles. He was fatigued to the bone and ceased to walk. He limped instead.

Wei Ling had to walk him home to the eastern quarters. Zheng Tan needed guarding at the moment, a small Chihuahua could kill him in his current state.

Zheng Tan looked over to the grove on his way home. Tiger was rolling in the grass; Sheriff was staring at a turtledove. As for the Fatty, Zheng Tan looked around. That guy was sleeping, as always, in a heap of stones.

Weeds grew all around the stones. If you didn't know what you were looking for, it was quite easy to miss the sleeping cat. It was crouched into the shape of a peanut with its head on the ground.

Zheng Tan took one step in that direction. Fatty's ear immediately perked up. He was upright in the blink of an eye. His eyelids were no longer drooping. He looked alert, unlike what he usually looked like after waking up.

Since Fatty began a stage of horizontal development, he gained lot of flesh on his face.

Together with his fluffy fur, his head appeared huge, making his ear appear small in comparison. But his hearing was just as good.

Zheng Tan was feeling puzzled when Fatty came running towards them. At the same time, a familiar car with army plates came rolling down the driveway.

The window rolled down slowly. Before it was halfway down, Fatty, who just came running, jumped up and into the car through that small crack.

If weren't for the fact he just he witnessed it with his own eyes, Zheng Tan never would have believed that this chubby kitty could jump with such agility and precision.

Couldn't Fatty have waited until the window was all the way down? This was so dangerous.

This guy was a masochist, for sure. He was looking to be punished. They were definitely going to be treated to the sight of him squatting on instant noodles when they got back.

Zheng Tan was pitying Fatty, when Wei Ling suddenly stood up straight and saluted.

Zheng Tan looked at Wei Ling, then back at the car, then back at Wei Ling. He was puzzled.

"That was my old commander. Of course, now he has climbed up the ranks." Wei Ling answered sensing Zheng Tan's confusion.

'No wonder he felt weird the first time he saw the fat cat. If it was trained by that person, everything could be explained.'

Zheng Tan was surprised. Who knew Fatty's family's relative was someone of great importance?

Wei Ling tossed a plastic water bottle into the trash. Although he had left the army, he saluted on reflex.

"Could you jump like that?" Wei asked.

Zheng Tan knew he meant that precise jump made by Fatty a moment ago. He twitched his ear. The odds were not good if he were to attempted the same move. If the window

was completely rolled down, he could definitely jump in. But if the window was only half way down like it was... it would be difficult. He could hit his head or his limbs could get caught.

Zheng Tan was smaller in size compared to Fatty. So technically, it should be easier for him. But he wasn't so sure of himself.

"So, you still have lots to learn." Wei Ling came to a conclusion.

What he just saw was just the tip of the iceberg. He believed that cat was capable of much more than it was showing. Although it had rarely moved since he came to the university, but its vigilance, keen observation powers and ability to calculate its enemy's next move had set it apart from other cats. Not to mention, it could jump as well as any feline.

"You have a long way to go!" With that said, Wei Ling left. He didn't continue running like he did the day before, but left campus to visit an old friend. He needed to share what he just saw.

Zheng Tan recovered from his surprise. He climbed trees for a while then went home for lunch.

What he didn't know was Papa Jiao came back to copy a document. He saw Wei Ling saluting to the car with Zheng Tan by his side. He heard from Yi Xin about his cat's daily runs. Madam Di also mentioned it to him. He was just figuring out how to investigate Wei Ling, when he saw this scene.

It was good he knew these people.

After copying his document at home, Papa Jiao went to visit Fatty's house on the first floor. Ten minutes later, he left.

That evening, when the Jiao couple were chatting about their cat, Papa Jiao said, "Rest assured. Although that Wei Ling's exact background is a mystery. He could definitely be trusted. It's good that Charcoal is learning tricks from him. It could be helpful to keep him out of harm's way on future trips."

[1] Ye He Na La is the last name of a famous female ruler who ruled with an iron fist. The Chinese sometimes call the mother/grandmother of an emperor "the Buddha". She both ruled as the mother of an emperor and the grandmother of another.

[2] A Paragraph from Lu Xun's essay. It was satirical.

Chapter 17

A Call From The Cat

When life becomes a routine, times passes quickly.

Zheng Tan's mornings now consisted of running, climbing stairs, climbing trees and practicing jumping.

The Jiao family calendar was flipped to November already. Only when he saw it, did Zheng Tan realize how much time had passed. He had been here for five months now.

Zheng Tan flexed his paws. Sharp claws appeared. These claws looked no different from the claws of other cats, but Zheng Tan knew, they were not the same. At least, they were different from what they were two months ago. He never deliberately grinded his claws, nor did he cut it. His claws grew, then his training wore them out. Then it grew again and was worn out again.

Cat claws were indeed a very magical thing. There were sharp, flexible and retractable. Some said that cat claws were like portable Swiss Army knives. So Zheng Tan was training his to become more sharp and more tough.

Zheng knew he was different from other cats. He heard Papa Jiao say before that cats cannot taste sweetness, but he could distinctly taste it. He could also eat a lot of things cats were supposed to avoid. People debated whether cats were color-blind. He didn't know what it was like for other cats, but at least he could distinguish between colors.

Then there was the issue of claws. Even if other cats underwent continuous training, they would not experience the surge in strength Zheng Tan was experiencing, nor would their claws change drastically.

However, that was about it. He didn't experience anything miraculous. Even if his strength was now close to the level of an adult, he was not physically turning into a human being. Just like even if he trained like a monkey, he was not becoming a monkey.

Was this really what it was going to be like from now on?

Zheng Tan pondered these things while running. Not only was he significantly faster, he could now afford to distract himself with thoughts. He wasn't tired to the point where breathing was painful anymore. At most, he experienced some mental fatigue, which went away after a bit of rest.

After completing two laps, Zheng Tan came to a small patch of woods on the edge of campus. It was larger than the grove in the eastern quarters and usually deserted due to its distance from classrooms. The school recently demolished some red brick buildings that had 'too much history' nearby and was planning to build a new dorm in its place. The university was expanding rapidly, and the old dormitories were filled up to capacity.

Therefore, the area was frequented only by construction workers and construction vehicles. Students and faculty living off campus usually avoided coming in through the side door here. Zheng Tan came here every day to climb trees after his run because no one was here to discover any peculiar behavior of his.

Wei Lin had been helping that police officer recently. Apparently, the case he was investigating was not yet solved. Zheng Tan mostly ran and trained alone these days. As for the other three cats, he gave up on trying to get them to exercise with him since the first day.

After taking a short break, Zheng Tan began his daily tree-climbing exercise. Another advantage of training here was that the trees were larger, which meant they were more suitable for climbing.

Zheng Tan hopped onto a big pagoda tree. He scratched the trunk a few times before picking a branch that could withstand his weight. He slipped off the branch, hanging himself upside down. He held on tightly with his legs, then took a deep breath.

His hind legs let go of the branch, leaving him dangling by only his two front legs. His claws sunk into the tree, and he started moving outwards to the tip of the branch. When he was almost there, he swung himself back onto the tree.

He then looked around, selected a suitable branch within a reasonable distance. He prepared himself before jumping onto the new branch and repeated the whole process again.

When he first heard of this training method from Wei Ling, Zheng Tan had his doubts.

After all, he was a cat, not a monkey.

Wei Ling acknowledged Zheng Tan's confusion. He asked, "Do you think it's not possible? Or that no cat can do it?"

"I had known a cat that could run through the woods with the agility of a monkey. It moved from branch to branch, tree to tree without touching the ground. Ever since it learnt to climb trees, it had spent most of its time on trees."

"Remember, sometimes for cats, trees are your last lifesaver."

So, Zheng Tan began his training, hoping one day, he might be able swing from branch to branch on one leg like a monkey.

After climbing five trees, Zheng Tan jumped onto an old Liriodendron tree. He first noticed it, because of its oddly shaped leaves. At the time, Zheng Tan was resting on its branches, when a leaf fell in front of him. It looked just like a vest.

Wei said that this tree was called Liriodendron and was a rare and endangered species. In a city, it was seldom seen anywhere out of a botanical garden. The fact that one of these existed on campus was a testimony to Chuhua University's long history.

Liriodendron flowers looked like tulips. Its English name could be translated to "Chinese tulips", but unfortunately, Liriodendron blossoms bloom in May and June. Zheng Tan planned on bringing the Jiao family here next year to see it together.

Zheng Tan listened to the leaves rustle around him. The wind was softly caressing his fur. He looked side to side, the trees were slowly turning golden. Soon, the temperature was going to drop again. Then, after a rainy or windy day, the leaves would start falling.

Winter was coming to Chuhua.

It was still early. Third period had just ended and Zheng Tan wasn't due home for lunch until the fourth period. If he went home early, he would just end up wasting time waiting around for food to be cooked.

As usual, he decided to go to the lake.

It seemed like calm, obedient animals had the ability to make people lower their guards, which was why people often vented to their pets. That Zhuo talked to Zheng

Tan sometimes. She never mentioned "Project A" though. She mostly said pointless things like "you came again" or "are you hungry?".

Once in a while, Zhuo would talk about stuff related to her field like Papa Jiao. One time, she was reading something, when she suddenly got excited and tore a corner from her notebook. She then tore the corner into even smaller pieces. She closed her notebook with the torn paper still inside, then took out a pen with a rubber cap and rubbed it against Zheng Tan. She put the pen close to the pieces of paper in her notebook and was able to attract paper scraps.

Zhuo showed the pen, now covered in paper scraps, to Zheng Tan with a wide smile: "Look, this is called the static electricity from friction! So what caused it? Let me tell you. Everything in our world is made up of atoms. The atom, on the other hand, is made up of positively charged protons and neutrons..."

Zheng Tan almost wanted to choke when he heard "Look, this is called static electricity from friction". Then he heard "Let me tell you". He wanted to cry.

Why did he always run into people like this!

Zheng Tan stayed on the bench next to the lake until end of fourth period, when he got up to go pick up the kids.

However, Zheng Tan didn't see the two little figures come out of the school.

Lan Tianzhu and his bunch saw the black cat sitting on the wall, so they called out: "Charcoal, Jiao Yuan left already. Auntie Ling came and got him after first period."

Auntie Ling was Tiger's owner, but also Mama Jiao's colleague.

He was soon informed by a girl that Auntie Ling picked Gu Youzi up from class as well.

Zheng Tan started to worry. Something must have happened or else the kids would not be taken out of school early.

He ran back to the Eastern quarters, brushed his security access card and hurriedly climbed up to the fifth floor. He meowed loudly at the door for a long time, but no one answered.

So he went back down and fetched the key he hid in the tree.

The house was quiet, very quiet, just like how he left it in the morning. Usually, by this time, it would be full of hustle and bustle and the aroma of food.

Today was different. Zheng Tan searched every room, not even the kids' backpacks were here. That meant they never came home after they left school.

There was no notebook spread open on the desk or notes stuck in the corridor. No tips and memos left around the house.

Zheng Tan was at a loss. He started walking in circles out of frustration.

Although this family was not related to him by blood and he probably wouldn't even meet them if not for this whole turn-into-a-cat fiasco, but Mama Jiao had found him inside a dumpster at the farmers' market and brought him home. The Jiao family, all four of them, treated him really well. And after five months, Zheng Tan had developed a sense of belonging he did not want to admit.

When he was human, he had properties in several locations, but none of them made him feel the way he felt now. He couldn't quite describe this feeling. It was as if whenever he was upset or angry, all he needed to do was come through the front doors, and he would feel alright again.

Just when he was starting to feel dizzy from circling too much, Zheng Tan suddenly remembered something. He ran back into the bedroom and hopped next to the phone on the table. He pressed the speaker button before dialing Papa Jiao's cell phone.

It rang several times before he picked up.

"Hi?"

Papa Jiao's voice sounded hoarse. Zheng Tan could feel he was suppressing his emotions. This made him even more upset. He let out a howl.

"Ah Woo-"

On the other end of the line, Papa Jiao was momentarily speechless. Only his family's cat made noises like that.

He did not expect to receive a phone call from his landline at home. When he saw the caller ID, he had no idea it was his cat. His cat wasn't like any other house cat, but he

didn't expect it to call.

Not getting a response, Zheng Tan howled again.

This time, Papa Jiao answered.

"I am at the hospital; I have the kids here with me. Ronghan got into an accident. Be a good boy and stay home for now. There are snacks in the fridge..."

"Ah Woo- Ah Woo-" Zheng Tan continued to howl.

Ronghan was Mama Jiao's name. Her full name was Gu Ronghan. Hearing she got into an accident, he couldn't just remain calm and stay put. He wanted to ask where the hospital was, but of course he couldn't. Frustrated, he just kept howling.

He was so irritable that when he saw a stack of books nearby, he lifted his paw right away and smacked it off the table.

Hearing the sound of books falling to the ground, Papa Jiao was silent for a second, "I'll get Yi Xin to bring you some food?"

"Ah woo -"

Zheng Tan looked around. There was a cup they got from their milk supplier sitting next to the keyboard.

He wagged his tail and off the table it went.

Papa Jiao heard the sound of glass breaking through the phone; he was silent for a bit longer this time.

"I will get Yi Xin to bring you over; wait at home. Stop breaking things. "

Zheng Tan howled his agreement : "Aoo."

Chapter 18

Charcoal, Help Out at Home

Zheng Tan waited at the door. No one came. He scratched the door out of frustration. Of, course he didn't scratch his own door, but Qu's door across the hall. He stuck his paw through the metal bars and went crazy on the wooden door inside.

That otaku Qu Xiangyang was playing computer games with headphones on. He didn't hear the noise outside. When he finally noticed, his door was severely 'scarred'.

Zheng Tan waited for nearly an hour before Yi Xin showed up covered in sweat.

Yi Xin was busy with his experiment when he got the call from the boss. He was told that he should finish his work first. However, he knew from past experience, the boss's cat was ill-tempered.

Yi Xin darted out the door the moment he was done, throwing off his lab coat on the way. He jumped onto his newly-bought second-hand bike and pedaled as fast as he could while trying to open the cap on his water bottle.

When he finally got to the fifth floor where the Jiao family lived, he was not surprised to find the murderous black cat waiting for him. The sound of claws on wood sent the a cold shiver down his spine.

He looked at the door, then at the look in the cat's eyes and quickly explained his reasons for being late. He stressed that this was with the approval of his boss.

Zheng Tan didn't want to listen to him babble. He ran back into the living room and fetched the bag Papa Jiao used to take him into the Health Department.

Yi Xin was not surprised by Zheng Tan's actions. He was surprised enough the last time that he was now immune. Following Papa Jiao's instructions, Yi Xin opened the bag.

Zheng Tan jumped in without being told, then stared at Yi Xin. Trying to urge him to get moving with his eyes.

Not being able to talk was a huge inconvenience. Before, he had little sympathy for the deaf and the mute. Now he knew exactly what it felt like. After all, most people couldn't read your mind.

Yi Xin did not understand the look Zheng Tan gave him. He simply followed his orders and carried the bag with the cat downstairs. He was on flat ground when he remembered that he could have just let the cat walk down by itself.

Yi Xin proceeded to bike the two of them to the university hospital.

Unfortunately, things could go wrong even with a bike ride.

They didn't make it too far out the Eastern quarters, when Zheng Tan heard a 'clank' followed by the bike slowing down.

Hearing Yi Xin swear, Zheng Tan looked out from the basket. Everything seemed normal. Then he looked behind them. There, in the middle of road, was a broken chain.

'How bad is the bike, that the chain can just break off! F*ck!'

They had to wait quite a while for the school shuttle, and it stopped way too often anyways. Zheng Tan didn't have the time to wait. Take a taxi? Who knew when a taxi would drive through campus? Go by bike? From whom could they borrow a bike? Zheng Tan didn't know what he would do if Yi Xin borrowed another bike that broke down half-way to the hospital.

Zheng Tan suddenly remembered seeing Papa Jiao's scooter in the shed when they came downstairs. The weather had cooled down recently. When time permitted, Papa Jiao jogged to work.

Yi Xin didn't have a clue what to do. He was squatting next to his bike when he saw the black cat jump out the basket.

"Hey, why are you running! Wait!" Yi Xin more anxious. He could buy another bike, but how could he face the boss if he lost the cat.

So Yi Xin left his bike on the side of road and ran after the cat. The bike was second-hand anyways. Now with a broken chain, it was so worthless that only sanitation workers would touch it. No one was going to steal his bike.

Zheng Tan ran back to the quarters. Back home, he found the other key to the scooter in a corner of the desk drawer. He brought the key out, just when a panting Yi Xin caught up with him.

Zheng Tan glanced at Yi Xin then jumped onto Papa Jiao's scooter. He patted the seat and laid down the keys.

Yi Xin: "..."

Well, it was official. The boss's cat was different.

The scooter was much more reliable compared to the bike. It required less physical work by Yi Xin as well. It was great that he didn't need to pedal anymore; Yi Xin wasn't sure he still had the strength to do so.

Zheng Tan was still dissatisfied. A scooter was slow compared to a motorcycle. It was during times like this that Zheng Tan really wished the Jiao family had a car of their own.

On the way to the hospital, Zheng Tan took special care to memorize the way. If something happened in the future, he would like to count on himself. Relying on others was both wasting time and looking for trouble.

The hospital affiliated to Chuhua university was not on campus, but rather two bus stops away. It served as medical, teaching and research facility and was a Level Three First grade hospital ^[1].

The medical side of the building was always full of people. Yi Xin parked the scooter, then followed the detailed address given by his boss and carried the cat in, hidden in a bag. After all, hospitals did not welcome pets. Zheng Tan couldn't just swagger in.

In the elevator, they ran into Papa Jiao, who had come down to buy lunch. His expression was calm, and when he talked to Yi Xin, his voice was no longer hoarse and depressed like it was on the phone. It seemed that Mama Jiao would be ok.

Papa Jiao bought five bentos, the extra one was for Yi Xin.

Yi Xin wanted to buy Mama Jiao some fruit. When he looked in his pockets, he didn't find anything except a school meal card. He left in a hurry and had left his wallet in his jacket

"So um... You reckon they take meal plan points at the fruit shop?" Yi Xin was very embarrassed.

Papa Jiao, Zheng Tan: "..."

"Maybe some other day. She wouldn't be able to eat it today anyways. She's not awake yet." Papa Jiao said.

Papa Jiao explained the situation.

Mama Jiao taught at the local junior high, but sometimes she went to the affiliated high school. She intended to transfer there in the future. She had lots of acquaintances at both schools, and she was capable enough to handle high school material.

Her only concern was that the two children at home were too young. When she didn't have class at her junior high, she went over to the high school to help out. It was like interning as a high school teacher.

The high school affiliated to Chuhua university was one of the best in the province, but was close to the third ring road, far away from downtown. Chuhua University had a daily shuttle that went from the university to the high school, stopping at the junior high in the middle.

However, today, the shuttle had turned a corner after leaving the junior high, when it was hit by a lorry transporting glass doors. The lorry driver was hungover and severely hurt. He was still in the operations room and in critical condition.

Many people on the school shuttle were hurt, out of which, six were seriously injured. Two of the passengers were still being rescued.

Mama Jiao was one of the luckier ones. She was brought to the hospital covered in blood. That was what Papa Jiao saw when he got here. She had been stabbed by broken glass in several places. Three of the cuts were very deep. The wound on her leg was showing bones. But none of her bones or organs were actually hurt. She just looked like she was in very bad shape. In truth, compared to those six who were seriously injured, Mama Jiao could be considered lucky.

The broken glass was taken out in surgery. No fractures were found, but she needed to stay for further observation.

When Papa Jiao received Zheng Tan's call, Mama Jiao had just left surgery. He had not yet recovered from seeing her covered in blood, which was the reason why he sounded like that. Now, he was back to his usual calm self.

He had asked Auntie Ling to fetch the children, in case the situation grew worse, to give Mama Jiao a chance to see them one last time.

Relatively speaking, Mama Jiao's situation was not serious. After the surgery, she was sent directly to the general ward. The ICU was full.

In truth, this so-called "general ward" was, strictly speaking, not very "general". The hospital gave school faculty and family additional benefits that included special rooms on a separate floor of the hospital.

Compared to other wards, the difference here was that the ward was divided by walls, instead of curtains, into four small compartments. The walls were thin, so talking loudly was still not an option. But it was better than being crowded together. The ward next door wasn't divided. It was up to the patients, but most of those who just went through surgery like Mama Jiao would choose the divided wards.

Each compartment was very small, with less than ten square meters of room. It felt crowded when more than a few people were inside.

Mama Jiao had not woken up yet, but knowing that she was out of danger now, everyone in the Jiao family felt better.

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi were sitting on a bench in the corridor. Gu Youzi's eyes were red and swollen from crying. Jiao Yuan was not better off by much.

Yi Xin did not stay for long. He still had work of his own, so Papa Jiao sent him away.

"Not enough people available!" Papa Jiao sighed while watching the boy walk away.

"I should take a few more grad students next year."

Zheng Tan wondered what Yi Xin would think if he heard that.

Zheng Tan ate his bento in Mama Jiao's compartment to avoid being seen by others. A nurse came by to check on the patient. He hid from her inside Jiao Yuan's backpack. The books were all taken out and put into a plastic bag.

Mama Jiao's accident was kept a secret from both her and Papa Jiao's parents. They were not young anymore, and traveling back and forth from their hometowns was too much of a hassle.

Zheng Tan and the two children stayed here, while Papa Jiao took a trip back home. He went to fetch clothes and supplies and also got the small wooden table with the Chinese chess patterns. It could be used as a bedside table, a desk for when the kids needed to write homework and a dining table.

Papa Jiao was planning to stay here for a couple of days. There was a folding chair in the compartment for any accompanying family to rest on. It was a bit small, but Papa Jiao figured it was only for a few days.

That day, the Jiao children did not go back to class, but stayed here with Papa Jiao. Mama Jiao woke in the afternoon, said a few words, then fell back asleep. Although her face was still pale, her waking up put the minds of three people and a cat at ease.

Around five in the afternoon, Papa Jiao went to buy dinner. He sent the kids home after the meal so they wouldn't have to take the bus in the dark.

Originally, Papa Jiao had planned for the two children to go to Auntie Ling's or some other family friend's place for the night. The children firmly opposed this plan, saying that they were old enough to look after themselves and that they couldn't sleep well in other people's homes.

Eventually, Papa Jiao backed down. He looked Zheng Tan, whose head was poking out from Jiao Yuan's backpack and said: "Charcoal, look out for them. Help out at home a little bit."

"Aow-" Zheng Tan agreed. He didn't need to be told to take care of the kids. He already thought of himself as their older brother.

Chapter 19

The Thieves Are On the Move Again

The two children waited for the bus in front of the hospital door. The first two buses that passed were too full. Jiao Yuan decided to wait a little longer for one with less people. Buses that went from the hospital to the East gate of the university came so frequently that there was no point in squishing onto a crowded one.

The commuters were mostly people leaving work. The population of Chuhua was very large, and the city didn't have a subway system yet, so buses were always crowded during rush hour.

Today, Jiao Yuan was very quiet. If it was any other time, Jiao Yuan would be kicking a tree or peeling stickers off a pole or talking to people nearby. He wasn't someone who could wait quietly for the bus.

Today he just held his sister's hand and stood still. Besides telling Gu Youzi they should wait for the next bus, he didn't say another word.

Zheng Tan stayed in Jiao Yuan's backpack. The zipper was not completely zipped. They left a little gap so Zheng Tan could stick his head out and fresh air could get in. It was uncomfortable staying in there, but to avoid any unnecessary trouble, he kept his head down and remained safely hidden in the backpack.

Jiao Yuan's backpack smelled of tea eggs ^[1]. He probably went to the cafeteria and bought some to snack on before lunch.

They waited for fifteen minutes before an uncrowded bus came. Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi got on the bus. Someone was getting off and gave them his seat. Jiao Yuan thanked the person. The kids shared the seat and carefully placed the backpack carrying Zheng Tan on their legs.

It was only two stops to the university east gate, but two more stops to the eastern quarters. It was better to ride the bus than to walk.

Zheng Tan was feeling stuffy, so he poked his nose close to the gap to get some fresh

air. The bus stopped and started again, sometimes because it reached a bus stop, sometimes because of the traffic lights. Zheng Tan was feeling sleepy.

However, not before long, Zheng Tan felt a sharp pain in his whiskers.

Looking out of the gap, a mother with a toddler was sitting in front of them. The child was facing backwards sitting on the mother's lap. The child probably saw Zheng Tan's nose and a few whiskers poking out of the bag and ripped a whisker.

Zheng Tan retreated back into the bag after feeling the pain. He dragged his whiskers with him.

"Cat... hair..." The child couldn't yet speak fluently. He saw the cat, whose whisker he still held, disappear back into the backpack, so he pointed at Jiao Yuan's backpack and cried out loud.

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi, both in a trance, were jerked back into reality. They didn't know what just happened and only saw the child pointing and yelling. They thought people had found out about their cat and were very nervous. Even though there wasn't a 'no pets' sign on the bus, most people were against bring animals onto public transportation.

The good thing was other people did not notice the whiskers poking out. The lighting was dim on the bus, plus people were exhausted from a day of work and paid little attention to others. Even the child's mother thought her kid was only pointing to the cat decorations on the backpack. She smiled and patted her child.

When they got to their stop, the two children got off as quickly as they could for fear of being caught. After all, they were young. They hadn't quite mastered public humiliation like adults.

Entering the quarters, Zheng Tan jumped out. He felt much better now that he could breathe fresh air.

The sky was already dark; the streetlights were lit, and they could vaguely hear the song that signaled the end of the school radio broadcast. A gust of wind swept by; leaves rustled around them, accompanied by the soft sound of leaves falling to the ground.

Zheng Tan shivered. He ran a few steps and climbed halfway up a tree. Then he slid

back down. The exercise made his body feel warmer.

Seeing their cat perform his tricks, the kids, who were depressed all day, finally felt a bit better. They were surrounded by people taking strolls and cars driving home from work. They could hear dogs barking in the quarters. The street was full of life.

At the entrance of their building, Jiao Yuan swiped his access card. Zheng Tan led the way inside.

These building were relatively old. They didn't have sound-controlled lights, but the people living here were used to the slightly out-dated system.

Lights on the third floor and below were on, but the fourth and fifth floor corridors were pitch black. The parrot's owners on fourth floor were not home. They were probably on a business trip again. Even that otaku Qu Xiangyang seemed to be on one of his rare trips downstairs, so no one turned on the lights.

Zheng Tan wanted to switch on the lights first, so that the children won't bump into anything on the stairs. For most people, it was impossible to see anything in corridors at night without the lights. It was, however, a piece of cake for Zheng Tan, or cats in general.

Zheng Tan jumped up and switched on the light on the fourth floor, then went up and did the same on the fifth floor. He went back down to greet the kids and ran into them on the second floor.

Two more flights of stairs later, the two children found out what their own cat was doing running up in advance. When they were outside, they saw that the corridor was dark on the fourth and fifth floor.

"Charcoal is really smart!" Jiao Yuan laughed.

This was the first time he laughed since he found out about Mama Jiao's accident.

"Yes!" Gu Youzi didn't talk much, as usual.

Zheng Tan was flabbergasted. This wasn't something worthy of praise.

"My dad said that cats that are too clever will alarm some people, so some things are best kept to ourselves. There's no point of telling other people what just happened."

Jiao Yuan remarked.

"I know." Gu Youzi nodded. She never talked about the cat. She had seen a child in her class bring her Barbie doll to school every day to show off. Soon, the doll was gone. When the girl found it again, the Barbie was trampled and thrown into the trash. It was apparently because some other girls got jealous.

The fact that the cat came to pick her up from school every day was eye-catching enough. There was no need pile on other stories.

Jiao Yuan called Papa Jiao to inform him they had gotten home safely. Before the phone call ended, Tiger's owner, the lady known as Auntie Ling to the Jiao kids, came by. She brought some cakes and a case of milk in fear the children would get hungry. They could also have it for breakfast the next day.

She couldn't stay long because her relatives were visiting. She heated up some bath water for the kids after they insisted on staying home. She stayed with them until they finished their baths and went to bed.

Zheng Tan stayed by Gu Youzi's side, waiting for her to fall asleep. Then he went to check on Jiao Yuan in his room. The kid was still awake. Zheng Tan stayed for a while, making sure he fell asleep. When that was done, he went out to the balcony.

Zheng Tan liked to come out onto the balcony when he couldn't sleep. The ambiance was particularly suitable for thinking about human existence. No, suitable for thinking about his f*cking cat-existence.

As the night went on, lights gradually went out one-by-one in the courtyard; The sound of TVs and chatting slowly died out as well.

Only Qu Xiangyang next door still had his light on. He wouldn't be going to bed until one or two in the morning.

Tonight, Zheng Tan was not at all sleepy. He just sat quietly on the balcony, his ears twitching from time to time to listen for movements in the children's bedrooms. To his relief, they slept well, at least free of nightmares.

Looking down from the fifth floor, the orange light from street lamps seemed extra bright. Looking into the distance, orange light spots flickered between tree branches. There was a special sense of peace and serenity when the wind stopped blowing and

everything— the branches, the leaves and the lights— stood still.

Most street lamps on campus used orange lights wherever there was a road for vehicles. He heard that orange lights were the safest, because the color had the longest wavelength. It was visible from far away. At the same time, it wasn't blinding. Drivers were able to see cars far ahead without tiring their eyes, even after being on the road for a long time. This measure greatly increased road safety.

Zheng Tan yawned, it was getting late. In a few hours, morning-joggers would be up. Even Qu had gone to bed.

Zheng Tan turned back to go into the living room to sleep on the sofa. It was possible to watch over both children there. Just when Zheng Tan lifted his paw, he heard the soft sound of wooden planks clanking together. He paused.

The sound came from the wind chime on the balcony of Fatty's home on the first floor. At first glance, the wind chime was no different from any ordinary ornament. To outsiders, the only thing special about it was that it had wooden planks instead of metal or shells, yet still managed to make bright crisp sounds.

Zheng Tan never noticed it before, until one day when Fatty was being inspected by Wei Ling's old platoon leader. He found out the wood wind chime was meant to be a warning.

It couldn't chime due to wind alone, unless there was a wind storm. Normally, the wind chime only made sounds when it was struck by human force, and each plank made a different sound.

Zheng Tan looked down when he heard it ring. That was when he saw the 'rats'.

Although the two people were hidden in the shadows, Zheng Tan still saw them. Even if he couldn't see their faces clearly, he caught their silhouette.

After the robberies in September, the quarters had welcomed two dogs, which managed to warn off thieves so far.

From the look of the two, this was not their first offense. They seemed extremely familiar with the layout of the quarters and knew a bit about the residents as well. They could be the ones responsible for the first two thefts.

'So, after a month in hideout, these two thieves finally couldn't stay away anymore?'

Who knew they were going to pick his building this time? Were they targeting his house? Certainly, they weren't planning to rob the fourth floor.

General's house was special. There were barbed wires around the balcony and the front door was specially made as well. It was extremely well protected due to the family owning an expensive rare parrot. The other family was not here for most of the year. Their place probably didn't have anything valuable.

Which house was these 'rats' thinking about this time? If it was this house, well...

Zheng Tans squinted; he flexed his paw, and sharp claws appeared.

'I can't speak, I can't heat water, I have to hide in a backpack to take the bus. But you are so wrong if you think I can't take care of you two.'

At this moment, the two people, hiding in the shadow at the foot of building B in the east quarter, had no idea there was a cat squatting behind a window on the first floor, watching them intently. Nor did they know that, at the same time, another cat on the fifth floor was also watching their every move.

Chapter 20

Good Boy, Mighty

Someone had once suspected that the robberies were the work of a group.

Zheng Tan was no Sherlock Holmes, but he knew it was more likely that committing a burglary in the residential quarters required at least someone on the outside as a lookout.

However, the police that came to investigate didn't find anything, so the matter was put to rest. During that time, all the residents who rented their place out had to come back to explain their situation to the resident committee. Eventually, they all signed an agreement to promise to ensure the trustworthiness of their tenant.

Zheng Tan heard a "clang". It came from the security door out front.

These two thieves had access cards and were very familiar with the building. Their target should not be the few retired faculty members.

Most retired faculty lived an austere lifestyle, even if they were actually very rich. Most of them bought bags of white buns from the school cafeteria to have with porridge. None of them lived luxurious lives that could attract thieves.

Besides, if they wanted to rob the retired faculty, why wait until now?

So, excluding the retired households, that left the residents on the fifth floor. Why did they choose today? Mama Jiao was in an accident and Papa Jiao was not home, leaving two elementary school children incapable of defending themselves at home. Was it a coincidence?

Zheng Tan saw one of the thieves enter the building. Calculating the time, he went from the balcony to the front door.

He checked the clock on the wall, it was ten past two. In general, this was when most people were sound asleep.

On the other hand, if their target was not the Jiao family, he would stay put. There was no point in waking the children. They've had a rough day. As for other people, he really didn't care about their well-being.

To be honest, people were always partial. What was it to him that other people got robbed? These people were thieves, not murderers after all. Even if he was to do something, he would wait until they were leaving. Unless absolutely necessary, Zheng Tan didn't want to cause any trouble at home.

However, things rarely went according to plan.

The man paused after reaching the fifth floor. He confirmed that the residents on the fifth floor were asleep, then headed directly to the Jiao house. Soon, he started picking the lock.

Listening to the footsteps outside the door, Zheng Tan twitched his ears. His claws appeared.

The person outside had no idea that inside, a black cat was waiting at the entrance. As the footsteps came closer, the black cat's posture changed. His legs were crouched, his body low, The tip of his tail stopped swaying, he was ready to strike.

Ka— the door opened.

Zheng Tan could sense a stranger.

The person at the door carefully pushed it open ajar. But before he could come in, he felt a sudden stab of pain on his face. A few gashes from his left eye to the right corner of his mouth appeared. Each gash oozed out blood.

Before he could really feel the pain on his face, something hit him right in the chest. He stumbled backwards falling to the ground. The lights in the corridor were off and in his scramble to get up, he dropped his little flashlight.

The man was in a panic and thought he was caught. They must have made a mistake beforehand; clearly, there were more than two kids at home!

He let out a yelp of pain, then hurried up and ran downstairs. His flashlight was not bright enough to show the staircase clearly. To make things worse, the blood from his wounds was trickling into his eyes, blurring his vision. He couldn't think clearly from

all the pain; he stumbled and fell down a flight of stairs. He regained his footing at the corner and hurriedly got up to continue his rush down.

Zheng Tan closed the door and chased after his target. These people had been checking out this location more than once. He wouldn't be satisfied until he got them.

The man was familiar with the stairs of the building, or he wouldn't be able to run so fast without lights and with a hurt eye.

When he chased the man to the first floor, he saw a person lying on the ground at the security access. A woman, to be exact. And next to her, was Fatty's owner. The lady nearing her seventies was standing there with an electric bat. Fatty was sitting at her feet.

Fatty had sounded the wind chime alarm not for Zheng Tan, but for the old lady. She was very sensitive to the sound of wooden plaques. Despite her age, she was very athletic or else the young woman would not be lying here.

This woman's associate had no intention of helping her, He dashed right past her. The old lady had caught one thief, so she didn't bother stopping the man. After all, she wasn't young and had no advantage over a stronger man.

Instead, she shouted out, "Thief! Catch the thief!"

In an instant, all dogs living in the quarters began barking, mixed with the meows of a few cats.

Zheng Tan chased after him. Although the man's face was injured and one of his eyelids were fused together by dried blood, he was not slowing down.

Behind Zheng Tan, a white figure appeared. Although it was slower, it kept on track chasing after the culprit.

The man was fast, but Zheng Tan wasn't slow either. His month of training had been worthwhile. Zheng Tan considered his attack plan whilst running. When the man turned a corner near a patch of flower beds, Zheng Tan accelerated. He jumped up and gave the man a push from behind.

The man did not anticipate this. He lost his balance, falling onto the cement edge of the flower bed.

He was dizzy for a moment, lying there, unable to get up. Before he could regain consciousness, the white figure was beside him. It bit down on his calf, drawing blood.

"Ah--"

He screamed once again. This scream was not like his yelp outside the Jiao house. After experiencing the terror of being found, chased and caught, the pain on his calf made him want to express his fear. His loud screams were slightly frightening at this time of night.

That man broke free and dealt a few kicks to the side.

Despite being kicked aside, Mighty got up in an instant and attacked again, even more ferociously. He gave the man another bite, while growling at the same time.

Zheng Tan saw the whole thing inside the bushes nearby. He couldn't help but admire the four-month-old terrier. 'Good boy! Mighty!'

It looked odd, but he had to admit that bull terriers were fighters! Zheng Tan felt pain in his legs even looking at it bite. The man's calf was a bloody mess after enduring two bites.

Zheng Tan was hiding in the bushes, because he felt that the lady's 'roar' was probably going to wake everybody up. He did not want to expose himself. The scratch marks on the man's face was enough. He'd leave the credit to Mighty. No one saw his chase after all.

He looked up. The Jiao family had their lights on. In fact, every occupied apartment in building B had their lights on. With all the barking and shouting, it was sure to wake up everyone.

Zheng Tan left the site of the crime and went home. The two children were probably scared.

When he reached the fifth floor, the door was still closed the way he left it, but the living room light was on. Zheng Tan could hear Jiao Yuan talking in hushed tones to his cousin.

Zheng Tan meowed twice then scratched the door gently. The door was immediately opened. Jiao Yuan greeted him, holding a rolling pin, followed by Gu Youzi.

Zheng Tan: "..."

Who taught these kids to grab a rolling pin whenever there was trouble? Last time, Xiong Xiong had one, this time Jiao Yuan was doing the same.

Seeing their cat, the kids relaxed a bit. At the same time, Qu XiangYang came out, still wearing his SpongeBob Pajamas, looking completely lost.

Many stayed up all night because of the incident. The two thieves were arrested. People who were robbed last time were demanding an on-site interrogation. They wanted to get to the bottom of this and were not easily fooled.

Obviously, the situation wasn't simple like people thought. Normal students wouldn't be able to do this.

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi followed Qu Xiangyang downstairs to figure out the situation; after all, there was blood on the fifth floor. Without finding out what happened, they couldn't rest easily.

Apparently, the thieves were targeting the Jiao family.

Auntie Ling, who came out to chase her cat, got the info after slapping the thief twice. Because the thief they caught was a young woman, the men in the quarters were hesitant to use force. The woman was crying, looking very pitiable. She was soft spoken and quite pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. No one could have guessed she was a thief in any other situation.

Suffering two slaps to the face, the woman started crying harder, which could almost melt the heart of anyone. Just not Auntie Ling, who slapped her again. If not for the people holding her back, she probably would have started kicking.

Zheng Tan followed Jiao Yuan downstairs, but avoided the crowd of people. The kids had Qu and Auntie Ling looking after them.

Zheng Tan went to look at Mighty, who was sitting next to his owner, Mr. Yan. He was immensely proud and very happy. He praised his dog while wiping blood off its face.

"Mighty, you're such a good boy. Tomorrow, no, today, I'll go buy you a big bone as soon as the markets open."

Mighty barked. It wasn't clear if he understood anything, but he was furiously wagging his tail.

Since Mighty came to the quarter, he slept in the corridor in Mr. Yan's building. The building had been robbed before, so everyone figured it was good to have a dog watching out for them. Someone came out when Fatty's owner called out, letting him out as well.

Auntie Ling did not notify Papa Jiao of the events that night. He had to stay with Mama Jiao in the hospital anyways. He didn't find out until dawn and allowed the kids a day off from school. He called their teachers while the kids were taken to the hospital by Qu, who was taking a rare trip outdoors.

Qu Xiangyang had a car, Zheng Tan didn't have to hide inside a backpack to take the bus again. He still had to be smuggled into the hospital though.

He peeked out from the gap in the parking lot and saw Zhuo who came for a check-up at the hospital.

Chapter 21

There Are Five Genders

Mama Jiao seemed better today, at least her spirits were up.

However, after hearing last night's events, she was determined to drag her injured self home if not for Papa Jiao doing all he could to stop her. There was no point in keeping last night a secret. Even if Auntie Ling didn't tell her about it all, last night caused so much of a commotion that the faculty and family in the hospital would have heard about it.

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi remained silent after answering a few of her questions. Qu Xiangyang did most of the talking. He gave a vivid recount of last night's story.

"Since the previous thefts, residents on the first and second floor had been taking precautions. Us living on the higher floors felt safer, but now it seemed that those people used this mentality. They target people living on higher floors specifically because they feel less at risk."

"Apparently, they saw the bulletin board in the bio building and learnt that Brother Jiao just received a million-yuan grant. Coincidentally, they found out something had happened and there were only going to be children at home. So they targeted your family."

"It was not as if we could have used the money from the grant. It's meant for research." Mama Jiao said emphatically, her tone rising.

"They didn't think so. Lots of people get rich off pocketing research money." Qu Xiangyang shrugged.

He suddenly remembered something and his eyes lit up : "I heard that several 'veterans' were at the scene of the interrogation last night and were able to get quite some information out of the thieves. The police didn't find any leads last month after the first burglaries because someone pulled some strings. This time, they weren't getting away with it that easily."

“The behind the scenes culprit who planned the thefts was someone living in building A. His family is quite connected. Apparently, his uncle is the vice president of the school, specifically, the one that oversees admissions.”

Qu Xiangyang loved gossiping about people high up in the school. He was not at all worried they would give him a hard time. His father was just as powerful, and he had graduated anyways.

“Usually we might have turned a blind eye, given his connections and everything. But this time, he hit a nerve, and we couldn’t just pretend we didn’t know anything. Several more of the residents had gotten grants. That information is on bulletin boards all around the school. No one would feel safe again if thieves were coming to their doors just because of that.”

“One of the more senior guys called that vice president last night. I’m guessing, after he settles the problem in the quarters, he would come here and apologize to you folks.”

Zheng Tan sat on Mama Jiao’s bed, quietly listening to them speak. Papa Jiao had brought the bedding from home. It was not only more comfortable but also more pleasing to the eye. The nurse had just changed Mama Jiao’s bandages when they got here, so she wouldn’t be back any time soon.

Listening to Qu Xiangyang talk about the culprit, Zheng Tan nodded silently. If the thieves weren’t connected to the school somehow, how would they get a hold of the access card? He wondered what the school would do to prevent similar incidents from happening. If they change the security access card, he would need Papa Jiao to get him a new one.

“Hey brother Jiao, I heard that the thief didn’t even get inside your house before he was scratched on the face by your cat. The guy thought someone was home and ran like his life depended on it. He didn’t even stop for his partner.”

“He was probably running too fast and not paying attention to the road. He tripped and hit his head on the cement walls of the flower bed. He then got bitten by that bull terrier Mr. Yan got. Apparently, the dog was able to rip off a piece of flesh. Now it’s a hero in the quarters, you should’ve seen it...”

Papa Jiao watched Zheng Tan as he listened to Qu recount the events. The cat had his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. ‘Not bad.’ He thought. ‘It’s a good thing he didn’t

feel the need to be in the spotlight.'

As they talked and laughed, the atmosphere lightened. It was the happiest they had been since Mama Jiao got into the accident.

Qu Xiangyang offered to watch over the kids for a few days, but Papa Jiao declined politely.

After Qu left, Mama Jiao asked him for his reasoning.

"I am going to ask Wei Ling. This way we know the kids are in good hands. That boy Qu puts too much of his energy into gaming. He might get Jiao Yuan to start playing."

Zheng Tan agreed it was possible. Besides, the guy disregarded everything when he started to play computer games. They were better off having Zheng Tan watch the kids, than to expect Qu to be a good guardian.

In contrast, Wei Ling was a much more dependable person. All he needed to do was come watch the kids at night. He would still have all the free time in the world in the morning.

Zheng Tan wondered how his case was going. He had been on it for a while, yet the case was still unsolved.

As he was thinking about crime and investigations, a knock came from the door.

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi hurriedly put Zheng Tan back into the backpack. They tried to look nonchalant, but came off as way too serious, which made Mama Jiao smile.

The visitor was Zhuo. She heard about what happened in the residential quarters and came to wish them well.

Papa Jiao quickly stood up to give her his seat. Because of the relationship formed between their cat and Zhuo, 'the Buddha' had been treating him better when he went over to borrow equipment. She didn't smile, but she didn't look like she was plotting murder either. So there was improvement.

Seeing it was Zhuo, Zheng Tan got back out. It was much more comfortable sitting on a comforter than squatting in a bag.

"Hey, Charcoal. Did you sneak in?"

Zhuo wasn't surprised to see Zheng Tan here. She gave him a light pat on the head.

The cat provided a common topic for Mama Jiao and their visitor.

Mama Jiao felt relieved. She really wouldn't know what to say to Zhuo if not for her pet.

Even though they didn't know the specifics, Zhuo's current problems were no secret. She felt bad for her.

The young woman was one of 'the Buddha's' three favorites, with such a bright future ahead. Recently, the physics department had got some big project going on. If she were to participate, it would most certainly become another highlight on her resume. Yet, this kind of thing had to happen at this exact time. She got pregnant after she agreed to conduct the radiation experiment and was dead set on keeping this kid whose health could not be guaranteed. Oh, young people these days...

Zhuo didn't stay here for long. She soon had her loose coat back on and left.

"This Zhuo... so unfortunate!" Because the kids were there, Mama Jiao couldn't really explain the whole thing.

"Is Auntie Zhuo having a little baby?" Jiao Yuan asked.

"Uh-Huh." Mam Jiao did not want to elaborate. They had been talking for a while and she was starting to feel tired, yet she wasn't sleepy.

Papa Jiao thought about it for a second, then said: "Speaking of babies, there's one thing you certainly do not know."

"What?"

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi looked up at him curiously. Zheng Tan did the same. Except, Zheng Tan was prepared for the 'let me tell you' that was about to come.

"Let me tell you..." Papa Jiao found a pen and paper. He began drawing figures as he spoke.

He was right! Zheng Tan twitched his ears.

Although the words 'let me tell you' provoked nausea for him now, he was still curious in what Papa Jiao had to say.

Mama Jiao, on the other hand, knew exactly what he was going to say. After all they had been together for so many years. She shook her head whilst smiling. She wanted to see the kids' reactions.

"We humans have more than one stages of growth and development. For example, fetuses go through several steps in their mother's bellies. You boys, Jiao Yuan, are pretty much the same as girls during the initial embryonic stage."

Zheng Tan, Jiao Yuan: "!!"

If you had to describe their reaction, the cat and boy looked as if they had been forced to swallow dog shit.

Papa Jiao ignored the look on their faces and went on: "Though you start off similar to girls, later on you experience a stage with five gender switch points."

Papa Jiao drew an "Y" on the paper, "Gender chromosomes will send out a signal at the appropriate time, which will trigger a series of hormonal reactions. Hormones will issue a sex conversion signal, so that the embryo gradually turns from female to male. There are five change points. If something wrong happens during anyone of them, the embryo will develop into a female..."

Pap Jiao went on and on, but the two kids and the cat were dumbstruck.

What did you expect when you told a boy he was transformed from a girl?

F*ck, this can't be true... right?

"I am a man! A guy! With a you know what!" Jiao Yuan was so desperate to get his point across, that he was ready to take off his pants to prove himself.

"Yes, you are a boy, we are all clear on that. I am just explaining a fact. Everyone has to go through those development stages. It's normal. " Papa Jiao said.

Jiao Yuan still looked sick. In fact, Zheng Tan was not feeling much better. It was just

that cat faces were less expressive, and he had black fur. People might be able to tell that this cat had a funny look on his face, but they wouldn't know he just died a little bit inside.

"Boys are boys and girls are girls! You are either male or female, how could there be such a thing?" Jiao Yuan was bewildered. Human evolution and development was indeed a mysterious and mess-with-your-head type of topic.

"Well, many scholars argue there are more genders than just male and female. There are at least five: male, male-like, bi-gender, female-like, female."

Zheng Tan: "..."

He didn't know what to think anymore.

"So, sometimes we discover people with Y chromosomes that look nothing like a man without surgery. It's rare, but it is possible. You cannot deny it. We must treat scientific fact as fact." Papa Jiao's last sentence caused Zheng Tan's thoughts to come to a halt.

He suddenly remembered some things.

Chapter 22

Motion Sickness Pills Can Be Deadly

Papa Jiao was quick to act. Since he had already decided to ask Wei Ling to look after the children, he called him straight after lunch. Those were non-working hours, a good time to look for people.

Because of Zheng Tan, Papa Jiao would stop and chat with Wei Ling when they ran into each other. Their topic of conversation revolved mostly around Zheng Tan, but seemed to have contained other stuff as well. Zheng Tan did not know for sure, but they might have talked about where Wei Ling was going to work in the future.

Wei Ling had replaced his PHS with a cellphone, which meant that Zheng Tan didn't have to listen to him swear anymore.

Wei Ling agreed immediately to come take care of the children in the evening. He was busy during daytime but had nothing to do at night anyway.

The two children stayed at the hospital until two o'clock in the afternoon. Auntie Ling came by with soup that Papa Jiao could just microwave. She offered to have the kids over for dinner so that they wouldn't need to eat boxed-lunches anymore. Papa and Mama Jiao gladly took her up on the offer.

Zheng Tan followed them back to school, then parted ways from the group. He did not want to go to Auntie Ling's place. There was a toddler at her place who was her relative's kid. Zheng Tan had seen the little brat pull Tiger's tail last time. Young kids were the enemies of all pets.

Zheng Tan would rather eat biscuits than have his tail pulled on. He wasn't sure he could control himself enough to not scratch his attacker. He decided to pay Wei Ling a visit since he had nothing to do at the moment. They could head back home together later. He thought about how to tell Wei Ling that thing he thought of.

The house Wei Ling rented was a private-home that had been turned into an apartment unit. It was mostly rented by students and young people who just started work. The buildings were poorly managed and the area was quite a mess. Things got

stolen all the time. Reporting it to the police was pointless. It happened so often that even if they investigated, they wouldn't find anything. However, the rent was dirt cheap, so the area never lacked renters.

Zheng Tan didn't come here often. There were too many people. Someone always tried to play with him by teasing him with strings and dolls whenever they saw him. They didn't know he saw them as idiots.

Zheng Tan got there by three o'clock. People living there were mostly at work or in school. Those who were home were napping. Stray cats were quite common around here. The landlord had a cat as well. The animal was a common sight here, so no one took notice of a black cat sneaking into the building.

Zheng Tan had stepped foot onto Wei Ling's floor when he heard a loud "bang". He stopped and peeked out from the staircase

A young man was knocked to the ground, clutching his stomach and moaning from the pain. Wei Ling walked out after him, holding an apple in one hand and a fruit knife in the other. He patted the man's face with the knife that was still covered in apple juice.

"I see you already have your eye on my newly-bought phone, eh? You got guts. Coming over to steal my phone when I'm napping... Did you think you could bully me, or did you think I was stupid?"

Wei Ling sounded like a complete rogue. The guy tried to get up but froze when Wei Ling pressed the knife against his throat.

The man wanted to open his mouth, but Wei Ling pressed harder on the knife.

"I don't want to hear your bullshit," Wei Ling said as he flung the apple core out of the window.

Zheng Tan sighed: "....."

The management of the building was a mess, but that didn't mean littering was ok. Zheng Tan remembered Jiao Yuan losing one yuan of allowance due to not throwing used tape into the trash.

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Zheng Tan twitched his ears. He didn't hear the apple hit the ground. The ground outside was made of cement. The sound of apple hitting cement was not the one he just heard.

Although puzzled, Zheng Tan didn't rush to check downstairs. He kept his attention on Wei Ling.

Wei Ling still had the knife on the man's throat, but his other hand was digging into the man's pockets.

He pulled out a wallet. Inside, there was no ID card, but he found 1000 yuan. Wei Ling took the 1000 bucks with a look of disgust then put the wallet back in the man's pocket.

In addition to the wallet, he found some tools for picking locks. Wei Ling's look of disgust deepened, but he laid the tools by his feet.

Eventually, Wei Ling found a small plastic bottle. He twisted open the cap. Inside was some medicine stuffed in by a cotton ball.

Zheng Tan remembered Papa Jiao telling him that newly bought bottles of medicine always came with a cotton ball that should be thrown away right after the bottle was opened.

The cotton ball was placed in the vials to prevent the medicine tablets from colliding together while being transported. It also absorbed moisture to prevent the drug from getting damp. But if the cotton ball was kept in the bottle after the bottle was opened, it would continue to absorb moisture, which made it easier for the medicine to go bad.

Zheng Tan wasn't sure if the guy on the ground knew he had to take out the cotton ball. Intuition told him that he probably kept it inside to prevent the bottle from rattling when he moved. He looked at the cotton ball in Wei Ling's hand. It was too large to have come with the original packaging. Judging from the half torn off label, the medicine was bought some time ago. Not all medicines needed a cotton ball anyways, so Zheng Tan trusted his intuition.

Wei Ling looked into the bottle, then slapped the guy with the side of the blade again. "You've used this quite a few times already. Must have made quite some money."

"I don't... don't understand what you are saying..." The man tried to argue, "That 's

just... my own... motion sickness meds.”

"Do I look like I'm stupid?" Wei Ling stood up and kicked the man.

The guy curled up after the blow.

Wei Ling had noticed Zheng Tan's presence a while ago, so he didn't argue on with the man. He took three pills out and stuffed them into the man's mouth. "Come by again soon. Just bring more money next time. 1000 yuan can't do shit. "

The guy got up immediately, ignoring the pain in his stomach. He didn't notice Zheng Tan by the stairs. It was dark in the stairwell and he was black cat. It was normal that the guy didn't see him.

Wei Ling wasn't someone with upright morals either. Zheng Tan came to that conclusion.

Wei Ling could have brought the guy to the police, but he acted mostly based on his mood. He didn't want to trouble himself with going to the police so the thief got lucky this time.

Wei Ling was sitting on the side of his bed, stuffing his newly stolen 1000 yuan inside his own wallet when Zheng Tan stepped into his place. The white plastic vial was placed on the bedside table, next to a glass of orange juice.

Seeing that Zheng Tan was eyeing the bottle, Wei Ling motioned him over. Zheng Tan jumped onto a chair.

Wei Ling still felt he was too far away so he dragged the chair by the bedside table.

Zheng Tan stayed put while he dragged the chair. He was too lazy to jump down.

"Did you see that?" Wei Ling pointed to the white vial and continued, "This thing really is motion sickness medication, but that idiot also used this to commit his crimes."

Wei Ling pointed to the half torn label, which said "One pill every time". The name of the drug was mostly torn off. Zheng Tan couldn't tell what it was.

"Most of the motion sickness drugs make people drowsy. If taken in large doses, it could cause headaches, severe drowsiness, orientation disorders and other adverse

reactions. It could even cause hallucinations and other mental symptoms. People are smart these days. They know purchasing sleeping pills will draw attention. But people buy motion sickness meds all the time, and no one at the pharmacy would take special notice. They could also deny attempting to drug their victims if they were caught. However, sometimes, motion sickness drugs can also be deadly. "

Wei Ling got up to pour away the cup of orange juice. It was laced with drugs. "You need to pay more attention in the future. Be careful of things given to you by strangers."

Wei Ling then told Zheng Tan about the types of drugs he needed to be cautious of. He also mentioned some specific ingredient or contents that Zheng Tan should know, such as barbiturates, hyoscyamine and so on.

Medicine can save people but can also kill people. A large dosage of some meds can even harm a human being, let alone a cat.

Wei Ling bought some food from nearby, then left the apartment, with Zheng Tan by his side. Zheng Tan remembered to check as they were walking out. The apple core Wei Ling tossed out was lying inside a trash can.

Was it a coincidence or was Wei Ling that good?

Wei Ling had bought a motorcycle. It was parked in the bike shed in the eastern quarters when he wasn't using it. After all, it would probably be stolen if left in front of his building. It was safer leaving it in the quarters. The security guy knew Wei Ling and could help keep an eye on it.

Shortly after Zheng Tan and Wei Ling got home, Auntie Ling brought Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi back.

Qu Xiangyang opened his door just when Auntie Ling was greeting Wei Ling. The three started chatting. Auntie Ling had met Wei Ling once before and remembered him, but this was the first time Qu met the guy.

"We could sleep soundly now that we know you are here!" Qu Xiangyang said.

"Hey Qu, is that cat claw marks on your door?" Auntie Ling asked.

"Yeah, it is. I don't even know when it got there. Maybe Charcoal was letting out steam?"

Look how deep the scratch marks are. I didn't know Charcoal's claws were so sharp." Qu Xiangyang sighed.

"That's for sure. You need to sharpen your tools before you tackle a task. A cat needs to know it's a cat. What can it do without sharp claws?" Wei Ling looked over at Zheng Tan, who was laying on the couch. "Am I right?"

Zheng Tan ignored them.

"Are you going to change your door? How about getting a steel one?" Auntie Ling joked.

"I'm not going to change the door. If I have claw marks on the door, mice wouldn't come by anymore, right?"

That night, Wei Ling heated some bath water and waited until the kids were bathed and in bed. He sat down at Papa Jiao's desk and started reading the material he had brought. He had gotten permission from Papa Jiao to use his computer for some research. He had closed the door, so Zheng Tan had no way of finding out what the documents were about.

It seemed that he wouldn't get a chance to tell Wei Ling about the thing. Zheng Tan considered for a moment and decided to go to bed first. He would figure out how to tell Wei Ling, then leave the rest till tomorrow.

Chapter 23

You Need Five Tries to Wake a Cat

At six o'clock in the morning, Wei Ling got up. He boiled some water so the two children could rinse their face with warm water after they woke up.

Wei Ling did not grow up in Chuhua. He came here after leaving the military because most of his friends lived here. His strongest impression of this city, after being a resident here for a while, was that the weather was terrible.

In his words, "The weather is sick, it needs a cure."

Temperature in Chuhua always felt like it was a practical joke of some sort. It was nearly 30 degrees yesterday, but had dropped to barely ten degrees today. Perhaps because the temperature was still fluctuating, some trees on campus were still green. Of course, leaves were falling off at the same time, but out of the patches of browns and greens on the side of the road, people always noticed the green parts first. Maybe green made people feel better.

Wei Ling had pulled an all-nighter last night. He was up very late looking up information he needed. Just when he was about to take a nap, Papa Jiao phoned in to remind him that the temperature was dropping and that it would be appreciated if he could make sure the kids stayed warm.

After the phone call, Wei Ling was completely awake. So he played some Solitaire. He went all the way from mid-level difficulty with two sets of poker to highest level difficulty with four sets of cards. Bored of Solitaire, he eventually started playing Minesweeper. The rest of the night was spent renewing the high score of that game over and over again.

Even without sleep, Wei Ling was quite energetic. The hour was still early; he planned to go for a run before buying the kids some breakfast.

He remembered to write a note for the children in case they woke up and wondered where he had gone. He left the note on the dining table and was ready to leave when he saw Zheng Tan, still fast asleep on the sofa.

After scratching the thief that day, Zheng Tan had stopped sleeping on Gu Youzi's bed. He was worried that the scent of blood on his paws would affect the kids negatively. Apparently, it could make children more prone to nightmares.

Gu Youzi had brought out her furry blanket for Zheng Tan to use as a quilt. The blanket had a hat attached to it. On it was a pair of cat ears.

At the moment, Zheng Tan was curled up in a ball under the blanket sleeping soundly. Before, he always wondered why cats curled up in their sleep. Wasn't the position tiring?

But when he himself turned into a cat, he realized that this sleeping position was really quite comfortable. Most times, he simply balled up unconsciously in his sleep, like now.

"Charcoal, Get up! Let's go!" Standing at the door, Wei Ling called out in hushed tones.

The cat didn't move.

"Charcoal! Wake Up! Running time." Wei Ling called out again. He didn't believe for a minute the cat on the sofa couldn't hear him.

The ears poking out from under the blanket twitched, then... well, that was it.

Wei Ling: "....." This little bastard was playing deaf!

"Charcoal!" Wei Ling called out for the third time. This time with a hint of warning in his voice. Zheng Tan still did not move. However, he did let out a noise from his nostrils, indicating that he had heard him and that Wei Ling could get lost now.

"Charcoal, now!" Wei Ling tried a fourth time.

Zheng Tan finally moved. He stretched lazily, poking his head out of the blanket. He looked at Wei Ling and yawned. Seeing that the man didn't move, Zheng Tan went back to sleep.

"Charcoal! Get up! Go run!" Wei Ling was pausing after every syllable as if to emphasize how serious he was.

This time, Zheng Tan finally began to get up. He got out of the blanket, stretched, then

shook his fur.

Wei Ling: "..."

F*cking hell, he did not expect to need to wake a cat five times to have it get up!

"Do you have to knead on the sofa for a while, go to the bathroom? What? You done yet?" Wei Ling said through gritted teeth.

Zhang Tan twitched his ears. He didn't knead. If he did, it would be on boobs. What was the fun in kneading a sofa? Zheng Tan always felt that this signature move of cats was slightly wrong. Especially since cats all did this when they missed their mothers. It was in their genetics.

Kneading was unnecessary, but taking a morning piss was not.

Seeing the black cat run into the bathroom, Wei Ling looked up to the ceiling and sighed helplessly. Why did the Jiao family treat this cat like it was some prize?

Because of the temperature drop, Zheng Tan felt a cold wave hit him right after he left the building. He shivered.

The sun was not out yet. It was quiet and peaceful on campus. Except from some noise coming from the cafeteria, the place was in complete silence.

Half-way through their run, however, the morning radio started right on time.

It played from six thirty to seven thirty every day.

When he was running pass the dorms, the school radio had finished its opening song and was starting to play the music for broadcast gymnastics.

"Now, the eighth series broadcast gymnastics. March on the spot! One Two Three Four..."

"F*ck, it's too early for this cr*p!" Agitated complaints were coming from the dorms.

Before the complaining ended, a slipper flew out of the window and hit the loudspeaker. This, unfortunately, did not stop the radio from continuing.

"Jumping movement! One two three four..."

"Ah! Sooner or later, I will smash it! Just wait, the day I leave school is the day this speaker turns into pieces."

Listening to the commotion, Zheng Tan felt oddly gleeful.

Not everyone could become accustomed to using earplugs. He felt bad for the poor idiots who thought they could avoid morning self-study sessions after entering university. Self-study sessions were indeed not mandatory anymore, but now they had the school broadcast that played every weekday to wake up to.

Zheng Tan felt relieved that he lived in the Eastern Quarters. It was relatively quiet over there. The broadcast couldn't be heard until he stepped on campus.

After a lap, the school radio was still not playing the news, indicating it was not yet seven.

Jiao Yuan usually got up at seven.

Wei Ling went to the cafeteria and bought some breakfast. Zheng Tan waited for him outside and the two went back to the quarters together.

They ran into Mr. Yan who was walking his dog when they entered the courtyard.

Mighty, with his big head and small eyes, wagged his tail furiously. This was because he saw Zheng Tan. Even though he was a mean little thing, he was quite nice to the other pets. Tiger often licked his fur for him. Zheng Tan saw that even the fur balls Tiger coughed up recently had bits of white and brown in it. That must have been due to Daisy and Mighty here.

Wei Ling sometimes did Tai Chi with the elderly folks here in the quarters, so he was familiar with the older crowd. Mr. Yan knew him too, so he stopped and greeted them.

"Your dog is quite something." Wei Ling looked at Mighty and said to Mr. Yan.

Hearing this, the old man's wrinkled face cracked up into a big smile. Recently, he loved telling everyone who would listen the glorious deeds of Mighty.

But Mighty was not friendly towards Wei Ling. Maybe it was animal instinct. He

avoided Wei Ling and if Wei stared at him, he would bare his teeth.

Mr. Yan looked at the breakfast Wei Ling had bought and shook his head disapprovingly: "You bought eggs and soy milk? I heard a few days ago that when eaten together, eggs and soy milk could not increase the intake of protein, but will affect the body's ability to absorb protein. I forgot the science behind it. You can ask Jiao, he should know."

Wei Ling thanked Mr. Yan and they were off again. Mr. Yan and Mighty resumed their walk while Wei Ling and Zheng Tan were in a hurry home. The news broadcast had begun, which meant Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi were probably up already.

Zheng Tan thought about what Mr. Yan said on their way home. Now that he thought about it, it seemed that he never actually saw eggs and soy milk appear on the Jiao family dining table together before. If it did happen, the eggs would be for Jiao Yuan to take to school to snack on. It wouldn't be eaten immediately.

In the end, Wei Ling went with milk powder.

Lan Tianzhu and Su An came by to go to school together with the kids, so Zheng Tan was relieved of his drop-off duty. It was better this way, Zheng Tan thought. Since Wei Ling was staying here these few days, he might as well just tell the guy that thing he thought up. No matter how things turn out in the end, he'd know if he was right.

When Wei Ling was in the washroom, Zheng Tan went into the bedroom and jumped on Papa Jiao's desk. There were some books stacked on the side that Papa Jiao regularly used. Among them was Zheng Tan's first goal "Genetics".

Papa Jiao was teaching a course on genetics this year. Zheng Tan had seen all the PowerPoint slides Papa Jiao had used so far in the course. Papa Jiao would do a mock lecture after he completed each PowerPoint. It was a habit of his. He believed some problems in the details could only be found during a lecture.

Zheng Tan took out that book on genetics. What he needed to do now was find the information he needed in the stuff Papa Jiao had yet to cover in class.

Zheng Tan was not sure if the stuff Papa Jiao talked about in the hospital that day came from this book. He was just giving it a try. If this book proved useless, he would look inside another.

For a cat, turning pages was no simple task, but Zheng Tan was used to it. It was a skill that improved with practice. As he read, Zheng Tan kept alert for sounds and movement. He would not flip through the book if Wei Ling came out. After all, it was unusual for a cat to read. Even if he didn't understand a word in the book, it still looked weird.

Luckily, Zheng Tan soon found the information he was looking for. No wonder Papa Jiao mentioned the subject of pre-birth development. Judging from the look of things, he would be covering the topic soon in class, so he had been doing some reading on it recently.

When Wei Ling came into the room to pick up some files, he saw the black cat squatted next to the computer, playing with a bookmark.

"Don't pull that out, Papa Jiao must have put it there."

But the bookmark was almost completely pulled out of the book by now. So Wei Ling flipped open that book "Genetics" to the page with the bookmark to fix it. Before he closed the book, he took glance of its contents. He froze.

He hurriedly read on, then flipped a page and read some more.

He frowned and went back and re-read the last passage a few more times.

In fact, this was the part on disputes on human gender that Papa Jiao mentioned in the hospital. Papa Jiao had made notes on the sides for class.

Zheng Tan did not directly put the bookmark on the page with the content he wanted Wei Ling to read, but rather, he put it on the previous page. This was supposed to be a cover-up of his intent.

After reading and re-reading several times, Wei Ling closed the book. He took out his phone and started dialing.

Chapter 24

The Guy On the Motorcycle Has A Cat On His Back

The person Wei Ling was calling was the policeman Zheng Tan had met last time. He was Wei Ling's senior in martial arts.

Zheng Tan had heard Wei Ling address him as 'Walnut' in past calls, but did not know the guy's real name. From the sound of things, this 'Walnut' would be moving up the ranks if he cracked this case.

Apparently, he was in line for a promotion already last month, but Walnut was stubborn. He refused to accept the promotion, like he said earlier, if he couldn't solve this case.

Zheng Tan's opinion of the man was that he probably got kicked in the head by a donkey. He had made all the right friends, and the promotion was bound to happen. Yet, he had to be stubborn.

Wei Ling called Brother Walnut several times, but his phone was turned off. Wei Ling frowned; he was becoming worried. He thought about it for a moment, then dialed another number, this time to someone else.

They talked in code that only they understood. Zheng Tan was lost, but he wasn't interested anyway. He already did all he could do, the rest was on Wei Ling.

He yawned and jumped onto the sofa, planning to take a little nap.

Cats spent most of the day sleeping. Normally, Zheng Tan got up at the same time as Jiao Yuan. He was up an hour early today. He felt he owed it to himself to make up for the hour of lost sleep.

This was his form of ODD^[1].

Whatever, Zheng Tan told himself. He was cat now, and cats ate when they were hungry, slept when they were tired, ran around outside and caused mayhem at home.

Apparently, even though Walnut switched off his phone, Wei Ling had ways of pinpointing his location. Possibly through a GPS of some sort. Wei Ling was on the phone, asking someone to find Walnut for him.

About ten minutes later, Wei Ling found out where Walnut was.

He picked up his coat and headed towards the door. He stopped when he was there and turned to Zheng Tan: "Want to go out to play?"

Zheng Tan was dozing off, but jumped up immediately when he heard this. He loved the rare opportunity to go elsewhere. Staying on campus everyday was boring. Looking at the same scenery day after day made him feel confined. This was not good, psychologically speaking.

Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi were not his responsibility today. Papa Jiao had class in the late morning and would pick up the children afterwards. Mam Jiao was feeling better after two days in the hospital. She was recovering well and could probably leave the hospital in a week.

Papa Jiao knew a resident in the hospital from a joint study he conducted with a professor in the medical sciences. He asked the resident to look after Mama Jiao when he was in class.

Wei Ling called Papa Jiao to inform him he was taking the cat out on a little trip. Naturally, Papa Jiao did not oppose. He told the two to be careful and asked Wei Ling to look after Zheng Tan.

Wei Ling was in a hurry this time, so he decided to use the motorcycle he parked in the Eastern Quarters bike shed.

This motorbike seemed completely normal upon first glance. It was plain looking and wouldn't earn a second glance from anybody. Zheng Tan felt it only looked normal. Wei Ling had modified it, and it worked well. At least it wouldn't be like Yi Xin's bike.

However, when Zheng Tan stood in front of the motorcycle, he was a bit unsure. The thing didn't have a basket in front, nor did it have a cabinet in the back. He looked around and jumped on the seat. He pressed down on it. He supposed this would have to do.

Wei Ling put on a helmet. He looked at the black cat sitting on the bike seat, then

looked at his motorbike. He went into the security guards' office and emerged later with an old red travel backpack. There were already two holes on it.

"Luckily the security guard had a backpack I could borrow." Wei Ling patted the shabby bag. "Hop in."

Zheng Tan was very displeased. He grudgingly jumped in. The bag had not been used in a while and had a moldy smell to it. Stains were everywhere.

Zheng Tan didn't know where Wei Ling was headed. They were on a path he had never taken before. The buildings they passed were unfamiliar to him. He poked his head out of the bag and checked out the retreating scenery.

For any motor vehicle, the downtown area was a nuisance because of the abundance of traffic lights. Even though the motorcycle was fast, it was not spared from having to stop at the lights.

As they were waiting for a light to turn green, a bus passed by and stopped in the lane beside them. Someone was eating an orange near the window on Zheng Tan's side. He opened the bus window to spit out the seeds. The seed traveled through the air and hit Zheng Tan right on the head.

Zheng Tan: "... F*ck! These people who spit on the ground should be fined to the point they were broke.

"Christ! The dude on the motorcycle has a cat on his back! A black cat." The guy eating oranges exclaimed loudly.

"Where?"

"Wow, it really is a cat. I thought it was a life-like stuffed animal."

"Mom, I want to look at the cat!"

"Stop squishing over here. It's just a cat."

"Move over, let me see it."

...

At this time and age, cellphones weren't 'smart' like they would become in ten years. People didn't have their heads buried down on public transport. Instantly, all the people who were bored on the bus were looking at Zheng Tan whose head was showing from the bag.

With the red backpack as a backdrop, the black cat head was very eye-catching.

Zheng Tan felt on display, like a monkey at the zoo.

The bus driver looked outside then looked back to ahead of him. He reminded the passengers that the bus was about to start moving again. But no one listened to him.

The light finally turned green. The motorcycle shot out, leaving the bus behind it. Zheng Tan caught a final glance at the bus. The bus was overtaken by a small car and the driver slammed on the brakes. The guy who was eating an orange was too busy looking out of his window and banged his head on the seat in front of him.

Zheng Tan felt better.

Outside downtown, there were less traffic lights and Wei Ling could pick up some speed.

The area was mostly occupied by factories. They were reaching the third ring road^[2]. Zheng Tan could tell from signs around him that this area was to be demolished soon. For reasons concerning the environment, the city government planned to move all the factories away. There was a lake in this area and developers were already targeting the soon-to-be free spaces around here.

Wei Ling parked his motorcycle next to the side door of a factory. He looked around and took out his phone to make a call.

The factory in front of them was an old food processing plant. The building was all that was left. The factory had relocated recently. Only the pictures on the walls hinted to what used to happen here.

Wei Ling called Walnut, who still did not pick up. However, Wei Ling was sure he was here. The factory doors were shut, so he had to jump over the wall.

"Follow behind me. Let me know if someone is approaching. Of course, cover me at the right times if you could... actually never mind, you don't know what I'm saying."

After instructing Zheng Tan, Wei Ling jumped right over the wall. He moved with ease, making it seem like a simple task.

Zheng Tan jumped on to the wall and looked around. He came here out of pure curiosity and he didn't need to cover his tracks like Wei Ling. He was cat after all; people weren't wary of cats. There were plenty of strays around here anyway. He saw quite a few on their way here. A black cat on the wall wasn't anything new.

Zheng Tan had taken off his collar before leaving the house. He didn't look any different from a normal cat. Even if he was spotted, the person who spotted him would likely just think he looked quite large, instead of suspecting anything.

The factory was empty except for rubbish on the floor. There were broken glass and bricks on the floor, flyers that were turning yellow and production waste. The smell of additives and chemicals still hung in the air. The deserted factory looked desolate.

Zheng Tan followed Wei Ling. He heard sounds— sounds made by humans. There was some moaning, like the sound someone would make after being beaten. Luckily, it didn't appear to be made by Walnut.

Fifty yards from here, there were at least three people behind a wall. Zheng Tan heard them speak in hushed voices. They were making a plan to wait for the person in the warehouse ahead of them to come out, before attacking him.

Zheng Tan looked over to the warehouse. It had few windows, and all of them were shut. He would probably make a lot of noise if he went inside. Was Walnut in there? The moaning was coming from there.

The people behind the wall were oblivious to Wei Ling's presence. They were too focused on the warehouse door to notice anything else. Or maybe it was because Wei Ling was too well hidden. It was difficult to notice him even when he moved quickly.

As Wei Ling hid in the shadows, debating whether to take care of the men behind the wall first, Zheng Tan noticed the exhaust fan on warehouse wall.

It wasn't blocked by barb wire like the windows and doors, and he could just about squeeze through the gaps.

Should he do it?

NOTES

ODD: Oppositional Defiant Disorder: A disorder in a child marked by defiant and disobedient behaviour to authority figures.

Ring road: A ring road is a road or a series of connected roads encircling a town, city, or country.

Chapter 25

Owed The Cat a Favor

Zheng Tan eventually decided to head over to the warehouse.

Wei Ling saw the black cat run towards that direction, so he quickly focused on the men behind the wall. With the cat over there, Walnut should notice what was going on outside.

Zheng Tan looked at the exhaust fan. It was a bit high; he couldn't jump to that height from the ground. He climbed up a wooden board sitting next to the wall and used it to jump to the opening.

He looked through the gaps... There was nothing in there except broken stuff that was abandoned.

The room with the exhaust fan was not large. Zheng Tan surveyed the room after he jumped in. The door was jammed shut by wooden boards and boxes of packaging bottles. Otherwise, someone would have come in here to steal the bottles and sell them for money. He didn't see any insects, probably due to the scattered preservatives around the room.

Though the door was shut, there was a hole in the wall that Zheng Tan reckoned he could just about squeeze through. It was a bit difficult, but he made it.

That was the thing with cats. Their bones and limbs were flexible without needing to practice yoga. Unfortunately, getting covered in dust was unavoidable.

Outside the small room, Zheng Tan shook the dust off his fur and looked around. This was where they actually stored things in the warehouse, except it was empty at the moment. The light was dim inside, and a few wooden beams lay in a mess on the ground. The beams were not from the warehouse, but taken out from under the fallen building next to here.

His vision was blocked by all the junk laying around and his sense of smell was affected by preservatives. He had only his listening to rely on.

He traced the sounds he heard and navigated through all the junk. If it were a human here, he would have a much more difficult time. Zheng Tan took advantage of his body to move quickly.

The warehouse was quite large; it took him a while before he traced the voices he heard to the source.

The area was cleared of junk and three people were lying on the ground. 'Walnut' was looking around for ropes to tie the hands and feet of those people. Their mouths were stuffed with packaging paper, and they were making muffled whimpering noises.

Walnut was not wearing his police uniform today, probably to not alarm his suspects.

Next to him stood a woman. Judging by her looks, she almost seemed like the girl next door. She was wearing red glasses with a jacket that was cinched at the waist and showed off her curves. If this was the woman Wei Ling suspected, Zheng Tan had a hard time linking this average-college-student-like kid with the ruthless murderer.

However, you can't judge a book by its cover. Zheng Tan had learned that from the thieves in the Eastern Quarters earlier. Looking harmless did not equal actually harmless.

Zheng Tan did go out of hiding immediately. He stayed behind a wooden board and watched the woman intently. Walnut clearly had his guard up too. He never turned his back against her.

Zheng Tan saw Walnut take out his phone after tying the three guys on the floor.

"No signal?"

Walnut frowned and looked around. He held his phone up and paced in a circle. He still didn't get signal, so he decided to go out to take make the phone call. After walking two steps, he turned around and said to the girl who didn't move:

"Follow me."

The girl still did not speak but followed him obediently. However, she made sure to stay a meter or two behind him. This was the 'safety distance' between humans according to psychologist.

Not only did Walnut have his guard up, she had hers up as well.

Zheng Tan followed them quietly. He maneuvered through the piles of junk. He had to be fast and silent. He had to pause once in awhile to calculate his next move and to survey his surroundings. But when he took off again after every pause, he was fast.

It was like when cat owners sometimes play with their cats. They would see their cats seven or eight meters away, but in a blink of the eye, the cats would be only five meters away.

Zheng Tan did not know that he looked awfully like Sheriff when he hunted. He followed his prey in silence, waiting for his chance.

There was less junk near the door; maybe the three people who came in first had already cleared the path. Walnut did not have a hard time walking out. He only had to push away obstacles in their path. He used these chances to check up on the girl behind him.

As Walnut was picking up a wooden board, Zheng Tan saw that the girl, who looked like a regular college student, took a tube like thing out of her sleeve and started to walk towards Walnut.

Zheng Tan instinctively felt that the thing she had was dangerous.

This was the chance he was waiting for.

Keeping his eyes on the girl, Zheng Tan shot towards them.

The girl held onto the syringe in her hand. She had a cold gleam in her eyes that were hidden by her glasses. Just as she was about to succeed, she felt a strong force hit her in the chest and lost her balance. The syringe was knocked out of the way.

Before she could realize what just happened, Walnut, who was walking in front of her, caught her arm and pinned her onto a wood beam nearby.

Bang!

The girl hit the beam, and her glasses flew off.

Zheng Tan sat next to a board after his successful strike. He flexed his paws and

thought that she was not that well-endowed in the chest area. It didn't feel that great.

Walnut took out some ropes. He had remembered to keep some on hand earlier when he was searching for it. He didn't think, however, that he would need it so soon.

"I've been watching you. So this is how you strike." Walnut looked at the syringe that got knocked onto the board. It had been modified. When pushed, the syringe would shoot out the needle head through pressure. The needle probably contained some sort of tranquilizer.

"I see you're all done here." Wei Ling, who just came in through a window said.

Zheng Tan traced his voice. Behind Wei Ling was a large window which he remembered was closed earlier, maybe locked even. To make things worse, the window was at least five meters off the ground. How did Wei Ling come inside without making any noise?

Walnut, however, was not surprised to see Wei Ling. "Thanks to the black cat here, I escaped being hit by her syringe. Didn't think she would have something like this." He shrugged.

Wei Ling looked down at the person who remained calm even after being caught. "I told you this woman was suspicious. Test her DNA, it should match that of the culprit."

"Shouldn't the culprit be male? Are you saying she's a transvestite? It can't be; I checked."

"It is her. She's just a bit special. You need to ask a biologist or someone who studies genetics."

With Wei Ling here, Zheng Tan didn't need to do anything else. He jumped on to the piles of junk and looked out the window from which Wei Ling came in. There was only an electricity pole beside it.

Zheng Tan did not think he could jump out using only a pole that was slightly far away to get out like Wei Ling. So he went back to where he came in from and left through the exhaust fan opening.

Outside were four people. All of them tied up, all knocked out. Clearly this was the work of Wei Ling.

Zheng Tan looked around. He used a tree to climb into a five story building. The lower two floors were offices. There weren't a lot of preservatives and additives there. The walls were lined with charts and graphs.

The upper floors were dormitories for the workers. On one window sill sat a simple vase made from a plastic bottle. The soil inside was dry, and in it grew a dead cactus.

Zheng Tan didn't linger, but went right to the rooftop.

He could see most of the factory from up there. Not only that, he could see two of the factories nearby. One of them had relocated like this one. The other was a bit livelier.

Right after Zheng Tan left, Wei Ling and Walnut opened the warehouse doors and brought out the people inside. They put the people on three sides together. One side was the people doing a drug deal inside the warehouse; one side was the woman; and one side was the people outside who were planning a heist on the drug deal.

"I heard the IOC did DNA test on all competing female athletes. Apparently, athletes with Y chromosome had an advantage against normal female athletes. This person here probably fits into that criteria. You have some luck, running into such a rare event in a case."

Wei Ling and Walnut chatted and smoked while they kept an eye on the criminals. Walnut had already called someone, so backup would be there soon. All they needed to do now was wait.

He Tao smiled bitterly after hearing Wei Ling's ridicule. "F*cking hell. Oh! I forgot to ask. Why did you bring that cat with you?"

"Our master told us cats bring good luck. When you don't know what to do, a cat might bring unexpected change. So I brought it."

He Tao shrugged. He still could not accept this theory of his master's.

"Now I owe the cat a favor. God, I hate this feeling!"

"Don't worry about it. This isn't the first time you owed a cat a favor. You have experience in how to pay them back."

"F*ck!"

They were silent for a moment. He Tao asked: "You mentioned you decided on a job. Where do you plan to work? What kind of a job?"

"I plan on being a security guard."

"Wha..." He Tao coughed violently. He was so agitated he choked on smoke.

When he finally finished coughing, he started yelling. "You refuse to enter the police force, you don't want to go to a company, instead you become a security guard? What is in that brain of yours?"

"This is a decision I made after careful consideration."

"Did you bang your head before your careful consideration?"

"I was completely sober and sane, and I already told the master."

"What did the master say?"

"He said 'oh', but I heard the sound of him breaking a table after he said that."

"He broke a table with his bare hands again?"

The emphasis was on the word 'again'.

"From the sound of it, he would be needing a new one. This was the seventh this year, yet he gets angry when we suggest a metal table."

"Of course he would be angry. He likes to break tables when he is upset."

"It's good. Letting off steam is better than holding it in. Er Mao prepared a warehouse of tables for him anyways. It would last him a few years."

"Now that you mention it, have you heard from Er Mao?"

"No."

When these two chatted, Zheng Tan was checking out the soda factory next door. This factory was moving at the moment. Trucks were lined up to transport goods away.

Zheng Tan watched a truck that was being loaded. Workers were carrying containers of glass soda bottles onto the truck. As they were working, police cars drove by. One of the workers watched the cars and speculated the reason why the police was here. He didn't notice a bottle cap by his foot and stepped on it. He twisted his ankle and dropped the container he was carrying.

The soda bottles that were being moved around made quite a commotion after being dropped. Glass shards exploded and flew everywhere.

Zheng Tan heard a bang. Workers close to the accident were hurt by the flying shards of glass. Their clothes were slashed and their hands and wrists, which weren't covered by clothes, were cut.

The hurt workers were taken inside, so Zheng Tan focused back on the factory he was in. Policemen were getting out of their cars and were talking to Wei Ling and his senior.

By the looks of it, Wei Ling wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

Zheng Tan yawned and stretched. He decided to take a nap first.

Chapter 26

Bite My Ear If You Dare

After giving out instructions, He Tao lit another cigarette and sat down next to Wei Ling. Now that this case was solved, he felt that a weight was lifted off his shoulders. In order to run his operation, he had been controlling his smoking so as not to smell like tobacco. Now, it was no longer an issue.

"Where do you plan to work as a security guard? In a residential complex? A company or maybe a factory?" He asked.

"A company or a factory. It will depend. After all, the factory is not yet built." Wei Ling answered.

"Whose factory is it?"

"Charcoal's dad and his friends. I decided to join in last minute. However, I don't know much about science, so after investing what was left of my savings, I decided that being a security guard is more suitable for me. I plan to invite my retired friends from the army to join in later."

He Tao was silent for a moment, he pointed to the black cat sleeping on the rooftop and said: "His dad?"

"Yeah." Wei Ling flipped the ash off his cigarette. "People at the quarters use language like that. They call themselves their pets' daddy or mommy."

"Since when did people decide to hold pets in such high esteem?"

"I suppose people started doing that when they became disappointed in humans. There was a saying that I heard earlier that the more people you know, the more you appreciate how cute pets are."

"I think this way of thinking is too extreme, and I for one do not think some pets are cute. For instance, that one." Wei Ling pointed to Zheng Tan, "That one has quite the temper and never listens."

He Tao tsked. He was going to add on some insults but remembered he still owed the cat a favor, so he didn't say anything.

"Oh right. Tell that friend of yours to stay out of the spotlight for the moment. I heard that there is command from up top to clean up the streets."

"I'd tell him even if you didn't mention it. It's a mess out there, so it's good that the police are planning to take action."

The police officers had finished their tasks, so He Tao did not press the matter. He patted Wei Ling on the shoulder. "If you ever need help, you know I'm here for you. I'll go check out your factory once it has been built."

Wei Ling shook his hands to indicate he understood. "As for you, my brother, don't just focus on advancing your career. Your moves are not what they use to be. If not for that cat earlier, you'd be in big trouble this time."

He Tao chuckled. "You boys are a pain in the ass. You cause trouble after trouble, so I need to be in high places to take care of you guys. Otherwise, you would need to go begging someone else."

Wei Ling watched as He Tao walked away. He took a long drag of his cigarette, then threw it on the ground and extinguished it. He called out to Zheng Tan: "Charcoal, let's go."

Zheng Tan stood up and stretched. He looked around him, then at the real estate advertisement billboard nearby, then shook his fur and went downstairs. It was time to go home.

On their way back to Chu Hua city, Wei Ling slowed the motorcycle down and took a few detours. It was like he was out just for a drive.

It was three in the afternoon when they got back to the quarters. Zheng Tan went straight to take a bath. He scratched his basin to hint at Wei Ling to heat up water.

Wei Ling took a shower as well. Because they were going to the hospital soon, it was not good to carry the dirt they had collected during their morning trip around. It was less about their looks, but rather because they didn't want to bring too many germs into the hospital room. Even if Mama Jiao wasn't staying in a sterilized room, it was better to tidy up for the hospital.

When they arrived at the hospital, they heard Mama Jiao laughing with the resident doctor named Li Xiaoxi who was taking care of her.

Zheng Tan twitched his ears. The kids were at school at this hour, what on earth could make Mama Jiao so happy?

Zheng Tan got his answer when they stepped into the ward.

At the moment, on Mama Jiao's bed, a blue figure rolled around next to her good arm. It laid flat next to her, asking for belly rubs.

Zheng Tan: "..."

Why was this idiot back so soon?

Inside, General's owner, Professor Tan, was chatting with Papa Jiao.

Professor Tan, who was about the same age as Papa Jiao, looked extremely pleased. "This time on our trip to that natural reserve, we met another blue macaw just like General. It was owned by an ecology professor. That macaw was smart too, although it couldn't enunciate quite as well as General here."

"The two birds had a singing contest. Of course, our General won big time. That macaw had no talent. It couldn't hit the high notes nor sing the lower notes. It sounded like it was hiccupping when it was trying to go low and sounded like dying chickens when it tried to go high."

Everyone laughed at this.

Hearing his story being told, General, who was lying on Mama Jiao's bed, flipped up and croaked: "Hurray for General! Hurray for General!"

"Sing us another song, General." Li Xiaoxi said.

General tilted his head and thought for a moment. Five seconds later, he started:

Oh sweet love~~your smile is like candy~~ like flowers blossoming in spring ~~
blossoming~ in spring~

He tilted his head from left to right as he sang. Zheng Tan was disgusted by his antics.

Ignoring General, Zheng Tan hopped on Mama Jiao's bed and squeezed the parrot away.

Seeing Zheng Tan jump on her bed, Mama Jiao rearranged the covers for his comfort.

With the soft and warm quilt under his belly, Zheng Tan felt better.

General sang while inching towards Zheng Tan. When he finished the last note, his beak was still open and he flew towards the cat. He was aiming for a nip on Zheng Tan's ear.

Zheng Tan flexed his paws and twitched his ears. He glanced sideways at the parrot with a threatening gleam in his eyes as if to say, bite me if you dare. I will teach you a lesson.

General hadn't seen a cat for a while and couldn't help himself. He wanted to nip on the cat's ears. However, he paused when he saw the look in Zheng Tan's eyes and eventually turned away.

Everyone in the ward couldn't stop laughing at the bird and the cat.

Li Xiaoxi checked the time and had to leave to complete her duties. She was due to be back later to change Mama Jiao's bandages.

Wei Ling did not stay for long either.

Zheng Ling laid next to Mama Jiao. He made sure to stay away from her hurt arm and other injuries.

Professor Tan and Papa Jiao were talking about projects at the university. General was bored and decided to practice opening bottles with the plastic bottle on the night stand. Whenever he was close to touching one of Mama Jiao's wounds, Zheng Tan shooed him away.

It was much warmer indoors, and Zheng Tan was growing sleepy. However, he was snapped out of his drowsiness by a knock at the door. Recently, Li Xiaoxi was in charge of Mama Jiao's ward. A few doctors came to check up on her regularly as well. Li Xiaoxi, of course, knew about Zheng Tan but the other doctors did not. If it was anyone else beside her, it was best he stayed out of sight.

General flew to his owner with a bottle cap in his beak. Zheng Tan jumped into a bag next to Papa Jiao.

The person who came in was in her thirties. Her clothing was orthodox but not serious. She seemed approachable but dignified at the same time. Of course, she was no match for The Buddha when it came to being dignified.

Seeing her, Papa Jiao stood up immediately.

"Ms. Yang, I'm surprised to see you here."

This woman was Jiao Yuan's homeroom teacher who also taught him Chinese. Zheng Tan had seen her before several times.

"I heard Ms. Gu was injured, so I decided to come by to visit." Ms. Yang put down the fruit basket she brought with her.

Ms. Yang did not live in the quarters. She lived off campus. However, she got off work early and happened to hear that Jiao Yuan's mother was injured, so she came to visit since she was here accompanying an older relative for a physical.

"Oh yes. The school had a blackout. At this time of the year, students couldn't possibly see the blackboard clearly without lights after four, so the last period was cancelled. I saw a few kids downstairs in the fruit shop. They had come here to visit Ms. Gu. I told them I'd keep their surprise visit a secret. Don't tell them I told you." Ms. Yang smiled and said.

Zheng Tan: "..."

Poor kids. Sold out by their well-respected teacher.

Ms. Yang had to leave early because she was here with someone. Five minutes after she left, Zheng Tan heard the footsteps of children outside. The door was pushed ajar, and Jiao Yuan poked his head in. He looked around the room and said: "My classmates heard my mother was in hospital, so they came to visit."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Ask them in." Papa Jiao pretended he had just learnt the news and got up to welcome them.

The ward was small, so Papa Jiao and Professor Tan went out to let the children come

in.

Zheng Tan peaked out from the bag. He saw the usual crowd: Lan Tianzhu, Xiong Xiong and Su An. With them was a girl.

"Well, who do we have here?" Mama Jiao looked at the girl.

Mama Jiao might not know everyone in Jiao Yuan's class, but she at least recognized most of them. This girl, however, she was sure she had never met her before.

"She's a transfer student. Her name is Shi Rui." Jiao Yuan emphasized her name.

"No wonder I don't recognize her. She's a new kid."

"Her name is Shi Rui." Jiao Yuan emphasized the name again.

"I know her name is Shi Rui."

Mama Jiao did not understand why her son was saying the girl's name over and over again. But Papa Jiao and Professor Tan, who were standing at the door, looked at each other and smiled. They understood what Jiao Yuan was hinting at.

Jiao Yuan pointed at Su An, then at Shi Rui who was staring at him. He didn't understand why Mama Jiao was still oblivious. Su An's ears were burning red.

"Do you understand?"

"Jiao Yuan!" Shi Rui raised her voice.

"What are you afraid of? Everyone is bound to find out sooner or later. Didn't you say your family would be moving to the Eastern Quarters soon?" Jiao Yuan did not care at all that Shi Rui was staring at him.

Mama Jiao finally understood with his very obvious hint. Now, the only ones who were still kept out of the joke were General, who was standing on Professor Tan's shoulder, and Zheng Tan, who was in a bag.

He finally understood after Jiao Yuan explained the events of the week. Litmus ^[1] was an organic acid commonly used as an acid and alkali indicator in chemistry. It turned red when in contact with acids and turned blue when in contact with a base. It was

very often mentioned in middle school chemistry textbooks.

The day Shi Rui transferred into the class, Su An was on sick leave. He didn't go to school until the afternoon. After class, he was resting on his desk when Lan Tianzhu and Jiao Yuan asked him if he knew Shi Rui.

He looked up and answered: "Of course I do. It's the indicator."

Shi Rui was standing behind him at the moment. She was not pleased. She hated being nicknamed the indicator.

After that, Su An grew red whenever he came in contact with the girl. His friends teased him on this relentlessly.

It was quite a coincidence that Su An's name sounded like acid^[2].

As the kids were laughing and joking around, Papa Jiao's phone rang. Professor Tan had decided to leave. General flew out the window and waited for his owner outside. It wouldn't be good to have him wander through the hospital.

Before Papa Jiao left to take his call, he thought about it and eventually decided to take the bag with Zheng Tan out with him.

Kids could never keep secrets. Let alone there was the unfamiliar Shi Rui with them today. It was best to avoid any trouble.

He answered the call at the end of the hallway.

Zheng Tan listened to the phone call in the bag. The person who was calling was that Yuan Zi who Papa Jiao went to college with. They were talking about issues regarding the company they were starting.

After the phone call, Papa Jiao looked down at Zheng Tan who was still sitting in the bag and said, "Charcoal, the thirty thousand you have in your bank account that you earned through those advertisements you did, I'm going to put it into our company. It would be like an investment. We'll pay you dividends. You'll be a shareholder."

Zheng Tan made a lot of money from acting in Xiao Guo's advertisements. Originally, he went over once a month for new photoshoots. Xiao Guo was receiving positive feedback, and now Zheng Tan went over once every two weeks. Zheng Tan did not

know the actual results, but Xiao Guo looked at him as if he was the god of money whenever they met.

Investing the money in Papa Jiao's company wouldn't be a problem, Zheng Tan thought. He wasn't going to use the money anyways. Xiao Guo mentioned other ads earlier, so he would be making new money soon. It wouldn't matter even if Papa Jiao's company failed and they lost all the money.

What Zheng Tan didn't know was that one day, in the future, the amount on his bank card would become so large that it would be shocking.

Footnote:

[1] Litmus is pronounced Shi Rui in Chinese.

[2] Acid is pronounced Suan in Chinese.

Chapter 27

Who Knows What Cats Are Thinking

Yuan Zi's real name was Yuan Zhiyi. Besides Papa Jiao, Wei Ling and him, another one of Papa Jiao's old college friends in Chuhua, Fei Hang, also invested.

After Professor Yuan passed away, Yuan Zhiyi began his own career. Recently, he had been abroad. Most of the equipment they needed was produced abroad. Besides, he wanted to gain some experience in the field.

Though his father had passed away, the professor's connections were still there. This put them a head above competitors.

Zheng Tan didn't know much about the science stuff, but he did know that the equipment they bought was easily above 10000 a piece. That was in dollars, not Yuan. Zheng Tan rarely went to the lab. The few glimpses he took of the equipment didn't tell him much. The labels were all in English. The few times Chinese showed up, it was the names of owners.

He heard that the Bio department invested two million in equipment recently. However, during his trip to the lab yesterday, he did not notice much of a difference.

It was no wonder Papa Jiao was complaining about not having enough money for the company. The fund he received could not be used for this purpose. He invested the family's entire savings, a little less than two million yuan, in the company. This kind of money wouldn't be able to purchase too much equipment.

That day, Papa Jiao told Zheng Tan that he received a call from Mr. Guo saying that there was an urgent job.

All of the work Mr. Guo threw in his way was related to modeling for ads. It was a piece of cake for Zheng Tan. It was mostly videos and story posters these few times. If the job was urgent, then the pay was definitely negotiable. Papa Jiao took care of money matters. All Zheng Tan had to do was go over and strike a few poses.

The afternoon Papa Jiao received the call from Mr. Guo, the man came to the hospital

with health foods and vitamin supplements. He paid Mama Jiao a visit before leaving to chat business with Papa Jiao in the hallway.

"Kitten food?" Papa Jiao asked.

"Yeah. One of my brother's client's cat had a litter of kittens. The mommy cat got injured and was being treated at my brother's clinic. The kittens are six weeks now and are off milk. The client said that he was keeping only one kitten out of five. The rest he was planning to give away. I took a look. The kittens were gorgeous. So I planned to use this opportunity to shoot a kitten food ad."

Mr. Guo's brother was a vet. Before the pet centre was built, his clinic was separate from Mr. Guo's pet store. Now that they were combined, they shared customers. Originally, Mr. Guo was planning to wait before making kitten food ads. It was hard to achieve the effect he envisioned with kittens. After all, kittens were not trained and would not obey instructions.

"If it's a kitten food ad, why do you need Charcoal?" Papa Jiao asked.

"I wanted to shoot the kittens together with a cat. Kittens are too hard to control on their own. I thought it might be better if a cat was there to control them. It's still going to be difficult but hopefully easier than before."

"What do you mean?" Papa Jiao still did not get it. First of all, his cat was a male. In the wild, male cats sometimes killed their kittens. Pet cats did the same in some circumstances. It was unsafe for kittens to be around a male cat. Secondly, Mr. Guo had a few cats in his store. They were all calm and gentle. Some of the cats were expensive breeds. Certainly, they were better than his ill-tempered house cat.

"I want Charcoal to go do a tryout. We'll see how things turn out. All the cats in my store tried yesterday. None of them achieved the desired effect. That's why I came to find Charcoal."

Papa Jiao accepted Mr. Guo's explanation. They started to talk about the pay.

As the humans were chatting, Zheng Tan was slightly upset. He disliked most human children beside Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi, let alone kittens. This job was such a pain in the ass.

Xiao Guo left after agreeing on a price. He would pick up Zheng Tan tomorrow

morning. If Zheng Tan could complete the task, the pay would be the agreed-upon amount. The kitten food in Mr. Guo's shop was on the pricey side, but the quality was top-notch as well. It would certainly make him a lot of money if he could break into the market. So this time, Zheng Tan's pay was higher than before.

After hearing the pay, Zheng Tan decided to swallow his disdain for kitten-sitting. It was just an advertisement. The job would take at most a few hours.

"Charcoal, I will remember the investment I made with the money in your account. Maybe one day, you will become a big shareholder in our company. Also, there is no need to push yourself for the job. You're going over there to shoot an ad, not to be upset. The worst that could happen is that we don't do the ad."

Zheng Tan meowed to show he understood. Papa Jiao was clearly joking at first, so Zheng Tan didn't take his words to heart. However, he agreed wholeheartedly with Papa Jiao on the second issue. He did not pressure himself but ate and slept like usual.

The next morning, Zheng Tan didn't go running, but waited on the tall Parasol tree in the quarters. He had done the same thing the last few times Mr. Guo came to get him. So the man didn't even have to enter the building; he just had to look up at the tree branches.

Most of the leaves had fallen out, so Mr. Guo could see Zheng Tan right away.

His face cracked into a smile when he saw the cat. He looked like he just saw gold. He patted the black duffel bag on his shoulder.

"Come on Charcoal, time to go to work."

Zheng Tan disliked pet travel cases. So whenever Mr. Guo came to pick him up, he would bring a large duffel bag or backpack.

The pet center was not far from the quarters. Mr. Guo came on a scooter. He put the bag in the front basket of the scooter. Zheng Tan stayed inside the bag but poked out his head to look at passing scenery.

Mr. Guo's pet center was on the rise. He had plenty of old customers, and now, because of the ads, more and more people knew of his store. After placing ads on some online forums, he received a few bulk orders. These eventually turned into some long-time customers.

They went in through the side door. It was closer to the studio, and there were less people here.

His employees were familiar with the black cat that their boss treated like the God of money. Mr. Guo's explanation was that this cat had special training, so it was extra good at following orders. It was an expensive hire. He emphasized expensive, so the employees would know to treat it better.

This cat was, in fact, his store's God of money. It was all because of him that the cat food sold so quickly. The ads played a big part in their sales. That and the quality of their food. Mr. Guo remembered to praise himself while praising others.

The employees did not doubt Mr. Guo's explanation. They saw Zheng Tan as similar to the animals in circuses. If Zheng Tan knew he was being compared to circus animals, who knew what he would think.

As usual, Zheng Tan hopped off the scooter and went into the studio. The people were the same, the cats and the golden retriever who all came to watch were the same, but a difference was easy to find.

In the corner of the studio, where there used to be equipment, was a pen. Inside were five, furry, little kittens. Three of which had the clear markings of a tabby. The other two kittens were black and white. Mr. Guo mentioned that these kittens were part Siberian cat, so their fur was slightly longer than your average cat.

Next to the pen was a cat tree, on it lay an American shorthair. Its two front legs were crossed together and it was watching the five kittens below.

The name of this cat was Prince. It belonged to the store and was named by Mr. Guo. The picture on the packaging of the canned cat food was of him.

The reason why he was used came down to the superiorities of the breed. American shorthairs had chubby faces and were slightly larger than other cats. They looked well built, unlike house cats which were often skinnier. Just on looks alone, it trumped Zheng Tan. Many cat food brands used American shorthairs on their packaging.

However, Zheng Tan was much smarter than that cat. This was an unfair competition. After all, Zheng Tan still thought about himself as a human. He didn't want to compare intelligence with a cat.

The other reason why Zheng Tan didn't make it on the packaging was because he was a black cat. Not everyone liked black cats. Some were still wary of them due to superstitious reasons.

So, looks were important. But Zheng Tan had no way of changing his looks, he didn't plan to dye his fur.

At the moment, Prince was staring at the five kittens. His paw flexed from time to time. He looked eager to jump in, but was not sure if he should.

"Everything still the same?" Mr. Guo asked the employees present.

"Yes. Whenever Prince went in, the kittens treated him as their arch enemy. The other cats were treated the same. Both the male and females. Boss, didn't you say Charcoal was ill-tempered. You sure he wouldn't bite the kittens?" One employee asked.

Zheng Tan, who was half-way up a cat tree, heard his words. He looked over at Mr. Guo.

How dare you bad mouth me! Who said I was ill-tempered? How was I ill-tempered?

As he thought angrily, Zheng Tan scratched the cat tree so hard that the inner fillings were showing. Prince saw this and inched in the opposite direction.

Looking at the scratch marks on the cat tree, Mr. Guo had a moment of doubt, but he decided to give it a try. He told all the employees to keep an eye on the pen. If Zheng Tan was going to bite the kittens, they would rush in to save them.

Zheng Tan squatted on the cat tree and looked down at the five kittens. At six weeks old, they were already showing curiosity. They used everything to sharpen their teeth. Everything was a toy to them. When they weren't playing with something, they played with their tails or paws. Zheng Tan saw this behavior as slightly schizophrenic.

Zheng Tan really wished he didn't have to go in to play with the little nuts. However, he was already here, so he at least had to pretend to work.

After some self-encouragement, Zheng Tan took a deep breath and jumped in.

The five kittens were deeply alarmed by the sudden appearance of Zheng Tan. Two of them immediately jumped and the fur on their backs stood up on end. They eyed Zheng Tan suspiciously.

Outside the pen, Mr. Guo and his employees all looked on nervously for any sign that the black cat was going to bite. Mr. Guo had promised the owner of the kittens that they would be returned safely when he borrowed them.

Zheng Tan stayed still after he entered the pen. He knew that everyone was watching him, so he had to keep his claws and teeth hidden. So he decided to do nothing and stood still. He planned to wait until the kittens passed their instinctive stage of alarm.

To everyone's surprise, the largest kitten of the bunch seemed to calm down. It started to come closer to Zheng Tan. At first, it inched slowly, then it picked up the pace, its tail held high.

Zheng Tan looked at the little tabby coming over. He didn't know how to react. It was so small. He could slap it away easily.

The tabby came to Zheng Tan's side and patted Zheng Tan on the front leg. Then patted him again, and again. Then it rolled over and started playing with Zheng Tan's paw.

Zheng Tan shook his whiskers. How he wanted to slap away the little thing.

Soon all the other kittens followed suit. Some played with his paws, others played with his tail.

Zheng Tan felt he had to do something. So he pulled away his tail and walked away. The five kittens followed behind him immediately. The largest one which ran faster even caught up and tried to grab Zheng Tan's tail.

Zheng Tan was losing patience and wanted to get away from the kittens. However, when he started to walk faster, the kittens started meowing like he was doing something inhumane.

So the following scene took place: A black cat traced the side of a pen and walked in circles. Behind it followed five kittens, which meowed whenever they couldn't keep up. The black cat would stop and wait, and they would quickly catch up.

"So are they judging cats by appearance?" An employee said. None of the cats in the store got along with the kittens, but the black cat was apparently different.

"Appearance?" Mr. Guo pointed at the cat walking in circles. "Who do you think is cuter? Our cats or that one?"

The employee fell silent.

Another employee then asked: "Why didn't the kittens reject Charcoal?"

"...Who knows what cats are thinking." This was all Mr. Guo came up with.

Chapter 28

Your Li Yuanba is Pregnant

Seeing that Zheng Tan was getting along 'well' with the kittens, Prince decided to try his luck again. He jumped into the pen.

The five kittens reacted in the exact same way as before. They arched their backs and hissed. Except now, because Zheng Tan was by their side, they felt as if they had support and acted even more aggressively. They huddled by Zheng Tan's side, making it hard for him to move.

Prince took two steps in their direction, and the kittens hissed harder. At the same time, they squeezed closer to Zheng Tan.

Zheng Tan was deeply annoyed. He didn't understand: why must the kittens come so close? He was stiff from maintaining the same position for too long. His annoyance reached peak level. So he took it out on Prince.

Zheng Tan pinned down his ears and stared at the American Shorthair making its way over with ice cold eyes. He was planning to give it a good beating if it didn't go away.

Seeing this, Mr. Guo hurriedly called out to his cat. By the looks of it, Prince was definitely not doing the ad. The kittens were not giving him a chance.

Seeing that 'the enemy' was gone, the kittens calmed down and began playing beside Zheng Tan again. They followed him when he moved and surrounded him when he stopped. They rolled around next to him or played with his paws and tail.

Unlike the happy kittens, Zheng Tan had his moody face on. Cats did not have a lot of expressions, but anyone with eyes could tell Zheng Tan was an angry cat at the moment.

Zheng Tan looked down at the kittens playing next to his paw.

Kitten paws were soft. They were a soft pink under the light, unlike the rough paws of cats. Zheng Tan ran every day and climbed trees, his paws were even more rough.

Zheng Tan looked at the little paws waving in the air. He raised one of his own paws and touched it to compare sizes. Kitten paws were tiny. They were smaller than the center cushion on his paw, but they were so soft.

Ka Ka ka.

Flash lights accompanied the sound of a camera.

Zheng Tan looked over. Mr. Guo was taking pictures, switching positions frequently like a monkey. Because the studio was filled with props, Mr. Guo's line of sight was often blocked, so his picture-taking pose was very awkward. It was akin to the posture that gross men used when trying to take underwear pictures of young girls.

"Boss, shall we use Charcoal for the ad?" The employees were very eager. It seemed that the black cat was the one for the job. The store's cats were not even close to being able to complete the job.

"Charcoal it is. Get everything ready. Let's start!" Mr. Guo was very excited. "This ad will surely win us lots of orders."

The ad Mr. Guo had in mind was simple. A cat found a litter of abandoned kittens, so it brought them cat food. Here, two kinds of food were being advertised: canned kitten food and a milk based treat. Both products were produced and sold by Mr. Guo's store. Both passed quality checks with flying colors, which was why Papa Jiao agreed to let Zheng Tan do the ad.

Mr. Guo's biggest worry used to be that the kittens could not get along with the cat. However, he soon realized that it was also a problem when the kittens liked the cat too much. They refused to stay put in the prop nest. Even if they stayed put for a second, they ran out the moment they saw Zheng Tan.

But this was still easier to deal with compared to if the two parties didn't get along. Even better, the kittens appeared to genuinely like the food. This increased Mr. Guo's confidence in his product.

The photo shoot took four hours. What followed was post production, which had nothing to do with Zheng Tan. He wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

The weather, however, was not letting him have his way. The sky had darkened, and it started to rain, even though the forecasts predicted a clear day.

Mr. Guo called Papa Jiao to inform him that he would be taking Zheng Tan home when it stopped raining. It shouldn't rain for long. He would have the cat back before nightfall.

So Zheng Tan had to stay in this goddamn studio. The silver lining was that the kittens were tired out by the photo shoot and were asleep at the moment. There was a heating pad under their bed. Their mother was not here; they could catch a cold sleeping alone in this weather.

Originally Mr. Guo wanted Zheng Tan to go accompany them. After all, no heating bed could actually compete with a real cat.

Zheng Tan ignored Mr. Guo and pretended to take a nap. He was not going to babysit any longer.

During break time, the employees got delivery. Knowing that Zheng Tan didn't eat cat food, Mr. Guo got Zheng Tan a serving of chicken rice.

As everyone ate, the door of the studio was suddenly thrown open.

"Guo Xiaoming! Help!"

A woman came in. She appeared to be young, but looked extremely distressed. She had an umbrella and her hair was all down. Zheng Tan couldn't see her face with all that hair and the black-rimmed glasses she had on.

She had a pet travel bag which she managed to keep dry even though she was dripping wet.

Mr. Guo almost choked when he saw her. "I told you Yanzi, my name is Guo Mingyi, not Guo Xiaoming. Also what's up with you?"

"Help! My Li Yuanba is sick." She put her umbrella down and ran over.

Hearing the name Li Yuanba, Zheng Tan almost spat out the piece of chicken he was chewing.

What must the cat look like to deserve a name like that? ^[1]

Zheng Tan looked over curiously, wanting to see the cat inside the bag.

"How come? I thought you said your cat was quite healthy." Mr. Guo went over to an empty table. He didn't want to check on a cat where everyone was eating.

"Also, you should bring it to my brother if it's sick. I sell pet products here." He unzipped the travel bag as he spoke.

"I know you from high school. I feel better taking him to a place where I have connections." Yanzi looked very worried.

After Mr. Guo unzipped the pet bag, Zheng Tan saw Li Yuanba.

Jeez! The cat's fur pattern could only be described as the aftermath of a fire. It was indeed unique. The cat was mostly black with patches of yellow and white.

From a cat's perspective, Zheng Tan felt that this cat was a not easy going. It looked like it did well in fights.

This was Mr. Guo's first time seeing Li Yuanba. He had seen pictures of the cat online before and had heard about it from Yanzi. After the two got in touch, they chatted online once. Yanzi was very happy to learn Mr. Guo had opened a pet center. She had shown him pictures of the cat and came in to buy vaccines and cat food before, but this was the first time she showed up with the cat.

"Your cat... seems fierce." Mr. Guo did not pet the cat. He had enough experience that he could tell the cats current mood from its eyes. He decided it was best if he didn't touch it, or else he would probably earn a few scratches or bites.

The cat laid there calmly. Besides giving Mr. Guo a warning look when he came close, it didn't show any unusualness.

Mr. Guo looked at the cat, then asked: "Why do you think it's sick?"

"He just lays there and sleeps. He used to at least go out to play. He doesn't react at all when I play with him at home, not that he ever played much with me. He completely ignores all his toys and this has been going on for weeks. My neighbor says he's probably sick. Guo Xiaoming, do you think he's sick, like really really sick?"

Mr. Guo thought for a second then asked: "What about its appetite? Any changes?"

"Yes. He's eating more now."

Mr. Guo nodded. "It's fine. Don't worry. Li Yuanba's just pregnant."

Zheng Tan: "... That's one weird sentence.

Yanzi had an even more extreme reaction. She looked at her cat as if looking at a monster: "That's impossible. Li Yuanba can't be pregnant. He's a boy."

Mr. Guo rolled his eyes. "You can tell that's not true just by its fur color. Black and Yellow cats are basically all female. The pattern is caused by random X chromosome inactivation in cells in different places of the cat's body."

If the inactivation happened to a dominant gene, the patch of fur turns out black. If it happened to a recessive gene, the patch of fur turns out to be yellow.

Yanzi was still somewhat confused after listening to Mr. Guo's explanation. "I'm a CS major, not a genetics major."

The two went to highschool together, but majored in different things in University.

"Did nobody tell you that your cat was female?" Mr. Guo was perplexed. Yanzi lived in an old apartment complex, the residents were familiar with one another and had regular interactions. Even if Yanzi couldn't tell the cat was female, it didn't make sense that no one realized this.

"Well... I kinda just stay home all the time. My neighbor said he's a boy, so I named him Li Yuanba." Yanzi seemed embarrassed.

Yanzi's actual name was Li Yan. It was an ordinary name, and she was an ordinary girl. She never stood out from the crowd when she was a student. This cat used to be a stray. She had found it and adopted it.

"Your neighbor? The short guy with the hair parted in the middle and the really shiny shoes?" Mr. Guo asked.

"Yeah. That's him." Yanzi nodded.

Mr. Guo tutted. "That guy brought his cat in to get neutered last week. His cat was female; it can't be neutered. The guy probably thought it was easy to tell the gender of a cat like it was easy to tell the gender of a dog."

Now realizing that her female cat was pregnant, Yanzi asked if she needed to do anything special to take care of it.

"Well, avoid giving it medicine or any chemicals, especially steroids and Bleomycin. You need to control the quality and quantity of its food intake..."

Yanzi recorded everything Mr. Guo said.

"I'll stop here for now. Go home and look it up on the internet. If you have any more questions, feel free to ask me. Leave me a message online or email me. I'm a bit busy recently, but I check my email regularly."

"Thanks so much. Ah! Are those kittens?" Yanzi finally saw the fur balls in the corner of the studio.

"Yes. They're six weeks old. They just did a photoshoot for an ad and fell asleep."

"An ad? An ad for kittens? Can I see it?"

Mr. Guo considered it and showed her the unprocessed photos.

"They're so cute." Yanzi exclaimed. She pointed at Zheng Tan who was resting on a cat tree. "Is that black cat the father?"

"No. Their mother is a shorthair house cat, and their father is a Siberian cat."

"Then how is it getting along so well with the kittens."

"...Maybe kittens just find it approachable." Mr. Guo was curious himself.

"What a special cat. Guo Xiaoming, when my cat has kittens, I'll bring them in for a photoshoot as well. Can I borrow that cat too?"

Mr. Guo did not answer but looked over to Zheng Tan.

Zheng Tan: "..."

He did not want to babysit kittens anymore.

[1] Li Yuanba is the brother of a Chinese emperor. He is said to be a very strong warrior.

Chapter 29

What Are You Looking At

After finishing the kitten food ad, Zheng Tan did not have any time to worry about its reception. He had a bigger thing to focus on; Mama Jiao was coming home.

Even though she had not completely recovered, there was no point in staying in the hospital anymore. Faculty benefits covered most of the costs, but she didn't want to occupy a bed when others might need it more. She always felt uncomfortable in the hospital anyways. Also, she didn't want the kids to eat cafeteria food any longer. Not that the cafeteria served poor food; it was just that home cooked meals always seemed better.

So, on a sunny Saturday morning, the entire Jiao family went to the hospital.

Jiao Yuan brought his backpack, hiding Zheng Tan within it. When unfamiliar doctors and unrelated strangers walked by, Zheng Tan would bury himself inside the bag. Otherwise, he would stick out his head to watch everyone pack.

Everyone was smiling. It was hard not to feel happy about leaving the hospital.

During Mama Jiao's stay in the hospital, the family had brought quite a bit of stuff here. Though it didn't seem like a lot normally, the stuff couldn't even fit into a large cardboard box. It included bowls and cups for the kids, cat bowl for Zheng Tan and some blankets and throws.

Zheng Tan looked on as everyone worked busily, then he took a peek inside the neighboring wards. A man in his fifties came out holding one of those hospital portable toilet basins. He was headed to the washroom to wash the thing.

After he was done, he ran into Papa Jiao carrying a large box outside the ward. "Yo Jiao. Here to take Gu home?"

Papa Jiao sighed, "She's not yet recovered, but she complains that she always feels uneasy here at the hospital. So we figured she might as well go home to rest." Though he sighed, his tone was light and cheerful.

Papa Jiao and the man chatted for a while. Packing up was tiring, and Papa Jiao could use a rest.

From their conversation, Zheng Tan found out that the man's wife was injured in the same car crash as Mama Jiao. However, she wasn't quite as lucky. Beside flesh wounds, she had broken several bones. On top of that, she had high blood pressure and chronic heart disease. She had been in critical condition several times after the accident. She only left the ICU a few days ago.

Her husband never left her bedside during this whole time.

Mama Jiao had to stay in bed during her first few days here as well. Papa Jiao also stayed by her side catering to her every need. During that time, the most frequent thing Zheng Tan heard him say was 'don't worry, I'm here'.

Sometimes, Zheng Tan envied them. He envied Papa and Mama Jiao, and he envied the man and his wife. He felt that the relationship they shared was what family was supposed to be like.

"Ok! Let's go home!"

Mama Jiao dragged a small suitcase out of the ward. Papa Jiao grabbed it from her right away. Yi Xin, who had just finished some experiments, arrived to lend a hand.

They hadn't told Auntie Ling about their plans today, and Papa Jiao had only mentioned it to Yi Xin briefly when they were discussing their schedules. However, Yi Xin remembered and came.

Papa Jiao had borrowed an SUV from a colleague. They loaded everything and headed back towards the eastern quarters.

As they were loading the car, both Papa Jiao and Zheng Tan were thinking the exact same thing. It was time to buy a car.

Papa Jiao was a bit short on cash at the moment. Every penny he had was invested in the company, including the money made by his cat. He didn't have enough to purchase a car just yet.

As he drove, he decided to wait a bit longer. He would buy the car before the end of next year and then take the whole family, including Charcoal, back to his parents' for

New Years.

This year, the Lunar new year was quite early. Because of Mama Jiao's condition, Papa Jiao had decided to stay in Chuhua for the holidays. He had informed his parents of this decision and offered to have them come over. However, Grandpa Jiao refused. On the phone, he said: "Your place is tiny. I'll stay in our town."

Mama Jiao's school was very accommodating and gave her paid leave so she could rest and recover. All the injured teachers got such treatment, so Mama Jiao was happy to accept it. She would have more time to spend at home taking care of the kids and the cat. She could make up for the time she spent in the hospital.

With Mama Jiao home, Zheng Tan felt that his life was glorious. He woke up at the same time as the kids; washed up with Gu Youzi and went to the bathroom with Jiao Yuan. Breakfast would be waiting for them on the table when they were finished.

There was now one more person joining Jiao Yuan on his trip to school. Shi Rui had moved into the quarters. After the theft incident, the vice principle's relatives had moved out and their apartment was vacant. So Professor Shi's family moved in. The apartment was completely renovated, so it saved his family quite a lot of work.

Though the kids had people walking to school with them, they still liked it when Zheng Tan walked with them. After dropping off the kids at the school gate, Zheng Tan went on to do his daily exercise.

He rarely saw Zhuo anymore when he went to the lake these days. Apparently, the weather was too cold so she stayed home. The Buddha had helped get her a dorm room.

It was time to do another photoshoot for Mr. Guo again. He came to pick up Zheng Tan and brought a magazine. It was the magazine that his friend had started. Most of the pet ads Zheng Tan did were published in that magazine. Apparently, it was selling well.

Mr. Guo didn't leave right away, but called Mama Jiao over and showed her the page with Zheng Tan's ad.

Like the earlier ads, this was a story told by pictures made up of shots from the video of Zheng Tan and the kittens. Many readers flipped to the page with the ad first, before reading the other content. This week's ad got especially good reviews.

Beside the story series was a large picture of the large black cat touching paws with the kittens. On the corner of the picture was the line that said 'Justly... So loving you justly, will you take me home?'

Mama Jiao cut the two pages out and added them to her photo album. Then she asked for a printed version of the picture.

Zheng Tan did not actually like the picture that everyone else seemed to love. He felt like it made him look sappy.

However, it didn't matter how he viewed the ad, the sales were the only thing that Mr. Guo cared about.

Apparently, he had received several orders for kitten food after the ad. Though most of the people contacting him only wanted to ask for advice. They wanted to know how to get the same effects and whether the pictures were Photoshopped. More than anything, they wanted to know how he got a cat to act out those moves.

Mr. Guo beat around the bushes and avoided answering anything real.

When Zheng Tan arrived at the studio, he immediately noticed something different.

Li Yan was there and was surrounded by some unrecognizable yet oddly familiar scents. He walked over to her and saw her staring at her computer. On it were pictures. They were poorly taken, but you could still see the subject.

All the pictures featured two cats— one larger, which was Li Yuanba, and the other was tiny. The kitten was white with yellow markings. It was even smaller than the five kittens Zheng Tan had worked with before.

So this was Li Yuanba's kitten?

Zheng Tan looked at the name of the folder, Li Yuanba and Nougat.

Now that he found out the tri-colored cat had kittens, he lost interest. He just wanted to finish his work and go home. Except two of the employees who were supposed to work on the job had other business at the moment. The photoshoot wouldn't start until one to two hours later.

Zheng Tan waited in his usual spot on top the cat tree. He closed his eyes to rest.

Not far from him, Li Yan was discussing things with Mr. Guo while pointing to her laptop. Apparently, both Li Yan and her cat had been staying at the pet center these past days.

The pet center had dorms for employees, and since Li Yan was worried about her cat, she moved into the dorms. She even paid two months' rent in advance. Her cat became a resident too, so Mr. Guo would watch over Li Yuanba.

She never took care of pregnant humans, let alone pregnant cats. As for her, she wasn't picky on living standards as long as it came with internet.

Li Yuanba went into labor a couple days after they moved in. It only had one kitten, which was larger than most kittens that were just born.

Li Yan wanted to take as many pictures as possible to save for the future. However, Li Yuanba acted defensively whenever she saw a camera, and she was not the sweetest looking cat to start off with. Mr. Guo couldn't help either. The cat was on defense mode whenever someone unfamiliar tried to approach.

Li Yan never turned on the flash light when taking her cat pictures, and she had to hide and do pap shots. This cat had incredible reflexes, so most of her attempts failed. Most of the time, she only got a picture of a tail or a shadow.

Eventually, she set up a surveillance camera and spied on her cat everyday on her laptop.

After going through the picture, she began spying again.

"I heard tri-color cats were obedient and more well-behaved than other cats. They are good at looking after their young. Is that true? I think Li Yuanba fits the profile," Li Yan remarked with contentment.

Mr. Guo thought about it: "My grandma used to say that these cats were either angels or devils. Clearly yours is the latter."

"Guo Xiaoming!" Li Yan slapped him with a cat toy.

They joked around for a while before Li Yan began to get worried about her cat again.

"Aren't you being a bit paranoid?"

Mr. Guo rubbed his arm where it was slapped. “Many cats won’t even let people see their kittens. Your cat is pretty nice about it. You don’t have to be so cautious when raising your cat. All you have to do is make sure it gets enough nutrients. Cats are not like dogs; they prefer to live alone. You see those dirty strays around all the time, resting on fences. They are completely calm and content. However, stray dogs are way shabbier. They have their tail between their legs, always on edge and scared. Stray dogs die way easier than cats. Cats hunt for food and are kings of their own kingdom. Dogs like being with their owners and need to be taken care of.”

Zheng Tan looked over to Mr. Guo’s golden retriever. It was a bitch. Most people thought that if the American shorthair was named ‘Prince’, the dog would be named ‘Princess’.

However, its name was Master. Apparently, it was an award winning dog. Mr. Guo hung the award in his shop as advertising. Because of its looks, this dog was put on most of the pet center’s dog food packaging.

Golden retrievers were eye-catching because of the color of their fur. They were also playful, smart and sweet. They were a widely accepted breed of dogs.

Because Mr. Guo mentioned strays, Li Yan looked over to the Golden Retriever as well. Mr. Guo followed her gaze. Master was looking over at them and wagging her tail furiously.

“What are you looking at. We’re talking about you.” Mr. Guo shouted out at her.

It was hard to tell if Master understood his words. She stopped wagging her tail for a moment, but resumed grinning and wagging immediately.

“All you do is eat! You’re useless.” Mr. Guo rolled his eyes.

Zheng Tan started considering what Mr. Guo had just said.

How should he define himself now? Was he a social animal or not? Humans formed societies, but cats preferred to be alone. He had the soul of a human male but the blood of a cat.

If one day he was out in the world on his own, what would happen? Would he be able to enjoy the sunlight or would his tail be between his legs?

He really didn't know.

When the two employees got back, Zheng Tan started working.

This photoshoot was not difficult. It was not for kitten food, so it didn't take long. After it was done, Mr. Guo took Zheng Tan back to the quarters.

Well-fed and well-rested, Zheng Tan laid on the sofa and watched a sappy soap opera with Mama Jiao. He took another nap and then went outside to play. Mama Jiao was home; he didn't have to watch the kids anymore. Sometimes, he stayed out late.

It was the end of the year, and Papa Jiao was busy most of the time. His experiments were reaching a critical point. He often stayed in the lab until eleven or twelve at night. Sometimes, Zheng Tan would stay out until eleven before visiting Papa Jiao at the Bio building, and the two would return on Papa Jiao's scooter together.

Chapter 30

Every School Had One or Two 'PhD' Roads

The biology department had recently hired a few professors who came back from abroad, and the enrollment was higher than ever. Therefore, the department had to reallocate resources. Papa Jiao's office had been given to three young lecturers. He had been given a new office that was much smaller than his original office.

The department was originally worried that Professor Jiao would object, but he was very understanding and moved to his new office the very next day. The department head was very pleased and thought even higher of Professor Jiao.

Of course, the reason that Papa Jiao agreed to the move was not that he understood the department's difficulties and wanted to help. Zheng Tan thought he could guess what Papa Jiao was thinking. Since the department had made such arrangements, as a faculty member, it would be best if he just accepted.

However, Papa Jiao gladly agreed to move to his new office because of its location. The new office had a window facing south, which guaranteed lots of light in the winter. More importantly, it was a corner office. Outside the window was a parasol tree, and it's. The tree branches extended to the office window. Zheng Tan could now climb up the tree and enter through the window when he came to visit.

Often, when Zheng Tan was tired or grew bored, he would come over and jump on Papa Jiao's window sill. Papa Jiao never locked his window when he was in his office. The window was a sliding window; Zheng Tan could easily open it.

Next to Papa Jiao's desk was a small chair. If Jiao Yuan was not there, Zheng Tan would use the chair to nap. Like yesterday, Zheng Tan walked Jiao Yuan and Gu Youzi to school after their nap, then came over to Papa Jiao's office and slept on the chair. In the afternoon, the sun was shining directly on the chair. It was the perfect spot.

He slept until five in the afternoon. Zheng Tan yawned. Papa Jiao was probably not having dinner at home tonight. He was too busy these days and usually had his students bring him food from the cafeteria.

He now had three students working with him. One, of course, was Yi Xin. The other two were undergrads doing their dissertation. Papa Jiao normally ate dinner with them. The four often worked until midnight.

Though Papa Jiao had been planning to get a few more grad students, he was not planning to lower his standards. Quite a few professors now had many grad students working in their labs. Papa Jiao still only had Yi Xin.

Most students from Chuhua university entering grad school this year who were worth teaching, were either planning to study abroad or already reserved for the heads of the department. The rest were with professors who had more projects and more money. The others were not up to standards, so Papa Jiao didn't want any of them. He was planning to wait and see if there would be anyone good from other schools.

Besides working on his projects, he had Yuan Zhiyi's company to worry about.

The company was named 'Tianyuan Biology'. 'Tian' was a word in Professor Yuan's name, and 'yuan' obviously came from Yuan.

Zheng Tan had heard Papa Jiao and Yuan Zhiyi say that they were planning to set up a research department. However, the company did not have enough employees at the moment. Most people with talent did not want to come work at a small start-up, so Papa Jiao and Yuan Zhiyi had their work cut out for them.

Papa Jiao bought most of the equipment he needed through this company. He was able to buy the same equipment with less money with the support of Yuan Zhiyi. If his project went well, Papa Jiao would have an easier time becoming an making professor.

Professor Jiao sometimes recommended the company to teachers who wanted to save research funds. He never mentioned his part in the company, but rather only hinted towards it in conversations with his colleagues. Most professors had plenty of projects. They had funds in the millions, and most were not planning to use these funds on just research. Both Professor Jiao and Yuan Zhiyi understood the kinds of shady dealings that went on in academia, so they decided to keep quiet on some things.

Around six, Zheng Tan jumped onto the tree and closed the window. He went home for dinner. After dinner, he went out for a stroll. Tiger was being kept home. Sheriff and Fatty were still the same—, they always stayed out with Zheng Tan until late at

night.

Because of the weather, other than a few students outside walking to class, most places were empty. This was good for cats. No one got in their way.

Once in a while, they would run into young couples getting it on. Sometimes, Zheng Tan would watch a little and reminisce of the days when he was still human. When he just entered university, he had done similar things. Now that he thought about it, he should have checked his surroundings for cats. He never would have thought anything of them even if he checked though.,

Zheng Tan and co. came to the little forest where he used to climb trees. They had been playing in this area recently with some other cats from other places. Some belonged to school employees while others came from off campus. This place was on the edge of campus, so cats from the outside came inside to play too.

Fights were unavoidable with this many cats. Sheriff had participated in almost every fight, while Fatty was his usual self. He ignored other cats unless they chose to fight him first.

Zheng Tan had gotten into a fight once, because of a female cat.

He swore he did not like that cat. He still thought of himself as human and was not planning to start a relationship with a cat. He would rather watch the young couples. However, the female cat had approached him and that made some other cat envious.

So he got into a fight. It wasn't really a fight. He slapped the cat, and it was knocked away. He couldn't control his force, so he might have slapped the cat harder than he intended.

Other cats who saw the scene left Zheng Tan alone from then on. The cat who got slapped disappeared for quite some time.

Cats were clear when showing their feelings, though they could be hard to understand sometimes as well. Two cats who were close could be licking each other's fur one moment, then start biting and fighting next moment. Then somewhere during the fight, they would start licking again.

Zheng Tan would sometimes see two cats chasing and fighting in the grass. He would hear them screech then see them soon huddling together again.

Cats were running around under the trees. Zheng Tan could hear meows everywhere. He ignored all of them.

Zheng Tan liked nights like this one. He could do whatever he wished. With the night as his cover, no one would see his odd behaviors. He could run around all he liked.

The cats were running around in the grass, Zheng Tan was running around on the trees, going from branch to branch like a monkey. Under the moonlight, his shadow was barely visible.

It was a dark night. He was a black cat.

Zheng Tan increased his pace. He enjoyed the feeling of standing up high, but he was not ready to stop. He ran along tree branches, jumping onto a new tree when he reached the tip. Against the night wind, he could feel leaves falling onto him. He felt like he was breaking free. This excited him.

When he stopped, he realized he was quite far from the other cats. Sheriff and Fatty would come find him later, and the other cats would follow them.

He stood on a branch and panted a little. The night wind was cool; it calmed him. He stepped onto a leaf that was falling off the tree. He scratched it into little pieces, then watched the wind blow away the bits. After doing this several times and still seeing no sign of his friends, he couldn't help but wonder why they were being so slow.

Suddenly, he heard something. He looked ahead.

He heard the sound of someone being dragged. The person's mouth was covered and could only make muffled noises. The person was fighting back, and the shrubs made rapid rustling noises.

From the sound of it, the person being dragged was a woman. Zheng Tan heard the lowered voice of a man as well. He couldn't tell what he said, but he heard the voices move deeper into the woods.

He carefully jumped onto another tree and moved towards them.

Suddenly he understood what was happening. Even without seeing anything, he could make an accurate guess.

Every university had one or two 'PhD' roads.

It was not a nice name, but rather a sarcastic one.

Every university, especially the ones with large campuses, had one or two places that were too far from everywhere. Once in a while, bad things happened in these places. The most typical was rape incidents.

A ridiculous unspoken 'tradition' was that to keep these incidents quiet, the victim would be automatically accepted into the school's graduate programs with tuition covered if he or she chose to attend.

Therefore, these places were nicknamed 'PhD' roads by students.

Zheng Tan came to this part of the school quite often. He would hear talks of similar incidents in conversations between students passing by.

Such incidents had happened in Chuhua university before. This area was surrounded by deserted buildings that were built too long ago. The roads were long and winded. Beside construction vehicles that had no choice, no cars came this way.

The street lamps and speakers were common victims of vandalism, and the culprits were never caught. The school had given up on the place and had faculty members tell students to just avoid the area at night.

These woods were within the 'caution' area. This was why Zheng Tan seldom saw female students around in these woods.

Maybe this was one reason why the school was planning to build new buildings around here. If people frequented the area, these kind of stuff wouldn't happen quite as often.

Zheng Tan moved closer to the voices while thinking of the stories he had heard. At the same time, he heard the other cats come towards this direction.



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