

The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a futuristic city or industrial complex. It features curved, metallic-looking structures and a grid-like floor. A person in a dark suit with a glowing red light on their chest is walking in the lower-left foreground. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with some highlights in orange and white.

by Lazy Cliché

Superstars of Tomorrow



QIDIAN
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SUPERSTARS OF TOMORROW

- 未来天王 -

- VOLUME 1 -

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[Webnovel]

- STORY -

Well-known Composer Fang Zhao was in the glorious stage of his career, when the Apocalypse arrived; After finally experiencing the bitter difficulties of a thousand dangers, when the Apocalypse was simmering down to an end, he collapsed; When he opened his eyes, he was reborn in a New World, 500 years after the end of the apocalypse, in the body of a student who had been dumped barely after graduation, who had been cheated of his hardwork barely after he started working...

The World of the Future, Virtual Idols PK Real Idols

“Every time background music plays in my head, I feel like there is nothing to be afraid of.” – Fang Zhao

Toward the end of the apocalyptic period, Fang Zhao lost his life. However, instead of dying, he found himself 500 years later in the body of a young and aspiring composer who shared the same name. Having received a second chance at life, Fang Zhao sets out to achieve the previous owner's dreams.

Armed with the experience of living through an apocalyptic age and his profession as a composer before that period, Fang Zhao uses his talent, wits, and knowledge to make his mark in the entertainment industry of the future.

Chapter 1

The New World after the End of the Old

After a devastating meteor shower, the apocalypse beckoned as foreign elements sparked deadly mutations in animals, and micro-organisms invisible to the naked eye unleashed countless epidemics.

On top of their own diseases, mankind had to deal with mutated beasts. Threats loomed everywhere and a torrent of microbiological mutations lurked as illness and disaster halted progress and curbed productivity.

Bustling cities were reduced to ruins and vast plots of fertile land turned to hellish wastelands.



Fang Zhao couldn't remember how long he lingered in that apocalyptic world, how long he fought.

Ninety-odd years? Or perhaps 100 years?

He could no longer remember.

Before the apocalypse, he was a somewhat well-known composer whose career was on the rise. Just as he was about to release what he considered his best work, the mother of all wars arrived. He fled for survival and led troops into battle.

When conquered lands were recovered one after another, people thought the war would end soon and prosperous times would emerge. Yet this was when he collapsed, in the darkness before the dawn.



"If you don't have the determination to fight to the death, then this war will certainly be lost."

"That's why earth's population has dwindled from 8 billion to 80 million."

"Old Zhao, say, do you think we will win?"

"We will."

"I'm not afraid of death, but I am afraid of a Pyrrhic victory."

"We will win."

"That's good. When we win, I'm going to find a place and start herding again. Boy, how I loved the ranch where we lived when I was a kid—the blue skies and the green pastures. What about you, Old Zhao? Are you going to relaunch your career as a composer?"

"Relaunch? I never stopped in the first place."



In Fang Zhao's head, a conversation he once had with his comrade Su Mu suddenly popped up.

The cries of his men facing imminent death and the howls of the mutated animals began to fade. The extreme pain from decades of illnesses and deadly wounds had been wiped from his memory as his body began to recover its senses.

The vitality of a withered tree that meets the spring was confusing to Fang Zhao. After all, he was more than 100 years old, an emaciated old man with damaged fingers. Even though his body had mutated and strengthened as a function of his immune system, he was still bogged down by injury and illness. He was also an old man. He felt like an overheated engine all the time and could no longer relax at will.

Just when Fang Zhao was about to carefully feel out his body, his brain was assaulted by a pain resembling pricking needles and barraged with images he couldn't recognize, crowding his head to its breaking point.

As he gradually gained control of his body, Fang Zhao's eyelids spasmed and he sat up to take deep breaths. The overloading of his brain blurred his vision, but as his headache faded, his vision resumed too, and Fang Zhao took in his unusual surroundings acutely.

With instincts and sensitivity honed from countless battles, Fang Zhao could tell without looking that he was in a foreign location.

No.

It wasn't an unknown location.

A scene appeared in his mind, a seemingly very familiar scene.

This is where he used to live.

He was Fang Zhao and not Fang Zhao at the same time.

He died in that end-of-days war, but now he was reborn into the body of another person also called Fang Zhao. He survived.

Fang Zhao raised his hands and examined his 10 young, intact fingers. He dangled his legs, which were weak but felt no pain.

This was a young and healthy body.

Fang Zhao's brain contained his own memories—the battles that led to his death were crystal clear, as were his nearly 100 years of fighting and being on the run. But at the same time, he was also equipped with the memories of his new host body.

This young man also named Fang Zhao was merely 23 years old and was about to complete his tertiary studies.

He was a young composer.

Unfortunately...

He was dumped after graduation and cheated just when he started his new job. A friend he considered a blood brother betrayed him and stole three months' worth of his work. Succumbing to the blows, this man chose the final resolution—suicide.

Fang Zhao was puzzled. Apocalypse had been avoided. Why would anyone give up on life in such a beautiful world?

After all, it was merely a case of heartbreak, piracy, and betrayal.

So what?

Did the world fall apart?

People who lived during the end of days tried so hard to survive, and this boy took his life over such petty matters. People from the end of days wouldn't get it.

But after all, these were peaceful times after what was thought to be the end of days. People thought differently in times of peace. Fang Zhao also lived during peacetime, but it was too long ago and such good memories had already blurred by a giant sea of bloodshed.

How did people from peacetime think?

Never mind. What has happened has happened.

As Fang Zhao canvassed the memories of his host body, exasperation mixed with pity. Someone who chose to resolve things like this was too cowardly. It was a form of avoidance. The host was dead, and yet the person who poached his work was living happily and enjoying greater status. Was his death worth it?

In any case, Fang Zhao felt it wasn't. Current grievances were best avenged in the present—who knew if there was an afterlife.

The original owner of his body was afraid to confront his circumstances, but Fang Zhao was different.

Someone who had endured the end of days naturally had a different temperament than people from peacetime.

The more memories he uncovered, the more amazed Fang Zhao was.

There really was a new world.

All those years of battle and all those of years of hellish living were worth it. While searching the memories of his new body, Fang Zhao remained vigilant toward his surroundings as well. Even when he was in a safe environment, Fang Zhao couldn't relax. It was an old habit cultivated during the end of days, which was also why he was able to survive for so many years.

As a whining sound from nearby grew, Fang Zhao stopped searching his new memory and looked over.

He had already sensed another life form in this narrow room, but it posed no threat and didn't signal the intent to attack. Drawing from his experience from the end of days, beasts like this weren't of the violent, mutated variety, so he didn't pay much attention. Fang Zhao only shifted his focus as the noise grew.

It was only a small dog with tangled, finger-long fur. Its coat was stained with an unknown substance. It was very skinny. Remove its fur and all that was left was a veiled skeleton.

The stray dog the original owner of his body had adopted before committing suicide.

After adopting the dog last night, he fed it a spiked dinner. He ate half and fed the remaining half to the dog – both portions were mixed with poison he bought from a drug store.

An empty bowl lay on a table nearby. Its drugged contents were gone, but the plate next to the dog was left untouched.

Fang Zhao knew from his new memories that the dog was in poor health last night. He could barely stand. A day later it seemed in better shape, but it still had trouble getting up. It lay there with its head tilted slightly, his neck twisted in Fang Zhao's direction. Tail wagging, its black eyes started at Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao dangled his legs. Even though they were weak, he could walk.

He planted his feet on the ground. The wholesome feeling that traveled from the soles of his feet to his brain made his heart race.

Fang Zhao walked carefully and deliberately, as if verifying the reality before him.

One step, two steps...

Soon the probing steps became confident moves, as every cell in his body came alive with his heightened mood.

How lucky he was to return from the dead.

Fang Zhao walked toward the dog, knelt, picked up the plate of unknown material carrying the muck that was the poisoned food and tossed it into the garbage can.

As he bore witness to Fang Zhao's actions, the dog's spirits appeared to be lifted and his eyes became more expressive.

There was no more food in the apartment. Drawing from his new memory, Fang Zhao took a bowl from the cupboard. He felt the surface of the bowl and determined it wasn't a material he knew. It looked ceramic, but it felt like some sort of plastic composite. It was very light.

His brain contained vague memories about the new material, but Fang Zhao could only gather from these fragments that it was a material that dissolves quickly in certain conditions without releasing any pollutants.

Fang Zhao dropped the matter and fetched half a bowl from the pool, which he knew about his new memory, and placed it in front of the dog.

The dog got up with a swagger, looking like it would collapse at any moment. But it stood stiffly and lapped up the bowl of water, its tail wagging slightly.

Even though it was a stray dog, it was still doing its best to survive.

Fang Zhao looked at that dog, then focused his attention on the small apartment.

It was about 20 square meters, crowded and messy. One corner was a total disaster. But his new memory told Fang Zhao that the same corner was the tidiest part of the room before yesterday.

That small corner taking up about four square meters was where the previous owner of his body worked. All the songs he composed in the past two months were completed in that cramped corner.

Many of the tools and appliances in the apartment were alien to Fang Zhou. He had never seen home appliances before. But he could decipher everything with his new memory. As long as his new memory was fully integrated, he could navigate his new world easily.

Fang Zhou walked toward a spot and pressed a small button on the wall. A waist-high cabinet thrust forward. A mirror was placed on top of the cabinet.

Ignoring the mirror itself and the material of the cabinet, Fang Zhao carefully examined the man in the mirror.

The original owner of his new body looked somewhat like Fang Zhao, even though Fang Zhao couldn't remember what he looked like when he was a young man. Still, the face in the mirror looked a bit familiar, based on Fang Zhao's own memories instead of his new ones.

The two Fang Zhao were cosmically linked after all.

Even though he didn't know how he obtained a healthy new body, Fang Zhao disagreed with what its original owner did. But now that he inherited his body and memories, Fang Zhao had to take stock.

Staring at the eyes in the mirror, he said in a serious tone,

"I'm taking over the life you abandoned."

"I will exact revenge for you."

"I will repay your debts."

"So your dream is to become a world-famous composer? It just so happens I used to be one."

Fang Zhao was actually quite ambitious, but he had landed in a new world that he didn't know, after all. As grand as his ambitions were, they had to be grounded in reality and competence. Maybe he could fulfill the dreams that he couldn't during the end of days.

Anyone can talk big, but before adapting to his new surroundings and figuring out his skillset, talk was just talk.

Fang Zhao shoved the cabinet back into the wall, walked toward the window and opened it.

It was nearly noon and the weather was great. The curtains had been drawn already, but the apartment was still dim, because this was a "black" street, a slum-like neighborhood.

Chapter 2

Black Street

What was a "black street"? As buildings increased in height with the advancement of technology, areas with a high concentration of skyscrapers blocked sunlight from narrow alleys at the bottom of these clusters. These streets were dark most of the day, so people called them "black streets."

The area where Fang Zhao now lived was surrounded by mass housing blocks more than 100 stories tall. There were gaps between these towers, and beneath these gaps lay the "black streets." People who lived on black streets were also called "those who lived in the gaps," a euphemism for the poor.

Conditions were rough on black streets. In addition to the lack of sunshine, it was a dangerous setting.

After the original owner of Fang Zhao's body signed with a record label, he moved off-campus. Living alone was more conducive to creative work and was more private, but he had limited funds, so he could only afford to rent a container-style room on a black street. The original owner wanted to move out after he was paid for his work, but before he could submit his work, it was stolen by a trusted friend.

The original owner had four childhood friends: Fang Sheng, his ex-girlfriend Xi Hong, Zeng Huang, and Zeng Huang's fiancée, Wan Yue.

The five of them grew up together. They lived in the same building as kids. Unfortunately, when they were in secondary school, an explosion occurred in the building and only a tenth of the residents survived. Only children who were boarders survived.

The government paid out a substantial amount in compensation and a strong welfare system was in place, so the five of them could afford to finish university with cash to spare. They attended the same primary school and secondary school and went on to attend college in Qi'an City. They attended different universities, but they stayed in touch. However, they weren't as close as when they were children.

After the apocalypse, a global alliance was formed. The entire planet was a unified whole. There were no countries.

The alliance comprised of 12 continents—eight major continents and four special continents.

Fang Zhao lived in the political and financial hub of one of the eight major continents, Yanzhou, the capital city of Qi'an.

The original owner of the body was the best student among the five. The university he was admitted to was the best music school in Yanzhou: the Qi'an Academy of Music.

Since the beginning of the New Era, the composition department at the Qi'an Academy of Music accounted for nearly half of Yanzhou's 100 most influential composers. Among them were composers who had global influence. The academy was a dream school for many.

Final-year students of the composition department were mostly signed by record companies before graduation. The original owner of the body was one such student. Half a year before graduation, he signed a six-month trainee contract with Silver Wing Media, one of Yanzhou's three major entertainment conglomerates.

During the first three months, the original owner of the body ran errands for senior musicians and attended classes scheduled by the company. The second half of the internship was devoted to preparing for the annual new talent competition. How the trainees performed in the last three months determined if they would stay on at Silver Wing as full-time employees and shaped their futures. Silver Wing would allocate resources based on their performance in the new talent competition.

But the pieces the original owner had toiled on for the new talent competition were stolen by his childhood friend Fang Sheng.

Fang Sheng shared the same family name with the original owner – they were distant relatives. He was a good brother and partner, but he stabbed the original owner of the body in the back at a critical juncture. Caving to the painful blow and the pressure, the original owner committed suicide.

Fang Zhao stopped searching his new memory and noticed that it was getting lively outside. The movement of people could be heard everywhere. The apartment was located on the second floor. Right beneath it was a large shop where people could be

heard opening shop and moving things. Residents of the building across the street had also opened their windows and were staring outside.

Even though it was quite dark, Fang Zhao still examined the street like taking in a rare piece of art.

Things had changed so much since the apocalypse, which was both alien and intriguing to Fang Zhao at the same time.

This was the new world.

A golden age had emerged after the near-apocalypse, also known as the Period of Destruction.

Those old friends who survived the end of the war must have been delighted. The 100-year war, which cost billions of lives, resulted in the prosperous times everyone had hoped for.

The noise and the dark should have gotten on his nerves, but Fang Zhao was an untapped bundle of energy. The world he had longed for was afoot again.

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Fang Zhao greedily took in the fresh air of the new world.

Inspiration rumbled in his head, ready to burst out. His blood had risen to near-boiling temperatures. Every single one of his hairs was trembling in excitement.

But that wasn't enough.

To create a masterpiece, that bit of inspiration wasn't enough.

The noise grew louder, and it was bright outside. It was getting louder and brighter at an increasing pace.

Fang Zhao stopped searching his memory and locked the window. Based on the memory he inherited along with his new body, Fang Zhao knew that the busiest and also most valuable period of the day on a black street—daytime—was about to arrive.

He scanned the house and his gaze landed on the bracelet on top of his nightstand for two seconds. Fang Zhao darted over and fastened it to his left wrist. This was an item

that 90 percent of people in the new world owned, something like a personal computer terminal.

Virtual currency was the norm, so Fang Zhao needed the bracelet to buy things. It also served as the key to his apartment.

After he fastened his bracelet, Fang Zhao paused before the door and turned back to scoop up the stray dog, who was staring at him, and brought him along.

As he left, Fang Zhao noticed that many others were headed to the first floor, just like him. His building was like a beehive, housing a massive number of residents. Most, like Fang Zhao, also struggled to make ends meet and could afford no more than a tiny, cramped room devoid of sunlight for most of the time.

Where tall buildings were clustered, even though it was daytime, the streets below were dark most of the time. People who could afford to moved to higher floors. People are always drawn to the light.

As for those who couldn't afford an apartment on a higher floor or were handicapped, they set their sights on noon every day, the only time when black streets were briefly graced by sunlight.

The people who were rushing downstairs glanced at Fang Zhao quickly and walked past him. They only had a vague impression of him. They didn't know him well, so they didn't bother to say hello.

Several of them gave Fang Zhao a curious glance when they noticed he was carrying a dog. Fang Zhao didn't mind and smiled at them in return.

The fellow residents were obviously taken aback. They were probably surprised that this usually depressed young man was smiling.

The people who went outside around that time to get a tan were mostly elderly. The crowd that emerged from the elevator was mostly made up of stumbling, grey-haired old men and women.

As he emerged from the lobby of his building, Fang Zhao noticed that the street was already quite crowded. Major forms of transportation were diverted elsewhere, so black streets were usually free of car traffic. During the day, they were very empty, except for now.

As the sun rose, it shined on the lower levels of the mass housing blocks. People who didn't go outside also opened their windows to take in the precious sunshine.

Fang Zhao wasn't in a hurry to stake out his spot. Instead, he walked into the shop on the first floor. He was starving. Everything else could wait.

Because of the apocalypse, the planetary government of the New Era did not impose gun controls initially, lest another major war break out again. In the unfortunate scenario where events unfolded that way, at least people could fight right away. But eventually, the situation grew out of control. Arms became prolific and riots rampant. Several continents went through leadership changes and the planetary government was nearly toppled. That was when gun controls were implemented. Gun controls were especially strict in the past century. It was impossible for the average citizen to own a gun.

But Yue Qing, the owner of the shop, was a veteran and one of the few people on this black street that owned arms legally. The punks of black streets didn't dare mess with people with arms, which was the main reason why this shop could operate in peace.

When Fang Zhao entered the shop, a yawning Yue Qing gave him a quick glance. He remembered Fang Zhao from yesterday, when the kid was hellbent on killing himself and oblivious to feedback. He'd thought another black street suicide was in the works, but low and behold, Fang Zhao showed up again.

Yue Qing's line of sight shifted to the dog Fang Zhao was holding. That's right—it was the kid from the yesterday. He saw him take the stray dog home. Several punks who were shopping at his stores started a bet on what Fang Zhao would do with the dog—whether it would become a burial item or if he would kill it and eat it. It looked like they were all wrong.

Fang Zhao sensed Yue Qing's probing eyes, but his stare suggested curiosity and no ill will, so Fang Zhao didn't react. Drawing from his memory, he bought the cheapest items: three thumb-length sealed strips. Their size was misleading—the strips felt like metal in hand. Low-end compressed food.

Yue Qing stopped staring and eyed the item Fang Zhao had picked. "That's 9 dollars. You want them decompressed?"

Decompression referred to the decompression of compressed food, which restored

these compressed blocks into an edible form.

"Yes. And a cup of tea please," Fang Zhao said.

"Decompression is fifty cents, the tea is another fifty cents—the total is 10 dollars." As he spoke, Yue Qing opened the three strips and stuck them into a decompressor. Ten seconds later, he removed the tray from inside, on which sat three items that resembled dim sum. They were each about 20 centimeters by 8 centimeters in size and steaming hot.

"Takeaway?" Yue Qing asked.

"No, I'll eat here." Fang Zhao took the plate and asked, "Boss Yue, can I move a chair outside?"

"Not too far out," Yue Qing answered without lifting his head. He wasn't afraid the kid would steal his chair. Very few people had the guts to steal from him on this street.

Fang Zhao put down the dog near the store entrance and returned inside for a chair.

Fang Zhao gave the dog one of the three compressed cakes and kept the other two for himself. If this were the apocalypse, he would not have generously shared his food with a dog he just met, but Fang Zhao was in a good mood, having been reborn into the New Era. He was willing to share. Since the original owner of his body adopted it and it did not die, he would keep it for now.

The compressed cakes tasted horrible, and the tea was cheap powder-based stuff—otherwise they wouldn't be so cheap. But for someone who had survived the apocalypse, Fang Zhao thought the food was a delicacy. During the end of days, he had to endure famine. Later on, he didn't have to worry about food, but he wasn't picky.

Compared to simple and crude food items and the stress of war, compressed cakes were exquisite. Now he could actually sit and enjoy lunch in peace. That already meant the world to Fang Zhao.

Chapter 3

Your Friend Has Made It

The noonday sun was already shining, dispersing the gloom and cold of the black street.

Store owner Yue Qing also moved a chair to his storefront to catch a tan and doze off. He didn't get much business during the day. Black streets were the liveliest by night, so he didn't sleep much at night and caught up during the day. This was also when most store owners on black streets rested.

After downing two compressed cakes in large mouthfuls, Fang Zhao eyed the dog sitting by his feet. He had finished its compressed cake and was licking crumbs off the ground. These veteran strays were experts on what was and was not edible. They couldn't have lived this long on a black street without some basic survival skills.

His appetite satisfied, Fang Zhao relished every second as he sat on the curb and looked to the sky. The sky resembled a bright blue strip, the bright sun unabashedly overlooking the landscape from above. Not a trace of the murkiness and bloodiness of the near-apocalypse.

"This is great."

The apocalypse hadn't panned out after all.

What they called the apocalypse became what people in the New Era dubbed the Period of Destruction. After an extended period of massacres and extinctions, new life sprouted from all things on earth. It was a rebirth of sorts. Human beings were still in charge of the planet.

The world had finally ushered in prosperous times again.

It hadn't been this peaceful in a very long time. His creative wheels couldn't help spinning again.

Fang Zhao started to lightly tap the fingers he casually placed on his lap. Very few

people noticed, and even if they did, they wouldn't know what it was all about.

Yue Qing stared for some time but couldn't make anything out of it. As a veteran, he had been part of quite a few military operations and learned many types of code, but what Fang Zhao tapped wasn't among the codes he knew.

After staring cluelessly for a while, Yue Qing gave up and continued to nurture his tan.

Some people tapped their fingers unconsciously when they were thinking, but people who knew Fang Zhao could tell that his finger tapping was his way of composing. When he was inspired, he would start composing, but during the apocalypse, he never had the time or space to compose in peace. Pen and paper were out of the question, so Fang Zhao came up with his own method, creating a system of musical notation that took advantage of his impeccable memory. Come to think of it, it was a code of sorts, a code that only Fang Zhao could decipher.

The sun lingered on the black street only very briefly, for about an hour or so, before gradually fading in retreat.

Without the sunshine, the temperature at street level dropped several degrees. But it was already late May and the weather in Yanzhou was quite mild, so some of the elderly residents didn't head back after getting their tan, chatting with old friends instead. This was their liveliest time of day.

Fang Zhao didn't want to stay any longer. He returned his plate, his cup, and his chair to the shop.

At that moment, the street chatter suddenly grew louder. The sound of an approaching aircraft could be heard.

Yue Qing raised his head, let out a sardonic laugh, and pointed to the sky. "Your friend has made it big time."

Fang Zhao could see.

A flying car descended.

Flying cars were a luxury item for people who lived near black streets at the bottom of the mass housing blocks. Not everyone could afford one. The fuel it used was more expensive than regular fuel.

Every time a flying car arrived, it was either a mafia boss or someone who had made it.

The elderly people of black streets were very curious about events like this, so when they heard the hovering, they stopped their conversations and watched the arriving car in unison. They wanted to know who had made it and whether they knew the person. If they did, it would confer bragging rights for another 10 days or so.

The people who were sitting on their stools at the flying car's landing spot had already scattered, creating a clearing for its arrival.

The flying car was emblazoned with a flashy, gaudy wind graphic with seven colors. It was a symbol widely known in Qi'an and even the entire Yanzhou.

"It's a Neon Culture official car."

"Was someone signed by Neon Culture?"

"Wow, such great fortune, such great fortune. Neon Culture is loaded."

"Someone else from our street was signed by one of the Big Three and became a big star. What was his name? I can't remember. Anyway, he is rich now."

The three leading entertainment conglomerates in Qi'an were Silver Wing Media, Neon Culture, and Tongshan True Entertainment. Even though it was clear at first glance that the car was an official company car and not a private vehicle, they were talking about the famed Neon Culture here, one of the Big Three. Who would worry about money after joining Neon Culture?

The entertainment industry was a gold mine. That was what the masses thought.

Signing with Neon Culture equaled a change in fortunes, which equaled rolling in cash. That was what most people living on black streets thought.

The original owner of the body had signed with Silver Wing Media as an intern six months before graduation. As for this childhood friend of his, he wasn't much of a student and his school wasn't as prestigious as Qi'an Academy of Music, so he wasn't signed with graduation right around the corner. But now, things were different. People changed.

As Fang Zhao watched the person who emerged from the flying car, his new memory gave him the lowdown on the passenger. Fang Sheng was a childhood friend of his body's original owner. They were friends who kept no secrets. The original owner was even contemplating using his connections to get his friend hired at Silver Wing after the new talent competition, if not as an artist then as an assistant. In any case, he wouldn't be unemployed. Yet he was stabbed in the back by his friend in the end.

Now Fang Sheng had replaced his cheap wardrobe and came and went in a flying car. It wasn't a high-end flying car, but it was still a flying car, and a Neon Culture company car at that. That was enough to draw attention on a black street.

Fang Sheng stole the fruit of his friend's hard work and leveraged it into a contract with Neon Culture. It looked like Neon Culture was happy with the songs Fang Sheng submitted; otherwise, they wouldn't have sent a car. Fang Zhao had seen plenty of folks like that—people who had no talent but who knew how to scheme.

As Fang Sheng emerged from the flying car, he reveled in the jealous gazes thrown his way. Being the center of attention made him feel like a star, so when Fang Sheng got out, he was giddy with delight—until he saw Fang Zhao standing at the store entrance. His mood instantly soured.

When Fang Sheng saw Fang Zhao standing there, he was awfully surprised. Based on his understanding of his friend's personality, coupled with the gossip he had gleaned from a few punks on the black street, Fang Zhao should have committed suicide today. Even if he hadn't, he'd be holed up in his apartment brainstorming a solution, or mired in an endless bout of bitching and self-pity. Who would have thought he'd be in the mood to get a tan?

Had this dumbass composer lost it?

What was even more surprising was Fang Zhao's state of mind. There wasn't any despair, self-pity, or any sign of madness from the pressure. Instead, he looked like nothing had happened, as if his work hadn't been stolen and he wasn't dealing with a predicament. That sent Fang Sheng into a panic.

What exactly had happened to Fang Zhao?

Fang Sheng's probing gaze didn't linger and he didn't dare look Fang Zhao in the eye. Fang Zhao's eyes projected an eerie look of calm. They looked like a bottomless ocean

that would sprout a monster at any given moment. It gave him the chills.

But Fang Sheng didn't think he had done anything wrong. Who didn't look out for their own interests? Why wouldn't he capitalize on a golden opportunity? It wasn't that he didn't have a history with Fang Zhao, but compared to the huge benefits he had reaped, their relationship wasn't worth a mention. At least, that was what he thought.

"What are you looking at? Hurry up and pack your things so we can head back to the office. Don't waste your time here," the driver who emerged from the car urged as he scanned the bystanders on the black street in disdain.

"Oh... OK." Fang Sheng stopped procrastinating and rushed to the elevator, his silhouette cutting an awkward figure, as if he were avoiding something.

After Fang Sheng stole the three songs from Fang Zhao, he had applied to Neon Culture. Their recruiters liked what they saw and signed him. Neon Culture was indeed happy with the scores that Fang Sheng had submitted, paying him an advance and even arranging for new living quarters. Fang Sheng was there to move. He lived on the fifth floor. Even though the conditions were slightly better than Fang Zhao's surroundings on the second floor, the fifth floor was still considered a lower floor at the mass housing block. It was still dirty, messy and crappy. When he found out he could move out, Fang Sheng wasted no time in asking for a chauffeured company car.

His mind preoccupied, Fang Sheng appeared out of sorts. When he emerged from the building after collecting his things, Fang eyed the shop again and didn't see Fang Zhao, much to his relief. He immediately thought he was too timid and didn't need to be afraid of Fang Zhao.

He was worried that Fang Zhao would report the theft of his songs, but when he was packing, he pondered the matter again and concluded he had nothing to fear. He had uploaded the three songs first and they were registered under his name. Legally speaking, he was their rightful composer and owner.

Even if Fang Zhao wanted to sue, he still had nothing to fear. When Fang Zhao was busy composing, he had already covered his tracks. How could Fang Zhao sue without evidence?

Moreover, Fang Zhao didn't have money to sue. He had enough trouble paying for food and clothing—maybe he didn't even have next month's rent. How could Fang Zhao sue

him? Would he borrow money from Zeng Huang and Wan Yue?

Ha!

Fang Sheng despised those two indigents—they were no threat. All he had to do was stick to his claim that he wrote those three songs.

Before he got into his car, Fang Sheng glanced at the black street again, his line of sight focusing on the windows of Fang Zhao's second-floor apartment. The windows were shut tight and darkened. He couldn't tell if anyone was in.

Fang Sheng took a deep breath and ducked into his car. From now on, he had nothing to do with shitty neighborhoods like this black street. Bye bye poverty and hello riches! Onto the pinnacle of his life!

Be it Fang Zhao or black streets, he didn't have to deal with them anymore. He had qualified for the new talent competition. His future lay in the glittering song chart of the new talent contest.

Chapter 4

Virtual Idols

On one hand, Fang Sheng departed brimming with ambition, leaving behind the endless chatter on the black street, while Fang Zhao didn't bog himself down with thoughts about Fang Sheng either.

Perhaps everyone encountered loyalty and betrayal in their lives. In the apocalypse, such events were even more common. Familial love could turn into deep-seated hatred in an instant.

Revenge had to be exacted for the body's original owner, but the most pressing task of the moment was to compose a new song for Silver Wing Media. If he missed his deadline, not only would he lose the great job he was on the cusp of landing, he would also miss out on this season's new talent contest. Life would be more difficult as a result.

It was the end of May. Each season of the new talent contest lasted three months, and the contest was rebooted every three months. The New Pioneers Chart reserved for newcomers would also only be compiled for another month. This time of year was when the competition among newcomers was the fiercest. It was also when the major record labels pushed their trainees the hardest.

Fame and riches were guaranteed for those who made it. The road ahead would become smoother. Their record labels would promote them with maximum effort without prompting. But if they didn't shine in the new talent contest, then industry insiders would cast them aside as poor prospects. Their careers would stall.

The original owner of the body took the contest very seriously. With two days left until June, Fang Zhao didn't have much time left. It wouldn't be worth the effort to challenge Fang Sheng over the copyright of those three songs—he had no evidence whatsoever. Fang Sheng was also prepared for the battle. The legal maneuvers could take up to two seasons and he might not walk away with anything. Meanwhile, he was missing out on the opportunity to shine.

After Fang Zhao returned the items to the store, he walked his dog another 100 meters

or so to a drug store. The poison that the original owner of this body bought to kill himself wasn't available at your usual drug store. Heavy medication usually required a prescription, but black streets operated by a different set of rules. If there was a will, there was a way.

The drug store wasn't big. It was typically quite empty at this time of day. A man half-haphazardly wearing a lab coat was sleeping on the counter. When Fang Zhao walked in, the motion detector by the entrance sounded a ding.

The man raised his head with effort and glanced at the entrance with a yawn, wearing the expression of someone half-asleep. He froze when he saw Fang Zhao.

The owner of the drug store was quite surprised. He still remembered how the same young man showed up with a death wish yesterday. He had tried to talk the young man out of it to no avail. He'd thought that yet another person was about to vanish from the black street. Things like that happened on black streets way too often—someone would commit suicide after losing the will to live. Like the bugs that festered in the street corners of black streets, their death hardly caused a ripple.

Fang Zhao's reappearance caught him off-guard. He prided himself in having seen it all, but he never would have guessed that the same person would show up again in a completely different state of mind.

Unless the drug purchase wasn't for suicide? The shop owner started to wonder.

That couldn't be right either. He trusted his judgment as a practicing doctor. Odds were that the person bought the medication to commit suicide but for some reason changed his mind.

The surprise only lasted briefly and he recovered quickly.

On any given black street, there were people who abused themselves to death, and there were people who found a purpose overnight.

"Looking for medication?" the shop owner asked.

"No. Can I trouble you to check out the dog?" Fang Zhao handed the dog to the store owner.

The owner retreated in disdain. "I'm not a vet."

Fang Zhao pressed on, saying, "Can't you just take a look?" There were no vets nearby. Vet clinics were expensive and hard to come by. Fang Zhao knew from his new memory that this shop owner had once treated a bird.

"I'll give it a shot," the owner responded. He was free anyway. There was no point in turning down business. It was OK if the job didn't pay well as long as he turned a profit.

He had the necessary devices and equipment. He might not have been able to handle a complex diagnosis, but he could conduct a basic checkup.

Fang Zhao surveyed the equipment the owner fiddled with. That, coupled with fragments of his new memory, made him realize that there had been significant technological advancements since his time. Bulky equipment had become portable and each piece of equipment could serve multiple functions. The steps for operation had been dumbed down. Even an ordinary person without medical training could use these devices to conduct a minor checkup on himself or herself, let alone a professional doctor.

About two minutes later, the owner had a diagnosis. "It's nothing major. It's malnourished from hunger. It'll get better on a full stomach."

People in the New Era preferred large dogs. During the apocalypse, a batch of dogs went mad and became the enemy. Another group was trained as guard dogs and fought alongside human beings. When all electronic devices failed, they became a huge help. Some of the monuments marking the Period of Destruction included dog sculptures to honor their sacrifice during the end-of-days war. The unit Fang Zhao served in also had a dog.

Another batch of dogs neither went crazy nor were drafted into service. They kept a low profile during the near-apocalypse. Few of them survived.

He didn't know whether the dog before him was descended from those honored army dogs or the few strays who survived the war, but judging from the face of the dog and the color of its fur, even if it was the offspring of those storied dogs, it was an undistinguished descendant. It wasn't worth keeping. The shop owner had labeled the dog a failure.

The shop owner gauged Fang Zhao again. The way he looked yesterday, he could barely keep himself alive. What would he do with a worthless dog?

"You're gonna... raise this dog?" the owner asked.

Fang Zhao looked at the dog. Maybe it understood the question. It looked back and wagged its tail.

"I'm going to keep it for now," Fang Zhao said. It was serendipitous that it was the first living thing he saw when he woke up. Even though his finances were tight, Fang Zhao was confident that things would improve quickly. He couldn't continue to live off the little cash that the original owner of the body left behind.

The owner didn't say anything more. It was someone else's call. All he had to care about was getting paid and doing his job. He pointed to the dog and said, "Its fur is all tied up in knots. Who knows how long it's been out on the streets for. You won't be able to wash it thoroughly. It would be a waste of time and money. Why don't you have it shaved instead."

"Then let's give it a shave. How much would it cost?"

"The checkup is 50 and the shave 100. But you look like you don't have much cash. I'll charge 50 for the shave for a total of 100," the owner said. He wasn't price gouging; that was indeed the market rate. And why was he willing to offer a discount? It was impossible to say what the future held for someone who clawed his way back from dire straits. Examples like that were hard to find on a black street, but he had come across a few. He was just going with the flow in extending a kindness. For him, it was still a good deal. Even if the man decided to commit suicide again, he wouldn't suffer a loss at that price.

His own meal only cost 10 dollars and yet he splurged 100 on the dog. Why bother? Fang Zhao did an imaginary shake of his head. Still, he was reborn today, so he was happy and impulsive. Whether he would keep the dog or proceed alone, that was up to the dog.

After Fang Zhao paid with his bracelet and learned from the owner that the shave would take an hour, he left the dog at the shop and went for a stroll. He wanted to get to know his new world better. He could only take care of business once he had a basic understanding.

He left the drug store and took the elevator to the 50th floor, then walked along the corridor to a dead end where there was a platform. It was a train station. People were

already lining up.

The sight of freeways sprouting from the side of buildings like a spider web and extending to higher ground like veins was a huge visual shock. The images from his new memory weren't as powerful as the real thing.

It had been 500 years.

Five hundred years since the apocalypse.

The alarm signaling the arrival of a train sounded and the 100-meter-long train that was part of public transportation slowed down as it approached. Drawing from his new memory, Fang Zhao flashed his bracelet against a touch pad on the train door. He found a seat by the window when he entered the compartment.

It was 2 in the afternoon. There weren't that many passengers at this hour. The students and commuters were already gone, so the train was quite empty.

The skyscrapers became a blur as the train sped along.

The area was filled with mass housing blocks. They were built flush against each other, not leaving much space in between. Otherwise there wouldn't be so many black streets. But once the train left the neighborhood, the horizon opened up instantly. Sunshine refracted through the train windows sporadically. On distant buildings, silhouettes shimmered on huge screens.

Celebrities, ads, marketing campaigns...

While technology advanced in leaps and bounds, so did the entertainment industry. After the apocalypse, everything moved forward at an increasing speed. Fang Zhao couldn't find any trace of the near-apocalypse and the times leading up to it.

"Look, it's Mi Yu!"

"Gorgeous!"

"My idol. The bracelet she endorsed has sold out. I couldn't place an order online."

"I hear Mi Yu is about to stage a concert. Have you bought tickets yet? The online scalping is insane!"

Fang Zhao took in the giant screen hanging to a distant skyscraper as he listened to the discussion between several young women sitting in front of him. On the screen, a young woman with a nearly perfect body was dazzling viewers with her beauty. Every smile and every wink suggested an irresistible charm. Not a single flaw could be found on her pretty face. Her full figure exuded infinite sexual energy. Staring into those kind, sparkly eyes, anyone would easily miss a heartbeat.

She was indeed a beauty. Fang Zhao agreed on that much. During the near-apocalypse, survival was the top priority. Man or woman, no one had the time to tend to their appearances. A stunning sight like that was unheard of.

The only thing was, Fang Zhao got a weird vibe as soon as he laid eyes on the woman with the charming smile on the screen. Soon his new memory told him why.

This wasn't a real person.

Fang Zhao kept staring at the screen until it was out of sight.

"Virtual idols."

The perfect marriage of technology and art.

The so-called virtual idol wasn't someone who existed in flesh and blood. It was an artificial creation that stemmed from advanced technology.

Virtual idols were born into virtual worlds. They looked no different than actual human beings. They were the fad for some time, crowding out many of the superstars who were their contemporaries. They had boxed real idols and celebrities into a corner, even forcing some of them to retire. Even though real idols and celebrities were now dominant again, virtual idols were still a force to be reckoned with. They were a product with global recognition.

A media mogul who backed real celebrities once commented that virtual idols were monsters born into the virtual world. If they weren't stamped out, as long as they could find some reprieve, they would stage a comeback that would spell doom for real idols.

Chapter 5

New Talent Competition

What disappointed many businessmen who invested in real idols and celebrities was the fact that the virtual idols didn't disappear completely over the years, even if their influence had waned since their peak years. Even though virtual idols lasted for a briefer period than real celebrities, they still carried significant weight in the entertainment industry.

An up-tempo melody started playing in the train, grabbing Fang Zhao's attention once more. It was a classic piece by a superstar from many, many years ago. It was a solo instrumental performance without lyrics.

Fang Zhao closed his eyes and let the melody sink in.

The piece was often used as an upper by public transportation drivers. It wasn't just the drivers; the passengers were also stimulated. Some joked that the melody had become an office anthem—a few listens and you would be motivated to work.

The music transmitted a fiery passion and buzz. Passengers sitting on their seats began shaking their crossed legs to the beat. The sleepy heads of the afternoon ride saw their spirits soar as their leg shakes increased in frequency.

Listening to the same song, the fellow commuters felt a sense of camaraderie.

How long had it been since he felt that way?

Fang Zhao felt the blood in his veins start to boil. He was so excited he wanted to roar.

This world -- he approved.

The train was on a circular route that looped around the city. Even though it only looped a small part of the city—and a suburban part at that, not downtown—Fang Zhao got a good sense of the geography. His new memory had almost fully integrated.

When he returned to the station where he boarded and disembarked, he was in a

different mood. He was keen on blending into this world as quickly as possible—and then enjoying it.

Train fares were determined by the length of the journey. Fang Zhao started incurring a fare the moment he swiped his bracelet. Still, public transportation was relatively cheap. The trip cost Fang Zhao 50 dollars, slightly cheaper than other forms of transportation. That was a bit of a luxury considering Fang Zhao's limited cash on hand, but he thought it was worth it.

Back at the black street, Fang Zhao picked up his dog from the drug store first. The filthy dog with knotted fur whose original color eluded him looked skinny after being shaved. His bones protruded in sharp relief beneath his skin.

The dog looked unsettled after its shave. Likewise, the owner of the drug store was also pale.

"Your dog almost jammed my clippers," the owner complained to Fang Zhao. "But since I said 50 dollars, I won't renege."

Dog fur could be that stiff? Fang Zhao was skeptical. Because the dog's fur was badly tied up in knots and stains, he couldn't get a feel of its texture. Now that the owner of the drug store was complaining, he wondered if dog fur had stiffened since the apocalypse.

But the owner might not be telling the truth. He might have exaggerated a bit.

"Anyway, take your dog. I need to catch up on sleep." The owner waved his hand. On any black street, business was the best at night, so he had to sleep during the day.

Fang Zhao left in silence, carrying the shaven dog in his arms.

When the drug store owner cleaned his clippers after Fang Zhao left, he realized they didn't work anymore. He swore he wasn't just embellishing.

"They really broke down after shaving a dog?" The bemused owner checked the clippers again and confirmed they indeed had gone bust.

"Good thing they were cheap. I'm not shaving dog fur again," the drug store owner mumbled.

On his way home, Fang Zhao passed Yue Qing's store and picked up some more food.

He returned to his second-floor rental. Residents of his building living on the 80th floor or higher were lucky enough to enjoy a bit sunshine, but people living in lower floors could forget about it, not to mention that Fang Zhao lived on the second floor, which was even darker. His room was even darker than when he woke up before he turned on the lights.

After tidying up the apartment, Fang Zhao scanned the display on his bracelet, which indicated 17 blocked calls.

Out of the 17 calls, three were from the Silver Media agent in charge of interns, four were from Wan Yue, and 10 were from Zeng Huang.

Wan Yue and Zeng Huang were the other two childhood friends of his body's original owner. But unlike Fang Sheng, even though the couple didn't spend as much time with the original owner as Fang Sheng, they were sincere. They had only drifted apart from him during their university days at the instigation of Fang Sheng. They had even less contact after he started his internship at Silver Wing Media.

No more than two minutes after he disabled his call blocking, Zeng Huang called again.

Fang Zhao tapped the connect button on his bracelet and out popped the hologram of a nervous Zeng Huang.

"You doing OK, Big Zhao?" Zeng Huang breathed a huge sigh of relief after seeing Fang Zhao. He wanted to comment on Fang Zhao's peaceful demeanor but refrained so as to gauge his mood some more. "I was worried you were stuck in your head and would do something silly."

The silly deed has been done, Fang Zhao thought to himself.

Noticing the genuine emotion on Zeng Huang face, Fang Zhao responded, "I'm OK."

"That's great. As long as you've thought things through. Xiao Hong..." Zeng Huang stopped when he realized it'd be cruel to mention his ex-girlfriend so soon after the breakup. He shifted gears and said, "That scumbag Fang Sheng must be pleased with himself. Big Zhao, are you going to sue him? He could fool an outsider but not us. Those are clearly your songs. Someone of Fang Sheng's talent couldn't have possibly composed them."

"No need, for now," Fang Zhao said.

"If you're worried about money, Wan Yue and I still have some savings left."

"Really, there's no need. I don't have time to wrangle with him now," Fang Zhao said. "The new talent contest has begun. I need to catch up."

Zeng Huang was dumfounded. He never would have thought that Fang Zhao would still make a run for it this late in the game. Two months had passed in the current season of the new talent competition. Only one more was left. Entering in June was doable, but Fang Zhao didn't have any presentable material to submit.

Zeng Huang was skeptical, but since Fang Zhao had found his mojo again, Zeng Huang didn't want to rain on his parade. As long as Fang Zhao could survive this rough patch...

"In that case, go get 'em! Let us know if you need anything. Do you have enough money?" After blurting out the question, Zeng Huang worried he would hurt Fang Zhao's pride. After all, Fang Zhao hated it when people mentioned his tight finances.

Before Zeng Huang could explain himself, Fang Zhao said, "I still have a bit of cash. It'll last me for another month or so."

"Oh... That's great. But you have to let us know if you end up in a tight spot."

"Got it. I'm going into lockdown mode starting today."

"Lockdown" was slang favored by creative types. It meant they had to immerse in their work and tune everyone and everything out.

Zeng Huang knew that meant Fang Zhao was getting ready to compose again and that he shouldn't intrude unless it was urgent. Fang Zhao had been in that headspace before, but when Fang Zhao gave them the heads up in the past, he sounded resentful. Now he didn't. He just spoke matter-of-factly.

Zeng Huang was glad to see that Fang Zhao didn't resent him and Wan Yue after Fang Sheng's betrayal, actually seeming friendlier instead. The five of them had grown up together through thick and thin. Zeng Huang was the oldest of the group. After they were orphaned, he felt responsible for the rest of the group, like an older brother. Still, as they grew up, the five of them drifted apart.

Yet Zeng Huang had still been worried after what happened. Fang Zhao didn't live on campus and hadn't told them where he lived. They hadn't known where to look. Fang Zhao hadn't answered his phone either, so Zeng Huang and Wan Yue had been at a loss. Now that he had confirmed Fang Zhao was stable, Zeng Huang could finally relax.

After hanging up on Zeng Huang, Fang Zhao looked up his agent Du Ang's number and placed a call.

As soon as the call went through, a furious-looking Du Ang lashed out. "Fang Zhao, what the hell is going on? You still want to become a permanent employee? Are you giving up on the new talent contest? What's the date, huh? It's nearly June. June! Do you know what that means? It's cutthroat time for this season's new talent competition. Out of our 10 interns, six have entered the contest. Of the four who haven't, three have already submitted their songs. They've finished recording and will launch their singles tomorrow. You're the only one left. Where's yours, Fang Zhao?"

"I'm not finished yet," Fang Zhao responded. At this juncture, any other comment was bullshit to the volcanic Du Ang. What Du Ang wanted were results. Other circumstances like whether your work was stolen or not—those didn't fall within his purview.

Du Ang glared in disbelief and took a deep breath. In the hologram, his bulging eyes stared at Fang Zhao as if they were about to erupt.

In the end, Du Ang maintained his temper. It wasn't that he didn't want to chew Fang Zhao out; he didn't want to waste time.

Du Ang said emphatically, "Ten days. If you can give me something in 10 days, I'll sign you up for the contest. I'll save a spot for you. If not, you're gone." He hung up before Fang Zhao could respond.

Fang Zhao wasn't upset by Du Ang's temper. Du Ang was furious that Fang Zhao hadn't turned in his songs after all this time and he couldn't get through to him by phone. He had to do his job and couldn't pretend nothing was going on. He had finally reached Fang Zhao, but still came away empty-handed. Naturally, he couldn't be in a good mood.

Even though Du Ang sounded harsh on the phone, Fang Zhao knew from his new memory that his agent was on his side. He had lobbied for the 10-day extension. If it

were any other agent, he wouldn't have gotten five days, let alone 10. He might have even been fired by now.

The new talent contest Du Ang referred to, its centerpiece was the New Pioneers Chart, a listing coveted by all newcomers.

Not everyone qualified for the chart. Candidates had to be signed by a record company and vetted. Most were imminent music school graduates or fresh graduates. There were also a few standouts who were signed when they were still in school.

Many companies who hadn't signed newcomers also followed the chart closely, hoping to scavenge among the leftovers. They were hoping to bag a promising newcomer or poach one from another company.

Speaking of the New Pioneers Chart, you had to mention one more thing. The birth of virtual idols was great for composers.

Who cared about the singer? The companies that created virtual idols could engineer a voice. Any technician could turn a toad's croak into a heavenly cry. So in contrast, record labels that focused on virtual idols placed a greater premium on their technical and creative expertise. Any virtual idol release on the New Pioneers Chart shined the spotlight on the composer.

It was a huge opportunity for aspiring composers new to the music industry.

It was a battle between newcomers as well as a battle of company resources.

Fang Zhao got online on his bracelet. Just as Du Ang had said, among the interns who signed with Silver Wing Media at the same time he did, six had qualified for the new talent contest and five had already made the top 50. As long as the company kept promoting them, their songs would become even more popular. They would end the competition ranked even higher.

Chapter 6

Brainstorming

Silver Wing Media signed 10 interns this year, three of whom were classmates of the body's original owner. They were all very competent. Competition was fierce.

Fang Zhao didn't bother studying the chart further, contemplating his next move instead.

He had fewer than 10 days left. What could he do?

Reeling from consecutive blows, at his wit's end with the new talent contest around the corner, and his record company on his case, the original owner was out of moves.

Should he scrape together a rough cut and turn it in? He would be rejected for sure.

But if that was what he did, not only would it be beneath the pride of the body's original owner, Silver Wing Media would show no mercy and kick him out. His internship would be over.

Being kicked out by Silver Wing Media early on would tarnish his résumé forever. It would make his career all the more difficult.

"The new talent competition..."

Fang Zhao searched his new memory for information about the new talent competition. Record labels from before the near-apocalypse operated very differently. He had to adjust. Before putting pen to paper, he had to figure out what people listened to.

Pop culture shifted from generation to generation. Having endured the apocalypse and then evolved for another hundreds of years to this point, popular tastes had changed vastly. The sheer variety of new instruments and synthetic sounds was dizzying. The masses thought differently. The styles they preferred were a far cry from what passed as hip in Fang Zhao's old world.

Even though Fang Zhao wanted to say screw it and compose by instinct and prior habit, he was not in a position to fail, or he would become homeless.

Artists were also practical human beings. They had to fulfill their basic needs first.

"A sharpened blade is no impediment to chopping wood," so the saying went. Fang Zhao sat in the corner where he worked, closed his eyes, and started meditating.

He had an idea. He pulled open the drawer next to him and took out a notebook.

In an age when people preferred to take notes with their bracelets, the original owner of his body liked to jot down important thoughts on paper.

These were the original owner's notes from the past six months. The first half were notes from his internship at Silver Wing. The second half contained his songs for the new talent contest. The dates indicated that he started preparing for the new talent contest early.

The three completed songs were crossed out with heavy strokes. Several pages were perforated, a sign of the tremendous force he applied. That was him venting his extreme disappointment, anger, and desperation when he realized the three songs had been stolen. But the original owner didn't tear up the entire notebook. He kept it in his drawer, because he couldn't bear destroying the fruits of his labor.

Fang Zhao studied the three songs. Only one of them had lyrics; the remaining two did not. He was probably planning on asking lyricists at the record label to help out.

The notes also contained an unfinished song written when the original owner broke up with his girlfriend. There was also a diary entry. He probably wanted to use it as the lyrics for the song.

The melody had been finalized. The original owner of the body probably planned on leveraging company resources to complete a proper recording after performing well in the new talent contest. After all, the song had special significance. Little did he know his songs would be stolen and that his breakup song would never see the light of day, something the original owner mourned before committing suicide.

Fang Zhao studied the incomplete song carefully and circled it with his finger. "This is it."

A fixture resembling a folding fan was attached to the shelf in the corner. Tugging it revealed a piano keyboard. It felt functional. This was what the original owner used to compose. It wasn't top-notch, but it wasn't shabby either.

It was Fang Zhao's first time using a keyboard after his rebirth. He was a bit rusty at first, but the more his memory kicked in, the smoother his performance became.

Fang Zhao played a few of his old pieces, but they were fragments of incomplete songs. Fang Zhao memorized them, hoping to polish them after the new talent contest. These were treasures tucked away in his memory, gems that pulled Fang Zhao through countless rough days during the apocalypse. One day, Fang Zhao would present them to the world.

After acquainting himself with the keyboard and integrating his memory, Fang Zhao started channeling his emotions.

He wanted to experience what the original owner of his body was feeling when he composed the song. He could only finish the song when he was in the same headspace.

Over the next few days, Fang Zhao didn't leave his apartment except for his noon tan and getting food from Yue Qing's shop. The windows couldn't block out the bustling nights of any black street, but the noise didn't interfere with Fang Zhao's process.

The noise bothered Fang Zhao the first two nights. His excessive vigilance affected the quality of his sleep. But on the third night, Fang Zhao figured out how to lower his guard. Adapting quickly was a skill he developed during the apocalypse, a quality found in many survivors.

One day, Yue Qing was dragging his chair back into the shop after his noon tan. Even though the weather was getting hotter—some sunbathers had started putting on sunblock—the black street residents still treasured this brief window. Before he entered the store, he scanned the lobby of the building and spotted Fang Zhao walking his furless dog.

"That kid's been busy," Yue Qing mumbled to himself.

By June, the battle for the top spots on the New Pioneers Chart had reached its climax. The music industry was abuzz with discussion over who would make the top 10 and which companies they were signed to.

The higher ups at Silver Wing were also paying close attention. Du Ang was under a lot of stress. On the one hand, he had to field questions from his superiors. On the other, he had to keep an eye on his interns. He couldn't afford to relax even with three assistants at his beck and call.

Du Ang could very well follow the standard procedure from years past: getting on the case of composers, lining up producers, recording the songs, releasing them, and then promoting them. All he had to do was give the order and his team would execute it. But this year, the bosses had a different agenda—you could tell from the fact that they recruited 10 interns. They usually only took three or four, but this year, they had expanded the program to 10 interns out of the blue.

Du Ang had also heard through the grapevine that the bosses had decided that, if all 10 did well, if they could all make the top 50, every one of them would be signed as full-time employees. No one could dissuade him from the impression that the company was betting big.

That was why the pressure from up top was greater. Du Ang was exhausted from attending to every detail. But agents like him in charge of newcomers had it easy by comparison—the agents assigned to veteran singers were worried sick.

But to think of his 10 interns and to remember the only one who hadn't turned in a song was Fang Zhao pained Du Ang.

Du Ang sighed. "It's tough leading a platoon."

Despite the pressure from above, he had lobbied for 10 more days for the kid. And that was because the higher ups had pinned huge hopes on this year's interns. However, only time could tell if the kid would come through. If he couldn't turn in something presentable in 10 days, Du Ang would have no choice but to fire him.

Du Ang refreshed the New Pioneers Chart and glared at the top two. His eyes were about to spit fire.

He was genuinely pissed.

The first place where newcomers could showcase of their talent was the New Pioneers Chart. The top two hadn't changed hands in a week. They held on and even increased their lead on the others. If the opposition wasn't too stiff, Du Ang would consider making another push for one of his newcomers. But once these two showed up, Du

Ang gave up.

On the New Pioneers Chart,

In first place:

"Believe in Me," performed by Xue Huai, composer Xue Huai, a Tongshan True Entertainment release.

In second place:

"Rainbow Candy," performed by Fei Lisi, composer Fei Lisi, a Neon Culture release.

Both songs were both composed and performed by the same person. They had to be quite talented, no?

No.

The musicians behind the two songs were indeed very talented, but the songs were fronted by virtual idols.

When they debuted, real idols had to overcome countless hurdles. The newcomers left no stone unturned in their chart campaigns. They were worried all the time, terrified their debut single would tank, which would reflect poorly on their record company.

But virtual idols were different, especially the tailor-made ones. They were launched only after internal vetting, after elaborate planning and a major mobilization of resources. Their record labels also lavished huge budgets on them. It was the kind of treatment that real newcomers would never receive.

Behind every virtual idol was a crack team and unlimited capital.

Was it f*cking fair to even consider them newcomers?

The kind of manpower and financing big record labels threw at virtual idols—other newcomers could only dream of. Plus there wasn't a real newcomer who could rival the two top virtual idols, and Silver Wing couldn't possibly focus all its ammunition on taking them down. The record label wanted to save resources for their established stars, so the higher ups had already given up on the top two spots.

The virtual idols on the New Pioneers Chart were like computer bugs that grew more permanent with every passing year. Every time a virtual idol showed up in the new talent contest, the other newcomers were left biting dust.

A senior executive at Silver Wing once lobbied the global trade association for record companies to ban virtual idols from new talent contests, but he was turned down. Reminded of the rebuffed proposal, Silver Wing staff always wanted to spit blood.

Of course, the uninformed masses would wonder: "If the top two of the Big Three record companies launched virtual newcomers this year, what's stopping Silver Wing?"

But anyone with a basic understanding of the music industry would know that virtual idols were the Achilles heel of Silver Wing. Whoever they promoted failed, one after another. None had made it. They were all flops.

The company dedicated a team to virtual idols last year. The producer in charge was mocked mercilessly by the staff at Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture after his virtual idol failed to make an impression. He was still hospitalized. He was also too ashamed to face senior management and the rank-and-file staff. After all, he had promised a triumph, but now he wished he hadn't.

The senior executives at Silver Wing also wished they had acted differently. If they knew such a dismal failure was in the works, they wouldn't have bothered with virtual idols. Now they were the laughing stock of the industry. The money they splurged on their virtual idol project was enough to launch several real newcomers.

The project generated nearly zero returns. The senior executives at Silver Wing thought that Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture launched virtual idols this year deliberately to rub salt in their wounds as they made a major push for their real newcomers.

Now that the company had banished any thought of launching virtual idols and focused their attention on real idols, the pressure shifted to the newcomers. Taking down the top two was unrealistic, but the higher ups were hoping to land a few songs in the top 10. If they could land three top 10 hits, Du Ang's salary would double. If he could manage four, he could get promoted.

Be it a raise or a promotion, Du Ang had major incentive to do well.

How many top 10 spots could they claim?

Just as he was pondering the matter, a reminder sounded on Du Ang's bracelet. He tapped the message.

It was a demo from Fang Zhao.

"Wow, that was quick." Du Ang felt reinvigorated.

Regardless of quality, whether Fang Zhao composed the song himself or had outside help, receiving the demo meant that all 10 of his newcomers had submitted songs. Du Ang's work was almost done.

Chapter 7

Qualification

To prevent theft, every demo sample submitted was encrypted using internal software. Du Ang had to decrypt them before he could listen to them.

As he was listening, Du Ang also read the document that Fang Zhao had submitted along with his demo. His furrowed brows relaxed, surprise shone in his eyes, and he flashed a rare smile. "He's quite crafty."

After mentoring so many newcomers, even though Du Ang didn't have much talent in the way of composition, he could still determine the potential of a song. Even though demos were often incomplete and crudely made, he could extrapolate much from such a short sample.

When this song is completed, it should do OK. At the very least, it won't fail miserably.

Du Ang was happy with the song Fang Zhao had submitted. It vindicated his decision to lobby for 10 extra days for the kid, despite the pressure from above.

After listening to the sample, Du Ang sent Fang Zhao a text message. "Stop by the office this afternoon and get cranking on recording the full song."

Even though advancements in technology cut down on production time dramatically, Du Ang would feel more secure if the song was completed early. Not to mention that this season's new talent competition was almost over. If they didn't get cranking, they'd be left eating dust somewhere.

After sending the text message, Du Ang contacted operations. "I'm releasing a new single in three days. Appreciate if you can save me a spot."

After touching base with the producer, operations, and so on, Du Ang asked his assistant, "How many of our newly signed singers are free?"

"Singer-wise, we've signed four fresh graduates. We've already lined up work for three of them. There's still one left, but he doesn't seem to be in good shape of late," the

assistant responded, neck hunched.

"Not in good shape?" Du Ang furrowed his brows once again. He hated hearing that phrase. "Not in good shape" was too general a term.

"I think... he may have broken... broken up with his girlfriend." The assistant's voice faded as he noticed Du Ang's mood swing.

Of course Du Ang was in a foul mood. Who the hell did they sign this year? They're too young to know the ups and downs in life. He was hired to mentor industry newcomers, not babysit. Who had time for heart-to-hearts?

"They're all so much hassle!"

This industry was so competitive, and the new talent competition was utterly cutthroat this season. Who had time to monitor your mood? You think you're a superstar? You want someone to comfort you? Go to mommy and daddy!

As a nobody newcomer, you had to suck it up. Who didn't come up the ranks that way? No matter what was going on, when presented a golden opportunity, you had to claw through even if it meant tasting blood. If you couldn't deal with that kind of pressure then get lost!

"Drag his ass over here!" Du Ang said in a fiery tone.

"Yes sir!" The assistant scampered. He sure as hell didn't want to stay and face an upset Du Ang.

Du Ang's mouth was a flamethrower these days, lighting up one after another. His underlings were on high alert, attentive to the smallest detail, lest they catch fire themselves.

Once Fang Zhao got Du Ang's message, he rushed over by car. It was a half-hour ride from the mass housing district to downtown, thanks to a massive improvement in transportation infrastructure. Before the end of days, you couldn't even imagine getting close to downtown in less than an hour. If there was traffic, it was a different story—a two- or three-hour journey was nothing.

Silver Wing Media had built a 150-story building downtown. It was tower-shaped, nearly 800 meters tall. The top was graced with a giant pair of silver wings. Height-

wise, the building wasn't a standout in the neighborhood. There were plenty of buildings taller than Silver Wing Tower, but as one of Yanzhou's three top entertainment giants, Silver Wing was no bit player.

People came and went. No one noticed a nobody like Fang Zhao. The VIPs enjoyed private passage. Fang Zhao could only ride the regular elevator along with the rank-and-file employees.

Du Ang's office was on the 20th floor. When Fang Zhao arrived, he was tearing someone apart, spitting saliva and all.

Before Du Ang sat a young man of about 20, taking his beating submissively. He didn't even dare wipe the saliva off his face, repeatedly assuring Du Ang, "There won't be a next time. Definitely not! I've been meditating for three days now. I can perform right away. Really! Let me show you."

"Shut up!"

Du Ang halted the singer's overeager apology and shifted his attention to Fang Zhao, who had just entered his office. Fang Zhao looked like he was in good spirits, not as disheveled as he expected, which improved Du's mood.

"Alright, stop bullshitting me. Get ready for your recording session soon. The chart rankings for the new talent competition are pretty much settled. If you don't enter now, don't think about making the top 100, let alone the top 50."

As a matter of protocol, Fang Zhao had to submit his song to Silver Wing Media, which then picked a singer. He was signed to Silver Wing as a composer. His contract dictated that, unless otherwise specified, his songs had to be performed by singers signed to Silver Wing.

"Fang Zhao, all you've got is one song?" Du Ang asked.

"Yeah, just one for now." Fang Zhao responded.

"For the same amount of time, other composers produce two or three. Never mind, just finish this one. Are you going to arrange it yourself?"

"Yes."

"OK, it's up to you. Even if you need one of our arrangers, you're not gonna be able to find a good one right now," Du Ang mumbled.

All the best arrangers had been assigned to the top stars. Newcomers weren't so lucky. Instead of prying a few mediocre arrangers from the demons that ran the arrangement department, he might as well let Fang Zhao do the job. He couldn't stand the sight of those demons. Every visit left a bitter taste in his mouth.

After tearing into the newcomer, Du Ang couldn't rest just yet. After a quick glass of water, he led Fang Zhao and the newcomer, Bei Zhi, who was also on probation, to the recording studio. He had no expectations now—all he wanted was to get this last person out there. That was mission accomplished. As for how well he placed, whether he could seize the day, that was up to the trainee himself. All he could do as an agent was to lay the groundwork.

Fang Zhao took in the production process with eager eyes and finally understood the saying that it was easier to catch a shade beneath a giant tree.

That was why so many people wanted to sign with a big company at a time when the industry was blooming. More often than not, talent alone wasn't enough. There were so many composers out there and thousands of songs were being submitted every day. What the public fixated on and what the major companies got behind were seasoned veterans.

As for the nobodies who weren't connected or didn't hail from prominent families, the only hope was the new talent competition, maybe a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. If they missed out, getting the record label to promote them was a tall order.

That was why the original owner of Fang Zhao's body took the new talent competition so seriously, why he was so desperate as to commit suicide when his work was stolen. He felt that his dreams had died along with those three stolen songs.

After the three-day process of recording a song, the final product was subject to an internal audit, to see if the piece closely resembled any previous releases. If there was a high-percentage match, then it was flagged. If there was too much of a resemblance, or piracy, or any other problems, the company wouldn't release the song.

The entertainment industry had evolved rapidly. The rules were different from those during Fang Zhao's times before the end of days, but you could say it was more orderly.

And even though a completely level playing field was impossible, relatively speaking, under the new rules, more aspiring talents had a shot at stardom.

"The official launch is tomorrow morning at 8 a.m.!"

The moment when Du Ang confirmed the launch date was when Fang Zhao officially qualified for the new talent competition chart. Even though the season was almost over, at least he had entered in the nick of time.

It was June 10. Ten days had passed since the last month featuring the new talent charts started. Although the rankings were still changing, there wasn't a major reshuffle. All eyes were on the battle for top 10. The top two finishers were all but confirmed—the two virtual idols were a shoo-in for first and second. As for third to tenth place, let the games begin.

The artists and staff of Silver Wing Media were glued to the charts. After all, placing well in the new talent competition meant happy bosses, which made life easier for the small potatoes. Maybe a raise was in the horizon.

"We have three artists in the top 10 this season so far."

"Not bad at all. We only used to place one or two. Our newcomers worked their hearts out this year."

What a rare occurrence—three artists from the same company placing in the top 10. The staff of Silver Wing were quite happy with this result. No wonder Silver Wing was one of the Big Three, even though it was on the decline in recent years and failed to place well in the new talent competition. At least they broke through this year.

Companies smaller in scale than Silver Wing were also gossiping.

"The Big Three account for the entire top 10 in this season's new talent competition."

The so-called Big Three referred to Yanzhou's three biggest entertainment companies: Silver Wing Media, Neon Culture, and Tongshan True Entertainment.

"Silver Wing did well this year. They've got three in the top 10. I heard they're making some major moves."

"That's what I heard too. I heard Silver Wing signed 10 new composers this year alone."

They went all out."

"Wow! Ten newcomers at once! That's a huge investment."

"Ten? How come I only see nine?"

"There are nine Silver Wing artists in the top 50. Maybe the 10th wasn't that good and placed lower."

"No, I checked the top 200."

"Then the 10th artist must not have entered the competition. Even though Silver Wing has been in decline, they're still a force to be reckoned with. They're not so weak as to not even be able to make the top 100. The Big Three can't afford to lose face."



"Boss, the top 10 are gaining distance from the rest. Should we make a push?" the employee of one entertainment company asked. Their outfit had also entered a few newcomers, one of whom placed in the top 20.

With the top 10 pulling ahead by greater margins, after canvassing the charts, the boss set his sights on the final spot in the top 10 and pointed to the entry, commanding. "He's our target. Let's make a push and take his spot!"

At No. 10 was "Flight," performed by Kong Xie, composed by Fang Sheng, a Neon Culture release, with a total of 1,502,461 downloads.

There was no other way. The rest of the top 10 had already surpassed 2 million downloads, only No. 10 had just hit 1.5 million. Even though No. 11 and lower were drawing 1.3 million or fewer downloads, a considerable gap from No. 10, competitive juices were stirred. Everyone had their eyes on the plumb spot.

Even though there was only one place's difference between No. 10 and No. 11, the gap in prestige was huge. There were 20 days left in the competition. With the right push, it wasn't impossible to overtake the current No. 10.

The bosses of other smaller companies shared similar sentiments. Seeing that the chart rankings had more or less settled and a bigger cushion developed between the top 10 and the rest, some had already thrown in the towel, but a few companies with

deep talent set their sights on No. 10.

Like a group of cats greedily eyeing a fat mouse darting about.

Chapter 8

Awoken by Coolness

Music students were also paying attention to the chart movements.

At Qi'an Academy of Music in particular.

In the post-apocalypse era, university education had been expanded to six years. Rising Year Six students, whether they majored in composition or performance, were paying close attention to the chart. They also determined the strength of each entertainment company based on the chart.

Out of the Big Three, Silver Wing Media was considered the weakest. Its glory days were in the past. The top students preferred Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment, especially the latter, which had made a major push in recent years. Their virtual idols were flourishing and generated a huge demand for composers and arrangers, a perfect fit for the students.

"Silver Wing did OK this year. They account for three of the top 10," one student said.

"The top 10 are all from the Big Three."

"That's the kind of dominance the Big Three should project!" As far as the students were concerned, given they were the three biggest entertainment companies in Yanzhou, the Big Three should rightfully rule the charts.

"Hey, out of the top 10, five of the composers are graduates of our school. Three are signed to Silver Wing, one to Tongshan True Entertainment, and one to Neon Culture," one student said excitedly.

"Oh, there are three at Silver Wing? What happened to the fourth? I heard that Silver Wing signed four of our final-year composition majors. Three of them are in the top 10. Where did the fourth go? He's not in the top 10. I checked the entire top 100 and couldn't find him."

"Really? Let me see who the last person is. The composition majors they signed are

Rong Zheng, Chu Guang and Sha Andu—no, Sha Andu signed with Tongshan True Entertainment. Is it Prius?"

"Prius signed with Neon Culture. He's in the top 10."

"Oh, then it's not him. Who else is there? That's right – Fang Zhao. We haven't spotted Fang Zhao yet."

"Yeah, he hasn't shown up yet."

"Wasn't Fang Zhao the first one to sign? Our adviser was quite bullish about Fang Zhao, saying that Fang Zhao had the potential to make the top 10 in this season's new talent contest."

The students sifted through the chart again but still couldn't find Fang's name.

What had happened?

It was nearly the end of the season. How come he hadn't entered the contest yet?

It wasn't only the students at his alma mater—his childhood buddies, Zeng Huang and company, were also freaking out and pissed off. They felt so repressed seeing Fang Sheng sitting triumphantly in the top 10. What they would have given to announce to the world that Fang Sheng's song was stolen, stolen from Fang Zhao.

They had no proof, so if they rabble-roused, they would be sued for defamation. The punishment for defamation was heavy and Neon Culture would no doubt defend Fang Sheng. Getting on the wrong side of Neon Culture would do no good for these nobodies.

"What is Big Zhao thinking? Is he really going to enter the competition now? It's already the 10th." Zeng Huang's fiancée Fang Yue, also Fang Zhao's childhood friend, was also keeping tabs on Fang Zhao, but there still wasn't any news, even after days of waiting.

As they were talking, Zeng Huang heard a "ding"—the crisp sound of a reminder on her bracelet.

They saw the sender of the text message and their eyes brightened. "There he is!"



Even though Fang Zhao was riding a high tide, he hadn't slept well since entering the new talent competition. Initially it was nerves and anxiety about his ranking, and then it was excitement.

As he monitored the number of downloads on his wristband screen, he could picture his coffers filling with cash.

Every download cost a dollar. Unless specified, revenue was split three ways: the composer earned 30 percent, the singer 20 percent, and the record label 50 percent. The rise of virtual idols boosted the value of composers and devalued singers. Status-wise, B-list singers weren't as important as composers, so naturally, they received a smaller cut.

For the current season, Fang Sheng entered all three songs that he stole from Fang Zhao as insurance. He bet everything on the current season, a strategy his company signed off on. If revenue was split according to his contract, given that the three songs had already combined for 3 million downloads, Fang Sheng's cut was 1 million. If his career took off even more and he signed a better contract, his cut would increase and he would earn even more.

He had risen from poverty because of these three songs. It'd been only how long?

Seeing how the three songs charted, not only was Fang Sheng free of guilt and remorse, he was glad he had gone down this path. What a great f*cking deal it was, stealing these three songs!

When he first joined the company, the staff members who dealt with newcomers were quite cold. Now they smiled every time they saw him. The shift in attitude meant he was growing in stature. From now on, he'd be entitled to more resources at Neon Light and would work with better singers. The two words "infinite wealth" flashed in his head.

As for Fang Zhao?

Fang Sheng chuckled in a low voice, unlocked the screen to his bracelet, and skimmed the chart rankings again. There hadn't been much movement.

"Fang Zhao has no hope."

At that very moment...

"Ding!"

A reminder sounded.

Fang Sheng had set up many reminders. The "ding" may have indicated a text message or an update in a newsfeed he followed, but somehow, Fang Sheng's chest tightened when he heard the sound.

He looked at the clock on his wristband. It was 8 a.m. sharp.

Eight in the morning was when new songs were uploaded and released after being vetted.

Suddenly, Fang Sheng had second thoughts about tapping the reminder.

Still, he took a few deep breaths and tapped. Maybe it was something else, Fang Sheng thought.

After he tapped the reminder and read the message, his face turned pale.

His screen showed a reminder announcing the new release of a composer he followed. "Hehe, My Dear," performed by Bei Zhi and composed by Fang Zhao, a Silver Wing Media release.

Composer, Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao.

He glossed over the title of the song. The two words "Fang Zhao" were the eyesore. Yet he masochistically stared at the name for a minute before moving his stiff fingers, tapping the play button. When he was done, Fang Sheng stayed in his room. It was dead silent.

When he was summoned to Neon Light in the afternoon, people wanted to approach and say hi but noticed that he was pale as a ghost and wearing a terrifying look.

"What got to him?" the staffers wondered in private.

"I don't know. He's doing well in the new talent contest. All three of his songs are in the top 100, one is in the top 10."

"I was afraid he had dropped out of the top 10. So isn't he in good shape?" a Neon Light staffer said after reading the latest chart.

No one could imagine how Fang Sheng felt at the time. Even though he wasn't a talented composer, he could tell a good song from a bad one. He could figure out which songs would succeed and which couldn't—his tastes were in synch with the masses. That's how he knew what repercussions Fang Zhao's song would bring. Now, if Fang Zhao had released his song independently, it wouldn't have been a problem. He posed no threat that way. But Fang Zhao had the backing of Silver Wing Media, one of the Big Three.

As long as Silver Wing applied the full weight of their promotional machine for newcomers, Fang Zhao was bound to soar in the rankings.

Twenty days was neither a short time nor an extended period.

How was it possible?

How on earth was it possible?

How did Fang Zhao produce a new song in a matter of days?

He must have composed it ahead of time. That was definitely it.

So Fang Zhao was on guard.

Fang Sheng recalled the look that Fang Zhao gave him when he returned to his black street to move. The look harbored a deeply buried sense of hatred. Now revenge had emerged, dangled in front of him.

By June, the weather in Yanzhou was quite warm, but Fang Sheng felt a coldness travel through his body, as if he had just been dragged out of a freezer.

Even though Silver Wing Media had been in decline in recent years, as one of the Big Three, its marketing prowess was still no match for many of the smaller companies. Any new release would be promoted within channels dedicated to newcomers.

The intranet at Qi'an Academy of Music, for example.

"There it is. Silver Wing has uploaded a new song. The composer is Fang Zhao!"

"Let's download it right now. He's an old boy. We gotta support him."

"Brothers and sisters from the composition department, let's support our alumnus Fang Zhao!"

"Already downloaded."

"Downloaded +1."

"Even though I'm an instrumental major, I'm going to help out too."

Many of the students didn't listen to the song but joined the outpouring of support for these fresh graduates. It wasn't a privilege that only Fang Zhao was entitled to. All the top graduates received this kind of treatment.

Thankfully, none of these students were intent on supporting Fang Zhao. They didn't know Fang Zhao and might be fans of other newcomers, but they were still curious about Fang Zhao. What kind of product would this latecomer who showed up at the end of the season deliver?

For Silver Wing to have the gumption to enter Fang Zhao now, it wouldn't be a crappy piece of work. Even if Fang Zhao wanted to enter a shit song, Silver Wing couldn't afford to lose face.

Inside the dorm of a certain higher education institute in Qi'an, a Year Three student had the morning off. He woke up late and got online with a yawn, planning to catch up on the news.

In line with habit, he launched a music app called Intimately You Music that he used frequently and played the recommended playlist for the day.

These recommendations were all drawn and whittled down from his past preferences. If he heard something he liked, he would bookmark it, only splurging on a download when it was a song he really liked.

He wore his headsets and browsed the day's flurry of entertainment headlines as he

listened to music.

Nothing interesting was going on and the music traveling to his ears didn't impress him much. It wasn't bad, but there were no surprises. Maybe there were one or two songs that were OK, but he wouldn't think much of them after a first listen. If you asked him what he thought after he went through his playlist, he wouldn't be able to say much.

This was a common routine. Music industry outsiders like himself often just played songs they had already downloaded on a whim, maybe occasionally listening to recommended new or previous releases.

Just as he was yawning and reading the news distractedly, a spooky laughter sounded in his years, turning his partial yawn into a sneeze. His body woke up, cleared of any lingering sleepiness, and he sat up in shock.

After maintaining that posture for about 20 seconds, the student finally moved his fingers, scrolling through his screen as he switched from the news to his music app to find out the name of the song he was listening to.

When he saw the title, the student blanked for a second.

"Hehe, My Dear'—what kind of title is that?"

The student stared at the title that stood out from the others on the chart as he complained out loud. Yet his fingers kept moving, hitting play once again after the first listen.

And again.

And again.

And again.

"Ding!"

"You have hit your sampling quota for the day," said the reminder that popped up on the screen.

I've hit my quota already?

I've listened to the song five times already?

Wow, that was fast.

It suddenly dawned on him that he had devoted his complete attention to listening to the song five times. He had actually focused on one song and listened to it five times.

Gotta download it!

It was only 1 dollar. He was thinking he could loop the song the entire afternoon, a perfect fit for those two particularly boring classes. Maybe he would be awoken by the sound of "hehe" in his headsets when he about to fall asleep.

After the download, he posted the song on his school's intranet.

Handsome's Cool Song: "I was blown away by a song today. Below's the link to the sample."

Chapter 9

So That's the Kind of Little Secretary You Are

By that time of day, even the lazy bones were getting up. There were still plenty of students without morning classes online. When they saw the post, they clicked away.

There were also those who couldn't bother to click and joined the chitchat instead.

Guitar's Flight: What kind of song can wake you up with coolness?

Handsome's Cool Song: "Hehe, My Dear."

Swimming Fish: What?

Handsome's Cool Song: Go search for it yourself. I'm out, gotta grab a bite. Got a date with the God of Dreams this afternoon.

Mi Yu My Love: Wait! Are you talking about that "God of Dreams," one of the three hypnotist extraordinaires at our school?

Handsome's Cool Song: Precisely.

Guitar's Flight: I'm gonna check out the song.

Swimming Fish: Me too!

Mi Yu My Love: Same here!

Others monitoring the conversation also clicked on the song as a result. They also wanted to know what song could withstand the hypnosis treatment of the God of Dreams.

"God of Dreams" was the nickname for an old professor at the school who still hadn't retired. He used to teach philosophy, but now he had crossed over to music arrangement. The old geezer suffered from low energy in recent years, so he switched to teaching electives. There were only a handful of electives, which also demanded less

of teachers than the required courses.

The problem was this particular professor was an agonizingly slow speaker. To paraphrase the students, Professor Zhou spoke like a sloth, putting everyone to sleep. Students had repeatedly petitioned Prof. Zhou to lecture by webcast instead, but he refused.

Though the class was sheer hypnosis, attendance was still mandatory. It would make sense for students to steer clear of his class, but the thing was that the course was credit-rich, so quite a few students signed up. Thus there were tons of people being hypnotized. Upon hearing the student gossip, a young lecturer wasn't convinced and decided to see for himself. He never showed up again. No one saw the lecturer sitting in on Prof. Zhou's class again.

Prof. Zhou had seniority and he had contributed to the school's success, so no one dared confront him. Those who did didn't want to deal with him, so Prof. Zhou's class kept being offered. Over the years, Prof. Zhou got addicted to the class. He was strict in class. Students could ignore his lecture but they were absolutely banned from doing anything else, including sleeping. Serious infractions led to docked credit.

That day, Prof. Zhou strolled into the classroom casually and scanned his audience. He had poor vision—it seemed like a big crowd, so he thought attendance was good.

In keeping with routine, he checked his surveillance footage, examining every corner of the massive classroom that fit nearly 1,000 students. Good, no one was playing with their bracelets. The same case with other angles.

This pleased Prof. Zhou immensely. The only weird thing was that the students in class looked like zombies, staring upward as if their spirits had left their bodies, a group of thinkers in communion with the stars and planets. In other words, collective daydreaming.

Prof. Zhou would have ignored one or two isolated daydreamers, but the longer he lectured, the weirder the vibe. It wasn't just a select few, not even a minority—most of the class was daydreaming.

How odd!

Prof. Zhou slowed down and eventually came to a halt. There was something off in the atmosphere. He couldn't continue.

Prof. Zhou pressed a button. "XXX, please repeat what I just said."

The student who was called upon was awoken by the flashing light on his desk, which indicated that he had been summoned. He wanted to get up and say that he hadn't caught what the professor had just said, but instead he mumbled mysteriously, "Hehe."

Prof. Zhou: "....."

The other students yelled, "Damn, that was bold!"

Old Prof. Zhou dismissed his class with a sullen look on his face. He also exited at a much brisker pace, unlike his sloth-like movement of the past. The students were spooked, wary of a brewing storm.

In no mood to pay heed to the student reaction, Old Prof. Zhou got online as soon as he returned to his office. He had learned from his students what the problem was. As soon as he logged on he headed for the sample.

Donning his headset, Old Prof. Zhou wanted to give it a good listen. What kind of song would wreak such havoc on his class?

When he heard the human voice at the beginning of the song, Old Prof. Zhou's furrowed brows sunk more deeply. "What kind of crap are the kids singing these days..."

Prof. Zhou picked up a pen and was about to write a critique, but his movement and train of thought were halted abruptly by the prelude.

He took a deep breath when the song ended. He tapped the blank piece of paper with the tip of his pen and put the pen down, instead browsing the song's credits, shifting his attention to the name of the composer on a secondary page.

"Fang Zhao?"

After scanning the credits, Old Prof. Zhou posted: "I discovered a new song that I want to recommend today. The arrangement is quite interesting and defies convention. The fresh grads over at Qi'an Academy of Music this year are quite something!"

"Haha, there are scarcely any songs that elicit this kind of praise from you. And to think it's the work of a newcomer. Gotta check it out." Old friends expressed curiosity. Even

friends who didn't know a lick about music arrangement joined the fray.

Two days later.

It was time for Prof. Zhou's elective again.

The students were extra attentive. They didn't get online or wear headsets. Even if they did, they didn't turn on the music. They wanted to see how the "God of Dreams" would behave today. He was in such a foul mood when class ended last time, which had left them wondering for two days. They were worried that the God of Dreams would flunk the entire class.

Yet they were surprised to find Old Prof. Zhou in a decent mood when he entered the classroom.

Old Prof. Zhou scanned the classroom and turned on the projector. "We're going to analyze a new song today. This is important material. It'll be on the final."

At the back of the room, three words appeared, flashing on the 10-meter tall screen: "Hehe, My Dear."

Before the screen stood Prof. Zhou's smiling face.

The audience: "....."



That evening, a group of upcoming graduates held a gathering to mark the end of their student days.

The karaoke bar was a splendid place to vent. A waiter smiled professionally as he emerged from a private box carrying a tray. His smile was impeccable, but he was sighing inside.

Pre-graduation breakups were very common. Every year around this time, they saw quite a few imminent graduates who were especially emotional.

In the private box on the left, a young man about 1.9 meters tall was tearfully mourning his university-era relationship. In the box on the right, a petite young woman was singing a heartbreaking ballad with her bellowing voice.

Sigh... these kids.

The waiter let out a long, imaginary sigh, but he gave no further thought to the matter. All they had to do was keep smiling. Remembering that business was up and they were due a bonus this month, his smile widened.

Inside the private box on the left the waiter had just passed.

Seven students were sharing a meal. They had stopped after a round of singing, shutting the projector and stereo system. Six of the students consoled the tall, bulky young man sitting in the middle. The music was gone and the mood somber.

"Say, I haven't checked my little secretary's recommendations today." A tall and slender young man sitting on the side tried to change topics, seeing as the consoling was going nowhere.

The "little secretary" he spoke of was a special function part of the hit music app Intimately You Music. It recommended songs and tailored playlists based on your listening history, just like similar functions, except that, for a surcharge, you could pick an avatar for it.

As he launched his app, the tall, skinny young man was ecstatic. "My little secretary is Mi Yu, yo."

As he spoke, Mi Yu's slender body appeared on top of his bracelet as if she had sauntered in from afar. At the same time, a passionate voice announced, "Welcome back to Intimately You Music."

"F*ck, you set Mi Yu as your little secretary! It must have cost a fortune!" The other students were jealous.

A pop idol's images generated royalties. The hotter the star, the higher the royalty. Mi Yu was the talk of the town, so she commanded high royalties. Most fans weren't willing to splurge on a tailored "little secretary."

The tall, skinny student was reveling in the attention and about to show off, but considering the presence of a heartbroken brother, he held back, saying instead, "Let's see what my little secretary recommended today." He'd been listening to a lot of upbeat music, so today's recommendations should be able to lift spirits.

"I listen to whatever Mi Yu recommends." This was a diehard Mi Yu fan, even though what he was referring to was actually just a music app that used Mi Yu's likeness.

"Yeah, let's check it out! Let's build up the mood again!"

Rowdiness was the best antidote for negative emotion. They were going all out to comfort their sensitive, heartbroken dormmate.

The app was connected to the stereo system in the private room.

"Hehe, hehehe..."

A laughter that exuded part self-pity, part sadness erupted.

The entire room went silent, including the heartbroken student still mired in depression, and shifted their gaze to the tall, skinny student, as if complaining, "This is your style? This is your way of building the mood? This is what you mean by upbeat?"

The tall, skinny student started sulking too. He wanted to lash out at his "little secretary," but seeing Mi Yu's perfect face, he couldn't do it. Instead he mumbled, "So that's the kind of little secretary you are."

"It's OK. Let's generate another song." The tall, skinny student had raised his hand, but he froze when the laughter ended and the prelude began.

A slightly retro chorus, a jumpy beat, and a jumble of instruments appeared like a gathering sandstorm.

"It's been a long time

Since we last spoke.

...

In the same city

Too many pictures bring us to a halt.

Time flies.

I'm a bit nervous."

The lead vocals, the chorus, and the instrumental performance blended perfectly to paint a certain setting, where the protagonist was an abandoned traveler soldiering alone, trudging along as he remembered past events and encounters.

Electronic music was common, familiar to listeners of the day, but the electronic music in this song defied categories. Refined listeners could tell what school the composer hailed from, but in the case of this song, they were clueless.

The front half of the song was sad and repressed. The high notes were tearjerkers. But gradually, the melody shifted. After a beautiful, spirited base performance, the song rose to another level and became more epic.

The torrid emotions that were gushing like a raging flood were suddenly plugged by a sturdy dam. The listener was transported to a roller coaster about to soar into the horizon.

Sometimes a song was worth a thousand words.

In the private room, the student sitting in the middle wiped his tears and snot. "What's this song called? I want to sing it."

The tall, skinny student came to his senses, frowning when he heard the question but eventually eking out a smile. "It's a new song. It's not in the system yet."

"Then I'll sing without the music."

"....."

The others opened their mouths but refrained from speaking. "Sure! "Whatever makes you happy."

What a horrible feeling it was listening to an off-pitch singer belt out a passionate solo.

When the tall fellow sang the first "he," the other students grimaced and pulled out their headsets.

Forget it, they were better off listening to the original.

Chapter 10

Crowded Out

The number of sample playbacks revealed the promotional prowess of the record company behind the singer and the composer. But whether the audience could be turned captive, whether they would splurge on a download, that depended the song itself. Undoubtedly, this song had legs.

It was close to the end of the season, and though the extended delay put the song at a disadvantage, its meteoric rise drew a lot of attention, especially people who paid close attention to the music industry.

No one would notice a leap from the bottom of the charts to the top 200.

Nor a leap from the top 200 to the top 100.

But you couldn't ignore a song that made the top 50 in three days.

For a newcomer's single, the rapid rise of "Hehe, My Dear" dropped jaws among those who followed the new talent chart.

Most of the people who listened to the song were students, but among them were also veteran musicians who studied composition and arrangement, such as Prof. Zhou, who had his students analyze the arrangement in a test. That made the students both love and hate the song.

However you looked at it, the song was a success.

Just as Du Ang had predicted, the stars had aligned for that song. Even though it was a late entry, it wasn't that late, and it had enough momentum.

Since Fang Zhao's song was launched, Du Ang was glued to the new talent chart from dusk to dawn. His other newcomers weren't raking in that many more downloads and had started to taper off, stagnating on the chart. The key was Fang Zhao's release. It would determine whether Du Ang would get a raise or a promotion.

At Du Ang's office at Silver Wing Media, things had quieted down as the new talent competition drew to a close. He didn't have any more songs produced. The heavy lifting was left to marketing and sales.

So all Du Ang did was monitor the chart. He watched as Fang Zhao's number of downloads went from zero to three digits, then to four and five, and then to six.

It hit 1 million on the ninth day after its release. Even if they hit 1 million downloads, many new releases would taper off, but not Fang Zhao's. It saw J-shaped exponential growth as it crossed the 1 million download threshold and kept surging.

Glued to the data on his tablet, Du Ang's eyes, covered in bloodied veins, barely blinked. From the moment he arrived at the office at 8 a.m., apart from meals and toilet breaks, he was obsessed, constantly staring at the download tally on his screen. Every muscle in his body was taut and his brain remained in an orgasmic state.

None of his nine other interns had had Du Ang this on edge. Fang Zhao was an exception. He was quite surprised and eager with anticipation.

Even though demos differed from the final product, differences were minimal. But Fang Zhao's arrangement in the final cut had even the demons over in the arrangement department impressed. "Maybe I will get promoted this time," Du Ang mumbled. Between a raise and a promotion, Du Ang naturally preferred the latter.

Du Ang's three assistants could hear him mumbling whenever they entered his office. Initially, they weren't able to make out what he was saying, but after a few trips they realized Du Ang was chanting as he stared at the download counter, "Promotion! Promotion! Promotion!"

It wasn't just Du Ang. The staffers who worked with newcomers were also glued to the chart; they also wanted Fang Zhao's release in the top 10. The only thing was that No. 10 had already hit 1.8 million downloads.

Eight hundred thousand downloads was too big a gap. Fang Zhao had to close a gap of 800,000 in 10 days. No, he had to chalk up at least another million. After all, the 10th-placed song would garner more downloads, so probably 1 million more downloads were needed to crack the top 10.

Was 1 million more downloads possible for a newcomer, considering what promotional channels were in play?

He thought it was impossible, and yet he hung on to a sliver of hope. That sense of hope grew and expanded as the days passed.

What a rapid ascent.

It had just cracked the top 50 the day before yesterday. Now it was in the top 30. The song at No. 30 was released by a small company. Their goal was to crack the top 50. Low and behold the newcomer they signed went all out and clinched the 30th spot. What a pleasant surprise!

The composer was likewise delighted. Considering the season was coming to a close and the chart rankings had more or less settled—he had a considerable lead on No. 31—he was quite relaxed and had been celebrating with friends the past few days.

He was hungover and fast asleep at 2 in the morning when he was awoken by repeated reminders. His bracelet was set to "Do not disturb" mode and most calls were blocked, but calls were put through after a third try.

Three calls from the same number meant an urgent matter.

Frowning, he rolled on his bed and announced in a foul mood, "Put it through." His bracelet put through the call after confirming his command. Before he could say anything, the caller started shouting.

"You've been crowded out!"

"You're the one who's been crowded out!"

The composer was still groggy but the caller had touched a nerve, which prompted the sharp response. After he rubbed his forehead, he froze and exclaimed, "What did you just say?"

A crisp voice emerged from his wristband. "You're really being crowded out. I'm not kidding. Hurry, take a look! Check out the newcomer chart. You're going to drop out of the top 30."

The composer got up instantly, turned on the screen on his wristband and scanned the chart. Indeed, he had dropped to No. 31.

"F*ck! Who did this?"

He hadn't been paying attention to the chart the past few days and didn't pay much heed to the other songs on the list. Every day he would check his own ranking and the five songs above and below him. How did he drop out of the top 30 in the blink of an eye?

No. 32 to No. 36 were the same, and the gap between them hadn't changed much. He shifted his attention to the songs ahead of his. He recognized No. 30, No. 29 and No. 28 – it was the same three songs that had edged ahead for some time. But No. 27 was a fresh face. "Hehe, My Dear?' From Silver Wing Media?" He was curious and puzzled by the last-minute challenger, so he clicked for more details.

It was released on June 11. So late. "What's wrong with Silver Wing Media, waiting until June 11?" As he was complaining, the composer's fingers shuffled, scrolling through other details about the song. The more he read, the more he freaked out. After tracking the song's movement over the past few days, he took a deep breath. It resembled a hormone injection, the way it jumped from 500,000 downloads to 1 million in a few days. And counting. In two days, the song had risen from around No. 50 to the top 30. An increase of 400,000 downloads. Now it was eyeing the top 20.

The gap between No. 25 and No. 30 wasn't that big. No. 30 had 1,403,952 downloads, while No. 25 accounted for 1,437,756. If it were early in the season, a gap of 30,000 was nothing, but it was near the end of the season and most of the songs had peaked. Even a hike of 10,000 downloads was difficult. Low and behold, this song broke into the top 30 and upended the existing order in a few days.

What kind of song could manage such an amazing feat?

Curious, he clicked play.

A long silence followed.

He studied the details of the song with a confused look on his face. This wasn't just a matter of marketing muscle, it was also a function of the quality of the song.

"I'm a lesser composer," he admitted to himself.

It had been more than two hours since he got word that he had been crowded out and started studying the song and everything about it. Daylight began to seep in.

It suddenly dawned on him that he knew the composer who wrote No. 25. Yesterday

his friend was still praying that the chart stay unchanged. He was quite happy with 25th place.

Now a dark horse had emerged, he reached out to his friend.

His friend was also sleeping. He figured he had been partying the past few days as well. The friend answered with a sleepy voice, not bothering with a videoconference. All he heard was a slurred voice saying, "Who is it?"

"You're being crowded out!"

"What? Don't joke about something like this." The voice on the other end sounded panicked.

"I swear, I'm not lying."

Bam! Smack!

A series of jumbled noises followed. After a while, his friend's voice re-emerged. He sounded distracted.

"I've been... crowded out already."

"What? That's impossible." When he got word of his decline, Fang Zhao's song was only at 27. How could he have cracked the top 25 in two hours?

He refreshed the newcomer chart in disbelief. Indeed, there was new entry at No. 25.

A bit of research revealed that a famed late-night radio host that gave relationship advice had recommended "Hehe, My Dear" around midnight. A flurry of downloads ensued.

"This isn't the end of it. It can't be." The composer shut the screen on his bracelet and checked the time.

There are seven more days left in the competition. Many other composers are going to start losing sleep." Framing the problem that way, he felt a bit better about being squeezed out of the top 30.

He couldn't sleep anymore. He washed his face and contacted his agent, who was still

asleep. He couldn't afford to take it easy these last few days. If he persuaded his company to launch one last marketing campaign, he might be able to reclaim the No. 30 spot. If he did nothing, he might not even hang on to No. 31.

The storm that this dark horse had brought would impact the entire chart.

Chapter 11

Overtaken

"Hehe, My Dear," the dark horse that had, near the end of the season, burst through the gates from nowhere, continued its impressive run like a hot knife slashing through butter.

On June 25, "Hehe, My Dear" hit 1.7 million downloads and broke into the top 20.

On June 26, it reached 1.9 million downloads. Ranked 18th.

The song's ability to maintain its ascent this late into the season sent shockwaves through the industry. It even forced other record companies to dip into their contingency plans, tapping promotional platforms previously off-limits for newcomers.

For example, seeing the tides had turned, the company behind No. 17 diverted marketing resources from other singers, pushing the song to No. 14 overnight.

Singers who were crowded out were freaking out too. They scrambled to lobby their own labels for more exposure.

Some labels were willing to divert their resources, but others did the math and decided it wasn't worth it. They concentrated their marketing efforts on newcomers they considered promising.

The huge stone Fang Zhao had cast caused major ripples.

On June 27, "Hehe, My Dear" hit 2.2 million downloads and climbed to No. 12 in the rankings. It was less than 1,000 downloads away from the No. 11 spot. At that point, No. 10 had 2.4 million downloads.

A gap of 200,000 downloads.

With three days left in the season.

Following the chart movements, Zeng Huang was even more excited than Fang Zhao. He called Fang Zhao and said, "Big Zhao, you're about to overtake Fang Sheng!"

"Uh-huh." Fang Zhao was combing his dog in his black street apartment. After his last shave, the dog had grown about two centimeters of fur again. The fur was also slightly curly. He had asked the owner of the drug store about it, but he too was dumbfounded, only saying that some dogs were different. After the apocalypse, some animals developed certain quirks. That maybe explained the fast fur growth.

Fang Zhao's lack of emotion didn't dampen Zeng Huang's excitement. He was still ecstatic. "Big Zhao, at this rate, you'll overtake him by tomorrow or the day after that. Many people say that 'Flight' is actually quite flawed."

"Indeed."

Zeng Huang wanted to criticize Fang Sheng's song some more, but then he remembered that Fang Zhao was the real composer. Criticizing the song would be slapping Fang Zhao in the face. That would be f*cking awkward.

Sensing the awkward silence, Fang Zhao responded, "He can't win because of the arrangement. He only stole the score and a fraction of the demo, but he got stuck arranging the song."

"Ah, so that's what happened. I see. Fang Sheng isn't much of an arranger. I'm sure Neon Culture assigned him one, but I bet they weren't able to communicate with each other, ha ha." Even though Zeng Huang was neither a composer nor an arranger, he knew the business.

Arrangers usually communicated with the composer to better understand the creative process and matters of craft, style, and so on, but Fang Sheng had stolen just the score and part of the demo. He knew nothing about the emotions behind or origins of the song. Even if he forced the original Fang Zhao to tell, he couldn't match the actual composer's passion for the song.

And clearly, the arranger Neon Culture assigned to newcomer Fang Sheng wasn't the best, which prevented the song from reaching its full potential. Otherwise, "Flight" wouldn't have stalled at No. 10. It would have gained at least a few spots.

What a shame.

Zeng Huang also felt that it was a pity. He also had mixed feelings about watching as Fang Zhao was about to overtake Fang Sheng. The few of them grew up together but still ended up enemies.

June 28, 1 a.m.

Fang Sheng's frozen face and wooden eyes stared at the numbers shuffling on his screen. The New Pioneers Chart was in a state of constant flux. Fang Zhao had long claimed the No. 11 spot and was about to overtake him.

Ever since Fang Zhao joined the contest, Fang Sheng hadn't had a good night's sleep, plagued by nightmares every night. He often dreamed he was standing on the surface of the sea. Beneath his feet lay a deep, blue ocean. A huge sea monster broke the surface, flashing its sharp fangs, and charged straight at him.

Wasn't his situation similar in real life?

1:32 a.m.

No. 10: "Flight," 2,430,561 downloads.

No. 11: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,402,796 downloads.

2:15 a.m.

No. 10: "Flight," 2,434,129 downloads.

No. 11: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,419,582 downloads.

3:55 a.m.

No. 10: "Flight," 2,437,643 downloads.

No. 11: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,437,596 downloads.

4:00 a.m.

No. 10, "Hehe, My Dear," 2,437,710 downloads.

No. 11: "Flight," 2,437,709 downloads.

Fang Sheng turned pale. His lips started twitching and the hand on which he wore his bracelet trembled violently.

"I lost. Hehe, I still lost..."

Bang!

He hurled the shiny bracelet he bought after signing with Neon Culture to the ground, shattering it into pieces.

Neon Culture wouldn't allocate more marketing platforms to Fang Sheng because he had already asked once when he sensed Fang Zhao becoming a threat. If he asked again, the label wouldn't agree.

A big company like Neon Culture was loaded with talent and established stars. It could only concentrate so much in the way of resources on a single newcomer. If you were overtaken, you couldn't blame the record label.

Speaking of priorities, Neon Culture did invest in Fang Sheng. After all, he had climbed to the top ranks of the chart. But special attention was impossible. The company's muscle was still lined up behind the virtual idol it had launched this year. Everyone else had to take a number.

No. 10 and No. 11 might have been separated by just one spot, but for Fang Sheng, it was the difference between heaven and hell.

As the sun rose, people started another busy day.

Insider Silver Wing Tower.

Fang Zhao was summoned by Du Ang first thing in the morning to discuss his full-time contract. Fang Zhao was already in the top 10 and gaining on No. 9. No matter what, a top 10 finish was guaranteed. A promotion was guaranteed.

Du Ang was in a particularly good mood. He wasn't yelling at anyone for a change, and he wore a beaming smile when he was discussing the terms of the contract with Fang Zhao. He even lobbied for additional benefits, so the discussion went smoothly.

"Oh, have you checked the company's message board yet?" Du Ang asked.

"No, I haven't." Fang Zhao found some information about the message board in his new memory, but not much. The original owner of his body didn't browse the message board much.

"Go take a look. There are quite a few messages for you."

Guided by Du Ang, Fang Zhao logged into the company's official website and visited the message board.

The top threads revolved around the label's biggest stars. Fang Zhao searched for his name. There were indeed quite a few messages. Nothing compared to the major stars, but some 1,000 messages was a lot for a newcomer.

Fang Zhao left Silver Wing Tower and boarded a train back to the suburbs. He clicked on the messages after he boarded.

Because Fang Zhao was only an intern and not a full-time employee, fans could only leave a message but not gifts. Some left written messages, while others recorded them. He could, however, listen to all of them using the broadcast mode on his bracelet.

Fifth comment: "Why does there have to be 'hehe' at the beginning of the song? Without the 'hehe,' the song would rise to another level. Why didn't Silver Wing release an altered version of the song?"

Sixth comment: "What a joke. Why release an altered version? Someone at our school muted the human laughter at the beginning of the song when they played it in public and was booed until he played the original version. And you're nitpicking about the laughter. You are testimony to the saying that those who missed out on treasures are always restless and those in possession of them treat them like a pair of shabby shoes.

...

Twelfth comment: "I don't care. I like the original. Ever since I discovered it, I've stopped falling asleep in class. I just daydream."

Fang Zhao had read some of the online discussion before, but he could see how strategic intervention by the marketing team at Silver Media promoted the song.

The laughter track wasn't in the diary entry the original owner of his body left behind, but he did chuckle before he wrote the entry. Speaking of which, Fang Zhao had to

admit that Silver Wing vetted its singers properly. Even though he had gone off the rails, Bei Zhi was very talented and his experience with heartbreak could help him perform the song better than someone else.

After reviewing the comments, Fang Zhao felt assured that his arrangement still struck a chord with the public. Did that mean he could release his old pieces too?

He kept listening.

...

Fifty-first comment: "I almost missed out on this song. Now downloaded and added to my library."

Fifty-second comment: "Ha, I almost missed it too. On my first listen I was thrown off by the laughter too, thinking what kind of gimmick was that? But after 10 seconds, the intro sounded OK. I replayed the song. After I was done, I couldn't stop singing 'hehe, my dear,' 'hehe, my dear.'"

...

Who knew who had leaked the information that Fang Zhao's song was inspired by being dumped. In any case, it helped many people understand the song.

One hundred and twenty-ninth comment: "Word has it that Fang Zhao wrote the song after he was dumped by his girlfriend. If I could write a song like this, I'd be willing to be dumped by my girlfriend."

One hundred and thirtieth comment: "Dude upstairs, first..."

One hundred and thirty-first comment: "You need..."

One hundred and thirty-second comment: "...a..."

One hundred and thirty-third comment: "girlfriend..."

...

Two hundred and seventy-second comment: "The worst thing for a man is meeting a girl you want take care of for the rest of her life when you're least capable. I don't know

Fang Zhao, but I can empathize with his feelings."

...

Three hundred and sixteenth comment: "You go, bro! I spent all my pocket money on you on the 15th, betting that you'd crack the top 10. My last impulse buy before graduation. I'm counting my cash now."

...

Four hundred and twenty-ninth comment: "Don't be afraid. Even if the world has given up on you, you still have your music, Fang Zhao."

...

Five hundredth comment: "Go get 'em, alum Fang Zhao—from Year Five arrangement majors at the Qi'an Academy of Music."

...

Admiring the bustling cityscape beneath the sunlight, Fang Zhao smiled. "Rest assured, this is just the beginning."

Chapter 12

The Shelved Virtual Project

June 28, 3:21 p.m.

No. 9: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,512,576 downloads.

June 28, 7:08 p.m.

No. 8: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,578,394 downloads.

June 29, 12:03 p.m.

No. 7: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,710,962 downloads.

June 30, 2:33 a.m.

No. 6: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,800,357 downloads.

June 30, 12:45 p.m.

No. 6: "Hehe, My Dear," 2,908,728 downloads.

June 30, 11:56 p.m.

No. 5: "Hehe, My Dear," 3,000,923 downloads.

That night, nearly every pop music newcomer in Yanzhou stayed up all night monitoring the New Pioneers Chart.

They watched the dark horse that had entered the new talent contest the latest maintain its momentum. After crowding out No. 10, it overtook the next four songs ahead of it in three days and began to threaten the top four.

If Fang Zhao had another day, he would have taken down No. 3 and No. 4. If he had another month, who knows what would have happened.

When the clock jumped to midnight, when the New Pioneers Chart finally flashed a symbol indicating the chart had been finalized, the throngs monitoring the chart could finally breathe a sigh of relief. It was finally all over.

Especially Chu Guang in fourth place and Rong Zheng in third. They were signed to Silver Wing Media as well. They were also fellow graduates of the same department at Qi'an Academy of Music. They entered the contest early on and were given priority by Silver Wing, but Fang Zhao's appearance gave them a real scare.

They were almost overtaken.

Even though they still held onto third and fourth place, they both just hit 3 million downloads, not much of a lead on Fang Zhao. Just as people suspected, if the chart was live for another day, they might have been replaced in half a day.

Luckily, as far as Silver Wing was concerned, all three were newly signed composers. But the composers themselves were quite conscious of their ranking.

Thankfully, the season was over.

Over.

Or was it really over?

The beginning of a new month brought the kickoff of a new season of the new talent contest. Even though this season wasn't as closely followed as the previous, it still marked a new round of battle.

The previous season was over and the winners and losers determined. Newcomers who performed well would gain access to better resources and better music, while those who didn't do so well had their existing resources pulled.

Fang Zhao, the last-minute dark horse, also drew attention and generated plenty of discussion within the industry.

"Prairie Fire" was a Qi'an-based webcast popular among industry insiders. Their main focus was Yanzhou's celebrities of all levels. This season's new talent contest naturally fell on their radar. They even started a betting pool on the final ranking of the New Pioneers Chart.

A new edition of the show aired on July 1.

Sharing hosting duties were the regular male and female presenters.

As soon as the show started, the lavishly dressed female host joked, "June has just passed. So many people struggled to sleep in the intense heat toward the end of the month."

Industry insiders bitched in their heads, "It's just a show for the voyeuristic masses, but we, the actual competitors, have been losing sleep for a long time. No wonder people say the second season of the year is the year's most brutal. It's the real deal—cutthroat, grounded in reality, no room for fakery. No matter how good of a bullshitter you are, the market will deliver a rude awakening."

The host continued, "This season's new talent contest was quite the draw."

The male host: "Indeed, thanks to a hit song that drains all sleepiness out of you, hehe."

The male host's pun had music newcomers watching the show hurling their bracelets. "Hehe your ass. I get a headache from just hearing 'hehe.'"

The female host: "The past season of the new talent contest didn't exactly go according to script, though it was expected that the two virtual newcomers would take the top two spots."

The male host: "After a quiet period for Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture, the two conglomerates relaunched their virtual idol projects."

A video appeared alongside the host's voice.

A slim silhouette wearing a white hoodie bearing a cone pattern flashed an insidious smile. A slight shift of his head could capture the hearts of thousands of teenage girls. The song "Believe in Me" started playing.

The performer was the winner of the new talent contest, virtual singer Xun Huai. He had held the No. 1 spot on the New Pioneers Chart for more than two months now. His single recorded more than 5 million downloads. Xun was created by Tongshan True Entertainment.

After Xun Huai, a shapely figure emerged. Even though she looked young, her face was

impeccable. Her mischievous smile and soulful eyes were downright charming.

Following "Believe in Me" was the No. 2 song, virtual singer Fei Lisi's "Rainbow Candy," which was downloaded 4.8 million times this past season. Fei was created by Neon Culture.

"Wow, two virtual idols in a single season. Xun Huai's star power is beyond dispute. All of my cousins are keeping tabs on him. Fei Lisi isn't bad either. Word has it that a candy maker Neon Culture partnered with made a killing on rainbow candy this year," the female host said in a joking tone.

"The two virtual idols were indeed strong contenders, but I was paying attention to someone else on the chart," the male host said. "Today we received an animation created by a viewer. It's about this year's new talent contest."

The viewers were intrigued. What animation?

A video soon followed.

A slick, fat mouse marked with the number 10 darted forward, huffing and puffing, trailed by a group of cats. Each cat had a different fur pattern. If you looked closely, you could see that both the mouse and the cats were emblazoned with company logos.

People who had followed the new talent contest understood immediately and flashed a knowing smile.

Isn't this a depiction of the chart movements toward the end of the season?

In the animation, a group of cats were chasing a fat mouse.

"Mine."

"It's mine."

"F*ck off, y'all. The mouse is mine."

"Y'all make way. I'm about to make a major move to take down the fat mouse."

As the cats quarreled, a cheetah whisked by like the wind, passing the cats and laying claim to the fat mouse with an emphatic stomp. It kept on running, fading into a speedy

silhouette.

The reaction of Neon Culture staffers in the newcomer department who saw the cartoon: ""

Fang Sheng's agent: ""

As people around him heaped looks of scorn, pity, and cynicism, a ghastly pale Fang Sheng trashed his second bracelet.

In contrast, Silver Wing staffers were chuckling. They were used to being ridiculed by Neon Culture. Now the tables had turned.

Even though they missed out on the top two spots, Silver Wing releases finished in third, fourth and fifth place. Add to that No. 8 and they accounted for four of the top 10. Four.

It was an outcome they never would have imagined.

Du Ang was ecstatic after tracking the New Pioneers Chart until midnight. He wore a silly smile until the next morning, despite being whacked by his wife with a pillow. He was going to be promoted, promoted.

Singer Bei Zhi was also too excited to fall asleep after seeing the final ranking.

"I'm a star now!" Bei Zhi stared at the chart without blinking. "He, hehe, hahahaha!"

A change of fortunes often follows the depths of despair. A mishap might be a blessing in disguise.

Bei's three roommates were amazed by the reversal.

The four newly signed singers were housed in a company dorm. Unlike the composers, the singers had nothing to hide from each other. They took the same classes and vocal lessons.

Bei Zhi's three roommates knew he'd gone through a rough patch after signing. He was in no shape to sing. They'd thought that Bei Zhi would be cut loose before his contract ended, but who would have guessed that Fang Zhao would come to the rescue. By June, Bei Zhi had recovered and gotten the call from Du Ang. He'd lucked

out.

"I'm a star, hahaha!" Bei Zhi burst into a frantic dance in his room.

"That's right. I need to thank Fang Zhao." Bei Zhi raised his arm to call Fang Zhao. If now wasn't the time to kiss up to such an auspicious patron, then when? He was a rookie singer. Cultivating ties with composers was standard procedure. That way he would keep getting good songs. Good songs sent his stock rising.

It wasn't all celebration. Sometimes woe followed triumph.

Du Ang was miserable after getting promoted the next day.

Du Ang used to be in charge of rookie composers. Now he was in charge of all of Silver Wing's composers. His predecessor had quit after leading the failed virtual idol campaign last year. Now, Du Ang took over his portfolio.

The promotion was a good thing. But Du Ang stopped smiling after seeing his to-do list.

Silver Wing launched virtual projects every year, but they rarely received much support. As far as the Silver Wing bosses were concerned, they could prioritize other singers, their virtual idols could be second-rate, but they had to have them. A conglomerate like Silver Wing couldn't be dissed for not being able to create virtual idols. Whether or not they became huge stars was a different matter.

But after last year's failed full-court press, the virtual idols team was in shambles. Staff either transferred to other projects or jumped ship. The department was a ghost town.

The higher ups were at wit's end. However hopeless the mission, they charged the team leaders with figuring things out. They had to have at least one virtual idol project a year. If no actual work had been done, they still had to pull something out of their asses. As long as they came up with something. Quality was not an issue.

Still, to fail miserably was a major loss of face.

After being passed around, the hot potato had landed on Du Ang's desk. His new position had been left unfilled for some time, so everyone had pretended the problem didn't exist. Now that Du Ang had taken over, the other managers could rest easy.

"Old Du." Ya Erlin, the head of the arrangement department, gestured toward his colleague with his fingers.

"Don't 'old' me. I'm only 40, at a time when the average life span is 180. I've only lived less than a quarter of my life. I'm still young," Du Ang said without lifting his head.

Ya Erlin ignored the comment. "Old Du, what's the point? You've risen up the ranks, only to suffer."

Could he afford to take on the virtual idol project?

Du Ang tried telling his superiors—virtual idols weren't his specialty. But no one wanted to take the project. His bosses told him that, since he was filling the open post, he had to suck it up.

Du Ang wanted to spit blood. If he had known, he would have passed on the promotion. He would have applied for a transfer after someone took over the virtual idol project.

Hindsight was always 20/20.

The manager lying in the hospital was a harbinger of things to come.

A disgruntled Du Ang could only pass the buck to the composers he supervised. He wasted no time in offering incentives.

"Whoever is willing to take this on will be fast-tracked for promotion."

Chapter 13

I'll Leave This Mission to You

The entire composition department got online punctually after receiving word that Du Ang had called a videoconference, as did Fang Zhao. He was going to go for a stroll, but stayed home after learning about the meeting.

As soon as everyone got online, Du Ang threw a time bomb in their face.

Indeed, every single Silver Wing staffer knew that the label's virtual projects were a death pit that chewed up money and people. Anyone who landed there was doomed.

Plus this fell outside of their expertise. They only knew how to compose, not how to produce virtual idols. They were clueless outsiders who had no idea how to respond to Du Ang.

So after Du Ang dropped the bomb, everyone went silent. They drooped their heads, even breathing lightly lest a deep breath draw attention, just like students who avoided eye contact with their teacher. Once contact was made, they might be called on.

Fang Zhao also remained silent. He didn't know much about virtual technology, so it wasn't an assignment he would jump on.

The other three newcomers who were signed along with Fang Zhao were enticed by the promise of promotion, but once they saw how everyone else reacted, they knew what was going on. This project was kryptonite. There was no way they would jeopardize the great momentum they had built from the new talent contest, so they shut up and pretended they were rocks.

Du Ang was awfully frustrated when he saw his staff playing dumb. See, he had told the higher ups that they couldn't complete the project—even the promise of promotion didn't do the trick. But Du Ang couldn't refuse a command from above either.

The higher ups just wanted to muddle through. They didn't have high expectations,

they just wanted the job done, so Du Ang pondered briefly and broke the silence.

"OK. We all know what's going on here. I'm not going to bullshit you. We're stuck with this project. We just need to put something together that's presentable—that's it. Our budget is only 2 million..."

"Two million?" someone exclaimed. It wasn't too generous a budget—it was peanuts.

Officially, the company spent 50 million on last year's virtual project, but insiders knew the real amount was probably no less than 100 million, and it was all for nothing. Otherwise, the company wouldn't have gutted the project team with firings and demotions. The department was practically unstaffed. The people who remained behaved like retirees.

Two million was nothing compared to 100 million. The amount of investment also reflected the label's level of confidence in the project. Getting involved was a career-killer.

Du Ang glared at the person who interjected. He was in charge. "I'm not done yet. What are you butting in for?"

After a brief pause, Du Ang continued. "Initially the budget was 2 million. However, I successfully lobbied for another 3 million, for a total of 5 million."

Five million was still a paltry amount, the group thought.

Take Xun Huai and Fei Lisi, for example; the initial investment those two virtual idols received was in the tens of millions. If they did well, another few hundred million was in the pipeline. The difference was that Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture knew how to make money with their virtual idols. Even if they poured in hundreds of millions, they could recoup their investment. Fei Lisi's candy deal was a case in point.

But as for Silver Wing, so far none of their virtual idols had generated much revenue. Every single one had fallen flat on their face after their launch.

Seeing as no one spoke up, Du Ang cleared his throat. "Since no one is willing, let's draw lots."

Drawing lots.

Everyone started panicking, praying that they wouldn't be the one drawn.

Du Ang didn't care how his people prayed for luck. To preempt any talk of cheating, he didn't draw lots by computer. Instead, he made paper strips with everyone's names on them in full view of the entire group, and then he crumpled them and put them in a box. The old-fashioned way.

"As you can all see, it's a fair process. I didn't rig the lots. Just pray that you're not so unlucky." As he spoke, Du Ang stuck his hand into the box and pulled out a piece of crumpled paper. He flattened it in front of his computer screen.

Du Ang flattened the paper strip with it facing his camera, so everyone else could see the name on it, but not him.

The moment he flattened the piece of paper, he heard heavy sighs of relief. They sounded like the breathing of a drowning person taking gulps of fresh air after being rescued.

Du Ang flipped the paper strip over and saw the words "Fang Zhao."

His eyelids jolted. Du Ang was surprised. He didn't want to put Fang Zhao on the project. Given his performance in the new talent contest, he was bound to produce even better songs. There were 50-odd people in the composition department. Considering the odds of one in 50, Du Ang didn't think Fang Zhao would get drawn. Lo and behold, he was.

There was nothing he could do. He had drawn lots in front of everyone. If he reneged, his staff would go ballistic.

Du Ang tried to gauge Fang Zhao's response. All Fang Zhao did was furrow his brows slightly. He didn't respond dramatically. Du lamented that the newcomer had no idea what he was getting himself into.

Even though the outcome wasn't ideal, the decision had been made.

"Fang Zhao," Du Ang spoke toward his camera. "I'll leave this mission to you, then. Alright, everyone else can leave. Fang Zhao, stop by the office this afternoon. I'll take you to the virtual projects department for a quick look."

Not long after Du ended the videoconference, Ya Erlin, the head of the arrangement

department, dropped by. "Old Du, I heard you outsourced that terrible burden."

As soon as the meeting was over, Ya Erlin had gotten the lowdown from several composers who attended, using his cunning ways.

"None of your bloody business." Du Ang found the demon an eyesore. He used to be Ya Erlin's junior and had to restrain himself. Now that they were the same rank, he could speak with more authority.

Not long after he saw off Ya Erlin, Julian from operations stopped to gossip as well. "Du Ang, I heard a composer under you took the project."

Julian was much more senior than Du Ang. Position-wise, both were department heads, but Du Ang didn't want to get on Julian's bad side, so he was more diplomatic.

After disposing of Julian, Bu Lai, the head of back office operations, showed up. He was 30 years older than Du.

"Du boy, I heard one of your composers took the project.

Du Ang: "....." He was tired of explaining.

Within an hour, the entire company knew that the much-delayed virtual idol project had found a home, assigned to a newcomer in the composition department.

So when Fang Zhao arrived at Silver Wing in the afternoon, he was the center of attention.

"That's him."

"That's right, that's him, the newcomer the composition department signed this year, the guy who finished fifth in the new talent contest.

"No. 5 in the new talent competition, you know, the 'hehe' song?"

"Right, right.

"It's him. Poor guy."

"What a stroke of bad luck."

"What can he do? A newcomer can't turn down an assignment. I feel sorry for him."

"Aren't newcomers meant to be used as scapegoats? You watch, he's gonna get torn into."

Everyone considered Fang Zhao unlucky. He had finished fifth in the new talent contest, and people in the know were clear on how much real talent backed up his ranking. As long as he did what his agent told him to, riches lay ahead. What a pity that he was stuck with a dead-end virtual idol project.

Fang Zhao didn't go to Du Ang's office, heading straight to the 50th floor instead, as his boss had requested.

The 50th floor was where the virtual idol project was based. They took up the entire floor. In the early days after the label was founded, the virtual projects department occupied the 45th to 50th floors, but with the passage of time, the department deteriorated and its floors were reallocated one by one. Now they were left with the 50th floor.

When Silver Wing splurged on the department last year, the entire floor was packed. But when Fang Zhao emerged from the elevator, all he could sense was emptiness.

A vast emptiness created by the diversion of hardware and personnel. A shout could generate a clear echo.

"This way." Du Ang was already waiting. He led Fang Zhao to an empty office. "This is where you'll work until the project is complete."

Fang Zhao looked it over. It was a tastefully furnished 200-odd square meter office, for him alone. Only a cash-rich company like Silver Wing could pull this off.

Since Du Ang took over the virtual idol department, he was the head of the department. Fang Zhao was his designated producer.

But Du Ang's focus going forward would still be the composition department. He would leave the virtual idol department to Fang Zhao.

"From now on, you're the producer for the virtual idol project. You're the most senior employee apart from me. You'll make all the key decisions. This has been signed off by the bosses. It's been logged in your personnel file. You've been cleared for access to

this floor. All you need to do is flash your bracelet."

Fang Zhao nodded. "Where's everyone else?"

"Make a left and head to the end of the corridor, the office in the corner—I spotted someone sleeping in there. Probably pulled an all-nighter gaming," Du Ang responded.

Fang Zhao was baffled as to why, given Du Ang's temper, he didn't lash out at someone sleeping at work.

"How many people are there in the department?" Fang Zhao asked.

"One."

Fang Zhao: "....."

He raised two fingers to confirm. "That's to say... the entire department comprises two people."

"Uhm, that's right." As thick-skinned as Du Ang could be, he felt ashamed. This was hazing, hazing a newcomer.

Fang Zhao didn't know what to say next. He had heard about the virtual projects department. He knew last year's failed project had ended in a bloodbath. He just hadn't realized the company had cleaned house so thoroughly. If Du Ang hadn't taken over, the label would probably have kept procrastinating.

"You can make new hires or loan from other departments." Du Ang couldn't bullshit any more. "You take your time to settle in. I'm off. I still have a lot of things to attend to in the composition department." Du Ang got ready to bolt.

"Wait." Fang Zhao put the brakes on Du Ang's escape.

"More questions?"

"I need to attend my graduation ceremony tomorrow and take care of some paperwork. I can't start immediately."

"Take your time," Du Ang responded. Of course he wasn't in a hurry. He had outsourced his problem. He had nothing to worry about. As for what kind of virtual idol Fang Zhao

came up with, he didn't care. As long as he completed the assignment.

He slapped Fang Zhao on the shoulder. "Work hard and do a good job."

Chapter 14

Don't Set the Bar Too High, Young Man

After Du Ang left, Fang Zhao examined his office carefully.

Apart from his office desk and mini-computer, the most glaring items were a row of bookcases.

Very few people read physical books these days, but there were still a few. Some folks liked to go retro, others liked the look and feel of paper.

The bookshelves in the office held up to some 10,000 volumes. Some of them looked new, some were dog-eared from repeated use. Perhaps it was the improvement of paper quality, but Fang Zhao didn't see any damaged pages. Or maybe the damaged books had already been replaced with new ones.

Who knew how many department heads the bookshelves had survived.

Fang Zhao scanned the collection. Most of the books were about virtual idols, including volumes covering the history of virtual idols, technological advancements in the field, and aesthetic design.

"Virtual Idols and Their Cultural Characteristics," "The Aesthetics of the Virtual Idol Body," "Emotional Expression in the Virtual Idol," "An Introduction to the Reg Dimension," and so on.

Fang Zhao picked a book about the cultural development of virtual idols and began reading in his office chair.

The office was much nicer than his surroundings on the black street. There were no distractions. He had enough light with the window open; he didn't need to turn on a light.

Browsing the book, Fang Zhao could sense how far along the entertainment industry had come. The virtual revolution began in the 206th year of the New Era, when the so-called "father of virtual idols" invented the "Reg Dimension," which launched virtual

idols onto the big stage. The open competition between real celebrities and virtual idols marked the pinnacle of the virtual age.

"After the apocalypse, the world economy recovered rapidly. Technological advancements proliferated, among them the advent of digital technology, which converted all available data into a digital format and created a new sensory experience that encompassed sight, smell, and other human senses. Through certain algorithms and procedures, the digital revolution also paved the way for images, texts, sounds, and physical shapes that didn't exist in the real world."

"Virtual forms derived from digital technology are a by-product of mankind's visual era. They crossed over from the virtual world to appear life-like in front of regular people, dazzling audiences on screen and injecting life into convention centers. The Reg Dimension is undoubtedly a ground-breaking invention.

Fang Zhao was fascinated by the book's overview of the Reg Dimension.

The Reg Dimension was a virtual world, an application blending physics and computer science, invented by the New Era's so-called "father of virtual idols," Reg Smith, 300 years ago. Virtual idols were created with this program.

Three hundred years ago, Reg Smith revolutionized virtual technology with the invention of the Reg Dimension, which enabled future digital artists to craft better and more realistic virtual forms.

The Reg Dimension encompassed billions of colors, overcoming the limitations of digital projection, making the movement of virtual idols smoother and more natural. Regardless of vantage point, they looked like real humans when beamed into life.

To quote the book: "The creation of a virtual idol is the process of creating an image in the virtual world and breathing life into it."

Virtual idols born into the Reg Dimension were refreshed by new ideas digital artists brought to the table and advancements in digital technology.

In the past 300 years, virtual technology has gone through countless upgrades that have perfected the virtual idol, but all these breakthroughs were built on the foundation of the Reg Dimension. You could say the Reg Dimension was the cornerstone of virtual technology.

Reg Smith created the Reg Dimension, laying the groundwork for the golden age of virtual idols, but 300 years later, Reg Smith and the golden age were long gone. That wasn't the program's fault. The key was human talent.

Human expertise was the driving force behind the Reg Dimension, the "hand of god" that shaped virtual idols.

If he had the choice, Fang Zhao would've loved to time travel to 300 years ago and see the golden age of virtual idols for himself, the period so well-documented in books and film. Footage wouldn't leave as deep of an impression as the real thing.

Back in the real world, Fang Zhao had a problem on his hands. He could find the technical expertise, but first he had to decide what his virtual idol would look like.

The book said, "In the Reg Dimension, you're an artist with a pencil or a sculptor with a chisel, ready to bring your dreams to life."

Fang Zhao's dilemma: what would he draw or sculpt if he had a pen or chisel?

Just as Fang Zhao was deep in thought, he had visitors—three of them, no less.

The head of the arrangement department, Ya Erlin, operations head Julian, and the head of back office operations, Bu Lai, showed up together.

"Geez, what a rare sight it is to see someone on this floor again." Ya Erlin raised his seemingly boneless finger and pointed at the corners of the office. "It's still too empty."

"No worries. It's Fang Zhao, right?" The head of back office operations, Bu Lai, assumed a paternal tone. "I'll have a sofa shipped over tomorrow. Let me know if you need anything else. As long as it's not too much trouble, I'll take care of it."

"Don't be a stranger with Bu Lai. He's got tons of funding. Siphon off a little and you can take care of things," Julian joked.

The trio were curious about the project. They also felt that it was poor form to assign such a dead-end project to a newcomer, not to mention the newcomer who performed the best in the new talent contest. Wasn't this hazing?

Even though they felt bad, they would never take on the project themselves. All Bu Lai was offering was to throw some resources his way. They didn't want to touch the

project itself.

"Fang Zhao, I know your expertise is composition. How much do you know about virtual idols?" Julian asked.

When it came to their age, Fang Zhao was much older than even Bu Lai, the oldest of the group, but he was trapped in a young body. Sensing their patronizing attitude, Fang Zhao didn't take the conversation seriously. As for Julian's question, Fang Zhao pondered and said, "Virtual idols are like Xun Huai and Fei Lisi."

The three department heads went silent for several seconds. That was a tough comment to follow up on.

After a while, Julian joked, "Don't set your bar too high, young man. Otherwise you'll be disappointed."

Everyone knew the other two Big Three companies excelled at producing virtual idols, especially Tongshan True Entertainment. Anyone they launched drew tens of millions of fans. Xun Huai was another success. They had even started putting him in movies, which meant he would become even more popular. The two-bit virtual idols of Silver Wing were no match.

"There's no need to set your sights on Xun Huai and Fei Lisi. Ai, just do your best. If you fail, we won't blame you," Bu Lai said with a sigh.

Hovering in the horizon, Ya Erlin rolled his eyes. Sure, they wouldn't blame Fang Zhao, but the higher ups were a different story.

"Do the three of you have favorite virtual idols?"

"Of course." Ya Erlin was about to say something but pretended to laugh instead. "That was so long ago. It's not worth mentioning."

Fang Zhao shifted his gaze to Julian and Bu Lai. The two of them weren't in a sharing mood either.

"We were just concerned. Fang Zhao, we gotta get back to work." Bu Lai waved and headed out.

"I should get going too."

"Me too."

Julian and Ya Erlin followed suit. Barely out the door, Ya Erlin was glad he had stopped his train of thought. If he said too much and Fang Zhao created a virtual idol based on his ideas, he would be blamed for the failed project too.

"Thank God I caught myself. Thank God."

After the three department heads left, Fang Zhao was just a few more pages into his book when another person showed up.

The new arrival was about 30. His beard was a mess and his palm-length hair resembled a mop. There was a mark on his face, probably made when he fell asleep on his desk. This was the lone staffer Du Ang had mentioned.

"How are you? I'm Zu Wen, a technician in the virtual idol department."

"I'm Fang Zhao, the new producer." Fang Zhao signaled Zu Wen to find himself a chair.

Zu Wen pulled up a chair casually and sat down, legs spread. "I know about you. The whole department has heard."

Fang Zhao knew his new reputation didn't stem from the new talent contest. Even though the competition was important to newcomers, it wasn't not so important to other staffers. He had an idea where his newfound renown derived from.

The whole company knew that the virtual idol project had been dumped onto a newcomer from the composition department. It was a hot topic on internal message boards. A techie like Zu Wen had to be up to date.

"So we're the only two people left on the project?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Yep, it's just us two," Zu Wen responded lackadaisically. "There used to be three more people. They applied for transfers this morning when they heard you were assigned to the project."

So before Fang Zhao's arrival, the virtual idol department hadn't been gutted entirely. There were four staffers this morning. The department hadn't had a manager since last year's project failed. The last department head/producer was still hospitalized. Word has it he took the failure hard and was mired in deep depression. He'd been

resting in the hospital since. No one knew exactly how he was doing.

Since they didn't have a boss, the staffers behaved like carefree shepherds, signing in and then napping and gaming until the workday was over. Their pay wasn't great, but it didn't require much effort.

After word spread that the department was being revived, the three staffers fled.

"Why did you decide to stay?" Fang Zhao asked. "How come everyone else left and you decided to stay?"

"I didn't transfer in time," Zu Wen said with a yawn. "I fell asleep writing my transfer application. I just woke up."

Fang Zhao: "....."

No wonder Du Ang didn't lash out at Zu Wen when he caught him napping. He was probably afraid that he would scare off the final employee.

Zu Wen kept yawning. Fang Zhao suddenly asked, "You follow any pop stars?"

"You mean the virtual idols that are active on the internet these days?"

"Yes, but older ones count too."

"If that's the case, no." Zu Wen flashed his white teeth. "Because I'm a Reg Dimension technician."

Fang Zhao remembered reading in his book that most Reg Dimension technicians shared the same mindset: I only worship the idols I create. The existing pop idols on the market were created by others. My idol has to be the product of my own imagination.

Chapter 15

Do You Follow Pop Stars?

"Then what do you think our virtual idol should look like?" Fang Zhao asked. He was a newcomer when it came to virtual idols. Even though there were virtual idols before the apocalypse, that was a different story. Now virtual idols were a mature product. It was hard to choose between them.

"Don't ask me." Zu Wen sprang from his chair, as if he'd sat on a nail. "You don't wanna ask me. I'm just a technician who executes. The look of the virtual idol is decided by the producer. I'm just responsible for building the image the producer decides on. In simple terms, I just do what you tell me to do. You, the producer, decide what we make."

Zu Wen had no intention of becoming the scapegoat. That had always been the prevailing mood on Silver Wing's virtual idol projects. If any of his ideas contributed to the failure of the project, he was dead meat.

Seeing that everyone was avoiding volunteering ideas like the plague, Fang Zhao realized that he would have to design the look of the virtual idol. No one else was going to touch that one.

"If that's all, I'm going to head back." Zu Wen just wanted to report for duty and scope out the new producer.

"No problem. Why don't you head back?"

Released by his boss, Zu Wen bolted in huge strides, leaving Fang Zhao alone in his massive office where he became engrossed in the book on his desk.

What should the virtual idol look like?

A call came through on his bracelet.

It was about his black street apartment. He had hired contractors to renovate his studio.

Silver Wing had wired him a payment. Per his contract, Fang Zhao got a 100,000-dollar cut because his entry for the new talent contest recorded 1.9 million downloads. It was a token of thanks for finishing fifth.

Fang Zhao could have used the money to rent a better place or even buy a smaller studio in the suburbs. The label asked him if he wanted company housing, which full-time employees were entitled to.

Fang Zhao had planned to buy a studio in the suburbs, but he dropped the idea after taking on the virtual idol project. He would be spending more time in his office for an extended period. Composers could set their own schedules, but as producer for the virtual idol project, he had to look up a lot of information that he could only access for free at the office. He would have to pay a significant extra amount to access the company's intranet from a remote location.

He could do his research at his office—he could even sleep there. In that case, finding a new apartment wasn't a pressing matter anymore. He had lived in worse places during the apocalypse; he was in no hurry to upgrade his digs. That better wait until the project was over. So Fang Zhao decided to renovate his current apartment instead.

After giving Du Ang a heads up, Fang Zhao left Silver Wing and returned to his black street apartment.

After deciding not to buy a new place, Fang Zhao upgraded his headset, his glasses, and his stereo system. The contractors were about to install sound-proof windows and a ventilation system.

The installations were completed in less than an hour.

He checked the time. It was already 5 in the afternoon. Fang Zhao headed downstairs and his dog with curly hair followed.

He bought some food at the store. Now that he had some cash, he didn't have to mistreat himself anymore. He ordered food of better quality.

Yue Qing handed Fang Zhao the decompressed food. This meal was more refined and more tender and naturally fragrant than the decompressed dim sum he'd had before.

"How much?" Fang Zhao asked.

"It's on the house. Congrats on doing well in the new talent contest." Yue Qing didn't follow the music industry. He'd only found out because he overheard a few youngsters chatting in his shop yesterday.

Fang Zhao didn't put up any pretenses. "Thanks!"

"That's right, Boss Yue, what kind of pop idols do you like? Virtual or real?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Pop idols?" Yue Qing froze and then shook his head. "I don't follow pop idols. The current pop stars don't really strike my fancy. When I listen to a pop song, I don't bother figuring out who the performer and composer are. The only reason I knew about the new talent contest is because I overheard someone else talking about it. I wasn't following the competition. But..."

Yue Qing turned his head to scan his store carefully. After making sure his wife was still at work, he said, "But I remember one celebrity who had quite the body." Yue Qing traced her curves in a dreamy state. "What was her name again? I can't remember her name."

"Was she a virtual idol or a real one?" Fang Zhao asked.

"I'm not sure. Does it make a difference? These idols are all beyond our grasp," Yue Qing said.

"Boss Yue, is there someone you admire?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Someone I admire... Yeah, my former commander. Before he retired from the army..." Yue Qing got carried away reminiscing about his army days, but he quickly came to his senses. "What are you asking all these questions for?"

"I took on a virtual idol project," Fang Zhao responded. It was no secret, so there was no need for him to lie.

"Then I won't be of any help. Those celebrities and idols really don't do much for me. Even if I remember what they look like, I can't remember the names of their songs, let alone know how to critique them. I just save songs when I hear something I like. But very few songs strike my fancy these days—they're either too mellow or they rock my eardrums. Not my cup of tea." Yue Qing was no music aficionado. He didn't listen to much music.

Someone called for Fang Zhao.

"Hey, Fang Zhao, over here."

Fang Zhao followed the voice and saw the owner of the drug store waving at him.

"Ai Wan wanted to see you," Yue Qing said.

Ai Wan was the owner of the drug store.

Fang Zhao stuffed down what was left of his food, returned his plate, and darted from the shop to the drug store.

"What's up?" Fang Zhao asked.

Ai Wan eyed Fang Zhao's dog, which was following closely. "It's about the dog with the curly fur."

After inviting Fang Zhao inside, Ai Wan handed over a batch of test results from the past few days. After he shaved the dog, he was curious what was so special about it that it could jam his clippers. But the tests revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

"I found traces of five rare metals. They didn't show up before because their levels weren't excessive. But it's no big deal, probably from the dog's years of scavenging. There's a lot of toxic waste in garbage dumps. Don't worry about it," Ai Wan said.

Fang Zhao scanned the test reports and asked, "This is what you wanted to tell me?"

"Of course not." Ai Wan brought out another batch of test results. "When I analyzed the dog fur, I cross-checked its DNA sequencing against a database. Weren't you asking what breed it was? Turns out it might be descended from a Curly-Coated Retriever or a water spaniel from before the near-apocalypse. But your dog's fur is extra curly and many species mutated during the end of days, so the results aren't completely reliable. That's the best I could do—the database is limited because too many animals went extinct during the apocalypse. But I also checked a database of New Era dogs."

Ai Wan brought out another chart. "You probably don't know that a distinguishing marker gene was found in the service dogs that survived the apocalypse. The wild dogs that survived have a different marker gene. That's how dog researchers can tell whether a dog is descended from a service dog or a wild dog."

Ai Wan pointed at the chart and pointed at the dog with curly hair sitting next to Fang Zhao. "I found both marker genes on this one."

"And your conclusion is?" Fang Zhao asked.

"One of its ancestors is definitely the offspring of a service dog and a wild dog, but perhaps, by its generation, its wild-dog genes are stronger. It's a small dog, after all. Service dogs are usually quite large. Of course, I can't rule out the possibility that it's the descendant of one of those rare, smaller service dogs, but I'm inclined to believe in my hypothesis."

Wild dogs from the New Era were known for their small build and top-notch survival skills. The larger wild dogs have long gone extinct.

"Think back to what it looked like when you first adopted it and consider the heavy metal levels in its system. It would have died if it were any other species. Its wild dog genes kept it alive."

As Ai Wan spoke, he reached out to fondle the dog, but it shied away.

"Hey, you were such a steady boy when I was shaving you," Ai Wan complained.

"Many thanks," Fang Zhao said. He didn't request the tests, so he was grateful that Ai Wan took the time to conduct them and had shared the results.

Ai Wan waved off his thanks. "My pleasure. I was curious. I just hope you don't mind."

Fang Zhao paused, then asked, "Boss Ai, are you a fan of any pop idols or celebrities?"

"Idols or celebrities? Yeah, what's her name. She played a nurse in a movie last year. She was really cute, haha."

"Do you remember her name?" Fang Zhao asked.

"I can't remember off the top of my head."

"Is she a virtual or real idol?"

"A virtual one. How great it would be if she were a real one; I might run into her one day. She was a better actor than the real actors. She really delivered as the nurse. She

reminded me of an actual ER nurse. The other actors couldn't pull their parts off. They wouldn't be able to fool someone with a medical background."

After leaving the drug store, Fang Zhao returned to his second-floor apartment and watched a few movies and concerts that featured some of the more popular virtual idols in recent times on his new projector. He wanted to see what a hit virtual idol looked like.

Chapter 16

Graduation

Quality situational glasses and headsets allowed Fang Zhao to better experience the mood at the scene. They resurrected the event in question.

Situational technology was the same as simulation technology, or what people often call virtual reality technology.

Virtual idols staged two types of concerts—live shows and virtual concerts.

Live shows refer to actual, real-life performances that fans buy tickets to attend. Virtual concerts were staged online with the help of situational equipment.

The advancement of virtual technology allowed people to experience the volcanic energy that radiated from the stage in a different space and time.

Regardless of whether the glittering scenes on stage were real or simulated, as far as the fans were concerned, their sole focus was the people on stage the moment they arrived at the arena.

The epic scale of the event and the shuddering sound effects were recreated with utmost authenticity. But what Fang Zhao dwelled on was which performers could set the tone on stage, regardless of the quality of the songs they were singing.

There were all types of hit virtual idols, just like real celebrities staked out different styles. Virtual idols were launched by their production teams with a specific personality in mind, be it the happy-go-lucky type, slightly depressed, mature, or utterly adorable.

But unlike real people, virtual idols were ageless. A 16-year-old virtual idol would always be 16, unlike a real idol who needed to cover up the passage of time.

Fang Zhao couldn't possibly watch the performances of every hit virtual idol, so he just browsed. The current crop of virtual idols seemed to be tailored to younger fans. That made sense—young men and women were a demographic willing to follow pop stars

closely and spend on them. Older people like Yue Qing didn't bother.

Fang Zhao was still clueless after watching all that footage.

There were many types of virtual idols who made it big, especially in the age of Reg Smith, the father of virtual idols. Humans, animals, crossbreeds, fairies and demons—you name it. You could say that the abundance of talent made the golden age of virtual idols. Otherwise, virtual idols wouldn't have all but relegated real idols to a historical footnote.

The golden age of virtual idols was also known as the Reg Era. Many of the idols might not have been created by Reg Smith himself, but they were all products of Reg Dimension technology.

The virtual idols who are popular now had traces of their predecessors from that era. You could find similarities between the virtual idols from the two periods.

How about basing his design on a hit idol during the Reg Era?

Fang Zhao couldn't make up his mind, and he didn't want to do a half-assed job as Du Ang had suggested. For him, it was all or nothing.

He decided to consult a professor specializing in virtual technology when he attended graduation the next day.

The next day was the last day the imminent graduates appeared in school as students. When the day was over, they would shed their identities as students and join their respective professions.

The talk of the school was naturally the outstanding graduates. The composition department accounted for six of the composers behind the New Pioneers Chart's top 10. Setting aside the two virtual idols, six of the eight remaining composers were Qi'an Academy of Music graduates.

The composition department was in a great mood, and the school leadership in an even better mood. They ordered everyone to brag about their illustrious alums, no holds barred.

The graduation of one batch of students meant it was time to recruit a new freshman class. The more people knew about how well their alums performed in the new talent

contest, the stronger their applicant pool.

So the entire campus had been reveling in a celebratory mood the past few days. The head of the composition department was especially boisterous, striding around in a confident gait—until he heard that Silver Wing Media had stuck Fang Zhao with the virtual idol project.

"I don't care. You're hazing a newcomer, wasting talent. It's a travesty."

When Fang Zhao arrived, the department head was videoconferencing. The other party was Du Ang, the head of Silver Wing's composition department.

Du Ang wore a look of resignation. He kept his temper and offered an explanation—Fang Zhao was indeed being mistreated, after all. He could also tell where the department head was coming from.

He had to do something when a star student from his department was being treated this way. So what if Silver Wing was one of the Big Three, Qi'an Academy of Music was a top school too. A big-name school had to project the aura of a big-name school—it should speak up when it was called for. He would have done the same thing for any other student.

He knew his call wouldn't change things, but changing the outcome was one thing and speaking up was another. He had to at least posture.

Du Ang thought the sly fox showed a great knack for timing, calling just as Fang Zhao was visiting. Who knows—the timing might have been intentional.

After hanging up angrily, the department head shifted to a gentler mood when he turned to face Fang Zhao. He looked like he felt for Fang and uttered a few words of consolation.

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Their top professionals couldn't put together a decent virtual idol, so don't be too hard on yourself."

"Thanks, Professor, I know. So Rong Zheng said you wanted to see me?" When Fang Zhao had arrived on campus, fellow composition major Rong Zheng told him that the department head was looking for him.

"Oh, it's no big deal. I just wanted to help you put things in perspective. Silver Wing

doesn't care about the project, and you can keep composing on the side."

After more consolatory remarks, the department head let Fang Zhao go, but not before making sure that he wasn't as depressed as people had imagined.

"Sigh, bad luck for such a budding talent, and a year down the drain." The department head sighed as he watched Fang Zhao leave, but his mood improved when he thought of his other graduates.

The virtual idol project would definitely take up a good chunk of a year, or even more than a year. Even though he told Fang Zhao that he could still compose on the side, when things got busy, who had the mood and inspiration to compose? So wasting a year was certain. Still, there were other composition department graduates who could make their presence felt in the industry in the coming year. Discounting Fang Zhao, didn't they have five other graduates among the composers who made the top 10 of the New Pioneers Chart? The "QiMu Posse" still reigned supreme. No other music school could compare.

Meanwhile, Fang Zhao also had an inkling of the old geezer's thinking. He wasn't born yesterday, after all, so he didn't take the lecture too seriously.

What bothered Fang Zhao more was the way his most fervent supporters during the new talent contest avoided him.

Out of the six composition majors who placed in the top 10 of the New Pioneers Chart, the reception given Fang Zhao was markedly different. People weren't cold or distant, they just didn't know what to say. The ones that approached him offered consolation. The students knew from alums how important the year following the new talent contest was. To waste a year or even longer on a dead-end project added an element of uncertainty. His future hung in the balance.

Fang Zhao didn't mind the consolation, though. He just smiled and said thanks.

As one of the outstanding graduates, Fang Zhao got to go on stage during the graduation ceremony and receive an award, along with the other honored students. That was why everyone fought so hard to make the top 10 during the new talent contest. The top 10 offered plenty of exposure and name recognition.

Fang Zhao could also hear the whispers in the audience and see the mournful looks thrown his way. People were probably expecting him to disappear from the composer

contingent of the music industry in the next year.

Fang Zhao didn't leave with his classmates after the graduation ceremony. The original host of his body didn't have close friends at school. There wasn't much to say.

He applied for an auditor's pass for a class on virtual idols instead. Now that he had graduated, he no longer enjoyed student perks. He had to pay for an auditing pass.

The class was held in a large, terraced auditorium. Compared to web lectures, live classes were more interactive. The main attraction was that this particular classroom was well-equipped, outfitted with the latest audiovisual equipment, which enhanced the lecture experience. It was worth the long trip for Fang Zhao.

He ran into Chu Guang when he was applying for his auditor pass. Chu Guang was also a composition major. He placed fourth in the New Pioneers Chart and was also signed to Silver Wing.

"An auditor pass? You're sitting in on a lecture?" Chu Guang was surprised initially, but it made sense after he remembered Fang Zhao had been stuck with the virtual idol project. "Not too many students sign up for this class, but the professor is my uncle. His name is Chu Hong. I'll give him a heads up so you can ask him questions. He's just been called away by a few other professors."

"Thanks," Fang Zhao said.

"Spare the pleasantries. We're classmates and now we're signed to the same company. No need to thank me." If Fang Zhao hadn't been assigned the virtual idol project, Chu Guang may have been more guarded. After all, they were competitors. Now that the situation was different, he was willing to lend Fang Zhao a helping hand.

"So your uncle teaches a class on virtual idols. How much do you know about virtual idols?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Not much. But I do know one thing—my uncle said this, not me." Chu Guang was quick to claim anonymity.

"No worries. I won't tell anyone." Fang Zhao understood Chu Guang's concerns.

Chu Guang relaxed after Fang Zhao offered his reassurances. After scanning their surroundings to make sure no one was eavesdropping, he said in a low voice, "Once, I

heard my uncle b*tch when he got drunk with my dad, 'War and chaos breed real men, and prosperous times produce sissies. That's the direction virtual idols are headed in.'"

Fang Zhao frowned. "Why's that?"

"Because the market no longer needs a warrior to maintain order."

Chapter 17

Creativity

Fang Zhao was still frowning, so Chu Guang turned on his bracelet screen and switched to draw mode.

"To put it in simple terms..."

Chu Guang drew two circles on his screen and connected them with a straight line. He pointed to the circle on the left. "Let's say this is the tough guy type." Then he gestured to the circle on the right. "This is the pansy type."

Fang Zhao nodded.

Chu Guang drew a third circle in the middle of the line. "This is the hybrid. During the Reg Era, most virtual idols were centrists or center-left. Even if right-leaning idols existed, they were a minority. But after the Reg Era, virtual idols veered to the right. That's why my uncle made that comment. Even though he was exaggerating and things aren't that bad, the overall data supports this trend."

Fang Zhao understood. He had read about the transformation of virtual idols in his research as well. To compete with real idols, virtual idols had to reinvent themselves—and their evolution did indeed lean toward the right of the spectrum as Chu Guang had said.

Chu Guang turned off his bracelet screen. "This is a visual era. Standards of beauty shift from generation to generation. The top idols during the Reg Era may not be successful if they were transplanted to today. You can see traces of the classic idols from the Reg Era in today's virtual idols, but they have been tailored to current aesthetic standards so they can better fit prevailing visual preferences. Just like our styles as composers will evolve over our lifetimes."

"A businessman once said, 'The market is always right. If you can't fit in, then the problem lies with you. You must change with the times and not fight the market.'"

Fang Zhao still looked puzzled, so Chu Guang offered up more consolation. "But you

don't have to take these things too seriously. You're a composer, not a professional virtual idol producer. Plus, Silver Wing doesn't really care about the virtual idol project. Just base your design on the company's previous virtual idols and wrap up the project soon. Composing is your priority. We'll be waiting for you on the charts."

There were many more charts beyond the New Pioneers Chart. The New Pioneers Chart was only a starter chart. They had many other charts to climb.

After leaving campus, Chu Guang drove away in his flying car. Fang Zhao boarded his train too. He had to switch trains once to get to his black street.

When Fang Zhao got home, it was already 4 p.m. The black street was still dark.

Curly Hair sensed Fang Zhao's arrival and was waiting by the door. When Fang Zhao entered, it whimpered and wagged its tail vigorously.

Fang Zhao scanned his apartment. Nothing was broken. He fondled the dog on the head and poured food onto its plate.

He had just set down his briefcase and barely finished a glass of water when his bracelet indicated a call.

Fang Zhao raised his eyebrows when he saw the caller ID.

When he answered, Fang Sheng's face appeared.

After being crowded out by Fang Zhao on the New Pioneers Chart, Fang Sheng's stock at Neon Culture had no doubt suffered, even though it hadn't completely tanked.

It was their first contact in some time. Fang Sheng looked less obnoxious. His horrible pallor, puffy eyes, and the dark green circles surrounding them suggested he was in bad shape. It had been a while since he'd last slept well.

"You cunning bastard." Fang Sheng gritted his teeth.

"Why, thank you." Fang Zhao was oblivious to the anger in his tone. Did thieves have the right to be angry?

"You must be delighted to have pulled a fast one on me, eh?" Fang Sheng was convinced that Fang Zhao had held back a song from him as a precaution. Otherwise, where did

the "hehe" song come from? He never knew about it when they were close.

You couldn't blame Fang Sheng for his suspicions. Yet a diary entry written during heartbreak was very private. Unless Fang Zhao completed the piece, he would have never shown it to anyone, even Fang Sheng, whom he considered a close friend back then.

Fang Zhao ignored the question. He put down his glass and stared at Fang Sheng. "You think this is over?"

Fang Sheng was going to make fun of Fang Zhao for being stuck with the virtual idol project at Silver Wing. Instead, he was caught off guard by Fang Zhao's response. "What do you mean?"

"Just wait and see."

Wait for what?

What did Fang Zhao have up his sleeve?

Could Fang Zhao have held back other songs?

"What do you mean, Fang Zhao? Be straight with me."

Fang Zhao hung up, shunning the panicked Fang Sheng.

He walked to the corner where he composed and pulled open the drawer where the original owner of his body kept his diary. He added the medal he'd received today at graduation from Yanzhou Music Association for his fifth-place finish in the new talent contest.

Even though Fang Zhao arranged the song, his body's original owner was the composer. He deserved the credit.

"I'll take care of the rest."

Now that he had graduated, Fang Zhao didn't need to go to campus anymore. It was also summer break, and the next virtual idol course didn't start until September. It was only early July. That was more than a month away.

Fang Zhao had to draft a project proposal in the next month; otherwise, he would be too busy to sit in on the virtual idol class come the new semester.

Recruiting a team could wait. First, Fang Zhao had to decide on the look of his virtual idol.

Fang Zhao understood everything Chu Guang had said, but he was an old relic parachuted into the present time, after all. He was still absorbing.

Why not retain the core of past virtual idols and repackage it?

Virtual idols had an edge in that they didn't have to be human. There was a huge market for the fairies and demons that ruled the Reg Era and furry, cute pet animals. Some of the classics lasted several generations. Different styles catered to different demographics.

The market.

How do you cater to the market?

But the market was a mystery. No one had an absolute answer.

Fang Zhao was still struggling the next day.

When he was having breakfast in the morning, Fang Zhao noticed the paper notebook sticking out of his briefcase. He used it to take notes when he was doing research in his office. Eventually, there had been too much information to jot down, so he'd started scanning pages with his bracelet instead.

But among the few lines in the notebook was a quote that stuck with him. Something the father of virtual idols, Reg Smith, had said: "I worship only what I create."

Composing was a form of creativity.

Even an artist trapped in a cage was free at heart.

"I worship only what I create."

Fang Zhao repeated the quote again in a low voice and laughed. He opened the notebook and started drawing with a pen.

No one knew that the core of this body had endured the end of days. Fang Zhao couldn't shed his experiences from his soul.

Instead of second-guessing all the time, why not give yourself free rein?

Time passed and light started seeping through the windows. The noon sun was about to arrive.

Dressed in a wife-beater and baggy boxers, Yue Qing dragged a chair to his storefront for his daily tan. He was surprised that Fang Zhao hadn't showed up yet.

"Did the kid head out?" Ai Wan stopped by to ask.

"I dunno. Didn't see him this morning." Yue Qing scanned Fang Zhao's window, which was open.

"He hasn't left. The kid's still in," Yue Qing confirmed.

"That's odd. Very unusual." Ai Wan shook his head. Out of occupational habit, he had studied Fang Zhao for days. There was something off about him. He was a bit guarded. Maybe all artists were like that.

Inside the apartment, Curly Hair had just finished his breakfast and was resting quietly. Its droopy ears occasionally shifted in sync with the hustle and bustle outside.

The noon sunlight and the noise didn't affect Fang Zhao's concentration at all.

Chapter 18

Longxiang Tianluo

War heroes from the Period of Destruction couldn't be casually appropriated as virtual idols. When virtual idols were first introduced, a few companies modeled their idols after war heroes, but they often distorted the real person, which infuriated the descendants of the heroes. They banded together to clamp down on the trend.

Virtual idol companies were banned from basing their designs on real-life war heroes from the Period of Destruction or even using their names. When exceptions were made, they required extensive vetting. Violators faced legal action.

There was no way he would use a fellow veteran's likeness, and Fang Zhao never considered drawing himself. He was right there in the flesh. If he wanted to do anything, he could do it himself. There was no need for a virtual version of himself.

But Fang Zhao still preferred to draw from people and events that had left a deep impression on him. If real people from the end of days were off-limits, then he would find inspiration elsewhere.

Fang Zhao worked for two days straight, taking breaks only to eat and sleep. He labored in his corner, drafting and redrafting before completing a prototype. He wasn't a visual artist—his sketching skills were limited. He would leave it to the professionals to polish his design. He just needed to come up with a rough draft.

Another noon arrived. It grew brighter and brighter outside.

A draft sketch appeared on the piece of paper sprawled on the desk in front of Fang Zhao. Even though it wasn't very detailed and refined—no more than a rough outline—anyone could tell it was the image of a tree.

Fang Zhao took a deep breath. He didn't know if it was the right decision, but this was what came to mind.

"Longxiang Tianluo."

The Longxiang Tianluo was a common plant during the apocalypse. No one knew what it looked like before the end of days, but judging from its size, it was probably descended from a regular, widespread species found across the world. Many species died during the end of days, which saw a massive round of extinctions, but some plants survived after undergoing mutations. The Longxiang Tianluo, for example.

The name Longxiang Tianluo, which roughly meant powerful and sprawling, was coined by a botanist. Unfortunately, the botanist died in the early days of the apocalypse. No one remembered his name, but the name Longxiang Tianluo survived.

At a time when most plants withered, this species of tree survived the end of days. It was one of the rare plants during the apocalypse that wasn't poisonous and actually had medicinal value. During the apocalypse, many types of medication were derived from the Longxiang Tianluo.

When designing his prototype, Fang Zhao recalled a conversation he'd had with a few old friends.

"Old Zhao, don't you think the three of us kind of take after the Longxiang Tianluo? We were just ordinary folks before the end of days—I was a prison guard and Su Mu tended to his cattle..."

"Old Xi, you got it wrong. I was a shepherd," Su Mu corrected.

"Same thing. See, Old Zhao—a shepherd, a teacher, a prison guard, and a composer. All regular people. The apocalypse changed everything. It's not just us. No one who has survived looks like they used to. It wasn't for the fame—it was all in the name of survival, no matter what we became."

During the end of days, he used quite a few wooden tools made from Longxiang Tianluo. Vaccines were also extracted from the tree. You could say that the Longxiang Tianluo and mankind had survived the apocalypse hand-in-hand.

Someone once joked that the Longxiang Tianluo was another comrade.

Fang Zhao tucked away his drawing, washed his face, and headed downstairs.

After seeing Fang Zhao for the first time in three days, Yue Qing and Ai Wan both approached to chitchat.

"You've been holed up working the past few days?"

"Yeah." Fang Zhao bought some more food from Yue Qing's shop. He ate while getting a tan.

"It's not easy being a creative type. Takes up a lot of brain power," Ai Wan said.

Fang Zhao chatted briefly with Yue Qing and Ai Wan. When the sun faded, he returned to his apartment to tidy up, then picked up his briefcase and headed to Silver Wing headquarters. He went straight to the 50th floor.

He wondered if Zu Wen had pulled another all-nighter gaming in his office. His sole staffer only responded after several shouts.

"Who are you? Oh, right, the new producer." Zu Wen was still in a daze. He'd almost forgotten that Fang Zhao had been assigned to the virtual idol department. Thankfully, he caught himself in time.

"You've decided on a prototype?" Zu Wen asked with a yawn.

"I've finished a draft." Fang Zhao opened the notebook and laid it before Zu Wen.

Zu Wen stared at the page and went blank for two seconds. He rubbed his eyes and took another careful look. After a long silence, he blurted out, "Either I'm not entirely awake or you've gone nuts."

Zu Wen's first reaction was disbelief. Are you f*cking kidding me?

"Uhm, if I'm not mistaken, you drew a... tree."

Zu Wen had been wondering for the past two days what Fang Zhao would come up with. He'd even wondered whether Fang Zhao would cherry pick features from various virtual idols like previous virtual idol designers had done—this nose, those eyes, this face, and that body. It'd never occurred to him that Fang Zhao would hand over a tree.

There had been all types of virtual idols—humans, animals, fairies, and demons. But as a veteran virtual idol designer, Zu Wen had never seen a plant.

If it was going to be a plant, so be it. But it had to be a unique plant, no? Cuter than

usual, more attractive than the average plant, or more colorful. Otherwise, how were you going to attract a following? But Fang Zhao was a renegade.

Brother, are you shooting to become the basket case of the modern virtual idol industry?

Zu Wen stared at Fang Zhao, who nodded firmly. His world collapsed.

"What kind of tree it?" Zu Wen asked, pointing at the drawing. He wanted to rip it to shreds.

"Longxiang Tianluo."

"What?"

"Basically what you know as the Tianluo tree."

"Since when were Tianluo trees called 'Longxiang Tianluo'?" A skeptical Zu Wen started typing on his computer.

"Also known as the Longxiang, the Tianluo is a product of the Period of Destruction. It was a giant among plants from the end of days." Zu Wen read verbatim from the research he'd looked up without an iota of embarrassment. "Sorry, I flunked botany. It's the first time I've heard the name."

"You really want to do this? I mean, have you run it by Boss Du?" Zu Wen asked.

"Boss Du is busy," Fang Zhao responded.

"Understood." Regardless of whether Du Ang was actually busy, he didn't want to have anything to do with the virtual idol project for sure, so Fang Zhao was calling the shots.

"How long do you need to create a detailed virtual image?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Based on your prototype, probably a week. Don't think I'm a slow worker—it's just me, after all. A week is pretty quick."

The prototype was like a draft sketch, the first step in deciding the look of a virtual idol. Revisions and fleshing out the design were still to come.

Virtual idols had the upper hand over real idols in that imagination was the only limit when it came to their aesthetic potential.

But how pretty could a tree look? Even an anthropomorphic tree wasn't that attractive.

A cartoonish design could make it cuter.

Zu Wen was brainstorming how to improve the prototype when he heard Fang Zhao say, "We'll have to prepare a music video to go with the launch."

"That's the standard procedure. Oh, speaking of which, you need to get ready for soul casting," Zu Wen said.

Finalizing the look of the virtual idol was only the first step. Next came the more important process of soul casting.

Soul casting referred to the process of injecting life into the virtual idol, coming up with a back story, adding a voice and personality and so on.

Deciding the virtual idol's personal history, where it came from, and how it behaved.

The point was to allow fans to better understand it.

That's what soul casting was all about.

The launch of a virtual idol was usually associated with a music video. For example, Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment released music videos when they entered Xun Huai and Fei Lisi in the new talent contest.

Typically speaking, the first music video of a virtual idol in the New Era gave a personal history and introduced its personality.

Launching a virtual idol also involved storytelling. Maybe nobody paid attention at the beginning, but if the idol became a star, you'd have to extend the story line.

Virtual idol teams planned well in advance before taking their first step.

If you only wanted to pass muster, you could fool around and keep things simple, but if you wanted to do a good job, that involved a lot of preparation.

That's why virtual idol projects were so costly. There were too many details to consider.

"I can take care of the look of the virtual idol. You need to start looking for a voice and start recruiting other technicians. It will take an expert to engineer a professional voice. That's not my expertise. Hiring more technicians is a must. I'm not going to be able to manage on my own much longer. Whether you make new hires or loan staffers from other departments, the sooner you decide the better. As for a starter voice, we have so many singers signed to our label. Just pick one," Zu Wen added.

Chapter 19

Professional Extra

Fang Zhao was beginning to understand why an entire team made a virtual idol. He and Zu Wen were working themselves to death but were still making little progress.

Recruitment.

Everyone avoided the 50th floor like the plague. No one wanted to get sucked in.

Their budget was limited, so new hires were unrealistic. Fang Zhao could only loan staffers from other departments.

After deciding on the initial look of the virtual idol, Fang Zhao had to source a starter voice and land a technician who could engineer the voice.

Technicians on loan would simply charge by the hour. They were not hard to find. It could wait until after he decided on a starter voice.

Zu Wen had suggested Fang Zhao land one of the singers signed to the label. The company also had dubbing talent, but it wasn't a large pool and they were already busy with existing assignments. Even if they could be transferred, they wouldn't be cheap. Many of the staffers had dubbed for big stars and might not bother with a virtual idol project. It might be easier to hire an unassigned singer. A second-tier singer would be cheaper. Even though they all worked for the same company, the pricing was fixed.

Fang Zhao first tried the newcomers. Du Ang was his boss, so he was Fang Zhao's first stop.

Du Ang's eyelids had been twitching non-stop since he got up. Somehow, he had a hunch that something bad was going to happen, so he reviewed his pending and completed workload to make sure he didn't miss anything—items he had taken care of, projects that were ongoing, and upcoming tasks.

Fresh assignments for his newcomer singers had been issued. The project proposals

submitted by agents he had just been put in charge of looked OK.

The new composers were doing OK. No problem there.

Arrangements for his newcomers' upcoming releases—he had delegated to that demon Ya Erlin. That wasn't part of his portfolio.

He had completed the minutes for yesterday's meeting.

What else?

There seemed to be one department that he had skipped...

Ding!

A reminder for an internal message. It was his assistant.

"Boss Du, Fang Zhao is here to see you."

F*ck.

Du Ang felt his eyelids twitching even more violently.

It was the first time Du Ang felt more nervous meeting an underling than a superior.

He drank a glass of water to calm himself down.

After taking a deep breath and soothing himself, Du Ang cleared his voice and said with the authoritative tone of a boss, "Send him in."

As soon as Fang Zhao entered Du Ang's office, he could sense that something was wrong. Even though he looked serious and calm, Fang Zhao's well-honed instincts told him that Du Ang was tightly wound, as if Fang Zhao were a time bomb.

Fang Zhao pretended he hadn't noticed and cut to the chase. "Boss Du, do you want an update on the virtual idol project?"

"I've been busy. Didn't I tell you to use your own discretion on the virtual idol project?" Du Ang made the point of gesturing at his full screen.

Fang Zhao nodded, pretending that he hadn't seen the "completed" label at the bottom of the screen.

"I've decided on the look of the virtual idol. Zu Wen is refining the prototype. We're quite short-staffed. I need to pick a starter voice. I also need actors, judging from the project proposals from previous years. I can poach a few technicians after other key personnel are in place, but the starter voice can't wait. Can you check if any of the newcomer singers are available?"

When he heard Fang Zhao say he had decided on the look of the virtual idol, Du Ang was about to say, "Let me see." But when he heard Fang Zhao's request, he swallowed the comment. He cared more about his newcomers than the look of a virtual idol that was going nowhere. He had already lost Fang Zhao. He couldn't afford to lose more people to the death pit.

"They're all busy. I'm not bullshitting you. Bei Zhi and company were sent to training camp the day before yesterday. I can't say for sure when they'll be back."

There was some truth to Du Ang's response. It was true that the newcomer singers were dispatched for specialized training. Even though they performed OK in the new talent contest, their vocal skills could use improvement. To better prepare them for their careers, Du's agents had tailored training sessions to their weaknesses. Du Ang had signed off and the singers were off-site. They couldn't be tracked down.

But Du Ang had lied about the timing of their return. How could he not know, considering he had signed off on the training sessions?

Fang Zhao stared at Du Ang when he responded. He noticed the twitching in his eyelids pick up a notch.

Du Ang scrambled to switch topics. "None of the newcomers are available. You can try the rehearsal studios on the 51st floor. Our singers like to train there when they're free. It's only one floor above your office, a stone's throw away."

The virtual idol department used to also take up the few floors above and beneath the 50th, but as the department's fortunes declined, every floor except the 50th was reallocated.

For example, the 51st floor was turned into a public rehearsal area.

After leaving Du Ang's office, Fang Zhao headed straight to the 51st floor. All full-time employees were allowed without exception, but not interns or contractors. They had to get special approval.

Fang Zhao was now a permanent employee and the producer for the virtual idol project, so naturally, he had clearance.

After scanning his ID, Fang Zhao crossed the threshold. A buffer zone was located just inside the entrance, where employees could relax and store their personal items.

When Fang Zhao showed up, there were seven or eight people engaged in conversation. When they saw Fang Zhao, they eyed him curiously. The regulars on the floor all knew that Fang Zhao was a stranger.

Looks-wise, Fang Zhao was OK, but pretty and handsome faces were the norm in a company stacked with idols, so even his above-average face didn't stand out.

But the virtual idol project was a hot topic on internal message boards as of late, so people remembered what Fang Zhao looked like.

Someone who hadn't recognized Fang Zhao was getting ready to say hello before a neighboring friend whispered in his ear and shut him up. Some of the folks pretended they hadn't seen Fang Zhao, others nodded and smiled, their smiles apologetic and awkward. Fang Zhao didn't mind and smiled politely in return before stepping into the official rehearsal zone.

He walked through a door. When he opened the second, a cacophony of sounds gushed toward him, which sent him briefly into a dizzy spell.

But Fang Zhao had endured worse noises during the apocalypse, so all he did was frown slightly before finding a seat on the side of the rehearsal zone.

The singers who rehearsed here weren't big shots. Singers who were either talented or connected would train on other floors that had individual booths. This was a public area.

Everyone wore headsets and minded their own business.

Fang Zhao scanned the crowd. There were about 80 people or so. Not all of them were singers. Some were regular employees who wanted to vent. The building was

equipped with karaoke rooms, but they were off-limits to the rank-and-file, so singing in the pubic rehearsal studio was a good alternative. And it was free.

Some of the singers recognized Fang Zhao. They pointed him out to friends in their vicinity and started gossiping, giving Fang Zhao the occasional glance. They probably figured out why Fang Zhao was there.

For many, serving as producer of the virtual idol department was a toothless position that promised neither riches or power, so even if they recognized Fang Zhao, they didn't bother to approach him.

Fang Zhao paid no heed to what people were saying or the way they looked at him. He had been focusing on the voices since he entered the room. In scouting a starter voice, all that mattered was the voice—looks, age and experience were irrelevant.

Even though he could tinker with the starter voice, Fang Zhao was hoping to find one that met his requirements right off the bat.

His eyes wandered and his ears started filtering the different voices in the room. Suddenly, he focused his gaze on a spot in the room.

The room was too crowded and cluttered furnishings blocked his line of sight, so Fang Zhao couldn't immediately identify the source of the voice. He got up and headed toward the voice.

The people who were gossiping about Fang Zhao were intrigued and moved toward him.

Fang Zhao followed the voice to a corner where he found a young man who looked like a fresh graduate. He was shorter than the people around him. That's why Fang Zhao couldn't see him.

His looks were so-so, the type that wouldn't stand out in a crowd. If you had to choose an identifying feature, his neck was a bit short. Good thing he wasn't fat. If he were fat, you wouldn't have been able to see his neck.

The other singers stayed away from the young man. The singer closest to him was at least 10 meters away, headsets on and ears covered.

Fang Zhao noticed the young man was wearing a contractor tag on his chest. People

like him usually served as background vocalists or sang in choruses in a pinch. They weren't official Silver Wing employees. They enjoyed no benefits and were considered even lowlier than interns.

Folks like him were also known as professional extras. They were marginalized and lacked job security, not knowing what two-bit gig lay ahead.

Chapter 20

One Freak Dubbing for Another

Judging from the warmup exercises he was performing, the young man was preparing for a chorus.

When he noticed Fang Zhao approaching, the young man began to interrupt his practice. When he stopped and realized Fang Zhao was seeking him out, he panicked.

"So-so-so-sorry. Am I bo-bo-bo-bothering you?" the young man stuttered.

"No, not at all. Carry on. I'm just listening." Fang Zhao sat in a chair in the corner. The corner was empty. The other singers were avoiding the area and the chairs were all unoccupied.

The young man scratched his head hesitantly. He glanced at Fang Zhao and the onlookers. He opened his mouth but couldn't continue. It just felt like he was surrounded by a crowd that was focused on him. What if he was so afraid and nervous that his voice scared people away? Would they kick him out?

After pondering the matter, the young man stopped altogether and walked to the corner. He decided to take a break and resume after folks shifted their attention elsewhere.

"What's your name?" Fang Zhao asked. "Preparing for a chorus?"

"A Silver Wing choir is recruiting. I'm here to try my luck." The young man clutched a glass of water nervously. "My name is Pang Pusong. Doesn't it sound like the name of a song, haha?"

He had wanted to crack a joke to ease his nerves, but Pang Pusong became even more nervous after laughing. He wondered if Fang Zhao was about to kick him out.

"My name is Fang Zhao," Pang Pusong heard the other man say. "I'm the producer for a virtual idol project here at Silver Wing."

A producer? A big shot.

Pang Pusong was immediately impressed. The man looked like he was about Pang Pusong's age and he was already a producer—no wonder he projected such a powerful aura.

"I'm looking for a starter voice and I heard your warmup exercises. I think you might be a good match, but I want to listen some more. Can you repeat the section you just sang? Don't hold back. Don't sing it like a chorus. Sing it like you would normally sing it," Fang Zhao said.

Pang Pusong felt like he'd been struck by a huge stone. He was a little dizzy. He wondered if he'd misheard Fang Zhao. "S-s-si-sing it again?"

"Yes. The section you were practicing. Don't hold back. Don't worry about anything else," Fang Zhao explained patiently.

"O-O-O-OK." Pang Pusong put down his glass and got up. He didn't set the glass down properly and it nearly toppled and rolled over, but he didn't look back. He was as serious as a soldier preparing for battle.

The surrounding gazes still gave Pu pause. He cleared his throat but didn't start singing.

"Go ahead. What are you looking at them for?" Fang Zhao asked.

"OK." Pang Pusong collected his thoughts. He was at Silver Wing to audition for a choir spot. The audition was scheduled for just after 4 p.m. His uncle had had a friend secure him a pass for the public rehearsal area. This was where he usually practiced before an audition. He never would have thought he'd have such good luck. Providing vocals for a virtual idol was naturally a better gig than singing in a choir. It was the difference between a leading and supporting role.

Trying his best to ignore the attention and let go of his worries, Pang Pusong started repeating the section he was practicing.

He had trouble relaxing at first, but after a few verses, he didn't hold back any more.

A few of the singers donning headsets nearby were singing to the melodies playing in their headsets, but they started to have trouble continuing. They frowned, turned off

their recordings, and started bitching to Pang Pusong. "If you wanna sing, go outside. You're not welcome here."

"That's right. You're not welcome here."

"Why not ask Fang Zhao take you downstairs and sing there?"

"If you have the guts, go downstairs with Fang Zhao. You can sing freely there." The onlookers pitched in.

This time, Pang Pusong freaked out. He stared at Fang Zhao blankly.

Fang Zhao wasn't affected by the heckling, flashing a smile instead. He seemed to be in a good mood.

"This is a public rehearsal area, meaning everyone can sing freely here. You're not able to concentrate and you blame others. If you've got the guts, why don't you practice in an individual booth?" Fang Zhao glared at the haters. He didn't press on. There was no point in wasting words on people he despised. Bullies were a dime a dozen.

He pointed at Pang Pusong. "You come with me."

Pang Pusong looked like a lost child. He shrank his already short neck and followed Fang Zhao out of the public rehearsal area.

"Wow, he really thinks he's a big shot." Someone chuckled behind Fang Zhao's back.

"Fang Zhao's probably here looking for a starter voice."

"Definitely. I wouldn't sign up even if he begged."

"All he can do is impress clueless outsiders. Look at how happy that fool was when he was leaving."

After leaving the public rehearsal area, Fang Zhao led Pang Pusong to his office on the 50th floor. He asked him if he was otherwise engaged. If not, he wanted Pang Pusong to start recording as soon as possible.

"No, I don't have anything else going on." Pang Pusong couldn't help but shift to the edge of his chair. He waited anxiously for what followed.

"This is your contract. Please take a look." Fang Zhao opened a file on the microcomputer on his desk. It was a template. He could use it for Pang Pusong, with a few modifications.

Pang Pusong studied the contract carefully and found everything in order. He nodded.

Even though it was still contract work and he wasn't about to become a full-time employee at Silver Wing, Pang Pusong was so excited he wanted to dance. After he signed the contract, he felt like he was on cloud nine.

He wasn't good looking enough to be on stage – he could only work behind-the-scenes. But there were different kinds of backstage work. On previous gigs, he had always shared the workload with others. This was the first time he landed a solo contract, meaning he was the leading man.

"I'll submit your personal information. I'll let you know when your pass is ready." Fang Zhao said.

"Gr-gr-gr-great. Thank you. Thank you." Pang Pusong wanted to bow. He was so excited when he left that he ran into the door.

Fang Zhao shook his head. "Actually, never mind. I'll head out with you. I need to see someone downstairs."

Fang Zhao wanted to see Du Ang, but first, he escorted Pang Pusong to the lobby. Pang Pusong was still in a daze. Fang Zhao was worried about his state of mind. What if something went wrong? Where was he going to find another singer on such short notice?

As they stepped out of Silver Wing Tower, a fleet of flying cars hovered above.

Unlike rank-and-file employees like Fang Zhao, the big stars at the label were typically allocated higher floors, which had separate parking spots, so it was rare for Fang Zhao to see them in person, because they headed straight to their respective floors in their flying cars.

The flying cars were headed for floors beyond the 100th. It was probably a few big shots.

"If I could reach their heights, I would die with no regrets." Pang Pusong looked up

with admiration, extending his short neck.

Fang Zhao chuckled. "Who knows what the future will bring."

Fang Zhao headed back inside as Pang Pusong queued for the train. He could hear his new recruit calling his mother with the good news.

"Hello? Mom? Yes, yes, I went to practice at Silver Wing. Yes, I used the pass uncle got me. No, I didn't cause any trouble. Really. I lowered my voice. I didn't bother anyone. But... Wait, calm down, let me finish. Don't think it's bad news just because I shifted gears. I landed a project today. Yes, I signed a contract. It's an internal project, not a chorus part, but a solo gig. One of Silver Wing's virtual idol producers wants to use my voice."

An extra had become the leading man. Even though it was a small production, it was still a leading role. For a veteran extra, it was a milestone.

After heading inside, Fang Zhao asked Du Ang to issue Pang Pusong a pass, then returned to the 50th floor to get an update from Zu Wen.

When Pang Pusong visited, Zu Wen was holed up in his office. When Fang Zhao told him he had signed a singer, he reflexively responded, "What an idiot!"

When Fang Zhao glared back, Zu Wen rephrased. "No, I mean, what a good man." The contract didn't state the length of the project. If it ended up taking an extended period, weren't they holding the singer hostage? Zu Wen thought Pang Pusong was too naive, too easily swayed.

But Zu Wen was also curious. "How come you picked him out of all the people in the public rehearsal area?"

Fang Zhao pondered the question. He didn't respond with a direct answer, asking instead, "Do you know what 'radiance' is?"

Zu Wen shook his head. He had never heard the term despite working on previous virtual idol projects.

"Radiance is invisible. It can exist in silence and create tension, but it can also exist in a voice, teasing out emotions like fear, sadness, happiness, or excitement. For a singer, it's not just a matter of delivering the melody. You also have to adjust various aspects

of your voice to enhance the listening experience and move hearts. That's the power of radiance," Fang Zhao explained.

"Just like the same song can be handled differently by two singers. One could sing with feeling and the other version could be instantly forgettable," Zu Wen said.

"That's right. It's a specialized skill. You can unleash hidden radiance by manipulating your voice, tugging senses, heartstrings, and souls in the process. But there are some singers who are naturally better at unleashing their radiance than others."

"You mean the kid you just signed?"

"Right. The only thing is that radiance is hard to harness. That's why he had to restrain his radiance when he was practicing to stay in line, to blend in with the crowd. He thinks his voice is a monster. The monster sets him apart. It gets to other people in a chorus. He's heckled when he sings. His voice throws up roadblocks everywhere. That's why he keeps suppressing it. Little does he know, it's a force that is a game changer. It's not a monster. It's talent."

Zu Wen scratched the goosebumps that had started forming on his arms. He still felt that radiance was a monster.

But then he thought, "one is a vocal freak, the other is a virtual tree—what a great combination."

One freak dubbing for another. A trace of anticipation set in.

Chapter 21

Step Aside

After securing a starter voice, Fang Zhao went about renting professional equipment to engineer the voice. Naturally, the label had the best equipment of this kind. It also had other types of top-notch devices and tools. But everyone—regardless of rank or department—had to pay to rent the equipment.

Some of the more popular devices had to be booked in advance. The good thing was that there was no competition for the type of equipment required for a virtual idol project, so advance bookings weren't necessary. Fang Zhao talked to Bu Lai and requested the necessary gear from the property department.

Fang Zhao also loaned a technician from another department to work on the voice. She was a young woman, a fresh graduate who studied music post-production, voice engineering, and so on. She had just been hired by Silver Wing. Because she was a newbie, she had been chosen as the sacrificial lamb when Fang Zhao came beckoning.

"He-hello, my... my name is Song Miao. I'm a voice engineer. This is my... my proof of graduation and diploma." Song Miao presented her credentials. She was an anxious fresh arrival who stuttered.

Fang Zhao gave his loaner a look-over. Her slightly lengthy hair was tied in a ponytail; she donned a track suit and trainers—the typical look of a technician. She carried a toolbox and looked tense, probably nervous about her new workplace.

After asking a few questions about voice production, Fang Zhao summoned Pang Pusong. "Take Song Miao to our studio."

"Yes, sir!" It was time to record. Pang Pusong was geared up.

Creating a complete vocal database required a professional system. Now that the equipment was in place, Song Miao would take care of the rest. She would record and process vocal samples and build a vocal database.

The latest sound engineering equipment was highly automated, requiring less

manpower than before. Otherwise, Song Miao would have her hands full. With the starter voice taken care of, Fang Zhao paid Zu Wen a visit to see how the look of the virtual idol was coming along.

"That's right, do we need an eye model?" Zu Wen asked. The virtual idol was an anthropomorphic tree, so they couldn't count on that many facial expressions. Thus its gaze was all the more important.

Eye models were models who provided eye shots for virtual idols. Actors who weren't good-looking, lacked influence, or didn't receive much backing because of bad luck suffered from a lowly status in the industry. It was hard for them to get exposure, movie parts were hard to come by, and the ones that were offered were unsubstantial, so they often took on other assignments, like providing eye shots for virtual idols.

Project teams that weren't exacting would use existing eye shots from a database, such as eye shots from previous films, and incorporate that acting prowess into their virtual idol. But project teams that were more demanding would shoot fresh eye shots in a variety of settings.

Even award-winning actors and actresses delivered performances within a plot context and drew from their character's psychology. If the virtual idol were set up in a different context and had a different personality, then those eye shots wouldn't apply. They would even turn people off.

People who resisted virtual idols often accused them of being blatant acting copycats, but the project teams behind those virtual idols didn't mind. That was how virtual idols were designed. Everyone did the same thing. As long as they could draw an audience.

Zu Wen asked about eye models because he noticed how serious Fang Zhao was about their project.

"I discussed this with Boss Du yesterday. He said he would try to line someone up for us."

Just as Fang Zhao was speaking, Du Ang arrived on the 50th floor with another person.

Even though Du Ang didn't want to micromanage the virtual idol project, he was the manager in charge, after all, so he couldn't be completely oblivious. After asking Fang Zhao about the look of his virtual idol out of curiosity, Du Ang fell into deep thought in

his office the rest of the day. He even wondered if he should overturn Fang Zhao's previous decisions and take over the reins himself.

But Du Ang eventually thought things through. He knew he wasn't that creative. No matter what Fang Zhao decided, now that the project was under way, he would give Fang Zhao total control. Even if he failed and became the subject of ridicule, he could chalk it up as a learning experience. He was a young man, after all. Adversity was a good thing, and no matter how poorly the dead-end project failed, the label wouldn't completely put it on a newcomer like Fang Zhao.

So after Fang Zhao showed up yesterday, Du Ang hit up a few friends who managed actors.

Regardless of whether you were a singer or an actor, everyone was ranked internally. They were classified in their contracts from grade D to A, with A being the highest. The top talents were ranked S, which was a different category altogether.

Grade D talents were typically newcomers or marginal players. Du Ang set his sights higher, so when he asked his friends for loaners, he approached agents who managed B- and C-grade actors.

"I can't give you any B actors. They're all A actors in waiting. They can't afford to stumble. But I could pick from my C actors." That was how an old friend had responded yesterday. He brought over the actor today.

A C actor showing up and doing his thing would suffice, Du Ang thought. Even though a C actor wasn't as competent, he would still be better than many others. If he didn't work out, then they could use eye shots from the database. That would save a lot of trouble.

"This is Ji Polun. He starred in a movie about the Period of Destruction. He should be able to help you." Du Ang left after briefing Fang Zhao quickly.

Fang Zhao gauged the loaner. He knew Ji Polun was a C actor. He wasn't entirely clear on the distinction between the different grades and he couldn't find much relevant information in his new memory, so he was polite. Ji Polun was doing them a favor, after all.

In contrast to Song Miao's nerves and uptight demeanor, this actor carried himself like a star. Naturally, he was rather good-looking. In this day and age, people who could

become stars wouldn't look too bad. His hair was meticulously combed and he stood straight as a rod. His gestures were sleek and refined. But it was all contrived.

Ji Polun scanned the furnishings of the 50th floor with discerning eyes and glanced at Fang Zhao and company, his gaze brimming with a sense of superiority and arrogance.

"Let's get started. What kind of shots are you looking for? I'm on a tight schedule." After dusting his sleeves for non-existent dust, Ji Polun started walking.

Zu Wen looked at Fang Zhao, who nodded, so he led Ji Polun to the filming studio. "This way."

Fang Zhao explained the scene to him. He was interrupted by Ji Polun just two sentences in. "OK, I got it. I've done this before. Give me some space." He shifted his gaze to Zu Wen. "Get ready. I'm about to start."

Fang Zhao didn't respond. He retreated and sat in the chair next to Zu Wen. He wasn't offended by Ji's attitude, as long as they could get the right shots.

On his end, Ji Polun started acting hard after building his mood.

Lo and behold, even though Ji Polun was an obnoxious prick who looked down on everyone, he was serious about his craft. The only thing was...

"I'm thinking, why don't we just find some suitable shots in the database?" Zu Wen typed in his bracelet. Ji Polun was still acting, so he couldn't speak his mind.

Ji Polun was acting with purpose. You could tell he wasn't holding back, but he still fell considerably short compared to a top actor. It was even more obvious in close-up. Zu Wen had seen quite a few movies set in the Period of Destruction recently. In comparison, Ji Polun's acting was a bit awkward. They were better off just searching in the database.

Fang Zhao's frown grew. After reading Zu Wen's message, he got up, walked toward Ji Polun and tapped him on the shoulder.

"What are you doing? Can't you see I'm acting?" Ji Polun fumed. "Do you know what being in character means? You've interrupted my train of thought."

Ji Polun was furious that he was tapped on the shoulder just when he was getting into

character. He turned his head and watched Fang Zhao lift his hand and point to the side. "Step aside."

Chapter 22

What Do You Think About When You're Acting?

A puzzled Ji Polun pointed at himself. "You were talking to me?"

Fang Zhao nodded and repeated, "Please step aside."

Ji Polun stared at Fang Zhao in disbelief, as if he had gone mad. Having confirmed that Fang Zhao wasn't kidding, he distorted his face, got up abruptly, and stepped away in exaggerated strides. "Fine. Don't accuse me of being a prima donna." He had showed up as a favor to his agent. Not only are these clowns ungrateful, they don't think I'm good enough?

Shedding the posture with which he had arrived, Ji Polun bolted toward the door, but he stopped just as he was about to cross the threshold. He turned back and plunked down on the chair next to Zu Wen. He dropped his act, folding his arms and crossing his legs. He wanted to see what these clowns would do now. It looked like they were going to act out the scene themselves.

What a joke. He'd heard this fella was a new composer—and now he thought he could act. Did he think acting was the same as gaming? How naive. Who did he think he was? As a newcomer, he was only on a grade D contract, one notch below Ji Polun.

Ji Polun started brainstorming for a snide comment he could make to avenge his dismissal if the producer turned out to be a shitty actor. Otherwise, he wouldn't be pacified. How could they treat him this way?

Fang Zhao didn't care what Ji Polun thought, let alone pay attention to his furious gaze. He signaled to Zu Wen that he wanted to reshoot the scene.

Fang Zhao didn't understand the craft of acting, but what Ji Polun had just said about getting into character—it was just a form of imagination, placing yourself in the scene conjured in your brain.

But be it Ji Polun or any other actor, their acting was just a function of their imagination, because none of them had actually experienced those desperate times.

What they knew about the period came from watching documentary footage. But Fang Zhao was an exception.

Some events during the Period of Destruction were digitally recorded, and quite a few films about the period were shot during the New Era. The advancement of virtual technology also enhanced the viewing experience, leaving a deeper impression than regular footage.

But no amount of simulation could rival the memories of Fang Zhao, someone who had actually survived those times.

Taking a page from Ji's playbook, Fang Zhao closed his eyes for a few seconds to build the mood.

Ji Polun was blown away. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. The condescension on his face faded, replaced by a serious look.

Fang Zhao's eyes were red and tearful, as if he were listening to a song that mourned the loss of the world, projecting a deep sadness and resignation, although he didn't cry.

All hell breaking loose, lives sacrificed and families destroyed. How puny and helpless everyone and everything became when the world fell apart.

The pain and suffering projected in that moment engulfed the entire studio.

Ji Polun took a deep breath.

Fang Zhao managed to stir those emotions all by himself in this closed space without a set. He didn't have an acting partner. He had no lines. All he did was sit there. He barely moved his body, conveying his character's emotions with the subtlest of facial expressions and his gaze.

His timing was impeccable, down to the wink of his eyes. Had he winked a second earlier or later, the effect would have been completely different.

Ji Polun reflected on his own performance just now. By comparison, his delivery was slightly exaggerated and contrived, lacking genuine emotion.

A professor once said in acting class that sadness wasn't conveyed by screaming or

crying. Sometimes a subtle look would do.

Was this guy really an amateur actor?

Ji Polun quickly scanned in his head all the classic scenes from the countless movies about the Period of Destruction. He couldn't find any matches. Fang Zhao wasn't aping a previous performance.

Ji Polun even got the feeling that he wasn't acting, that he had actually survived the horrible disaster and had lived in those times.

Come again, what was the character they came up with?

What was its personality?

He had acted based on his imagination without learning about his character first—bad move.

That was a major no-no.

Maybe it was the casual tone of his agent. He didn't care for the job, didn't take it seriously.

Ji Polun continued to observe in silence. Fang Zhao continued acting based on his script. He needed no pointers. He knew the character he designed the best.

This was a scene without dialogue. For eye shots, the focus was the eyes.

Everyone in the studio breathed lightly. The only sound was the noise of Zu Wen setting up equipment. But both Zu Wen and Ji Polun, who was sitting beside him, could feel the mood evolving in the small studio.

Repressed sorrow, smothering desperation, disappointment, indecision. How did one survive? He was a bee frantically looking for a light source in a shuttered house.

The minutes went by.

Fang Zhao ended the session only when Song Miao had a question about the starter voice.

"Let's take a break." Fang Zhao told Zu Wen to catch a breather, while he got up to leave and headed to the sound mixing panel. When he got up, he instantly dropped out of character and became his normal self.

He was out of character already? Mind-boggling.

When Fang Zhao left, Ji Polun approached Zu Wen. "That Fang Zhao character—he's really just a composer? He never studied acting?"

"I'm not sure if he ever studied acting, but he is a professional composer. He soared to No. 5 in the new talent competition in 20 days. You must have heard," Zu Wen said.

Of course he had, but Fang Zhao's performance still left him perplexed.

"Hey, aren't you going to leave?" Zu Wen thought Fang Zhao had spited Ji Polun into leaving, but now it seemed he had no intention of doing so.

"Leave? Why would I leave? That's right, did you shoot a music video? Do you have more details about your character? Let me take a look," Ji Polun asked.

Zu Wen gave Ji Polun a surprised look and handed him a few pages from his drawer. Ji Polun had signed a confidentiality agreement and Zu Wen was going to show him the information anyway. Ji Polun just didn't bother.

The next day.

Zu Wen had counted Ji Polun out. Fang Zhao could do the job himself. But Ji Polun still showed up on the 50th floor.

"Don't look at me. Just pretend I'm not here and do your thing. Which scene are you on? Has the character transformed yet? Ignoring the gazes of Fang Zhao and Zu Wen, Ji Polun dragged over a chair, sat down, and began watching intently from the periphery.

It wasn't only the second day. Ji Polun showed up the next few days. He didn't do much, just sat in the studio and watched. His body language suggested he was there to stay.

Even though Ji Polun had his flaws, he was an actor keen on improving his craft. And Fang Zhao didn't kick him out.

When shooting finally wrapped, Ji Polun couldn't help pestering Fang Zhao with questions.

"Can I impose on you to reveal what you think about the most when you're acting?" He wanted to know how Fang Zhao got into character and delivered genuine emotion.

When Fang Zhao heard the question, he stopped drinking from his glass and responded in a serious tone, "BGM (background music)."

Ji Polun: "....."

Ji Polun suddenly remembered what a professor once said during his university days. "Don't bother trying to figure out what goes on in the head of a professional composer. BGM is always playing no matter what they're doing."

Chapter 23

My Version, My Rules

As far as Fang Zhao was concerned, drawing out a certain mood depended on a passage of music, not a certain visual.

Just like how a programmer turned everything into code, Fang Zhao could turn everything into music.

He already had a song in mind for the music video. It was a song he'd written during the end of days. It wasn't complete—he'd only gotten around to finishing it recently. He'd also rearranged it and modified parts to better fit Pang Pusong's voice.

When he was shooting, he did recall certain scenes, but his memories of the first few years of the apocalypse were blurry. However, the music he composed during that period remained fresh in his head.

Every time he recalled those broken melodies, Fang Zhao could remember how he'd felt at the beginning of the apocalypse.

After projecting the eye shots onto the virtual character, Zu Wen showed Fang Zhao a draft.

He had juxtaposed on his computer screen shots of Fang Zhao's eyes and a pair of brown, wood-colored eyes surrounded by rough, cracked bark.

"Don't they look the same? Happy?" Zu Wen asked.

Fang Zhao nodded.

They were clearly two different sets of eyes but they conveyed the same gaze and mood. It was as if two people were injected with the same soul.

Reg Dimension—such amazing technology!

Perhaps that was why virtual idols created with the Reg Dimension drew so many

fans. Even though they often looked very different from humans, it was easy to forget that they were virtual images and instead believe that they possessed real souls.

"As long as you're happy." Zu Wen stretched his arms. "The basic look is also complete. The only thing is that I could use more help on the music video, even one extra person would be great. If it's just me, Lord knows when I'll finish the CD. If you want to see a completed product by the end of the year, then get me a loaner." Zu Wen was so busy these days he didn't have time to game.

"I've asked around. The people you mentioned who know how to use Reg Dimension don't want to transfer. The company hasn't made any new hires this year and they fired a bunch of people last year. We can forget about an internal loaner," Fang Zhao explained.

"Then poach someone from one of the smaller or independent record labels, or outsource to a contractor, although the company usually frowns on outsourcing on a project like this. The bosses prefer that you take care of things internally. But see if you can poach some people from other companies. There are so many fresh graduates out there. There must be quite a few who haven't landed jobs, no? Let's con a few into working here first." Zu Wen started brainstorming as he organized the eye shots.

Zu Wen's suggestion reminded Fang Zhao of someone. "How many years of experience would you be looking for in a Reg Dimension technician?"

"Let's not set the bar too high. The most important thing is to con some people into helping me out. I've been so tired."

Zu Wen returned to his office to work. Fang Zhao headed back to his office and sent Zeng Huang a message.

Zeng Huang responded quickly.

"What's up Big Zhao? Your project isn't going well?" Zeng Huang knew Fang Zhao was stuck with the virtual idol project and had even offered to help, but Fang Zhao refused at the time, saying he needed to learn more about the project first.

"How busy is your current project? Do you have time to take on another gig?" Fang Zhao asked.

"You hiring?"

"Yes, we're short on Reg Dimension technicians. If you aren't available, do you know anyone who hasn't landed a job yet or wants to switch jobs? I don't need someone super-experienced, someone who knows the basics will do."

"A Reg Dimension technician who doesn't have to be that experienced, someone who hasn't landed a job or wants to switch jobs..."

"Indeed. Any recommendations?"

"Me."

"....."

"I want to switch jobs. You know I'm a fresh grad—and not from a very prestigious school. I won't be able to command a very good salary. Plus, I'm looking for a new job. It's a perfect fit now that you're hiring."

Zu Wen's idea was to con people into joining the project, but Fang Zhao was completely honest about the state of his project. Zeng Huang was offering to help out when Fang Zhao was in a tough spot. It would be shitty of him to take advantage of a friend now.

After being briefed by Fang Zhao, Zeng Huang said he needed to think it over. But he ended up calling back in less than 10 minutes.

"Big Zhao, you still hiring? Why don't both Wan Yue and I help out? She knows a thing or two about the Reg Dimension, but her expertise is post-production. I wonder if she would come in handy too."

"Yes." Fang Zhao smiled. "Thanks!"

"Hey, who's the boss here? Big Zhao, don't put too much pressure on yourself. We're still young. Even if we fail, we can chalk it up as a learning experience. It's good for us to take risks."

"Got it."

"As long as you've put things in perspective. So it's a done deal—Wan Yue and I will defect tomorrow!"

Just like Pang Pusong, Zeng Huang and Wan Yue would be signed as contractors, not

full-time employees. Fang Zhao had explained the temporary and transient nature of the work, but Zeng Huang still insisted on joining. Considering the status of the virtual idol project, Zeng Huang and his girlfriend had no ulterior motives—they just wanted to lend Fang Zhao a hand.

Zeng Huang was actually thinking Lady Luck wasn't on Fang Zhao's side this year. Setting aside the theft of his songs, Fang Zhao had worked hard to make a name for himself in the new talent contest—only to be tossed into this death pit. Zeng Huang didn't want to see a brother begging for help, so he and Wan Yue quit their jobs to help out. They were still young and had plenty of other jobs ahead of them. Now it was time to help Fang Zhao.

The next day, Zeng Huang and Wan Yue tracked down Fang Zhao at Silver Wing. After signing their contracts, Fang Zhao got them company passes.

Besides Zeng Huang and Wan Yue, Bei Zhi, who had just finished training camp, also chipped in. He knew that he owed his success in the new talent contest to Fang Zhao. He'd heard that they were setting up on the 50th floor, so he decided to help out.

"Wow, they actually let you come? They're not afraid of jeopardizing your career?" Zu Wen asked when he saw Bei Zhi.

Bei Zhi didn't care. "It's OK. Training is over and my next assignment hasn't started. I have three days off, so here I am."

Pang Pusong, Song Miao, and Bei Zhi set up outside as Fang Zhao discussed the music video with Zu Wen and Zeng Huang in his office.

Since the music video was set in the end of days, they would have to feature mutated animals from the period. Zu Wen showed Fang Zhao a batch of images he had compiled.

"Get rid of this," Fang Zhao said, pointing to one of the pictures.

"Why?" Zu Wen asked.

"I've never seen it before." Because he had never seen it before, he couldn't be sure that it existed. Fang Zhao decided to drop all the animals he'd never laid eyes on.

"Wow, you sound like you've seen the actual thing," Zu Wen responded. But he didn't

resist, deleting the animal from his screen.

Fang Zhao pointed to another image. "Shrink the head of this one a bit."

"Like this?"

"Smaller."

"How about this?"

"You overdid it. Allow me."

Fang Zhao pondered the projected hologram, his fingers playing with the head of the animal.

He couldn't feel the actual object, but the smart design software allowed even a non-technician to tweak the image. It was like altering a clay figurine.

"That looks weird," Zu Wen said.

"Not at all. That's how they look. Get rid of their mustaches."

"They don't have mustaches? Are you sure? I remember seeing them with mustaches in many films about the Period of Destruction." A skeptical Zu Wen checked his research. He had downloaded a database from a leading scientific journal that was compiled by scholars who studied mutated animals from the Period of Destruction. The researchers were considered the world's leading authorities on the subject. The download was quite expensive, but he'd billed the project.

"They have mustaches in the film I starred in." Ji Polun, who had been watching them work, offered his two cents.

"That was fiction to begin with." Fang Zhao had seen the movie Ji Polun starred in. There were way too many inaccuracies, but you couldn't expect much from a commercial film. It was just entertainment.

"But your virtual idol isn't real either." Ji Polun remembered that the look of the virtual idol was also made up.

"My version, my rules," Fang Zhao responded curtly.

"Got it. You're the boss. You have the final word."

At that point, Zu Wen had found a photo of the mutated animal in question in his database. "No mustache indeed."

They went through the other animals. Every modification Fang Zhao asked for was consistent with the database. This time it was Ji Polun, not Zu Wen, who checked. "You're the man," he thought to himself.

Everyone in the room wondered: how good of a history student was this guy to remember so many details?

Chapter 24

You're F*cking Messing with Me

As things were picking up on the 50th floor, Du Ang was taking a videoconference call from an old friend.

Ji Polun was heading to the 50th floor every day, so his agent was worried. When he asked Ji Polun to help out, the kid was reluctant. How come he was so keen now? There had to be something shady going on behind the scenes.

"I heard your producer is from a black street. Did he somehow blackmail my guy into helping out?" Ji Polun's agent was full of speculation.

"They're not done shooting? I heard two days ago they were done with their eye shots." Du Ang was puzzled too.

"That's why I think it's odd. I'm not in Qi'an right now. Old Du, go take a look yourself. Maybe your guy pulled something on my guy. I hear folks from black streets are ruthless." Ji's agent was being diplomatic—what he suspected was that Fang Zhao had threatened force against his client.

"Wait—Fang Zhao is just renting a room on a black street. He didn't grow up on a black street. Also, just because you're from a black street doesn't mean you're the mafia. Don't be a bigot. I lived on a black street when I was young."

Ji's agent was about to say something else, but Du Ang preempted him. "OK, OK. I understand your concerns. I'll head up for a look in a bit. But rest assured—everything is fine. Fang Zhao isn't that kind of character."

After hanging up, Du Ang realized he hadn't dropped in on the 50th floor in a while. Even if Ji Polun was OK, as the manager in charge, he should put up pretenses.

He rode the elevator to the 50th floor. When the elevator doors opened, he saw Ji Polun huffing and puffing and moving equipment.

Du Ang: "....." He suddenly questioned his judgment. An idol that relied on his looks

like him couldn't risk getting injured. If he did, he had to pay the company damages that would consume way more than a month's wages.

"Uhm, Ji boy, come over here."

When Ji Polun saw it was Du Ang, he put down the equipment.

Du Ang took a close look at his face and didn't see any signs of physical abuse. "Aren't you done with the eye shots? How come you're still here?" he asked.

"I don't have anything else going on, so I decided to help out," Ji Polun responded.

Du Ang surveyed the floor. The 50th floor looked quite different—maybe it was the additional staff. He spotted Du Zhi also lugging equipment around nearby. "Where's Fang Zhao?" he asked.

"He just stepped into his office." Ji Polun pointed to Fang Zhao's office.

As Du Ang approached Fang Zhao's office, Fang Zhao was getting ready to head out.

"Boss Du! Great timing. I was about to go to you," Fang Zhao said. "I'm about to start recording my first single. Can you book a recording studio for me?"

"The song is ready?" Du Ang took the paper score Fang Zhao handed over and uploaded the encrypted demo file. He pulled out his headsets and gave it a listen. He was also curious how Fang Zhao's song was coming along.

He was a bit baffled by the score, but once he heard the demo, it came together.

No wonder the score looked weird. So Fang Zhao had decided on this style.

Du Ang lifted his head abruptly and gazed at Fang Zhao. "Did you... Did you compose this yourself?"

"Yes."

"This... this is the song you're making a music video for?" Du Ang raised his voice, prompting the movers nearby to look his way.

"Yes." Fang Zhao wasn't too alarmed by Du Ang's response.

"Hold on. Put everything on hold. Wait until you hear from me." Du Ang dashed out. As for the original purpose of his visit, who gave a damn? Du Ang had only one mission now—to talk this over with someone. He needed to decide if he would actually release the single.

The head of the arrangement department, Ya Erlin, and the operations head, Julian, were quickly summoned.

"I say, Old Du, what's the hurry? What's wrong? Have things gone south on the virtual idol project? Let me put this out there—I'm not going to get involved with the virtual idol project," Ya Erlin said as he stepped into Du Ang's office with Julian.

Du Ang didn't speak, instead handing over two pairs of headsets he had prepared for the two.

"What's going on? So secretive..." Ya Erlin wore the headsets reluctantly, but soon enough, he was hooked.

Julian's expression also indicated her surprise. "Where... where did you get this? Is this a new Pegasus release?"

"No, no," Ya Erlin blurted before Du Ang could answer. "At first glance, it's a similar style, but there's still a big discrepancy. This is not a Pegasus song. Not to mention that a Pegasus demo wouldn't be this crude."

The "Pegasus" that Ya Erlin and Julian referred to was Flying Pegasus, a leading cooperative under Silver Wing. Ya Erlin had tried to join several times, to no avail. Flying Pegasus was home to Silver Wing's top composers and arrangers, the cream of the crop.

"But if this isn't a Pegasus song, who composed it?" Julian wasn't an expert in composition or arrangement, but she knew this song would make waves if released. Besides a Pegasus member, who else could compose a song like this? If such a talent existed, he or she would have been recruited by Pegasus already.

"That's right, Old Du, who wrote this? Who?" Ya Erlin demanded. Julian was a music outsider, but as a veteran arranger, he was already blown away by many aspects of the incomplete demo.

Du Ang wore a look of mixed feelings—proud, a bit sad, among other emotions.

He paused before saying, "Fang Zhao."

"Who?"

Du Ang rubbed his ears, which had just been pierced by two sharp cries, and sighed. "The composer is Fang Zhao."

Ya Erlin and Julian were speechless but glared at Du Ang with the same expression: you're f*cking messing with me.

"Sigh, I'm not lying. I got this from the kid. As soon as I got it, I called you guys."

Ya Erlin took a deep breath. He was still in disbelief. "Fang Zhao can produce something like this, at his age?"

"What about his age? Don't forget how well he did in the new talent contest." Du Ang hated when others dissed his composers.

"But this song is completely different from his entry in the new talent contest. This is..." Ya Erlin was agitated. He didn't finish his sentence. He wouldn't jump to conclusions until hearing the full song.

"Alright, let's cut the bullshit. I've invited you here to help me decide. So what do you say, do I release this song or not? Will something go wrong if I do?" Du Ang asked.

"Of course! Why not?" Ya Erlin was more excited than Du Ang.

Du Ang shifted his gaze to Julian, waiting for her response. If Julian disagreed, even if they recorded the song, it wouldn't see the light of day.

Julian returned the stare and smiled gently. "I agree with Ya Erlin. It'd be a such a shame not to release a song like this. I, for one, want to hear the complete version."

Julian was a big fan of Flying Pegasus' work, yet the cooperative rarely released complete songs, even if you were willing to pay for a download. Lowly managers like her weren't qualified to commission Pegasus members either.

"Alright, we'll release it, then. Fang Zhao said he can start recording right away. As for the recording studio..." Du Ang gave Ya Erlin a glance.

"I'll book a studio for him." Ya Erlin was close with the folks who ran the recording studios. It was easier for him to pull strings.

Ya Erlin had trouble breathing. He couldn't wait to see the look on their faces when the Pegasus members heard this song.

Chapter 25

Yanzhou Derby

Before anyone knew it, it was mid-September.

Newcomer status only lasted for a year. After the new season of the new talent contest that kicked off in June, Fang Zhao had disappeared from the newcomers' chart for nearly a season. The chart was filled with new songs. Last season's entries were replaced by new singles.

Nonetheless, leading the charts were still the two virtual idols, Xun Huai and Fei Lisi. They just swapped their previous songs for new ones.

Fang Zhao had long been forgotten. Perhaps some still remembered that hit song from last season, the dark horse that emerged toward the end of the season, but the internet suffered from amnesia. In an era of a rapid change, memories were shortened, and the masses were at the mercy of the constant influx of new things.

Fang Zhao sat in the huge terraced auditorium listening to the lecturer outline the evolution of virtual idols and offer insight into the charisma of hit virtual idols.

"Virtual reality is an art. By expanding reality with virtual imagination, the real and the virtual feed off each other..."

The classroom with a capacity of several thousand was sparsely filled, only about a tenth full.

Fang Zhao jotted notes by hand on his notebook. He stayed away from electronic gadgets.

A few of the students in the classroom recognized Fang Zhao. As a distinguished alum, he was a regular topic on internal message boards. Some of the students who didn't know the full story were wondering why he was auditing the class. When they were told the reason by fellow classmates, they felt bad for him and threw him sympathetic glances.

To imagine what other outstanding alums from his class were up to and contrast that to Fang Zhao auditing an unpopular class by his lonesome self—what could they say? However talented he was, he couldn't stave off a formidable streak of bad luck. It really was such a pity.

After the class ended, the students departed in groups of two or three. Fang Zhao also collected his belongings and was planning to head back to the office.

"Fang Zhao." Chu Hong approached from the lectern and interrupted Fang Zhao.

"Are you able to follow my lectures?" Chu Hong asked. He wasn't being patronizing. It was just that he knew that his class was quite off-beat, plus Fang Zhao had never completed coursework on virtual idols before. He wasn't sure if he was going too fast for Fang Zhao. Chu Guang had briefed him on Fang Zhao. He had to at least make a gesture.

"I'm OK," Fang Zhao responded. In fact, he had already covered the bulk of Chu Hong's lectures in online classes. He was auditing to get more insight.

"Feel free to ask me any questions. I heard from Chu Guang that you've been busy with your virtual idol project. How is it coming along?" Chu Hong asked.

"Not bad. We're almost done."

"Good to hear."

Chu Hong held back. In any case, he wouldn't get too many answers if he probed. Projects like this were confidential and couldn't be shared with outsiders, so Chu Hong didn't ask specific questions about his progress. He just asked Fang Zhao if he wanted general pointers from a scholar who specialized on the topic and shared thoughts on what stood out about the hit virtual idols of the day.

"Virtual idols these days, first and foremost, they have to be good-looking. That's basic. You're aware of this, right?"

"Yes, of course." Fang Zhao nodded.

"Then what does your virtual idol look like?" Chu Hong was quite curious what a virtual idol designed by an outsider, a composition major, would look like.

"Can't say it's good-looking," Fang Zhao responded.

If he was being so diplomatic, that meant it was ugly. Chu Hong was troubled. If even its looks were in question, what could he do to help?

When Fang Zhao left, Chu Hong sent Chu Guang a text message. "That classmate of yours, Fang Zhao. How's his virtual project idol coming along? Have you seen what it looks like?"

Chu Guang happened to be free, so he initiated a videoconference when he saw the message.

"I heard the project is almost done and the virtual idol may be launched soon. As for what it looks like, I haven't seen it. Boss Du has been quite vigilant about keeping it under wraps and won't entertain questions about it," Chu Guang said.

"Then it probably won't end well." Recalling that Fang Zhao had said the virtual idol wasn't good-looking and considering he was a producer new to virtual idols, Chu Hong wasn't optimistic.

"People within the company aren't bullish either, but Boss Du has been acting weird. He's often holed up in his office with two other department heads. Their discussions can last two or three hours."

"Regardless of what they're up to, you should be preparing your song for the last season, no? I heard from your mother that she hired her old teacher to tutor you. This one should take the No. 3 spot, no? Just yesterday, your mother was complaining that, if not for the two virtual idols, you'd be shooting for the top spot." Chu Hong smiled.

Chu Guang responded in a relaxed tone, "No. 3 shouldn't be a problem."

It wasn't just Chu Guang. Everyone else in the industry was paying close attention to the final season of the year.

The final season of the year was about to kick off. Singers that had done well in the three previous seasons were eyeing a good finish to the year. A strong finish on the New Pioneers Chart in the final season could translate to a higher end-of-year bonus.

A rough pecking order had been determined by the preceding seasons and the major labels had reallocated their budgets accordingly. The top performers saw their

marketing budgets beefed up and the underperformers received less backing.

Both Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment were planning on giving their virtual idols an extra push in the final season. Their first movies were coming out and promotional campaigns were already under way. All eyes were on the final battle.

Even the popular webcast "Prairie Fire" had proclaimed that the final season was a duel between Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture. Which of the two virtual idol newcomers—Xun Huai or Fei Lisi—would claim final victory?

The program had coined the phrase "Yanzhou Derby," suggesting a clash of titans between Yanzhou's two strongest entertainment companies.

But Silver Wing supporters went "hehe" when they saw the phrase.

Yanzhou Derby?

What about us?

So the so-called "Big Three" of Yanzhou was just bullshit? Had Silver Wing disappeared?

Under fierce attack from Silver Wing supporters, the pundits explained that "Yanzhou Derby" referred to the two Yanzhou labels that produced the best virtual idols, nothing more.

But anyone with a brain would realize that it was an intentional slight. The phrase would suggest to the ordinary masses who didn't know the industry well that the only major record labels in Yanzhou were Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment.

But there wasn't much Silver Wing could do. Virtual idols were indeed their Achilles' heel—and it was a brutal wound that bled badly.

Some media outlets even started a bet called "Eye on Yanzhou Derby," encouraging punters to submit their picks for the top spot on the year-end new talent chart.

As the buzz around the contest heated up, the two major virtual idol newcomers, Xun Huai and Fei Lisi, saw their stock rise even further, just as their companies had expected.

Amid a sea of speculation from industry insiders and outsiders, September passed and October loomed. The final season of the year was about to begin.

Oct. 1.

Without any warning or advance advertising, Julian launched a full-court press when the clock struck 8.

The newcomers were ranked according to marketing budget. At the outset, they all received the same backing and were launched in no specific order—whoever was ready first debuted first. After taking part in the new talent contest, budgets were allocated based on performance and by company discretion. The better your prospects, the more exposure you got.

The priority list for the final season of the new talent contest:

No. 1: "Divine Punishment," performed by Polar Light, composer Polar Light.

No. 2: "The Lavish Dance," performed by Enoch, composer Chu Guang.

Chu Guang was dumbfounded when he saw the list. This was not what had been discussed. How come he was ranked second? His main competitor, Rong Zheng, was pushed to No. 3.

Where did No. 1 come from?

How did it merit the top spot?

Who was Polar Light? At first glance, he thought there was a typo in the top spot.

Chu Guang was even more pissed off when he saw the "music video" label after "Divine Punishment." He thought only he and Rong Zheng were given the music video treatment, because they did well in the previous season. How come this newbie who parachuted in got a music video?

Then he noticed the singer and composer were the same, and factored in the music video...

It was a f*cking virtual idol launch.

Chapter 26

First in History

Chu Guang was puzzled, but he wouldn't question the decision before getting to the bottom of things.

He wanted to listen to the song first. Did Julian place the song first because of quality or because virtual idols were given special preference?

There were many screening rooms at Silver Wing. Some of the offices also had the audiovisual equipment to play music videos. After signing with the label, Chu Guang was given his own office. A fully equipped screening room was located near where the newcomers were housed, so Chu Guang planned on heading to that screening room and playing the song on the audiovisual system there, to see what kind of song merited the top spot.

But before he arrived, he noticed that Rong Zheng and a group of other newcomers had already shown up. Rong Zheng's expression was one of bafflement, surprise and disbelief—but not the look of someone who felt robbed.

"Oh, you're here too. Let's listen to it together." Rong Zheng pointed to a seat on the side.

Chu Guang sat in his seat and took in the holographic image projected by the audiovisual system. The top-of-the-line stereo system delivered every note clearly.

Was it techno, rock, or another genre?

When the music started, Chu Guang was shocked to discover it was none of the above.

The music video.

A vast, lush forest that projected vitality. The flowers, plants, and trees were all anthropomorphic. The branches had eyes, noses, and mouths.

They had peaceful faces.

The blue skies were abruptly tainted with a coat of red.

A horn sounded an unsettling melody on a low register. The seemingly inchoate notes suggested a growing anxiety. The symphonic arrangement resembled a whimper, suggesting imminent disaster.

"A symphonic structure?" Chu Guang was so shocked he almost stood up.

In the music video, fiery meteors hurled toward earth. Panicked human beings fell into deep despair before the unexpected crevices.

The heavy drumming resembled the sound of rolling thunder. It grew in volume and pace, delivering an unsettling shudder.

Bang bang! Bang bang!

It could have been the landing of the meteors, the collapse of the landscape, or the heavy beating of someone's heart.

Panic and fear spread.

After the deafening clash of percussion and strings, a low voice sang.

Unlike the ebullient, wholesome opera technique that Chu Guang was familiar with, this voice was wild and unkempt, a mournful sigh emerging from the tree silhouette the camera had focused on. The voice had an amazing energy that radiated from the sound system and imprinted itself on every nerve of the brain.

A tense string score re-emerged and the drums found a measured, upbeat rhythm. The various tones created by the electronic synthesizer suggested a darkening mood. An invisible thunder invaded the universe.

Planet Earth was sick.

The combination of heavy percussion and wailing woodwind foreshadowed the ruthless, violent character of mutated animals.

The savage beasts lurked everywhere.

A trail of destruction engulfed the landscape. One after another, towering trees that

had been around forever toppled one after another. Some were struck by meteors, others overturned by the massive tremor that broke the surface of the planet. There were also some torn to bits by the silhouettes darting about. Trampled by unrelenting catastrophe, every form of life inevitably marched toward death.

In the face of total destruction, everyone and everything was reduced to specks. The sun was blocked by thick smog and the lingering warmth trapped in the atmosphere dwindled amid the tragedy popping up everywhere.

A piano and woodwind combination made for the "end of days" theme, ushering in stark images of bodies scattered across the land.

The intricately layered string score and the tastefully structured arrangement, coupled with a top-notch sound system, delivered the melody to the human brain with the utmost authenticity. It felt like a supernatural power was tugging at your soul, easily parachuting you into those war-torn times.

The symphonic bass foundation conveyed a weighty sense of history. Even if you closed your eyes, images of jadedness, turbulence, suffering, and the dilapidated earth surfaced. It was a period everyone in the New Era knew about.

The 100-year Period of Destruction.

A refined, low-register piano melody resembling a painful sob accompanied scenes of wasteland. Electronic music transcended the limited range of traditional instruments, creating a chilling atmosphere with a conventional arrangement, like a mysterious music whisperer.

The tone shifted again, this time reinforcing the sense of restlessness and the anxious, panicked mood.

Scenes of chaos and gore inundated this sick planet. There were countless casualties. Once lush forests were depleted to a pathetic state. Mutated beasts ravaged the bodies of innocent souls. Seas of fire erupted everywhere.

The silhouette the camera focused on examining its surroundings, its eyes revealing a deep sorrow and helplessness. Was this the end of days? Were the days of earthly life numbered as a result?

The figure started humming in a deep voice. The hum seemed to stem from the bottom

of his heart—it mourned the death of souls and the uncertain future that lay ahead.

The melody picked up. A melancholic woodwind score mixed with a steady percussion beat that resembled rolling stones. The heavy beat and extended notes seemed to suggest the silhouette's indecision, but a blaring horn broke through, rekindling the hope of survival.

Danger was approaching. This land was no longer fit for living.

Should he curl up in a dark corner and pray for Lady Luck to save his scalp? Or should he forge a way out?

Straddling the threshold between light and darkness, mired in blood and fire, he had a decision to make.

The tempo of the melody shifted, as if a turning point had been reached. A quirky flute solo combined with the synthesizer picked up the pace. After a brief pause, the tone became spirited.

The silence of percolating thoughts, pierced by the determination of a charging bull.

A modulating piano melody and firm strikes of the timpani shattered the lingering doubt, signaling the muted triumph of rebirth after surviving dire straits and capturing a volcanic eruption of unfettered masculine pride.

Once deeply buried in the ground, his roots freed themselves from the encumbering earth and burst to the surface, transforming into leg-like limbs. His verdant green leaves receded and his thick branches shrank.

Finally, he took his first step.

An excited human voice emerged, projecting a powerful aura that sent every hair on your body standing. It felt like a storm was afoot.

"Can't let it go,

And can't call it quits.

Hope still exists.

March forward,

Despite the thorny path ahead.

...”

It was the first time in his life that he had stood erect on this land. He didn't know how long it would take to find a destination, but now that he had planted his first step, he could take the next 1,000, the next 10,000.

The laws of nature prevailed, but uncertainty and patterns existed side-by-side.

One decision could bring about a change of fate.

He turned back to look at his compatriots.

The weak light of dawn seeped through as a horn sounded a wake-up call.

The piercing siren was followed by a spirited chorus of indeterminable size, which augured the determination and gall to take the world by storm. One tree, two trees, 10, 100...

A flurry of shadows flapped like butterflies.

Thousands of survivors broke free of the earth, taking a cue from their leader and transforming into ambling figures.

They were about to leave the land that nourished them and hit the road once and for all.

But from that moment on, they need no longer cower.

No one was born with endurance, but for survival's sake, why not take a first step?

There was no room for retreat.

To survive, they could only move forward.

Maybe there was some place on earth where they could keep living?

The symphony lingered on a long note and a drum beat suggested rolling thunder harbored by the clouds. A new chapter was forthcoming.

The screen showed a dense, packed cluster of countless departing survivors on one side, and the fluttering shadows of demons amid a bloodied, dusty atmosphere on another.

Fade to black.

The credits rolled.

"Leading man: Polar Light

Species: Longxiang Tianluo

Song title: "100 Years of Destruction, First Movement: Divine Punishment," producer Fang Zhao

Production team: Polar Light project team, Fang Zhao, Zu Wen, Song Miao, Pang Pusong, Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, Ji Polun, Bei Zhi

A Silver Wing Media production"

The music and footage ended at the same time.

The audience in the screening room let out deep breaths, as if they had just been suffocated for a long time, recovering from the chills sent down their spines.

"This is... This is..." Chu Guang didn't have the guts to mutter the word he had in mind. He questioned his judgment, yet his sense of injustice had vanished. He was a lesser composer.

...

The arrangement department.

Ya Erlin has just hosted a screening for his staff.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if taking in a lingering fragrance in the air.

"Do you smell it?" Ya Erlin whispered to the arrangers sitting beside him.

"What?" They were still in a trance.

"The smell of an epic."

There was a genre in the New Era distinct from pop music and the repeatedly covered classic songs. Maybe it didn't have many fans, but no one could dispute its status.

It evoked life-and-death situations, rebirth in extreme circumstances, the vastness of the universe and the enormity of the galaxy. It captured boundless dreams and hope, the beauty of human life, and miracles in dire times, its awesome power derived straight from the soul.

People called it the epic.

Epic.

That was the word Ya Erlin refrained from using when he'd heard the demo, the same word Chu Guang had hesitated to utter.

When he listened to the demo, Ya Erlin wasn't sure how the final product would turn out, so he didn't want to jump to conclusions. Symphonic songs weren't easy to pin down. It was hard to craft a satisfactory track without sufficient experience and sensitivity and the ability to steer the overall piece. Even Ya Erlin wasn't confident he could execute a song to such perfection.

That's why, when he'd first heard the demo, Ya Erlin had questioned Fang Zhao's ability. He seemed too young, hardly someone who could compose and harness a song like that.

But when he heard the final cut, Ya Erlin realized Fang Zhao handled details like intensity and tempo perfectly. He blended a symphonic score and electronic music from the New Era seamlessly, carefully crafting a layered texture and engaging plot. The powerful yet subtle melody beautifully conveyed the mood of the music video.

Accustomed to cute, lively ballads, the passion and vigor of dance tracks and other musical styles, this was the first time Rong Zheng, Chu Guang, and company were exposed to the grand narrative of an epic.

Captivated by the magnificent melody, every listener was transported to those dangerous times, traveling through the layers of bloodied smog to witness the evolution of a race, tracing their footsteps one by one.

'Twas the end of days, the cry of survival.

A melody and voice so powerful they penetrated your bones.

Now that was an epic in Ya Erlin's book.

That perfect blend of score and singer lent itself to an incredible, awesome effect and impact. That was beyond doubt.

"Yes or no? Perhaps we'll find out this afternoon."

Yet Ya Erlin had underestimated the industry response.

It didn't take the whole day. Oct. 1, 9 a.m., an hour after "Divine Punishment" was released.

The most respected music publication in Yanzhou, "Voice of Yanzhou," founded by the Yanzhou Music Association, posted this review:

"Polar Light is the first virtual idol to debut with an epic in the New Era."

Chapter 27

Gold Brick Road

An epic debut.

A definitive review.

By the most authoritative industry publication. No one could dispute that.

The "epic" label also meant that the upcoming season of the new talent contest was destined to be a bloody battle.

No, maybe it went beyond the New Pioneers Chart. Maybe it would develop into a storm that sucked in the entire Yanzhou music industry. Calling it subversion wouldn't be an overstatement. It had disrupted the planning of so many others.

There was a reason why Ya Erlin and Chu Guang didn't classify the song as an "epic" lightly. Setting aside the quality of the piece itself, this was still an unprecedented feat.

There had been epic pieces before. The Big Three—Silver Wing Media, Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment—all boasted their own elite cooperatives. Silver Wing had Flying Pegasus, Neon Culture had Metal Torrent, and Tongshan True Entertainment was home to Fourth Dimension. They were all capable of producing epic works.

The same went for the other top music cooperatives in other parts of the world, not just Yanzhou. The music they produced was copyrighted. It was never positioned as pop music and their target audience was never the average consumer.

These cooperatives usually only composed for projects with hundreds of millions in profit at stake, like blockbusters, hit TV shows, ads, and online games. Or the biggest of superstars. They always enjoyed a heavenly existence.

And every project was kept tightly under wraps. There were no leaks. That was why these elite cooperatives had special status within their respective record labels. Even a department head like Julian carried no weight with them. She wasn't kidding when

she'd said she had trouble obtaining a full song from Flying Pegasus.

When outside companies or entities wanted to use the work of these elite cooperatives, they had to pay up, and it was beyond what the average consumer could afford. Four figures was a minimum, and that only bought you a limited license that lasted a few days or a few months. It depended.

If you wanted to own a song outright, the pricing was even higher. Word was a piece composed by Flying Pegasus was sold for seven figures to a video game studio last year. No one knew the exact amount. No one could vouch for the quality of the song because no one had heard it. The rumor was it wasn't an "epic" piece. If it were, it would have cost even more.

That was why, when Silver Wing launched a virtual idol with an epic song, it sent jaws dropping everywhere.

"Are they nuts?"

That was the response of the Fei Lisi project team at Neon Culture.

Had the folks at Silver Wing lost it?

An epic song for a virtual idol with uncertain prospects? This was no ordinary song. It was golden.

If the Metal Torrent cooperative at Neon Culture produced such a song, they would never waste it on a new virtual idol.

Silver Wing's behavior was downright crazy, wasteful, and incomprehensible. It was like using a dragon-slaying sword to chop garlic. Even if Silver Wing could stomach it, other bystanders felt the pain.

The community of composers was also blown away by this costly investment. So Flying Pegasus had quietly, secretly crafted a virtual idol. And everyone thought they were working on the score for a year-end blockbuster. They never would have guessed.

Insiders at that level maintained a certain level of contact. So when "Divine Punishment" was released, Flying Pegasus members kept being pestered, but no one found out anything.

"It's OK. I understand if you can't say anything. No need to explain. You have your considerations." The folks calling Flying Pegasus started answering their own questions.

But the composers at Flying Pegasus were equally dumbfounded.

Wait, what do you understand? Please explain.

What considerations? How come we were kept in the dark? Who wrote that song? How come Silver Wing had signed such a great talent and we didn't know about it?

The head of Flying Pegasus clutched his chest with a shivering hand after hanging up the phone again.

Heartbreaking.

An epic.

Used to launch a virtual idol.

He wanted to find out who had made such a wasteful decision.

After swallowing a pill handed to him by an assistant, the head of Flying Pegasus couldn't sit still. He got up and punched his intercom.

He was going to complain to the head of the label.

The music industry was abuzz with heated discussion, and outsiders were equally excited.

A song deemed hefty enough to back an epic film by an authoritative publication was used to launch a virtual idol. It was the equivalent of rolling out a red carpet made with gold bricks.

"What do I hear? Money! Tons of money!"

"No, what you're hearing is the sound of gold bricks."

Gold bricks.

A gold brick you could purchase for a dollar.

Even music fans uninterested in epic scores couldn't help downloading the song. Only the song was available for download. The music video could only be added to a playlist.

Everyone who watched the music video shared the same thought.

"How come it feels like this is just the beginning?"

"You're spot on. It is just the beginning. Didn't you see the words 'First Movement' at the end of the video? It's the end of the year. I think Silver Wing is up to something."

"I think Silver Wing is up to something too."

"Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment created such a frenzy with their virtual idols, while Silver Wing kept a low profile. Turns out they were holding back a secret weapon."

"They've made their first move. A second move is coming, no?"

"Am I the only person who noticed the name Fang Zhao?"

...

No matter what, "Divine Punishment" being deemed an epic by industry authorities caused countless ripples. Everyone at Silver Wing was shocked except for Du Ang, Julian, and Ya Erlin.

After reading the review, Du Ang and company rushed to the 50th floor. Today marked the official launch of Polar Light, so the entire virtual idol project team was there. They were celebrating when the trio arrived.

Zu Wen and Zeng Huang weren't music fans, but they knew what the review meant for Polar Light's debut.

When Du Ang and company arrived, they locked the elevator doors so no curious outsiders could bother them.

Du Ang was so excited he forgot what he wanted to say when he opened his mouth.

Ya Erlin and Julian shoved him aside when they saw he couldn't manage a syllable after several false starts.

"Fang Zhao, are you really the composer?" Julian asked. Even though she had asked the question many times, she was still skeptical when the review came out.

"Yes, I wrote the song." Fang Zhao nodded.

"If I'm not mistaken, there are still other movements in the works?" Ya Erlin followed up.

"Indeed." Fang Zhao had nothing to hide. "There are still three more movements to go."

The trio of department heads took a deep breath.

Three more movements.

"Have you started recording them? Let us take a look." Du Ang was anxious to get a head start.

"I haven't started recording," Fang Zhao responded.

"Why?" Du Ang asked in a surprised tone.

But Fang Zhao was the one who was surprised by the stupid question.

"I've used up all my funding."

Chapter 28

Upstairs for a Meeting

Much of their top-notch equipment had a limited shelf life and their rental payments accounted for a good chunk of their 5-million-dollar budget, let alone other costly expenditures. Plus the project staff hadn't been paid yet.

It was a cliché, but artists had to eat too. Fang Zhao didn't want to mistreat his own people, so when he used up all his funding, he put the project on hold. They would continue whenever they received additional funding. The success of the first movement convinced Fang Zhao that Silver Wing wouldn't pass on such a promising project.

"Hiss—that's a loaded question." It finally dawned on Du Ang and company that the project was only budgeted for 5 million—and that was the result of Du's lobbying. It would have been even less had the original appropriation gone through.

Indeed, 5 million was too little considering the success of the project thus far. Fang Zhao and company had done an amazing job just launching Polar Light.

"Rest assured, I'll lobby the bosses for more funding. It will be more than last time. Plus you'll get decent bonuses," Du Ang said.

Even an idiot knew that Silver Wing finally had a proper virtual idol on its hands. How could it not back the hell out of it? Not to mention a second epic was in the works.

This kid was going to become rich. He might even be recruited by Flying Pegasus. That was a goal Ya Erlin had failed to achieve up to this point.

Having been dealt a reality check, Du Ang calmed down somewhat. "Speaking of which..."

Du Ang scanned the group, his gaze pausing briefly on Zu Wen and company. "Mum's the word. Try to run a tight ship."

Zu Wen struggled not to break into laughter. "Understood."

Outside observers all thought that Polar Light's epic debut was a secret bomb Silver Wing had held back for the end of the year. When a Silver Wing spokesman was asked about the project in a clip they just watched online, all he could do was maintain his composure and smile, projecting an aura of mystery. But the project team figured the spokesman's back was drenched in sweat.

What else could he do but smile and act coy? Say he didn't know about Polar Light? That would be the equivalent of slapping himself in the face.

If that was how he answered, Silver Wing would've become the biggest joke in the industry and even gone down in history as such.

Silver Wing couldn't afford to lose that much face.

After Du Ang and company left, Fang Zhao was thanked by Bei Zhi and Ji Polun. Fang Zhao had listed their names in the credits, which gave them exposure. It was an important boost for any singer or actor.

Bei Zhi probably didn't expect Fang Zhao to list him in the credits, considering he had only helped out on the 50th floor for three days during his break. All he did was haul equipment around for three days. Even though he was listed last, he was still excited. His agent had just told him the number of online searches for him would spike considerably. However you looked at it, that was a form of fame as well. He had an edge over other newcomers.

So excited. So excited.

"Hehe, hehehehe, hahahaha!"

Bei Zhi scampered about ecstatically in the newcomer dorm, behaving like a convulsing lamb.

His three roommates were jealous. What could they say? You can't control luck.

After he was thanked and congratulated by Bei Zhi and Ji Polun, Fang Zhao skimmed the comments on the song posted online, getting a sense of the overall response before moving on to the more respected media outlets. They were the opinion leaders on the matter.

The hosts of the popular webcast "Prairie Fire" had all forgotten about the "Yanzhou

Derby" they had coined earlier. Now all the talk revolved around Silver Wing's underlying strategy and speculation about its next move. They were convinced that Silver Wing had been working on the virtual idol for some time and all previous rumors were simply a smokescreen.

To back up their speculation, "Prairie Fire" invited experts onto the show. Experts wouldn't lie, no?

Two guests appeared on the live webcast. The first was Prof. Bradley, a scholar from the history faculty at Yanzhou University who specialized in the Period of Destruction. The other was researcher Kou Da, who studied animal mutations during the Period of Destruction at the Yanzhou Academy of Science. Both were bona fide experts.

Both were genuine leaders in the field. What they said was authoritative. No one questioned the veracity of their research.

Bradley analyzed the authenticity of the "Divine Punishment" music video—the sequence of events and the location and scale of the meteor showers and subsequent earthquakes. His conclusion: the music video was spot on. Although the virtual idol was fiction, the historical backdrop was accurate. He couldn't find any flaws. The music video was better made than many movies about the Period of Destruction.

Professor Kou Da of the Yanzhou Academy of Science focused on the mutated animals that appeared in the music video. His conclusion: there were no inaccuracies. So many mutated animals appeared during the Period of Destruction, but the music video got all the minute details right. The production design was so exacting that he wanted to meet the expert consulted for the project.

The two hosts acted as if they had landed a major scoop, concluding, "Therefore, our suspicion is that Silver Wing was backed by a formidable team of consultants comprising the top names in the business. They stayed out of sight because they signed confidentiality agreements. You can tell that Silver Wing put considerable thought into the project. It must have been in the pipeline for some time."

On the 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower, Zu Wen and company shifted their gaze to Fang Zhao.

A formidable team of consultants?

Hehe.

Among outsiders, all eyes were on Silver Wing's next move. In fact, many Silver Wing staffers were wondering too. They were waiting for the company's top brass to respond. This was no ordinary debut. There was too much attention. The higher ups were also cautious. Didn't you notice the label's chief spokesman could only smile and remain silent?

Du Ang had decided to ask for more funding after conferring with Ya Erlin and Julian in his office. They had heard nothing from senior management so far. Du Ang wanted to use funding as an excuse to probe. But before he could make his move, he received a text message from his superior. He was so shocked he turned ghastly pale and nearly dropped his cup.

"What's up, Old Du?" Ya Erlin and Julian asked when they saw Du Ang react the same way a rat did when it ran into a cat.

"Manager Shi asked us to round up Fang Zhao for a meeting upstairs." Du Ang responded as he tightened his grip on his cup.

"You mean us three?" Julian pointed at herself.

"That's right. That's what Manager Shi said—us three and Fang Zhao. The four of us. Not one less."

"What floor?" Ya Erlin asked. The location of the meeting reflected the rank of the executive who called and led the meeting. The rule of thumb at Silver Wing was the higher the floor, the higher the rank. The meeting was most definitely about the virtual idol project and its epic song. If they found out where the meeting was being held, they could try to figure out the agenda through their connections.

Du Ang took a gulp and pointed upward. "Top floor," he said in a shaky voice.

Only one person could convene a meeting in the top-floor conference room—the big boss.

Chapter 29

The Label Prizes Its Best Talent

No wonder none of the higher-ups had said anything. They were waiting for the big boss.

"You mean... Boss Du-Duan?" Ya Erlin's voice was even shakier. "Didn't she go to Huangzhou?"

"How would I know?" Du Ang didn't know what to do. They had expected the label not to handle the matter with kid gloves, but things had evolved beyond their expectations.

"Someone at Flying Pegasus must have complained to her," Ya Erlin voiced his speculation.

"Regardless of what went down, let's get ready. I'll get in touch with Fang Zhao. We'll head up to the top floor together."

On the 50th floor, Fang Zhao was monitoring the feedback to his release online. He was a bit surprised when he got word from Du Ang. He didn't expect the big boss to get involved.

He got up, sorted out his wrinkled outfit, and then told the others, "You guys take a break. I have to head upstairs for a meeting."

"Where's the meeting?" Zu Wen asked.

"The top-floor conference room."

"The top floor?" Zu Wen sprang from his seat. "Brother, a bit of advice. When you see the big boss, remember these five words: 'no bullshit, tell the truth.'"

The head of Silver Wing was Duan Qianji, the granddaughter of founder and megastar Duan Yizhi. She was in her 70s. Word was that, when Duan Yizhi was still alive, a young Duan Qianji enjoyed an active on-screen career under the tutelage of her grandfather.

When Duan Yizhi passed, Duan Qianji took over Silver Wing.

Fang Zhao recalled the research he had done before. There was a limited amount of information online and there were signs it had been doctored. As for the real Duan Qianji, Fang Zhao had never met her and knew little about her. He could only surmise from the reaction of Zu Wen, Du Ang, and company that the boss didn't have the best of tempers and wasn't the type of person who smiled all the time.

The elevator for rank-and-file employees couldn't reach the top floor. Fang Zhao followed Du Ang and company into a different elevator. The higher the elevator rose, the more nervous Du Ang and the two others became, Fang Zhao sensed.

Initially, Du Ang still managed to give Fang Zhao a few pointers, but eventually he turned silent. His whole body stiffened. It seemed as if the air pressure had dipped.

The elevator doors opened to reveal a 5-meter long hallway flanked by cold, metallic walls. Even the sunlight couldn't disperse the invisible chill.

After confirming their identities, an expressionless young man waved at them, signaling them to go ahead. Fang Zhao noticed that the man's gaze lingered on him for a few extra seconds.

When they entered the conference room, the chitchat stopped and some 20-odd pairs of eyes shifted their way. Every single person at the table was a senior executive above manager grade. Lowly department heads like Du Ang normally had no business being there.

The discerning and probing gazes were suffocating. Du Ang and company smiled stiffly. It seemed as though they could hear the heavy beating of their own hearts.

Taking a cue from his direct boss, Du Ang and party walked to the four spots at the end of the table. They were the lowest ranked employees and were seated accordingly.

The conference table was an inverted V. The seat at the joint was reserved for the big boss. It was still empty. There was another empty seat by her chair. It was unclear who it was reserved for.

Fang Zhao wasn't that nervous. He was checking out the conference room and wondering how the big boss would react. If she wasn't happy with his work, he wasn't going to grovel. In the worst-case scenario, he could leave and take his entire team

with him. There were plenty of other record companies who would happily hire them.

Less than a minute after they sat down, before other curious senior execs could question them, the doors to the conference room opened again. The buzz that had greeted the arrival of Fang Zhao and company disappeared. It became so quiet every breath could be heard. This wasn't a curious silence. It was driven by fear and pressure.

Fang Zhao saw a stern-faced woman walk in with huge strides. Because life expectancy had increased in the New Era, even though Duan Qianji was nearly 80, she looked like someone in her 40s from before the apocalypse. There were some wrinkles in the corners of her eyes, but she looked quite sharp. She projected the strong aura of someone in charge.

Duan Qianji was trailed by four underlings—two secretaries and two assistants. They didn't show much emotion but seemed more relaxed and less serious than their boss.

Another elderly man entered along with Duan Qianji. After she sat down at the head of the table, he took the seat next to her.

Fang Zhao scanned the old man and noticed he was wearing a lapel pin with a Pegasus logo. He was from Flying Pegasus.

"Which one of you is Fang Zhao?" Duan Qianji cut to the chase right after she sat down.

His head drooped, Du Ang tapped Fang Zhao beneath the table, signaling him to stand up. His other hand wiped away the sweat on his forehead. He took an imaginary deep breath. If she was going to question Fang Zhao first, did that mean she wasn't upset that they'd taken matters into their own hands?

"I am." Fang Zhao got up.

Zip.

Fang Zhao's seat left its original spot and shifted to the empty space in the middle of the conference table, toward the head of the table.

Duan Qianji observed Fang Zhao's response. If he were a newcomer attending his first meeting on the top floor, the slightest movement would affect him. But Fang Zhao was unfazed. He wasn't nervous. Instead, he eyed his moving chair curiously. The

surrounding gazes didn't get to him one bit.

This was no ordinary newcomer. He was too calm for his age.

"You wrote 'Divine Punishment?'" Duan Qianji glared at Fang Zhao when she posed the question.

"Yes, I wrote it," Fang Zhao said without avoiding Du Qianji's gaze.

Sensing no sign of deception, Duan Qianji's expression relaxed somewhat. "How many more movements are you planning for your Period of Destruction series?"

"Three more."

Gasps emerged from around the table. It was the same reaction Du Ang had had when he heard the news. The old man from Flying Pegasus was about to speak, but Duan Qianji raised her hand to interrupt. His eyes flashed panic.

"Have you recorded the remaining movements?" Duan Qianji asked.

"No, I'm out of funding."

Another round of gasps.

Du Ang and company became even more sheepish.

You've got guts, kid, asking the big boss for more funding.

Duan Qianji paused for two seconds, a trace of a smile appearing on her face.

"Fifty million for the second movement and the music video. I want to see a final product before November."

"No problem."

Duan Qianji remembered something and asked, "Who was the eye model for the music video?"

"Me."

"And your team of consultants?"

"It was just me."

The others at the table glared at Fang Zhao like he was a monster. The manager in charge of film production rolled his eyes and shut his eyelids in contemplation.

This time, Duan Qianji paused a little longer. "From now on, you're the manager of the virtual projects department and the producer for the Polar Light project. You'll be in charge of staffing. As for the bonuses for your team, Zhu Zhen will be in touch after the meeting."

One of the assistants standing behind Duan Qianji stepped forward and smiled at Fang Zhao.

"The label prizes its best talent." It sounded like a consolatory remark. Noticing that Fang Zhao was still deep in thought, she asked, "Anything else?"

"One more thing."

"Go ahead."

"Can I bring a dog to work?"

"..."

Chapter 30

We're Rich Now

Du Ang's head dropped even lower. The mood in the room froze. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. The pressure mounted again, reducing Du Ang and company to labored breathing.

Can I bring a dog to work?

This was the first time they'd heard someone pose that question to the big boss in the top-floor conference room.

Kid, do you have a death wish?

You wanna bring a dog to work? How about becoming a dog's bitch instead?

Why not capitalize on the opportunity to lobby for more perks instead? What are you thinking?

He was indeed too young, or maybe an artist's brain functioned differently. So this was the kind of brain that could produce an epic.

After a nearly 30-second silence, Duan Qianji slowly responded, "No problem. Like I said, the label prizes its best talent."

Of course the special treatment didn't mean that Fang Zhao could roam around the company with his dog. That was restricted to the 50th floor. The virtual projects department was now Fang Zhao's turf. He could do whatever he wanted. Duan Qianji had one demand—that he deliver a satisfactory product. As long as Fang Zhao met that demand, as far as she was concerned, he could bring a zoo to work.

"So that's the agenda for the virtual idol project. I want to see the second movement released before November. Alright, the four of you can leave first," Duan Qianji said.

Du Ang raised his head and glanced at his boss. Gleaning from Manager Shi's gaze, he confirmed that Duan Qianji was talking about the four of them, meaning their business

had been attended to and they could leave. The rest of the meeting was beyond their pay grade.

After tapping Fang Zhao, whose chair had returned to its original spot, Fang Zhao led the four out of the conference room. Whatever happened behind closed doors after they left was none of their business.

Du Ang and the two department heads only dared to breathe when they entered the elevator. It looked like they'd been reborn. Ya Erlin was still clutching his chest. "I was scared shitless. Shitless. Hey, Fang Zhao, weren't you scared?"

"Why would I be scared?" Fang Zhao asked.

Julian looked at the peaceful Fang Zhao and recalled his bold question in the conference room, then took in the Ya Erlin still drenched in cold sweat and shook her head. Both were creative types. How come they were so different?

"No matter what, congrats on the promotion, Fang Zhao," Julian said with a laugh. They used to be able to pull rank on him, but from the moment they left the conference room, Fang Zhao was no longer junior to them. Judging from his new title, he was actually more senior, except he didn't wield much real authority. But if his second movement also became a hit...

"Fang Zhao!"

Du Ang grabbed Fang Zhao's arm tightly and stared at him with a strange gaze. The nerves that paralyzed him during the meeting were gone, replaced with excitement and disbelief.

"Fang Zhao, the second movement must be a success."

Du Ang wasn't mad that he'd lost oversight of the project. He could tell from his boss's gaze that he would be receiving a decent bonus too. Plus, he'd never wanted to manage the virtual projects department. He wasn't upset. He was thinking about something else.

In the New Era, commercial entertainment was never limited to one medium, be it real idols or virtual idols. They were never confined to the music industry only. Pop music was only the tip of the iceberg.

It was always part of a broader strategic plan.

Take the virtual idols Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment launched, for example. After their songs charted well, they began to plot their movie careers. Silver Wing's real idols followed a similar path.

The difference was that, since Silver Wing's founding, none of its virtual idols had received this kind of backing from the label. But Du Ang had sensed a shifting landscape when he'd left the conference room today.

Why had Duan Qianji lavished so many perks on Fang Zhao? Even someone from Flying Pegasus might not have received that kind of treatment. Something had to be lined up for him, pending the launch of the second movement.

"Now it's up to you to record the second movement."

Du Ang could only confirm his speculation if the second chapter was also a success.

Fang Zhao didn't know how much longer the meeting on the top floor lasted after they left, but less than an hour after he returned to the 50th floor, Silver Wing's chief spokesman mentioned Polar Light in an interview. He still maintained that calm smile. No one could tell what he was thinking and he didn't reveal much, only saying fans should expect a second chapter. He continued to play coy, not announcing a release date, but Du Ang was willing to bet that the spokesman felt more confident.

Duan Qianji's assistant, Zhu Zhen, had already sent Fang Zhao a bonus breakdown. The people who actually worked on the project—Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, Song Miao and Pang Pusong—were each awarded 100,000 dollars. Zu Wen, the chief technician, got 300,000. Fang Zhao, the producer, received 1 million. That was strictly a bonus. He would also get a cut of his song's profits next month.

The second round of funding was also in place. They could start working on the second chapter right away.

After consulting Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, and Pang Pusong, Fang Zhao changed their status to full-time employees.

After becoming a full-time staffer, Pang Pusong felt he could carry himself with more gusto. After signing his new contract, he notified his mother and told her he wanted to buy her a gift.

Song Miao was planning on using her bonus to buy the dress she'd spotted last time.

Zeng Huang and Wan Yue were wondering if they should buy the flat they were considering.

"Zu Wen, what are you going to buy?" Zeng Huang asked after noticing the technician remaining silent.

"Me? I've already bought something." He turned on the screen of his bracelet and showed the group a settings page. "I've upgraded my gaming gear. What's the point of having money and not enhancing the gaming experience?"

Zeng Huang: "...Whatever makes you happy."

"Boss, what are you going to get?" Zu Wen asked Fang Zhao, now addressing him differently.

Fang Zhao was reading a text message he'd just received. "Zhu Zhen, the chairwoman's assistant, says she's sending us two flying cars. She wants us to check our garage to make sure they aren't cluttered."

"Flying cars?" Zu Wen forgot about his gaming upgrade and jogged to the garage.

Every floor above the 20th was equipped with a garage. So was the 50th, but the department had been gutted and nothing was left. Only a few staffers had remained, and they had been dirt poor. Things had only improved when Fang Zhao arrived, but they had still been on a tight budget. They'd rented their equipment by the hour; otherwise, they would've gone over budget.

Now they were rich.

"I checked. The garage is empty." Zu Wen opened the garage door.

Soon, someone delivered two flying cars, each emblazoned with a pair of silver wings.

They were also company cars, but these two were much better than the one Fang Zhao saw Fang Sheng arrive in on his black street. That wasn't to say that Silver Wing's cars were better than Neon Culture's. The make of the car was a function of one's status within the company. The higher your position, the more the label valued you and the better your car.

The two cars were department property, not for personal use. They were there for emergencies, so the department didn't have to beg other departments for transportation.

Zu Wen fondled the two cars lovingly top to bottom, even their wheels.

"I decided not to game today. I'm going to go for a spin instead. Boss, didn't you want to head home for a bit? I'll drive you," Zu Wen said.

Fang Zhao gave his staff the day off. They would start piling on the overtime again tomorrow. They would be living at the office for some time, although with only the few of them occupying the whole floor, everyone would get their own office. Plus there was a lounge. It wasn't a hardship. It was easier living at the office.

Food-wise, Fang Zhao also treated them well. Meals from the company cafeteria weren't great, but they weren't bad.

By the time Zu Wen drove Fang Zhao to his black street, it was already dark. Fang Zhao didn't have Zu Wen drop him off at his building entrance. There was more traffic at night. Various forms of transportation were out and about, zigzagging in the airspace, and Zu Wen was an average driver. So for safety's sake, Fang Zhao got off at a train station. He took the elevator to ground level and walked toward his building.

Black streets were noisier at night. Many of the street lamps were broken and left unrepaired. The streets were illuminated by shop signs on both sides.

Fang Zhao kept walking, pondering how to go about the second movement of his series at the same time. He stopped suddenly.

He had reached a street corner. There were no shops on either side and the street lamps were busted. He was about 100 meters from the busy stretch of the street. What stopped Fang Zhao was the four people standing in front of him. One held a gun that was pointed at Fang Zhao. The four men were wearing black masks and had scrambled their voices.

"Be smart and transfer 1,000 dollars to this account." One of the young men, wearing a biker jacket, flashed a card with an account number written on it with fluorescent ink.

He knew instantly that this was a repeat offender who specialized in extorting bank

transfers.

After he got over the shock, Fang Zhao couldn't help laughing. Even when he'd learned about his promotion, that he could requisition resources from other departments to produce his second movement, when people were flattering him, he hadn't laughed.

How long had it been since he'd had a gun pointed at him? Fang Zhao couldn't remember.

The gunman didn't know what Fang Zhao was laughing about. He was wondering why Fang Zhao's response was so odd. Wouldn't a normal person tremble and make the transfer?

Is he nuts or crazy? The four robbers gauged Fang Zhao again.

Whatever, the robbery was the pressing matter at hand.

"Transfer the money, hurry!" the gunman urged.

"You just got the gun today, didn't you?" Fang Zhao walked toward the gunman.

"What? Stop, or I'll shoot."

"Is this your first time using a gun?" Fang Zhao pressed forward.

"None of your business. Stop, you hear me?"

"Your hands are shaking."

"I told you, I'm going to shoot if you keep walking."

"Do you know what they called someone like you in my times?"

The quartet stared at Fang Zhao, puzzled by what this fellow who looked no older than them meant.

Fang Zhao smiled at the four robbers. "A little bastard."

Chapter 31

It Can't Be Him

Bang!

It was a dark corner and the gunshot wasn't that loud, so it didn't draw much attention on a busy black street at night. Some shops were playing music at deafening volumes—their employees were completely clueless.

Yue Qing was taking payment at his counter. He raised his head abruptly and looked in the direction of the gunshot. It might have eluded others but it stood out to him amid the clutter of other noises. He couldn't hear it clearly, but he instinctively knew it was a gunshot.

His shop was quite crowded, so Yue Qing didn't head outside. He sat at his counter, adjusted the surveillance camera installed at his entrance, and watched his monitor. The street corner was a short distance away and his camera had limited coverage.

A few secondary school students riding their skateboards passed by, joking among themselves.

Not them.

A few drunken men mumbling as they leaned on each other.

Not them either.

Huh?

Yue Qing spotted someone on his monitor.

Fang Zhao?

He was carrying something in his hands. Yue Qing zoomed in and realized it was only a takeout box from a neighboring barbecue restaurant.

Fang Zhao showed up in Yue Qing's shop soon.

"Overtime?" Yue Qing asked with a smile and probing eyes.

"It's a busy time at work, but it'll start getting even busier from now on. I might be gone for a few days straight starting tomorrow. I'm just going to crash at the office."

Fang Zhao opened his takeout box.

He handed Yue Qing a piece of barbecued meat. "Have some?"

"Thanks. The barbecued meat at that joint is decent. They get their meat from Muzhou. It isn't hybrid meat." Offered food, Yue Qing flashed a wide grin. He pulled a bottle of liquor from a shelf and offered Fang Zhao a glass.

"Bonus?" Yue Qing asked. He knew the barbecued meat wasn't cheap. People in the neighborhood typically dined on compressed synthetic food. Real barbecued meat was a luxury on a black street. A palm-sized piece cost 200 or 300 dollars. Yue Qing indulged himself only once or twice a month.

"Yep. That's why I splurged." Fang Zhao handed Yue Qing another piece.

"That's right—your new song sounds great. I downloaded it. The music video looks good too. I recommended it to my old comrades. They enjoyed it too. I heard in the news today that you're about to release your second single?" Yue Qing asked.

"Hence the overtime."

"I'm rooting for you. We'll be waiting for your new release, haha!"

Fang Zhao bought 10 pieces of barbecued meat. He and Yue Qing each had three pieces and he saved another three for Ai Wan. Ai Wan had said he was too busy to drop by and asked Fang Zhao to leave the pieces with Yue Qing. He would pick them up when things died down at his shop.

Fang Zhao brought the remaining piece in the takeout box upstairs.

Inside his shop, Yue Qing slapped his forehead. He was so busy eating and drinking he'd forgotten to ask Fang Zhao if he'd seen anything unusual at the street corner, but it probably had nothing to do with that kid. Then who was it?

Yue Qing pulled up his surveillance monitor and started watching the people who passed by.

Around dusk something went down on the street behind his shop. It was a violent dispute but no one was killed. Yue Qing also learned that a gun was lost. But a lost firearm wasn't something people discussed publicly. After all, it wasn't a legal gun. Most of the guns in circulation on black streets were made in underground workshops. They were never registered and no one advertised when they went missing.

But he didn't nail down who had taken the gun. The gunshot from the street corner must have had something to do with the lost gun.

Who had taken the gun?

Yue Qing stared at his monitor for some time but didn't spot anyone suspicious. He eventually gave up. Who cared—as long as trouble didn't come his way.

As for Fang Zhao, he had already arrived on the second floor. As soon as he opened his door, Curly Hair approached, wagging his tail violently. The smell of barbecued meat excited it even more. It couldn't stop whining.

Fang Zhao scanned the room and didn't see any damage. He fondled the dog on its head. "Good job."

He placed the piece of barbecued meat on the dog's plate, closed his windows, and drew the curtains. He took off his coat, from which he plucked a gun.

The gun was a rather old model, but it was still quite advanced for Fang Zhao's time. There were many improvements.

Fang Zhao also removed a mangled bullet from his pocket.

So when Yue Qing was glued to his monitor searching for suspicious characters who might have picked up the lost gun, Fang Zhao was upstairs studying the gun he'd confiscated. He was a long way from home. He didn't know how to use the current generation of guns, so he had to study up.

The next day, Fang Zhao took Curly Hair downstairs to Yue Qing's shop. He would be crashing at his office for some time. He would need Yue Qing's help keeping an eye on his second-floor apartment.

Ai Wan was there too. He was telling Yue Qing about the four young men he'd treated at his pharmacy last night.

The four kids were petty thieves in school and eventually graduated to robbery. Now they had dropped out and continued their life of crime. Their previous marks were outsiders, they robbed small amounts and no one was killed, so black street residents turned a blind eye. But their job last night seemed to have gone awry. The four of them were badly beaten.

Ai Wan had asked them what had happened. Initially, the four were tight-lipped, but eventually, Ai Wan got a few words out of them.

"I'm guessing the four kids are the ones who picked up the gun. As for who beat them up, they wouldn't say. They only suffered from flesh wounds. They'll be hurting for a while, but they'll be OK in the long run. The person who attacked them just wanted to teach them a lesson."

"So the gunshot at the street corner was those four kids?" Yue Qing asked.

"No way. Those four kids had never handled a gun before. Even if they had a gun, they wouldn't have the guts to fire it. Even if they had the guts, they never had the chance to follow through. They were knocked down before they could see their opponent. The shot was fired by their attacker, probably to scare them. One of the four kids was so scared he peed. I could smell the piss on him when they arrived at my shop," Yue Qing explained animatedly.

When he spotted Fang Zhao, Ai Wan greeted him with a smile. "The barbecued meat yesterday was great. I hear you'll be stuck at the office for a while? Rest assured, Old Yue and I will keep an eye on your apartment. No one will dare touch your windows. Just treat us to barbecued meat again next time you get a bonus."

"Sure thing. No problem," Fang Zhao responded succinctly. He was in a hurry.

"Go, go. Don't worry about your apartment." Yue Qing tossed Fang Zhao a bag of compressed biscuits. "For your commute."

"Thanks!" Fang Zhao stuck the bag in his pocket and headed out in a hurry, Curly Hair in tow.

As Fang Zhao faded into the background, Ai Wan picked up where he'd left off with

Yue Qing. "Say, which outsider is capable of delivering such a good lashing in this neighborhood?"

"You think it might be that kid?" Yue Qing pointed at Fang Zhao's silhouette.

Ai Wan shook his head firmly. "Him? He's a musician. How could he? The four kids told me their attacker clearly knew how to handle a gun. But aren't you the only veteran on this street, Old Yue?"

Yue Qing didn't think it was Fang Zhao either. "Let me look up the new tenants."

After leaving his black street, Fang Zhao called a cab because pets were banned from public trains. The first order of business was applying for a permit for his dog. He listed "Curly Hair" as its name.

The dog was only officially adopted when it had a chip implanted. The chip served as its ID. Fang Zhao could locate it wherever it went. And a quick scan would reveal the pet's identity and owner.

After registering his pet, Fang Zhao brought it to the company.

Staffers on the ground floor were puzzled to see Fang Zhao bringing a dog to work. Then they noticed that he wasn't stopped. The security guards took a quick glance at him and moved on. They had no intention of interfering.

"I'm not mistaken, right? The person who just passed by was Fang Zhao, no?"

"Yep, and he brought a dog."

"The things newcomers can get away with these days..."

"He's even younger than you are and he produced an epic, haha."

"Your information is out of date. My sources tell me that he's been promoted."

Fang Zhao ignored the discussion and ducked into the elevator. He was on the phone with Bu Lai. The body he inherited was weak. He needed to work out.

"Why, isn't it Manager Fang? Congratulations on the promotion." Bu Lai's jaded face beamed a warm smile.

"Thank you."

"You need more equipment? I can ask the property staff to hold your equipment."

"No, I was actually wondering if you had any exercise equipment."

"I don't think so, but I could order some, although the company already has a gym. You wanna set one up in your department?"

"That's what I was thinking."

"No problem. Your floor is quite spacious anyway."

"Anything else? I'll put them in the same order."

"Gaming consoles?"

"...Manager Fang, you're here to work."

"I also want the gear for shooting games. I prefer realistic guns."

"Fang Zhao, you're here to work."

"Let's go with games that aren't too old. The newer the better."

"Fang Zhao, you're here to work!"

Chapter 32

Killing by Flattery

Bu Lai could authorize the gym equipment, but he didn't want to take any flak for the gaming equipment. In his mind, Fang Zhao was still young, and young men lacked sufficient willpower. If Fang Zhao got addicted to gaming and didn't complete his project, or if the quality of his work declined, Bu Lai would have to be held accountable. So when it came to gaming equipment, he deferred to his bosses. He couldn't decide himself.

The people Bu Lai delegated to were efficient and well-equipped. And since an existing space was available, the same with the equipment, tools, and manpower, it was a quick setup.

The same afternoon, the virtual idol department on the 50th floor added a 100 square-meter gym.

"Our own gym?"

Zu Wen was especially excited. Sometimes he wanted to work out when he got tired from gaming—no, he meant working. All he could do was jump up and down in his office. The company gym was too crowded. You had to book a time slot in advance. He was also a homebody and weak physically. His parents often urged him to work out, to not alternate between working and gaming. The key to life was exercise, they told him.

Now that their department had its own gym, he didn't have to fight for gym time.

"I actually applied for gaming equipment too," Fang Zhao said.

Zu Wen's ears bolted up immediately. "And?" he asked eagerly.

"The request was rejected."

Zu Wen shrank to his original state.

"What the bosses are thinking is if our second movement is a success, they might sign off," Fang Zhao continued.

"Then let's bust our asses!" Zu Wen threw hard punches into the air. He felt as if his life had renewed purpose. He was brimming with energy. For him, gaming equipment was a stronger incentive than a cash bonus.

Fang Zhao had sent out the timetable for the Polar Light project and the division of labor a long time ago. He didn't want to set individual schedules. Staffers could decide their hours as long as they didn't mess up and stuck to the schedule. The project team met once every three days to take stock and deal with issues.

One morning, Fang Zhao was running on his treadmill. It was an artificially intelligent treadmill that adjusted to Fang Zhao's pace.

Curly Hair ran alongside its owner. If Fang Zhao picked up pace, so did Curly Hair. If Fang Zhao slowed down, it slowed down too. He never tripped on the treadmill.

Fang Zhao browsed industry news as he ran.

The hit show "Prairie Fire" had turned its sights to Silver Media's Polar Light project again. It had advertised yesterday that it would invite another expert to weigh in on the project.

This time it wasn't a science or history academic, but a master from the music industry. Indeed, Padley was an especially verbose master who had an acid tongue. He had the talent to back it up, but he was quite talkative.

Professionals naturally offered a professional perspective, and Padley specialized in symphonies. Fang Zhao's "Divine Punishment" happened to employ a symphonic structure. That was also why "Prairie Fire" invited Padley onto the show. He was an expert in the field and had a foul mouth. The ideal guest to generate controversy.

Padley didn't trash "Divine Punishment." To the contrary, he was full of praise throughout the interview. He zoomed in on every section of the song and expressed the utmost admiration. Of course, he sprinkled in some trash talk as well. As with his previous media appearances, it just didn't feel right unless he started a feud. He was only satisfied when he dissed a few folks.

The show generated a lot of discussion, and what surprised people the most was that

both Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment praised the "epic" scale of "Divine Punishment" on their own live programs. They didn't seem upset at all that their own virtual idols were crowded out in the charts. They all but crowned "Divine Punishment" a masterpiece. Both labels said on their shows that they were eagerly anticipating the second chapter of the Polar Light project and predicted it would also be an epic that didn't pale in comparison to the first chapter.

That sort of commentary wasn't the exception. You could hear that kind of talk online every day just in Qi'an alone. When the buzz faded, people would add fuel to the fire. There appeared to be a driving force behind the scenes.

Du Ang was also worried about the situation. He was thinking it was the doing of Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture.

Among the top cooperatives at the Big Three, each unit would study the other two when they had down time—their musical style, patterns in their songs, and so on. Metal Torrent and Fourth Dimension, the leading cooperatives at Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment, had to have noticed that "Divine Punishment" was quite different from Flying Pegasus' past releases and suspected the composer was an outsider, hence the underhanded tactics to ferret details. They might have identified Fang Zhao already. Silver Wing wasn't a seamless ship. You could always pry out some information.

The higher you ascended, the harder the fall.

"Killing by flattery."

Given Fang Zhao's age, hearing such fulsome praise from all these masters would either get to his head or create pressure. Regardless the scenario, it would affect the quality of the second chapter. It was a thin line between an epic and an epic fail.

Within Silver Media, people who were familiar with the Polar Light project knew that Duan Qianji had prevented Flying Pegasus from getting involved for a reason. All of Polar Light's chapters would be penned by Fang Zhao alone. No one from Flying Pegasus would take part. It was all on Fang Zhao. No one else could take credit.

Even though virtual idol projects normally didn't credit their composers initially, they would be unveiled later on through certain channels. The creators would not go unsung.

Pieces produced by Flying Pegasus might have involved some individual work at some point, but at the outset, they were all composed as a cooperative, with the emphasis on Flying Pegasus as a collective. They would only reveal later if a certain person or several people wrote certain songs. Only by promoting the overall brand of Flying Pegasus could they boost the individual worth of its members.

By the same token, Fang Zhao's current priority was to promote the virtual idol Polar Light. Everything revolved around Polar Light. They would reveal the creative talent after Polar Light gained a profile. If Fang Zhao was credited when "Divine Punishment" was released, then he would detract from the popularity of and divert attention away from Polar Light.

Duan Qianji had given Fang Zhao a choice, and Fang Zhao had chosen to go solo. She had agreed and kept Flying Pegasus on the sidelines.

Now, all eyes were on Fang Zhao—not just outside observers, but within Silver Media, Duan Qianji and other senior executives were also paying close attention—to see whether he could shoulder the challenge of continuing the epic series.

Of course, if Fang Zhao felt he was stretched and needed additional support, Duan Qianji would send help from Flying Pegasus, but that meant that, when the credits were announced, it wouldn't be Fang Zhao's name but the Flying Pegasus cooperative.

The other staffers working on the Polar Light project also noticed the commentary.

"Should we hire a consultant?" Zeng Huang asked. He was worried that Fang Zhao was under too much pressure. From top to bottom, the entire label had huge expectations, and killing by flattery was being committed in the media every day. A less steely person would have gone crazy. If Fang Zhao could hole up and focus on composing, maybe he could steer clear of some of the distractions. That would require hiring a consultant.

"That's right, boss. Why don't you hole up and focus on composing. We can hire a consultant or an additional team," Zu Wen also proposed.

If Fang Zhao were actually a kid in his early 20s, he would definitely be affected by the widespread adulation. He would become too proud or crumble under the pressure. But not Fang Zhao.

He didn't live 100-plus years in his previous life for nothing. He had weathered

countless close calls in the past. A little bit of pressure wasn't enough to rattle him.

"It's OK. I can handle everything on my own."

Chapter 33

Expansion

Fang Zhao could handle the overall artistic vision and manage his staff, but the other members of the team weren't as mentally strong as he was. They were still affected by the pressure, both internally and externally. Even Zu Wen was making careless mistakes.

"We're short-staffed."

Thus Fang Zhao pronounced at their meeting every three days after surveying everyone's progress.

"My apologies. My focus hasn't been great. But we are indeed short-handed. The music video for the second chapter is even more complicated than the first. It's a tall order to maintain production quality and meet the advanced deadline next month." After starting on the video for the second chapter, Zu Wen had realized it was more challenging than the one for the first chapter. He also wasn't good at managing large scenes. He made mistakes frequently, but he didn't feel comfortable delegating to technicians from other departments.

"I agree. It's best that we recruit a few more Reg Dimension technicians, ones that excel at staging scenes with many characters." Zeng Huang agreed with Zu Wen. Even though they had a few loaned technicians from other departments, they weren't on the same page, leading to occasional disputes. They didn't follow instructions.

"Let's recruit a few more people," Song Miao suggested. She wasn't assigned to the virtual idol department initially. She applied for a formal transfer after the first movement was released and became an official member of the team. Only their own staffers would go all out and dedicate themselves to the project.

Fang Zhao shifted his gaze to Zu Wen. "Zu Wen, any recommendations?"

"Internal candidates or external?" Zu Wen asked.

"Internal." The Polar Light project had received a lot of attention. Outsiders might not

be trustworthy. It was best to hire internally.

"Got it. Let me ask around." Technicians like Zu Wen had their own chat groups. He was friendly with a few of his colleagues. The department ended up being overstaffed during last year's expansion and a few technicians were crowded out. Now the department had been revamped and was recruiting. He could ask if they wanted back in.

Fang Zhao also posted a notice on the label's internal chat forum: "Virtual Idol Department on the 50th Floor Seeking Reg Dimension Technicians."

The notice didn't generate many responses. Quite a few staffers saw the notice but adopted a wait-and-see attitude. There was too much press coverage of the project. The praise was over the top. If the second movement failed, the backlash would be just as intense. They were reluctant to make a move when the project's fate was still unclear.

"Can I switch fields?" Bei Zhi asked his manager after seeing the notice.

His agent vetoed the idea without hesitation. "Considering your IQ, you better keep singing."

"There are quite a few smart singers."

"And you think you're one of them?"

"..." Bei Zhi went silent.

"Don't think too much. Go practice the new song you got yesterday. I won't say anything if you want to help out on the 50th floor when you're free, but don't think about switching careers. Reg Dimension technology is too difficult." Bei Zhi's agent recalled his greenhorn days when he also aspired to become a Reg Dimension technician. Unfortunately, he didn't have the talent. Just seeing the lines of code gave him a headache.

Ji Polun wasn't contemplating a career change, but he had cleared his schedule for the next 10 days. He left a message for his agent saying he was going to hang out at the virtual idol department on the 50th floor.

His agent didn't disagree this time. The "epic" release boosted Ji Polun's popularity

somewhat. More importantly, Ji Polun's acting improved slightly. He didn't know whether it was the acting courses he'd signed Ji Polun up for or if Ji Polun had actually learned a thing or two on the 50th floor. In any case, Ji Polun said he learned a lot over there, so his agent signed off.

The next day, three of Zu Wen's candidates showed up—two men and a woman. They had all spent time in the virtual projects department but were let go. They never thought about coming back. Even though Polar Light was a success so far, they were unclear about the dynamics within the new project team, so they didn't act even when they saw Fang Zhao's notice. They only turned up after being approached by Zu Wen.

Apart from the trio, a fourth candidate responded to Fang Zhao's ad.

"I'm Rodney. I graduated from the Yanzhou University of Science and Technology and joined Silver Wing last year. This is my diploma and my transcript for all six years. I've also included the certificates for awards I've won."

Rodney lined up his certificates in front of Fang Zhao. He wanted to join Silver Wing's virtual projects department after graduating last year, but the department was undergoing a massive expansion then and competition was fierce. A fresh graduate without any connections like him was no match for veteran technicians. So he bided his time in the film production department. He was tempted when he'd heard that the virtual idol department was recruiting a while ago, but he hadn't acted because he hadn't seen an official recruitment notice. When he saw Fang Zhao's notice yesterday, he decided to try his luck.

Frankly speaking, Rodney was a strong candidate. The Yanzhou University of Science and Technology was one of Yanzhou's top schools. Its Reg Dimension department ranked well in the continent. The transcripts and certificates Rodney brandished were impressive. Without a doubt, he was a stellar graduate, maybe even a nerd.

But in a company like Silver Wing, nerds were everywhere. Every department had a few geniuses. Even the unimpressive Zu Wen had an impeccable resume. That was why he was kept on while others were crowded out during the virtual projects department's expansion last year. The reason was simple—his technical skills were superior.

Speaking of which, Zu Wen had also graduated from the Yanzhou University of Science and Technology. He was only a few years ahead of Rodney.

Fang Zhao sent Zu Wen a text message. "Have you heard of Rodney?"

Zu Wen, who was working on something with Zeng Huang and company, responded immediately. "No."

Fang Zhao didn't follow up, turning his attention instead to Rodney's graduation project, a video he had made. It was a video of army ants attacking their prey during the Period of Destruction.

Army ants mutated during the Period of Destruction. They became quicker and larger and proliferated in numbers. They were awfully deadly.

Rodney's video probably drew from documentary footage and films about army ants. There were quite a few flaws in the details, but overall, he had successfully conveyed the invincible aura of the species. Otherwise the video would not have been deemed prize-worthy.

Fang Zhao didn't speak and Rodney couldn't read his face. He kept rubbing his palms on his knees. For some reason, even though the project head before him was younger than he was, he felt like he was dealing with a professor at school. He was too scared to take a deep breath and his palms were sweaty.

"Do you game?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Huh?" Rodney was caught off guard by the abrupt question.

How many Reg Dimension technicians could resist the temptation of computer games?

But given the circumstances, Rodney had to consider his answer. What if he came off as a slacker? Being caught lying was worse.

Rodney hemmed and hawed before whispering, "I do, but actually, I—"

"You're hired."

"Actually, I'm a decent gamer." He was going to say he didn't game often but switched gears. Thank God he had a quick wit and quick reflexes.

"Fill out your transfer application before 10 a.m. I'll pull your file."

"Got it. I'll get on it right away." Rodney answered gingerly.

"I'll give you a day to rest. Start tomorrow."

"Sounds good. I'll head back and get ready."

"Speak up. Can you live at the office?"

"No problem."

"Pack your things and live out of the office."

"Yes, sir!"

"Get ready for some major overtime."

"Yes, sir!"

"Any more questions?"

"No, sir!"

"Dismissed."

Rodney turned around and ducked into the elevator. He wiped the sweat on his forehead. He was suddenly at a loss.

Something didn't feel right.

Chapter 34

He's Panicking

Rodney was still at a loss when he arrived on the 50th floor the next day. He wasn't sure if he'd made the right call in deciding to transfer. He'd had many questions he wanted to ask when he visited the 50th floor yesterday, but for some reason, none of them had come out. He'd signed his contract in a daze and left in the elevator.

After tidying up in the office Fang Zhao had assigned to him, Rodney entered Zu Wen's studio.

"How are you, senior colleague? I'm Rodney, the new hire." Rodney wanted to introduce himself first.

"Cut the bullshit and start helping out." Zu Wen didn't bother to lift his head and pointed to an empty work space beside him. A desktop and other equipment were already in place.

Besides Zu Wen and Zeng Huang, the studio also housed the three other new recruits and Rodney, for a total of six people. The technicians loaned from other departments had left. From now on, the project was an in-house job.

Even though the department had expanded, the workload was still very heavy. They hadn't completed the day's tasks yet, so there was no time to welcome the newbies.

Rodney stopped talking, headed to his work space, and turned on his equipment. He scanned the list of tasks assigned to him. He was surprised. No wonder the department had to expand. Large scenes involved so many elements. Fang Zhao was also a demanding producer who paid close attention to detail. There was no room for fudging. It was time to get serious.

Fang Zhao was recording the second song with Pang Pusong. He still wasn't happy after two straight days of recording, so they had to continue today. Around noon, Zu Wen's staff had completed their assignments for the morning and Rodney still saw no sign of Fang Zhao.

"We've finally finished before lunch for once." Zu Wen rubbed his eyes.

"I'll buy lunch," Zeng Huang said. It was his turn to buy lunch. He left for the cafeteria after asking Rodney if he had any dietary restrictions.

Only then did Zu Wen turn his attention to Rodney.

"You're a new hire? I heard you also graduated from the Yanzhou University of Science and Technology," Zu Wen said.

"Yes. I've heard about you, senior alum. Your graduation project is still on display in the exhibition hall for outstanding student projects," Rodney responded.

"Work hard. The future of our department is bright. You've bet on the right boss." Zu Wen shifted to morale-boosting mode.

"Our boss being?"

"Fang Zhao, of course. He's the head of our department."

"Oh." Rodney nodded and pondered briefly. He followed up with another question. "Say, senior alum, don't you think that Manager Fang looks like Old Shen?"

The "Old Shen" Rodney referred to was a veteran Reg Dimension instructor at the Yanzhou University of Science and Technology. He was well-regarded within the industry. The only thing was that he was too serious and spooked people wherever he went.

One particular scene stayed with every single class of Shen's students: the sight of the entire class paying him their undivided attention. Even if their minds were wandering, they would pretend to be listening to put the old man in a better mood, because if he was in a bad mood he could easily flunk a higher percentage of students.

When the class ahead of Rodney's had gotten on Old Shen's bad side, he dropped the pass rate for the final exam to 50 percent, flunking half of the class. He also refused to give a make-up exam, so the students who flunked ended up having to retake the course with Rodney's class. This time they learned their lesson and managed a bare pass.

Zu Wen graduated three years ago, so he did remember Old Shen, but he

misinterpreted Rodney's comment.

"How dare you say that boss looks like an old man?"

"Hush, hush—I'm referring to his aura, not his appearance." Rodney gesticulated wildly.

"You said what you said. I'll remember this transgression."

"No, I just think Manager Fang is a bit... different?" Rodney explained frantically. He just felt that even though Fang Zhao was younger than they were, he had the nerve-inducing presence of a senior professor.

Zu Wen didn't think it mattered. "Artistic types are different from us technical types. There's usually something different about them. As long as he treats us well and lets us game during office hours, I don't care if he's a monster."

"True." Rodney forgot about the weird vibe Fang Zhao had given him yesterday. Zu Wen was right. As long as they were well-paid and could game during office hours, who cared about anything else? They just had to do a good job on their assignments. Whatever else was going on, there was a producer to cover for them.

"Oh, I wanted to ask you something. Senior alum, why is there a lower urinal in the bathroom? Does someone in our department bring their kid to work?"

Zu Wen glared at Rodney like he was an idiot. "It isn't for you and it isn't for a kid. It's for a dog."

"Oh."

While Fang Zhao was tweaking with Pang Pusong's vocal style and articulation and Zu Wen was hard at work with his junior colleagues in the studio, the demo for the second chapter had been delivered to Duan Qianji.

This was something Duan Qianji had demanded of Fang Zhao. Once the demo was ready, he had to send her a copy for vetting.

Listening to the demo ended up taking half a day.

Duan Qianji ended up looping the crude, incomplete demo all afternoon.

She took a long sigh and pressed a few buttons on her desk, commanding her assistant: "Send He Hao and Wayne up. We can move on to the next step already."

Zhu Zhen flashed a look of surprise. "Got it."

'It's about time we let the world know that Silver Wing can produce a decent virtual idol, a real idol!' Duan Qianji said, looking into the distant sunset.

Zhu Zhen relayed the latest gossip. "Boss, it seems that Master Glifetz has been asking around about the Polar Light project."

Glifetz was the former head of the virtual idol department at Silver Wing, the producer in charge, the master virtual idol producer that Silver Wing wooed with a hefty salary. He had produced a few relatively successful virtual idols in his day. He later retired from producing and, as a master of his craft, became a visiting professor at various universities. He taught the occasional class, accepted the rare apprentice, and invested in some projects.

Silver Wing's lucrative offer had lured this long-retired master producer. Before the project kicked off, he confidently vowed that he would jump-start Silver Wing's long-struggling virtual projects. But reality delivered a slap in the face instead.

Glifetz had fallen ill after last year's virtual idol project had fizzled. The official word was that he was still recovering in the hospital, still remaining there after more than a year.

When Duan Qianji had purged last year's project team, Glifetz was naturally upset. Quite a few staffers were students he had handpicked. They were all forced out by Duan Qianji.

When she heard her assistant mention Glifetz, Duan Qianji laughed sarcastically. "That old geezer. I'm sure he's panicking."

Of course Glifetz was panicking—the virtual idol department he had failed to reform was making waves this year. And it had generated heated discussion right off the bat. That was good news for Silver Wing, but not for Glifetz. If the Polar Light project took off, the reputation he had worked for years to build would be in jeopardy.

"Ignore him. Let him keep playing ill at the hospital." Duan Qianji couldn't help another snicker. "I wonder if his condition will 'deteriorate' again."

Chapter 35

Comeback?

The coastal Yanzhou city of Jिंगgang is home to several large sanatoriums. Jिंगgang was a scenic city constantly bathed in sunshine with warmer winters. Many people liked to recover in Jिंगgang.

Inside a sanatorium in Jिंगgang.

Famed musician and virtual idol producer Glifetz was sitting by his room's French windows. Typically, this was the time of day he was in his best spirits. He could take in the sunshine of Jिंगgang peacefully. But today, he was in no mood to enjoy the warm sunbath that so many envied.

Glifetz frowned deeply as he read a news item passed to him by an assistant.

Standing next to Glifetz was one of his former students, one of the staffers forced out by Duan Qianji when last year's virtual idol project had failed.

"Teacher, any new moves from Silver Wing?" the young man asked.

"Yes." Glifetz closed his eyes. He wanted to think hard about what Silver Wing was up to.

Glifetz had run the virtual idol project last year. While he didn't have a total grasp on the thinking of Silver Wing's senior management, he was usually half there. Silver Wing had never paid much attention to virtual idol projects. That had been the culture since Silver Wing's founding. The label had never produced a presentable virtual idol ever. Even if it decided to get in the game now to boost its profits, it would take time. At least, that was what Glifetz thought.

Glifetz thought the failure of his virtual idol project was a function of Silver Wing's internal problems, not his fault. Yet industry insiders and clueless observers were influenced by the media to think that the downfall of last year's virtual idol project was on him. How ridiculous.

Glifetz insisted he was not to blame. He even told close friends: "Silver Wing's virtual idol project was beyond salvation." Just two days after he'd made that comment, it somehow made its way to Duan Qianji and the entire virtual idol department was purged. The few students he had handpicked were kicked out. Glifetz lost a lot of face and became the subject of his colleagues' ridicule.

Because Silver Wing had never produced any substantial virtual idol projects, many news outlets did not draw a firm conclusion—whether the project had failed because of Glifetz or as the result of internal corruption at Silver Wing. Only when Polar Light had debuted at the end of the year did many observers think back to Glifetz's fall from grace after the failure of last year's virtual idol.

Unfortunately, journalists who wanted to interview Glifetz found that he was heavily secluded. He refused interviews by videoconference as well. Since the man in question was nowhere to be found, the journalists could only speculate in their daily reports.

Jinggang was a considerable distance from Qi'an, Yanzhou's political and financial hub, and people in Jinggang didn't pay much attention to the entertainment industry, so the heated discussion in Qi'an never spread to Jinggang. That was also why Glifetz picked Jinggang to recover.

The failure of last year's virtual idol project had dealt Glifetz a blow, but he'd never thought it was his fault. The news of his ongoing illness was indeed fake. He had recovered a long time ago.

So why did he stay in the hospital?

The first reason was to give the impression that he'd given his all to the virtual idol project and left no stone unturned, that he was sick from exhaustion and quite ill at that, to project professionalism and dedication. A restrained show of vulnerability would tilt news coverage in his favor.

Second, he was embarrassed to appear in public. The failure of last year's virtual idol project did indeed taint his reputation, so he wanted to wait until Silver Wing launched its virtual idol this year. If the project was still lackluster, then people would conclude that Silver Wing's virtual idol projects were beyond saving.

That way, the criticism would ease. Everyone would think that it was Silver Wing that had tarnished his reputation, even landing him in the hospital.

Glifetz had been waiting since the beginning of the year, but there had been no sign of movement at Silver Wing. He'd finally breathed a sigh of relief when someone heard that Silver Wing offloaded the virtual idol project to a newcomer. Even Silver Wing itself had given up, ceasing to lavish funds on virtual idol projects, so no one would be willing to stir the pot again. It wasn't a matter of producer talent. The problem was Silver Wing itself.

But now, Silver Wing's true intentions were being unveiled.

But a big chunk of the year gone, three seasons later, the story still wasn't over. Silver Wing had to have saved the best for last, Glifetz suspected, so he ordered his people to keep digging. He'd never believed Silver Wing would put a newcomer in charge of a virtual idol project.

"Ha—Silver Wing can fool others, but not me. Duan Qianji must have been planning this."

Ding!

Glifetz received a text message.

A glimmer flashed in Glifetz' eyes after he read the message. He became absorbed in deep thought.

"Teacher, is there news?" the young man beside him asked.

"The second movement will be released before November." He checked the date. It was Oct. 25. It would be any day now. Glifetz had set up several alerts. He would be notified immediately when there was news about the second chapter.

The first chapter was just a teaser. The second chapter would reveal Silver Wing's true colors.

Was it a continuation of the "epic"? Or a publicity stunt?

Glifetz knew his comeback hinged on the second chapter.



Inside Silver Wing headquarters in Qi'an, Fang Zhao grabbed a copy of the new music video and shouted in the direction of the studio, "Zu Wen, head upstairs with me."

"Upstairs where?" Zu Wen yawned. He badly needed a gaming session to rest his overworked brain.

"The top floor," Fang Zhao responded.

Zu Wen nearly fainted at the sound of the two words "top floor."

"The top floor?"

"Hurry up and get ready. We'll head up in five minutes. Chairwoman Duan is waiting for us." Fang Zhao glanced at the time.

Even though Silver Wing had given Fang Zhao full authority, he still had to run his final product by senior management. The top executives were starting to pay attention. Plus the success of the second chapter depended on Silver Wing's next move. This was something Duan Qianji had stressed when she ordered the budget allocation.

Fang Zhao needed to bring a technician. Zu Wen was the senior technician in the studio, so naturally, Fang Zhao brought him along. If the projection equipment needed to be fine-tuned and levels needed to be adjusted, Zu Wen would have to do it on the spot.

When he heard the big boss was already waiting upstairs, Zu Wen felt his legs give in even more. He scrambled. When he washed his face, his hands were shaking. All he could remember was the stern look on the faces of Duan Qianji and other senior execs at the debriefing for last year's virtual idol project. The staffers had become pinatas. All they'd wanted to do was curl up in a corner.

After tidying up, Zu Wen followed Fang Zhao into a special access elevator.

"Boss, I'm nervous." Even taking deep breaths couldn't calm his nerves. Zu Wen felt as if the temperature inside the elevator was plunging.

"Think of it this way—after the second movement, we get our gaming console."

"No, that makes me more nervous. What if we fail?"

Zu Wen was so nervous his teeth were clattering. He turned to see Fang Zhao as calm as always. He was baffled. It was genuine calm, not faked.

"Boss, I have a question I'm not sure if I should ask," Zu Wen said.

"If you're not sure, then don't ask it."

"But I can't help myself." Zu Wen stared at Fang Zhao. "How come you're not nervous? What if the second movement fails? Of course I'm not doubting the quality. I quite like it myself. But will other people like it? Will the Yanzhou Music Association give a positive review? Will the Polar Light project really end up a success? Every time I think about these things, I get nervous, lose sleep, and become unsettled. How come you don't feel anything?"

Fang Zhao pointed at his head. "That's because I feel fearless every time background music plays in my head." That's what calmed him on the battlefield, and it served the same purpose now.

"..." Zu Wen looked at Fang Zhao to make sure he wasn't kidding. "It's mind-boggling to me. What do you carry around in your head?"

"Probably a large symphony orchestra."

Chapter 36

Bringing Out the Big Guns

Zu Wen felt that the concept of nerves or butterflies was inherently alien to someone like Fang Zhao. At least, he'd never seen Fang Zhao panic.

The fact of the matter was, if Fang Zhao were an ordinary person, or if it were the Fang Zhao from before the end of days, he would have reacted just like Zu Wen. But people who had endured an apocalypse were definitely different.

Fang Zhao would get nervous and afraid too. But during the apocalypse, everyone had to find a center so they could carry on; otherwise they would break down. Some fought for the people they loved, others for religion or another surrogate.

At the beginning of the apocalypse, Fang Zhao still had some family, but by the middle of the period, all he had left were his comrades. Some people looked for company, but more often than not, lovey-dovey was quickly replaced by permanent separation. What the apocalypse had in abundance were hysterical cries. After witnessing their share of painful separations, people became less attached. Fang Zhao led his troops from battle to battle. He had no time for distractions.

Maybe it was the prevailing mood of the apocalypse, but Fang Zhao developed a rare talent. His brain was separated into two halves. One half was used for thinking and managing his body. As for the other half... just like Fang Zhao told Zu Wen, the other half probably housed an orchestra. It started as a small orchestra that played musical fragments but later grew into a full-scale orchestra that played with alternating passion and heaviness.

Eventually, music would play in his background regardless of what he was doing. It was a form of hypnosis. He forgot about his other emotions, his nerves, his fear. He was prepared to die at any given moment. That gradually became the norm. He became numb.

Compared to what he'd endured during the end of days, this was nothing.

Fang Zhao wasn't nervous. On the contrary, he was excited.

When they stepped out of the elevator, they were greeted by the same wide and chilly passage that led to the conference room. Zu Wen trailed Fang Zhao. He refrained his eyes from wandering and mentally propped up his legs so he wouldn't collapse right there and then.

This time, there was an extra guard at the checkpoint. Even though it was a simple ID check, the two guards didn't waste a single syllable. Fang Zhao detected a familiar quality.

The two guards were veterans.

Actually, Fang Zhao had noticed when he'd first joined Silver Wing that many of the label's security guards were veterans. Word had it that Duan Qianji's husband served in the Yanzhou military. No one knew his exact rank and title. In any case, due to her military ties, Silver Wing's security force was largely made up of veterans.

When they entered the conference room, he noticed there were fewer people than last time. Including Fang Zhao and Zu Wen, there were a total of 10 people.

After Fang Zhao and Zu Wen entered, the doors to the conference room shut and isolated the space. No one knew what was discussed except for the 10 people in the room. Hardly a ripple was sparked.

Until that afternoon. The marketing department received a last-minute directive. The original marketing campaign was scrapped, replaced by a new plan. The allocation of promotional channels was shuffled too. Someone had butt in.

Usually, the scheduled order of the marketing plan wouldn't be tampered with unless it was urgent. After all, too many factors were in play, and a change in order usually meant special intervention, like someone enjoying preferential treatment.

Previous protocol suggested that special treatment was reserved for Grade A stars. Yet the marketing staff was dumbfounded when they got the new promotional plan.

"What..."

"Not a Grade A star? It's actually a virtual idol."

"Are the bosses sure? Starting blanket coverage now?"

"This is too much. Aren't they worried about history repeating itself?"

Yet no matter what the underlings thought, they still had to follow orders. Switching marketing strategies, adjusting ad launch dates, and so on—everything went ahead.

The next day, a series of unique ads popped up in Yanzhou's public transportation system, public squares, construction sites, and so on. They were bound to stand out because they were too eye-catching. Posters with a distinct style showing up amid a cluster of pretty or handsome faces would naturally draw more attention.

Amid the passionate melody of "Divine Punishment" emerged a still picture.

The picture was separated by a lightning bolt. On one side was an army of anthropomorphic trees, and clusters of mutated animals took up the other.

At the bottom in bold: "'100-Year Period of Destruction,' Second Movement, out Nov. 1."

The journalists that had been waiting for Silver Wing's next move were blown away. They had expected an early promotional campaign from Silver Wing, but they'd never thought the label would launch such a huge and aggressive campaign. The intensity rivaled the campaign for a Grade A star. Stars Grade B or below definitely wouldn't enjoy such treatment.

Besides locations with heavy foot traffic, the campaign also had deep penetration on the internet.

Were they bringing out the big guns?

No one would have thought that Silver Wing would one day bet so heavily on a virtual idol. Even their expanded virtual idol project that year wasn't promoted this vigorously.

Even though Silver Wing had launched a marketing campaign for last year's virtual idol, it struck people as lacking confidence. But this year, Silver Wing was strutting its stuff.

Several students riding a public train were admiring the huge screen hanging on a tall building they passed.

"Is that an upcoming film?" one student asked. They were some distance away and couldn't read the text on the ad clearly.

"No, it's a virtual idol launched by Silver Wing. But this virtual idol is special. Have you checked out the song 'Divine Punishment'?"

"I have. It was playing non-stop at school a while back, but I'm not into that type of musical style. I haven't seen the music video either."

"I quite like it. And the second single is about to come out?" Another student searched online. "Oct. 1? Haha, that's soon! I hope the second song is an epic too. I'm telling you, you have to listen to these epics with quality headsets or a good stereo system; otherwise, you won't be able to fully appreciate the genre."

Apart from fans that were into epic songs, the most active internet commentators were fad-seekers.

"The second song is an epic too, no?"

"I hope so. You guys probably don't know that every time I listened to 'Divine Punishment,' I heard the sound of clashing gold bricks."

"I'll read the Music Association review when it comes out. If it's an epic, I'm going to download it."

"Is the second song only available for download within Yanzhou? If that's the case, I'm going to laugh my ass off. Right now, outside of Yanzhou, the other continents don't allow legal downloads of copyrighted music. The full soundtracks for many blockbusters aren't available online."

Silver Wing was explicit in its advertising for the second chapter—the release date was announced in advance. The date wasn't announced merely to promote its virtual idol. It was also a challenge of sorts to the other two members of the Big Three—come Nov. 1, I'll be ready for battle. Join me or not.



Song Shihua, Tongshan True Entertainment's big boss, sat in his office silently pondering the meaning of Silver Wing's next move. He didn't believe that Duan Qianji

had laid down an epic just to prove that Silver Wing could produce a hit virtual idol.

He was a businessman. Duan Qianji was a businesswoman. From a business perspective, Song Shihua believed that Silver Wing had made such a massive investment with huge returns in mind.

But what was it all for?

Suddenly, Song Shihua snapped his fingers, his pupils shrank, and his cheeks twitched. He was skeptical, in disbelief. He had to squeeze every syllable out of his mouth.

"Is it for next year's release of 'Battle of the Century?'"

He couldn't think of another reason.

"Battle of the Century" was the most anticipated game in the world, period. It was a title gamers around the world had been looking forward to for nearly 10 years. And it was set against the 100-year Period of Destruction.

The studio behind "Battle of the Century" had announced ahead of time that the game would be endorsed by a single celebrity in each continent. And only virtual idols were being considered.

The endorsement fee was secondary. The most important thing was the exposure the deal came with. It was global.

Silver Wing wanted to join the contest for "Battle of the Century" endorsers with that tree? What a joke. To count on that tree?

Chapter 37

Fiery Bird

Lo and behold, Song Shihua had indeed figured out Duan Qianji's thinking.

Why else had Silver Wing splurged on and built such a massive team for its virtual idol project last year?

On one hand, it wanted to prove itself by producing a quality virtual idol. On the other, from a business perspective, the label also had its eye on the "Battle of the Century" endorsement deal.

The production studio behind "Battle of the Century," Fiery Bird, released just one game every 10 years. Each game lasted for 10 years. It was a snobbish company, but at the same time, it was a force to be reckoned with.

Fiery Bird had been founded 100 years ago. Word was that the founder was a plane maker. Its first game revolved around spaceships. It was a huge global hit. It had never dropped out of the industry's annual poll of top three games in the 10 years since its release. Ten years later, Fiery Bird released its second game, which became as big of a hit as its predecessor.

Duan Qianji didn't care about anything else. She wasn't a gamer. What she did know was that Fiery Bird's previous release nine years ago, "Myth," earned a profit in the tens of billions.

No one knew the exact number, but it couldn't have been less than 100 billion. And that covered profits from the game alone and didn't include earnings from related merchandise. Still, the main chunk of income alone had many competitors jealous. Everyone wanted a piece of the action. Not to mention every single celebrity affiliated with Fiery Bird in the past century had become a big star on a global scale.

Among the Big Three, why did people think that Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment were stronger companies than Silver Wing? Virtual idols were the main reason. In terms of real idols, Silver Wing didn't fall short, but when it came to virtual idols, Silver Wing did indeed pale in comparison. Both Neon Culture and

Tongshan True Entertainment had landed Fiery Bird endorsement deals in the past. That was why, in terms of global influence, Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment were superior to Silver Wing.

Virtual idols were a critical line of business that Duan Qianji always wanted to improve. Silver Wing had to produce a successful enough virtual idol to resolve its predicament.

But Duan Qianji had never revealed her thinking to Glifetz, or to anyone else for that matter. Maybe some of her colleagues had guessed what she was up to, but they'd stayed mum because they lacked confidence. Silver Wing had never produced a virtual idol popular enough to be a contender for the endorsement deal.

It just so happened that Fiery Bird was at the end of a 10-year cycle. They had announced the name and setting of their new title last year—"Battle of the Century," set against the backdrop of the Period of Destruction. Duan Qianji had learned through her sources that the budget for "Battle of the Century" was even larger than the one for "Myth." From a businessman's perspective, the more you invested, the greater the returns you expected.

It was obvious that Tongshan True Entertainment was positioning Mi Yu—a virtual idol adored by youngsters—as a candidate for the endorsement deal. The virtual idol produced by the Silver Media team led by Glifetz last year, like Mi Yu, was also a female virtual idol with pretty looks and a seductive body. Unfortunately, it hadn't been embraced by the market. Of course, this also had to do with interference by Tongshan True Entertainment, but the failure of the project couldn't be attributed to underhanded maneuvers by their competitors alone. The inherent problems of the project were the key.

Mi Yu was already a big hit and her popularity had no sign of fading. The market didn't need a similar virtual idol. That was why Neon Culture's new virtual idol, in contrast to Mi Yu, sported a playful, lively, and adorable look.

The failure of last year's project had put an end to Duan Qianji's aspirations. Naturally, she wasn't happy about it. Why else was Zu Wen so afraid of Duan Qianji? Because the tantrum she'd thrown last year was so scary. No one forgot what went down.

And just when Duan Qianji had given up on virtual idol production and the race for the Fiery Bird endorsement deal, she stumbled upon Fang Zhao's Polar Light. That

rekindled her competitive spirit. She even gave Fang Zhao free rein to launch an epic series over the strong objections of Flying Pegasus.

As long as Polar Light became a hit, money was not an issue. If the 50 million she budgeted wasn't enough, she would divert funds from other departments.

Special perks were OK too. Bringing a dog to work? That was nothing. A private gym? No problem.

Gaming equipment? As long as the second movement was a hit, she would build a gaming room right away.

The timing of Fang Zhao's appearance was so serendipitous, so terrific.

Now that they had a shot, she was counting on Fang Zhao's performance.

On the 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower, even though the second movement had been recorded, no one ventured out, so as to prevent leaks and for various other reasons. They rested on the 50th floor instead. Besides, they had everything they needed there. You could work out and you could game. You wouldn't get bored. Come Nov. 1, when the second movement was officially released, they could storm out and party. The prerequisite being that the second chapter was a success. If not, forget about partying—they could be out of work.

"Divine Punishment' had hit 10 million downloads. The second chapter should do well too." Zu Wen wasn't in the mood to game. All he did every day was monitor the download figures for "Divine Punishment" to psych himself up. They were going to make it. A bonus and gaming equipment—the two things he cared about most—were riding on the second movement.

How could you explain the fact that the first chapter, "Divine Punishment," had managed to break the 10 million mark? Not every person who downloaded the song was a fan of epics. Some were followers, and others saw a good deal. But regardless of the reasoning, it had been a long, long time since a newcomer's debut had hit 10 million downloads.

The media was all over the milestone, but industry insiders thought it was a bad strategic move.

Having chosen to release the song publicly, Silver Wing could no longer command high

royalties for placing it in movies or video games. Plus, a public release seemed to cheapen the song's status. Still, these insiders had to admit that they were surprised to see "Divine Punishment" surpass 10 million downloads.

There had been epic songs that received wide releases before, but their numbers hovered around 1 million downloads. In an impatient, fast-paced world, not many people were willing to slow down and truly appreciate a sophisticated piece of music.

But pieces like this typically found a more suitable home.

Quality scores were critical to certain video games, ads, and movies with large-scale scenes that couldn't be carried by more earthly tunes. Hence, epic or quasi-epic pieces filled the void. Composers often earned millions or tens of millions through these commissions. Over time, this genre carved a rarefied niche.

Epic music had never been associated with a single virtual idol, not even in the golden era of virtual idols, the Reg Era. That was why Polar Light's debut had sparked plenty of discussion and drawn attention.

The right timing, the right company, and the right combination of people—the stars had aligned for Fang Zhao. If he were missing any of these factors, he never would have achieved such success.

Regardless of whose side you were on, whether you were a fan or critic of Silver Wing's strategy, everyone was glued to the calendar, waiting for Nov. 1 to arrive.

Oct. 31.

After skimming the label's marketing plan for November, Chu Guang, who had dropped to No. 4 on the New Pioneers Chart, was dumbfounded. Again?

Hey, wasn't Fang Zhao's debut a series?

Chu Guang had a hunch he was about to fall out of the top five.

Chapter 38

Second Movement

"Cocoon Breach"

Nov. 1.

This was a day marked by many in the Yanzhou music industry and also a date some in the entertainment industry paid attention to.

Could Silver Wing maintain the quality of its first movement?

Song Shihua, the big boss of Tongshan True Entertainment, had long been ensconced in his office, which was equipped with top-of-the-line audiovisual equipment. Once he heard the second chapter, he could confirm his suspicions.

Did Silver Wing splurge even more on the second chapter? If that was the case, then it was obvious that Silver Wing was using the epic series to promote Polar Light and vie for the "Battle of the Century" endorsement deal.

Eight a.m.

It was time for the morning commute, and also breakfast time for many schools before early classes went into session.

In the New Era, compulsory education was divided into introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels. Every period lasted six years. The introductory level was equivalent to primary schools before the apocalypse. Intermediate schools were a combination of junior and senior high schools. Advanced education referred to post-secondary studies, the rough equivalent of university, but students were also taught more difficult material.

Many intermediate students in Qi'an were riding their bikes or taking public trains to their schools, where they headed for their school cafeterias.

Schools in the New Era were well-funded. The food was decent and quite cheap.

Rushing to school for breakfast before dashing to the classroom was a common routine.

At that time of day, both day students and boarders were trickling toward their cafeterias.

Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School, inside the northern cafeteria.

The big TV screens on the cafeteria walls typically played loud, fast-tempo songs to wake up the students. Secondary school cafeterias were noisy to begin with. Slow and mellow songs wouldn't be able to rise above the din. They'd be long buried under the noise, save a few faint notes.

November was mid-term time for most intermediate schools in Yanzhou. Schools weighed exams during this period quite heavily.

The small clusters of students having breakfast were bitching about grades, homework, life, and their budding romances.

Students drank soup and chatted with classmates at the same time while eyeing the big screens to see if any footage caught their fancy.

"It's the same stuff every day. I can guess what they play next with my eyes closed."

People who grew up during the era of fast internet connections were exposed to so much information when they were kids. The older they grew, the less novelty they detected. The footage and songs that played on the big screens might have stirred something at the outset, but they wore on them quickly. They were already sick of the current playlist.

Students who were planning on ignoring the big screens suddenly heard a fellow student exclaim.

"Look, it's Polar Light!"

"Where?" Students scanned their surroundings.

"On the big screen."

"That's right, I almost forgot, today is Nov. 1. Polar Light's second song is coming out."

Journalists had revealed in their reporting that, among the student fans of "Divine Punishment," most were secondary school students, not higher education students.

Even though students at the intermediate level were at a restless age, they weren't as restless as advanced students on the cusp of entering society. It was also a sensitive age, which was why it was easier to sway the emotions of teenagers.

Nov. 1, 8 a.m. The second movement of "100-Year Period of Destruction" was released online.

The overall color tone of the first scenes was darkish, but the resolution was crystal clear. The TV screens in the cafeteria were large enough. The quality of the projection equipment and related hardware was key to attracting students, so naturally, the gear wasn't that shabby.

Emerging at the same time as the initial scenes was a deeply unsettling foundation melody.

A prolonged bass score and a repeated beat combined with an electronic score that sounded out of place and wasn't pleasing to the ear. A gradual sense of suffocation.

A traditionalist would argue that the electronic melody detracted from the song's musicality, blurring the lines between the music and sound effects, but it also made the score more stimulating, provoking a sense of curiosity and unease in the listener. It was as if human souls were in conversation with the landscapes of the apocalypse.

The 100-year Period of Destruction—the real yet surreal time the video drew inspiration from.

Fang Zhao incorporated more electronic elements in the second movement.

If the first movement was a seamless blend of electronic and symphonic music, then in the second chapter, the electronic music was an integral part of the melody.

Considering the level of human development by the Information Age, standards of living and spiritual fulfillment had taken huge leaps. Technology was highly sophisticated. Automation and artificial intelligence were commonplace. And with these advancements came the sound of robotic machinery and electronic gadgets. People had long been accustomed to these sounds that inundated daily life in the New Era.

And composers in the New Era incorporated these sounds into music. Aesthetic standards were evolving, personal tastes were evolving, and so was pop culture.

Electronic music produced new tones and sound effects. In contrast to traditional instruments, electronic elements were more representative of this era and more easily embraced by audiences.

That was why composers in the New Era either strictly used electronic sounds or mixed traditional instruments and electronic music. When in Rome, do what the Romans do. Fang Zhao injected these new elements into his work, adding a metallic and electronic flavor to his music. After all, musical styles from a long time ago might not be readily appreciated.

The first chapter, "Divine Punishment," struck many fans as alternative classical. It was just novel enough to attract audiences. But if it were overdone, the piece would have turned people off.

Inside the northern cafeteria at Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School, the din scaled back. More and more students were paying attention to the big screens.

Cafeterias were always noisy, which was why the stereo system was typically turned up. As the chitchat faded, the music gradually stood out.

The footage showed overcast skies and a trickling of rain. The barren landscape was accompanied by a mellow cello solo. Next came a melancholic and winding horn that projected a deep sense of resignation, mixed in with tragedy and bleakness.

The tree men who had chosen to leave their homeland in search of a new beginning saw their expectations crushed again and again. Danger was everywhere. They didn't know where they would be safe and wondered if there was still a peaceful land left for them.

Their companions who had left home with them had either died of illness or were ripped apart by mutated beasts. The remaining tree men were heavily wounded. Disappointment, exhaustion, and a downtrodden quality permeated their faces and hearts.

For them, life had hit a low point. Their faith in finding a new home had crumbled under the cruel reality. A prolonged sense of fear and resignation was about to swallow their consciousnesses.

A classical melody conveying disappointment and muted notes projected desperation and terror. Deep background vocals gradually emerged against the backdrop of a dark symphonic arrangement.

It was as if a voice had whispered, "Do you see?"

The low hum of the background choir encompassed the latent tension of hidden dangers, reflected the cold, cruel conditions of the end of days, and recreated the survivors' tepid moans of agony.

The silhouette at the forefront of the group carried many wounds. Its branches had obvious scratches, and some were truncated. Flapping on the branches was a sparse smattering of green leaves. It was the picture of struggle.

Ahead lay a slope populated with a flurry of bloody and evil beasts.

Behind the leader lay a tribe emaciated by the cruel circumstances.

The vivid imagery was backed by a low-register, meandering string melody that resembled a sigh, as if suggesting an imminent end.

'Look, this is what's left of the world. There's no hope. Let's give up. We'll stop marching forward, find a place to hide, and pray that our luck will carry us on, a day at a time.'

The surreal imagery, coupled with the symphonic and electronic score, made for an overarching feeling of helplessness. Dragging their weak limbs, it was as if the tree men were looking up from a dark pit, resigned to the cold, cruel fate God had doomed them to.

Just sheer determination wasn't enough to fuel their battle against fate.

There was no room for hesitation in times like this.

A cocktail of spooky sound effects and a percussion score of varying beats repeated themselves. A fleeting, trembling piano solo interjected, along with a male bass vocal performance that spoke of utter sadness. Propelled by the thick sound texture, the leader of the pack ambled forward.

He looked back after taking two steps. No one had followed. When he looked ahead

again, a shadow making menacing gestures pounced.



Inside the northern cafeteria at Qi'an No. 1 Secondary School, there was hardly a whisper. Students who were about to down their spoonfuls of soup stopped halfway, eyes glued to the big screens.

The servers in the cafeteria also slowed down.

The atmosphere inside the cafeteria turned tense, as if a single string was being plucked repeatedly.



In the video, the lonely silhouette that walked toward the slope was flanked by converging branches that then twisted and tightened into solid arms while its roots assembled into sturdy and powerful legs.

A string melody played that suggested resistance and evasion. Such feelings prevailed like the weather, which was intangible but enveloped the atmosphere.

Two contrasting registers in the melody resembled conflicting forces and emotions. It was as if a heavy cocoon encased the tree man. Every step took tremendous effort.

"Everything is gone.

Where is the light?

..."

Should they obey fate?

What was fate anyway?

Past companions were lost and their homeland abandoned.

The remaining life forms during the end of days mourned and agonized, but they could also fight back and resist.

Lighting flashed through the dark clouds. The wind picked up and the rain grew heavier.

The woodwind score resembled howling winds picking up pace, and the heavier drumbeat mirrored the sound of thunder, suggesting an even stronger storm.

The drums, woodwinds, cello, and electronic elements made for a textured melody. A sliding male vocal played, signaling bold and sacrificial intentions, as if a deeper force was about to be unleashed.

The brown pupils of the lone shadow shrank as it examined the approaching red-brown beast that resembled coagulated blood. The tree man knelt, picked up a rock, and clenched his fist.

A broken, plucked string melody played.

With one giant step, the tree man leaned forward and raised high his arm of bunched branches. The hand that held the rock painted an impressive trajectory that looked like a wildly swung hammer and hurled itself toward the attacker.

Bang!

A series of heavy drumbeats burst out. A blur appeared. It looked like the shadow attacking with menacing gestures was struck down, but it also looked like something else was smashed.

The tree man panted and watched the neutralized threat.

The pounding of a keyboard seemed to suggest a mental confirmation of sorts. The triumphant melody that emerged lightened the heavy mood.

The tree man finally realized that many problems weren't as scary as he imagined them to be once he had confronted them with bravery. The world would not easily shake.

That was all these threats amounted to.

The sun will set today and rise as usual tomorrow. Even though the skies were smothered with thick smoke, he knew that the sun still existed.

The tree man lifted his foot and stomped on the collapsed beast heavily, thoroughly dashing its chances of a comeback once and for all. He wanted to punish all those sharp claws and gnarly teeth that struck fear in them.

After taking a glance at his fellow tribesmen, he proceeded again, tossing away the rock in his hand, replacing it with a larger stone baton, and lunging toward a second beast. Large strides turned into a quick gait. His sluggish frame became nimble, as if it had shed the heavy cocoon that once encumbered him.

"In a tumultuous world,

You still remain.

..."

The deep male vocal was emboldened by the rhythm of battle. Set against a grand, sweeping symphonic score, this crudest, most natural form of expression touched the heart.

Fight.

There was no other alternative.

In times like this, someone had to rise to the occasion.

Not cower, not muddle through.

Fight to the death against this absurd and cruel fate.

The remaining life forms in the end of days stood in the abyss, roamed the darkness, and chased the light, always climbing upward.

This quality called belief could be as still as stagnant water and frighteningly kinetic at the same time. It was both mind-blowing and gory.

Against the epic symphonic arrangement blended with electronic music, a fierce, dogged evilness abruptly arose alongside the extreme tension and overwhelming atmosphere.

Music and film were temptations that no one could resist, regardless of the era.

Electronic elements seamlessly folded into the grand symphonic structure and the footage matched the melody. Every viewer and listener felt as if an ice cube had been slipped under their clothing, prompting an impromptu shiver. Yet their hearts were on fire, sizzling like a mean barbecue. It felt as if they had been disintegrated and reassembled.

The silhouette in the video that resembled a person, a convergence of twisted branches, looked like it was bulging with beefy lumps of muscle. Every step he took was accompanied by a heavy drumbeat, making for a pronounced battle cry.

The tree man lost his heavy, cumbersome shadow and turned into a nimble and speedy leopard. He planted one foot emphatically, leaped from the ground, and greeted the approaching silhouette with a swinging whack, delivering a blow even more powerful than his previous.

The passage of time seemed to slow. Blood-tainted fragments from the stone baton sprayed in the rain, creating an explosion of muddy splashes that enveloped the sharp tooth that was dislodged.

The music approximated an explosive force in the winter light. The cheesy melody was replaced by a mixing of electronic music and brass performance that tugged at the heartstrings like a sword removed from its sheath—cold and heavy.

It was the coldness that remained after layers of warmth had been stripped away.

A seemingly out-of-sync choir backed up the spirited male vocals, the unconventional combination bringing greater stimulation to the senses and audio shock. A rich tapestry of instruments was weaved in, the exquisite layering bringing the score to its climax. Every single note was bursting with an unyielding passion for survival.

An escalating piano solo twirled like a tornado and telegraphed howls into the stratosphere, sending the human body shuddering, as if an electric current had zapped through the spine and blown open every pore.

The shadow wielding the stone baton didn't look back because it didn't need to. He had heard the trailing footsteps press forward, stomping all over the bodies of the fallen beasts.

Following his lead, a second pair and then a third pair of feet walked over the two beasts.



The end of days, the 100-year Period of Destruction, was an era that produced an abundance of heroes.

Many people thought that Fang Zhao had randomly picked a species that appeared during the Period of Destruction and built a virtual idol around it with a crafty, epic score.

But Fang Zhao's choice of the Longxiang Tianluo tree man Polar Light actually was a metaphor for people like him who were born during peaceful times but spent most of their lives fighting for survival.

The cruelty of the end of the days lay not in the butchering of lives but in the toll and torture it exacted on people's spirits, the double-whammy of physical and mental pain, in addition to the utter mockery and callous treatment human life received.

Consider the characters from the Period of Destruction widely glorified into heroes in the New Era. If you took away the deification and over-the-top emotions, these were ordinary people on a plain quest to live.

Was it for fame and glory?

Hell no. Back then, they were simply staving off death.

It was the brutal battle for survival that turned them into hardened heroes.

It was heroism necessitated by the times.

That was why Fang Zhao created Polar Light.

In the video, the camera panned wide. The heavy rain continued to pelt. Behind the leader, several silhouettes emerged from the stagnant cluster of trees that trailed him, their branches transforming into fierce fighting poses. They trudged through the mud and followed, treading on the corpses of the slain beasts.

A woodwind score played at a frenzied tempo as the strings section repeated the same note frantically. A gushing melody accompanied the wide shot. The stormy weather harbored a renewed, earth-shattering spirit that was about to erupt.

The footage and music came to a sudden halt, and the end credits appeared:

Lead character: Polar Light

Species: Longxiang Tianluo

Song title: "100-year Period of Destruction," Second Movement: "Cocoon Breach,"
producer Fang Zhao

Production team: Polar Light project team, Fang Zhao, Zu Wen, Song Miao, Pang Pusong, Zeng Huang, Wan Yue, Fu Yingtian, Stiller, Zhang Yu.

A Silver Wing Media release.



The silent cafeteria resumed its buzz only when the big screens started playing other songs.

"I feel like I can blow up the cafeteria right now."

"I don't know why, but for some reason, I suddenly feel a weird sense of purpose."

"Server, two more bowls of rice please. I'm going to battle after I have a square meal."
There were three more exams left that day.

"Coming right up!" The servers doling out rice in the cafeteria worked their serving spoons with what seemed like energized strokes. Students who were just arriving at the cafeteria did a double take on the students who were leaving in a hurry.

"What's up with them?" a new arrival asked his companion. There was a killer vibe going around.

"Maybe they just took part in a mass pledge for their midterms."

"A mass pledge in the cafeteria?"

"It's probably just second-year students They're always neurotic like that. Just ignore them."

"That's not right. I just saw a fifth-year."

The strange atmosphere puzzled the late arrivals. What had happened in the cafeteria before they arrived?

Chapter 39

Haven't Heard of a Single One

After the second movement, "Cocoon Breach," was released, it racked up nearly 100,000 downloads within a minute. This was mostly industry insiders or people from related fields. They had been on standby. Online news outlets were geared up for the release so they could do their write-ups and immediately post. Everyone wanted to get the first word out.

But the pundits were at a loss after listening to the second movement. There was so much they wanted to say, but they didn't know where to start.

Chu Guang and company were also camped out in a projection room. They downloaded the music video at 8 a.m. sharp and turned on their projector.

The same scene as last time replayed itself. No one said a word when the video played, and no one spoke for the longest time after it ended.

Sitting in his chair, Chu Guang took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He knew he would soon lose the No. 4 spot.

He felt some sadness and a sense of failure, but then he quickly remembered the virtual idols launched by Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment. That made him feel vindicated.

Those two virtual idols wouldn't be able to hang on to their No. 2 and No. 3 spots for long.

Knowing they would suffer too, much of Chu Guang's depression dissipated. He admitted he was outperformed, but he was also delighted to see the two virtual idol teams from their rival companies, who always had the upper hand, finally take a beating.

Things were playing out just as Chu Guang imagined. The project teams behind Xun Huai and Fei Lisi were agonizing over their next moves. Did they need to revise their strategy?

Song Shihua, the big boss of Tongshan True Entertainment, smashed his cup in his office.

"This is indeed what Silver Wing is up to."

Even though, considering Tongshan True Entertainment's prowess when it came to virtual idols, they shouldn't be afraid of Silver Wing, Song Shihua was starting to get worried.

Judging from the two movements that had been released, "100-Year Period of Destruction" couldn't be underestimated. Either song was epic enough to carry a blockbuster. What was more, it was a series set against the Period of Destruction.

"Battle of the Century," the game being launched next year, was also set during the Period of Destruction.

Would Fiery Bird pick the more popular virtual idol or the one that fit the theme of its game better? Song Shihua could neither decide nor speculate.

"You wanna fight us for the endorsement deal? Let's see what you've got." Song Shihua summoned the senior execs from the virtual idol department for an emergency meeting in his office. It took up half the day.

Yet outside observers didn't care about Song Shihua's plans. All eyes were on the Yanzhou Music Association's review. Without their blessing, other industry insiders were reluctant to draw their own conclusions, even if they thought the second chapter wasn't inferior to the first.

The person who deemed the first chapter an "epic" last time was Ming Cang, the deputy head of the Yanzhou Music Association. He was also the former president of the Qi'an Academy of Music. No one from the academy had said anything yet—they were waiting to hear from Ming Cang. It would be an embarrassment if they broke their silence at the urging of news outlets and diverged from Ming Cang's take.

Silver Wing staffers were also waiting for the "Voice of Yanzhou" review because it was considered the most authoritative publication in the entire Yanzhou music industry. That was also why no one dared question the "epic" categorization of the first chapter. The Yanzhou Music Association might have had its internal politics, but anything published on their official website was gospel. It carried with it the reputation of the entire Yanzhou Music Association. No one would dare to dissent on the official website

because of personal grudges. If they did, they would do so in another setting, like in media interviews.

On the 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower, besides Fang Zhao, everyone else on the Polar Light project team was glued to the website of "Voice of Yanzhou."

"How come the review still isn't out?"

"It's almost 9. Last time, the review came out around now. It doesn't stand to reason that they would post later this time."

"I'm nervous." Zu Wen was glued to his screen, hands raised and thumbs twiddling.

He no longer cared about the number of downloads. All he cared about was the judgment of the music association. If they got a negative review, even if the download numbers went up, they wouldn't be considered a total success.

He glanced at Fang Zhao beside him, who was calmly browsing on his computer. Zu Wen wanted to ask Fang Zhao something but closed his mouth as soon as he opened it. 'Forget it—who knows what kind of background music is playing in Fang Zhao's head.'

After 9 a.m., the eagerly anticipated review from Ming Cang didn't appear, but another deputy head of the music association, Dina, posted instead.

"Deputy chairman Ming is a bit emotional right now, so I've showed up instead." Dina's old smiley face appeared on the official website of "Voice of Yanzhou."

Many were confused by Dina's comment. Why was Ming Cang so emotional? It was just one song. What an overreaction.

But Dina carried no less weight than Ming Cang. In fact, in terms of seniority, Dina was senior to Ming Cang. He belonged to an even older generation of musicians. It was even better to hear from him.

Normally, Dina refrained from commenting on the work of newcomers. Usually, what elicited comment from this seasoned veteran was an A-list star or an extremely popular song. But Polar Light was a special case. Ming Cang had classified the first movement an "epic," after all, which piqued Dina's curiosity. He was waiting around for the second movement today as well and was willing to offer his two cents.

Music journalists perked their ears, not wanting to miss out on the words of wisdom from this music veteran who was more than 100 years old.

"Many people have asked me if 'Cocoon Breach,' the second movement of '100-Year Period of Destruction,' qualifies as an epic. As for this question..."

Ears perked up even more.

"Let's set that question aside. Let's first discuss the concept of an epic," Dina said in a relaxed pace.

Journalists who were getting ready to copy, paste, and send: "..."

People who knew Dina had already rolled their eyes. That old geezer was still the same, switching gears halfway through a thought. Who knew when he would get back on topic. A downright tease.

Dina didn't care what other people thought. He spoke at his own pace. Restraining his smile somewhat, he launched into a solemn commentary.

"The genre of epics has to be traced to the Period of Destruction or an even earlier time. Be it the ancient tradition of chanting, or the folk songs that circulated in the imperial court, in army barracks, or among ordinary people and were passed on for generations—they can all be considered epic forms. Many epics extolling heroics during the 100 years of war also appeared after the Period of Destruction, in the beginning of the New Era. But as peaceful times prevailed and the war became a distant memory, no one bothered to listen to these songs any more. Nowadays, any grand pieces that can stir emotions are easily labeled 'epic.' But many people forget that epics were intended to honor heroes."

The seasoned veteran continued to expound on the history and development of epics and how more contemporary styles evolved.

The journalists looked like they were constipated. They quietly urged, "Can you get to the point, old man? Just state your conclusion and explain later so we can file."

But music professionals were paying close attention. Dina's spiel helped them understand the creative process behind the two chapters and their arrangements.

"...Life itself is a series of stumbles and recoveries. Likewise, the second movement

moves from adversity to triumph. The point is for people to experience hope through the fluent flow of musical notes... Another thing worth mentioning is that in the second movement, which barely lasted four minutes, there are hundreds of tracks created by virtual instruments and hundreds of tones. The arrangement and use of vocals is outstanding. You can tell the second chapter was worked on by a top-notch symphony mixer and electronic music arranger. But I couldn't find a distinguishing signature, so I'm also curious whose work this is."

Music professionals knew that the most minor slip-ups in mixing and arrangement would stifle the ear. For example, too many modulations or out-of-sync or overwhelming background vocals could be easily magnified and deemed glaring inconsistencies.

Judging from these comments, the mixer and arranger were stellar. Only, it wasn't known who these two seasoned musicians were.

After much waiting, Dina finally pronounced, "This is indeed worthy of the 'epic' label," which sent the press corps scrambling to file.

But industry insiders, including Dina himself, were still curious who had composed the two movements. Was it really the newcomer Fang Zhao, as was rumored? Who were the symphony mixer and electronic music arranger?

Senior musicians who didn't pay close attention to newcomers took the time to read the credits at the end of the music video. They were still clueless, because they had never heard of a single member of the Polar Light project team.

Chapter 40

Pushing Back

The technical analysis of the second movement was valued by the professionals, but for most people, the "epic" label was sufficient.

A second epic.

This shocked many industry insiders, not just because of the nature of the song, but more so because many of them realized that Silver Wing was clearly determined to launch a virtual idol with an epic series.

Was it worth it?

That was what many people wondered, and also the question posed by many journalists after Yanzhou Music Association deputy head Dina deemed the second movement an "epic."

Silver Wing's chief spokesman, Lin Dun, had a simple eight-word answer for the media: "We remember history and honor our lost martyrs."

Song Shihua: "...Hehe."

Go bullshit someone else.

Such noble intentions you tout, but isn't the real objective the race for the endorsement deal?

Even people who didn't understand how spin worked were skeptical, let alone folks who had figured out Silver Wing's true intentions like Song Shihua.

How implausible was it that Silver Wing had invested so much money and produced two epics—and more epics were probably in the pipeline—because of those eight words?

That was the explanation Lin Dun offered, regardless what people believed.

On the 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower, Zu Wen and the other members of the project team were ecstatic after hearing Dina's review. The success of the second chapter meant bigger bonuses, more prosperous futures, and...

"Boss, can we get approval for the gaming equipment now?" Zu Wen asked at the top of his voice. He could finally breathe a sigh of relief. He was downright giddy and wanted to take a celebratory dash, but first things first.

"It's done," Fang Zhao replied as he browsed the reviews online.

"What did the top floor say?" The other members of the project team shifted their gaze to Fang Zhao.

"It's approved. Someone will stop by tomorrow to set things up."

"Oh, hahahaha!" Zu Wen let out a weird, piercing laugh. Nothing beat sanctioned gaming during office hours.

"What type of games?" Rodney asked.

"Shooting," Fang Zhao responded.

Shooting games weren't Rodney's favorite, but like Zu Wen, he was happy to be able to game in the open at all.

It was indeed the right decision to jump ship.

The three technicians who were recommended by Zu Wen—Fu Yingtian, Zhang Yu, and Stiller—were sharing the good news with family and friends. A bonus was a shoo-in—Silver Wing had always been generous with bonuses. They wanted to share their joy.

Their decision to switch jobs had met a lot of resistance. Even their family members had been worried. Plus, they couldn't share too many details while they were working on the second movement because of confidentiality rules. All three of them were tightly wound. Now, they had finally survived.

This was a f*cking gold mine!

Given how things were unfolding, there was a good chance the third chapter would be

a success too. After all, they had the full backing of the label and a mad genius like Fang Zhao as a boss. They didn't have to worry about funding or discrimination from other departments. How good did that feel?

Didn't y'all think that the virtual projects department was a death pit?

All the not-so-subtle sour grapes.

You're regretting your words now, aren't you?

Too late.

Seeing Zu Wen and company share their good news and brag in their social media feeds made some of their colleagues jealous. If only they'd known, they would have applied for transfers to the virtual projects department too. Unfortunately, the department wasn't recruiting any more. Even if it were, the competition would be fierce.

Silver Wing's official video channel also gave significant coverage to Dina's comments on the second chapter. The host even facetiously thanked Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment for their praise ahead of the second chapter's release. That gave them a big boost in visibility, he said. They wouldn't have drawn as much attention as they were getting now otherwise.

Still, there were naysayers among media outlets. The reason the first movement of "100-Year Period of Destruction" had logged so many downloads was because Polar Light's debut was quite unique and novelty drove playbacks and downloads, they argued. But with the release of the second song, the novelty had faded.

As high profile as "epics" were, it was a genre reserved for a niche audience and was out of touch with the masses, they said. Not many people in modern society could appreciate an epic. The most they would want would be to listen to one as part of the soundtrack to a blockbuster movie.

Other commentaries argued that, while the first epic song released to a mass audience definitely drew a lot of bargain-seekers, the second release would strike some as a worse deal. Sales for the second single might suffer as a result.

More than one news outlet touted this line of thinking. Simple supply and demand—an abundance of supply led to a drop in value.

The music co-operatives within some labels outright demanded that Silver Wing "quit while it was ahead," meaning if download numbers dropped for the second song, the music industry would lose face and the "epic" label would be cheapened.

However, while some talked trash about the second song, another demographic was gaining attention.

People who paid attention to intermediate-level education noticed that a weird fad was going around. Many people were listening to "Cocoon Breach." Others listened to "Divine Punishment" and "Cocoon Breach" together. They played the songs when they got up, when they ate breakfast, before they worked on problem sets, and even during breaks. The prevailing mood was also extremely upbeat.

Initially, people thought it was just those sensitive and escapist second-year students again. But they later realized that the trend wasn't confined to second years. Students from other grades were also taking part. The fad was in full force, especially in the lead-up to midterms.

Quite a few teachers thought to themselves that the inner worlds of secondary students were a mystery to them.

The trend drew some media coverage and Silver Wing was there to fan the flames. Soon enough, Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment started to fight back.

"Mi Yu and Andy Leo Cast in 'Wasteland Rebirth.'"

"Scarred Soul Andy Leo Plays Tough Guy, Fights for Justice."

"Rumor has it Mi Yu will play a disfigured character..."

The headlines kept popping up. Soon, all the buzz about Silver Wing was overshadowed by Yanzhou's two main virtual idols.

In the New Era, virtual idols could act in movies just like real idols, the difference being one performance was generated by software programming and the other delivered by a real person.

"What? Mi Yu is going to disfigure herself?"

"Why will my unparalleled beauty Mi Yu disfigure herself? Project team, please

explain yourself."

"Seeking tough guy pictures of Andy Leo."



The combination of a handsome leading man and a pretty leading lady was always worth looking forward to. But what took Duan Qianji by surprise was the fact that Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment had decided to work together.

Mi Yu and Andy Leo were Tongshan True Entertainment's and Neon Culture's two top virtual idols respectively.

In terms of star power, Silver Wing simply couldn't rival Mi Yu's and Andy Leo's popularity and fan bases. Everyone had to concede that point.

Still, Duan Qianji wasn't too panicked. She didn't respond by cranking up their marketing campaign. She decided to wait.

Song Shihua was delighted to see that online discussion of Polar Light and "Cocoon Breach" had fizzled somewhat. He celebrated by nursing a glass of wine in his office.

Even though Tongshan True Entertainment and Neon Culture were competitors, the race for the endorsement deal should have been restricted to the two of them. Silver Wing wanted to butt in? That was up to them.

See—as soon as they promoted their top idols, everyone else was sidelined, be it Polar Light or "Cocoon Breach" or epics.

He wanted to show the folks at Silver Wing what a real hit virtual idol looked like. This was what was called a talent gap.

The movie "Wasteland Rebirth" was a project he had been working on for some time. It was a tailor-made production for Mi Yu set against the Period of Destruction. Their intentions were clear—they wanted Fiery Bird to take notice. But when Neon Culture had approached them two days ago about a collaboration, Song Shihua quickly agreed.

No matter what, they had to crowd out Silver Wing first. He had a hunch that if Polar Light took off, they would face an unprecedented threat. The folks at Neon Culture had to have seen the same signs. That was why they proposed an alliance, so they could

push back against Polar Light's momentum.

As he was contemplating his next move, Song Shihua's intercom beeped. He scanned it and saw a text message labeled urgent.

The sender was a vice president. It was someone who was solid and dependable, but for some reason he was panicking.

Had something gone wrong?

Song Shihua tapped on the message immediately.

"Old Song, check out 'Voice of Yanzhou.' Ming Cang has spoken."

Ming Cang, the deputy head of Yanzhou Music Association, the first person to dub "Divine Punishment" an epic, had finally, belatedly posted his review, five days after "Cocoon Breach" had been released.

Chapter 41

The Assigned Topic Is Over Our Heads

Even though Dina, an industry veteran with even more seniority, had already spoken, many people were still looking forward to Ming Cang's comments.

Epics varied in quality. In Ming Cang's opinion, was there a discrepancy in quality between the first and second movements?

Also, Dina had said that Ming Cang was too emotional to comment when he'd offered his own thoughts the other day. What had prompted the other deputy head of the music association to get so worked up?

That was why people were glued to Voice of Yanzhou, the publication run by Yanzhou Music Association, during the five days Ming Cang was missing. When Ming Cang showed up, everyone took notice.

In his webcast, Ming Cang looked like he was in good spirits, his gaze bursting with joy and lingering passion. That vouched for Dina's remarks five days ago.

"My apologies. These were probably the most exciting five days of my 60-plus years of existence!" Ming Cang's voice started to quiver toward the end of the sentence.

A hand carrying a teacup entered the frame.

Even though the hand was the identifying feature, people who knew about Ming Cang's family situation recognized it belonged to his wife.

Ming Cang was probably trying to break the ice. Wasn't his wedding the happiest few days of his life? But judging from the gesture that had just occurred, Ming Cang's wife agreed with the sentiment.

What exactly had happened to create such emotional upheaval in the couple?

The keen news sense of the "Prairie Fire" producer prompted him to message a staffer immediately, asking him to look into Ming Cang's latest movements.

Back at the live webcast, Ming Cang accepted the cup of tea and calmed himself down. He continued speaking with a steady voice.

"Many people know that I was preoccupied with my music career the first 50 years of my life. When I was 51, I married Prof. Su Tong from the arrangement department at the Qi'an Academy of Music. The year I turned 52, we had a child. But God added a twist—our son was different from other kids."

At that point in the monologue, many viewers remembered that Ming Cang was once a rising star. He was named president of the Qi'an Academy of Music at 49. That was young, considering life expectancy had doubled in the New Era. Ming Cang was the type deemed a genius since he was a kid.

Ming Cang's wife Su Tong was also well-known back then. Hailing from a musical family, she was supremely talented, a standout at the Qi'an Academy of Music.

But soon after their son was born, he was diagnosed as a carrier of the Hull virus.

The New Era was marked by rapid technological advancements. Medical care also improved leaps and bounds. Some 95 percent of diseases that had existed during the Period of Destruction had been cured, but 5 percent remained unsolved. Even though those illnesses were treatable, existing protocols provided limited relief.

The Hull virus was part of the 5 percent—and even basic treatment and alleviation were unavailable. The virus emerged during the Period of Destruction. Infected patients were trapped in a frozen state, zapped of all emotion. Even though their bodies were perfectly healthy, they needed help performing basic bodily functions. They were rendered speechless, their listless eyes blinking non-stop. They were shells devoid of their souls. Their brains were state-of-the-art machines that simply refused to function.

A Dr. Edward Hull had contracted the virus during the end of days. He had spent the nearly six-month period of his illness studying the virus and promised his corpse to researchers following his death. The virus was later named the Hull virus.

Perhaps for many people, having a deadly virus named after them might be a curse, but for researchers studying viruses, it was an honor, just like it was for Hull, whom future generations considered a madman.

The Hull virus was transmissible by air, although it didn't survive long in the

atmosphere. However, it could be picked up by many carriers, including plants, animals, and many microorganisms. It was tough to guard against.

Initially, people had used sophisticated filtration systems as a precaution, but research later showed that the infection rate was less than one in 10 million.

Gradually, people became complacent. *Given the odds of one in 10 million, it can't possibly be me.* So eventually, people gave up on the strict and complicated filtration protocols.

Nonetheless, the odds of less than one in 10 million had struck Ming Cang and his wife. They would have done anything to trade places with their newborn son.

When they were informed of the diagnosis, the couple nearly broke down. Ming Cang resigned from his hard-earned university presidency and Su Tong quit as well. They traveled the world with their son in search of treatment, but time and again, they were greeted with the same response. No cure. Untreatable. There's nothing we can do.

Close friends and family remember that the couple was deeply fragile. The young—by life expectancy standards in the New Era—and promising couple started accumulating gray hairs.

Many lamented the fact that these two genius types met such a cruel fate. If not, Ming Cang might have still been the president of the Qi'an Academy of Music, enjoying tremendous status and prestige. Presidencies at the academy usually lasted five years, but it wasn't uncommon for presidents to serve two, three, or even more terms. Ming Cang had that potential.

But some cynics teased that tragedy struck because the couple used up all their good luck in their first 50 years. How unlikely was it that the couple became that one case in 10 million?

It was an emotional wound that no one dared touch, because the slightest breach would lead to a massive rupture. But now, Ming Cang was actually bringing up the matter himself in a live webcast.

Watching the live feed, Song Shihua had a bad feeling.

Recalling the events after his son's birth, Ming Cang was overcome with emotion. His eyes turned red.

"From total despair and breakdown to gradual acceptance, 12 years have passed. There's nothing you can't recover from. Our child is growing up. As parents, we are aging too. We thought the rest of our lives would continue this way."

At this point, Ming Cang got emotional again. "A month ago, I listened to a song. To be specific, I listened to a movement."

Song Shihua started gripping his cup hard, nearly breaking it.

Ears pricked and eyes stared among the many viewers. *Here it comes.*

"My close friends know that I rarely listen to the songs on the newcomers' chart. But every time I do, I share them with my son Ming Ye."

Even though patients infected with the Hull virus were non-responsive, Ming Cang still liked to share his music with Ming Ye and offer his comments as if his son was a normal kid. He had kept up the practice for 12 years.

"By chance, I stumbled upon the song recommended by Silver Wing, 'Divine Punishment.' The first thing I saw was a tree. I was a bit surprised at the time. It was the first time I had seen a virtual idol that was a tree man, so I watched the music video. Quality-wise, 'Divine Punishment' is undoubtedly a great song. Even though I'm not an expert on symphonic structures, I could notice many details worth studying. My common practice is to share my thoughts with my son first and then write a review. But this time, when I turned my head and locked eyes with my son, I noticed a slight movement."

It was as if someone's finger had smudged a small opening on a window covered in a thick layer of dust.

Before Ming Cang's brain could formulate a response, tears started streaming down his face without warning. He'd been afraid it was an illusion. After all, his son's eyes showed such little emotion. He and his wife were so familiar with their son's body from spending every day with him. Others would have missed such a subtle expression.

So Ming Cang played the song again, downloaded it, and started looping it.

When he was certain, Ming Cang was ecstatic. He immediately invited a medical professor in Qi'an who specialized in viruses from the Period of Destruction to check

on his son.

That was also why Ming Cang gave his take on "Divine Punishment" so quickly and why it was a brief phrase without elaboration. He was busy tracking someone down to examine his son.

Ming Ye's brain clearly responded slightly, but it was a subtle response. It was hard to draw a conclusion.

Ming Cang switched to other songs, but none of them prompted a response from Ming Ye's brain. That piqued the professor's curiosity.

"If the second song provokes the same response, maybe we'll have more data to work with," the old professor said.

Sensing a sliver of hope, Ming Cang got in touch with Duan Qianji. He wanted to know who composed "Divine Punishment" and whether she could set up a meeting.

Duan Qianji refused, but she told Ming Cang that the second movement was being recorded and scheduled to be completed by October. It would be released in November.

After waiting for 12 years, one more month was nothing.

Ming Cang could understand where Duan Qianji was coming from. From a businesswoman's perspective, to unveil the composer behind the virtual idol then would hurt their interests and throw a wrench in their marketing plan. As a fellow composer, he knew that the composer had to have been busy composing and brainstorming at the time. He didn't want to intrude. He knew well from personal experience the frustration of being interrupted. An unintentional interruption could stem the flow of creativity. He'd be damned if impatience smothered the long-awaited sliver of hope.

After a painful month-long wait, the release of the second movement was finally imminent.

Ming Cang's home was crowded with people filled with anticipation. Besides the couple themselves, there were also two professors who specialized in the Hull virus and their study group.

The second movement was obviously an escalation of the burst of emotions in the first movement. During the month-long wait, Ming Cang had studied quite a few songs with symphonic structures, but none of them provoked the slightest response. But when the second movement, "Cocoon Breach," played, Ming Ye's eyes showed an even stronger response.

If the first movement had smudged a small opening on the dusty window, then the second movement left a large and clear hand print.

For anyone else, the level of response was merely a flash of emotion, but for Ming Ye, it carried as much weight as a meteor crash.

Sixty-year-old Ming Cang resembled a weary traveler who could finally shed his burden. He collapsed to his knees in a free fall and covered his mouth. He was scared a scream would scare off the smidgen of emotion in Ming Ye's eyes. Meanwhile, Ming Cang's wife, Su Tong, was crying hysterically in a soundproof room next door, venting years of repressed feelings.

When Ming Cang's forehead hit the floor, he wore a silly smile, but his face was covered in tears.

Twelve years.

The pressure of outside gossip and inner turmoil had nearly crushed the couple on several occasions.

They had searched and hoped for 12 years and were prepared for a lifetime of waiting and searching. Low and behold, their prayers were finally answered.

"I'm sorry. I got emotional again." Ming Cang had stopped reminiscing and wiped the tears on his face with a trembling hand. He took a deep breath to calm himself then said to the camera: "I know many people are curious about my thoughts on the second movement, but my sincere apologies—I can't offer an objective review because, for me, it's an act of God."

First-year classes at the Qi'an Academy of Music.

Five days after Dina had reviewed the second movement, "Cocoon Breach," instructors from the composition, arrangement, and mixing departments handed out a new assignment to first years asking them to submit a paper analyzing "Cocoon Breach"

from the vantage point of their respective specialties. The paper served as their midterm and was due in 10 days.

When they heard that former president Ming Cang was about to break his silence, the students scrambled to get online to gather material.

But now they were dumbfounded.

We were expecting musical analysis, and you start spewing medical diagnoses?

After conferring among themselves, the first years from the composition, arrangement and mixing departments wrote a joint letter petitioning their instructors to switch topics for the mid-term essay, the reason being:

The assigned topic was over their heads.

Chapter 42

It's Actually a Real Photo

No one would have thought the debut of a virtual idol would gradually spin out of control like this.

Even though they switched the mid-term paper topic for first years in three departments at the last minute, none of the instructors at the Qi'an Academy of Music themselves dared to offer original comment on "Cocoon Breach." In terms of qualifications and stature, they were still inferior to Dina and Ming Cang. Even when someone wrote a review, it merely built on Dina's and Ming Cang's comments and sprinkled in a few of original thoughts. Are you kidding me? To contradict prevailing opinion at that time would be asking for a beating. That wasn't something they would sign up for.

You could frown on the epic style. You could even choose not to listen to the two movements. But you couldn't deny that they indeed caused unexpected, surprising ripples. Its influence wasn't limited to the music industry. The medical community was probably blown away by now as well.

After Ming Cang's speech in the Voice of Yanzhou broadcast, he held up a still photo to the camera. It was a picture Ming Cang had taken of his son Ming Ye when he had showed that flash of emotion while listening to "Cocoon Breach." Compared to the response of a healthy person, it wasn't that obvious. It resembled a slight shimmer in the gaze of someone with a cool personality. But considering Ming Ye had been suffering from the Hull virus for 12 years, it was a remarkable reaction.

The photo convinced people who thought Ming Cang was exaggerating. Ming Cang and wife and the two professors were also in the picture. It couldn't have been faked.

So it was a real photo.

Before he ended the webcast, Ming Cang wore a broad smile as he admired the picture. "Go get 'em, my little sapling. You must stay strong," he said.

There was nothing wrong with describing your son as a little sapling.

Just as Ming Cang had himself said, because of his son, he could no longer evaluate this virtual idol's debut and the creative team behind it, so he would no longer publish his reviews in Voice of Yanzhou. Commentaries published in the Voice of Yanzhou couldn't be driven by personal feelings. When the next movement was released, he would review it in a personal capacity. Maybe that would lead to more unexpected commentary.

"My thanks to Polar Light, the Polar Light project team, and the composer behind Polar Light. Even though I don't know who you are, I hope I can thank you in person after the entire series of songs is released." This was a sore point for Ming Cang—the fact that Duan Qianji still refused to identify the composer. But she had told him that there were two movements left. After the two remaining movements were released, Silver Wing would unveil the identity of the composer.

The fact that two movements remained was great news to Ming Cang. He couldn't wait. He'd also promised Duan Qianji that he would not pester her about the identity of the composer before the two movements were released. At the same time, he had made a veiled suggestion that Duan Qianji not front the project with another composer, which was common in the artistic community. Ming Cang didn't want to thank an imposter.

The public wasn't privy to the private communications between Ming Cang and Duan Qianji, but Ming Cang's final sentence during his live webcast got many people wondering.

Who was the composer he was referring to?

Did a single producer pen the two movements, "Divine Punishment" and "Cocoon Breach"? Not a team of composers?

This threw off people who had speculated that the songs were the handiwork of Silver Wing's Flying Pegasus cooperative.

If it was a single composer, then who was it? Such a talented composer couldn't be an unknown. Which Flying Pegasus master was it?

Yet industry insiders who were familiar with Silver Wing also speculated the musical style of the two movements suggested someone that didn't belong to Flying Pegasus, or at least not one of its best-known members.

Who exactly was it?

That was the natural focal point of the music industry, but outside of the industry, the medical community was obsessing over how the two movements stimulated Ming Ye's brain waves.

Word was that the Yanzhou government was assembling a research team to develop a cure to the Hull virus.

That afternoon, the hit entertainment show "Prairie Fire" interviewed a medical expert in its live webcast to provide context.

The producer of "Prairie Fire" had a keen sense for news. Ming Cang had just been a few sentences into his webcast when he'd sensed an opportunity. He had dispatched a staffer to investigate and splurged on an expert from the Yanzhou Academy of Science who could unravel the secrets behind the medical mystery for the viewing public.

Many people who were interested in Ming Ye's unexpected response—and skeptics as well—were glued to their screens.

"Many people know that sound waves serve as a stimulus to animals, and to some plants as well, for that matter. Some types of sound waves can advance plant growth. Others stunt growth or kill the plant altogether. Whether they can stimulate a plant hinges on their impact on its musically sensitive spots.

"Music is transmitted through rhythmic and flexible mechanical waves. When it travels through a medium, it also generates chemical and heat reactions. When music stimulates plant cells, the metabolic processes within the cells are also affected.

The Academy of Science professor even broke down the exact impact a piece of music had on a specific part of a plant. "In other words, every note in a piece, or a specific verse, will correspond with a specific amino acid in the plant. Protein is made up of amino acids. So from a biological perspective, a song is like a group of amino acids sequenced into a complete protein. When a plant is exposed to this protein—no, I mean a specific song—certain enzymes in the plant are activated and create certain biochemical reactions.



The professor spoke at length. Some of viewers could follow him. Others understood about half, which gave them a basic grasp.

Basically, he was saying Ming Ye's response wasn't embellished.

It was for real.

If plants and primitive animals could be stimulated, then humans were naturally even more responsive.

The Hull virus emerged during the Period of Destruction, while the two movements, "Divine Punishment" and "Cocoon Breach," were part of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" series. Was that the crucial link? Yet previous songs about the Period of Destruction didn't have the same effect. So it was still something inherent in the two movements.

Others had also tried to use sound waves to stimulate the brains of patients infected with the Hull virus, to see if these stalled machines could produce some feedback, to no avail. Now, researchers knew that music did make a difference—but it had to be the right music.

Just like substrates need to be matched with the right enzymes for conversions to take place.

"I'd really like to meet this musician who's threatening our livelihoods." The professor's tone was vindictive, but he wore a smile that was joyful and expectant.

Music and medicine were separate disciplines that minded their own business. But now that this composer had cracked an opening for researchers and pointed them in the right direction, the rest was up to the scientists. The development meant that there was a general strategy for treating a virus that posed a serious threat to mankind. Even though it wasn't clear when a cure could be devised, coming up with a strategy was a good thing. Now that the first step had been taken, the rest of the process was a matter of time.

Big news.

This drew the attention of journalists across different beats, regardless of whether

they took an interest in medicine and entertainment. This pertained to a human disease that hadn't been cured. Naturally, the reverberations were huge.

Reporters started scrambling.

"What about the story about Mi Yu and Andy Leo?" The cub reporter who had just filed a story about the creative teams behind the two hit virtual idols was in an awkward position.

"Who cares about that now? Let's hold the story. Hurry up and do as much reporting as you can about the two movements and the Hull virus, then file a story."

Thus, all the carefully engineered buzz about the two virtual idols was overshadowed by talk of Polar Light, "Divine Punishment," "Cocoon Breach," and the Hull virus after a few short days.

Inside the chairman's office at Tongshan True Entertainment, Song Shihua smashed the teacup that was a recent replacement.

Song Shihua was furious with himself. He should have delivered a knockout blow when the first movement was released.

Now it was too late.

They could try foul play within the Yanzhou entertainment industry, but the situation had evolved beyond the reach of his influence. The rise of Polar Light was now unstoppable.

What could he do?

Poach?

Wait, wait—that was actually not a bad idea.

Chapter 43

Serendipitous Indeed

The person Song Shihua wanted to poach the most was the actual composer behind the two movements. Initially, he had suspected it was the newcomer Silver Wing listed in the credits, but after figuring out Silver Wing's true intentions, he reversed himself. Silver Wing couldn't possibly have assigned such an important project to a newcomer.

Song Shihua studied the credits at the end of the two music videos again and again. He also ordered his underlings to research everyone listed. His conclusion: the list of project team members was incomplete. Silver Wing had left out the most important name.

More than a few people shared Song Shihua's thinking.

Industry practice was to only identify the producer of the virtual idol project at the outset. The producer was the equivalent of the director of a TV show or movie. As for the composer, the arranger, the mixer, and the actual performer, they were never named. Any other names that would draw attention away from the virtual idol were held back. Only when the virtual idol became a bona fide star, when the timing was right, would the label provide a detailed division of labor.

Even though everyone wanted to know who had composed the two movements and who had mixed and arranged them, you couldn't tell from the list of credits at the end of the music videos. Most people believed that the names listed were merely technicians and that Silver Wing had held back the names of the composer, arranger, and mixer. They were probably afraid these folks would get poached.

Inside a sanatorium in Yanzhou's coastal city of Jinggang.

Famed musician and virtual idol producer Glifetz was sitting by the window in his room as usual, except he hadn't been in the mood to enjoy the bright sunshine for days now. All he did was stare at his tablet. He looked pale and frowned increasingly harder.

He wasn't faking it this time. He was really sick. On the day the second movement, "Cocoon Breach," was released, Glifetz was nearly transferred to intensive care.

His humble hopes for a comeback were dashed with the release of the second movement. Ming Cang's comments put him in an even tougher spot. The more attention Polar Light got, the worse his situation, and the dimmer the prospects of his comeback. Quite a few colleagues were already poking fun at him, saying he didn't even measure up to a newcomer.

"Still no luck?" Glifetz asked the three people standing next to him. They were all disciples of his. Two of them had been purged from Silver Wing's virtual projects department last year.

Glifetz's voice was hoarse and muffled, but his tone was pointed. He spoke slowly, making for a creepy delivery. It sounded like a set of rusty gears struggling to rotate, giving his three students the goosebumps.

"Not yet," one of the students said, his head drooped.

The other two students shriveled, wishing they were somewhere else.

Glifetz had asked them to identify the composer who wrote the two movements. The composer was the key to Polar Light's success. The three students tried on their own and worked some of Glifetz's connections, but they still came up empty-handed.

It wasn't just them. Most of the folks at Silver Wing only knew that the project was assigned to Fang Zhao, but they didn't know who the actual composer was.

"No?" Glifetz sounded like he was responding and talking to himself at the same time. He had a desperate look in his eyes.

Glifetz paused briefly, then waved his hand, signaling his students to leave.

A tremendous weight lifted from their shoulders, and the trio bolted, not bothering to ask any follow-up questions.

Glifetz was the only person left in the quiet room. The afternoon sun was quite strong, flooding the entire room with light. The flowers in the vase were still lush, adding a touch of brightness to the room. But the room was so quiet you could hear Glifetz breathe, and a sense of chill prevailed.

Glifetz switched his tablet to encrypted mode and dialed a number. The person on the other end answered after about 15 seconds.

"What is it?" The person sounded cautious. He lowered his voice and, before Glifetz could speak, blurted out, "If you're calling about the Polar Light project, I can't tell you anything. Duan Qianji is watching everyone like a hawk. I don't want to get kicked out."

The person on the other end was a senior executive at Silver Wing who had a history with Glifetz. He benefited quite a bit from Glifetz's help in the past.

"It's OK. I know I'm putting you in a difficult bind. All I want to know is who the actual composer behind the first two movements of the Polar Light project is."

"..." The senior executive went silent for a few seconds. "Duan Qianji issued strict orders not to tell."

"I just want to know for myself. I won't tell anyone else." Glifetz knew his source had to be careful, so he added, "I swear I won't tell anyone else."

A longer silence on the other end. Hesitation.

Glifetz didn't dial up the pressure. He just waited patiently.

After a minute's silence, the person said in a muffled voice, "It's Fang Zhao."

"Come again?" Glifetz was so shocked he got up abruptly and almost fell before struggling to regain his balance.

"You know, the newcomer."

"Impossible!"

"Believe it or not."

"How come... That doesn't make sense. Why would Silver Wing trust a newcomer with such an expensive project? A newcomer couldn't possibly have composed..." Glifetz was in disbelief.

"I'm warning you, just keep this to yourself. Don't tell anyone, otherwise we are both finished. You know what Duan Qianji is capable of," the source said before hanging up.

In the warm and bright room, Glifetz collapsed onto his deck chair, limbs sprawled, and dropped his tablet. He lay paralyzed, a corpse waiting to be fossilized.

A sudden shiver. Glifetz felt the chills.

Fang Zhao?

The newcomer he'd researched, the one who had joined Silver Wing just this year?

He remembered that fellow. A fresh graduate in his 20s. Fang Zhao wasn't even a third his age.

A little punk had all but hammered the final nail into his coffin.

If only Fang Zhao knew what Glifetz was thinking. He would have responded, "I'm your daddy, not the other way around."



Regardless of what other people thought, regardless of the fact that some industry publications were clamoring for the name of the composer behind Polar Light, Fang Zhao was in no mood to deal with the media. He stuck to Silver Wing's new protocol of not leaving the building unless it was necessary. He wanted to game.

The gaming equipment he'd requested from Duan Qianji had finally been set up.

There were about a dozen prop guns that were nearly identical to the real thing. These were hard to come by. They looked so realistic that they were more tightly regulated than the prop guns used by the label's film division. Duan Qianji's husband was a military official and she had her own connections. If they wanted to, they could probably procure a sizable batch of real firearms, let alone prop guns.

Some of Silver Wing's security staff were licensed to carry.

Duan Qianji gave the virtual projects department 20 days off. Fang Zhao planned to devote the bulk of this period to gaming.

Fang Zhao's bracelet rang as he watched technicians install the gaming consoles in a dedicated room.

It was a number he didn't recognize.

He walked into his office and selected voice transmission.

"Hello? Is it Fang Zhao?" It was the voice of a male stranger.

"Speaking." Fang Zhao walked to his window and examined the flying car traffic below the 50th floor.

"My name is Beavis. I'm a B-level agent at Neon Culture. Are you interested in working at Neon Culture? Don't worry about the fine for breaking your Silver Wing contract. We can take care of that. As long as you're willing to jump ship, we'll sign you right away. You'll be treated as a level B star. Your work will be given priority release during your first year. We'll also assign a master composer to mentor you. And if you want anything else, we're all ears."

Beavis was quite confident. His offer was better than what most newcomers could manage. He was thinking that Fang Zhao was just a figurehead at Silver Wing's virtual projects department. He was better off jumping ship to Neon Culture, where he would enjoy real perks. He had other enticements up his sleeve, but he wanted to gauge Fang Zhao's reaction first. He would continue with his sales pitch if Fang Zhao was interested.

Neon Culture? Fang Zhao had thought Tongshan True Entertainment would approach him first. He hadn't expected Neon Culture to beat them to the punch.

Fang Zhao knew what Neon Culture was up to.

Since they couldn't find out who had composed the first two movements, then they would poach a few known staffers from the project team. As the project's producer, Fang Zhao was naturally first on the list. While Song Shihua was still debating whether or not to make an offer, Neon Culture reached out first.

"Beavis from Neon Culture? How did you get my number?" Fang Zhao asked. The original owner of his body had gotten a new number when he'd moved to his black street after graduation. It was different from the number in the school directory. Only a few people had the number.

"Now that you mention it, it's quite serendipitous. One of our newcomers is from the same hometown as you are. I think you know him."

"You mean Fang Sheng?"

"Exactly! What a coincidence, right? Haha!"

When he was digging into Fang Zhao's background, he had noticed that Fang Zhao shared a hometown with one of Neon Culture's new composers. They went to the same primary school and high school. He asked around—it turned out they did know each other.

Fang Sheng turned pale when Beavis asked him for Fang Zhao's number, but Beavis didn't think much of it. He thought Fang Sheng was just jealous and didn't dwell on the matter.

"Serendipitous indeed." Fang Zhao chuckled as he stared into the glint from a passing flying car. "Why don't you ask who the real composer of his first three songs was first?"

He hung up before Beavis could respond.

Chapter 44

Such a Bully

Even though Beavis was mad that Fang Zhao had hung up on him, he was more intrigued by Fang Zhao's comment before he hung up.

"Why don't you ask him who the actual composer of his first three songs was?"

Which three songs? The actual composer? So Fang Sheng hadn't written them after all?

Beavis wasn't in charge of newcomers. He wasn't on top of the inner workings of the newcomers department. He merely scanned the list of newcomers Neon Culture had recruited this year. If his bosses didn't want to poach people from Silver Wing, he wouldn't have bothered studying the list.

But even though he wasn't familiar with the workings of the newcomers department, he could deduce from Fang Zhao's parting comment.

A gloomy Beavis sat in his office pondering the matter for some time. Then he got in touch with newcomers department and requested Fang Sheng's personnel records. He gave them a careful look. The more he read, the angrier he got.

If he was 70 percent skeptical of Fang Zhao's allegations, then after reading the personnel files, that figure dropped by 20 or 30 percentage points.

Fang Zhao had graduated from the Qi'an Academy of Music, probably the best music school in Yanzhou, while Fang Sheng had graduated from a so-so school. That didn't necessarily make a difference. During the recruitment process, graduating from a top school wasn't a prerequisite. Even if you attended a low-ranked university and flunked all your classes, as long as you had musical talent of some kind, if you shined in some way, you would be considered.

In other words, setting aside your educational background and connections, the key was real skill and talent.

The reason Fang Sheng had caught the eye of Neon Culture's newcomers department and was signed was because of the three songs he'd submitted.

Nothing stood out in Fang Sheng's files. He wasn't a stellar student and he'd never won any prizes. But the three songs still won over the newcomers department. The songs weren't top-notch, but they were slightly better than what the average newcomer produced. One of the three also placed well on the newcomers' chart. The label actually wanted to promote Fang Sheng, but he hadn't submitted any new songs since.

Beavis summoned Fang Sheng and his agent. He scanned both of them with a vicious gaze. Beavis usually smiled, but he looked scary when he got serious.

Fang Sheng's agent was still a bit pissed and disgruntled about being summoned by Beavis. Even though he managed newcomers, he had managed B-level stars before. He had also spent more time at Neon Culture than Beavis. Beavis's tone was downright rude, hardly befitting the respect he deserved as a senior employee. But now that he saw Beavis's expression, he could tell something was wrong.

"Is something wrong?" Fang Sheng's agent asked. He knew Beavis had looked over Fang Sheng's files, but he still didn't know why Beavis had asked to see them.

Beavis ignored Fang Sheng's agent and stared at Fang Sheng hard, as if launching a flurry of daggers. "What I want to know is: who actually wrote the three songs you submitted when you joined the label?"

Already a bit fidgety at the outset, Fang Sheng's heart leaped when he heard the question, and he broke into a cold sweat. The muscles by his mouth twitched, but he didn't know what to say. He remained silent but clasped his hands nervously. When his agent cast him a questioning look as well, he knew there was nowhere to hide. He tried hard to mask his guilt, somehow managing to eke out a smile. "Did someone say something? Don't believe them. I wrote those three songs myself."

"Oh?" Beavis didn't press on, looking at Fang Sheng's agent instead. His gaze seemed to say: "You signed the guy. It's your move."

The agent stared at Fang Sheng with piercing eyes. He had managed dozens of artists. Even though he might not be as competent as Beavis, he could still spot a liar. The subtle changes in expression on Fang Sheng's face hadn't escaped his notice.

Panic. Guilt. Fear. Lack of confidence.

Once Fang Sheng's agent became suspicious, everything made sense. The arranger of the three songs had told him in private that Fang Sheng had a poor grasp on the three pieces. His understanding was hazy and incomplete. Initially, the arranger had chalked it up to the usual inexperience of a newcomer and thought a bit of training and guidance would do. But Fang Sheng hadn't produced any new songs since the three he'd entered in the new talent competition. Again, he'd thought Fang Sheng had simply been running low on inspiration. But it had been so long that it was becoming a problem.

The three songs may very well have been stolen.

He didn't want to believe that he'd signed someone like this. He had heard of similar cases of theft or plagiarism. Some were exposed and some were kept secret. The final outcome depended on company policy and individual finesse. Of course, the safest practice was to avoid folks like this. The bigger the label, the more it cared about its reputation. So he had the manpower and resources necessary at his disposal for a cover-up. But he'd never thought something like this would happen to him.

Even if he had made the mistake of signing the man, the mistake couldn't be made public. To do so would be slapping himself in the face. It might also create unnecessary hassle for the label at this critical juncture.

He had to get rid of Fang Sheng as soon as possible.

Even if Fang Sheng's theft was exposed, they could prepare in advance and take the backlash in stride.

Fang Sheng was signed to a three-year contract. His contract stipulated that if he was fired without cause, he was entitled to severance totaling three times his income during his employment.

This wasn't an unjustified firing, but the label couldn't reveal the real reason behind the dismissal. They also had no proof that Fang Sheng had stolen the three songs. Fang Sheng would never admit to it.

Based on the number of downloads the three songs had generated, Fang Sheng's severance would amount to more than 10 million dollars. That was an expense the label didn't want to incur. Even though the amount was nothing to Neon Culture, they didn't want it spent that way.

So after "amicable" negotiations that were stick-and-carrot in reality, Neon Culture agreed to a severance pay of 1.5 million. Fang Sheng was terminated effective immediately.

Fang Sheng's agent conducted the negotiations on his behalf. Beavis stayed mum, giving his tacit approval to the deal. So Fang Sheng stole someone else's songs, most likely Fang Zhao's. Even if they confirmed the theft, if Fang Zhao was a nobody and Fang Sheng had potential, they wouldn't have fired Fang Sheng. They might even have helped cover up the theft. They were businessmen, after all. Their financial interests came first.

But Fang Zhao was a rising star with the full backing of his label, while Fang Sheng wasn't an asset worth protecting. His firing was a no-brainer, and it had to be done fast. They had to get rid of him before the scandal broke and the finger-pointing began.

If people asked, they would just say that Fang Sheng had poor character.

"Poor character" was a catch-all term in the industry. It could refer to personality issues—an inability to get along with colleagues or a foul temper that affected morale. It could also refer to specific behavior, like theft or plagiarism. The former wasn't a big deal. As long as the person in question was talented, personality wasn't an issue. But the latter was a problem.

There were no secrets in the industry. If they pried enough, prospective employers would find out about the "poor character" assessment in Fang Sheng's personnel files at Neon Culture even if he tried to hide it. That was enough to make him off-limits for most record labels in the industry.

Fang Sheng was kicked out of Neon Culture's headquarters half an hour later.

He struggled to maintain his composure as he got all sorts of looks from the people around him. He didn't linger.

He ran to an empty corner and quietly cursed to himself. His eyes were bloodshot. Lord knew how long it had been since he had rested properly. His face was paler than Zu Wen's after two straight days of gaming.

As for the 1.5 million in severance pay, the old Fang Sheng would have counted his blessings. But after enjoying the adoration and the easy money the three songs had generated, the 1.5 million was a pittance. But he didn't want to lock horns with Neon

Culture.

If he'd stayed at Neon Culture, he would have earned much more.

He was entitled to much more.

After taking a few deliberate breaths, Fang Sheng turned his attention to his bracelet and looked up Fang Zhao's number.

It was just a matter of time before he could buy another song from a music student desperate for cash. But Beavis had to tear into him now and interrupt his plans.

How had Beavis found out he stole the three songs?

Fang Zhao.

The raw hatred gushed like a raging current when the call went through. "Fang Zhao, you son of a b*tch! You said you considered me a brother, but you had your bases covered all along, right? You've got quite a few songs up your sleeve besides those three songs, right? Nicely done. Slick move." He was so agitated the veins on his neck were bulging.

He rambled on for nearly three minutes until his voice went hoarse. But no response came from Fang Zhao.

"You're mute now?" Fang Sheng screamed at the top of his voice.

Two second later.

"Woof! Woof!"

The other end answered with a series of barks. They were real barks, not simulated ones. The barks were followed by clear sound of panting.

Fang Sheng: "..."

He had just delivered a three-minute tirade to a dog.

Fang Sheng was so pissed his body shook. He felt like spitting blood.

Such... such a bully!

Chapter 45

Don't Be Afraid

Fang Zhao had actually used a dog on him.

Fang Sheng was so mad he wanted to smash his bracelet, but luckily, he held back. He had just been fired. He wouldn't be receiving any income for some time. His severance pay was still being processed—it hadn't been wired to him yet. There wasn't much left of his cut from the revenue from song downloads during the new talent contest after he had bought his new apartment. The bracelet had cost him tens of thousands of dollars. He couldn't afford to trash it now.

Fang Sheng wanted to vent his anger from losing his job. He didn't dare take aim at the folks at Neon Culture. All he could settle for now was Fang Zhao, the person who had "set him up." Little did he expect Fang Zhao to not answer altogether and put his dog on instead. Was Fang Zhao mocking him?

Knowing full well that his tirade would only be answered with dog barks, Fang Sheng took a few deep breaths and hung up. He was going to bottle up his frustration and take off, but after taking two steps, he stopped suddenly to look at his bracelet.

He was so angry he had let his guard down. He reviewed what he had just said. He didn't think he had confessed to stealing the songs outright, so even if Fang Zhao had recorded the conversation, it wouldn't amount to much proof. He wouldn't lose in a court of law.

Good thing he had restrained himself. If he was thrown off by a few dog barks and confessed to stealing the songs, then it would all be over.

So that was what Fang Zhao was up to?

"You wanted to set me up again!"

Fang Sheng stared at the end of the road, eyes burning.

Fang Sheng was being paranoid. Fang Zhao knew that he wouldn't fess up to stealing

the songs that easily. Here was someone savvy enough to steal the three songs without the original host of his body noticing and without leaving a trace of evidence. He wouldn't be easily duped into a confession.

There were always people who felt that they were entitled to your generosity. Even if there was a falling out and they were clearly in the wrong, they wouldn't own up to their mistakes. They would even play the victim.

Personal interest and temptation distorted the human heart.

Fang Zhao had seen so many examples and heard of so many during the end of days. Fang Sheng acted purely out of self-interest. If it were the end of days, Fang Zhao would have delivered a bullet to his head, but the rule of law prevailed in the New Era. Fang Zhao didn't want to run afoul of the law on account of Fang Sheng and squander the rare opportunity of a rebirth.

"Good job." Fang Zhao picked up his bracelet and fondled Curly Hair's head. He grabbed a handful of dog food and placed it on the dog's plate.

Fang Zhao returned to the lobby of the 50th floor after making sure the technicians had installed the gaming equipment properly.

The department was on vacation, so no one else was in the lobby. Zeng Huang and Wan Yue were spending time as a couple. They wouldn't be showing up during the vacation. Pang Pusong was traveling with his family. Song Miao was gone too. The only people left were Zu Wen and company. They gathered in their studio to game every day. If all you were doing is gaming, then you might as well live out of the office. You wouldn't have to worry about the utilities bill, and the cafeteria food wasn't that bad. It was also quite cheap.

When Fang Zhao approached, Zu Wen's group had just wrapped up a gaming session and they were deep in discussion.

Neon Culture had reached out to Zu Wen and company as well, but not through an agent. A few of their technicians knew Zu Wen and his team and put out feelers, but the Silver Wing crew rejected the overtures.

Their reasoning?

Setting aside the tremendous potential of the Polar Light project, they had landed the

unlikely boss who was addicted to gaming. It didn't make sense to give that up. For folks like them, as long as they weren't in a pinch, bonus size was secondary. The key issue was whether they could partake in their preferred form of entertainment during office hours.

Why had Zu Wen stayed when the entire virtual projects department was purged last year? It wasn't that he was lazy. He was lured by the prospect of gaming all day if the department no longer received any assignments.

The group stopped talking when Fang Zhao entered the room.

"I'm going to head home for a bit. Are you guys going to stick around?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Yup. But we're going to head out later in the day to check out a gaming trade show. Will you be using the flying car, boss?" Zu Wen asked.

The department had two flying cars. Zeng Huang and Wan Yue had taken one of them and one was left.

Zu Wen and company leered at him, which gave Fang Zhao a kick. "No. I'll take public transportation. Knock yourselves out."

"Thanks, Boss!" Zu Wen hooted.

"We'll bring back some samples for you," the others said.

Fang Zhao left the office after reminding Zu Wen and company to lock the door to the 50th floor before heading out for the trade show. He didn't bring Curly Hair. All he had to do was pick up a few things from his black street apartment. He would be back first thing in the morning.

He could already afford a place in downtown Qi'an. Barring massive, extravagant properties, he could pay in cash.

But it was hard to find quality real estate in Qi'an these days. And folks who owned prime properties were reluctant to part with them. Fang Zhao hadn't been looking online because Duan Qianji had promised to introduce him to a homeowner looking to sell, a veteran composer. The composer rarely lived in his home but didn't want to sell it to a stranger either. Duan Qianji knew that Fang Zhao was in the market, so she

had approached the elderly composer. But the owner wasn't in Yanzhou. He would return in a few days to handle the paperwork and meet Fang Zhao at the same time. It was only a matter of days. Fang Zhao could wait.

Evenings on black streets were still the same. Loud dance music mixed with laid-back tunes. Drunks shot the breeze in clusters. Young punks new to the life were plying their trade.

Fang Zhao bought two boxes of barbecued meat for Yue Qing, who ran the shop downstairs from his apartment, and the drug store owner, Ai Wan.

"Thanks. Not much to report. A few days ago a drunk wanted to toss a bottle at your window. I got rid of him," Yue Qing said as he took the boxes. He grabbed a piece of meat and started chewing away. "Are you moving?" he asked.

Yue Qing didn't know how the entertainment industry operated, but he had watched the music videos for the two movements. And he knew from news reports that the two songs were a big hit. Regardless of whether or not Fang Zhao was the actual composer of the two movements, judging from his official credit, he stood to benefit in a major way. It was time for him leave.

"Soon, but I'm not going to give up my apartment in the coming weeks," Fang Zhao said.

"Please make sure you give me a heads up when you move out so I can buy your apartment," Yue Qing blurted. He had been eyeing the flat above his shop for some time. Tenant records were kept electronically. Once Fang Zhao gave up his flat, it would be up for grabs. If another tenant moved in, Yue Qing wouldn't be able to buy it.

"Planning an expansion?" Fang Zhao asked.

"It's about time. I've also been in touch with the tenants on the two floors above yours. I should be able to buy those flats next year. I've been laying the groundwork for some time, haha." Now that he had saved enough, Yue Qing could proceed with his shop expansion. Naturally, he was in a good mood. Of course, folks like him couldn't compare to Fang Zhao, who could earn more than 1 million on one song alone. But average folks had their own way of life. Yue Qing was quite happy with his life right now.

"Got it. I'll give you a heads up before I give up the flat."

Yue Qing's shop was swarmed with customers, so Fang Zhao got out of the way. He left the shop and headed up the staircase.

But once he got to his apartment, Fang Zhao could tell that something was wrong.

When he lifted his head, he saw someone standing in front of his flat. Another approached from behind on the staircase. The sandwich approach signaled premeditation and professionals.

The staircase was dimly lit. To cut costs, public areas like this either had faulty lighting or were dimly lit.

Fang Zhao didn't look back and continued walking until he was two steps away from the man standing in front of his apartment.

He looked perhaps a few years older than Fang Zhao. He had a crew cut except for a crown-shaped hairdo in the middle, which was dyed half red and half blue. His right cheek sported a tattoo of a snarling beast.

Fang Zhao remembered Yue Qing mentioning once that black street thugs with a beast tattoo on their right cheek were typically hired guns and not young punks who engaged in random petty crime.

In other words, someone had paid them to show up.

When the man scanned Fang Zhao's bracelet, Fang Zhao had a hunch who their employer was.

"Fang Zhao?" The man standing in front of the door gauged Fang Zhao like a quality control inspector. His teeth were dyed neon green. The beast tattoo on his cheek became even snarlier.

A fellow resident on the second floor was about to head downstairs. He turned around immediately after noticing the impending conflict, too terrified to even fart.

Zap.

The man standing in front of Fang Zhao's door was holding an electric rod that emitted a live current. The sound echoed clearly in the corridor. He took a step toward Fang Zhao and said, "Don't be afraid. Just hand over your bracelet and we'll be outta here in

no time. There's no point in blocking traffic."

But before he could finish, Fang Zhao had pulled a gun and trained it on him.

Fang Zhao could hear the trailing footsteps cease. He flashed a warm smile and told the man in front of him:

"Don't be afraid. You've made a long trip, so why don't you step inside for a chat. There's no point in blocking traffic."

Chapter 46

Coffee

Fang Zhao's move caught them both by surprise. This wasn't part of the plan.

The man blocking the apartment door secretly cursed their employer. *Didn't you say this kid was an artist type?*

An assassin, no question. A composer? Hell no!

His temple pressed against the barrel of a gun, he swallowed the comment he was about to make and lowered his hand carrying the electric rod.

The two of them had been working black streets for some time. They had completed quite a few jobs, so they knew who was faking it, who was a paper tiger. They could deduce from a single move or look.

The way Fang Zhao handled his gun and the look in his eyes scared the man blocking the door shitless. He could tell Fang Zhao's composure and proficiency weren't faked. He knew that if they made the wrong move, Fang Zhao would pull the trigger.

So the man trailing Fang Zhao also halted. He couldn't risk making a move before gauging the situation. Otherwise, he'd be returning with a body bag.

But the good thing about professionals like themselves was that they were flexible.

"Big brother, this is all a misunderstanding. No need to get worked up." The man blocking the entrance to the apartment mustered a smile and turned off his electric rod. The sound of the current disappeared. He raised his hands up high. He had no qualms about addressing a man younger than him as older brother.

"I'm not worked up. Let's go inside and have a proper chat," Fang Zhao said.

"No, no, no. We better not intrude. We'll leave right away. Right away." As soon as he lifted one leg, he noticed Fang Zhao's finger on the trigger tighten. He stayed put, wearing a pained expression on his face. The snarling beast tattoo looked like a joke.

"It's OK. Head on in. I just want to ask you a few questions. Unlock door." On Fang Zhao's command, the apartment door opened automatically.

Fang Zhao had upgraded the security settings on his door to a dual ID check—detection of his bracelet and voice recognition.

Staring down the barrel of the gun, the first man walked into the apartment with a gloomy look on his face.

The other man was about 2 meters tall. His neck was exposed, despite the cold weather, revealing a blanket of tattoos. His muscles were firm and chiseled. Fang Zhao could also tell from the sound of his approaching footsteps that he wasn't as slow as he looked.

"Stand over there." Fang Zhao gestured to the big guy.

"Make yourself at home. Find a place to sit down. I'll let you go after asking you a few questions." Fang Zhao pulled up the only intact chair in the room and sat down.

The two men scanned the tiny room top to bottom with one quick look. The only places to sit were two stools.

Even though the stools were a bit low, they were better than sitting on the floor.

The two 20-centimeter tall stools were used to reach higher shelves. Curly Hair also liked to sunbathe on them. Now they looked completely undersized as they held two grown men, one of them a big fellow.

"Forget about the knife behind you," Fang Zhao interjected.

The man with the red crown hairdo had felt the knife behind him when he sat down. Fang Zhao's comment caught him by surprise, almost prompting him to jump up.

Damn, we've met our match.

Crown Head lowered his head and cursed quietly as he withdrew his hand.

"Fire away. It's our own fault that we got caught red-handed. We took the job without doing our research," Crown Head said. "But we're not sure who our employer is."

"You're not clear but you have a good idea." Fang Zhao was in no mood for fudging. "Tell me, what has Fang Sheng asked you to do?"

Crown Head raised his eyebrows when Fang Zhao uttered the words "Fang Sheng." Now that all the cards were on the table, there was no point in bullshitting.

"You should know we are hired guns. We do what we're paid to do. Someone offered us 30,000 to steal your bracelet. The client only sent us a text message, and the number he left is a burner number. But I'm guessing he is probably the Fang Sheng you speak of. He hired a friend of mine to monitor your movements." Crown Head stared at Fang Zhao and tried to glean a response. Nothing.

Crown Head had revealed what he knew of Fang Sheng's recent moves, but the two of them didn't know that Fang Sheng had stolen three songs from Fang Zhao. Fang Sheng was very cautious. He didn't tell a soul.

"Anything else besides the bracelet?" Fang Zhao asked.

Crown Head was going to say no, but he cast a glance at Fang Zhao and decided to tell the truth. "He said if we taught you a lesson he would pay us an additional 10,000."

"He didn't ask you to kill me?"

"No, no, no. We don't do murder." Crown Head was quick to explain. He raised his now-silent electric rod slightly. "This is just for show. Really, we never take kill assignments. There are only a handful of assassins working the black streets. And they are extremely selective. You can't contact them directly. Their pricing is also through the roof. They earn on one job what takes us dozens of years to make." Electric rods were strictly regulated, but these types of things were easier to come by on a black street.

The big fellow sitting next to Crown Head kept nodding. They most definitely stayed away from kill jobs. They didn't want to die. All they wanted to do was make a living. Why risk their lives?

As long as they stayed within bounds, no one would waste time hunting them down. But taking a human life was different. That wasn't something you could hide from.

Fang Zhao watched as the two thugs justified their actions profusely and shifted all the blame to Fang Sheng. But he wasn't fooled by their cowering act. If he lost focus for one second or showed any sign of weakness, they would take advantage and turn

the tables on him. These two weren't greenhorns. They were too experienced to intimidate with mere violence. That's why Fang Zhao went straight for his gun. It was easier to talk once he seized control of the situation. And it would dash any ideas of a comeback.

"Our typical job is collecting debt. We've done no wrong!" Crown Head wailed.

"Then what are you doing here?" Fang Zhao asked.

Crown Head noticed Fang Zhao glaring at him, so he stopped wailing and rubbed his hands. "The new year... the new year is around the corner. We just wanted to earn a few extra bucks." Thirty thousand was indeed decent pay for black street thugs. They were tempted. Plus, Fang Sheng had hired someone to watch Fang Zhao. They'd thought it would be a straightforward gig. Once they had gotten word that Fang Zhao was back, they had scrambled to set up in front of his apartment. Little had they known they would end up in this predicament.

As Crown Head spoke, the doorbell rang.

It was Yue Qing.

A customer had told Yue Qing that he saw a man with a beast tattoo on his cheek head up to the second floor, so he had rushed upstairs to make sure Fang Zhao was OK.

"I heard a man with a beast tattoo on his cheek showed up..." Yue Qing hadn't finished his sentence when he noticed the two men with beasts inked onto their faces kneeling—or sitting, rather—inside Fang Zhao's apartment."

"These two are?" Yue Qing pointed to the two men with a look of surprise.

"Guests, here for a cup of coffee," Fang Zhao said.

The two men sitting on the stools played along, lifting their plastic cups filled with room-temperature tap water.

The two thugs grew up on the black street, so of course they knew of Yue Qing. They had bypassed Yue Qing's shop on purpose, but here he was anyway.

Were Fang Zhao and Yue Qing close friends?

Crown Head closed his eyes to conceal his sense of doom. Fang Zhao alone was enough trouble. Even if they snatched Fang Zhao's bracelet, would Yue Qing seek revenge for his friend?

They hadn't researched their target properly. If they had known, they would have turned down the job. Fang Sheng screwed them over.

But when he lifted his head, Crown Head was already flashing what he thought was an honest smile and his rows of neon-green-tinted teeth.

Yue Qing gave both men a careful look-over. They sat obediently on the two stools like primary school students listening to a lecture. If you ignored their build and beast tattoos, Yue Qing would have thought they were victims.

He was baffled.

Did Fang Zhao really know them?

These two were familiar faces on the black street. They weren't from this building but the one two blocks away. They had shopped at Yue Qing's store before. Yue Qing remembered them.

He took another glance at Fang Zhao, who did not seem threatened. Someone had to mind his shop—his wife hadn't left work yet—so he couldn't be gone for too long. His customers would start getting antsy after a five-minute absence or so.

"Then... just holler if something goes wrong. I can hear you downstairs," Yue Qing said.

"Got it. Thanks."

"Great. Then... enjoy your coffee." Yue Qing was still confused when he headed downstairs and shook his head. He could no longer read youngsters these days.

Crown Head kept defending himself after Yue Qing left, all but calling Fang Zhao their daddy. Anything so that Fang Zhao would let them leave.

Fang Zhao listened quietly as Crown Head wrapped up his spiel. He responded, "There's a saying from the black streets, 'Live in the present. Let bygones be bygones.'"

In a black street context, that didn't mean you left grievances unanswered. What it

meant was that you had to exact revenge right away.

Crown Head understood right away, saying, "We'd love to look up Fang Sheng for a chat, but we don't have his address."

"I do," Fang Zhao responded.

Chapter 47

Home Purchase

When Fang Zhao had received his first paycheck, he had hired someone to follow Fang Sheng. He knew that once Fang Sheng had money, he would move out of the company dorm. Fang Sheng also liked to party at night.

He told the two thugs Fang Sheng's address and let them go. It was going to be an exciting night at Fang Sheng's place that night.

Fang Zhao stayed in the chair after the two men left. He sat quietly for some time, fondling his gun with his fingers and taking deep breaths. He was trying to suppress his instinct to kill.

He had nearly pulled the trigger just then. He knew his opponents weren't out to kill—they just wanted to send a message—but he'd had the urge to shoot.

Even though he was reborn into the New Era, Fang Zhao had spent most of his previous life in the apocalypse. He was still adjusting to his new surroundings. Even though he looked no different than anyone else and blended into the New Era well, he himself knew that he was suppressing a mean streak that was born during the end of days and had snowballed for nearly 100 years.

The two thugs had noticed his inner turmoil. That was why they'd been so obedient.

Fang Zhao didn't know how much longer he could control the mean streak. He didn't know if it would dissipate over time or accumulate like it had during the end of days. All he could do was keep repressing it and try not to act violently.

When he'd been mugged on the street corner, he had nearly killed the little punk after snatching his gun. He had fired the shot that Yue Qing had heard. He'd fired against the ground right by the kid's skull.

After that, Fang Zhao could sense his mean streak swell.

The New Era was a world regulated by laws. Even black streets had their codes of

conduct. Fang Zhao didn't want to break the rules. All he could do was vent his anger over time when he had the chance.

That was why Fang Zhao was looking forward to having gaming equipment installed in his office. New Era games allowed players to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Whatever mean streak he couldn't vent in the real world, he would do so by gaming.

Just when Fang Zhao was wondering when he could game and vent his frustrations properly, Fang Sheng, who was waiting for an update at home, was paid a visit and badly beaten. He was also forced to fork over 500,000 as compensation.

He was robbed of 500,000 just when he'd received his severance pay of 1.5 million from Neon Culture. Luckily, he was cautious and deposited the 1.5 million into three accounts. Otherwise, he might have lost it all.

Fang Sheng didn't report the robbery or the beating. Investigating the matter would do him no good. He also wondered how the two men had found out his address. Weren't they supposed to steal Fang Zhao's bracelet? Why the hell did they beat him up instead?

Fang Sheng also remembered one of the men flashing his neon-green teeth and accusing him of setting them up. How had he set them up?

Fang Sheng was hospitalized for five days, and that was thanks to the fact that medical technology in the New Era was far superior to what it was before the end of days. If he were being treated before the apocalypse, he would have been hospitalized for at least a month.

Indeed, the two thugs had given Fang Sheng a rather heavy beating. They'd cowered before Fang Zhao because their well-honed instincts told them that he wasn't a pushover. It would have been a tough battle. They would have had to go all out. But they were just in it to earn a living—they had no intention of risking their lives. So they chose to play terrified. But matched up against Fang Sheng, they showed their true colors. They wanted to let him know what a black-street thug was really like.

Fang Zhao read the new messages on his bracelet. Fang Sheng had moved into a new place after leaving the hospital. He'd probably realized his old flat wasn't safe any more. He also wanted to avoid the two thugs.

After sending a message to his hired guns, Fang Zhao headed to an apartment block near Qi'an's Third Ring Road. The black streets were located beyond the Sixth Ring Road. The Third Ring Road was considered the outer limits of downtown Qi'an, although it was populated with mostly residential buildings, not commercial ones.

Fang Zhao had gotten word from Duan Qianji that the elderly composer looking to sell his home was back in town. He wanted to meet Fang Zhao and discuss the possible sale.

Fang Zhao located the building based on the address he was given. It was a 120-story, pyramid-shaped building about 600 meters tall. The lower floors were thousands of square meters in size, but by the top floor, the floor area was only around 200 square meters.

The apartment number Fang Zhao was given was the top-floor penthouse.

The owner of the penthouse was an old man some 160 years old. He was older than Fang Zhao's previous incarnation had been. He was a composer who edited and co-wrote quite a few composition textbooks used by local music schools. Fang Zhao could instantly recall a few.

Xue Jing was a well-known name in the music industry.

Xue Jing's assistant was waiting when Fang Zhao arrived.

"Please. Teacher Xue is inside." The assistant brought Fang Zhao to a room but didn't enter with him. Without Xue Jing's permission, the room was off-limits.

When Fang Zhao entered, Xue Jing was sitting on a sofa with a wooden frame. Few sofas were made of natural wood these days. The bookshelves, tables, and other pieces of furniture were also made of wood. The room had a distinctly antique feel to it.

The sofa and the chairs in the room were covered with cushions with a wood-grain pattern. The room temperature was moderate.

"How do you do, Teacher Xue?" Xue Jing was much older and a veteran teacher. The "teacher" honorific was appropriate.

Xue Jing put down the score he was reading and pointed to the single sofa chair across from him. "Sit."

Xue Jing was some 160 years old, which was equivalent to 60 or 70 years old before the end of days.

He had quite a few grey hairs but seemed quite energetic.

"What do you think of the decor in this room?" Xue Jing's scrutinizing gaze swept across Fang Zhao and met his eyes.

"You definitely don't have any pets," Fang Zhao responded.

The assistant who had Xue Jing's permission to enter the room to serve tea heard the response and glared at Fang Zhao. The aspiring musicians who had sat in the same chair typically lavished praise on the interior design, gushed at the painting on the wall comprising musical notes, which Xue Jing himself couldn't quite decipher, and kissed ass.

It seemed that Fang Zhao's brain was wired differently.

Pets?

The assistant reviewed his entire tenure with Xue. The elderly musician indeed had never had a pet. The sofa and bookshelves would have never survived.

The response also caught Xue Jing by surprise. He laughed, responding, "Indeed. You have a pet?"

"I have a dog. I found it on a black street," Fang Zhao said.

Most people would have avoided associating themselves with potentially self-demeaning references like "black street," but Fang Zhao didn't think it was a big deal. It was a fact that he lived on a black street. There was no need to lie. There was no point in lying, either. Xue Jing had most likely gotten a detailed lowdown from Duan Qianji.

"That's a shame. I was going to leave you the furniture," Xue Jing said with a sigh. The furniture was handcrafted by a master carpenter, not machine-made.

"The same score in the hands of different arrangers will turn out differently. It's not a big deal," Fang Zhao said.

"Indeed." Xue Jing laughed gently, a few deep creases forming on his face. "Nowadays, few young musicians can find the inner peace to compose. If Duan Qianji didn't assure me that you'd written the two movements, judging from the two pieces themselves, it would have been hard to believe the composer was so young. But now that I have met you, I have no doubt."

Xue Jing couldn't explain why, but when he laid eyes on Fang Zhao, he felt that this was someone who could produce those two movements.

"Age is not a good predictor of musical quality," Fang Zhao said.

"Indeed." Xue Jing gazed out the window quietly, exuding a sense of peace honed from an abundance of life experience. He could see quite a few taller buildings. There used to be a 100-plus-year-old building nearby, but it had been torn down recently. A new building was taking its place. It was going to be taller, prettier, and attract more eyeballs.

Chapter 48

An Order from Another Continent

Xue Jing only wanted to sell to someone that gave him good vibes. Good vibes were hard to define, but somehow, he felt that he wouldn't be upset if he sold his flat to Fang Zhao and the apartment was completely renovated.

Just as Fang Zhao put it, different arrangers would handle the same song differently. Different styles would come out. Everyone was equally entitled to leave their mark. Any buyer was simply a temporary custodian of the property.

Property prices in Qi'an were quite high, especially in this neighborhood. Flats that were located on the 100th floor or higher usually cost at least 10,000 dollars per square meter. There was only one penthouse apartment in the building. The entire property took up some 200 square meters, but the flat only accounted for half of it. A garden and a parking space took up the other half.

The price tag was 10 million, which was cheap compared to similar properties in the area. The market value was no less than 20 million.

One of the reasons why real estate in that neighborhood was expensive was the presence of security guards and regular patrols. Quite a few Yanzhou celebrities bought homes in the area to avoid media attention. Xue Jing had bought this place back then because he'd wanted the peace and quiet. He was no celebrity, but he was quite influential in the music industry. Many people sought him out for favors, hoping a word from Xue Jing would translate into shortcuts. Xue Jing got so fed up he moved here. "There's another reason I invited you here, besides selling you my apartment. It's entirely up to you. No pressure," Xue Jing said.

Fang Zhao had thought a favor might be attached when Xue Jing had announced his asking price. Given Xue Jing was so generous with his pricing, Fang Zhao would comply as long as it wasn't too big of a favor.

"Please continue," Fang Zhao said.

"As you know, I'm not teaching these days, focusing instead on editing and writing

textbooks." Xue Jing looked at Fang Zhao. "I'm working on a book about symphonic works. I'd like to use your songs as an example."

Xue Jing was writing a textbook that analyzed symphonies and served as a how-to primer. Symphonies were an offbeat genre. Music students tended to avoid the specialty. Even though symphonies enjoyed greater prestige within the industry, they weren't too popular.

Xue Jing wasn't only concerned with turning a profit. The elders in the industry didn't bother with symphonies, but the genre had to be preserved. Xue Jing didn't want to cut and paste like previous authors. He wanted to present contemporary examples. This would require Fang Zhao to discuss his creative vision, his sources of inspiration, and some memorable moments from the creative process. In short, Xue Jing wanted Fang Zhao to pass on his knowledge and expose more students to the genre of symphonies. It would be the equivalent of a master class in written form. Of course, it was up to Fang Zhao to decide how much to reveal.

"As you know, this isn't a hit single. There won't be much money in it." Xue Jing was frank.

Fang Zhao's emergence gave Xue Jing hope. The "100-Year Period of Destruction" series probably made for the most memorable symphonic pop songs in the past century. More importantly, the series was not condescending. It took the accessible form of pop music and reached a broad audience.

Many young composers were reluctant to share their creative insight, so Xue Jing thought Fang Zhao would take his time to consider the request. Little did he expect Fang Zhao to agree immediately.

"No problem."

But Fang Zhao wasn't actually that young. He was happy to share his knowledge and pass on the lessons he'd learned from the end of days. Human life was finite, but there were no bounds to shared experience and knowledge.

Xue Jing was delighted. "Terrific. Terrific. I'll add your name to the list of consulting editors."

Textbooks in the New Era—whether in print or electronic form—identified their authors clearly. University regulations also required them to identify their editors and

consulting editors.

Normally, protocol dictated that if the length of your contribution was brief and the content wasn't essential to the book, you weren't listed as a contributing editor. Xue Jing was thinking Fang Zhao probably wouldn't share at length, but the fact that he was willing to open up and share was worth applauding. Xue Jing was glad to give him credit.

"My assistant will brief you on the mechanics of contributing to the book. You could also organize your thoughts ahead of time. As for the apartment, I'll send for packers right away. I'll have all the paperwork completed and the flat vacated in three days. There's no rush in paying me. If you can't pay the full amount in one go, you can pay in installments over a few years. No hurry."

"It's OK. I can pay in full now," Fang Zhao said.

Fang Zhao left the apartment after the conversation ended. Xue Jing had him chauffeured back to Silver Wing. Fang Zhao got a call from Zhu Zhen, Duan Qianji's assistant, while en route.

"Fang Zhao, someone from Leizhou wants to use the third movement in a movie soundtrack. They don't want to buy the song outright—just license it for 30 days." In other words, there would be a moratorium on the song's release in other formats for 30 days after the film began screening in theaters.

Orders like this from another continent were rare and often translated into new opportunities.

"We haven't discussed the price yet. Chairman Duan wants to get your OK first," Zhu Zhen said.

"To use on a soundtrack? It's a production company from Leizhou?"

"Yes. The deal will help promote the song, but the production company doesn't have a great reputation."

Every continent had protectionist measures in place to shore up their own music and film industries. "Cocoon Breach" was a good example that illustrated this trend. After the song was proven to have an impact on Hull virus patients, the publicity on other continents glossed over the title of the song or made brief mention of it. The focus was

on its effect on Hull virus carriers and related topics. The medical discussion took precedence, obscuring any talk of Polar Light or details about the first and second movements.

It was one thing if the two songs were merely released as songs. But the two movements were inextricably linked to a virtual idol, so they were heavily censored in Leizhou.

Media coverage of the songs in Leizhou not only buried the title of the songs and the names of the composer and production company—Polar Light wasn't mentioned at all. Few people who read the news reports searched for the songs. The first two movements also weren't available for download outside of Yanzhou.

So what Duan Qianji had in mind was using the Leizhou film as an alternative platform, even though it might be a crappy production. Given the fact that the two songs were not available for download outside of Yanzhou, they could license them for placement in films. This didn't affect their marketing plan in Yanzhou.

But Duan Qianji was worried that Fang Zhao would find the placement degrading if the film was a mediocre production just judging from appearances. He might be turned off. That was why she had asked Zhu Zhen to run the plan by Fang Zhao first before entering into negotiations.

After being briefed by Zhu Zhen, Fang Zhao thought for about two seconds. "I'd like to get a sense of the plot of the film and where exactly the song will be placed."

"I'm not entirely clear on either. Let me get back to you."

Half an hour later, Zhu Zhen sent Fang Zhao an encrypted file that outlined the plot and where the third movement would be placed.

The document also listed the names of the production company and key investors as well as the main actors.

The credits would have meant nothing to someone outside the entertainment industry in Yanzhou. But anyone from Leizhou could tell from the names of the production company and investors that the film was a shameless ploy to promote a certain star. What was funny was that, despite their corny story lines and shitty acting, films like this did OK at the box office. People usually bitched as they watched these movies online. They knew they were crap but they couldn't resist watching.

Maybe it was a form of venting.

Fang Zhao spent an afternoon watching previous releases backed by the same production company and investors. He had his answer by sundown.

"I'll sign off on this. My only request is that the third movement only be used for the scene specified. There is no leeway on this. It can only be played then."

Chapter 49

From Whence the Gumption

The continent of Renault, or Leizhou, was named after the New Era general Harmon Renault. In Renault, the last name of Renault was a status symbol.

Renaults frequently popped up among the top names in politics, military, and finance, but what captured the public imagination the most wasn't these men in positions of power, but young Zaro Renault, a regular in the paparazzi pages.

Zaro Renault was the youngest grandson of the current governor of Renault. Even though the governor already had great-grandchildren, his favorite was still Zaro, who was rather spoiled.

Zaro Renault was the prototypical impulsive rich kid. Born into royalty and wealth, he'd never worked a day in his life and spent most of his time partying and chasing skirts. After graduating from university, he had launched the movie company Wireless Media. But even people who paid scant attention to the entertainment industry knew that the company was a joke. Every movie project it backed was a vehicle for his current girlfriend. So far, Wireless Media had seven films to its credit, and Zaro had cycled through seven girlfriends in the past two years.

People jokingly dubbed Zaro "Senior Master," and not because of seniority. He was the youngest Renault in his generation. "Senior Master" was a reference to his excess, indulgence, and incompetence.

Anyone who lived in Renault knew that any Wireless Media production was crap plot-wise. Every film had a simplistic story. You could figure out the ending by reading the synopsis.

Utterly unoriginal. Sometimes the movies barely made sense.

Given the level of technological advancement in the New Era, film production was quite straightforward. The number of films made had grown exponentially. Still, some of the major online portals screened their offerings. Yet any such restrictions were amenable to political and financial influence.

Take Zaro's Wireless Media, for example. Its releases were nearly universally panned, yet they were promoted vigorously on the most prominent platforms. They drew a significant viewership and did OK at the box office. Their revenues could never rival hit blockbusters, but they still managed to break even.

Viewers also loved to trash the films online because Zaro didn't seem to mind. Gradually, moviegoers became emboldened. Every time a Wireless Media film was released, they would watch it right away and generate tons of reviews. The reviews were still mostly critical. But despite the overwhelmingly negative commentary, the movies still drew a considerable audience.

Part of the reason was Zaro's reputation. Everyone wanted to see what kind of crap the notorious rich kid had produced. They got a kick out of it.

There was another reason. Wireless Media releases usually boasted huge budgets and realistic sets.

The Renaults were loaded, and while Master Zaro set low standards for story development, he was exacting when it came to production design and visual effects. He loved films with epic scenes, so the movies he made were filled with them.

Movie technology was in full bloom in the New Era. A single digital artist could easily create grand and realistic space shots. But sophisticated viewers could always spot flaws.

The proliferation of special effects created a niche audience that preferred big-budget blockbusters that used actual sets and props.

And the reason such viewers enjoyed Wireless Media releases was because they often used the real thing instead of props, be they firearms, flying cars, or spaceships.

For his last production, Zaro had rented a spaceship and 10 fighter jets from the military. Several scenes were also shot in space.

Zaro himself was no expert when it came to production design, but as a Renault, he felt he had to distinguish himself. When everyone used special effects, he would use the real thing. Only lavish budgets and splashy moves would live up to the Renault name.

And now Master Renault was on his eighth girlfriend and Wireless Media was gearing

up for their eighth production. It was an old-fashioned damsel in distress movie.

Usually, Zaro would hire a famous actor to star alongside his girlfriend. When he was in the mood, he would make a cameo appearance himself. But this time, Senior Master didn't want to guest star. He wanted to be the leading man proper. So Wireless Media's eighth production had an even larger budget than usual. Zaro ordered the filmmakers to rent three battleships and nearly 50 fighter jets.

Of course, the battleships and fighter jets were steered and piloted by actual soldiers. As impulsive as Zaro was, he wasn't stupid enough to let non-professionals man the battleships and fighter jets. If any of them were damaged during shooting, his father would skin him alive.

Zaro had the perfect excuse cooked up when he approached his father for his military connections—the film would promote the military, boost recruitment, and help clamp down on draft dodgers.

In the New Era, a mandatory two-year period of military service was required for both men and women. The length of service was scaled back to one year after 200 years. Still, people went to extraordinary lengths to avoid serving.

Leizhou had been plagued by a series of high-profile desertions not too long ago involving several rather prominent celebrities, which generated considerable public discussion.

Zaro's father didn't buy his son's story for one second, but alas, his father—Zaro's grandfather, the governor himself—was already on board. Dad had no choice but to comply grudgingly. As a result, he was ostracized within the military and treated like a leper. The insults made in private were even worse.

Someone once joked that Zaro was born to screw over his father.

The latest production generated buzz within Renault's entertainment industry because of the huge budget and the large number of military rentals. Others saw a golden opportunity.

No matter how crappy the film turned out to be, people would still flock to see it. It would probably draw a larger audience than Wireless Media's previous seven movies. Any role in the film offered great exposure. Agents were dying to place their clients.

Apart from actors, composers also wanted in. They scrambled to offer their best songs. Many even offered discounts.

But Zaro didn't like any of the demos he received. Yet his appearance in the film called for the most epic song, so he decided to hire the best composer in town.

Just as he was about to shop for composers, word broke of the magical songs that had a healing effect on a Hull virus patient. The story piqued Zaro's curiosity. He ordered his underlings to obtain copies of "Divine Punishment" and "Cocoon Breach." The songs weren't available for download in Leizhou, but Zaro had his connections.

After listening to the two songs, he made contact with Silver Wing immediately. He loved the first two movements. Judging from the evolution of the songs, Zaro figured the third movement would strike his fancy even more.

He never used pieces that had been previously released on his movie soundtracks. They were too familiar and wouldn't add to the class of the film. He was starring in this eighth production, after all. His entrance had to be accompanied by a brand new, epic song. Only that kind of background music befitted his status.

Most blockbusters hired professional composers to write songs tailored to their plot and different scenes, also known as made-to-order songs.

So Zaro had people reach out to Silver Wing to see if the composer of the first two movements was willing to write a song for his movie. But Silver Wing refused immediately. The reason they gave was that the composer was too busy working on the third movement.

That pissed Zaro off, but Silver Wing was adamant in their refusal. There was nothing he could do. Zaro could make mountains move simply by flaunting his family name in Renault, but people in Yanzhou were less likely to extend a similar courtesy.

After pondering the matter, Zaro asked Silver Wing roughly when the third movement was coming out. The answer was January, which was when Wireless Media's eighth movie was being released. So Zaro decided to buy the rights to the third movement.

Zaro wanted to buy the third movement outright, which meant it would not be released online in Yanzhou. He was willing to pay extra.

But Silver Wing responded with an equally definite no.

Zaro was so furious he cursed in his office the entire day.

Even paying a premium couldn't get them the third movement. Zaro's assistants and his agent told him to give up.

"There are quite a few composers in Leizhou who write symphonic pieces. If you haven't found one you like, just sift through some more," Zaro's agent pleaded. The movie was already over budget. It was just a matter of commissioning a song. There were so many movie composers in Leizhou. All they had to do was find a reputable one. It was going to be a crappy movie anyway. The most important thing was for Zaro to get his fix from the starring role. What was the point of being so exacting?

The agent was already in a tough spot. Other members of the Renault family were already upset that Zaro had made so many trashy, soulless, and critically panned movies. He already been summoned by a few of them, who had asked him to restrain Zaro and stop tarnishing the family name. Alas, his words carried little weight. Senior Master Zaro didn't care what he said.

At Zaro's insistence, his people kept negotiating with Silver Wing. They finally reached an agreement. Silver Wing would agree to the placement, but it would only license the song for exclusive use for one month. The third movement would still be launched in Yanzhou as scheduled, while in Leizhou, the release would be delayed by a month, until Wireless Media's eighth film ended its theatrical run. Silver Wing's price: 10 million.

Zaro signed off on the deal.

His agent wanted to cry.

In the first half of the year, the filmmakers behind an expensive Renault space war flick had commissioned a famed music cooperative to write a song. That only cost some 3 million. The filmmakers owned the rights to the song outright, which meant they could keep recycling the song in other movies without paying additional royalties. But now Wireless Media had spent 10 million licensing a song from Silver Wing for a mere month.

Where did Silver Wing find such gumption?

And yet Zaro had agreed to the deal. What was he thinking? Did money grow on trees? He really was clueless about his finances.

"Senior Master, should we maybe reconsider?" the agent pleaded again.

"There's no need. Let's do it. Let's speed up the shoot. The day the third movement is released in Yanzhou will be the day our movie is released!" He didn't want the background music that introduced his character showing up elsewhere first.

"But the price and the terms..." Zaro's agent made a last-ditch effort.

"They're fine." Zaro was already fed up. He wanted to get on set and figure out when his first scenes were. His stunt double had been filming until now.

Zaro's agent was the picture of doom. He wiped his forehead.

You had to be nuts to spend so much to license a song. They were bound to become the laughing stock of the industry.

He knew there was no room for savings on production design, given how demanding Senior Master was, but not being able to cut costs on music rights and going over budget instead—how very indulgent.

"I almost forgot—did Silver Wing mention any other conditions?" Zaro asked.

"The composer has requested that the third movement only be used for the scene he specified and no where else," an assistant standing next to him said.

Zaro looked at his assistant and smiled. "That's what we were thinking all along! That's where I make my grand entrance."

"Indeed. That's why Wireless Media agreed to the deal," the assistant said.

It was just one scene and they couldn't even play the entire song. For that, Silver Wing had demanded 10 million. *Only a dumb*ss so loose with his cash like Zaro would agree*, his agent thought.

Ten million! Were they paying for golden bricks?

Taking note of his agent's sour mood, Zaro chuckled and said, "Look how stingy you are."

"It's not that I'm stingy, Senior Master. It's 10 million dollars, for crying out loud. What

if the song doesn't work?"

"Then we'll buy another song, the song you picked earlier. We'll use that as backup."

So they would splurge on another song? What about the 10 million?

"Then we'd have to write off that 10 million," his agent said.

"Then write it off. I can afford it," Zaro responded casually.

Yeah, you're a Renault, 10 million is like 1000 dollars to you, but for mortals like us, it's like treading ice, the agent cursed silently.

Given the cumulative profits from Wireless Media's first seven movies, they could break even despite taking a 10 million dollar loss this time.

That was also why Zaro was so carefree. They were breaking even, even making the occasional profit. He could keep fooling around in the entertainment industry.

"Is it worth it?" Zaro's agent was still in pain.

"Are you suggesting it's not worth it spending this much on music for a crappy film?" Zaro looked at his agent askance.

The agent flashed an embarrassed smile, thinking to himself, *So you realize this is a shit production too?*

"Wanna hear a saying?" Zaro asked.

"Yeah?" The agent and assistant were all ears.

"Since the beginning of time, crappy films have generated hit songs."

Chapter 50

This Mofo Ain't Backing Down

Zaro was rather indifferent to the online commentary that all his movies were crap. He knew the movies he produced were shallow and lacked depth, but that was the kind of film he liked—simple, straightforward, epic scenes, and visually exciting. Most importantly, they pleased his girlfriends. He felt good about them too.

When he had launched a production company after graduation, he had been in it only for the experience. He hadn't thought that far ahead and was prepared to incur a loss. And yet he was able to break even.

So eventually, Zaro had become addicted. He did things his way, regardless of how the media and general public trashed him. Who cared what other people said? As his uncle once put it: "How are you going to get through life without a bit of thick skin?"

But now, he no longer wanted to be a spectator. He wanted to act himself, to star in an epic love story and play an invincible hero who saved the world.

Everyone aspired to be a hero. Zaro actually quite envied the men and women of his generation who joined the military. He wasn't cut out for it and he didn't want to suffer, so he would fulfill his dream through a movie. That was much easier.

He was ready to go all out. Ten million for a song, even if it was all for nothing—no problem. It was a movie built with cash. If he didn't like the song, so be it.

He had thought about poaching the composer behind "Divine Punishment" and "Cocoon Breach" to tailor a song for him, but Silver Wing had done a good job of keeping the musician under wraps. All he could do was wait. If he liked the third movement, then he would make a move on the composer. If not, he would blacklist Silver Wing and the composer and not work with them again.

Zaro was a big spender, but he wasn't stupid. If the song wasn't to his liking, he wasn't paying a cent.

As for the plot of the movie?

He didn't care. It was just a movie, after all. It just had to be entertaining. The story didn't matter. This year, it was an ordinary person who saved the world by defeating monsters, next year it'd be a mutant, and the year after the next it'd be a superman. And then a monster battling other monsters the following year. It was all the same.

For his eighth production, he was going to battle beasts in robot armor. How cool was that? His stunt double was doing all the fighting. All he had to do was show his handsome face at some point. Piece of cake.

Zaro had even named the film himself: "God of War."

People teased after hearing the title: such hubris. Does his great-grandfather know?

Zaro's great-grandfather, the father of Leizhou's current governor, had belonged to the famed "God of War" unit when he was a young soldier. He had gone on to a highly decorated career and served as the deputy commander of the Leizhou military.

Now he was an old man, more than 190 years old. He had stopped wading into family affairs a long time ago, ever since his son became governor of Leizhou. Still, the old man wielded considerable influence. Every year, some of his former troops would pay him a visit.

While Zaro's father was ostracized every time his son loaned military vehicles and equipment for his movies, he was never purged. That wasn't entirely on account of Zaro's grandfather, the governor. The top brass also felt they had to show respect for Zaro's great-grandfather. As long as Zaro's demands weren't too outlandish and he was willing to pay, they were willing to turn a blind eye.

But Zaro didn't think there was anything wrong with the title. He was starring this time. It wouldn't be worth the effort unless he crafted a heroic image for himself.

As he was pondering the title, his agent ducked out to take a call, then scrambled back.

The agent looked miffed. "Senior Master, we have a problem."

"What now?" Zaro asked.

"'King of Snipers' has bumped up its release date to Jan. 1."

No wonder his agent was so alarmed. The reason they had scheduled their movie for

a January release was because there was little competition, only a few low-budget productions. Considering Zaro's ability to generate buzz, they were confident about their box office returns. They weren't aiming high anyway. All they wanted was to break even.

Zaro himself was a walking advertisement. So many people followed his every move. He was a frequent topic of discussion even on other continents.

"Leizhou Senior Master's New Girlfriend Revealed." "Eligible Bachelors on Each Continent You Don't Want to Piss Off." "Senior Master Zaro Named Leizhou Male Celebrity of the Year." The headlines never ended. Even though Zaro didn't sing or act and had no other talents, the constant attention made him a bona fide celebrity in Leizhou.

News of Zaro's starring role had dominated entertainment headlines for days. Interest was huge, so Zaro's agent wasn't worried about the box office. This was the first time Senior Master had starred in a movie, so many people were curious. The movie didn't have to be a big hit. They just wanted to break even.

But now, a genuine blockbuster that was scheduled for release in February had bumped up its release date to January. Somehow, this move seemed aimed at Zaro.

"King of Snipers" was a coproduction by Leizhou's two leading film studios. It featured an all-star lineup. Rumor was that it was awards bait. Movie fans were looking forward to it keenly, and films that catered to mass tastes and critics alike tended to have more depth and cultural significance.

A great plot, top actors, and a big budget to boot—even outsiders could tell a movie like this was a box office guarantee that would also likely meet critical approval. So when news that "King of Snipers" was being released in February broke, Zaro and company had breathed a sigh of relief. It was such good news that they didn't have to go up against such a Goliath.

But now, "King of Snipers" was being bumped up. What could they do?

The good thing was that they had never nailed down their release date. They had announced a January release, but they could still push it back to February. All they had to do was come up with an excuse to feed the press.

Zaro also started getting calls from members of his family.

"Yes, Uncle. What is it?"

"Zaro, have you heard that 'King of Snipers' is bumping up its release date? Why don't you push back your release date by a month."

Zaro hung up before his uncle finished. He sat on his chair pouting.

Less than a minute later, another call came through. Zaro took a quick glance at the caller ID and put the call through.

"What's so urgent, Auntie? If it's about my movie, stop now."

"Zaro, don't be impulsive."

Zaro hung up again and threw his tablet to the floor.

His terrified assistant tip-toed to the tablet and picked it up in case Senior Master wanted to keep using it.

Zaro was fuming. Everyone wanted him to back down, but he was no fool.

The filmmakers behind "King of Snipers" wouldn't have bumped up their release date so publicly without the tacit approval of the Renault family.

Zaro was right. The move did in fact have the blessing of the Renault family. The point was to give Zaro a reality check, to make him realize that his success was due to respect for the Renault family. The time had come to burst his bubble, to restrain his personality through hardship.

Zaro had too many enemies. He had publicly trashed several leading actors. In revenge, their agencies had banded together and coordinated with the Renault family. The release date for "King of Snipers" was advanced after the Renaults gave the go-ahead.

Members of the Renault family, including Zaro's father, had spoken privately of wanting to teach Zaro a lesson, within reason. Just a bit of real competition would do. They didn't want to overdo it. If the Renault family ended up losing face, other family members wouldn't sign off on the move.

The Renault family didn't own the continent outright, but it was an indisputable fact

that it was still the most powerful family in Leizhou. And they were still a prominent force 500 years into the New Era. That showed how united they were on key issues.

The shrewd operators in business and entertainment knew how far to push things.

In the Leizhou capital, several investors that backed "King of Snipers" were kidding around in an office.

"It's time to let Zaro know that the only reason his movies made money and broke even in the past is because we gave way on account of his family name."

"We never complained. We even cracked down on the naysayers. But he should be more mature and not just mouth off without regard to our reputations."

"Let's let him find out what real competition feels like."

What else was there to Zaro's movies except for buzz and military hardware?

They were total crap.

Zaro was the target of their sniping.

"The gap in quality is obvious when there's a contrast to Zaro's films. People like Zaro are a nuisance who poison the industry. It's time we industry elders come out and restore order."

News of the earlier release date for "King of Snipers" generated a massive response in the Leizhou entertainment industry.

"God of War" had also announced a January release, so these two hotly discussed films were going up against each other.

Except the quality of the former was guaranteed. You could tell from the names of the director, the screenwriter, the actors, and the production companies. As for the latter... Everyone knew what to expect.

After "King of Snipers" announced its release date, Wireless Media kept putting off a formal announcement on the release date for "God of War," leading to speculation that Zaro was going to cave and push back his movie.

"Looks like 'God of War' won't be screening in January," the editor of a local magazine told a friend in private.

"It's the right move to back down. This is no time to cling on, even if he's a Renault. I'm sure other members of the family have long taken issue with him."

"Yeah, you need to pick your battles. Being too aggressive and egotistical does you no good. He's in his 20s now. It's time to grow up. Zaro has caused too much trouble already. Even other members of the Renault family can't stand him."

"And it's quite the lesson. Zaro is going to get his ass kicked, isn't he?"

"Let's hope that Senior Master can learn his lesson."

"But given Senior Master's personality, will he back down?" others speculated.

Zaro acted like he was king of Leizhou. He was used to having his way. Was he going to back down over a slight hiccup like this?

Wireless Media headquarters.

"Senior Master, should we have someone rework the script?" Zaro's agent asked.

"No. We're almost done with the shoot. How can we change the script now?" Zaro let out an eerie laugh. "You wanna mess with me? This mofo isn't going anywhere. Let's check with Silver Wing and see when the third movement will be completed."

Sensing Zaro's determination, his agent gave up and called one of Duan Qianji's assistants.

After being briefed by her assistant, Duan Qianji asked Fang Zhao, "You're positive you'll be done before January?"

"Yes."

"That's great."

After getting off the phone with Fang Zhao, Duan Qianji issued her orders: "We're sticking to our plan. The third movement will be released on Jan. 1. Get word to Wireless Media that we'll deliver the third movement in late December."

Zaro's agent looked ashen when he heard back. His wistful thinking that Silver Wing might not meet its January deadline was dashed. He didn't want to lie, so he relayed Duan Qianji's message to Zaro unfiltered.

"That's great. Then let's set our release date for Jan. 1. I'm not backing down an inch." Zaro kicked his feet up and started fidgeting hard. "Have the production team hurry up. Let's wrap things up by the end of December. We'll announce the release date now. I'm going head-to-head with them."

The result of the matchup didn't matter. He didn't care about the box office. He just wanted to stick to his guns.

This. Mofo. Ain't. Backing. Down.



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