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THE WATER GOES
DRIP-DROP

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By

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[ENG TRANS] 水滴聲聲 BY 風起漣漪

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Synopsis

It is not unusual for students to play some spooky games when bored and for a freshman in university, they never get boring. I have tried them all, the Ouija Board, whatever, you name it. No harm had come from playing these games until three of my roommates and I played a mysterious game in a dark room.

The fifth person that mysteriously appeared. The sharp drip-drop of water. The large water stain on our dorm wall... No one from Room 308 is going to be spared. Fear of the unknown and tremors of precognition enshrouds us all. What are the perpetual trickles of water? Are they the tears of the dead who yearns for life or the cries of injustice formed by the blood of spirits who have lost their voices?

<http://bltranslation.blogspot.com/>

Chapter 01

*D*rip-drop.

A drop of water falls into the sink and causes a ring of ripples. I tighten the tap and one last drop drips out slowly before it falls quiet again.

“Hurry up, Sunny! We’re leaving!”

I hear Chief’s voice coming from the stairs and I rush over with my lunch. All six of my roommates are standing by the stairs as they roll their eyes or give me a slap for my sloth-like speed.

My name is Xiao Yu and I am a newbie freshman at the prestigious Northern Yu¹ Institution, majoring in engineering physics.

NY is a modern experimental institution that has its own junior high, senior high and college. The requirements to enter are impossibly high but it hasn’t stopped the crowds of applicants from trying to enter. I was lucky to squeeze by and get into NY’s senior high by a single point and then easily into the college with a fifteen-mark freebie for NY senior high students.

My dorm is Room 308 in the Engineering Physics Men’s Dormitory building. The washrooms are right across from our room door. It’s pretty convenient for a midnight piss but not that great when you want to eat, especially when a certain smell wafts in through the wide open door in the summertime.

Perhaps it’s not the best idea to talk about that this close to dinnertime.

The person mumbling while pushing his glasses is the Chief, Wu Fan. He’s obviously our dorm chief since he’s the oldest.

He is two years older than us and is the current Vice Secretary Treasurer of our Student Council. He’s an extremely naggy person and his vision is so horrible that he’s even had surgery done. His glasses have always been one of our prank tools. We would sneakily put them on the target while they are asleep and wake them up. Then we would simply wait, two seconds at the most, for them to howl in confusion and dizziness—it works every time without fail.

The two walking really close together in the forefront are Cheng and Eng. Their real names are Mu Mu and Kong Linglin. Both of them are ethnic minorities; Mu Mu is Uyghur and Kong Linglin is Hui, I believe.

Mu Mu has a light and slightly shy-looking complexion while Kong Linglin looks like a typical person of minority race—you can tell right away he isn’t Han.

But the two of them are a good match for some reason. Mu Mu isn't from a pure Uyghur background so he isn't restricted to certain foods and would always fight us for hotdogs. Even so, he always gets food from the cafeteria with Kong Linglin so we jokingly call them Cheng and Eng after the famous conjoined twins.

The quiet one in the back is Grooms and he's kind of gloomy. I personally feel that he's not a person you would want to be around. His name is Xu Ping², a name that's as plain as his looks. His academic grades are average; he's okay at sports; it seems as if he's mediocre at everything and he never stands out. There's not much difference whether he attends our group activities or not. He's just a person you could easily forget about.

Furthermore, there are burn marks all over his neck, hands and feet. There's no way these marks could be covered up and people always give him strange glances. Plus he's not good with socializing so it's as if there's always a wall around him.

And Casanova, one moment please...

There, there! That tall guy over there getting surrounded by girls the moment he steps out of the dormitory building is Yuan Fei, a.k.a. Casanova.

He's the evil love child of nasty looks and vain personality. Why does he look nasty, you might ask? See, I've always believed that guys who are too good-looking are just trouble for our fellow female students, especially this Casanova, whose moral level is zero and who keeps switching girlfriends every other day! And I say vain personality because this guy is super duper annoying! He's the stuck up type who can utter one thing and drive you nuts.

In conclusion, this person is less than a piece of shit in the mind of yours truly.

And Sunny would be me, all things to all people, naturally, because of my awesome people skills and charming good looks.

Cubs is the youngest in 308. He's actually a year younger than me because he started school early, I think. See this little obedient guy beside me? Isn't he cute? Don't you just want to pinch his chubby little cheeks? His real name is Jin Can³. It's kind of silly but I don't put him down because he's my young grasshopper.

All right. Introductions, complete. Trek for food, also complete. We always eat in the cafeteria due to the unique geographical location of our room and today is no exception.

Mu Mu goes with Kong Linglin to Hui People's Cafeteria to get food and they meet up with us afterwards. A rough battle is inevitable with seven guys and one table full of food. I know Cubs likes chicken so I put my chicken on his plate; Cubs knows I like fish so he sneaks his fillets over to me. We share a knowing smile and dig in.



“Hey Chief, could we use the meeting room t’night?” Kong Linglin asks through a mouthful of roasted beef.

“No activities planned tonight, why?” Wu Fan pushes his glasses.

Kong Linglin flashes a mysterious smile as if he knows some juicy secret. “Mu Mu heard about this super cool spirit game and you need an unused rectangular room. We wanna try it out t’night.”

“Oh, really? How do you play?”

I’m immediately intrigued; I have always been interested in spirit games like these. I wouldn’t be exaggerating when I say I have tried every single one out there. Sadly nothing’s ever came from playing them but I’ve never gotten bored of them.

Mu Mu hurriedly gulps down the roasted eggplant he had in his mouth and starts explaining. “You get a really dark rectangular room and four people to stand, one in each corner of the room, and then the first person would start running. The first person taps the back of the second person when he gets there, and he says ‘tagged’. Then the second person runs and gets to the third person and says ‘tagged’. After one lap, there’ll be one person who reaches the wall and he says ‘touched’. Then this person keeps going and says ‘tagged’ when he taps someone. Then after a few laps no one will say ‘touched’ anymore...”

He flashes a creepy smile. “Meaning another person appears outta nowhere!”

“Oh, oh, I’ve heard about this before,” Cubs exclaims, “I read it somewhere in a book.”

“Sounds fun. I’m in!” I raise my hand right away.

“Alright! You, me, Mu Mu—that makes three. Who else?” Kong Linglin is practically jumping up and down with excitement.

“No!” Wu Fan, our party-pooper Chief, says, “I can’t grant access to the meeting room for personal purposes. It’s against school policy. Not to mention you should stay away from these games—who knows what might happen?”

“Yeah, Sunny, I don’t think it’s a good idea either.” Cubs tugs on my sleeve cautiously. “I heard people who play that kinda stuff run into weird things. Some even lose their lives. Don’t do it.”

“What’s there to be afraid of? What you heard’s proly just bullshit people say on the internet.” I pat my chest confidently. “I’ve played them all. All the talk about your hands moving by themselves is bullshit. Once I asked who my future wife is, then I secretly pushed it in the way I wanted and I ended up with the school cheerleader! Can you believe it?”

“That’s right. She’s never been single—the board doesn’t work.” Someone says in a condescending tone.

My anger flares and I glare at the owner of said voice—Yuan Fei. “Shut up Flying Ape⁴, unless you’re coming with us tonight!”

“Psh, I wouldn’t bother with such stupidity.”

“Chicken!” I narrow my eyes. “I suggest you stay on your planet of the apes if you’re too scared to play *human* games. Earth’s a dangerous place, you know!”

“Reverse psychology won’t work on me, child.” He smirks.

This guy’s just asking for it, isn’t he?

“Okay, settle down.” Wu Fan says impatiently, nudging his glasses again. “If you want to play, go find your own room; I can’t give you access to the meeting room.”

“Oh c’mon please, Chief, you got the keys in your pocket!” I beg in a soft, whiny voice.

“No means no. As a member of the student council, I can’t let you guys use it for personal purposes; as Chief, even though I’m an atheist, I still think there are just too many strange things humans can’t explain...”

I, being a smart cookie, cover my ears while the others all lower their heads in unison and pretend to not hear him, but Chief just goes on with his long winded lecture as if nothing has happened. Chief’s lecture skills are probably the best in the whole school. From natural sciences to cosmic energy, from feudal imperialism to modern society, he can make any little small issue sound directly related to the end of humanity itself, as if us hypothetically summoning anything would turn the world back fifty years.

I sneak a peek at Kong Linglin and Mu Mu, and they give me a look that I return. We then raise our hands in surrender, saying that we will not play that game for the sake of mankind. Unfortunately for us, once Chief gets going it’s hard for him to stop, and he doesn’t give up even when we have returned to our room to do homework.

Chief leaves for the night study block with an armful of books a bit past seven o’clock, and after, Xu Ping the Gloomy leaves without a word and doesn’t come back. Thereafter Kong Linglin, Mu Mu and I start discussing where we can find a rectangular classroom.

“C’mon Cubs, we need a fourth person.”

I try to get him to fill in the fourth spot, but neither threats nor bribes work with the little scaredy-cat. I guess even my obedient grasshopper has his limits.

I push. “What’re you worried about? You got the three of us going with you. C’mon, don’t be so superstitious. It’ll be fun; nothing’ll happen!”

“I said, no!” Cubs shouts and digs in his heels, leaving me hot under the collar. “You guys shouldn’t play it either, Sunny. You never know.”

“Scaredy-cat! Chicken! Shoo, shoo, shoo. Get outta here!” I hiss, frustrated.

I think he is taken back by my anger and he deflates like a pin-pricked

balloon. He droops down over his homework though his pen barely moves. I can tell he has a sad expression on his face.

But I stand my ground.

“You can’t play without a classroom anyway...” Cubs mutters with a slight snuffle.

“You-!”

“Hey, hey, let’s not make things hard fer anyone.” Kong Linglin budes in. “And Xiao Yu, go easy on ‘im. B’sides it’s only seven-thirty. We’ll find someone in time for sure.”

“But what about the room?” Mu Mu asks. “We can’t get any room without a key. Not to mention we need a room that’s unused; the whole school’s locked down by then.”

“We can always hide in a classroom and come out when night study’s over,” I suggest.

“Then don’t count on sleeping in our beds tonight,” Mu Mu sighs.

Then, Yuan Fei shuts his book, goes over and pulls open Chief’s drawer. He fishes out a ring of keys with a pompous look. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

“Ah!” I let out a yelp—How come we didn’t think of that?

I immediately reach out to snatch it from him but, being taller, that stupid monkey raises it high above me like it’s his treasured banana.

“Say! Isn’t it time for you to go back to where you came from, King Kong?” I spit between my clenched teeth. “You better hurry back before your passport expires!”

“Just how many nicknames do I have?”

For once, he doesn’t look so good, and that in turn makes me feel especially good.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just have a habit of calling it how I see it. It’s not your fault you look how you look.”

“Oh is that so?” He gives a careless shrug. “Well, it seems like Chief forgot his keys. I better get it to him in case anybody has ill intents.”

“You little-!”

“Oi!” Mu Mu pulls me back before I tackle that stupid gorilla. “Why can’t you guys just get along for once?”

Said gorilla puts on a contemplating face. “Probably murdered his whole family in my past life.”

I spit, “And I’mma make it even in this life!”

Kong Linglin interrupts. “Alright, quit bickerin’, you’re not in first grade no more.”

He puts an arm around Yuan Fei with a smile so delightful I swear I can see his saliva pooling. “So how ‘bout it, Casanova? We might even summon some

spirit babes, iunno, maybe Nefertiti or Phryne. We'll let ya have dibs."

"No, thanks." He turns him down without a thought.

I stare daggers at him. "Then give us the key!"

He casually glances over at me. "Why should I? It wasn't yours to begin with."

"You're just asking for it, aren't you?" I threaten.

"Is this how you beg?"

"What? Who's begging? You're the chicken who's too scared to play," I retort.

"No, I've played it, and it was lame."

"Wait," I do a double take, "you have?"

"Well, duh. It's been around for a while," he explains unenthusiastically. "I was in high school. The four of us ran around a room for a couple dozen times but nothing happened. In the end we gave up 'cause we got tired of running. It was a waste of time."

"Maybe you did somethin' wrong?" Mu Mu says suspiciously. "Didn't follow all the rules?"

"Cheng!" Cubs looks anxious and his voice jumps an octave. "You make it sound like you want something to come out!"

Sigh. Cubs, you just made the entire male population look bad.

Yuan Fei shrugs. "Whatever the reason, it was lame."

"What was that I heard? Tired?" I cackle. "I guess things aren't always as they seem—tired after couple dozen laps around a room? I think you should just stay outta this. I sure don't want little missy here fainting on us and end up having us carry her back."

"Oh yeah? Let's see who faints first!" Yuan Fei's face darkens and his brows arch up in challenge. All of a sudden, a thunderstorm seems to brew between us.

"Hey, Casanova, Sunny, let's behave." Mu Mu tries to break us up.

"Leave it. We finally got four now anyway," Kong Linglin dissuades.

"Oh, right."

Mu Mu and Kong Linglin are sure glad to avoid the crossfire, watching WWIII about to go down with a bag of popcorn in their hands. Oh, how much I'd give to punch those two in the smacker—what have they been teaching kids these days?



Four suspicious figures quietly slip out the dorm after the lights go out at eleven o'clock and head straight for the meeting room on the top floor of the classroom block.

The desolate NY school yard in the dead of night makes my skin crawl. Only the shuffling of leaves from the bristling wind whooshing between branches

resonates throughout the enormous school yard. Dark clouds enshroud the moon and the wind seems especially cold. I can't help but shiver with goose bumps all over me. In summary: creepy.

I might be braver than most but don't all scary stuff happen on nights as pitch black as this? Plus the moon's nowhere to be found while the cold wind blows tonight; certainly sounds like the setting of many horror stories out there.

"You're sure holding on awfully tight. You're not scared, are you?" Yuan Fei's ridiculing voice interrupts my thoughts.

Huh? Wasn't it Mu Mu who was beside me?

I quickly let go and yell in complaint. "Open the goddamn light, Cheng! I almost ran into a wall, for god's sakes."

A beam of light appears and I sigh in relief, but Mu Mu covers it with his hands again.

"It's too bright."

"What're you talking 'bout? It's so quiet; there's not a soul!" I hiss.

"I hope not. Or else our brave Sunny won't have a chance to scream his lungs out," Yuan Fei taunts.

"You stupid Ape! You just do nothing all day but cross me, don't you?" I spit.

"But it's my biggest contribution for the advancement of socialism," he retorts.

"Put a lid on it, both of you." Kong Linglin grabs me by my collar and straight out drags me into the corridor of the classroom block.

I think the clouds has been blown away because the silvery moonlight is peeking through some windows at the end of the dark corridor. Oddly shaped clouds slowly float across the sky and contorts the thin, long shadows casted by the hazy moonlight. The light and shadow play off the ever-changing shapes like a kaleidoscope. Our leather shoes make sharp squeaks against the floor and send it far into the darkness.

The four of us glance at each other and take off our shoes in unison—R.I.P. here lies four good pairs of socks.

With cold marble underneath my feet I suddenly feel appreciation for my school's unique school motto: cleanliness. If you run a white gloved finger over things it might not be white after, but you can at least be assured that there won't be anything on the floor. No need to worry about stepping on glass or anything like that.

When we finally get to the fifth floor, Mu Mu opens the door carefully and the four of us slide in, shutting the door behind us.

"Alright! Step 1: Success."

The four of us bump our right fists together—the way we celebrate victory in 308.

"We'll head to the back. You guys figure out where you're standing," says

Kong Linglin before he drags Mu Mu to the back of the room.

“You go behind me; I don’t wanna touch you.” I shoot a glare at Yuan Fei even if I’m not sure he can see it.

“Whatever,” he replies indifferently.

Hah, I knew you were a ‘whatever’ kind of person.

“Xiao Yu!” Kong Linglin lowers his voice but it still echoes a little in the quiet meeting room. “Close those curtains over there. We can’t have any light.”

“Roger!”

As soon as we close the curtains of the only two windows in the room, it becomes pitch black—so dark I can’t see my own fingers.

“So we all know the rules, right?” I hear Mu Mu’s voice from the other side of the room.

“I’ll start first. The person ahead of me is Yuan Fei, the person ahead of him is Xiao Yu, and Kong Linglin is ahead of Xiao Yu. There will be three ‘tagged’ and then one ‘touched.’ Stop if you don’t hear ‘touched’ anymore and rendezvous at the podium and we get the hell outta here!”

“Got it.” I jiggle my legs around impatiently. “Let’s start already.”

I can’t believe Mu Mu has thought so far ahead; he doesn’t think something will actually happen, does he?

“I’mma say this beforehand: you’re dead if you call out the wrong thing on purpose!” Kong Linglin threatens. “I’mma hunt you down myself.”

My shoulders droop down in the dark—I was planning to pull a prank on them after a couple of laps.

After Mu Mu’s ‘ready-set-go’, all that’s left in the dark room are running sounds. First, I hear Mu Mu say ‘tagged,’ then after I hear Yuan Fei from behind me I run along the wall to the other corner.

“Tagged!” I call out after touching someone’s plushy back.

I hear that person take off and soon I hear Kong Linglin’s voice.

“Touched.”

Rinse and repeat.

What a boring game! I have touched the wall four times so far. Other than that it’s just been running and more running and calling out ‘tagged’...

I bet the other guys think it’s boring, too. It’s just that no one wants to be the first to say it so we keep going around the room. The only way of telling one person from another in the dark is from their footsteps, pants and calls.

Thump, thump, thump.

Heavy footsteps approach from behind and my shoulder gets tapped lightly.

“Tagged.”

I continue running, secretly regretting agreeing to this game, until I reach a plushy back.

“Tagged.” I drawl.

When is this gonna end?

Minutes slip by but I’ve made up my mind on not being the first to crack. I just run forward without thinking and by the time I snap back to reality I realise I haven’t heard ‘touched’ for a long time.

“Tagged,” a voice calls out behind me.

I start running and I say my line when I tag someone.

But wait, there should be a “touched” for every three ‘tagged,’ and I should’ve hit the wall for every three times I say ‘tagged.’ But I haven’t! There has to be someone ahead of me so that I never touch the wall!

But how is that possible?

After someone says ‘tagged’ behind me, I start running, but slower this time.

Who’s ahead of me? Is it Kong Linglin or...

Touching the back before me sends a numbing chill straight down my spine. I strain my ears and listen; if, for some reason, there is really a fifth person, I should be able to tell their voice apart from the others.

“Tagged,” says Kong Linglin.

“Tagged,” says Mu Mu.

“Tagged,” says Yuan Fei.

Hold it right there! Yuan Fei is supposed to be behind me! But I didn’t get tapped!

“Tagged.” A voice rings from behind me.

It’s slightly off-key because everyone is trying to keep their voice low, but I can clearly tell that it’s Mu Mu.

But how?

I suddenly feel soft in my knees. It should be Yuan Fei who is behind me! I leap forward and hold my hand out instinctively but my arm is shaking. I pull back sharply when I touch something.

“Tagged.”

The person takes off.

“Tagged.” It’s Kong Linglin’s voice.

“Tagged.” It’s Yuan Fei’s.

Mu Mu should be the one after Kong Linglin!

Who’s messing our order up?

“Tagged.” Someone lightly touches my back.

I don’t even bother listening to the voice; I just want to stop, I want to yell ‘stop!’ But the words get stuck in my mouth while my legs continue to run.

I can’t stop shaking but I’m don’t dare to call out. It’s not about losing to Yuan Fei anymore—I’m scared shitless! Am I the only one to notice this? The others haven’t yet? What would that thing do if I call it quits now? I don’t want that thing

to notice me!

Xiao Yu courage level: 0.

“Tagged.” I swallow some saliva to moisten my parched throat.

Did they not notice my wavering voice? Why didn’t they take a second to tease me about it? Not even Flying Ape? What’s wrong with them?

The room is still pitch black. No matter how much I squint or stare I can only make out unknown blackish shadowy figures, that is, until the next round when the person behind me stops and remains silent. My heartbeat quickens to the point I have difficulty breathing.

Then, a hand is on my shoulder. I’m rooted to the spot, scared stiff.

“Let’s stop.” It’s Yuan Fei! “Mu Mu, open the flashlight.”

I can hear the wavering in his voice from where I am. I guess he noticed, too, that there was one extra ‘person.’

A beam of light flickers on from another corner of the room and I hear Kong Linglin’s voice. “Everyone to the podium.”

I instinctively grab on to Yuan Fei’s hand, too scared to consider it embarrassing. He holds on tightly, the sweat collecting between our palms revealing our unsettled nerves. We head towards the podium under the guidance of Mu Mu’s flashlight but at snail’s pace.

What about... Is *it* heading over there too?

My legs are spaghetti right now. I’ve done tons of dangerous stuff in my almost twenty years, whether it’s bungee jumping and roller coasters or spirit games. I love that rush of adrenaline and sense of accomplishment when you’ve overcome something dangerous.

But I’ve never thought about the other world.

Humans are the rulers of this earth, no? All the horror stories of ghosts and spirits and demons are all fictitious, no? The so called supernatural phenomena are just what we call what we can’t explain, no? How could they actually exist?

Mom used to whisper by my ear when I was young: If you don’t behave... the big bad wolf is gonna eat you! Despite this I would wait countless nights for anything to crawl through my window but to no prevail. I actually teased wild captive wolves in the zoo with a branch when I was seven, but that was because I knew there was no danger, not because I was brave.

Roller coasters operate on the laws of physics; bungee jumping takes many safety precautions; wild beasts cannot escape the confines of their cages. Whether it’s Flying over Yellow River or Tight Roping Across the Great Wall, all you have to do is use bravery to accept the possibility of failure under extremely high safety factors. Therefore, bravery is just doing something that others don’t dare to do.

I’m brave because I dare to. I dare to because I understand the risks and dangers and when I know there’s no immediate threat on my life I can dive right

into it.

But I've never considered the existence of another independent factor.

What is *it*? What kind of power does it possess? Will it harm me? Will it kill me? Am I its match? Can I escape?

The most feared in this world is the unknown.

Mu Mu carefully sweeps the flashlight across the room. There are no suspicious figures or things other than the four of us. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Let's head back." Kong Linglin's voice is very calm, and it is because it's too calm that I suspect he noticed the fifth 'person' too.

His proposal gets immediate approval from everyone and Mu Mu keeps the light on, not worrying about getting caught. The four of us huddle close around the only light source, no one says another word.

Then a crisp, clear sound resonates in the quiet building.

Drip-drop.

My footsteps falter. "What was that?"

"Huh?" Mu Mu turns to me with a highly-strung look. "Quit it. I'm so tired I could drop so quit playin'!"

I can hear fatigue in his voice; I can tell he's on the brink of snapping. I guess they all noticed, huh.

"Oh, nothing. Just heard some water dripping. Don't worry 'bout it." I quickly give him a reassuring pat.

"Probably just a loose faucet in some lab." Yuan Fei pushes me forward.

"Let's hurry, don't wanna bump into the night watch."

I lean against the wall to get more support for my wobbly legs. I can feel Yuan Fei's hands shaking ever so slightly on my shoulders but I take some comfort from the warmth. I suppose even my arch nemesis can be useful once in a while.

Drip-drop.

The sound of water droplets echoes throughout the fifth floor. Its acuity makes it sound close but the empty echoes sound distant.

I look back at the staircase and leave the building with the guys in silence, but somehow that tinkling sound keeps ringing in my ears.

Drip-drop.

¹ Judging from the name 豫 (*yu4*) this academy is most likely in the province of Henan.

² His first name is 平 (*ping2*) which means flat or normal.

³ The two characters are 金 (*jin1*), which means gold and 燦 (*can4*), which means dazzling.

⁴ Pun on Yuan Fei's name. 袁 (*yuan2*) 罪 (*fei1*), his name, said backwards sounds like 飛 (*fei1*, fly) 猿 (*yuan2*, ape).



Chapter 02



By the time the four of us make it back to our dorm, we're not trying to be careful anymore like when we were sneaking out, instead we shoot straight for our individual beds like arrows, waking everyone else.

"What's goin' on?" Chief asks groggily.

But no one answers him. He turns around and curls back into his blankets, but I know there'll be endless nagging and questions in the morning.

Screw it! Too tired to care. I swear climbing Taishan wasn't even this taxing.

My blankets warm up and fatigue seeps into me. My eyelids drift down and finally shut.

In that hazy moment between light and deep sleep, my eyes crack open a tiny bit. The room is filled only with the sound of everyone's low breathing and the only light source comes from the ventilation window above the dorm door. I can see a dim yellow bulb wavering outside from the top bunk. I quickly shut my eyes against the dry air until something sounds amid the tranquility.

Drip-drop.

Water? It's the only thing that comes to mind.

Perhaps it's a loose faucet in the washroom across the hall. But it sounds too close to be. Perhaps because it's too quiet at nighttime. I've never heard such clear dripping of water before, as if it were right beside my ears.

Click. Creeeaaak.

The door opens.

I grumble and open my eyes. With the light from the hallway, I can faintly make out a black figure slowly pushing the door open. It might be my exhausted mind playing trick on me but its movements are extremely delayed, and along with the creak of the door the whole thing drags out like a slow-mo scene from a movie.

Who is it? From the look of that skinny head, it's probably Glooms. Why the heck is he so sneaky going for a piss? What a weirdo.

He steps in very slowly and delicately, making no noise other than the door's creak. I can only see a dark figure moving slowly once the door closes again.

He's walking so evenly...it's almost like floating.

I let out a yawn. Just when I want to say something I notice he has stopped

beside Kong Linglin's bed and then he starts climbing up the bunk bed.

*You idiot, your bed is over by the windows! Above Chief's! Across from mine!
For crying out loud.*

I shrug and let fatigue take over.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

The water goes lightly, drip-drop, through the whole night.



I wake up refreshed the next day. The others also seem better after a good night's rest, laughing and joking around. Chief starts his lecture while preparing for his classes today. The four of us denies all charges of going out last night in unison, our alibi being that we went to the washroom together.

“Oh yeah, which one of you idiots slept in the bed above Eng last night?”

I leer at Grooms quietly making his bed. Our eyes meet and his brows scrunch together in confusion.

Wait, it wasn't him?

“What? There was someone up there last night?” Kong Linglin bursts out laughing. “I wonder who'd want to sleep on bare planks.”

“It was you, idiot!”

“No! You!”

The room is bustling and hustling with our taunts and teases.

We get tired after a while and start heading down to the cafeteria for food when Mu Mu noticed something.

“Hey, look,” he calls out, pointing to the wall near Kong Linglin's bed. “Is that a leak?”

I follow in his finger's direction and there is indeed a huge water stain on the wall his bed is pushed up against. The origin of the leak is behind the top bunk so it looks as if the water's been leaking from the bed above. But that's impossible—there's nothing up there to leak.

“It's probably a leak from next door, then.” Cubs touches the wall curiously, his fingers becoming covered with water droplets.

“Uh, hello? 309's storage space. No one lives there. There're only old beds and stuff.” Kong Linglin tears some toilet paper and wipes the wall—the paper is instantaneously dripping with water. “A pipe or two broke, probably. Let's get the caretaker to take a look in the afternoon.”

“Calling Chief! We have an important mission for you!” I slap Wu Fan on the back and chuckle good-heartedly.

He doesn't say anything; it's his responsibility to take care of us anyway!

The morning drama wraps up soon after. We eat breakfast and the six of us freshmen head off to our individual classrooms.

Other than Wu Fan, the rest of us are all freshmen in the Engineering Physics Faculty but we have different majors, for example I'm majoring in Modern Physics while Mu Mu and Kong Linglin are majoring in Radiophysics so our classes are in different places.

I peer at Yuan Fei walking haughtily behind me. Why does it have to be him? Xu Ping is in Modern Physics, too, but he's in section 2. Why do I have to be in the same class as this gorilla?

"Cubs!" I catch him before he heads upstairs to his Pharmaceutical Engineering classes. "Wait for me later. Let's get lunch together."

"Mmkay!" He answers cheerfully.

I suppose the reason why I'm so close with Cubs, other than the fact he's super adorable, is because he never holds a grudge no matter how bad I treat him.

Lecture on Plasma Energy. The minutes tick by while I yawn uncontrollably to the teacher's flat voice reciting the textbook for his dear life. I really try to pay attention at first for the teacher's sake but soon I start nodding off.

The teacher probably couldn't stand seeing half of the class dozing either so right when the bell rings he shoots out the door without another word. The next moment it's as if the whole class wakes up and it becomes livelier than a summer carnival. Then the sound of things scattering onto the floor from the back of the room turns everyone's attention.

I catch a glimpse of Yuan Fei gathering his books and stationery from the floor looking pale as a ghost before booking it out the room as if his life depends on it.

Diarrhea. My first guess.

"Hey, Xiao Yu, maybe you should go take a look at him. He didn't look too well; is he sick?"

Within half a minute I'm surrounded by a bunch of girls urging me to skip class. Peer pressure is a powerful thing. Next thing I know, I'm walking out of the room before the bell rings again.

I stroll to our dorm, whistling a joyful tune—like I give a damn about him. All the 'bros before hoes' and other bro-code shit don't apply to us but since I have such a nice excuse to skip class I might as well pretend to care a little.

The door isn't locked when I get back and Yuan Fei is actually sleeping away in his bed. He has the top bunk beside my bed; Mu Mu sleeps on the bottom. I take my shoes off and step on Mu Mu's bed to get to him.

"You sick or somethin'?" I nudge him really hard a couple of times.

He rips his blankets off all of a sudden and what I see shocks me. His face is pale beyond description and his eyes are red as if he has been crying. His

forehead is coated with sweat and his breaths are more like pants.

“Hey! Are you okay?” I’m not teasing anymore; he looks really bad.

He just glares at me, panting, but not saying a word. It seems as if he’s frightened, judging from his violently quivering hands.

“How’re you feelin’? Do you wanna see the nurse?” I swipe my hand across his forehead—holy shit, where was he when there was a drought?

“D-d-did, d-did you...” His voice is quivering more than his hands.

“Huh?”

He shuts his mouth and dives back into his blankets.

I shake him, not giving up. “C’mon, what were you saying?”

“Nothing,” a muffled voice comes through the blankets.

“I’m gonna go if you don’t wanna tell me.” I exclaim and jump off the bed.

I’m putting on my shoes when I hear him toss around and pull his blankets off but he hides once more when I stand up.

If you want me to stay that badly, just say so, geez.

Peering at the round lump on the bed, I heave a sigh. I guess I should stay, even if I don’t know what’s wrong, because he’s just like a terrified child right now, and you shouldn’t leave terrified children by themselves.

So I just jump on to Mu Mu’s bed and pop a CD in. I turn the volume down without much thought—this way I can still hear him if he needs something.

I glance at the bunk bed across from me. The stain is two-thirds the way down, soon it will reach Kong Linglin’s bed. I quickly get some paper and dab at it. The dry paper turns into a wet blob of gunk.

How is it leaking this much?

I search around for a place where the leak might come from, and I finally pinpoint the only possibility to be Room 309. There can’t be this much water unless it’s coming from next door.

I stop before Room 309 and jump up a couple of times to peek through the vents, but all I can see are wooden boards.

“Is anyone there? I’m your next door neighbour.” I don’t know why but I start knocking on the door and ask as if I’m expecting a reply.

Of course none came.

I chuckle at myself for being so silly before returning to 308. I put the music back on.

Drip-drop.

When I shut our room door, I think I hear a drop of water drop from afar.

Yuan Fei doesn’t stir for the longest time so my eyes start getting heavier and heavier out of boredom. I close the CD player and let the sleepiness take over me. I think the water’s still dripping in my hazy state.

Better get that damn tap fixed soon.

And I fall asleep.

Who knows after how long, the bed suddenly rocks violently. My eyes snap open in time to see Yuan Fei landing on the floor from his top bunk. The space between beds is obviously not big enough for such manoeuvres and before I know it he's tripping hard over table legs and chair legs.

I jump up. "What the hell? Are you outta your mind?"

I do a double take when he looks up at me. His eyes are bloodshot, his gaze flickering nervously like a madman. He stares at me wildly, shakes my hand off and runs out the room without even putting some shoes on.

"Yuan Fei!" I dash out after him.

He races towards the stairwell as if his life depends on it. I've never seen him like this. All I can do is call his name while trying to catch up to him. Bewildered, he misses a step all of a sudden and starts falling down the staircase. I yelp and watch helplessly as he tumbles from the third floor to the next landing.

"Yuan Fei!" I hurry down the steps and help him up. "You okay, man? You hurt anywhere?"

It seems that the fall knocked some sense into him. He collapses against the wall, panting harshly, his pale lips trembling nonstop.

"Hey there," I coax gently, "Can you tell me what happened just now?"

He weakly shakes his head and closes his eyes. I try to get him to stand up but I think he doesn't even have enough energy to do that, so I bring his arm around my neck and haul him back to our room.

I'm not strong enough to get him into his bed so I just leave him on Mu Mu's for now. The caretaker comes after hearing the racket earlier and asks me what happened. I laugh it off as an accident: Yuan Fei rolled out of the bed and fell, nothing else. I especially emphasized that it was not a fight.

The caretaker looks at him worriedly, which is only normal the way he looks now, and instructs me to take care of my roommate and remember to bring him to the infirmary when he comes to.

I take this chance to report the leak and stain to the caretaker. He⁴ opens Room 309 to investigate and I take a peek inside. There's nothing inside but dust and more dust, nothing to cause a water leakage.

So where is the water coming from?

After the caretaker leaves, I grab a chair and plop down beside Yuan Fei, not taking any chances this time.

Drip-drop.

There it goes again.

I was just about to head across the hall to check when Yuan Fei suddenly jerks violently and opens his eyes wide as if he's been electrocuted. I honestly just about jump out of my skin from him staring wide-eyed at nothing and shaking

like a leaf like that—it's as if he's possessed.

“Okay, that's it. We're going to the doctor's, now.”

With that said his gaze finally slowly fixes on to me and he stays quiet catching his breath.

“Yuan Fei,” I coax softly once more. He's a bundle of nerves right now; I think if I so much as coughed he might just have a break down. “Let's go see the doctor, okay?”

I use my sleeve and gently clean the cold sweat off of his face. He suddenly grabs on to my wrist and words finally start to form around those trembling lips.

“D-d-don't g-go.”

“Okay, I won't. You can keep holding my hand if it helps.”

He clings on to my right hand with two hands and I feel his trembling through the contact. I can't help but tense up too. Soon I can't tell whose sweat is whose.

The bell rings several times but I have no idea which block it is anymore. Slowly the pressure on my right hand lessens and I can tell from his breathing that he's finally asleep. I keep my hand there despite my prickling numb arm and study his frowning face. It hits me that he's really in trouble this time.

I start hearing more people around in the building so I guess it's lunch break. Soon everyone arrives one by one. They all look surprised to see Yuan Fei holding my hand and sleeping in Mu Mu's bed. Cubs was huffing and puffing about being ditched but when he saw Yuan Fei he quietly inquired about his condition.

Yuan Fei wakes up a bit past one in the afternoon and I take my arm back. The prickling sensation is so strong I can't help but let out a yelp. He looks kind of guilty and his lips jerk a couple of times before muttering his thanks.

That's it?! And to think I lent my arm for so long.

I don't reply and push the lunchbox Chief got for him over. I dig into my portion even though it's cold now out of hunger. He picks a bit here and there, cleans up his utensils and climbs back into his bed.

Pig.

I curse him in my mind and then jog to the washroom to wash our lunchbox, humming.

Drip-drop.

I freeze for a moment, then reach out to turn the tap off. I survey the empty washroom; all the faucets are dry as a desert, not a drop of water in sight.

Drip-drop.

It's so close but there's nothing abnormal with any of these faucets.

I rush to the toilets. The main hatch is on but it's dry everywhere else, no sign of leaking.

Drip-drop.

Whatever, not my problem. I roll my eyes.

After I finish, I huddle on Cubs' bed and start chatting away with him quietly; Chief is doing Advanced Math; Xu Ping is taking a nap while Mu Mu is napping on Kong Linglin's bed because his was being used by Yuan Fei; and Kong Linglin is writing to his family.

I glance at Yuan Fei's bed since I can't see him from the bottom bunk, but I guess he's sleeping like a log judging from the lack of noise.

I guess he's all right now?

Chief wakes us up one by one a bit before two-thirty. We freshen up and leave for afternoon classes. I purposely walk next to Yuan Fei while thinking to myself about how kind and saintly I am, but the damn monkey keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't even react to my taunts. I have to say my self-esteem feels a little dejected and undignified from that.

Screw you, monkey!

I pick the farthest seat from him when I get to class. I don't even know what I'm upset for, though.

Boring English lecture. The pretty English teacher spews a string of alien tongue with her angelic voice. Bored to tears, I start doodling on my English notebook waiting for the bell to go off.

5

After class, Yuan Fei, Cubs and I walk back to our room together but when we get there, Mu Mu and Xu Ping are both knocking at the door.

"What's up? Forgot your keys?" I laugh.

"No, it's locked from the inside." Mu Mu says, panicking. "We've been knocking forever, but nothing."

Other than a lock that all of us have the keys to, there's a latch on the inside. Once it's latched, unless the person inside lets you, there's no way in. We even have a name for it: 308's privacy insurance.

I knock a few times and put my ear against the door. Nothing. Sounds like no one's in but then how could it be locked? Did the person pass out or something?

"Who is it? Wu Fan or Kong Linglin?"

"Not Chief. It should be Eng." Mu Mu looks like he's on pin and needles. "He said he felt dizzy and left right after class without even bringing his things. I rushed back after getting all his stuff but he's not answering no matter how much we knock. Chief already went to get security to pry it open. I hope he didn't faint in there."

I pound on the door. "Kong Linglin! You in there? Yo! Talk to me!"

Getting no response, I place my ear on the door once again, hoping to catch something, a moan, anything. I guess my expression got everyone to hold their breath and it becomes so quiet I can hear the sound of my own breathing.

Then, I hear the tiniest sound from behind the door.

Drip-drop.

Water?

I perk my ears and continue to listen. It's really small but I'm sure it's coming from our room. It's the sound of a single droplet falling into a larger pool.

Did someone tip over a glass of water?

I get down straight on my knees and try to look through the door crack. But I can't see anything, so I have to lie flat on the ground.

"Goddamn, Kong Linglin. You're doing my laundry this week." I curse lowly.

With my face right up against the floor, I can finally see the room but what I see scares me stiff.

Red.

Thick, thick red. Below Kong Linglin's bed. Everywhere.

Red. Makes my blood curdle. Red. Like blood.

Drip-drop.

The soft sound makes me jump in my skin as the red on the floor slightly quivers. Then another.

Drip-drop.

I shoot up and backward but I hit the cold wall before I can even stand up straight.

"What's wrong, Xiao Yu? What's going on inside? What d'you see?"

What did I see?

Red. Ink? So thick, so red that it's black. So much, so much, as if someone got bled out.

What was it I saw?

What was it?

"Sunny, you okay?"

Cubs is alarmingly shaking me by the shoulders but nothing comes out of my mouth. I can only bore holes into that tightly shut door and tremble uncontrollably.

It's not blood. It can't be. It's ink. It must be.

"Help! Someone!" Mu Mu screams.

I really scared them, huh. But I can't just jump back up with a smile and act as if nothing happened. I'm dumbstruck, slumped on the floor.

Chief and two security guards come rushing over with a long wrench. One of them rams the door a couple of times before deciding to pry it open. By this time, the commotion here at 308 has attracted students from other rooms and soon the hallway's filled with people pointing and whispering.

I sincerely hope Kong Linglin would walk out laughing when the door gets pried open. He'd slap me on my back and cackle: 'I got you there, didn't I?' and

then I would punch that sucker. I'd get made fun of by the guys for a long time and all my classmates would call me a chicken and people from other classes would point to me in the halls and say: 'Hey, that's the guy who got so scared he couldn't stand! Xiao Yu!' and then the story of my cowardice would become a classic story at our school, and then-

The door has been opened.

I watch the guards frozen in place. Then a terrified shriek from Mu Mu. Then screams from everyone who was curious enough to go forth. Everyone screaming and running for their lives.

Cubs doesn't. He just holds on to my shoulder, shuddering. I pull him into my embrace but neither of us seems to stop shuddering.

Why...? I already got ready to be made fun of for the rest of my life. Why does reality have to be so harsh with me?

⁴ Gender of caretaker not specified.

⁵ A passage has been left out due to its tense conflict with the rest of the story:

"If someone had told me that that bell would be the prelude to this tragedy, I would have prayed for time to stop, I would be willing to listen to that boring lecture forever and doodle on my notebook, again and again.

At least then nothing would have happened."

Chapter 03

Everyone from 308 has been gathered in the principal's office. The atmosphere of NY Academy is tense like never before. Police cars have surrounded the premise. Reporters and curious citizens are packed against the gates. The five guys and I are getting interrogated separately by different officers, asked again and again about Kong Linglin's recent behaviour and if he was involved in any conflicts.

I didn't see it but from the snippets I have heard from the investigators I get the picture: Kong Linglin's body on his bed, flesh sliced open all over, so deep that bone shows through, blood sprayed all across the room, the floor soaked in blood...

Even the police officers paled.

Who did it? What for?

The interrogation lasts three hours, followed by comfort consultations with our homeroom teachers, counsellors and principal. I don't have the strength to even distinguish what they are saying, nor the strength to pretend as if everything is all right, but I do follow my homeroom teacher to our new dorm, 501. The fifth floor is for graduating students. There aren't as many restrictions here. Furthermore, most of them have left school already so there are lots of rooms available.

The atmosphere is ridiculously heavy when we all meet at 501. We sit around a table, faces pale, not speaking, not moving.

"I bet," I try my hardest to sound normal. "We'll make national headlines."

No replies. Just more silence. I really want to crack a joke but my mind's blank.

"Do you think, a human did it?" Wu Fan's voice is like thunder in the silence.

My blood turns cold and my heart starts beating furiously. From the looks of it the others feel so too.

If they were human, how would they have executed it? Because even with the sharpest blade, it's impossible to do what they did in such a short period of time.

Unless. Unless it was a customized weapon with several parallel blades, and then slowly pulled through... And considering the amount of blood, it's as if the body was torn open in the middle and separated in half while the person was still alive.

For the first time in my life I despise my specialization, how it lets me easily understand how difficult it is to die that way and then makes me analyse the possibilities...

“Maybe the murderer left through the windows after destroying the corpse,” Cubs stammers. “Since two stories isn’t far from the ground. That’s why the doors were locked from the inside and there was no one inside.”

“Then there should’ve been prints! But the police didn’t find anything suspicious!” Chief starts getting steamed up. “It couldn’t have been more than ten minutes from the time he got back to the time we got the door open. It’s impossible to bleed that much just from wounds. I reckon they used some sort of machinery to draw the blood out after wrecking the body. Plus-”

“Stop it!” Mu Mu is almost roaring. “What’re you tryin’ to say here? What’re you tryin’ to prove? The police are the ones to investigate, not you! Think about Eng; we were just foolin’ around with him earlier today! How can you be thinkin’ this shit now?!”

The room falls silent once more, only our heavy breathing can be heard.

“Did you guys,” Grooms suddenly speaks, “play that game?”

His words are few but the memories of that night in the meeting room surfaces in my mind. I glance at Mu Mu and Yuan Fei. Their pale faces tell me they’re thinking the same thing.

“You what?” Wu Fan shouts.

“What what? There’s no such thing as ghosts! You hear me?” Mu Mu almost springs up from the table and yells back at Chief.

I understand why he’s reacting this way. He’s realised too, probably, that extra ‘person’...

“Now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. These two things might not be related at all,” I point out.

Now, I might say so but I’ve already linked these two events together in my mind. Because that shadow that I saw climb on to the bed above Kong Linglin in the dark of night might really be...

My breathing becomes ragged.

Did we summon something bad by playing that game? Did Kong Linglin die because of that? But why? Does everyone who plays have to die?

Then...what about me?

“Which ones of you played? Quick!” Chief glares at us with tightly drawn fists.

“Mu Mu, Kong Linglin, Yuan Fei, and I,” I breathe.

“Chief, don’t put it like that.” Cubs is sniffing already. “Who says the two are related. Let’s not jump to conclusions, ‘kay?”

Chief starts pacing around the room nervously, rubbing his hands together and

nudging his glasses into place. I know he's trying to think of a solution but what he's said so far has me feeling hopeless already.

What could we possibly do if it really is...

Just then Grooms drops an A-bomb. "Let's summon it again."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Mu Mu jumps up.

"If it's really the supernatural we need to ask them why they're doing this," he analyses. "If there's nothing then we can all rest assured, no?"

I've got to say, I'm actually kind of impressed at how calm Grooms is right now.

"Over my dead body!" Mu Mu screams.

"But it's too late anyway," Grooms continues. "You've already summoned it—the cat's out the bag."

"Xu Ping!"

Mu Mu grabs Grooms by the collar and Yuan Fei and I quickly pull the two apart, but he refuses to let go.

"Enough!" Yuan Fei barks.

The commotion stops. He takes a breath before continuing.

"I agree with Grooms. I'd rather witness it with my very own eyes than be kept in the dark, even if it really is...at least I'd have died knowing why."

"Not you too?" Mu Mu thunders. "Fine, do what you want. Don't count me in!"

He shoots out the door, not forgetting to slam it in our faces. I can't help but smile bitterly. It was he who wanted to play in the beginning.

It is always in times of distress that the pettiness of human nature can be observed.

"You need four to play, right?" Chief nudges his glasses and says calmly.

"There's me, Yuan Fei, that makes two. Who else?"

"Me."

I speak calmly but my nails are digging into my palms, trying to suppress the jitters, because I know I'm already involved—I can't say no. More importantly, I don't want to run away like Mu Mu has, even if my legs are still spaghetti.

I look over to Cubs and Xu Ping. I see Cubs quaking in his boots but I guess he doesn't want to say no, either, so he just looks down without a word. I heave a silent sigh and look towards Grooms.

"I'll do it," Grooms volunteers.

"Alright, the four of us, tonight, meeting room." Chief says emotionlessly.

"Actually, I don't think we need to," Grooms suddenly dissents. "All we'll prove is that there's really a fifth person; we can't ask it any questions, we can't communicate with it."

"So what're you suggesting?" Chief sits down on his bed and watches Grooms.

“Pen God⁶.”

Merely two words impress me even more. He might be kind of emo but he’s surprisingly got a grip on things at times like this. What do you use to talk to spirits? The Pen God of course!

The four of us share a look and reach an agreement.

“Okay, we’ll start when the lights go off. I’ll make preparations,” Chief instructs like the leader he is.

“Guys, don’t, don’t do it.” Cubs is watching us with teary eyes. “Wh-what if, what if something else gets summoned?”

That’s right. If those who play die, then Chief and Glooms will...

I glance towards Yuan Fei. He’s watching me, too. Strange enough, we somehow understood each other just now, even though we’ve never had anything like that before.

“If it’s Pen God, Yuan Fei and I can do it,” I say.

“Right, two’s enough,” Yuan Fei adds.

It falls silent all of a sudden. It seems Chief and Glooms are in deep thought.

“We’ll play,” the two of them say at the same time.

“But-” I try to object, to warn them of the dangers, but Chief interrupts.

“I’m the chief so I have to keep tabs on you all.” He grins while shaking his head.

Glooms calmly explains, “I made the suggestion. I can’t just bail on you guys.”

The next moment, I feel a lump in my throat. I quickly fake a grin but I can’t hide the rush of emotion I’m feeling in my heart like never before.

I’ve never believed there are such things as ‘sharing the good and bad in life’. People always want to have a piece of the pie when things are going well but no one would when things are bad. Our instinct drives us to protect ourselves first in the face of danger and fear; stuff like putting others before ourselves only happens in stories and comics.

Even so, I think I’m really feeling it right now. I guess this is it. It’s like having a pair of hands on your shoulders and even through all your frightened trembling you can’t help but feel safe within its embrace.

My gaze unknowingly falls on Cubs. Ears burning, head bowed, he’s on the brink of crying. I know what’s going through his head right now but he’s just a little weak-hearted, especially with something out-of-this-world like this. I beckon to him and he walks towards me hesitantly. I take his hand and sit him down.

“We’re countin’ on you tonight. If anything happens to us, you gotta go get help right away, you understand?”

He nods his head fiercely and grins weakly only when I pat him reassuringly on his head.



The hours seem to crawl by. Mu Mu hasn't come back; he has only called saying he's going to stay over at a friend's place for the night. When the lights finally turn off at eleven o'clock, the five of us get up and huddle around the flashlight. Cubs stands by the door, ready to sprint out anytime for help.

Chief lays a piece of paper with the alphabet written on it in the middle of the table. There are two of us on each side of the table and our fingers criss-cross around a single ball pen.

"After I say 'start', try to keep your mind clear. I'll ask the questions if the pen starts moving," Chief says solemnly.

No one has anything else to add. Chief says 'start,' and I don't dare to breathe while I follow the pen tip with my eyes, not secretly trying to move it like the times before.

The pen remains still in the middle of the paper for a long, long time. Other than some slight leaning, I'd say it hasn't moved at all.

The four of us glance at each other. Chief contemplates and suggests, "How about we give it a little push, not in any particular direction, just to get it started. Let's try it out once. If it doesn't work then we'll leave it."

I sigh very inappropriately but I can't help but feel more nervous about having an answer than not. Without one I might feel lost and scared but I think I would jump out of my skin if we got one right away.

Maybe Kong Linglin's death really was the work of some psychotic murderer and has absolutely nothing to do with supernatural beings. Isn't it better like that?

I feel a sharp pang of guilt. I haven't felt grief for his death; instead I'm worrying about my own safety. Fear, anxiety, worry. When the negative feelings inundate you, there's no one else you can think of but yourself.

I sneer inwardly; what a coward you are.

The pen finally starts moving steadily, bringing my hand along with it. I quickly take a glance at the others. I definitely did not push it enough to get it moving, but I don't know about the others.

The pen tip is rolling slowly over the paper with no apparent pattern.

Chief takes the first shot. "Who are you?"

The pen moves steadily, crossing several letters, but they don't seem to form anything meaningful. I tried reading it as English but it's not a word either. So I guess it's merely moving.

Chief nudges his glasses with his free hand and presses. "Was it you in the meeting room that night?"

The pen slowly moves to 'Y', pauses, then slowly moves over to 'E', then

pauses again. My heart's in my throat as I watch the board intently. Is it trying to say 'YES'? Is this really it? The supernatural really exists?

The pen rolls and stops.

At 'B'.

What the hell is 'YEB' supposed to mean? Not Pinyin. Not English. It's not even Wubi input code.

"I...don't think it works," Yuan Fei whispers.

"Uh huh." Amazingly, everyone makes this exclamation at the same time.

"Maybe we should try to be more straightforward. Like 'was it you who killed Kong Linglin' or 'why are you doing this' or somethin'," I suggest.

The next moment, the pen jerks to life again. We didn't pay much attention while chatting but our hearts all miss a beat now that it has suddenly started moving again.

I watch the pen anxiously as it traces an arc on the paper. Seeing it move now is making my heart beat furiously against my ribcage, unlike before. My instincts tell me that *it* is moving the pen this time.

Our hands move slowly but surely along with the pen and soon a perfectly round circle appears on the paper. But our hands don't stop there; it continues tracing over the circle that it just drew once more.

We couldn't have possibly drawn this perfectly round circle even if the four of us wanted to. Not to mention it's staying flawlessly in its trail the second time around. It's simply impossible for humans.

If so, who is drawing this?

Once. Twice. Thrice!

I can feel it slowly picking up speed. An ominous feeling makes my hair stand. My hand is completely out of my control as it goes faster and faster with the pen. Faster. Faster—so fast I want to scream, but the circle stays perfectly circular. The pen is going to break through the paper any moment now.

I try to take control of my appendage but it's as if it's being sucked away from me, velocity increasing indefinitely as the pen carry on circling.

I jerk up trying to escape its suction. Chief also shoots up, bewildered, and pulls on the hand holding on to the pen with his free hand. I feel as if our hands has been glued together by something and it's no use struggling.

"Let go!" Chief yells.

The four of us attempt to but it's futile; the pen continues along its circular path at an alarming speed. It's going too fast. The pen tip scratches through the paper but it's showing no sign of stopping. It keeps doing circles over the shredded piece of paper, even leaving distinct marks on the wooden table underneath.

"It's not stopping! Whad'we do?"

“Get a hold on the pen!”

“It’s not working!”

The next moment, I turn to Cubs. “Ram the table! Quickly!”

Cubs is already dumbfounded and only comes to his senses after my shout. I, on the other hand, am being tossed around like I’m in a blender. It feels like my arm is being torn out of its socket. Slowly, my body gets swept along, and I’m losing control of it.

“Cubs!” I remind.

He charges and rams into the table but nothing happens. Then he closes his eyes, lets out a war cry and puts all his weight into it this time. This table and the one next to it get knocked a few inches off, and then he follows up with a kick.

The movement of the two tables forces the pen to leave its route and immediately the suction sensation disappears. The four of us get thrown against the walls and scatter across the floor.

I hear commotion outside the door. I guess what just happened woke everyone up. There’s someone beating on the door, asking what is going on inside, but the five of us only lie there dumbly looking at the furniture scattered all over the place.

The caretaker gets the door open in a jiffy and when the lights come on, I guess all they see are five pale-faced students who look possessed. Our gazes are all focused on the letter in the middle of the round piece of paper ripped out by the pen—Y.

What does that mean? ‘Y.’

Does it mean, ‘Yes, I killed him’?

Or maybe it’s, ‘You’re next.’

⁶ The Chinese version of the Ouija Board consists of a paper with letters and numbers instead of a board and a pen instead of a planchette. It is called ‘*bixian*’, literally ‘pen god.’

Chapter 04

All the remaining students from 308 and their new dorm are a mess in the wee hours of the morning. This immediately brings our homeroom teachers and even the principals back to campus. All the high ranking staffs are cramped in Room 501 within half an hour.

Their wording is careful and cautious, and I understand why they're so wary. Having a student die is already unusual, and then something strange happens to five of the deceased student's roommates in their new room.

Our homeroom teacher keeps talking to us gently. I just noticed how soothing her voice can be, as if she's soothing five children on the brink of insanity who might just turn fully insane if she made a wrong move. But we don't make a sound. We just sit, listen and remain silent. A shapeless force dissuades us from even bringing up what happened tonight, let alone telling another soul about it.

Who'd believe us?

In the end, they give up and call Chief out by himself—he is on the Student Council after all. I feel somewhat relieved after they leave. I pick the pieces of paper up without a word and roll them into a ball. I grip it in my hand not knowing what to do with it.

Should I throw it away? Into the garbage can? Out the window? Maybe shred it? Or swallow it?

I smile wryly. If it appears on the table again tomorrow morning after I throw it away, I'd probably scream until I'm hoarse.

"Glooms, you got a light?" I sound weak like I've been starving for a week.

He quietly passes a lighter over, and I place the ball on the ground before lighting it. The flames slowly devour it. Watching the white being taken over, first by yellow and finally by black, somehow leaves me feeling reassured.

I know I've accepted the notion that we're in trouble with the supernatural. I'm already thinking about the impossible things that could take place, like the black ashes before me turning back into a white piece of paper with a horrifying circle on it tomorrow.

When Chief finally comes back after god knows how long, he gives us a weak grin. "The principal said we could head home and take it easy for a few days if we wanted to."

“It’s for the best I guess.” I grin and look towards Cubs curled up into a ball on his bed. “Hey Cubs, aren’t you from around here? Go home and rest for a coupla days.”

His expression softens a bit. I know he already planned to but was just too embarrassed to be the one ditching the rest of us who are from out of town. No one wants to be that person.

“Let’s all stay at my place. It’s big enough for everyone.”

“It’s alright.” I chuckle.

The ones in danger are Yuan Fei, Mu Mu and me.

“Head back in the morning, Cubs, and stay a few days. Don’t tell your family what happened today,” Chief instructs.

He nods and his curled up body finally seems to slacken a bit. I actually kind of feel sorry for him. He’s long been scared out of his wits, but he hasn’t had the guts to call it quits.

“Glooms, your family’s here too, right? You head back tomorrow too, okay?” Chief continues.

Xu Ping doesn’t respond. He just lies quietly on his bed staring at the ceiling.

“Yuan Fei, I remember you’re from Jinan. Go get a train ticket home tomorrow morning. And Xiao Yu, you’re from the south⁸ right? You two go together tomorrow.

We only give a grunt for reply and remain still for the most part. Going home doesn’t really change much for me. My parents are abroad and left an empty house back home for me.

Ha, I’m afraid I would go ape-shit crazy if I’m left alone in that deserted house thinking *it* is going to pop out behind me like the Grudge.

That’s when it hit me—I am such a wimp.

The caretaker comes and reminds us the lights are going off and to go to sleep. Everyone goes back to bed with a heavy heart and soon darkness takes over the room.

Eyes wide open, I stare at the dark ceiling, zoned out for some reason. Then after a while, I think around 2 or 3 o’clock, I start feeling a little drowsy. I guess they’re all fast asleep. I can hear Cubs’ restless mumbling in his sleep. Poor kid will probably be having nightmares for a long time.

I yawn and shut my eyes. I wonder if I will be as restless as Cubs tonight.

Drip-drop.

My blood freezes. Was that water?

But this is Room 501! Far away from the nearest washroom! How could there be water?

Not to mention sounding this close, like, like it’s right outside the door!

My heart starts racing. I think of the deserted fifth floor of the teaching block.

I think of the night where that black figure appeared. That mysterious sound has always been there during all of those things. 'Drip-drop.'

Creeeeeeeeeeeeak.

The door slowly swings open.

I almost scream. I locked the door myself before we went to bed. I'm sure I locked it and I'm also sure no one has gone out!

I can see a black figure lightly pushing the door open with the help of some dim lights from the hallway. It slowly enters like it did the night before but it's only because this time I'm more than awake that I notice it isn't walking at all. It's simply gliding laterally into the room like it's on a skateboard. No footsteps, no breathing, nothing.

So it's here again.

Who will be its prey this time around?

I don't know if it can see me staring at it but it's undoubtedly moving past the two bunk beds by the door where Yuan Fei is sleeping and coming towards the window.

I hurriedly close my eyes and try to stifle my panicked gasps for air because it seems too loud in the silence. But it's no use; my heart's pumping too fast. I can still feel the blood-curdling thing approaching me with my eyes shut. It's the feeling where you know there's a person beside you with your eyes closed, you also know that it's not really a person and it's looking straight at you! It's a feeling that can make a man lose his mind.

Why did it stop by my bed? Why me? There are so many others!

My insides knot together. Is it better that it picks the others? Is it really?

I suddenly have an urge to cry my eyes out, not because I feel completely helpless right now but because I've realised that I'm actually this selfish and pathetic underneath the personality that I call a feather in my cap. I'm actually hoping that it picks someone else. Anyone else but me. I'm praying for all the misfortunes to befall another person. Anyone else but me. Even if everyone involved has to die in the end, I wish I could be the last one.

Drip-drop.

The sound comes from inches away; it's right beside me after all.

What should I do? Take a look at it? What would I see? What kind of face would it be? Or maybe I should make a loud noise and scare it away? Or better yet, give it a nice right hook while I'm close enough?

My mind is a mess. Lots of options run through my head but, really, the only thing I manage to do is keep my eyes shut, hold my breath like my life depends on it and bite down hard on my lips so I don't scream.

Drip-drop.

Why is it still here? What does it want from me?!

Drip-drop.

This time it sounds farther away from me but that might just be me.

I'm scared out of my wits and all I can do is keep doing what I'm doing.

What can I do? Nothing. Unlike the protagonists in internet horror novels, I can't face it, I can't defeat it. I only want to escape and get as far as I can.

I'm not sure when the sounds stops but it stays quiet for a long time. If I can just open my eyes and check I can be relieved but I'm too scared. I'm scared that once I open my eyes there will be an unimaginably horrifying face. I'm scared that this is some kind of sick joke it's using to trick me into thinking it has left and get me to open my eyes.

But more minutes slip by, so many that the anxiety is too much to handle. Out of nowhere, I kick my blanket into the air with all my might. My silly logic is that if it's still there the blanket will at least do some damage right?

I open my eyes to see the whole thing plopping on the table by my bed.

"What was that?!" Chief sits up immediately and questions groggily. Grooms sits up too. Even Cubs seems to sit up after doing a turn on his bed.

"Oh, it's nothing. My, uh, blanket fell." I try to keep my voice in check so that they don't hear any abnormalities.

"Geez. You gave me a scare there." Chief grumbles before falling back into sleep.

Grooms lies back down quietly as I hop off my bed. Cubs goes back to sleep yawning after helping me with my blanket. Only when I get back on my own bed do I realise I'm soaking wet with my own sweat. I wipe my forehead. My face is as wet as a swimming pool.

I bet it had left long before. I can't help but snicker. I think I'm starting to lose it.

"Perhaps it was just a dream and not reality." I comfort myself.

I catch a glimpse of Yuan Fei to my side while fixing my blanket. He didn't seem to be woken up by the commotion and is still fast asleep.

What a pig.

I can't help but feel envious.

Because I learn for a fact once I lie back down that I won't be getting another wink of sleep tonight.



I get out of bed in a daze in the morning with blood-shot eyes while getting terrorized by Cubs. I grab my towel and toothbrush yawning as I run straight into Yuan Fei on his way back from the washroom. His eyes are blood-shot and you can tell he didn't have a good night's rest from the dark rings under his eyes.

“Morning,” I greet.

We haven’t had any rough encounters since that night at the meeting room. I do wonder how that came to be. But he’s been looking bad, too, these days, blood-shot eyes and just looking miserable in general.

Maybe he’s even more scared than Cubs.

He stares straight at me and it makes me feel uncomfortable. His mouth opens, as if he wants to say something, but they close and he brushes past me with his head lowered.

Weirdo.

I don’t bother with him either and walk straight to the washroom to wash up. When I twist the tap shut, a single droplet of water plunks into the sink.

Drip-drop.

My heart jumps to my throat but it soon settles back down. I smirk while letting the sink drain out. I grab my stuff and when I turn to leave, I hear whispering and muttering coming from behind me. I guess Room 308 has become a hot topic overnight.

There’re car horns honking outside when I get back to the dorm and Cubs rushes over to the window, hands waving.

“My family’s here to pick me up,” he squeals.

I stick my head out the window and whistle. “Sweet car! You rich bastard.”

He grins shyly and hurriedly packs his bags. He turns to us after he’s finished and demurs. “Are you guys sure you don’t wanna come over for a few days?”

“We’re sure. Just take care yourself,” I laugh.

I take a bag for him and walk him downstairs but he snatches on to my sleeve.

“Come stay with me, Sunny. Your whole family’s abroad right? I’ll keep you company.” He says with a worried expression.

Moved by his concern for me, I pinch his cheeks and tease, “Just take care of yourself. Don’t you worry about me.”

I nudge him over to his car and make some small talk with his dad. Cubs finally gets in after a few exchanges and I chuckle when he sticks his head out the windows waving even after the vehicle starts moving.

The guys have already come back from the cafeteria when I get back to our dorm. I take the meat bun from Chief’s outstretched hand without a second thought and take a big bite.

“Did you see Cubs’ ride?” I squeeze through a mouthful of food. “So sick.”

“His grandpa is the director at the General Hospital.” Chief pushes his glasses up. “Probably really wealthy.”

I do a double take. “What? *The* General Hospital? The one that’s nationally famous? His grandpa’s the director?”

That damn Cubs never told me about this before!

“He lives in a 4-thousand-something square feet, two-storey mansion that comes with its own garden and pool,” Chief says matter-of-factly.

I gaze in awe at Chief. I guess being on the Student Council does have its perks.

I’m still dealing with my breakfast when Grooms speaks up. “Cubs’ bed...”

I look in the direction he’s pointing in and I freeze. There’s a large water stain on the wall right next to Cubs’ bunk. It looks like it’s coming from my bed if you don’t look closely, but I know for a fact my bed’s dry as a bone.

This stain, why does this stain remind me of that stain beside Kong Linglin’s bed?

“Um, is, is it leaking, next door?” I manage to get the words out.

We’re in Room 501. Room 502 is to the east. Cubs’ bed is on the west side. Which means...there’s nothing beyond that wall!

Then where is the water coming from? This is 308 all over again!

Leaking, water, drops, the black figure.

It climbed into the bunk above Kong Linglin that night. Kong Linglin died.

It stood by my bed last night and I had thought I was its next target. But I completely forgot that Cubs was sleeping in the bunk under me, so it was standing beside him too!

But that doesn’t make sense either; Cubs didn’t play the game, he couldn’t be a target! The food in my mouth suddenly tastes foul. An ominous feeling lurks in my mind. My head feels numb and my ears ring.

“You okay?” Chief pokes my shoulder.

I snap out of it and put on a smile. “Yeah, fine.”

I spit everything out of my mouth and quickly shove the rest into the garbage can by the stairwell.

What was I thinking? There’s no way Cubs is next. He neither participated that night nor yesterday night. I’m being overly sensitive. It must be a broken pipe or something. Right, that’s it.

I tell myself repeatedly until I feel completely calmed down, breathing out deeply.

That’s right. Cubs is the last person to be its target. I’m just being too paranoid.

I face-palm myself, trying to resist the urge to bang my head on something.

I turn around in time to see Yuan Fei walking in my direction with his chin tucked into his chest. He takes a quick glance at me before looking down again and brushing past me without a word.

“Yo, where’re you goin’?”

Maybe it’s just me, but I think he’s been trying to avoid me.

“Train station.” He doesn’t pause and when I catch his words he’s already

disappeared into the stairwell.

“Wait, I thought we’re goin’ together,” I murmur.

I take a look at the time—who in their right minds would go to the train station at this hour? Are they even open right now? I guess his intelligence level has finally de-evolved from that of a simian to that of a primate.

I lounge around the dorm until about half past nine before heading to the train station. The lobby is already packed like sardines when I get here. The long winding queues in front of every ticketing window coupled with the loud hollering everywhere give me a headache.

I find the train going home and take my place at the end of that queue. Soon, more people line up behind me. Peculiar smells waft up in the somewhat stuffy air. It gets more and more squishy and as I advance in the queue I bump into the people ahead and behind me from time to time. I feel like a sardine stuck in the middle of the school.

But somehow I feel safe.

I don’t hear that eerily close but indistinguishable dripping sound. I don’t feel those terrifying eyes watching me from somewhere in the darkness. I don’t sense things creeping up on me. There’s only the crowd and the racket. I fit right in here and I know it won’t be appearing here.

I feel like the heart that was up in my mouth until now has finally found some peace. I don’t have to act as if nothing is wrong, don’t have to cover up the butterflies in my stomach, don’t have to worry about death being around the corner...

Surprisingly, I feel sort of let down when it’s finally my turn. This is the first time that I feel no excitement with train tickets taking me back home in my hand. I wander towards the entrance slowly on purpose, looking around aimlessly, even taking a turn around the supermarket in the station. I’ve never found such peace and comfort amid noise before.

I take a seat on a bench in the departure hall, watching the continuous crowds of people and listening to the announcer read out the train schedules in her lovely voice. Slowly exhaustion hits me.

So sleepy. I don’t have to worry too much if I fall asleep here, right? At least not about some unknown creature. Maybe about my wallet getting stolen though.

Ah, finally some peace.

Fatigue from staying up the whole night finally pulls me into its embrace, wrapping me tight in its arms.

“Xiao Yu!”

I’m ripped away in an instant, figuratively, by a holler and, literally, by someone. I stare bewildered at Yuan Fei standing goggle-eyed before me. His eyes are swollen; it looks like he was crying for a moment there.

“Yuan Fei? What’s wrong?”

He looks at me dumbfounded, as if it’s unfathomable to him that I can talk, but the next moment energy seems to be sapped out of him like an old rubber band.

“Nothing,” he mumbles, gently releasing his grip on me. His lips tremble again like he wants to say something but he turns and walks away without saying a word.

I bolt after him. “Yo, man! What the hell’s up with you lately? What was that just now? What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit! What’re you tryna hide?”

“I said NOTHING!” He suddenly raises his voice, shocking not only me but the people around us.

I watch him for a second and then forcefully drag him into a washroom without waiting for his permission. Only after making sure we’re alone do I question, “Did you think something happened to me just now?”

He keeps his eyes glued to the floor and refuses to speak no matter what I say. Purely out of frustration I snatch on to his collar.

“Hey! Listen up here, bud. I’m in a very fragile mental state right now,” I bark. “I might just go on a killing spree after this so you better spit it out while I’m still here.”

He doesn’t struggle and just lets himself get shaken left and right by me like a lifeless puppet. This isn’t the Yuan Fei I know; that tall bastard might always piss me off but he would never be depressed and helpless like this.

“Yuan Fei.” My voice drops to a lower volume.

I think maybe I would look like him too if I didn’t try to act like everything’s okay.

“I’m really uneasy; I’m really scared, too. I’ve no idea what we got ourselves into. I’m getting more and more sensitive and I’m startin’ to imagine things lurking in the darkness. I’m imagining the worst case scenario for everything I see. But I can’t help it,”

My hands start shaking, bringing his shirt along.

“I’m afraid of the night, the silent night, where I can’t find comfort no matter how tightly I close my eyes. It’s like something’s watching me. Ya know what that’s like? That creepy feeling? That makes your hair stand on end? You’re afraid too right? You don’t want to be its next target either right? Don’t you see, we’re on the same side here.”

He finally looks up at me and I finally catch a sense of vulnerability from his eyes. He holds on to my arms.

“I-I thought, you might be the next one, ‘cau-‘cause I saw...”

I tense up.

“Last night, I saw...” Yuan Fei stutters and repeats himself, getting nowhere.

I heave a deep sigh, finally understanding why he had looked like he wanted to talk to me today. “Cause you saw a black shadow by my bed?”

The hands on my arms suddenly squeezes so hard that I’m frowning from the pain but he only looks at me like a dog seeing a bone. “You can see it? You can see it!”

“Hmmpf, it’s not like that’s a good thing.” I chuckle weakly.

“I actually saw it the night before Kong Linglin’s incident too. But then when I asked Glooms if he saw anything he said he didn’t and told me to keep my mouth shut so I don’t freak you guys out.” His expression seems much more relaxed now, probably since he finally found someone on ‘his side.’

“So what about just now?” I raise my brows.

“I-I saw you sitting there, eyes closed, I thought...” He looks down again with a sad expression.

Seeing this, I feel a warm feeling in my heart; I didn’t know this guy actually cared about me.

I pat him on the back and put my arm around his shoulders, mood much better than before. “Alright, King Kong. I, Xiao Yu, officially end our opposition and call it truce. From now on we’re fighting the same battle so don’t keep anything from me. Two brains are better than one, am I right?”

“Yeah.” He gives me a light grin.

He looks a lot better than before but the anxiety hasn’t left his eyes. I can tell he’s still hiding something from me but I don’t push him. Some things are better left unsaid until proven otherwise, like that water stain and that dripping sound. I’m not sure if they’re related at all. It might just be me, and I wish it really is.

I suppose the only thing I can do for my roommates is not spreading the fear any further.

Chief is on the phone when Yuan Fei and I get back to the dorm.

He beckons me over as soon as he sees me and says into the receiver, “Sunny’s back, I’m passing the phone.” Then he smiles at me. “It’s Cubs.”

I hastily take the receiver to hear Cubs call out in his adorable voice, “Sunny!”

“Good boy.” My mood gets even better. “Get home safe?”

“Yup. Been here a while now but they’d been asking me a ton of questions so I didn’t get time to call. They all left just now. I called right when I could.”

“Oh really? D’you have lunch yet?”

“Nope. Mum’s out grocery shopping. Said she’s gonna cook up a feast for me. What about you?”

I pull out a chair and plop down on it, laughing and chatting away with him, until I hear a creepily crisp sound.

Drip-drop.

My heart misses a beat.

It's coming from the receiver!

A chill runs up my spine and all the pores on my body shrinks instantaneously.

Drip-drop.

"Cubs,"

I can't control my voice. Its trembling is so obvious everyone looks at me. I hang on to the receiver but it almost slips out of my grip from the sweat that has perspired.

"Sunny, what's wrong?"

"Did you...hear something?"

Drip-drop.

"No. Why?"

I glance around nervously. The guys have noticed my nervousness and have gathered around me. My hands start shaking more violently and my teeth start chattering. Chief asks me what's wrong but I can't spare the time to answer him. I'm searching in my mind but nothing comes.

"Sunny?" Cubs questions again.

Drip-drop.

"There's a leakage at your place, right?" I force my lips to curve up but I bet it looks worse than sobbing.

"Leakage? Don't think so. Lemme check." He puts down the phone.

Clunk.

"Wait! Don't! Cubs! Don't go!" I scream.

But he doesn't respond. I wait on pins and needles. One Mississippi, two Mississippi...

Seconds tick by but he doesn't pick the phone back up.

"Cubs? Hello? Cubs!" I shout into the receiver.

The other end remains very quiet. No footsteps. No talking-

Crack!

Sound of glass shattering coming through the receiver is like thunder booming to my ears.

My blood turns cold.

"...Cubs?"

It falls silent again. I can't stand the burning in my nose anymore and tears threaten to flow out of my eyes.

"Cubs! Hurry back! To school! Cubs!" I cry into the phone like an insane person. "Talk to me! Pick up the damn phone! Cubs!"

"Xiao Yu, what's going on?" Someone is yanking on my arm.

I don't know who's pulling on me but I just keep crying into the receiver,

coming apart at the seams like a cracked dam that finally gave into the pressure of the waves. All of the stress and fear that has built up the past few days just come bursting out in an instant, transforming into pathetic bawling. I'm dragged away from the phone but I cling on to the receiver like my life depends on it. The phone tumbles on to the ground and I hear the dial tone.

"Cubs! Cubs! Come back!" I can't stop crying.

"Xiao Yu!"

"Cubs!"

"Hold'm on the bed!"

Why Cubs? He didn't do anything. He's such a nice kid. He never starts fights. He never does anything bad. He's pure like a blank piece of paper. Why did it have to be him? Why innocent Cubs? There's been a mistake!

I'm pressed down on the bed. A couple of figures hover before me but I can't tell who's who. I buckle like a mad cow, crying and screeching hysterically until everything goes black and the darkness swallows my consciousness.

Cubs....

⁸ Southern area of the province, Henan.

Chapter 05

“Hey.”

I hear Yuan Fei’s concerned voice beside me as I blink my eyes in confusion. Dazed, I survey my surroundings to find myself in the infirmary.

“You proly feel a bit weak now ‘cause the nurse gave you a shot. Go back to sleep, ‘kay?”

“Cubs...” My voice is impossibly raspy.

“Chief tried calling again but no one picked up.”

The persistent yet mysterious drip-drop resonates in my mind and my head clears up in a flash. I jerk up and get off the bed but my legs collapse under me almost once they touch the ground. Only then I feel that my limbs are completely out of juice, and my temples throbbing hard.

“Xiao Yu! You okay?” He rushes over and helps me up. My hands are shaking as I grab on to his arm instinctively to keep my centre of gravity.

“Quick. To Cubs’. Quickly.”

I’ve had an ominous feeling ever since the drip-drop sound had started. I don’t know what it is. It might even be a thing of my imagination for all I know. But I can’t just hide and tremble in fear. Because it’s Cubs! Cubs, who is like a brother to me!

Yuan Fei tries to dissuade me since I can barely walk right now but I’m so concerned I could kill. So I shove him aside with all my strength and teeter out of the infirmary, only to fall again from my legs giving out on me once more.

“Goddammit!”

I’ve never felt this useless before. I can’t do anything but beat my fists on the ground. The pain coming from them is nothing compared to the suffocating feeling in my chest. My eyes are already brimming with tears against my will.

Why did I have to run into this shit? Why can’t I fight off the ghouls and demons like the brave protagonists in novels? Why can’t I do anything but worry and fear, not even able to be by Cubs’ side.

I hate this! This useless, wimpy me. How I can’t do anything to change this. How I can’t even find the tiniest shred of courage.

“Dammit! Goddammit!”

I beat the floor even more furiously, treating it like my punching bag.

“Stop it! I’ll take ya there, okay?”

Yuan Fei takes my hands tightly into his and I notice it isn’t only mine that are doing the trembling.

We walk out, Yuan Fei supporting most of my weight. The students that we happen to pass by all give us odd looks. I guess both of our faces are fairly ghastly. Yuan Fei calls and gets Cubs’ address from Chief and we get on a cab.

The city zooms by the car window but I see none of it. I make a fist so tight that my nails are digging into my palms. I can’t tell whether the stickiness is sweat or blood. I just keep holding my fist for no reason really, as if I’m holding my erratic heartbeat within it.

Cubs lives in a well-known garden-styled community in the south of the city but our cab gets stopped by security before we even get near the gates. Seeing the crowd of people squished up against the heavy, metal gates and the police cars parked before them, my anxious heart actually miraculously slows down.

I- I guess I was right.

I feel a lump in my throat. I really wish Cubs would give me hard smack on the back and greet me with that silly smile of his.

But I know, from the bottom of my heart, that it won’t be possible. Ever.

“It might be someone else. Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Yuan Fei places his hand on my shoulder like he thinks I’m going to faint on him again.

I shake my head. I’m calm as can be. None of the worry or anxiety that I had in the beginning. None of the fear or sorrow from earlier. It’s like my senses have gone numb.

The process can’t possibly induce any more reactions if you already know the outcome.

I watch, dumbfounded, at the crowd, not knowing what to do. Just then, a familiar car slowly rolls through the crowd towards the gates. I linger for a moment, and then dart out after it. Fortunately, the crowd is making it hard for the car to go faster than snail speed. I knock on the window and a nervous-looking man glances at me. It takes him a moment to roll down the windows.

“You’re... Can’s roommate, right?” Cubs’ father asks.

“Yes! Mr. Jin, I’m Xiao Yu.” I’m not sure how to explain my presence so I just think of something on the spot. “I was talking with Can on the phone when I heard a noise and he hung up. I got worried so I came over.”

“Come, get in.” Mr. Jin’s expression becomes tense once more.

I hop in with Yuan Fei and we get in with no problem. There’s already several police cars parked in front of Cubs’ mansion. Mr. Jin gets out in a hurry as soon as the chauffeur parks the car and runs straight towards a huddle of people.

That woman bawling her eyes out is probably Cubs’ mom. She runs into Mr. Jin’s embrace once she spots him and starts crying harder.

Suddenly, there's a movement in the huddle of people as police officers guide them apart. Then, medical staff in white coats comes walking out with a cot. I can't recognize the person on it because the body's completely covered with a piece of white cloth, including the face.

And that means, that it's not a wounded person on the cot but a corpse.

I watch, stunned, as they lift the cot into the ambulance, slam the doors shut, and drive off. Somehow I'm not able to reattach myself with reality, and I continue to look in the direction off to where the ambulance disappeared. Yuan Fei gently holds my shoulder. I really appreciate this small act of his that is giving me some sort of support.

"Are you the roommates of the deceased?" An officer in casual wear questions with a notebook in hand. "The receiver wasn't replaced properly when we got here. Seems like the deceased had been on the phone. We traced the call back to dorm 501 of the Engineering Physics Men's Dormitory building at Northern Yu College, which is the dorm room that the deceased was staying in prior. Mr. Jin tells us you are roommates of the deceased. We hope you'll cooperate in our investigation."

"What d'you say? 'Deceased'? 'Prior'?" I grab his collar in anger, shouting. "Jin Can! He has a name, dammit!"

"Xiao Yu!" Yuan Fei snaps and drags me away.

The other officers are already around us and Yuan Fei is apologizing furiously on my behalf. I'm shaking from fury and my vision gets misty, obscuring the scene before my eyes.

But Cubs was a living human being! And all he gets in the end is an abbreviation: the deceased.

As if to declare to the world, Cubs is no more.

"Xiao Yu," Mr. Jin grabs my arms, his eyes bloodshot. "What was happening at the time? What was it that you heard? What happened exactly to your dorm? First that guy and now Can—Why? Tell me. Why?"

I stand here, mouth agape.

Mrs. Jin stumbles forth, sobbing, and almost falls on her knees.

"He was such a sweetheart. Why did this have to happen? His *kidney* was pierced! He didn't deserve it. Why? Why?" She howls.

"Mrs. Jin, please get yourself together," Yuan Fei gently comforts. "I'm deeply saddened by your loss."

I, on the other hand, can't get a single sound out.

Soon after, the officers sit us down at the community security office and jots down our accounts. I only tell them about hearing a loud crash over the phone before rushing over, leaving out, unknowingly or knowingly, the mysterious dripping sound.

Finally, we sign and fingerprint on the records. They remind us again not to leave town for a while so they can contact us again if necessary. I can tell this case is on the top of their list. Cubs' family background aside, the fact that the two victims of coldblooded homicide were from the same dorm can't possibly be pure coincidence.

Cubs' cause of death was quite peculiar. The shower door made of reinforced plate glass somehow cracked. Cubs, who ran in to check, slipped on some water and ended up falling onto shattered but still erect glass which pierced through his kidney. Instant death.

Even the expression of the detectives who came up with this notion was one of disbelief. It was simply too coincidental for all that to happen. I study physics and I know I'm far from being an expert but I cannot imagine for my life what sort of angle that shard of glass had to be in to have cracked but not fallen over. If, for some reason, equilibrium was reached and it stayed balanced, then it should have been knocked over by Cubs and not impaled him. It *is* just a normal piece of normal reinforced glass, right?

Furthermore, is it even possible to have something stab through the kidney at a right angle when the person crashed on it from momentum?

And that eerie sound. Was it just my imagination? Or did it actually...?



Chief and Glooms are solemnly waiting for us when we return to our dorm.

"The police came," Wu Fan says plainly.

Hah. The police in this city sure are efficient.

Wu Fan and Xu Ping most likely heard from the officers so neither of them tries to talk to me or Yuan Fei about it. Of course, we don't say a word either. I carefully sit down on Cubs' bed, gently stroking the surface.

Just this morning, I was sitting here helping him pack. Just earlier, he was alive and kicking like the Energizer bunny.

Gone. In the blink of an eye. Gone.

Life turns out to be such a fragile thing, not much stronger than a candle flame. It'll be extinguished by a breath just as easily.

"I went to the school archives and looked through the student records." Wu Fan's voice interrupts the silence, and everyone's ears perk up.

"I thought maybe something happened in 308 before and that's why we're being haunted, but I read through all the records since the school was established. And nothing. There's always one or two who die of various reasons every year but they're all normal ones like car accidents or illnesses. And they're not from 308. I've considered spirits from other dorms but I didn't find anything suspicious

either. Our school is fairly avant-garde so there haven't been many suicides."

"You sure nothing weird's ever happened in 308?" I ask in disbelief. I also thought that maybe someone from 308 died and continued to haunt the place, and that's how we summoned it.

Somehow I've become spiritual from an atheist merely in a few days. Ironic.

Wu Fan certainly shakes his head. "Nuh-uh, nil."

"Then it's from somewhere else," Xu Ping comments. "And it just got summoned by your game?"

I shudder. I'd just wanted to try an exciting game. Nothing else. I didn't know there would be such consequences. I'd thought then that the worst case scenario would be getting caught by the school and maybe getting suspended. But now, our lives are on the line.

"I don't know on what principle ghosts operate but from the looks of folktales and internet stories, one of us from 308 had a conflict with someone at some point in time, and that's why we're being haunted now." Wu Fan suggests.

I notice he said 'we' and not 'you.' This unsettles me.

Cubs' death has poked holes in our previous prediction—its target is not only the four of us who have played the game, but the others too. It might be very dastardly of me but I heaved a sigh of relief. Having more people on board equals a lower chance of dying.

But on what basis does it even have targets? What did Cubs and Kong Linglin do to become one?

"I don't know if it'll help but I snuck the files of students who committed suicide in recent years back with me." Wu Fan delegates a few files to us. "Let's go through it and see if there's anything useful."

I can't help but gape at the amount of files. To think a school like ours would have so many students commit suicide.

I don't plan on dying.

I want to live on but the fear of death lurks right around the corner, yet the people in these pictures all chose death themselves.

If they're given another chance, would they still choose to do so? Did they lose the hope to live because of some argument with other students, academic grades, or relationship problems? But those are obviously not what life is all about, only small parts of. But life is the beginning and end of a person. Like a single-use switch, once you flip the switch there's no way to do it again.

Perhaps they had doubts moments before their life ended. They were just past the point of no return.

I flip through over the files carefully. Nothing catches my attention until a picture appears before me. My eyes linger on it.

A very good-looking guy. Sweet and cute like a girl. He even has a ponytail. I

would've thought he was a pretty lady if not for the 'male' under the gender box.

"This guy's..." I rack my memory. "Isn't he that junior in Painting that everyone called the school hottie? He's dead? I thought he graduated!"

"Who?" Wu Fan takes the file. "Oh, Sun Le."

Flumppf. Yuan Fei's files scatter across the floor.

"What's wrong?" I look at him worriedly.

He forces his pale face into a smile. "It's nothin'. Just a bit drowsy. Guess I didn't sleep well."

"Then go get some rest. You can read later. Gotta take care of yourself first."

"I'm fine."

He picks up the files and starts reading again, but I swear his hands are shaking involuntarily.

"I think he had some romantic problems and jumped off a building last summer. Not many people knew about it because it was during break." Wu Fan sighs. "Sun Le was an orphan so only the police took note of it. Even his cremation was paid for out of charity by the hospital. He might've not fit in well, but it was still pretty sad."

"Again with the romantic stuff." I breathe out sorrowfully. "It's not like he couldn't find a girlfriend with his looks. How pessimistic was he to have commit-"

"Hey!" Yuan Fei suddenly snaps at me and Wu Fan. "We're the ones in shit right now, not these people. Quit wasting your breath."

Wu Fan and I zip up right away and return to our files. I sneak a glance at Yuan Fei. What he said was true, all right, but my sixth sense tells me something's out of place.

The room falls silent once more, save the sound of paper being flipped.

Then, out of nowhere.

Drip-drop.

My blood freezes at the bone-chilling sound. I feel the hair on my nape rising.

Without a moment's notice, Yuan Fei lets out a yelp, shoots up and swats at the air like he's trying to get away from something. The others and I watch, shocked. Then, after a few shrieks, he starts darting out the door, knocking me who was beside him on to the ground. He almost falls on his face, too, but he sprints out the door without stopping.

"After him!" Ignoring the burn on my palms, I yell at Wu Fan and Xu Ping, bringing them out of their stupor.

The two rush out while I painstakingly get up from the floor. I brush the dirt off my palms. Pink is showing through the abrasion. I hiss in pain.

What's wrong with that guy? That expression... It was the same as the day he fell down the stairs. Was it because of the dripping sound? Could he hear it too? So he got scared and lost his cool?

I'm baffled. Yuan Fei isn't someone who's easily scared. Then again, he's been looking more fragile than any one of us. It's as if he's enduring a fear on an entirely different level than ours.

What could it be?

Drip-drop.

I quiver as I look around frantically.

Impossible! It's broad daylight right now. Shouldn't it only appear at night time? It must be the tap! It must be!

Drip-drop.

The sound enters my senses again, as if to prove to me its existence. Just as I'm caught off guard, something chilly brushes my nape.

It's right next to me!

Without thinking, I bolt to the door where a broom lays unused. I take it in my hands and swing madly at the air with it.

There is something in here! There must be!

"Go away!"

I don't know what I'm fighting against. I'm just swinging it for the sake of.

"Go away! Whaddaya want? Go back t' where ya came from! Stay the hell away from me!"

I think my heart stopped when I realised it can appear not only during night time. I'm not going to have even one moment of peace if it won't give me time to catch my breath during the day. How could I possibly live then? Perhaps I was the target of its tormenting all along. It doesn't want to kill me; it wants to drive me insane!

"I ain't scared o' you! C'mon! Come at me!"

I have no idea what I'm saying or what I'm doing. My mind's completely blank. If every individual has a line between sanity and insanity, then I'm on that line right now.

Shouts of the caretaker and banging on the door bring me back to reality. There's only heavy panting coming from me in the room. That sound that drove me crazy is nowhere to be found. That chilly feeling has also disappeared.

My legs give out under me. My hands start hurting from holding on too tightly but I can't straighten my curled fingers, just like how I can't control my shaking. The dorm room is supposed to be warm but I only feel like I'm in an icehouse.

The lock opens with a click and the door hits me, but I don't even have the strength to get out of the way.

I hear Chief's soft voice calling by my ears. I turn my head over stiffly. There're a lot of people standing outside the door. Xu Ping has a distressed Yuan Fei in his arms. Chief is watching me with a worried look. The rest all sneak whispers and glances with each other as they watch me. I scoff and cover my

eyes.

What's happening to us? What the hell's happening?

Chapter 06

Chief shuts the door. It seems that he's explaining something quietly to the nosy people outside. I sit robotically on Cubs' bed and glance at Yuan Fei.

"What's wrong, Yuan Fei?" I whisper.

He's sitting on a chair, head low and sighing. He shakes his head.

"Xiao Yu, did somethin' happen when you're in here?" Xu Ping frowns.

I shake my head and it hits me that Yuan Fei's shake might've meant the same thing.

What's the point of saying it? How could anyone rid this fear in our hearts?

The dorm falls silent again, only to be broken by Chief's opening the door. Then it falls silent once more. We stay quiet for so long that I think we all forgot there's this thing called language. It's only then that Chief speaks.

"You two are hiding something from us, aren't you?"

Suffocating silence once more.

"How do you expect us to help? We're in this together now. Two heads are always better than one. Are you just trying to get on my nerves by not telling me anything?"

Wu Fan starts pacing the room anxiously. If the level-headed Chief has become this way, we're not far off.

I look at Yuan Fei without thinking. He's gotten thinner the past few days and always has his head lowered, always looking run down. I can't help but wonder why his fear is so obvious. I might be scared, too, but I'm scared because of how the unforeseeable future makes me uneasy. But that doesn't seem to be the only thing for him.

Our silence makes Chief more worked up while Glooms is rather composed.

"We won't force you to tell us if you don't wanna, but you gotta know, none of us are safe now and any clue is better than none. The smallest piece of information might become the key to our safety. You can save it if you're not telling us because you don't wanna scare or worry us. If we're gonna die anyway I'd rather die knowing what got me."

"I agree!" Chief holds eye contact with us.

I hesitate, more or less, seeing how they aren't going to stop until they get to the bottom of this. I'm not entirely sure whether I've been too sensitive these days

but I guess it wouldn't hurt to tell Chief and Grooms in case it just so happens to be true.

"A shadow..." I mumble.

It's all I have the strength to say. The memory is too much to describe.

"What shadow?" Chief nudges his spectacles and frowns.

I sigh. "I dunno, but both Yuan Fei and I saw it. Both of the times before Kong Linglin and Cubs..."

After those words escape my mouth, I feel as if I've been washed and wrung dry. I've accepted the existence of that phantom-like shadow. That it's not part of my dreams. That it's not some kind of illusion we saw.

And that it's the cause of all this tragedy.

"Why are we only hearing about this now?!" Chief rages.

On the other hand, Grooms has his head down, pondering. I do, too. I still haven't mentioned anything about the eerie sound. I'm sure Yuan Fei can hear it as well but as my ally he's never said anything about it either. Therefore I'm not sure if I should or not.

"So does that mean that thing also followed us to 501?" Grooms mutters.

"Xiao Yu. Yuan Fei. If you see it again, you must tell us immediately, no matter whose bed it's beside," Chief orders.

After his emotions settle, he says seriously. "From now on, no one shall act alone. Xiao Yu and Yuan Fei, you two are in the same class. Don't go anywhere alone, not even the washroom. Xu Ping, you skip class for a couple of days and come with me to the archives.

Grooms nods hesitantly and then I follow suit. Yuan Fei is the last to do so. I can feel his gaze on me and I catch him looking away when I look at him but I can sense worry.

Is he worried about me? Or something else?

Soon the sun is falling to the west. All of us go to get food. We wanted to get it over with at the caf but it appears 308's former occupants have become creatures for display. Not being able to stand the looks and stares, we end up bringing the food back to 501. Thank goodness we're not at 308 anymore. If not, we'd have an even harder time eating with the peculiar scent from the washroom across the hall.

None of us eat much. I even leave my favourite fish fillets after a few nibbles, going instead for some plain rice and a few gulps of hot water. Yuan Fei eats the least; only one or two grains of rice, not touching the other stuff at all. Now he's already cleaning up and getting his books for night study block.

"Yuan Fei! Wait up. We gotta go together," I call out as I toss the lid on my box and grab my books.

What the hell? Chief just said to not act alone! And now he's run off by

himself.

I catch up to him at the stairwell with great effort but he just speeds up when he notices me. I pause, shocked. I shoot forward and grab him.

“Yo! What the hell? It’s not like I wanna be with you either! If not for Chief.”
He warns lowly. “Stay away from me.”

I’m taken back from his sudden comment and he slips away. I get even more furious and rush ahead of him with my nose in the air.

Stupid jerk! I thought we called it truce! I thought we could become friends through thick and thin. I guess I gave you too much credit. Fucking Flying Ape. Go off being scared by yourself because I won’t give a shit about you anymore.

Other than labs, studios and computer labs, the entire Engineering Physics teaching block is open for students to come and go freely to study. I head for our department’s big lecture hall. There’s already a dozen or so students inside, heads buried in books, studying or doing homework.

I sit in a front-row seat near the door and not even half a minute pass when I hear:

Drip-drop.

I stare wide-eyed at the door.

Drip-drop.

“Excuse me. Could you turn the tap off properly?” A teacher calls out from the washroom down the hall.

A student answers soon after. Then a tap is turned. Then the sound is no more.

The hallways are so quiet that noise from the washroom sounds clear. Too clear. Like its right by my ears. My legs give out and I plop down in my seat. My heart’s beating so fast it’s suffocating.

I pant for air with my arms over my head. I’m quaking in my boots.

I must be going insane.

I’m already nuts.

I can’t anymore.

I quickly snatch my books and find a seat near the other students. I sit with my back to a wall. I never knew sitting with your back against a wall could be so relieving. You don’t have to worry about anything approaching you from behind.

I flip open a book and stare at a page full of English. I don’t see a single letter. People glance over at me from time to time and then chat quietly with the people beside them.

The reason why I chose this place was because it’s the favourite study spot for the graduating class. Almost all of them have left so I thought I would get the least amount of attention here.

Out of nowhere, Yuan Fei bursts in the door, looking around frantically. His

expression somewhat relaxes when our eyes meet, clearly more at ease. He randomly takes a seat without a word. Seeing him panting and wiping his sweat, I suspect he just ran a marathon.

I take a peek at my watch and fish the train ticket out from my pocket. My gaze lingers on the departure time and I end up ripping it apart.

I've realised after Cubs incident that escape is not the answer. I'd rather die at school where lots of people are than losing my marbles alone at home. At least, then, I wouldn't be alone in my final moments.

I think I've already accepted the fact that I'm going to die. I've always been scared of dying but I only hope I can be the last one. I know I'm dead anyway, but I'll fight until the last second. But I really don't know whether I should just give up and take the easy route, or fight until the end, until I can't anymore.

It hits me that, out of my many realisations, none of them says that I'll be the lucky winner. During this whole thing, I've never once thought that it would skip me, no matter how much I wished it would go after the others. That's because I know the chances for that is beyond miniscule and who's to say I'll be the numerator and not the denominator of that fraction?

I suppose I've never been a romanticist.

Something flashes. I look up to see the bulbs flashing a few times before going out. Instantly, students start making a racket. Some are even banging on the tables in discontent. It sounds like the other classes are as well. Some guy is even doing wolf howls. I chuckle along.

The lights don't come back on for quite some time. The teaching supervisor ends up coming by with a flashlight telling us to go back to our dorms because it seems like it won't be fixed anytime soon. My eyes are getting accustomed to the dark and I can kind of make out the other students getting up and leaving so I start packing up, too.

Suddenly, it's right by my ears.

Drip-drop.

My hands freeze in mid-motion and I glance up. Everyone's laughing and talking as they're leaving but none of it compares to that sound. I'm sure it's not the tap this time because it overrides all other noises, going straight into my head.

Could it be...

Drip-drop.

I hold my books in front of my chest. My teeth start chattering.

Drip-drop.

I fall back into my chair, shaking and staring wide-eyed at the podium. I don't know what I'm looking at but I can't peel my eyes away.

Drip-drop.

Gradually, everyone leaves and the room falls silent. Even the hallway seems

to be unusually quiet. They all left, not aware of that bone-chilling sound. They left, unbothered. Perhaps in this dark, quiet building, there's only me...and it.

I slowly slide down along the back of the chair and under the table, the constricting space actually providing me some feeling of security. I'm curled up as I cling on to my books, the thick covers and pages already curving under pressure, but I can do nothing but hold on to something, anything.

My eyes shut. I bite my lip to stop myself from shrieking.

Maybe it's just passing by. Maybe it didn't even notice me. Maybe it just wants to give me a little scare and leave. Maybe...

Absurd theories jumble my brain and my heartbeat is just as erratic. My rushed inhaled and exhaled sounds so loud in the silence, but I can't control what I already lost grip on, just like how I can't control this terror that strikes me.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

I sense another breathing organism approaching and I instinctively hold my breath. Then a black shadow jumps up me and covers my mouth before I can yell out in shock. The next moment I'm in its grasp.

"It's me."

It's Yuan Fei! He's still here! Recognizing the voice, I hug him tight.

"You can hear it too, can't you? You can hear the sound, right?" His voice shakes, but he repeatedly searches for my confirmation.

I nod furiously and his arms pull me in tighter.

"I can't believe we were hiding the same thing. Has it been bothering you as well? It's been dogging me so I thought I was the next one. I didn't want it to get you, too, but now..."

"You didn't want me to follow you because you thought you're the next victim?" I question. "Didn't want it to get me?"

I feel his head nodding, and instantly my throat itches and my eyes feel wet. I dig into his clothes. I can feel our trembling bodies and wild heartbeats. I had no idea it would be this comforting to have someone beside you when you're scared out of your wits.

Our wild heartbeats gradually slow down along with our steady breaths. It's only then that we realise that the sound has disappeared. We're looking at each other, wondering how we made it out of this one.

"D-did it leave?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"Lemme see..."

He gets up halfway and calls out. "Ah!"

I quickly grab his arm.

He retreats back and chuckles. "I'm fine. Just sore and tingly all over."

I falter and then punch him in annoyance. "What the hell! You had me

worried there!”

“Should be fine now.” He gets up again, slowly this time, and helps me up. I find that I have pins and needles, too.

“Let’s head back.”

“Kay.”

We walk out, shoulder to shoulder.

We’re halfway when I notice that we’re walking hand in hand. My face turns red. He’s the first guy other than my father to walk hand in hand with me. Something’s definitely off about two grown men holding hands.

I jerk my hand back a little and his grip tightens right away.

He whips around. “What’s wrong?”

I shake my head hard. “Nothing!”

He’s only holding my hand...because he’s scared, right? I can’t believe I’m thinking about that kind of stuff at a time like this. I bottle up my frustrations and follow him with my eyes glued to the ground.

Well, it’s not bad having a warm hand on a chilly night after such an encounter.

Chief has a flashlight in hand when we return, about to go out looking for us. That period of panic and fear apparently lasted one and a half hour; it’s well past nine o’clock now.

I remember how I stayed frozen on my bed, afraid to even breathe, when the black figure stood by my bed. Perhaps it was merely a few seconds but it felt longer than a century. Tonight, however, felt different. There was something else other than fear.

My eyes wander over to Yuan Fei. Is it because of him? His tight embrace? It reminded me of the strong, warm arms of my father’s in which I would hide during thunderstorms and which brought me a sense of security like no other.

Somehow, I’m not too against this possibility.

People tend to go sleep earlier when the power goes out. The halls has become deserted and it’s barely ten right now.

I lie on my top bunk, watching the night sky through the window. I can’t tell whether it’s the cloud or my drowsiness that makes the stars twinkle in and out of existence. I force my eyes shut. Biological fatigue overpowers any fear of the night, and soon I’m half asleep.

Then, I feel my hair being pulled.

My eyes shoot open.

All drowsiness gone.

“Xiao Yu...” Yuan Fei whispers. “Are you awake?”

I squeeze my eyes shut exasperatedly, hand on my chest, feeling its violent rise and fall. My teeth grind together.

“Fuck! Are you tryna gimme a heart attack?”

I just want to give him a black eye right now—he’s lucky Chief and Glooms are asleep across the room. I might have mistaken friend for foe but how can you help it when you’re on the brink of insanity and you get touched when you’re half asleep and completely defenceless? It feels like someone dumping ice down your shirt or pushing you into a pool in winter—the cold eats you up and your heart pounds like crazy.

My god, I can’t be anymore thankful that I don’t have any heart diseases.

“Can you sleep with me?” Yuan Fei’s voice is wavering.

This reminds me of that night when I kicked my blankets off in a panicked daze. He was the only one who didn’t wake up. This reminds me of his dark circles and bloodshot eyes every morning.

I finally realise that his fear of the night exceeds mine by far.

I still remember his trembling but delighted voice: ‘You can hear it too right?’ He’s been going through this all by himself, hearing sounds no one else can hear and seeing things no one else can see. When he found someone who could hear and see all those things, his walls came crashing down. He’s sending me an SOS right now. This means he has entrusted himself to me and sees me as a partner at last.

I scoff. Should I happy or sad? I found a desperate ally at the most frightening time, the two of us finding comfort with each other.

I get up, grab my pillow and step down to his bunk. A random question pops into my mind: What if I was sleeping in the top bunk across from his or the lower bunk diagonally across from him and not the one beside him? How would he have asked me then?

He lifts a corner of his blanket up. I put my pillow beside his and wiggle in. He then puts the covers back over the both of us. So warm.

I smile and toss the haphazard thoughts away.

Out of nowhere, I feel his arm on my waist and before I know it he has already pulled me in, his head right up against my chest like a child.

“Hey,” I complain in a tiny voice.

“Thank god I still got you.”

His muffled words tug at my heartstrings and I stop squirming.

“Or else, I really dunno if I can do it.”

It’s the least I can do for him in return for the sense of safety that he gave earlier.

But whose heart is this I’m hearing beating so strongly in the silence?

His warm breath hits my chest, a dubious sensation discreetly mixed in. My body stiffens, a strange emotion settling in. Perhaps he notices this change, because he turns his head towards me. Nervous, I try to avoid his gaze but he

grabs my head and forces me to look at him.

“W-what?” I stutter.

“Xiao Yu...”

“W-what i-is it?”

“Thank you for being here for me.”

I don't know how to respond to that so I just flash a silly grin and fidget awkwardly with my hair. Yuan Fei quickly snatches my hand. The burning heat from his hand unsettles me for some reason.

Just as I have no idea what's going on, his face suddenly enlarges and before I realise it, our lips are touching.

I stay glued to the spot feeling the wetness on my lips. Instincts tell me to get away and my brain is yelling at me ‘Run away! Go! Go!’ but my body stays frozen in place.

He leaves after a short, light kiss. Under the hazy moonlight, I can see him looking straight at me. My heart starts beating nervously again.

“Y-you, I-I never knew, th-that you're...” I don't even know what I want to say.

He watches me for a moment before rolling away to face the wall.

“S-sorry. I just. All of a sudden. You know I'm not. I have a lotta girlfriends.”

“Of course.” I nibble on my still-moist lips, turn the opposite direction and mutter. “You just need some rest.”

“Hmm.”

Silence.

“Sorry,” he then adds in a murmur.

I'm still awake when he says this, but I don't know what to reply so I choose silence.

Slowly, my eyes get drier and drier. It's still dim and hazy outside; even the moon's gone into hiding behind the clouds. Chief's seems really exhausted from the past few days. I'm surprised that Glooms hasn't been woken up by his thunderous snores. Yuan Fei has been motionless like a statue for some time, not even flipping around. I have slipped halfway into sleep when that sound echoes in my mind once more.

Drip-drop.

I'm instantly wide awake. It's standing beside the bed. Right by Yuan Fei's bed!

Drip-drop.

What is this supposed to mean? Is it looking for its next prey? If so, would it be Yuan Fei, to whom the bed belongs? Or would it be me, who is sleeping on the bed?

Drip-drop.

Yuan Fei suddenly turns around and wraps a trembling arm around me. I can easily sense his body tensing against my back.

So he was awake the whole time?

It occurs to me that his horrible state recently must be from being in constant fear and stress every night. He could only lie there in his bed with no one there to support him, shivering, trying his hardest not to lose it.

“Don’t...”

Even his whisper is wavering.

“Don’t, don’t hurt’im.”

I do a double take.

“Please. Don’t hurt’im. Please.”

His arm squeezes tighter and tighter but my heart amazingly slows down. I open my eyes and stare at the wall before me with Yuan Fei and it both behind me.

I’m actually curious as to what the thing is and why in the world is Yuan Fei so scared of it. It seems that he’s been driven up the wall ever since jumping off of his bed that time. I’m afraid of the unknown while he, on the other hand, seems to be afraid of the known so he’s had to bear far more than anyone else.

I turn around for some odd reason and roll right into Yuan Fei’s arms. I can only see a bit of the bedside over his shoulders.

He tenses up even more and holds me tighter while I stare wide-eyed before me.

I can see it! A human figure. A black shape. Nothing else.

I can’t distinguish any features even with the moonlight shining bright. No contour. It doesn’t even look three-dimensional. Just black. Like it doesn’t really exist. Just a cloud of black smoke. Not concave; not convex. Just black like a black hole.

My eyes start to feel sore and water. I’m very much conscious but my eyes try closing as if they’re being smoked. I squint, trying to make out its appearance, because I think all this can come to an end if I find out its identity. My eyes, however, get more and more unfocused as I stare at the entrancing black blob.

I mutter just before losing consciousness.

“Who’re you?”

Chapter 07

It's already morning when I come to. And I'm lying on an infirmary cot again.

It felt like I only fell asleep from fatigue. Like I grabbed some dreamless shut-eye and woke up. But the guys don't seem to think so. Yuan Fei called my name loudly and woke up Chief and Glooms. And that...thing disappeared without a trace when they did. But they couldn't get me to wake up from my 'sleep' so they had to call the caretaker in the end and caused a scene again. The doctor who got called in the middle of the night couldn't figure out what was wrong with me and made me stay overnight.

Chief says that Yuan Fei almost called the ambulance but the school got him to stop in time.

Hah. I doubt they want to raise any more attention from anyone. Two unsolvable homicides. Victims from the same dorm. And now a third dorm member unconscious. I'd be surprised if the school didn't cover this up and called the ambulance for me instead, disregarding its endangered prestige in return for the safety of a student.

"You feeling any better?"

Yuan Fei's eyes are red. His face is covered with stubble. He looks like one of those hobos under bridges instead of that good-looking fellow he usually is. Curious, I reach out and rub his chin. He's probably ticklish and his features soften as he starts chuckling.

"Sunny, how did you end up on Casanova's bed?" Wu Fan leers. "Were you sleepwalking or something?"

Yuan Fei's face turns red. I bet mine did too; my cheeks are burning.

"Wu Fan, don't we still have files to look through?" Xu Ping interrupts casually. "Xiao Yu should be fine now so let's get back to business."

"Oh, alright. I guess he's okay. You keep an eye on him, Yuan Fei."

Yuan Fei nods and Chief and Glooms leave the infirmary. He grabs my hands the moment they disappear and places them against his cheek. I can feel him shaking.

"I thought.... Thank goodness you're okay."

I feel all warm and fuzzy when I recall him begging for me while he himself was terrified. I hold onto his hands as well.

“Am I next?” I whisper.

“No!” His grip tightens and his breathing quickens. “I’m not gonna leave you outta my sight for a second from now on. I’m not gonna let him get to you.”

“Yuan Fei...”

I feel an indescribable emotion. Even if that thing appeared this instant and Yuan Fei was to ditch me, I’d still feel grateful for the incredible amount of warmth and security he’s giving me right now. Under his concerned gaze, I sense a complication in our relationship. Friendship love? More like familial love? Or is it...

Somehow I get kind of embarrassed and start chuckling.

I change the subject. “I’m okay now so let’s head back to our dorm while there’s class. We’re gonna be like zoo exhibitions again if we go during break.”

Yuan Fei keeps inquiring about how I’m feeling and all that. Frustrated but thankful, I answer all his questions and only then does he seem at ease. He then helps me off the bed like I’m some patient coming out of ICU. It’s amusing but I still feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Just when I’ve put my shoes on, the school doctor comes into the room. After a procedural check, he prescribes some token medication (vitamins), reminds me to rest well and dismisses me.

The doctor’s fleeting glances are entertaining. It’s as if he’s unsure of himself. I guess he’s not that skilled in his trade and lost a lot of face because he couldn’t diagnose me. No wonder he hasn’t looked me straight in the eyes this whole time.

“Does the doctor feel bad for me or something?”

“Nope.” He scoffs. “It’s because people are saying we’ve been cursed like the Ring or something. 100% death rate. No age limit. No nothing. At any rate, we’re more deadly than SARS in their eyes.”

“Thank goodness the phone didn’t ring before it all.” I burst out laughing. “Or else it’d be One Missed Call 2006: NY version!”

Yuan Fei starts laughing too. And I laugh even louder. Our laughter seems extra loud in the quiet campus. There are students looking at us from their classrooms. The P.E. class out of the field stare at us in unison. Yuan and I walk away without a care with our arms on each other’s shoulders.

It’s kind of a mutual agreement. Something only we from Room 308 would know. The more they think the ‘survivors’ of 308 should spend the rest of our time in fear then the more we need to show them. That we haven’t been defeated by horror. That we’re actually ridiculing this misfortune, ridiculing those nosy bystanders, and ridiculing those people who’re waiting for a good show.

This is what you call human nature. People plaster it everywhere when they’re not the ones involved. They wait and watch like curious children at the zoo because they don’t know us, because they’re not in danger in any way. If that’s the

case, why should we cooperate and give them their show? Why should we give them the opportunity to sigh in pity and say, ‘Wow, look how unsettled they are?’

They wouldn’t understand the pain of watching your friends leave, one by one. They wouldn’t know of the terror of waiting for the unknown in the dark. They certainly haven’t experienced the hysteria when you’re on the border of insanity. Neither do they know that the shriek stuck in your mouth would mean the downfall of your mental psyche. They couldn’t even grasp the helplessness you feel in the face of death.

It’s like an invisible moat that separates us and them into completely different worlds. We’re living under the same sky and speaking the same language, yet we have nothing to talk about, let alone any communication on a personal level. Even if they can tell we’re unsettled.

We get back to an empty dorm. A water stain below Yuan Fei’s bed—above Mu Mu’s—immediately catches my attention. All the heart-wrenching memories come rushing back. The water stain by Kong Linglin’s bed. The water stain by Cubs’ bed. Why did I make the same mistake again?

It certainly did stand beside the bed where Yuan Fei and I were sleeping in but the bottom bunk is Mu Mu’s. The water seeping through the wall is slowly traveling down to his bed. He is the target!

“Where’s Mu Mu? Where’s Mu Mu?!”

I grab onto Yuan Fei and shake him like crazy. I don’t know what to do. I definitely don’t know what to do when I do find Mu Mu. I’m just shouting out of instinct.

I think he got affected by me because his expression tenses up. “Chief called him this mornin’. Said he’ll take the bus home today so he’ll probably be back to pack.”

Just then, the door opens and Mu Mu comes walking in. He stops for only a moment when he sees us before getting his keys out and opening his locker. He keeps his head down as he packs.

“Mu Mu!”

Before I realise, I’ve grabbed onto him, startling him. I have no idea how to explain to him so I yell out the only thing I can think of.

“Run! Run!”

Mu Mu’s face turns sour and he pushes me away.

“...the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You’re next! You’re next!”

I don’t have the capacity to process that saying this will upset him. I can only try to raise his awareness of the danger. Even if I know we’re still helpless no matter what I say. I know Mu Mu left school these days because he was scared. I know letting Mu Mu know won’t help anything. But I don’t want to just keep this

in anymore. I'm scared something will go wrong again. Even if I'm wrong, even if it's me and Yuan Fei next, I do not want what happened to Cubs to happen again!

Perhaps this moment will be the turning point of this tragedy? Perhaps Mu Mu will stay out of danger because of his raised caution? Perhaps this curse will dissipate once it's been revealed? Perhaps there really will be a miracle?

Instantly, my mind fills with a million, a billion notions. Good ones, bad ones, terrifying ones, hopeful ones...

"What're ya talkin' about?" His face pales. Maybe I scared him. "You bastard. Are you tryna scare me? 'Cuz I left for a coupla days?"

"No. No." I shake my head furiously.

He tries to get away but I don't dare to let him go. I'm scared that I'll lose him once and for all if I do. He, on the other hand, starts getting frustrated and tries his hardest to pry my hands off. Soon we're tangled together. Yuan Fei snaps out of his daze and jumps in to help.

"Listen to me!" I roar. Only then does Mu Mu stop struggling.

I take a shaky breath and explain. "Listen here. This stain isn't a coincidence. I did my research. There's no leak. Not at 308. Definitely not at 501 either. You know very well there's nothing on the other side of this wall!

"I've seen it. The first time it appeared beside Kong Linglin's bed. The water seeped towards his bed. And it got him. The second time it appeared beside Cubs' and my bed. The water seeped towards Cubs' bed. And it got Cubs. The third time it appeared beside Yuan Fei and your bed. And it's seeping towards your bed-."

Mu Mu suddenly kicks me in the stomach. So hard I crash into a table and fall onto the floor.

"Xiao Yu!" Yuan Fei hurries to my side. He yells at Mu Mu, "Are you outta your mind? Xiao Yu's worried for you!"

"Then why is it me?! Why not you?!" Mu Mu screams.

Yuan Fei looks on, stunned.

"There're so many other people in our dorm! Why did it pick me? Why me?! You two played too. Why the hell are you fine? Why?"

Hearing his words, Yuan Fei and I fall silent. What should we say to him? I don't know. Words mean nothing to someone who has lost control in the face of death.

"Mu Mu, every one of us is in danger, and is afraid of being chosen." I can sense anger coming from Yuan Fei's voice as he speaks. "But could you please at least hold yourself as a proper human being until the end and not show the ugliest side of yourself?"

"Hah! You think *I'm* ugly? What? You expect me to calmly thank you for cursing me to die?"

He rips his drawer out and dumps everything on his bed. He spits as he packs everything away like the wind. "I'm not staying here a second longer! You two just go on acting your play. Leave me out of your fake tears!"

"The police told us not to leave the city after Cubs' incident," Yuan Fei says matter-of-factly.

"Like I give a damn!"

Mu Mu slams the locker doors shut. His expression is one of insanity, one full of contempt and arrogance.

"Cubs had left too..." Yuan Fei hints.

That's right. Cubs had left too. But he couldn't escape this curse either.

Mu Mu's hands falter for a moment before he zips his backpack shut. Without a moment's hesitation, he swings it on his back and heads out the door. I'm watching him dumbly. I want to say something but my words fail me.

He stops beside me and says emotionlessly.

"You don't hafta look at me like that, Sunny. If you were in my shoes, you wouldn't be any better. Might even be worse."

"Shut up! If you're gonna leave just leave! Don't compare him with the likes of you!"

Yuan Fei wraps me in his arms as if he's trying to protect me. He glares at Mu Mu as though he hates his very existence. Mu Mu frowns as he studies us. I thought he spotted something but the next moment he scoffs and leaves out the door.

Bam!

My heart seems to tremble.

Perhaps he has sensed it because he's holding me tighter.

"Xiao Yu, don't listen to him. People like him don't deserve your concern."

Yuan Fei comforts me in a low voice. "He was the one who wanted to play so badly. He was also the first one to ditch when shit hit the fan. Now he's attacking his friends. People like him should just die. No one'd miss them. He deserves what's coming."

"Stop! Just stop!" I push him away and curl up into a ball.

"Stop it!" I cover my ears. "Don't fight. Don't blame each other. Stop it. I don't want this."

"Sorry Xiao Yu. I'll stop. I'm sorry." He keeps apologizing.

My eyes rim with tears when I see his stricken expression. I look down. How could I tell him that my silence was not because I was sad but because I couldn't object to Mu Mu's accusations?

Because I already saw the evil inside me when it stood by my bed that night. I, too, was screaming in my mind, 'why did it choose me and not someone else?' I, too, felt relief when I found out that I wasn't the next target. That's right... I'm not

much better than Mu Mu who has abandoned his friends during hardship. Perhaps I'm worse.

What would I do if the target this time really was me? Maybe I would be more insane than Mu Mu. Maybe I would curse Yuan Fei and the guys to die an unjust death. I would show the true colour of human nature and reveal all of its evil.

Are you satisfied? Seeing the pathetic and ugly nature of us human beings, enjoying our display of vulnerability in the face of fear, are you satisfied? So when will you stop?



Wu Fan and Xu Ping come back at lunchtime, empty-handed. Yuan Fei goes over what happened with Mu Mu, leaving out his wild behaviour and what I had said about the meaning of the water stains. However, I'm pretty sure Chief and Glooms has started to suspect it because Chief frowned at the stain and Xu Ping also stared at it for a while.

The four of us go to the cafeteria for food and bring it back while getting pointed at by others along the way. I got my favourite dishes but I've got no appetite whatsoever. I stab at the food with my chopsticks and only get a few morsels down.

Yuan Fei reaches over out of nowhere and takes a few fillets of my fish. I raise a brow. He, in turn, shoots me a blaming look before bending down and starting to pick out the fish bones.

"It's quite horrifying to watch you eat fish like that. I see fish bones go in but nothing comes back out. Just stop please. I feel like I'm the one with a stomach full of bones. I can't even. Here, I'll get 'em out for you."

I blush furiously. "Thanks," I mutter.

"You really know who your real friends are during hard times." Wu Fan jokingly says as he adjusts his glasses, "Just look at Casanova and Sunny! Archenemies turned BFFs, am I right?"

"Watch it! One of these days Chief..." Yuan Fei barks but his ears are bright red.

I suddenly feel like I've been caught red-handed but I don't know what for.

"Oh, so did you guys find anything?" I quickly change the subject.

"Not much. Well, at least nothing out of the ordinary," Chief reports. "I've let my imagination run wild. I've considered the notion that there's been a conspiracy at our school and all the related documents have already been destroyed, so I've been looking out for information that doesn't match up. But still. Nil, nada."

"I asked my dad to find out what used to be here before the school. There

wasn't anything weird, far from a cemetery or place of execution or anything," Xu Ping adds casually.

"Your dad?" I ask.

"Oh right, you guys probably don't know. Xu Ping's dad is the chief of our city's Criminal Investigations Division. His people are the ones in charge of our case," Chief explains.

"Whoa." My jaw drops. I never knew Xu Ping had such a background.

"So there must be a lotta first-hand information." Yuan Fei's eyes seem to light up.

But Xu Ping shakes his head. "The higher-ups are really serious about this case. The investigators might be my dad's people but everything about the case is strictly confidential. But my dad's really worried about me so he's trying his best to get bits and pieces. He'll let me know once he does and I'll tell you guys then."

"Why don't you go home if your dad's so concerned, Grooms?"

I shut my trap right away because the answer hits me before I finish asking. The room falls quiet. Everyone is looking down at his own food without a word.

Xu Ping starts chuckling after seeing our reaction. "What's with those faces? I didn't stay for any selfless reason. I just want to get some experience before I go apply to become a policeman."

"Oh, you wanna be a policeman?" Yuan Fei laughs. "Then why didn't you go to the police academy? Or you wanna use your degree and directly apply for an office position?"

"Where'll police academy get me? With my dad, I can at least get to the Inspector rank as long as I have a university degree!" Xu Ping jokes.

"Ah, the corruption of bureaucracy!" Chief purposefully puts on his serious 'justice' face as he criticises.

"Haha, I never knew Grooms could be this humorous." Yuan Fei is laughing.

On the other hand, I study Xu Ping. He looks fresh and smart when he smiles, flashing eight pearly whites.

"I never knew Grooms could be this handsome," I mumble.

Xu Ping pauses and then immediately scoffs. "Gimme a break. I don't want that coming from a man."

The entire room gets filled by laughter. Laughter really is infectious. It wasn't anything hilarious but every person starts laughing at the others laughing their asses off, and their own laughter, in turn, makes the others laugh even harder. Then it just repeats and multiplies.

My stomach is starting to cramp. My cheeks are sore and tears are coming out of my eyes.

Bam!

"I FORGOT TO MENTION!" Wu Fan yells after hitting the table.

This scares everyone shitless. I'm rubbing my chest which my poor heart's beating wildly in. I glare at Chief, who almost became the murderer of three good men.

"MIS! TER! WU! FAN! Do you not know laughter relaxes the mind? Do you not know people have their guards down while relaxed? Do you not know people are easily scared when their guards are down? Especially me! Mentally and emotionally fragile me!"

Chief apologizes profusely before getting to his point. "I almost forgot to mention. I found something fishy. None of our files are in the archives. I had to ask around but apparently our files were taken out by the principal since Cubs' incident."

"Why is that?" Yuan Fei inquires.

"I thought there might've been something in the files like similarities between Cubs and Kong Linglin and these similarities could be the key to this whole thing." He pauses before adding, "But that's just a hunch. It might've been moved simply for the police's convenience or for security purposes."

"It could be that they didn't want the murderer to destroy any evidence," Grooms says calmly. "The archives room doesn't have the best security per se. Not to mention the fact that the Student Council and the teachers can get access to it anytime. So if the murderer is someone from the school they could get rid of crucial clues if they wanted to. Also, students' files are a sensitive area and it's almost exam time. The police probably couldn't take it anyway and only made a photocopy or something before returning it. But they'd need the original during trial so it's possible the school moved them for safekeeping."

"So what you're sayin' is..." My mind is racing. "The reason why the guys were chosen might be in there?"

"Right. Now we can only hope that the principal didn't lock them in his safe." Wu Fan suddenly smirks.

"Are you suggesting..." Yuan Fei peers at Chief with a frown.

Wu Fan cracks a sly grin and the four of us share a look before grinning knowingly in unison.

"Mission Impossible: The Principal's Office," I laugh as I give our operation a name.

"This time it'll be the four of us. This way we can look after each other if anything does go down." Wu Fan then heaves a big sigh. "If we get caught, my spot on the Council, no, even my degree might be at stake here."

"That's right, my brothers. If shit goes down, remember that the mastermind was Chief and we're just the poor minions who got coerced into being his partners-in-crime," I proclaim with a straight face.

"You little piece of shit!" Chief grins as he raps my head once. "Alright,

enough. Let's split up the job. The Party Secretary⁹ has the keys to the office and it won't be hard for me to borrow it. But I can't get the keys to his cabinet so Grooms and I are gonna try to get the cabinet open tonight. But if that doesn't work then there's nothing more we can do. Yuan Fei, Xiao Yu, one of you keep watch by the east staircase and the other one at the west staircase. If anything happens, let us know right away and retreat separately and meet back at the dorm."

I suppress a chuckle. The four of us are just like a couple of Eighth Routers¹⁰ planning to steal military secrets from the Japanese back during the Japanese invasion.

"What do we do if you guys can't get it open? Or if it really is in the safe?" asks Yuan Fei.

"Can't blame no government." Chief spells.

We burst out in laughter and start mock-beating Chief.

We got the basic plan down and we're joking and laughing, but I'm sure every one of us is at least a little bit anxious. That's why we're trying to distract ourselves with this racket. Because, after all, the closer to the truth we get, the more danger we're in.



The day has passed by without much happening. Throughout that time, I only thought of Mu Mu and worried about his wellbeing twice, both times quickly focusing back onto our mission tonight.

I had stopped to observe the others' expressions but they didn't look one bit unsettled or concerned. No one even stopped to ask if Mu Mu got home safely.

It was exactly this lack of the simplest kindness that made me notice how abnormal it was for everyone to have just forgotten about him or something. I suppose what this really means is that everyone actually cares about him a lot, and they're keeping in the anxiety regarding his fate so as to not alarm the others.

I finally get it now. I never forgot about him. I was only afraid of thinking about him. Every time I think of him, something to the left side of my chest jerks, as if my worst, most terrifying nightmares are all rushing to burst out to push events past the point of no return. I'm scared, terrified of this feeling, so I don't want to think about him. It may be selfish to say so but neither my nerves nor my heart can take it anymore.

I glance out the window at the sky. Finally, night has come.

⁹ Most likely the secretary of the Communist Party Youth League's division in NY.

¹⁰ The Eighth Route Army was an army led by the Communist Party during the Second Sino-Japanese War and was the main fighting force of the CP.

Chapter 08
The title 'Chapter 08' is written in a decorative, gothic-style font. The word 'Chapter' is in a larger, more ornate script, while '08' is in a simpler, bold font. On either side of the title is a black and white illustration of a rabbit's head with a skull for a face, wearing a small bow around its neck.

After lights-out, we quietly crawl out of bed and gather around with our things.

“Set all your phones to silent mode,” Chief instructs. “Yuan Fei, you key in my number. Xiao Yu, you do Xu Ping’s. Then if someone comes you can press call right away. Right away, you hear me? Once we get the call we’ll notify the person keeping watch on the other side. Remember, two rings mean someone’s here and scam. Three rings mean the mission’s a success and return to the dorm.”

“We’re not picking up?” I wonder.

“Minutes ain’t free!” Yuan Fei, Wu Fan and Xu Ping say in unison. The four of us all start giggling quietly.

“Pay attention you all!” Wu Fan jokingly scolds before raising his right fist in the air. Xu Ping, Yuan Fei and I all raise our own to meet with his.

Our celebratory fist bump hasn’t been used for a long time. I remember the last time we used it was when Yuan Fei, Kong Linglin, Mu Mu and I snuck into the meeting room to play that game. That was the beginning of everything and I hope this time it will be the ending to it all.

The night is dark and quiet; the schoolyard is deserted. Chilling wind blows in from my collar. I hunch my shoulders, shivering as I try to retreat into my shirt. By now I’ve learned to distinguish between the cold that fear brings and the cold that low temperature brings. Low temperature makes your pores shrivel up and quiver. It’s a feeling on the surface of your skin that kind of goes away with a deep breath. Fear, on the other hand, makes you quiver uncontrollably from the inside of your skull, and in that moment breathing itself becomes a burden because you’ve already forgotten how to breathe and how to think. You only want your wildly beating heart to stop and if that meant you have to stop breathing then so be it.

If I can make it out of this, I think to myself, I won’t have any more to be afraid of because I would’ve already experienced all the fear that I could possibly encounter in a lifetime all at once. If I am able to handle this and make it out alive and sane, then I can’t imagine there being anything else that could make me feel frightened again. Suddenly, someone gently grabs onto my hand. I turn around to meet with Yuan Fei’s concerned eyes.

“Feelin’ cold?” he asks quietly.

I nod and he immediately takes off his jacket. I quickly shake my head. “It’s okay!”

“Oh, put it on. I’m in better shape than you.” He starts chuckling mid-sentence. “I’ll be glad as long as you’re not scared.”

He leans in after seeing my puzzled expression and teases in a voice only the two of us can hear, “It’s really a torture to watch you when you’re scared. It’s like you’ll break out in tears any moment but then you try your hardest and suck them back in. Every time I see you like that I feel like I need to stop being scared and start protecting you some-.”

“I don’t need no protecting!” I hiss while shooting him a dirty look.

I take a glimpse at Chief and Grooms who’re walking in front of us. Thank goodness they’re talking and not paying attention to Yuan Fei and me, but my heart still speeds up. In the end, however, I put on his jacket because I actually am cold.

Only after things go smoothly and we arrive at the administrative building do we take out the small keychain flashlights we had prepared beforehand and light our way with its weak bulbs.

Chief is, well, the chief after all. He had prepared a whole set of keys and easily gets us into the building and start heading up to the principal’s office. The four of us split up when we get to the second floor. Yuan Fei and I are in charge of keeping watch at the west and east stairwell while Chief and Grooms goes straight up to the principal’s office on the third floor.

I cautiously walk down the deserted hallway by myself. Hallways are always so much longer in the dark for some reason. It’s so quiet I can hear Yuan Fei’s heavy footsteps going the opposite direction and even the sound of Chief and Grooms opening the door to the principal’s office.

The light coming from the thumb-sized flashlight in my hand becomes the only light source amid the darkness. Using it as my guide, I tread over to the stairwell and go down to the first landing between the first and second floor. This way I can see the first floor with a step forward and the second floor with a step backward—the most ideal spot.

I don’t think there’s a high chance that some teacher’s going to come back to their office at this hour so I lean leisurely on the railings. I put my weight on them and slide down, and then I climb back up and repeat, getting a bit lost in the fun. If someone were to come now, they would notice my loud steps right away.

Something starts buzzing in my pocket. I fish out my cell phone—it’s a text from Yuan Fei.

He writes: Your joyous footsteps cross the dark, long night and reach my ears, the deserted halls magnifying the signs of your existence. I want to exclaim from

the bottom of my heart—we're thieves right now! Please be quiet!

I giggle until my stomach starts hurting. I sit down on the stairs and speedily reply him: I thought Chief told us to have the numbers ready? You can't be texting. What if someone comes right now?

Yuan Fei replies in a few moments: Efficient mobile phones of the modern age—we introduce to you the speed-dial function!

I brood for a second before replying with a clenched jaw: Ah'm sarry. Ah'm frum down sowth and still be usin' them keypad-dial funkshun.

I actually did forget about the speed-dial function on my cell phone, so I stop checking Yuan Fei's texts and start setting Xu Ping's number to speed-dial.

Just as I'm setting up speed-dial with a grin on my face, still feeling light and cheerful from the funny conversation with Yuan Fei, something sounds in the silence that completely ruins my mood.

Drip-drop.

My fingers freeze on the keypad. My mind blanks out.

Did I just hear-

Before the question even forms properly, I hear another one, as clear as ever.

Drip-drop.

My breath hitches.

This isn't the sound of some loose faucet.... This sound that's so clear that it seems to be in my head.... It can only be.... But, how?

I can't be 100% sure that the sound is related to it but I've heard this mysterious dripping every time the wretched thing has appeared. I can't help but connect the dots. If it really is it, why would it appear here out of all places? Hasn't it already chosen Mu Mu as its target? Or am I wrong? Is the real target actually Yuan Fei or me?

I had been able to laugh and have fun only because I thought that 'the next one isn't me'! That I'd be safe until its business with Mu Mu ends. It's only because of this lowly, pathetic, and shameless reason that I'd been able to temporarily stay worry-free.

That reason was obliterated the moment the water sounds started. My arms stay rigid in their previous position. The phone has already locked itself and the screen has gone dark. I'm surrounded by complete darkness once again.

I keep telling myself 'Run! Run!' but all I'm able to do is stare wide-eyed at the black cell phone screen and listen for the sound that's closing in on me.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

It's not my imagination—it's getting closer! It's me! It's after me!

My mouth opens by itself but the scream about to escape gets stuck in my throat. Nothing comes out.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

I can feel it getting closer but I've lost count of how long I've been holding my breath for. By the time I snap back, I've slowly started to curl into a ball, sticking myself right against the wall and sliding downwards bit by bit, as if it wouldn't notice me like this. I go to the corner and align myself in an angle that I assume it wouldn't see. I think my phone's about to snap under my grip.

Can't move too much... 'cause it'll find me.

Can't make too much noise... 'cause it'll find me.

I only have to... If only I hide... It'll be fine if it doesn't find me.

It's like there's a naive and frightened voice in my mind persuading me. If you can't see it then it can't see you, it says. I don't even have the guts to make a break for it. Because I'm terrified. Terrified that my running would attract its attention. So terrified that I can't consider anyone else's safety.

Do people ultimately think of themselves first in the face of danger?

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

I cover my mouth. I'm not sure what this achieves but somehow I feel like it'll keep my hiding place concealed. I shut my eyes tight. I don't want to see anything horrifying with my eyes even if I'm a moment away from death. I won't be able to take it. My heart and mind can't take anymore.

I can't believe I had the courage to look at it the other night. I actually opened my eyes and turned around to look at it! Why was I so brave then? Where did my courage come from? Where is it now? Why don't I have the courage to even breathe?

I despise this me. I hate this gutless me. But still, I want so much to live on safely.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

It might be my imagination... but I think it went above me and drifted off somewhere farther. I have my eyes shut but I can somehow picture a hazy figure passing the second floor, drops of water dribbling down its side, one step, two step, moving upwards...

Steps? Upwards?

My eyes snap open. It's going to the third floor?

Who's on the third floor? Wu Fan! And Xu Ping!

But why would it go up to the third floor? There is no evidence that indicates its target is Chief or Glooms. No signs that says they're next! Unless something has already happened to Mu Mu! Has the next round of curses begun without me knowing?

A loud noise interrupts my frantic thoughts. It sounded like a large metallic cabinet falling, along with some tinkling of broken glass. The frightening sound then disappears instantly and everything falls silent once more.

My breaths quicken.

What was that? Did the two of them tip over a file cabinet by mistake? And then the cabinet broke some glass? And then? And then what?

My eyes are glued on the phone in my hands.

Please vibrate! Turn on! Please receive their evacuation call! Come on!

But there's nothing. Nothing at all. It's so quiet my breathing seems to resonate. There are no footsteps coming from the third floor. No running from the west stairwell. It's as if I've been abandoned. There's only me.

What about the guys? With a noise that loud, people will be coming to check soon. So how come I haven't heard them leaving?

I call Xu Ping's number with shaking hands and listen anxiously to it ringing.

Beep-beep.

Pick up. I'm begging you, Grooms. Please pick up.

The call is connected and I cry out in joy, "Grooms! What's going on with you?"

Tschhhhhh. Tschhhhhh. Tschhhhhh.

I hear a fuzzy scratching sound from the speakers, as if the signal is bad. I move to a different spot and keep shouting into the phone.

"Grooms! Can you hear me? It's me, Sunny!"

Tschhhhhh. Tschhhhhh. Tschhhhhh.

I'm just about to try banging the phone on something when I hear something from the other end.

Drip-drop.

I fall quiet and listen dumbly to this menacingly haunting sound.

Tschhhhhh. Tschhhhhh. Tschhhhhh.

It's still this strange noise. Slowly, an eerie feeling starts spreading starting from my nape like countless icy cold tentacles unhurriedly inching across my body. I'm soaked with a sheen of cold sweat.

Then the noise stops momentarily before the sound of glass falling on to the ground comes through the phone, as though someone tossed a piece of glass away. The dripping comes back the next moment, followed by more scratching, and then another piece of tossed glass....

A picture begins to form in my head. A hazy figure holding a shard of sharp glass keeps slashing at something, which is what made those scratching sounds... After so many slashes, the shard becomes dull so it throws this one away, picks another piece up and keeps cutting...

"Let us...go...please. I'm beggin'...."

I'm crying. I'm pleading for the unfeasible possibility to live, pleading to the phone, to whatever is on the other side of the phone.

Bip-bip-bip.

The call has ended. Has my pleas been rejected as well?

I was just calling Grooms' number.... Did disaster befall on him? What about Chief? And Yuan Fei?

Is tonight...our last night?

The scene of the four of us chatting and laughing suddenly pops up in my mind. Of us bumping fists in trust of one another. Of us sharing our wishes for success with each other. These scenes seem to play like a slow-mo from a movie, flashing across, pausing and replaying in my mind.

I scamper up the stairs to the second floor and drag my wobbly body up to the third using the railings. If it was a matter of order, I would pray that I be the last one, but if today's the end for everyone, then the order is no longer important! I want to confirm with my own two eyes who's left—how many of my comrades are left!

The principal's office is in the middle of the hallway. The only sounds in the entire hallway are my scurrying footsteps and breathless pants. The door to the room is opened. It's a mess inside. A row of cabinets knocked over. Broken glass and paper everywhere. But no Chief or Grooms anywhere.

This all seems eerily familiar, like a cliché comic scene. I'm still here, only in another dimension which is why I can't see anyone else. If not, I can't come up with any other explanation why the rest of the school hasn't acted after such a loud commotion on the third floor. Not one person has come to check. Furthermore, Wu Fan, Xu Ping and Yuan Fei are nowhere to be found. Not a trace.

And there's only me...

I zone out in front of the chaotic mess, not sure what to do now.

Suddenly, a chilly feeling rises and lightly, vaguely enshrouds me. I'm rooted to the spot, not moving a finger. I don't know how but I know...it's behind me....

Ice cold. Lifeless. Soulless. It's standing behind me, almost right behind me. I know I would come in contact with it if I moved the slightest bit. That's why I'm staying still, not moving a muscle, despite the fact my limbs are about to give out.

“Why...me?”

I know that's a useless question. My roommates were killed off by him one by one. I'm not special. There's no special reason for coming to me. It's simply my turn.

“The guys.... Are they still alive?”

My words seem to roll out of my mouth uncontrollably. My wavering voice reveals my apprehension. Moving is no longer an option; it's as if I can only

express my anxiety through my words or else I might suffocate.

I start catching whiffs of a strong medicinal odour. It's very pungent. I think I've smelled it somewhere before but I can't remember what it is. Puzzled, I try to pinpoint the origin of the odour. It seems...it's coming from behind me? Is it coming from it?

It's very untimely but I think it's kind of funny. What did I expect the odour to be? Its perfume?

Eeeeeee.

I divert my attention to where the sound is coming from. Under the hazy moonlight, I can make out a safe behind the swivel chair and its number wheel turning steadily on its own. I stare at it with wide eyes until it stops spinning.

Ka-lik!

I guess that signifies that the lock's been opened but I don't know what that means for me.

Then, out of nowhere, I feel a hand on my back! It takes all my efforts to keep from screaming my head off. It's its hand. Just like any other hand, only it's cold beyond description.

I move forward robotically under its push all the way up to the safe. Only then does its force lessen. I look dumbfounded at the mounds of cash, several official stamps, some files and contracts, and also a few familiar paper envelopes that look like the ones Chief got us to help check. Could it be? Are those the files of Room 308 students? My brain that was supposed to be blank unexpectedly starts running again.

It opened the safe. It pushed me over here. Does it want me to take them out? But what for? We wanted to see the files because we feared death, because we wanted to find the reason for its targets, and because we didn't want to be the next one. But what does it want me to have the files for? So we can find the reason? How is that even possible?

I might be able to make more guesses if I were in a calmer state. I might not be shaking like a leaf right now but I'm definitely not in the shape to think critically either. I instinctively notice the problem but I can't figure out the solution. Therefore I can't tell what will happen next if I were to cooperate.

If I do what he wants, maybe I'll be the only one he lets off the hook. But really, is that possible? If I do what he wants, maybe I'll be played with before I'm killed. But really, will that be the case?

I reach out stiffly and take the files in my hand. There are not eight, not nine, but exactly seven.

The hand on my back slowly leaves.

I stay still in my spot, trying to sense with every single pore whether it left or not. It's actually not hard to do. If there was a huge chunk of ice behind you, you

could tell its whereabouts even with your eyes closed.

It hasn't left. It's still behind me. I don't know what it's waiting for—perhaps it's waiting for my next move to decide its next move. My fingers tighten around the files. I can only stand here passively and wait with no aim like I have my back to a cliff.

Maybe it'll leave on its own, if I'm lucky. Then I'll be safe...

Illusory thoughts fill my cowardly head. I let them so I won't have to deal with the fear.

Suddenly, it starts moving behind me. Slowly, lightly, it starts moving. My eyes go wide and I stare straight ahead. My breath stops short—I'm too petrified to even exhale. The pungent odour is even stronger. I feel it to the side of my face. I'm too scared to look away because I don't want to see it accidentally from the corner of my eye. However, it's getting closer and closer to my face until finally something ice cold touches my earlobe.

All the logic and sense I've tried to maintain crumbles apart in an instant. I roar loudly and hurl the files to my side. They land on the ground with no obstructions but my eyes tell me that I've hit it! Because it's right there before my eyes! It's still a blob of dark, soul-eating black with no bumps or ridges to it as though it's made of shapeless smoke and mist.

I see it all very clearly with my eyes but it's only in that one moment when I had turned to throw the files at it because the next second I'm racing out the room. However, I still want to cry out in regret for doing that because that one glimpse proves to be too much for my heart. It's far from a ghastly sight but I feel like every hair on my body is standing.

I haven't even considered what kinds of misfortunes doing that would bring upon me. I only know that touch was my breaking point. My naive inner voice has finally woken up and it says: That thing can't be thought of as a human! And right now that thing wants to kill you, to murder you!

I run like a madman down the pitch black hallway as fast as my legs can carry me. I need some kind of mental support to give me the strength to keep running. I need it before my energy runs out, before my legs give out! Thoughts roll before my eyes so messily I can't tell one from another.

Until one name, and only one, rises above them all. I shout it out with all I've got. "Yuan Fei!"

Chapter

I forgot which fantasy story I had read this from, but it said that a person's name is actually some kind of summoning spell. Call out that person's name loudly when you're in dire need of him and he will appear just in time in front of you. Even though this sort of miracle should only occur in a fantastical world, it actually happens to me.

The moment I yell out the name 'Yuan Fei', I run so hard into someone's sturdy arm that my voice jumps an octave on 'Fei'. The next moment, however, I turn and pull this person tightly into my embrace. A familiar feeling along with a familiar scent—it's Yuan Fei.

He holds onto me tightly with what seems like all the power he can muster, so tightly that I'm having some trouble breathing, but I hug back, not wanting to be freed one bit. A comrade that I had thought was gone has appeared once more. I cling onto him, afraid that he'll leave, as though he is that last piece of rope that is keeping me from falling.

"Where d'you go?! Everybody's gone! I thought I was the only one left!" My voice cracks as I shout.

"I won't leave you behind.... I won't...." He breathes.

He's so shaken up I can almost imagine the terror he must have been dealing with by himself wandering in the dark. He hasn't exactly been having the time of his life recently and yet here he is, trying his hardest to comfort another scared person.

Really, I'm thoroughly moved. This shuddering chest of his is actually the safest refuge I've ever seen. All I can do is hold on tight to this person in hopes that I can give him even the tiniest amount of support.

If two people were stranded in a snowstorm, then the other person's body heat would become the only chance at survival. Therefore, they could never turn the other person down—or better yet—the thought wouldn't even occur.

I don't feel one bit embarrassed or hesitant. I'm not quick to pull back like usual. I'm hugging with another man like a pair of desperate¹¹ lovers, searching for some temporary comfort for my heart.

Until....

Drip-drip.

The two of us tense up. I grab onto his shirt while he braces himself as though to protect me.

Drip-drop.

He edges backwards with me in his arms as our gazes move to a certain place in the darkness—the origin of the sound.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

Every drop that falls shakes me to the core. It's as though they are dripping onto my heart, every drop weighing a ton.

“Run!” Yuan Fei takes my hand and starts running.

We shoot down the stairs. One floor, two floors, then another, and then one more. This is a five-storey building and we were on the third floor. The steps continue on endlessly as if we are climbing down a skyscraper. Suddenly, Yuan Fei breaks and pulls me into the hallway. He quickly rattles every door as we pass by and finally he gets one unlocked door to swing open.

It's the room where the school staff holds their meetings. With the moon dimly lighting the room, I take a scan—neat stadium seating and thick curtains that drape to the ground. There's not even a locker to hide in.

“This way!” He pulls me under the lecture stand in the middle of the podium.

The metal stand provides cover on three sides, creating a sort of feeling of safety. The stand is not huge and with two grown men the space seems cramped all of a sudden. He puts an arm around me, pulling me closer to him, and adjusts our position a little. The space loosens up. I let out a breath but then I notice how suggestive our position is. My cheeks start burning but that's about all I can do so I turn my attention to the safety of this hiding place.

My impression of that thing has settled as “anywhere at any time”. All my efforts to escape and to run are instinctive. I've formed thousands of scenarios in which I make it out alive, but really, deep down, I know well that none of them will come true and I would tell myself when I'm settled down that I'm actually in danger. Like right now....

Would we really be fine if we stayed here quietly in hiding if it really is shapeless and present anywhere at any time?

I don't think so—not one bit—but I still have to stay curled up here while praying for a chance at life and taking the time now to comfort myself—at least you're safe now.

Seconds tick by. The only sound in this dark room is our low breathing. We haven't spoken but our hands are tightly intertwined. We're both waiting for the unknown, waiting for some kind of sign. Maybe it'll go away once the night ends? Maybe it'll give up if it doesn't find us?

My mind keeps racing. Anxiously, we keep waiting.

As if in reply to our anxiety, a clear, crisp sound rings out nearby.

Drip-drop.

Both Yuan Fei and I grip harder onto each other's hand. I try to pinpoint the direction the sound is coming from. Is it here? Where? Has it discovered us?

Clang!

We quake and quiver. Something has struck the top of the metal stand! My heart almost jumps out of my throat at the blunt sound.

Then that something begins to move, slowly, making a sound not unlike fingertips dragging across metal. Bit by bit, the sound creeps past the midpoint and then moves over to the side. My eyes go wide as I retreat into Yuan Fei's arms but my eyes have started to wander to the left.

If it really was dragging its hand as it's moving then it should be moving to the left as the sound indicates, and if I'm correct, its hand would appear at the edge to the left...and I am located on the left side of this not-so-big space.

I can't even begin to describe what I'm feeling as I look at the left side of the stand while listening to that irritating screech coming from above. I think I smell that pungent medicinal odour, too, amid it all.

A black object then enters my field of vision a little by little, noticeable even in the pitch black night, moving at a slow, torturous speed. It looks like a hand but it's deformed. It might be my imagination but its fingers look bigger than the average person's. Every finger is swollen like a bloated corpse that has been soaked in water.

My brain is clearly processing the signals my eyes are sending it but I can't be sure whether it's a mirage or not. Actually, I have no way of judging if that black blob even has fingers or not but instincts tell me that this thing is its hand—a hand that no longer belongs to a human.

It seems to be searching for something. The hand reaches into the stand, feeling around slowly. If it had a body, the angle this hand is in would be well beyond physical constraints. It doesn't have an elbow—at least none that I can see—and it has extended in crookedly and keeps probing forward.

It's about to reach me while I don't even have the strength to run away.

“Scram!” Yuan Fei barks all of a sudden.

He rams the stand and the heavy thing starts tipping over. He pulls me out along with him the moment it does.

Thump!

The stand hits the ground and I see it has been crushed under the stand because half of the hand is sticking out from beneath! Yuan Fei backs up slowly, bringing me along with him. We're not sure what this means for us so we turn our gazes to the hand.

Suddenly the hand moves and the huge stand moves along with it. It starts

‘crawling’ over without giving us any time to react.

Screeeeech.

The sharp sound of metal scratching against the floor sounds so disturbing. One of us screams and we both whip around and dash out.

A long, dark hallway that seems to lead to the pits of hell. Two terrified guys fleeing for their lives. A sharp “*screeeeech*” of metal dragging across the floor. A supernatural hunter beyond the human recognition. A game of chase with unfairly balanced odds.

Yuan Fei and I are just the tiny mice under the claws of a cat. We can’t escape no matter how hard we try but we must continue to struggle nonetheless.

We head up the stairs. It doesn’t matter anymore what floor it is. All we need to do is to keep running. However, that alternate reality that had trapped us has unexpectedly disappeared. By the time we make it up the flight of stairs, we know well it’s the third floor we’re on, because there is obviously something strange next to the wide-open door of the principal’s room that wasn’t there when I was here earlier.

Somehow we both start walking towards that something lying on the floor without having to say a word to each other. The air is heavy with the scent of blood. I’ve only smelled it once before—on the day Kong Linglin mysteriously bled to death.

Blood so red it’s black. Endless amounts of blood. It lingers in the air, forming an unspeakable scent—the scent of death.

“Is that you, Grooms?” Yuan Fei calls out, because that loose-fitting jacket belongs to Xu Ping; but Grooms lies there on the ground, not moving one bit. I want to stay where I am but I start walking over when Yuan Fei pulls me along.

At once, we can make out that something on the ground, but we can’t tell if it’s Grooms or not because ‘it’ is just a heap of stuff. I can’t identify anything from its mess of bits and pieces. Then, like an ill-intended joke, the moon that has been hiding all night decides to peek out from behind its covers, brightening the hazy world, and to shine its luminous light on the scene in front of us.

I automatically know that it’s Xu Ping, only that his face has been stabbed full of broken glass. Not an inch of it was spared. Blackish red blood crawls across the floor. His torso, his limbs have all been stabbed by countless pieces of glass. He couldn’t have been injured this way from broken glass hitting him straight on because there is not one section of unscathed skin. He’s bloody from head to toe. Even his clothes have been soaked red. You couldn’t even call it a person!

But I just had to recognize that it’s Xu Ping, that it’s my good buddy, Grooms!

“Ahhh!” I shriek with my arms around my head.

I can’t take it anymore! Why do I know it’s Grooms? Why does it come so easily to me? Why am I thinking of that horrifying phone call? Why do I have to

think that the *'tschhhhhh'* noises were from it slicing through Xu Ping's skin? That it cut a living person up into a mess of flesh and bone, inch after inch, piece after piece, shred after shred?

"Why?! Why?!" I scream at nothing like a madman.

Why did it have to be Glooms? Why must it always do something I don't expect every time I think I have understood the rules of its game? There were no warnings, no signs of Glooms being its next target. Just when will it stop playing with us?!

"Xiao Yu!"

Yuan Fei tries to get a hold on me but I'm already out of control, already racing away. I have too much negativity I need to let out. I howl as I run. I've never cried like this before but I just can't keep it in. I would definitely go crazy if I kept my screams in. I would definitely collapse if I didn't let it out.

"Xiao Yu! Xiao Yu!" Not able to grab onto me, he tackles me to the ground, quickly grabbing my hands and restricting them. "I'm sorry! It's all my fault! I'm sorry!"

I hear his apologies through my screams and I ease my wails into sobs before inquiring, "How...is it your fault?"

Wasn't it the game that started it all?

"I'm the one he's after! He wants revenge!" Yuan Fei's voice shakes with frustration and terror as though he had just released a great amount of bottled up feelings.

My muddled mind miraculously begins to clear up. I ask warily, "You know who it is?"

We have put in every effort in finding its identity but to no prevail. How could Yuan Fei know?

He lets himself go limp after I stop bucking and lies on top of me. He puts his head on my chest and only speaks after a silence as long as a century.

"He's...Sun Le."

"Sun Le." I repeat the spookily familiar name and only remember after some thought.

"The Sun Le in the Fine Arts Painting program who jumped off a building and killed himself?"

Yuan Fei gives a weak nod.

"Why is it him? And how do you know? What went on between you two?" I yank him up by the hair and interrogate.

His eyes get jumpy as he tries to avoid my inquisitive gaze. He sits up weakly and slouches against the wall.

"This was last year when I was in grade 12; he was a junior. You've seen his picture, right? He was very pretty and he was in the painting program so the all

the guys in senior high were spreading rumours that he's gay. The more they spread it the more real it got. They even said at one point that the person he liked was in senior high and he's in grade 12."

He pulls a miserable smile. "There weren't many senior high guys in the limelight at that time, but I happened to be one of them. So a couple of guys in my class joked about me being his lover. I jokingly said that if he really was gay I'd definitely be the one he had a crush on. So then..."

His voice cracks as he continues, "We made a bet...whether I could get this gay guy or not. So I purposefully approached him..."

I had a hunch before he started telling the story but I'd never had thought he would really go and cheat another person of their love. I couldn't believe he'd do such a thing.

I stare at him in disbelief. He's actually that kind of person.

He notices me and he glumly looks away to avoid me and the guilt. "And after I got close to him I found that he was actually not gay. What's more, he was such a kind soul that he wouldn't think badly of anyone. He just saw all my advances as a sign of friendship.... Hah. I'd lost that bet. And along with it my heart..."

Shocked, I perk my ears.

"I actually fell in love with him...." Yuan Fei covers his head with his arms, his shaky voice turning into choked sobs.

"I liked him so, so, so much. So much I couldn't help myself, to the point that I scared myself. I'd never thought I'd have anything to do with being gay.... And even he realised before I did. And he's pretty dense.... He told me that he'd be willing to come out and challenge the social norms if I was serious. Hah. Hah. That's the confidence and pride of an artist alright. But he didn't realize that I was just a normal guy. I'd do anything in the heat of the chase but once someone reminded me that this was homosexual I called it quits right away. But he didn't know of my cowardice. He only saw that I started avoiding him after he confessed. He didn't know why so he kept trying to talk to me to get an explanation."

Yuan Fei inhales deeply and sucks his tears back. "It was last summer when I went back home to hide. I'd thought he'd get it sooner or later and give up, but then he found out about the bet.... He thought that I was avoiding him 'cause I'd won the bet, and that I've played with his feelings and now he's of no use to me. He called me...before he jumped...and asked me 'Did you only do it for a bet?' and I said 'Yes'...."

"But I wanted to explain!" He gets very emotional. "I wanted to tell him that that bet's been long over! That I really like him! And that our relationship was real. That I wasn't hiding 'cause of that stupid bet I'd already forgotten about! But he hung up right after I'd said 'Yes' and I only found out after school started again

that he committed suicide after hanging up....”

Strangely, I'm calm as his story nears its end. There's only his muffled sobs, nothing else, even it who has doggedly trailed us like a shadow isn't making a sound. It's as though the world has stopped to listen to his regretful recounts. Perhaps it's quietly listening, too, in some corner.

What should've been a tragic story actually ignites anger in me. It's all him! Everything is because of him!

I ball my fists up, the pain of my nails sticking into my palms managing to keep me thinking and not beating up that damn bastard.

“How did you know it's him?” My voice is flat.

“He kept following me.... I've felt like someone's been following since that night. Every second of every day, whether I'm in class, sleeping, or walking, he'd always be right behind me.”

I recall his first unusual behaviour when he had rushed out of the classroom in a panic. I had even gone out after him. He was so scared he was shaking under his covers. So, he had already known then?

Way before Kong Linglin got....

He croaks, “Sun Le used to like touching my earlobes a lot. It was absolutely unsettling being touched in the way someone used to but by someone you know who doesn't belong to this world anymore. I immediately realised it was him, but after trying to run away from him numerous times I've learned that I cannot.”

Earlobes?

My gaze falls on the jacket I'm wearing—Yuan Fei's jacket. That touch that made me jump out of my skin.... That's why.... I see.

“It was like the dripping sounds were in my head. I'd hear it anytime, anywhere without any sort of warning. I had felt like giving up, that is, until I found that you could hear it too. I found that in fact I wasn't alone! Don't you see, Xiao Yu? Nothing can compare to the amount of comfort you've given me. If it weren't for you I'd never have made it this-.”

I suddenly feel the urge to laugh and I do.

“If it weren't for you, we would've never been like this,” I scoff at his sincerity. “Nothing can compare to the suffering you've given us!”

I start screaming at him, “It was your fault. Why did the others from 308 have to die for your relationship mistakes? And you'd already known about Sun Le being the one behind it all and you didn't say a word! You just watched as Kong Linglin and Cubs get killed one after the other! Now no one knows how Mu Mu's doing, Xu Ping's dead and Chief's disappeared. And you're telling me this NOW?”

I grab his collar. “It's you! It's all you! Why didn't you mourn over your own sorry ass after I died as well? Why d'you hafta tell me it's all 'cause of you? Do

six people hafta die too just 'cause you cheated someone? Why do we hafta die too? Why?"

"Sorry. It's my fault. I'm sorry."

I've never seen a look like this. There are no tears but it's so miserable it makes you want to cry just by looking at it. It's he who is in the wrong and I have all the right to blame him, but those eyes of his that seems to have shed so many tears that it's depleted breaks my heart.

Yuan Fei-

Before my beliefs are shaken, I plant a punch on his face.

It's fake! It's all fake! He has only been so caring and unconditionally protective because he was feeling guilty. He has only supported me because he was trying to make up for what he had done. If it wasn't for him none of this would have happened! I wouldn't have had to roam around the borderline of insanity. I wouldn't have kept making a fool out of myself and exposed my deepest, most inner evils. I would still be that average, normal university student named Xiao Yu: growing up without a care in the world and living life like a new-born cub, excited and wet behind the ears, instead of experiencing this—the most terrifying, most blood-curdling and most inexplicable thing in the world. If it wasn't for him, none of this would have ever happened! It's all his fault!

I beat him with everything I've got. He just cowers behind his arms and takes it without fighting back. Only after I lose feeling in my hands do I kick him one last time and stop.

I spit at him, "I never wanna see you again. I'll never forgive you! Your debts belong to you only, not to 308! Now you have even more blood on your hands. You'll never be free from it."

I use all the curses and vile words that I can think of on him. I know my words are hurting him like sticks and stones but I'm unable to stop. All the pain, sorrow, horror and insanity that I've had to go through these days become a hatred so strong it scares me.

I had thought this all began because four young, stupid guys disrespected a spirit. As one of the four, I couldn't say I was innocent so I just accepted whatever sufferings and hardships I was faced with. I've secretly held Kong Linglin and Mu Mu responsible and even assigned part of my grievances to Mu Mu when he had refused to take responsibility but I still had to face the helplessness by myself.

I felt it was unfair. I felt scared. But I also accepted my fate because I must pay my dues.

But it was never our fault! It was never because of us! We didn't do anything. It was all Yuan Fei's fault and yet we had to pay for his mistakes! I can't believe I ever trusted the culprit and thanked him from the bottom of my heart for his

support the past few days.

Stupid! Stupid!

I leave after venting without turning back. He won't be coming after me. For a moment there I feel like I have destroyed the last standing column of support of his, but there is nothing else I can do. I need some time for the fury in my heart to go out so I can figure out the deeper-rooted reason as to why I have reacted so strongly.

I climb down from the third floor and when I reach the landing between the second and first floor, I stop dead in my tracks. The seven files I had thrown at Sun have been laid out in a neat row....

¹¹ The original Chinese phrase is actually 'two people struggling as if they were two fish out of water sharing saliva to stay alive.'

Chapter 10

I stare dumbly at the files that has appeared out of nowhere, my mind instantly becoming more of a mess than it already is. Then the sound comes back as if it thinks I haven't had enough.

Drip-drop.

I really want to break down in tears right now.

"Don't come after me...it wasn't me..." I hug my head and protest weakly.

Drip-drop.

I snap around and run back up to the second floor. I scramble towards the west stairwell as fast as I can. I'm dashing but I stop in my tracks when I see what's by the stairwell. Seven files, laid out in a row, quietly awaiting my arrival as if they always have been.

I automatically turn to look to the east to make sure that I haven't accidentally run back to the east stairwell.

Drip-drop.

The sound goes off like a bomb in my head, putting everything else on pause. Flames slowly spread to my body. Every cell seems to be burning.

I scream at the top of my lungs towards nothing, "Why're you after me? I didn't hurt you! Yuan Fei did! Go after him! He's on the third floor! The one you want is on the third floor! Leave me alone!"

I fall on my behind and pant heavily, exhausted after all the shouting. I strain my ears only to discover the absence of that dripping sound. The bone-chilling feeling has not faded, however, and I actually sense an overwhelming energy building in the air. An alarm goes off in my head but I don't know how the danger is going to present itself.

Suddenly, something yanks hard on my leg! I'm sprawled out on the floor, a bit dizzy, but my leg feels fine. It's as though my leg just jerked on its own. I drag myself up slowly and then that something grabs onto my leg again! This time I can feel the coldness coming from its impossibly firm grip that is clamping tight onto me like a pair of pliers.

This force whips me along. I claw at the smooth floor with my nails, trying to stop it but to no prevail. My cracked nails scratch across the floor, creating a disturbing sound. I wail like a helpless toy being dragged around by its owner.

The extraordinary speed that I'm going at makes me realise that I will easily be crushed to bits and pieces if I were to collide with a wall.

I'm guessing its goal is the wall or the windows at the end of the hallway, killing me by shattering all my bones against it. No, maybe I wouldn't die right away but die slowly from internal bleeding from my organs being pierced by the broken bones, or it will fling me out the window like a high-speeding car suddenly taken off the road. That way, even a two-storey fall would become as fatal as falling off a cliff.

The speed is terrifying. I would have thought I was being dragged by a car if not for the empty space in front of me. So this is how it feels like to get dragged to death by a car. It's so fast I see stars. I can't fight back.

It would be even worse if that thing understood physics because it would be instinctively analysing what the force would be given the mass and velocity right now.

I'm so dead, my brain tells me.

But it suddenly stops and flings me away. I somersault in the air like a worn rag towards the stairs. Then I'm hit. I feel something softer than the wall crashing into me. This greatly slows me down but I still feel as if my internal organs have all been displaced. The world spins before my eyes and my body goes numb.

The sound of someone breathing heavily brings me back to earth. That somebody struggles to get up and feebly takes me into his arms, extra carefully as if I were in grave condition. I can feel his arms shaking, not only from fear but also from the incredible impact of the crash.

"Xiao Yu...."

His voice is so weak. There's no way he's fine after leaping to catch a person propelling through the air and then falling onto concrete together. He might even be in worse shape than me. Why is he so stupid, recklessly saving me like that?

Yuan Fei....

I can't lift my hands, I can't move my body and I can't talk with my body still paralysed from the shock. Surprisingly, the only things functioning properly are my tear ducts. I stare dumbly at Yuan Fei's worried eyes and my tears start trickling down on their own.

"Dun be afraid.... Dun be afraid.... I'm 'ere. You'll be alright." His voice is quivering so much I can barely make out what he's saying.

How much of that is from barely making it out alive? How much of that is from concern for my wellbeing? And how much of that is...from the guilt of his own wrongdoings?

"Dun hurt 'im.... Sun Le, please dun kill'im.... It's my fault. It's all my fault.... Dun kill'im."

Drip-drop.

It's standing on the second floor, quietly watching the two of us barely breathing. My sensation has begun to come back and along with it unbearable pain, as if I were pierced all over by spikes. I taste sweet iron in my mouth. Yuan Fei uses his body to protect me. He's breathing sporadically, often only exhaling once after inhaling twice. He must've broken something.

Drip-drop.

"Dun kill'im.... It's my fault.... Dun kill'im," he pleads agonizingly in a feeble voice, not for himself, but for someone who was just beating him up.

You're so petrified that you haven't even looked up in the general direction Sun Le is. So why is it that I see sorrow in your eyes of which I am the cause? Why is it that I am the thing for which you're begging for life?

Is it worth it? I was the one who dumped all the blame on you. I was the one who associated all my suffering with you. I was the one who condemned you even though I knew you had already been feeling extremely guilty.

"Dun kill'im...dun kill'im."

Drip-drop.

Gradually the dripping fades away. Yuan Fei is still stuttering, begging in that soft voice of his, getting quieter and quieter until it eventually disappears. He lifts his head so slowly and painstakingly it makes my heart ache.

"He...left, I think," he mutters in disbelief, as if he had been dreaming.

"I'm...so...rry." It takes all my efforts to vocalize those three syllables in a voice so raspy it doesn't sound like me anymore.

He heaves a sigh, his expression neither a smile nor a frown. He relaxes and falls onto the ground, panting for air.

"It's I who should be sorry. It's all my fault."

He's holding my hand. We're so exhausted that our hands can only lightly overlap each other's but the touch of reality somehow brings so much comfort for the soul, as if that space between our palms was filled with a universe of invisible bonds.

"No...." I have so many things I want to say but I don't know where to start.

"It's all my fault. Everyone's gonna die 'cause of me. I screwed up big time. It's all my fault. I got everyone into this."

"No...." My tears keep streaming down as though it's never going to cease.

"Sorry, Xiao Yu." He props himself up with great efforts to wipe them away. "Don't cry.... It's my fault.... Don't cry."

I reach out for him without much thought, naturally forming a hug of unparalleled dependence. I snuggle into his arms and he hugs me tightly.

His shoulder is wet with my tears.

"Don't apologise." I choke through my sobs. "I'm not worth it. I betrayed you. I actually told him to go find you. I actually told him you were on the third floor."

I'm the worst. I sold you out so I could live. I-."

"Shhh. Stop talking...just stop talking."

He lowers his head and plants a light kiss on my lips. I instinctively hook my arms around his neck and deepen this kiss because, in this moment, I'm willing to give up my life for this tender act of Yuan Fei's. He reciprocates passionately and the entangling of our tongues ignites my feelings deep within.

He doesn't despise me but instead holds me even tighter. I understand in an instant what he had felt when he confessed everything to me. Right then, what he needed was the unconditional forgiveness and tolerance that he is giving me now, not more hurtful attacks. It appears that another person's reciprocity during a bitter repent gives you the motivation to live on and jump starts your ashen heart.

I've been forgiven. I did such a despicable thing...and yet I've been forgiven.

Yuan Fei...I'm really sorry.... Thank you...so much.

Our intense kiss lasts for quite some time and neither of us makes a sound when it ends. We just lie in each other's arms quietly feeling the other person's breaths swirling through the air. I don't know how much time has passed when, slowly but surely, our surroundings become brighter—the sun has begun to rise.

"...probably won't come...." He mutters.

"Let's head back." I whisper.

"Kay."

We slowly get up using the wall for support. Only then do we see the seriousness of our injuries. We're both grazed all over. My right arm is swollen and my left ankle looks like raised bread. Yuan Fei's hands are bloody from getting scraped and there is a large, green bump on his forehead. We burst out in laughter after taking a look at one another but immediately yelp from the pain.

I take him by the arm, he takes me by the shoulders, and the two of us ease our way through the schoolyard not knowing whether to go to the doctor's or back to the dorm. Once in a while we run into some early joggers who stare at us in wonder, some of whom even offers to help us and inquires about our injuries.

We laugh it off, saying that we were pulling an all-nighter at a cybercafé when some heated gamers lost a game of CS¹² and started a fight and we ended up getting dragged into it. Then we thank them for their offer and continue our painstaking trek. We are about halfway to the infirmary when we realise that the school doctor wouldn't be here this early, so we call that off and turn back to the dorm.

"Let's call in later and go get checked up," he grunts through clenched teeth.

"Us 308 people don't need to call in. They wouldn't take our attendance anyways," I say in a self-mocking way.

The special circumstances of 308 has made it so that we can pay no regard to the rules, attending or skipping class as we wish, and the teachers would still tell

us kindly to ‘take it easy.’”

When we finally make it back to the dorm building under countless pairs of curious eyes, the caretaker leaps over and insists on helping us up the stairs. The two of us share an amused look but let him help. Only then do we realise how damn difficult climbing five flights of stairs is for a wounded person.

“I’ll let the doc in when he gets here in a bit.”

I’m touched by the caretaker’s concern and the discovery that I’ve had a raise in status; the school doctor would come to me when I’m not feeling well.

“Oh yeah...did anything strange happen last night? Did you hear any loud noises?” I carefully probe.

Someone must have heard all the banging and my screaming amid the silent night. It should have caused a disturbance but we haven’t seen any signs of that this whole time.

“Nope.”

“Oh...never mind then.”

It’s easy for me to accept the fact that everything that happened last night will only be the memories of Yuan Fei and me. There were only the two of us in that dimension, no other ‘person,’ therefore what happened in the other dimension wouldn’t effect this dimension.

We open the door to our dorm and see Chief standing in the middle of the room.

I limp over, surprised but delighted. “Chief! So you came back! You had us worried!”

I only notice something is off when I draw near. Wu Fan’s eyes are fixed and his lips are pallid and quivering. He’s still holding the small flashlight and it is still on.

“Chief?” I call worriedly.

“Glass...” His eyes are so blank it unsettles me. He’s staring out to the front as if he’s seeing the most terrifying thing in the world. “Glass...broken glass...”

“Chief?” I grab his shoulders and shake him, and he just sways around like a rag doll. “Chief! What happened?! Chief!”

“Go! Go get help!” Yuan Fei barks at the dumbstruck caretaker.

Ten minutes or so later, the ambulance comes and takes Chief away. The doctor originally says that Yuan Fei and I should go to the hospital and get checked too but the police arrives and stops us to have a few words. Therefore, the doctor only does a quick look-over and leaves after not finding any serious injuries.

Thus the two of us who even has trouble walking get brought to the Academic Affairs Office. There are at least a dozen or more officers this time crowding around us in two huddles questioning us. Aside from them, there is a few more

rushing in and out of the room. The number is surprising; no wonder they say it's a 'big case'. The principal, our homeroom teacher and the Dean of Academic Affairs are the only school staff who could come in but they are only there to act as hosts, leading the way and making coffee.

"Where were you last night?" An officer asks with a note pad in hand.

"Pulling an overnigher at a cybercafé," I answer casually.

"And what about your injuries?"

"A few guys lost a game and started a scuffle at the cybercafé. We just got dragged into it." I'm actually pretty good at lying, if I do say so myself.

She doesn't look too amused. "We didn't get any reports of a fight in this area."

"Then the owner probably didn't call the police 'cause he didn't want any trouble."

"Then where is this cybercafé that you went to? What's the name?"

I pause for a moment before asking with an innocent face. "Does it really matter where we go to game?"

"Mr. Xiao Yu, I ask for your cooperation with the police!" She slightly raises her voice. She is a young officer after all, losing her cool so fast.

"Alright, alright, I'll come clean. I actually got in a fight with Yuan Fei. I only lied 'cause we'd get punished by the school for fighting." I flash a smile at the principal who's beside me. The officer doesn't appear to believe me so I shout to Yuan Fei on the other end, "Yuan Fei! We got in a fight 'cause of money problems right?"

I see his head peeping out from behind a mass of people. "Yeah! You little bastard owes me money!" He purposefully raises his voice.

"Shuddup! You asshole still owe me money! Why the hell should I pay you back?" I speak in my outside voice as well.

We don't actually need to talk this loud in the average-sized room, not to mention our back-and-forth is just so smooth, so by the time we finish all the officers are watching us warily.

Another older officer who looks like their leader takes the notes from the female officer and exchanges places with her. He tells the principal flatly, "Prepare another room. We'll question them separately."

Very soon, Yuan Fei is taken out of the Academic Affairs Room and into some other room, I'm guessing. I can't help but feel amused; 'tis too late splitting us up after we've agreed on a story. But I must be careful dealing with an older police officer. They often get very sneaky after being on the job for a while, pulling you into their trap at the slightest mistake.

"Would you mind if I smoke?" The old officer asks.

I shrug. "I'm fine with it if the Dean is."

The Dean quickly replies, "Make yourself at home."

"Oh? Then I'll take a puff too."

I deliberately glance over at the Dean to see him looking at me embarrassingly. Damn that feels good. I remember he wrote in my records for not attending an assembly once in senior high.

"No smoking then." The officer laughs heartily and looks to me. "You really can't stand us, huh, Xiao Yu."

I smile, not giving him an answer.

He lets out a deep sigh and says lowly, "Xu Ping has gone missing."

My heart jerks a little but I lower my head to hide the distress.

"It appears that the people from Room 308 have gotten themselves into something. It's one incident after another..." He pauses before uttering four words. "Mu Mu is dead."

My head snaps up and I gape at him.

"We have just received news of it. He was taking the coach back home and they stopped for a break at a gas station. There were witnesses who saw Mu Mu go to the washroom with some other passengers but he didn't return even when everyone else had."

I stare fixedly at his moving lips and listen on.

"The bus driver and the attendant didn't notice the missing person and it wasn't until they arrived at their destination that Mu Mu's relatives who went to pick him up found that he wasn't on the bus. We eliminated the possibility that he left midway from the fact that his belongings were still on the vehicle. The local police went to investigate after they received a report and they found..."

I look on quietly, not pushing him, because it's probably some extremely horrifying thing and I'm already desensitized.

It seems like the old officer wanted to string me along so my calm reaction kind of takes him by surprise but he continues.

"They found one of the stalls in the men's room locked from the inside and a burnt odour coming from it, but when they opened it they didn't find his corpse."

I notice he used the word, 'corpse.'

"There were burn marks present but the strange thing was only the inside of the stall got burnt. It didn't spread to anywhere else and there weren't any signs of smoke on the ceiling. In other words, it was like any other fire—the four sides were all black—but the floor and ceiling were fine, as if the flames were confined at a certain height, even the smoke too. No one would've thought there'd been a fire before opening that door.

I must admit that my common sense is restricting my imagination. A washroom stall is ventilated from all sides; you could see outside when you stand up and the floor when you stoop down. It's not sealed up at all. If there was a fire,

how could it have possibly only stayed on the sides and not left marks anywhere else? Was there an invisible shield that separated the space, keeping the flames in one place?

My lips twitch upwards. Impossible? Nothing is impossible with that thing's involvement.

He questions, a bit shocked by my smile, "You don't believe me? Do you think I made it up?"

"No, I believe you. Then what? What happened to Mu Mu?"

He looks at me steadily as if trying to catch something from my eyes, but my unfeeling self won't let anything slip.

"There were ashes of clothing and shoes, currently identified to be Mu Mu's belongings. There were also lots of fine particles and hard matter that we need to run tests on in order to find what they are, including remnants of human teeth.... We believe we'll be able to determine if it's Mu Mu or not from them.

"Clothes, shoes, unknown substances and teeth. What about flesh? And the bones?" I ask flatly.

"That's precisely what we're stuck on, Xiao Yu. The temperature must've been incredibly high for the clothing fibers to have dissolved to that extent. It wasn't typical burning. Even if Mu Mu was covered in gasoline, no, soaked in gasoline, it couldn't've reached the temperatures of an incinerator in an open space like that. His body was completely dissolved! No...perhaps it wasn't him...."

He looks uncomfortable. He doesn't know how to explain the scene to me. But I can imagine.

The so-called unknown substances are mostly carbohydrates, minerals, fat, protein.... Add those together with 65% H₂O and you get a human being.

I remember my chemistry teacher telling us it only takes a couple of bucks to purchase all the elements that make up a human being. So little is the physical worth of a human being.

My silence makes his determined expression falter. He sighs and continues, "To be frank, I don't have the power to get involved. I'd get in big trouble if my higher-ups ever found out.... But I must, because my child might be in danger here."

Confused, I ask. "And you are?"

"I'm Xu."

Xu Ping's father?

"Xiao Yu, I hope you can understand my concerns as a father. I've been urging Xu Ping to come live at home after the first incident in Room 308 but he told me you aren't locals, you don't have anywhere to go, so he couldn't abandon you. And now he's missing.... Every one of you kids is running into trouble. I don't know when it'll be Xu Ping...so if you know anything...." Mr. Xu's breath

hitches, stopping him mid-sentence. I see him turn his head away, fighting back the tears, and my heart pains, tears beginning to wet my own eyes.

He's right. Xu Ping could have left a long time ago but he chose to stay. He was never part of anything from the beginning and yet he never left us. Such a person has....

A heart-rending image of Xu Ping surfaces before my eyes and I quickly shut my eyes. I don't want to think of the horrible sight because I'm about to burst out in tears.

"The principal's office...." I breathe.

"What?"

"Did you...find anything in your office?"

I slowly turn to look at the principal and Mr. Xu also turns to him with a curious look. A bit caught off guard, the principal stutters, "N-no, nothing in particular."

"Did something happen there? Is it related to Xu Ping's disappearance?" Mr. Xu pushes.

I'm not sure how to reply. If the room is very 'normal'...how could I start talking about seeing Xu Ping all cut up and dead as a doornail?

"Oh right, the custodian found a cell phone in front of my office but didn't know whose it was," the principal mentions.

"Why haven't you told us before?" Mr. Xu roars.

"I-I didn't think it'd have anything to do with the case." The principal's face is bloodless.

"Where's it?!"

"I'll go get it right now!"

The principal comes back with the cell phone very soon. I take a quick peek at it—it's Xu Ping's cell phone.

"It's Xu Ping's phone. I bought it for him." Mr. Xu's voice wavers.

He snatches the phone away and looks back at me after quickly looking through it. "You are the last one he called with this phone. What did you talk about?"

What did we talk about? Nothing...because Xu Ping wasn't the one who picked up.

"Xiao Yu, tell me what happened! What did Xu Ping say to you? What was the last thing he said? It doesn't matter if it was irrelevant! Just tell me!"

Mr. Xu's blood-shot eyes are almost popping out of their sockets. He looks so awful that I feel sorry for him.

"He said...." I mumble. "He said that he was going to the principal's room to get our files...to look for any clues."

"And then?" He urges.

“And then...and then...”

I rack my brains. I realize I can't tell him the truth no matter what even though I know I shouldn't lie to this pathetic father who is losing sleep because of his son. “And then it got really late so I called him asking why he hadn't come back yet. He told me that he'd be back when he got the files.”

“What else?”

“Nothing. The call ended there.”

“How?” Mr. Xu points at the phone in a fury. “It says you talked for five minutes and twenty-four seconds! There's got to be more!”

I feel my temples throbbing with pain and frown. I close my eyes and massage them. “Really, there was no more. I couldn't remember every single thing even if you made me. Anyways that's what we talked about.”

He falls quiet, appearing to be considering the legitimacy of my information.

“Money was the breaking point. Both I and Yuan Fei have been way too high-strung lately and we needed to let some of that out so we got in a fight. There's nothing else to it.... It's nothing to do with Xu Ping going missing.”

He ponders on my words before asking, “What about Wu Fan? Why has he lost his mind all of a sudden?”

“I've no idea....” I curl into myself and hold my painful head. I breathe, “He was like that when Yuan Fei and I got back to the dorm. The caretaker can testify. I don't know what happened.... I dunno.”

“What about the ‘broken glass’ he keeps mentioning? What does it mean?” He presses.

“I dunno.”

I bite down, trying to use the pain to escape from the image of Xu Ping poked full of glass. If I had stumbled upon him without any preparation or watched as he was slaughtered by that thing...would I be in the same state as Chief?

It's rare for people to behave in the same way after reaching their breaking point. Chief lost his mind. What about me? Maybe I would wave bloody shards of broken glass around in the air....

“Xiao Yu, are you alright? You don't look too well.”

“I wanna rest for a bit...I'm wiped....”

I start tipping over as I speak. I guess I must really look bad because the principal has already rushed out for help. Mr. Xu hurriedly helps me over to the sofa before leaving to speak to the officers outside.

I feel myself drifting between slumber and alertness, as if I'm dreaming in my sleep or awake with my eyes wide open. My vision blurs at times and focuses at others and my skull feels like it's about to burst open under pressure from the inside.

I'm just too tired. I'll get some shut-eye.... Just a bit.

Drip-drop.

Involuntarily, I shudder, not even able to get up in fear.

Drip-drop.

“You really are everywhere.”

I murmur with my eyes half-lidded. I try to open them but they shut on me. Suddenly, I experience a very peculiar feeling. I can't feel my body or the softness of the sofa I'm lying on. It's as though I've lost all sensation. The shapes before me fade out as if someone has put a layer of gauze over it, showing only rough, clouded outlines.

Slowly, I sit up.

My legs start moving but I can't feel a thing. My body moves by itself as though it no longer belongs to me; I can't control anything. I should be shrieking with fear and yet it's as if I don't even have shrieking in my dictionary. All I can do is walk like a puppet towards the door along with this body.

There are many officers outside the door. Some are walking around, others are busy with work, but none of them turn to look at me. It's as if I'm transparent. My feet steadily take me out the room. I blankly watch the sight before my eyes. It's a bit familiar but also a bit foreign. I know I'm in one of the buildings in the school but I can't quite pinpoint which exactly.

My feet are still moving, taking me up a flight of stairs, and then another, and keeps heading up.

I count to myself: one, two, three, four....

I finally know where I am when I reach the seventh floor. It's the laboratory building, the tallest building in the school. But my feet are still taking me up. The door that's usually locked swings open; it's the rooftop.

Students used to be able to come here freely but I heard it's been locked up ever since some student committed suicide from here. Which student was that? I didn't know because rumours are never detailed enough. I've never heard of the student's name but somehow I think I know.

That student...was Sun Le.

My sensation comes back the moment I reach the rooftop. I feel my feet against the cement but I don't have the power to turn tail and flee. It's as though my feet are nailed down to the ground.

Drip-drop.

It has appeared behind me again and I catch that pungent smell once again. Then I feel a hand on my back nudging me forward.

Where is it going to push me toward this time?

I walk forward stiffly. My brain is screaming at me to stop but my legs keep moving forward. I try everything but nothing can stop these legs of mine.

Are you fucking with me? Why didn't it just let me walk to its destination

without ever feeling a thing? Why did it have to let my senses come back all of a sudden? So that I can be filled with dread as I get closer and closer to its destination?

I know where its destination is. I've had my eyes on it since the moment I stepped onto the roof.

And that would be the edge of the roof. There are railings but there's a pipe sticking out to the side. You could easily hurdle over the railings if you used the pipe, and fall towards the earth.

"I...don't wanna die."

Desperately, I say to it as my feet step onto the pipe.

And then my feet step forward towards the empty sky without a moment of hesitation. My tears scatter into the wind as I fall from the building.

Sorry, Yuan Fei...

I wanted to be with you until the end. But there's only you now.

¹² Counter-Strike, for all you non-gamers out there.

Chapter 11

Sharp shrills of the ambulance, strangers wearing white coats and white hats shimmy across my vision—it's blurry again as if there is a layer of white gauze over my eyes.

Am I still alive?

“Sun Le. Can you hear me? Sun Le?” A doctor bends over and asks me.

Who? Sun Le? No. I'm not Sun Le. I'm Xiao Yu.

“Can you see me, Sun Le? Try blinking your eyes if you can.”

I am NOT Sun Le!

I want to shout it out: I AM NOT Sun Le! I'm Xiao Yu who got pushed off the building!

That's right. I fell from the seventh floor and the loss of gravity made me faint. Thank goodness I did so I didn't have to watch as I hit the ground.

And then? Was I saved?

“Patient falling into coma. Prepare sphygmometer¹³!”

Where am I? It's a fairly narrow, white space. Unknown instruments and devices are dangling in front of me. Am I in an ambulance? But my mind's perfectly fine. Could it be...that my conscience has been separated from my body?

“Kids these days. Jumping off seven storeys like that. Don't they think of their families at all?”

No. I was pushed off. I didn't jump myself. I didn't-.

“Decreasing heart rate! Prepare FR2¹⁴!”

“I think this kid's an orphan. I mean, the school didn't mention any family when I asked them to notify his family, so all the charges will be billed to the school.”

There seems to be two vastly different conversations going on beside me. One consists of the doctor repeating stuff like ‘BP¹⁵,’ ‘pulse rate’ and ‘ECG¹⁶’ as though it is the end of the world while the other is a casual chat about some indistinguishable topic. The topic seems to be me.

I'm not an orphan though. My parents might be abroad but that doesn't mean I don't have family! I want to retort, to talk back, but it's as if I've been frozen. I won't even budge, let alone talk.

“Patient has stopped breathing! Shock now!”

Boom! Boom! Boom!

My body jerks wildly along with the shocks but I can't feel a thing, no pins and needles from the electric current and no feeling of a beating heart.

Is this really my body? Or maybe...I'm already dead and my spirit is quietly watching as people try to resuscitate me?

“Sun Le! You're still young! You've a long way to go! Don't give up!”

Boom! Boom!

I SAID I AM NOT SUN LE!

“Patient resuscitated!”

“BP on the rise!”

“Stop the defib!”

“This kid's lucky. Normally a fall from seven storeys means DRT¹⁷.”

“He might just pull through.”

I might just pull through? I...I'm not dead?

Suddenly, my sensation rushes back to life and bone-splitting pain shoots through my body. I can already feel the doctor's hands on my body, poking things in, rubbing and pressing. I gulp for air, pulling in as much as I can.

I want to live! I don't want to die! I want to live!

“Pulse rate normal!”

“Sun Le! Hang in there! You're gonna pull through!”

Yes! I want to live! I don't want to die! No, I do not!

For a moment, I can't tell who I am. Am I Sun Le? Or am I Xiao Yu? This strong yearning for life, whose is it? Xiao Yu's? Or Sun Le's?

The ambulance stops and the doctor and nurses rush me to the operating room. I can feel my chances of survival increasing and so is the possibility of making it out alive. I know I'm going to live. I'm not going to die!

I'm so happy I could cry. God, thank you. Thank you for giving me another chance. I will do the best to live my life and never let it go to waste.

Who is the one repenting? Who is the one praying to God? Is it Xiao Yu? Or is it Sun Le?

The door to the operating room has been opened. Mask-wearing doctors start working, tossing away piece after piece of bloody swabs. I listen carefully to the regular beeps from the ECG and feel joy from the bottom of my heart.

“Dad! Can't wait any longer! He must undergo surgery now!”

Who's that talking?

“The university student that got brought in just now is an orphan, right? No one would notice! What're the chances of surviving a seven-storey fall? No one would suspect a thing!”

What're you saying?

“Dad! Can needs a kidney. He can’t wait another second! That student’s blood type is a perfect match! We couldn’t have asked for anything better! No one would ever know. No one would ever find out. We’ll offer to pay for the cremation of his body on the hospital’s behalf afterwards. Surely, the school would be glad to have us pay for it. That way our tracks will be covered! Let’s not hesitate anymore!”

Wait a minute.... Who are you talking about?

This is the operating room. There are only the surgeons’ muffled orders and the beeps of machines. Then whose emotional voice was that? Where did it come from? Or should I say, who was making it audible to me?

Suddenly, the door is opened and in comes a man dressed in scrubs. He quietly speaks with the main surgeon. The surgeon hesitates, the man says something else, and only then does the surgeon nod. The man then leaves.

I instinctively feel a bit restless and scared. What is this ominous feeling?

The world before my eyes starts spinning, brightening and dimming. My eyelids feel heavier and heavier as if it’s filled with lead.

I mustn’t sleep! I know I will never get my eyes open again if I let them close now. But...what the hell is going on? Why has it become like this?

I use all my efforts to open my eyes and my muscles get so sore I start tearing up. The tears are blood red, however. My vision is a coat of crimson. There’s red, and more red—a life’s worth of red.

And then, my eyes no longer feel leaden. I also realise that the machine that indicates my vitals has long stopped beeping. The people in the room leave one by one. The doctors have left. The nurses have left.

But what about me? I’m still waiting for you to resuscitate me.

A few other people walk in. They’re dressed the same as the doctors from earlier but I don’t feel one bit enthusiastic. Instead, I feel freezing cold as if I’m in the Arctic.

“The director’s grandson needs a kidney. Quickly, now. I don’t think he can wait any longer.”

I see them sticking a shiny scalpel into my body. Desperately, I want to scream but I can’t make a sound.

“What do we do with the body?”

“I was told to cremate it ASAP.”

“Hold on. I have a classmate who was willing to purchase a cornea at high above market price a couple days ago. This kid’s dead anyway—let’s not let it go to waste.”

“You sneaky son of a bitch.”

“Hahaha, I could say the same about you!”

Who are they talking about so casually, so jokingly? Who are they cutting up

so carefully and precisely?

Is it...me?

But...I'm a person. A living human being. How could they? How could they do such a thing? Nah...I must have misunderstood.

"Eh, screw it. Let's just think of it as recycling. Take him for all he's got while he's still 30-minutes fresh."

"We'll be saving the hospital so much budget that we should ask the director for a bonus."

"Go get a few more guys in here. I don't want this to go to waste 'cause we were too slow."

"On it."

No. I want to live. Help. Someone come save me from these crazy people.

"Now, won't you look at that!"

They point at me and yelp in surprise.

"Why's he crying? Isn't he dead?"

"Stop scaring yourself. We're doctors for god sakes. Hurry up! I have a date with my girlfriend after this."

Tears of hatred and injustice stream out the corner of my eye. *Drip. Drop.* The heavens gave me a second chance yet it has been taken away by these heartless people. They never asked for my opinion, never asked for my consent, and just acted so coldblooded and ignorantly as though they were merely squishing an ant.

I've been wiped out of existence just like that. No one noticed anything. No one knows that I've been murdered. Not a soul knows. Still, my body gets placed on the guillotine while my executioners laugh and joke as they cut me apart piece by piece in exchange for dirty money.

Why? Do I not deserve to live anymore just because of one heated decision I've made? Do I not deserve the respectful end of a human being? Do I not have the right to choose just because I'm an orphan with no background? So these strangers get to decide my fate?

No fair! Those are mine! Those are my body parts! I don't want to give them away! No!

Give it back! Give it all back! Give back what belongs to me!

"GIVE ME!"

My heartrending wail finally escapes my throat. I finally make it audible. I scream over and over with all my strength.

"GIVE IT BACK!"

"Xiao Yu! Xiao Yu!"

I hear Yuan Fei yelling at me but I can't stop my screams.

I've restrained myself from screaming from the moment the scalpel entered

my body and watched helplessly with my eyes wide-open as they dissected me. The terror, fury and resentment from every cut accumulated in my chest to the point I could no longer withstand its weighted pressure on me.

Finally, I can finally express all my suffering and rage. A bottomless whirlpool of malice sucks my heart, mind and soul into it, transforming all the bitterness and injustice into my final grudge: I will take it back! Take it all back!

“Xiao Yu!”

Out of nowhere, my painful shrieks get stuffed back inside my mouth and a smell belonging to Yuan Fei envelops me. I cry and sob as I hold him tightly.

Suddenly, someone holds down my arm and I feel a sting. A doctor is injecting me with tranquilizer but I start shrieking again when I see the horrifying white coat.

It was people dressed like this who took my life away! It's them!

“Go away! Go away! Don't touch me!”

“Xiao Yu! Calm down! I'm here!”

I keep fighting. Only when I go hoarse from screaming and get too tired to struggle anymore do I relax. I start to see stars from using up all my energy. I then notice that everyone has left, leaving only me and Yuan Fei.

“Xiao Yu, I want you to look at me. Do you remember who I am?”

There's a hint of a sob in his voice. I look up at him with great effort only to see a pair of blood shot eyes. I think he's been crying for a long time.

“Yuan Fei...” I say with my scratchy voice.

“Yes! It's me! I thought you wouldn't wake up again!”

I can't tell if he wants to cry or smile. He caresses my face with trembling fingers as though he is not sure if he's actually touching me or not.

“What happened?”

My mind only begins to clear up after letting out all my anger. I'm alive. I haven't been dissected. I'm Xiao Yu, not Sun Le.

“I wanna know what the hell happened too!”

He holds my hands tightly. “You suddenly disappeared from the Dean's Office. No one saw you leaving but you just vanished in thin air. And then I heard you jumped off the lab building. I almost had a break down! Thank god.... Thank god there was a mound of sand from the construction. You weren't seriously injured only 'cause you hit a tree branch along the way, and fell on the sand. But after we brought you to the hospital you didn't wake up. The doctors said your pulse was really erratic. You know what, your heart had stopped once but your body jumped up all by itself before the doctor even started preparing the defibrillator as if it shocked itself. Everyone was gaping. And your heart started beating again soon after.”

So it wasn't just a dream. I really did experience the whole thing. Well, at least

I did go through, spiritually, Sun Le's experience.

"Guess what, even the police were freaked out. I'm sure they think we're being haunted by something now. I'm not under investigation anymore either. They've placed me under heavy protection instead now. And you know...you've been unconscious for three whole days. And that's how long my heart's been dead for."

"Yuan Fei."

Lightly, I touch his face as he watches me intently. He bends down. "If you hadn't woken up...I really don't know what I'd do."

He kisses me gently and licks at my lips. I crack up my mouth to welcome him in. Carefully, he slides his tongue in and my heart starts pounding sporadically, increasing with speed as our tongues entangle.

It's not my first time kissing someone but it is the first time I've felt a loss of breath. It's not my first time kissing Yuan Fei but it is the first time I've felt a solid connection with him. It turns out that a kiss is such a wonderful thing. It's as though nothing else in this world is important as long as you can have this kiss for the rest of your life.

When our lips finally part with reluctance, his cheeks have turned pink. I assume I'm not much better off. We burst into sheepish chuckles at the same time after exchanging fixed stares. He picks up my hand and places it on his lips.

"Let's never be apart, okay?" He asks earnestly.

I crack a smile but avoid answering the question.

"Was he the one who pushed you down?" He suddenly inquires.

I'm taken back by the quick change—it's as if he's a different person. Menace flashes in his once-loving eyes and pain shoots up my hand.

"Yuan Fei." I call his name.

Only then does he come back around. He keeps apologizing after quickly releasing my hand.

I flash a light smile. "I'm still alive, aren't I? If he'd wanted to kill me I wouldn't have woken up. You know that."

I see confusion slip across his eyes. He was anxious and frightened because he had thought I'd die for sure. He was overwhelmed with joy and reassurance because I have woken up. Consequently, he is perplexed because he doesn't understand why I have received a miracle when no other has been able to escape the misfortunes. I, too, am curious.

Perhaps, Sun Le did it on purpose? He wanted me to live through the injustice and anger he had gone through. He pushed me down but let a branch slow my fall and let me land right on a mound of sand...because he didn't want me to die?

However, I can't figure out one thing. Why did he have to show me his experiences? Why didn't he kill me?

He doesn't have any reason to be so generous to me. He did try to kill me

once, so what made him change his mind?

I get tired after a short chat with Yuan Fei and he leaves after tucking me in. I don't know for how long I've slept when I get woken up by the nurse to take blood samples and measure my blood pressure. I blink my eyes open a few times, mind still in a daze, and take a scan around the room. It's pitch black—it's probably the middle of the night. Then I drift back to sleep.

A while later, a crisp sound resonates in my mind:

Drip-drop.

This takes me completely off guard and I'm wide awake in an instant. People are especially vulnerable when they're sleeping and this almost makes my heart stop beating.

I shiver and pat my chest. "If you didn't want me to fall to my death, then why try to scare me to death?" I gasp.

Perhaps the reason why he let me live so many times is because he wants to drive me insane and not just die an easy death.

"Do you really resent me that much?" I mutter quietly to no one in particular, knowing there won't be an answer from it.

I don't hear another sound. I glance around curiously—a pitch black hospital room with no one else in it. The darkness holds nothing strange either.

Could it be that I imagined it? But how could I have imagined such a clear, distinct sound coming from inside my head? Or maybe I'm just so afraid of it that it's starting to haunt me in my dreams as well.

I let out a deep breath to calm my high-strung nerves and notice that my throat is parched. I climb up with difficulty and reach for the water bottle on the bedside table but I come into contact with a thick stack of something. Confused, I open the bedside lamp. I gape at what I see: seven files neatly stacked together on the bedside table. I'm certain, however, that there were no such things here when Yuan Fei was here earlier in the day.

I crack a bitter smile. It looks like it wasn't my imagination after all.

I take the files over, knowing I can't run from it, and untie the thin string holding them together.

"Alright, I'll take a look if you insist I do...." I mumble to it, wherever it may be.

In the beginning, I had been eager to know the answer but before I knew it, I had become too scared to find out. The files had already become a petrifying solution in my eyes when it had pushed me to retrieve them the first time. The answer made me scared beyond description. So I turned a blind eye to them again and again, and yet it places them in front of me again and again.

Why must I be the one to solve this?

If it were as I had thought—Sun Le is holding a grudge from getting dumped

by Yuan Fei—then why did he start with the innocent others and not Yuan Fei first? And if he wanted to leave Yuan Fei to the last why did he spare my life? More importantly, if what I had seen during my comatose days after falling off the building was what Sun Le wanted to show me, what would be the reason for it? He wanted justice? If so, why would he want to kill us?

I open the first file; it belongs to Cubs. I take a quick peek through his absence records, maybe because I had heard his name being mentioned in my dream state. It appears that he took a month off because he had a slow recovery from a surgery he had undergone in the summer.

I rummage through my memories. I've noticed a row of scars of stitches under his ribs when we went to take showers together. He had said it was from his surgery.

Drip-drop.

A faint vision materializes before my eyes after the soft sound:

Cubs is lying on a bed in the intense care unit with machines stuck all over his body. His mother is crying her eyes out by the bed while his father is standing to the side in his white coat quietly wiping at his tears. The next moment, a nurse comes running in saying there's an emergency patient and Mr. Jin follows her out of the room. The scene blurs and I see Sun Le being wheeled in by a bunch of people to the surgery room. Then I see the expression gradually changing on Mr. Jin's face as he reads Sun Le's medical report in detail.

"Cubs' kidney...."

I can't help muttering out loud. So the reason for every single thing...is this.

I put down the file and pick up Kong Linglin's.

I recall Kong Linglin bragging to us one time that he got in a huge car accident in the summer and that he was lucky to even make it out alive—he used up two whole boxes of blood for transfusion. He might have exaggerated more or less but the fact remains that he had used large amounts of blood.

"Kong Linglin's blood...."

I put the file down and pick up Mu Mu's.

Last summer, he had surgery done too. He stayed in the hospital for aftercare when school had started already and he was excused for six weeks.

It was also that day, after Kong Linglin finished bullshitting, that Mu Mu briefly went over how he went under the knife too. He said he had bone marrow transplant because his weren't functioning properly. Apparently, it had taken a lot of effort to find a match.

"Mu Mu's bone marrow...."

Xu Ping's file is next.

I don't even need to read this to have a good idea of what it details. There was a fire at Xu Ping's house and he got burned all over his body so he had skin

transplants done.

“Xu Ping’s skin....”

I pick up Wu Fan’s file and spot another similarity—a crucial one at that, too—they were all Type A.

Consequently, I’m puzzled because I’m Type B and Yuan Fei is Type O. Neither of us have hospital records. So in other words, we have never had surgery performed on us. So is that the reason why we’ve constantly brushed past the Reaper that Sun Le has brought upon us?

I stare at the file in hand. Wu Fan had severe nearsightedness. In his own words, he had been in danger of losing sight completely so he had surgery done.

Drip-drop.

Another vision appears before my eyes along with the sound:

A woman is almost on her knees as she cries. “Doctor, my son can’t go blind! He’s so close to graduating! Please help him! Please!” She wails.

The doctor explains uncomfortably. “But there aren’t many cornea donors out there and there are a lot of patients in line....”

The man who has been holding the woman up quietly steps forward and discreetly slips a thick envelope loaded with money into the doctor’s hand.

“Please! Our child’s future rests in your hands!”

A smile spreads on the doctor’s face. He scans around him before lowering his voice. “The only way now is to buy it off of the black market. I happen to know one cornea that matches your son’s blood type but it’s in high demands....”

The man looks determined. “Money is not an issue! Please, doctor, we’ll pay whatever is necessary!”

The smiling doctor pats the man’s shoulder.

A breeze seems to blow across the misty vision before me, the smile on the white-coated doctor’s face instantly warping into something more menacing than any ghoul.

Drip-drop.

I understand now. I understand everything.

This ‘drip-drop’ is not from water dropping down but rather the weak sound of teardrops made of aggrieved resentment hitting this filthy, vile world. The spirits that cannot weep cry tears of blood that hopelessly fall towards their unchangeable destiny. Weak but stunning, the sound is overpowering and echoes in the mind.

Drip-drop.

I shudder. “You want your eye back? Is Chief the next one?”

Drip-drop.

I roll off the bed without a second thought and fall over the moment I hit the floor, my body aching as if it’s been crushed to pieces. It reminds me that I have

recently fallen off a seven storey building.

“Don’t...kill anymore.”

Drip-drop.

“I’ll go get it back for you...your eye...so...please, spare Chief.”

Drip-drop.

¹³ Device for measuring blood pressure.

¹⁴ Defibrillator

¹⁵ Blood pressure

¹⁶ Electrocardiogram

¹⁷ Paramedic lingo for ‘dead right there.’

Conclusion

I have heard from Yuan Fei through our chat that Chief is in the psychiatric department on the twelfth floor of this hospital. I must thank the accessibility of this hospital: I chance upon a collapsible wheelchair by the closet while I'm battling with all the bones in my body. The wheelchair does a wonderful job, except for the pain it causes when I push the wheel.

Hospitals always give off a creepy vibe at night so it's only expected that my hairs stand up as I go down the dark, silent walkway by myself. The stench of disinfectants hit my nostrils and I quickly plug them up.

Disinfectant....

A fleeting thought flashes through my mind only to escape my grasp before I get the chance to examine it. I shake my head and focus instead on where I'm heading.

Sun Le didn't give me any more responses when I proposed I'd get his eye back in return for Chief to be spared his life. I only heard a few quiet 'drip-drops' before it became quiet again. What is that supposed to mean? An implicit agreement or a refusal?

Anyway, I know I must go to Wu Fan and tell him everything.

I'm staying on the fifth floor while Chief is on the twelfth. There are ramps made especially for the ease of transporting gurneys but I don't think I can wheel myself up to the twelfth floor in my breathless state right now.

I freeze when I hear the dinging elevator. I'd thought that the elevator wasn't in service anymore but it turns out it still is! I'm about to wheel myself over there when it hits me that the night shift nurses probably wouldn't just let me slip past their watch so easily.

So what should I do?

Drip-drop.

I shudder as a chill crawls up my back. I stay frigid in my wheelchair, too scared to even breathe normally.

The wheels start turning. I know it's Sun Le from the strong stench that wafts through again.

Strong stench?

That fleeting thought comes whizzing back once again and I catch it this time!

I know why the smell is familiar now. It's formaldehyde—I've smelled it in the biospecimen lab before.

Why would Sun Le smell like that? Why would a spirit have a smell?

Accurately speaking, all I've seen of Sun Le is a fuzzy, ink-black shape that doesn't seem to have any physical form. So why is it that I could feel a hand there when he was pushing me? And why do I always smell formaldehyde whenever he does?

The more I ponder the more petrified I feel so I just stop thinking about it altogether. I don't want my abnormal mind to come up with a bunch of disturbing explanations and get scared to death before I even get to the truth.

The wheelchair slowly rolls past the brightly-lit nurses station. I duck down and cautiously take a peek.

The station is busy. Several nurses are looking around for something. Still, they should be able to hear the sound of the wheelchair trundling on the marble floor, but I just slide past their line of sight without anyone noticing as if I'm transparent.

I should have known there wouldn't be a problem with him behind me.

The elevator is still dinging. Every time the doors try to close they open again as though something is there, as though someone is waiting for me.

The wheelchair stops in front of the elevator. The '*drip-drop*' has stopped once again. I clench my jaw and push the wheelchair into the elevator. Before I even get a chance to adjust myself, the doors have already closed and the button for the twelfth floor has lit up.

I gape at the lit button until I hear a '*drip-drop*' coming from my side. I shut my eyes almost out of reflex.

He's here, too. He's right here beside me. I might not see him...but he's actually....

The distance of seven floors seems to be longer than the River Styx itself.

Despite constantly reminding myself that Sun Le is after the people who took a part of him and that I'm not one of those people, I still don't have what it takes to go looking for him in this well-lit elevator.

"Thank you," I say in barely a whisper.

His actions so far show that he has accepted my proposal. He won't kill Wu Fan as long as he gets his eye back.

Drip-drop.

Have I become less afraid of him than I had previously thought? I'm still frightened but it's not in fear of death—I have the reassurance that I won't die. It might be tiny beyond detection, to the point that I'm still not 100% sure that he won't kill me, but I feel assured nonetheless.

Ding-dong.

Finally, the elevator has reached the twelfth floor. I wheel myself down the silent, black hallway and realise a problem upon my hands. I only know that Chief is on the twelfth floor but which room is he in? Yuan Fei didn't tell me the details.

Drip-drop.

I smell formaldehyde once again and my body stiffens. I've already developed a natural reflex to this sound. I would immediately go into an alert state or—better yet—a pessimistic mindset of an animal under the butcher's knife.

The wheelchair starts moving again. I think Sun Le is even more anxious than me to get his eye back.

However, I still haven't thought of how I'm supposed to ask for Sun Le's cornea when I see Chief. Am I supposed to carve it out?

I can't even fathom it.

The wheelchair stops in front of room 309. Lightly, I push on the door.

Kah-chik.

The lock opens and I roll in to the room after a deep breath.

There are patients in all six beds but, with the help of the hazy moonlight, I only have eyes for the one person who's still up.

A light shiver runs through me and I slowly wheel myself over.

"Chief," I call out quietly.

Wu Fan is sitting motionlessly by his bed staring fixedly at the moon, oblivious to my voice. Seeing Chief like this, I taste something bitter in my mouth and I almost can't stifle my sobs.

I take Chief's hand into mine. It's cold—as cold as ice. If it weren't for his even breathing I would have thought I was holding a dead man's hand.

"Chief...it's me, Xiao Yu. Do you recognize me?" I gasp.

He's still gazing into the distance, not sparing me even a glance.

"Chief," I say under my breath while holding his hands. "Sun Le is the one who did everything. Do you remember him? The Sun Le who committed suicide last summer?"

His finger jerks violently. Shocked, I look at him. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Chief?"

He hasn't made a sound but his expression has changed. I hurriedly continue, "He didn't die from the fall! He could've been saved but Cubs' father killed him to save Cubs! Those bastards cut him up and took away parts of his body and then transplanted it to other people's bodies."

I can feel his hands shaking and I continue as tears run down my face.

"Chief.... Cubs got his kidney pierced 'cause he took Sun Le's kidney. Kong Linglin got all his blood drained 'cause he received blood transfusion. Mu Mu got his bones melted down 'cause he received bone marrow transplant. Xu Ping got his skin sliced up 'cause he received skin transplant. Do you get it? Chief?"

The other patients in the room should have been woken up by my sobs but they remain still as though they're in deep slumber. My suppressed voice wavers as my tears mixed with sorrow drip onto Chief's hand.

“Chief, I don't remember which eye you got work done on but that cornea belongs to Sun Le...and he wants it back and he's gonna kill you doing so. Do you understand? You'll die, so...so....”

I'm choking on my sobs. “Give it back to him...’cause at least you could live even if you won't be able see. There's hope...as long as you're alive. I don't want to see anyone else dying. No more....”

Chief's hand has already stopped shaking. I lift up my head and wipe my eyes furiously. Chief is watching the moon again with that dumb look, his face returning to its previous emotionless state.

My hope withers as I watch him. My eyes trail over to the plate of fruit beside his bed. If there's a knife-

I jump in my seat. What was I going to do with a knife? Stab Chief's eye out?!

I scare myself so much with this absurd notion of mine that my hairs are standing up. Where did I get that horrifying thought from? Just how obdurate of a grudge is he holding?

Luckily, there aren't any fruit knives over there.

“I'm gonna go, Chief. I'll come visit another time.”

I whisper my goodbyes. I'm afraid that I might do something horrendous if I stayed any longer. But even if I do come again how would I get Sun Le's eye back from Chief?

My mind races as I wheel myself towards the door. When I approach the door, Wu Fan's feeble voice breaks the silence.

“I've seen...my cornea donor's consent form.”

I snap my head back. It takes me a while to comprehend his deeper meaning. I feel a pang of pain.

“It's fake.”

What is there to stop a bunch of lunatics blinded by money from covering up their sudden wealth with a seemingly legal guise?

Chief falls silent again. His silhouette from behind seems all the more worn and battered. I feel a throbbing pain in my chest.

I whisper, “Get some rest. I'm gonna go, Chief.”



I don't quite remember how I got back to my room but I do remember being so tired that I didn't have any energy left to move after climbing on my bed. I wake

up from my dreamless sleep the next morning and when I open my eyes I have a police officer rudely interrogating me with those seven files.

“These files disappeared from the principal’s safe the day Xu Ping went missing. Why are they here?”

I show an oblivious face. “Beats me.”

“The nurse who checked your blood pressure was certain the files weren’t here at two-thirty a.m. Why have they appeared during room checks at seven o’clock? Where were you and what were you doing between two-thirty and seven a.m.?”

“I was sleeping, of course. What else would I be doing in the middle of the night?”

“Why was your wheelchair unfolded? It was still folded up by the closet at two-thirty a.m.”

“Really? It probably opened by itself.”

He’s giving me hard looks—I don’t think he likes my flippant attitude. He looks like he might just torture me for information.

“Did you go to Room 309 on the twelfth floor at around three to four o’clock?”

I do a double take. Why is he asking me that? Could it be that someone saw me?

“The twelfth floor? You think I could make it up to the twelfth floor in this state right now, Officer?”

His impatience finally shows through. “Mr. Xiao! We ask that you cooperate with us! Wu Fan, the patient in room 309 was found fallen over in the room at five o’clock with his right eye damaged. The door was supposed to be locked but it was opened. We have sufficient evidence to believe someone entered the room.”

A violent shiver runs through me. I clutch onto his arm. “What happened to him? Who did it?! Is Chief alright?”

Could it be that Sun Le did it himself because I wasn’t able to get his eye back for him? Is Chief in any danger?!

My extreme reaction makes the officer waver and his attitude actually becomes better.

“He’s not in life-threatening danger but his right eye has been completely damaged. I’m afraid he’ll lose vision in that eye,” he in turn consoles.

I let out a sigh of relief and ask after some thought, “Who did it?”

The officer looks at me and steadily explains, “It appears that he had broken the plate on his bedside table and stabbed a glass shard through his own pupil, but the psychiatrist who diagnosed him stated that he has an irrational fear of broken glass so it’s hard to believe he’d do it himself. Moreover, the door was unlocked so there’s always a possibility that someone set the crime scene up to trick us.”

I clench my jaw hard and let my head drop forward.

Chief did it himself. He stabbed his own eye.

Chief....

“The nurses on night shift yesterday said there were signs that someone had used the elevator but the recordings from the surveillance camera inside the elevator between three and four o’clock have been wiped for some reason. This series of coincidences leads us to strongly believe that someone caused all this to happen within that period of time.”

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t let out a breath of relief. At least, so far, there hasn’t been any evidence that suggests I had been to Wu Fan’s room. At least I wouldn’t go from a suspect to the offender.

“Are you seriously considering that a patient like me sneaked past all the night shift staff, tampered with the surveillance camera in the elevator, picked open the door and assaulted a young man who’s bigger and taller than me?”

His expression twitches a little. I can tell he also agrees that this notion isn’t too convincing. The only reason that I’m even a suspect is because of the files in my room and the unfolded wheelchair, but that kind of speculation practically equals nothing.

The officer keeps questioning and I keep telling him lies just as before, only in a more sincere tone. His attitude softens as well, and he leaves after finishing with the records and fingerprints. I lie back down on the cot and rub roughly on the clay on my thumb. My eyes become clouded with moisture. Is it going to end now? Finally....

I stay in the hospital for recovery while Yuan Fei gets out after about a week in the hospital because of lighter injuries. He comes back frequently to visit and becomes my only connection to the outside world.

My parents also come back to the country to visit me and only go back to work after I insisted that I was fine and giving me a long-winded lecture. Fortunately, they haven’t heard of anything about our dorm since they have been abroad and only think that I accidentally fell down the stairs under Yuan Fei’s purposeful misleading. If not for that, they might just sell their companies and come back home, or worse, make me go abroad with them.

Chief has lost all vision in his right eye but he’s mentally more stable now. His family checked him out of the hospital after about half a month. I hear from Yuan Fei that the vision in Chief’s left eye has started to rapidly decrease due to the blindness in his right. The hospital had recommended surgery but Chief turned it down, the reason being that, unless he hears the donor say the words themselves, he won’t consent to it even if there’s a consent form.

And that essentially meant refusal of surgery.

Later on, Chief didn’t go back to school, instead he resigned from school and immigrated to Germany with his family.

The serial murders of Room 308 seem to have died down just like that. The ghastly corpse of the last victim, Xu Ping, is found outside the principal's office ten days after he goes "missing," causing the school to go in to panic once more. The perpetrator and motive—still unknown.

Investigations continue for another month or so without getting anywhere. They stop questioning Yuan Fei and me, too, and the investigation team is finally broken up after leaving one unsolved mystery after another, the whole case sinking into the bottom of the ocean.

I'm sure if there was an X-Files China then what happened to Room 308 and its tenants would be in it.

Finally, I can walk properly after two months or so in the hospital. Yuan Fei gets so excited that he spins me around and around the hospital room in his arms, the result being a brutal scolding from the nurse.

What a nice and relaxing time it has been. I don't have to worry about that fuzzy shadow in the night or that "drip-drop" sound that seemed to have leeches itself on me. Every day, I welcome the new day with a smile and wave goodbye at the sunset with a smile. The nurses wonder why I'm always happy and smiling all the time.

Why wouldn't I be? What would you do if you were marching in an endless, barren desert and you can't even spare a tear because of the relentless hunger and thirst, your remaining strength no longer sufficient to support your next step forward, when suddenly, you see a vast oasis, not the mirages you see before death but a real, actual heaven?

Smiling would be the least flashy display of the ecstasy you would be feeling inside.

Right now, I'm humming while packing my belongings because I'm going to check out tomorrow. I'm already really behind on my homework, but I'm excited and dreading it a bit, too, to end my pig sty lifestyle and get back into the real world.

"Oh yeah, I want a few more bags of those green beans they sell in the store downstairs. I haven't seen them anywhere else and they're so tasty!"

"Hey, hey, hey. You're too old for junk food. Plus, you'll fart a lot if you eat beans!"

"Shuddap!" I scold jokingly. "Just go get it!"

"Why should I?" He looks unhappy.

"Cause you're paying, duh!" I pep.

"But why?" He keeps whining.

"Now, now, be a good boy." I pat his head and kiss him lightly on the cheeks on my tip-toes. I hurriedly hop away and stutter nervously. "Alright! I gave you your reward! Now, go, go, go."

He touches his cheek, giggles and marches out with his nose in the air. After he leaves, my cheeks start burning and my heart pounds, making me pant and fan myself like crazy.

“Xiao Yu, oh, Xiao Yu, since when have you become so open?” I slap my mouth lightly as a punishment. “Don’t do such embarrassing things again!”

Punishment complete. I start humming again as I pack my things.

Out of nowhere, a minuscule yet extremely evident sound enters my senses.

Drip-drop.

The CD drops from my hands and I feel as if I’ve been soaked in ice water and my heart has frozen.

How?

Isn’t it over? How is it....

It must be my imagination.... Just my imagination.

Drip-drop.

The familiar feeling of my hairs standing up comes back and I hear my own teeth chattering.

“Why...?” I manage to ask in a breathy voice filled with a despair I’d never known.

Is it not over yet? Has the bliss the past few months been an illusion before death?

Is this his ultimate way of torturing me? If so, he’s succeeded because all my happiness and joy crumbled into pieces when he showed up beside me once again.

I’ve lost hope—all hope.

“We’ve given it back to you already. Why’re you still here?” Tears slide past my cheeks to my quivering lips. “Is there no escape?”

An odour wafts faintly in the air, becoming thicker by the second. It is the smell of...formaldehyde.

A hand-like thing sticks into my hair. I feel every one of my pores shivering and chills running through my scalp. My inner voice tells me the strange touch is not from an earthly being. It’s now running through my hair....

Drip-drop.

“Are you the devil?” I choke.

Why did he let me think it was over when he was going to do this today? It has destroyed my hopes once again right when I started to enjoy a normal life.

Only the devil would play with the human heart like this.

Drip-drop.

He keeps running his hand through my hair as if he enjoys toying with me. I feel each of my hairs scratching against his finger. I’m so frightened that I wish I could just run away but my feet are nailed down to the ground. The next moment,

I feel that chilly sensation reaching towards my earlobe.

I can't stand it anymore. My legs give in and I collapsed to the ground. I hold my head and sob quietly. "Stop this torture. Let me be or just kill me. I can't stand it anymore. I'll go insane."

Drip-drop.

Perhaps I'm too scared. My heart starts to pound erratically and soon my vision goes black from the suffocating feeling. Dizzily, I seem to have stood up. The hand behind me starts to push me forward and I robotically obey.

Where am I going this time? The roof again?

But I can only obey no matter where it is I'm going.

I walk on dumbly. Quite a few people say hello to me in the hallways. They ask me if I'm feeling all right because I look very pale. I force a smile that probably looks worse than a frown before continuing to my unknown destination under the guidance of an invisible force.

I am blindly heading to a place that I don't know of—some unknown place in the hospital. Then he makes me stop in front of an office. The door opens slowly.

I gape at a room full of specimens. Two-headed infants, deformed infants, underdeveloped infants, skulls, arms, legs.... If this wasn't a hospital, if I've never seen something like this before at school, I would probably scream my head off like anyone else would.

The hand behind me pushes me forward and I pass through rows and rows of shelves full of appalling specimens, finally stopping at one particular shelf. Slowly, I look up and my eyes stop on an arm soaked in orangey yellow formaldehyde on the second to the last shelf.

Drip-drop.

My tears fall down along with this sound.

"Those...sons of bitches." I clench my teeth and ball my fists.

No wonder. Sun Le should have no form but I can always feel a "hand." No wonder there's always a smell of formaldehyde whenever the "hand" appears. It's because he hasn't gotten every part of his body back yet. Some body part is still suffering in the mortal world.

Drip-drop.

Don't cry. Sun Le, don't cry.

Drip-drop.

Please don't cry anymore.

I go on my tip-toes and manage to get the sizable jar with lots of effort. I hold it close to my chest, afraid that my shaking hands would drop it, in turn shattering the last unresolved grudge of Sun Le.

Drip-drop.

"Who's there?"

I quickly turn around to see a familiar-looking man dressed in white standing at the door. He looks just as surprised as I do and asks tentatively, “Is that...Xiao Yu?”

It hits me. It’s him—Cubs’ dad.

“Mr. Jin.”

I can’t greet my good friend’s father normally anymore. His selfishness was the cause of this tragedy.

“What are you doing here?” He has dropped the wary look when he recognized me. He asks kindly, “What’re you holding that thing for? Now, put it down. This place is off-limits.”

Seeing him beckoning to me so good-naturedly makes my heart sting with pain.

“Mr. Jin, do you know whose arm this was?”

He pauses for a moment before chuckling. “All of the specimens here were taken from corpses. As for whose it was, I really don’t know. All I know is that it wasn’t taken from a living person.”

“No, this was taken from a living person.” I try to smile but fail miserably.

“What?”

“It was taken from a university student called Sun Le.”

Mr. Jin doesn’t recognize the name and looks utterly confused. I scoff. *So, you obliterated someone’s fate whose name you didn’t even remember, and took away his right to life.*

“Let me remind you. His name was Sun Le, a student at NY College. He committed suicide last summer, jumping off the seventh floor, and was sent to this hospital for emergency care.”

He stays quiet for a while and suddenly he pales.

“You remember now? You haven’t forget about that summer when Can desperately needed a kidney, have you? There was a university student who committed suicide who was a match for Can’s kidney transplant so you said to your father, the director of the hospital: ‘Dad, Can can’t wait any longer.’”

“Shut up!” Mr. Jin looks at me with frightened eyes and backs up in disbelief. “How did you know? How?”

“Hmm, that’s a good question.” My vision goes blurry and my throat constricts. “You remember how Can died, right? Mr. Jin, what goes around comes back around.”

His eyes go wide in shock and he shakes his head weakly. “No. Can’s kidney was a donation. His death was...was....”

He can’t continue because he knows the kidney that was pierced by that gravity-defying piece of glass was the kidney that was transplanted.

“Do you want to know what happened to Room 308, Mr. Jin?”

I feel like a devil now, slowly eating away at a father's conscience. "All five victims underwent different surgeries last summer. Each one took a part of Sun Le so he took them back, one by one."

"Shut up!" He roars like a madman. "Xiao Yu, you need to go get checked at the psych department! You're talking about a dead person here! A dead man can't do anything!"

"A person may die, but their grudges stay."

I hiss. "Don't you have any morals? Hasn't your conscience ever eaten away at you for taking a person's life in return for your son's? How could you? How could you decide his fate for him, just because Sun Le was a powerless orphan and nobody would question his death? Have you ever thought about the suffering he had to go through before dying, how much hatred he must've felt watching himself get murdered, how he watched you cut him up with scalpels and trade his life for money? What would you feel towards the world if you were him? You'd want to take revenge. Your aggrieved spirit would transform into a grudge so strong and take everything back from those who took it from you."

"Stop, just stop." Mr. Jin slumps down by the door, cheeks wet with tears. "You wouldn't understand, Xiao Yu. To helplessly watch your son's life slip away through your fingers, it drives a father crazy! Ethics? Morals? None of that mattered anymore. I just wanted Can to live, even if I had to kill for it. Can was the continuation of our bloodline. If he died our whole family would collapse. Do you understand? Can was so, so, so important—even more than me. I'd give my life for his but...but..."

Mr. Jin looks like he's in immense pain. "Can had a brother...the same problem...only I had a matching blood type so I gave him one of my kidneys without thinking! But his body rejected it after the transplant...then Can got the same thing! You know how that feels? You put in everything only to go right back to square one! Only this time I didn't have another kidney to spare. I wanted to save him...my only son."

"But the person who suffered in the end was none other than the son you didn't want to hurt."

My dear Cubs, if you were still here and knew about your kidney being one taken from a murdered senpai, would you weep tears of heartbreak?

You would. I know you would. Because you're so kind. But your kindness was devoured by the sins of those grownups.

Perhaps, the grudge-holding Sun Le is well aware that the best way of revenge is not killing a person but to destroy everything that is dear to him. Therefore, Cubs' death would become the most hurtful, most devastating punishment for this sinner.

"But why did it become like this? Why did it become like this?"

He's sobbing now. His wails seem to grind my heart. I look down at the jar in my arms and walk over to him, putting it down gently. "This is Sun Le's last grudge in our world. It was you who caused this series of tragedies to occur so you should be the one to put an end to it."

I place his hand on the jar and grip it tightly. "Let him rest in peace and resolve this hatred and sin."

I walk out of the room and take one look at Mr. Jin crying on the floor.

Sun Le, are you watching? Those are his tears of repentance. It might be too late but please try to forgive the irrational decision of a father who loves his son, for he has already paid with his suffering, his organ and the rest of his life.

I turn around and walk towards the exit.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop.

Drip-drop....

The distinct sounds drift further and further, lingering in the distance, no longer trailing me.

The piercing sunlight is so hot when I leave the building that my eyes tear up. I can't get it to stop.

"Xiao Yu! Where did you go? I was lookin' all over for you!"

I hear Yuan Fei's furious voice. I open my eyes to look at him. He grabs me in concern after seeing my face. "Are you okay? Not feeling well? You're crying."

"The sun's too bright."

I cling to him. The feelings I've been bottling up have finally been released and the tears keep coming. "Just let me cry. Let me cry a life's worth of tears...so I won't ever cry again...mmkay? I just wanna cry. Let me cry it all out, okay?"

Scared by my bawling, he embraces me and keeps patting me. "Mmkay, mmkay. You can cry all you want. I'll be here."

I let everything out with no restraint, speaking a bunch of nonsense, and get my face wet with tears and snot. Yuan Fei jokes and tries to comfort me but when I don't stop crying he gets concerned and red in the eyes as well. At last, I break into guffaws seeing his expression while there are still tears on my face, making Yuan Fei exclaim in bewilderment: "This kid's gone mad!"

The next day, I check out of the hospital.



Two days later, the General Hospital makes the headlines, shocking everyone. The son of the hospital's director went to the police and gave everything up, how the hospital abandoned the resuscitation of a certain student who was brought in from a certain school due to him being an orphan and instead transplanted his

organ to the director's grandson who had been in critical condition.

Instantly, the news spread like wildfire. The police follow the clues and uncover many more cases of black market trades that occurred in the hospital, the amount unimaginably high. The local media start reporting relentlessly on the illegal dealings of hospitals all over the country. Many well-known figures in the medical field are exposed and investigations are extended to the family members of the patients involved in the illegal trade. The society's trust in hospitals plummets and leaves the people in a panic.

Later on, every one of the medical staff involved in the murder of Sun Le, the student of Northern Yu College, gets sentenced. Mr. Jin was supposed to receive the death sentence but on the account that he gave himself up and repented for his actions, the court gives him a death sentence with reprieve and strips him of legal rights instead. Director Jin is sentenced to life imprisonment with no parole and is stripped of legal rights. The other offenders are sentenced to ten to thirty years with parole, depending on the level of involvement.

This appalling case has become the embarrassment of the nation's medical field and finally, after nine months of hearings, the whole ordeal comes to an end.

I put down the newspaper and lay it flat on the ground. Just as I sit up, I hear Yuan Fei yelling at me. "Xiao Yu! I found it! Over there!"

So I get up and crumple the paper into a ball, tossing it in the trashcan.

Right now, Yuan Fei and I are at a cemetery in the suburbs. We have finally found the tiny home of Sun Le on the solemn, grand Columbarium wall.

Yuan Fei puts down the flowers in his hands and lights some incense. He says quietly to the grey photograph, "Sun Le, I know I can't repay what I owe you so please come find me in the next life. I will definitely repay you for your love."

I observe his face from the side silently. Seeing his handsome complexion all earnest and somber makes my heart pound.

He sticks the incense into the small censer and grins at me. "Don't get mad. You can come find me too."

"Pshh." I roll my eyes at him and scoff. "What do you mean next life? Who says I'll have anything to do with you this life? Who do you think you are?"

"You little...!" He squeezes through his teeth while he glares at me. He then says to the photo, "Sun Le, you need to scare him in his dreams for me tonight. He's always picking on me!"

I kick him while laughing, only then does he start looking serious. "You burn some incense for him too."

"Kay."

I light three sticks of incense after replying and face Sun Le. My mind races momentarily. "Sun Le...I didn't know you that well and I never talked to you before but I really regret it...if only I knew you then. We would've been good

friends.”

Actually, I have a lot to say but it all melts into one: “I wish you happiness in your next life.”

Never to meet such a terrible end. Never to hold such grudges against this world. Never to use blood to cleanse the sins...because you'll have our blessings in your next life.

I plant the incense into the censer as a man and a woman approaches with curious eyes. “Are you friends of Sun Le’s?”

My eyes go to the strangers. He smiles. “Hello, I was Sun Le’s classmate. I used to be the class rep. My name is Wang Meng.”

“Oh, hello.” We quickly shake hands.

“What a surprise. I thought there wouldn’t be anyone else but us coming to visit. Didn’t think anyone’d still remember him. It’s very nice of you.” He points to the woman beside him with a smile. “This is my wife, Ma Xiaoying. Her first crush was Sun Le so she’s been dragging me along to visit.”

Embarrassed, Ma Xiaoying pinches Wang Meng and he cries out exaggeratedly, making everyone laugh.

“Oh, and you are...?”

“Oh, I’m Yuan Fei and he’s Xiao Yu.” Then he flashes a smile and continues.

“I’ve heard about you before. He said he wasn’t that popular in the class but you’d always look out for him. He was really grateful.”

Wang Meng scratches his head shyly but he grins. “He really said that? Hehe. Then it wasn’t all for nothing. That guy could go for a day without saying a thing and when you talk to him he’d just kinda smile at you. Made me wonder for the longest time whether he saw me as a friend or didn’t like me.”

Then, he studies me and blurts. “Weren’t you in the senior high department? Xiao Yu of class 3?”

I’m a little surprised. “Yes. How did you know?”

“It really is you!” He chuckles good-heartedly. “So you two were really friends after all! He didn’t talk much but he had a ton to say when it came to you. And he said you were the person he wanted to paint the most and he wanted to talk to you but was too scared. I thought he left with regret but it turns out you knew each other! This is great!”

I raise my brows. What is he talking about?

Wang Meng keeps going. “He was really good at landscape but he rarely did portraits. But actually, the portraits he painted were brilliant. It’s just that there weren’t many people that he wanted to draw. That’s why you looked familiar: you’re Xiao Yu. See, he had a portrait sketch book and it only had drawings of you in it. Laughing ones, mad ones, smiling ones, sad ones.... I’d always said he must’ve been really close with you or else how could he have drawn all those,

right? But he insisted that he never even talked to you and just drew from imagination.”

I’m not sure what to say right now.

Then he scratches his head again. “You know Sun Le’s a pretty good-looking guy, right? So people always thought he was gay. So these people asked me if he had someone...” He sighs. “Well, I really regret it now but I suspected he was, too, and I thought of you. So I told them he had feelings for someone in senior high. Then the rumours got way outta hand and they started saying he had a lover in senior high. Thank goodness I never said your name, or else things would’ve gone haywire.”

“Wait...so that guy in senior high was you?”

Yuan Fei looks at me, shocked. So I’m actually the reason why they met?

Actually, I’ve realised a while ago that Sun Le never wanted to hurt Yuan Fei and me and that’s why he kept following Yuan Fei around and couldn’t help touching him at night. It wasn’t revenge but a show of love by a spirit in love with him. As for me, I should’ve been a third party in it all but I’ve never been in real danger.

The only one time I was in danger was when Sun Le threw me down the stairs and that was probably because he was angry about my betrayal. Yuan Fei was really nice to me, after all, and Sun Le saw that so he got so mad at my betraying Yuan Fei at such a time that he almost killed me.

We were never Sun Le’s targets to begin with and we were never in danger. It was our fear of the other realm that demonized him and filled us with alarm with regards to his existence. That is why we kept hiding and running for our lives.

While we screamed ourselves hoarse from the overwhelming panic, he never once actually harmed us. He just trailed behind us quietly, watching. Perhaps, he was trying to find closure from us while we thought of the pitiful spirit as a nightmare.

Now I know more. He didn’t choose me randomly. He had been observing me before I even knew of him. Perhaps I was wrong about him touching my earlobes because I had been wearing Yuan Fei’s jacket. How could he not know who his beloved person was? He probably only did it because he had wanted to touch me.

The last time at the hospital when he gently brushed my hair, I was so terrified I was sprawled out on the floor, and I asked him “Are you the devil?” I wonder what he had felt when he heard that. He had never hurt me, yet I kept hurting him with my words and actions and misunderstanding him.

I was wrong. I was wrong right from the get go. I haven’t once been right when it comes to Sun Le.

“Xiao Yu? You okay? You don’t look too good.” Wang Meng asks, concerned.

I tug my lips up into a wide smile. “We were good friends. Really, really good friends.”

“Huh?”

Wang Meng probably doesn't know why I said such an irrelevant comment but I don't care. I just want to say it in the most sincere way possible so Sun Le can hear what I feel from the bottom of my heart.

If we had met before your incident, maybe everything would be completely different now. Don't you think, Sun Le?

“Oh right, oh right!” Wang Meng giggles as he rubs Ma Xiaoying's stomach. “I'll let you in on a secret. I'm gonna be a dad!”

He sounds like a kid boasting about his new toy.

Ma Xiaoying shoots him a dirty look. “What do you mean ‘secret’? You've literally announced it to the whole world.”

Yuan Fei cheerfully congratulates them while I stare fixedly at her slightly bulging stomach. A peculiar feeling comes upon me like the many hints Sun Le had given me. I slowly crack a smile.

“Have you picked a name yet?” asks Yuan Fei.

“Not yet. We're racking our brains out.” Wang Meng frowns. “We dunno if it's a boy or girl so we gotta prepare two lists!”

“How 'bout,” I mumble. “Lele¹⁸? I hope your child can always be happy.”

“Lele?” The couple shares a look and bursts into laughter. “Wang Lele. It's a good name. Good for both genders.”

“That settles it then! Wang Lele it is!” Wang Meng laughs as he holds my hand. “Thank you so much, Xiao Yu! You better come to the baby shower!”

“Well, aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves here?” Ma Xiaoying chides.

The four of us chat a bit more before we say our goodbyes. When we turn to leave, Wang Meng calls out again. “Oh yeah, I forgot to ask. Is that guy in student council called Wu Fan still there? How is he?”

I waver before answering. “Wu Fan? He went to Germany.”

“Aw. That's too bad,” he says. “The school wanted to get Sun Le's cremation done and over with as fast as they could. It was he who started a petition in the class to get him a place in the cemetery. It took a lotta effort but we secured a small spot in this good fengshui place.”

It takes me a moment before finding my words. “Is that so? He really did a good thing.”

“Yeah, he sure did! Alright, we're gonna head over there. Have a good day, you guys.”

“Bye.”

My lips curve up again after our second goodbye.

So that's why. No wonder Sun Le gave Wu Fan an extra chance. No wonder Wu Fan was the only lucky survivor.

"Whatchu smiling for?" Yuan Fei asks curiously.

"I was just thinking," I flash a sweet smile at him. "How there isn't such a thing as 'coincidental', only 'predestined.'"

"Huh?"

I pay no attention to the puzzled Yuan Fei and start running. He hurries after me, calling my name, and I go even faster while laughing out loud until I hear:

Drip-drop.

I stop dead in my tracks and Yuan Fei grabs my hand, quickly comforting me. "Xiao Yu, it's all over now!"

I look up and it's Yuan Fei's worried face. I chuckle out loud and pull my hand away. I walk over to the sink that the cemetery prepared for visitors. The sink is stuck, a pool of water lying in the bottom. Water oozes from the loose faucet and slowly drips down. *Drip-drop.*

I place my hand on the knob of the tap and take a deep breath to control the tremors brought by my reflexes. Everything starting from that game begins to flash across my mind. All the sadness, pain, suffering and fright are a nightmare of the past. Steadily, I let the air out as if to release every last bit of the negativity from my mind, only leaving the things that moved me and will remember for the rest of my life.

Gently, I twist it shut and watch as the last drop of water drip into the pool.

Drip-drop.

I know it's really going to be the end this time.

I turn around and see Yuan Fei standing there with a concerned look. For some reason I think of that one thing he asked me but I didn't answer.

Therefore, I ask him with a smile. "Let's never be apart, okay?"

He freezes and his expression changes drastically, both shocked and delighted. I feel all warm in my heart seeing this but his face darkens all of a sudden. "I'm not gonna reply to you just yet."

"Why?" I blurt.

"Hmmp. 'Cause you didn't reply right away when I asked you, and you only replied after nine months and twenty-eight days!"

I roll my eyes. "Who the hell remembers that stuff?"

"I do!" He retorts.

I burst out laughing and skip up to him, taking his hand into mine.

"Then I'll wait nine months for you," I whisper.

He nods, beaming, and holds my hand tightly.

My smile is innocent but I'm plotting in my head: "The most I'll give you is nine hours and twenty-eight minutes. I'll make you surrender one way or another!"

With that settled, I pull an even sweeter smile.


As we stroll towards the exit of the cemetery, a single drop of water slowly seeps from the faucet behind us. It falls into the sink and causes a ring of ripples and a clear sound.

Drip-drop.

¹⁸ This character, 樂 means joy or happiness.

THE END!!

Afterword

alms together* It's finally finished. Many thanks to the readers who have been with me through it all. Thank you all!

Now, I'll be answering some questions some of the readers may have.

First of all, a lot of people think that Sun Le is 'taking his revenge,' so they don't understand why he didn't 'take his revenge' on the doctors. Actually, though, this is not the case. The Chinese have always thought the worst way to die is to die without a whole corpse—even dead eunuchs held on to their p***ses for burial, so that they are 'intact' and are able to reincarnate. Therefore, it would be more fitting to say Sun Le was taking back his body parts rather than revenge.

♪ Bring back what you took from me~Puke out what you ate from me~

To be honest, taking out all the organs other than the eyeball without using surgical procedures looked really bloody in my mind, and that is why all those people died in a bloody manner. Firstly, the parents would experience the pain of losing a son. Secondly, I've always thought that you reap what you sow, and even if you're not the one reaping, your relatives would be. So you can't do anything immoral or there will be consequences. Therefore, their deaths were inevitable. Ahem.

As for the guiltiest of them all, the doctors, I didn't give them a bad ending in the story, only legal consequences. That's because I know the world's an unjust place. One murder sometimes only brings a few years in jail (I can give you lots of examples in real life). This is reality. No matter what you want, some bad people just get off easy. If Cubs' father didn't turn himself in, all those doctors would still be out and about so I chose to stick closer to reality with them. I consulted a lawyer friend and was told that Cubs' father and grandfather would be the ones with the harshest sentences. The other doctors would never get a death penalty and considering the grandfather's age and how the father turned himself in, they wouldn't either. As for the sentences for the other doctors, I did my research online. It was usually 30 years or less so I went with an average-length sentence. I personally think it's too short but it's hard to be objective. T_T

We can only imagine them: 1) discredited as professionals, 2) beat up in prison, 3) abandoned by their wives and kids when they get out, 4) not able to find jobs, and finally 5) dying after a long sorry life. Better than a bullet to the head.

Uh-huh.

But what's written above isn't what Sun Le was concerned with. His actions were more straightforward: he wants his body back. As for justice, I will leave that to you real human beings (the justice I've written is already an ideal outcome; bad guys turning themselves in and the secret being uncovered are actually all very unlikely to happen in reality, whereas it's more likely that they would get away with it). I'm sure you can picture what the ending would be like if this kind of incident actually occurred.

On another note, it's not a coincidence that the five dead guys were living in the same dorm but this novel's word count was way too high and I couldn't foreshadow anymore. So I have to sneak a little in here. Sun Le died an unjust death so someone wanted to use this to gather them together and then use the game to summon Sun Le back to the mortal realm. But Sun Le's grudge was resolved so the plan failed (actually I wanted to make the five ooxooxx). But the story doesn't end there. Sun Le killed too many people, no matter for what reason, so Wang Lele won't be having such a great life either (like I said, don't do bad things *sigh*). But that would be the content of another book predicted to come out in n months. But you can pretend it doesn't exist seeing that $n > 12$. Hehe, I'm done with my little blurb. See you in the next book!

<http://bltranslation.blogspot.com/>

Big Thanks To Chinese BL Translations
And Especially To

 Ayszhang 

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SEARCH FOR