Retribution (Cruel Intentions 3rd arc)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/2332064.

Rating: General Audiences
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: M/M
Fandom: Finder no Hyouteki | Finder Series
Relationship: Mikhail Arbatov/Liu Fei Long
Character: Mikhail Arbatov, Liu Fei Long, Yoh (Finder Series), Asami Ryuichi, Takaba Akihito, Tao (Finder Series)
Stats: Published: 2010-12-15 Completed: 2014-05-14 Chapters: 20/20 Words: 141530

Retribution (Cruel Intentions 3rd arc)

by FayeC

Summary

The third installment of Cruel Intentions trilogy - a Mikhail x Fei Long love story of epic proportions that will break your heart and make you swoon. This arc deals with Feo Long's past and is extremely heavy on angst. The entire trilogy has taken 7 years to write and has been translated into 7 languages. IMPORTANT: Cruel Intentions and Revelations must be read first for this to make sense.

Notes

Thank you angel0399 for the great beta job! *hugs* and special thanks to butterflysb for helping with the Chinese ^_^
Chapter 1

I think I should explain myself a little about the situation with Cruel Intentions. I’ve decided to end ‘Revelation’ as it is in Chapter 14 but continue the story, as requested, in a new arc that will conclude CI as a trilogy. The point of Revelation that follows NT plotline from start to finish was to have all the characters come clean with their feelings and the truth that, IMO, was all done in chapter 14. The new arc will be about how they deal with it and settle all their scores.

Title: Retribution One  
Rating: PG  
Warning: Major angst  
Characters: Mikhail, Fei Long, Alexei  
Spoiler: None this chapter  
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.  
Notes: Thank you angel0399 for the great beta job! *hugs* and special thanks to butterflysh for helping with the Chinese ^_^  

Moscow

The family dining room in the Arbatov estate was relatively small compared to the rest of the house and its decoration noticeably more subtle, giving the room a more intimate and warming ambience. The 30,000 square-foot residence was designed strictly to meet Vladimir Arbatov’s instructions, which was to lavishly decorate the more publicly used areas, and keep another set of rooms for private use that were smaller in size, and more functional and cozy in its decoration.

On the dining table that held up to twelve guests, only two were present. Vladimir sat quietly at one end, sipping his wine as he went through the food on his plate slowly without saying a word to the young woman across the table, who occasionally joined him for dinner at his request. It wasn’t the atmosphere he had intended it to be. The house was once filled with life, even after his wife had passed away. Now it seemed unbearably empty, even when he’d recently gained one more person into his family. The irony of it was that both he and Feodora may have lost something in the process, rather than gained something they’d always wanted.

The sound of heavy footsteps approached from the drawing room. He looked up, surprised at the crude and blatant intrusion he wasn’t expecting. But the sight of the intruder made him question whether his eyes had deceived him.

“Mikhail?”

A loud thump sounded as the small black leather case hit the table. Vladimir glanced briefly at the object, carelessly tossed in front of him by the son who’d never before failed to show the proper respect for his father, before looking up at Mikhail with disapproval in his eyes. “What’s the meaning of this?”

Ignoring the look from his father, Mikhail pulled up a chair and seated himself with an indifferent attitude. At that point, there was nothing the other man or anyone else could have said that would have an effect on him. He’d simply lost the ability to care.

“My travel documents,” Mikhail replied as he leaned back on his chair and gestured for his wine glass to be filled. “Keep them, and stay away from Baishe.”

Vladimir paused and calmly placed the wine glass on the table before shifting his gaze to meet the
icy blue eyes. “I haven’t seen you for months, and this is how you greet me? Did you even take a
glance at your wife when you came in?”

“What do you want me to do? Dance for you?” Mikhail replied with a sneer. “And as for my wife,
I’ll be looking at her for the rest of my life. You don’t have to worry.”

“Mikhail,” Feodora called in an attempt to interrupt the conversation that was getting worse by the
minute. Even though those words stung like acid, deep down she knew something had happened.
Mikhail could be extremely blunt at times, but he was never cruel, at least not to her, who had been
a close friend for nearly three decades. And for this reason, while other woman might have taken
the statement offensively being in her situation, all she found in her heart was worry. “Please.
We’re having dinner. I’m sure your father would love for you to join us.”

“I’m not hungry,” Mikhail replied bluntly without turning around to look at Feodora. He was aware
of his cold disposition, but at that moment, everything seemed to get on his nerves, be it Feodora’s
attempt to make everything seem all right or his father’s commanding attitude that had never
changed. Being back in Moscow and seeing the old man made him feel like a failure. A gentle
smile from his wife, whose presence alone reminded him of the situation he found himself in,
seemed like a victorious smirk. But what he despised the most was the indication that everything
was still the same when, to him, nothing was.

“So what do you say? Are you willing to hold up your end of the deal?

“When you learn to speak to me with proper respect, we’ll talk,” Vladimir said as he picked up the
tall glass again and continued to drink his wine unaffected.

Mikhail’s laughter filled the room, one that stung with extreme sarcasm it was difficult to tell
whether he was laughing at his father’s words or himself.

“Seriously, dad, I don’t give a fuck. I’m done being your puppet,” Mikhail said as he pushed back
the chair with force, creating a loud screeching noise on purpose before he abruptly stood up. He
intentionally knocked the wine glass over with his hand, spilling the red liquid onto the pure white
table linen. “Stay away from Baishe,” he warned, the look in his eyes made sure it was clearly
understood that all hell would break lose unless it was followed.

The silence in that dining room seemed like it’d lasted for hours after Mikhail left, even though
only minutes had passed It took a while before Feodora could let go of her breath and sighed in a
mixture of relief and despair. Vladimir, however, continued to sit there quietly, staring at his glass
as if the red liqueur wasn’t wine, but blood, or something equally disturbing.

“I guess the good thing is he’s back,” Feodora said. Even though the goal was to convince the old
man that there was still hope for things to go back to the way they were, she wasn’t sure she’d
succeeded in convincing herself of the fact. For a while she’d imagined how good it would be to
have him back in her life, with or without love for her. But now, deep down, she was beginning to
feel the complete opposite.

“I don’t know, Feodora,” Valdimir finally spoke, his eyes still fixated at the glass in his hand. “The
last time I saw that look on his face was 15 years ago. And two weeks later, he was in the hospital
for a drug overdose.”

Feodora held her breath as those horrifying images she’d long placed at the back of her mind
resurfaced. With all their quarrels, she’d almost forgotten who Vladimir was. The man sitting
across the table had always been a loving father who treasured nothing more than his own family.
While she had managed to seal away those haunting memories of Mikhail, Vladimir must have
remembered every moment of it, everyday, down to the tiny details of his son’s expression when he was completely helpless and broken.

“I wish he’d one day understand how you feel,” she couldn’t help but comment.

The man tilted the glass in his hand while those eyes continued to fix on an image in his head he alone could see, while holding back an emotion he didn’t wish to show.

“It was never his job to know.”

***

Hong Kong

Wong found himself holding his breath in front of the door to his master’s bedroom. It had been three weeks since the incidence on the ship, and since then, his master had bestowed upon him a task that made him want to request for resignation on a daily basis.

At six a.m. sharp every morning, he was required to knock on his master’s door to wake him up for his training. It wasn’t a problem except that he could never seem to accomplish the task. For three weeks, not once was he required to wait before the silky smooth voice allowed him to enter within seconds. And every time he’d entered the room his master would be in the same spot, sitting on his bed and staring into the darkness while his mind seemed to circle around something that was always present in his head. It was a picture that would’ve impacted all of his loyal subordinates’ state of mind, yet, he was the only one who had to see it everyday. No one else would know that the master would only appear like himself again. after exerting himself for two hours in the act of violence of his training everyday.

Despite being the only witness, he still wondered if anyone else noticed the slight difference in their master’s behavior. He wondered if the maids saw the teacup in his master’s hand hovering briefly in the air whenever those amethyst eyes noticed the jar of biscotti he’d always kept in his living room for a certain guest. Or whether the cooks realized the smell of brewing coffee from the kitchen made their master stop in his track for a few seconds before he’d start walking again, or whether the housekeeper noticed the new bottle of aftershave by their master’s nightstand, and its smell that came from his pillows rather than his clothing. Perhaps his master, too, realized this when he gave him Tao’s job the boy was always the first to notice when things weren’t right. It would explain why, despite Tao’s objections, the boy had been excluded from a lot of activities around the master lately.

Standing in front of that door, Wong couldn’t help but ponder how Yoh felt after all those years, being the one in charge of this duty, seeing and knowing everything that happened to the master and having to keep his mouth shut while carrying out his work to perfection. He didn’t understand until then the burden of being Liu Fei Long’s right hand man that fell on his shoulders the burden of having to see his every suffering, and at the same time, knowing that it wasn’t in his place to help, or anyone else’s. Liu Fei Long was the man his subordinates looked up to and worshiped, but never mingled with. The man was at the top of Hong Kong’s underworld, and on this pedestal, he stood alone.

Wong adjusted himself and decided to knock twice on the door, hoping that the answer wouldn’t come so readily. But it did, and there his mater was, on his bed, staring at something invisible as if he had no other choice. Although that day, he brought with him news that might make a difference, and he stepped into that room feeling a little more hopeful than usual.
“Laoban, Ma sifu* has arrived and is waiting for you in the garden,” Wong said as he opened the curtains to allow some sunlight into the room, to which his master quickly shielded his eyes.

Hearing the name made Fei Long lift his face, and for a split second, life seemed present in those eyes again before it slowly faded away. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he replied, rising from the bed to get dressed. Ma Chong De had been the family’s kung-fu instructor for many decades who had trained not only him and Yan Tsui, but Liu senior himself. After the death of his father, he was dismissed and had moved back to the mainland; Fei Long had not called upon him until now. To him, Ma sifu was a part of the family, someone he knew and respected like a father. Until now, Fei Long didn’t have the heart to burden the old man. But this time he felt he needed some guidance, something no other instructor could give him.

On the roof of Baishe headquarters housed a helipad and a small, private garden. While Fei Long kept an entire floor of the building as his training space, that day he’d decided to use the garden for the session and had ordered everyone to clear out of the area, leaving only Wong to keep watch and a maid to accommodate his needs during training.

For half an hour, Wong stood by the stone table where Ma sifu sat watching his student practice on the same muk yan jong** that had been passed down in the family for generations. With his hair tied back neatly in a tight braid and his upper body unclothed, the dragon of Baishe was a vision of pure strength and undeniable beauty. While every move was rendered with grace, each strike was precise and deadly. It was a sight not many people were allowed to see one that was simply impossible to look away or forget. Liu Fei Long of Baishe may seem somewhat femininely elegant, but there was nothing feminine about his form or the ability to attack. While Wong would not dare to imagine what it would feel like to be on the receiving end of these strikes, at times he could hardly tell whether it was the muk yan jong that his master was striking at, or himself.

“That’s enough,” said the old man, who watched in complete silence from the beginning. He rose from the chair and walked towards his student with the air of intimidation about him that could silence even the birds in that garden and made a man like Liu Fei Long of Baishe swallow the bile in his throat.

Fei Long stopped and straightened himself in front of his instructor, trying to steady his breath as he waited for the comment that he knew would strike him like lightning. Seven years had passed, and he could still recognize the message in that tone of voice all too perfectly. The reason why this man had been with the family for so long was because of his sincerity. Chong De da shi* had never hesitated to deliver a serious blow or a direct comment that would improve his students, no matter who they were. The Taoist da shi doesn’t speak a lot, but when he does, one either takes his words seriously, or expects to pay a high price for the negligence. After all, this was the man who once smacked his father with a cane and called him a “stupid fool.”

Standing just an arm’s length away, Ma Chong De crossed his arms behind his back, which was still surprisingly straight for a man of his age. His dark brown eyes traveled from his student’s face down to his feet and back with a mixture of disappointment and sympathy, the kind of look only he was allowed to give the leader of Baishe.

“It’s been more than seven years since I last saw you, and until now you’re still that six-year old child who has yet to grow up,” he said, shaking his head slightly at the man who stood before him with eyes that were still of the same boy decades ago. “The heart of Wing Chun is finding your centerline. It’s the most important thing in your body. You protect it with your life, and you strike by it. Lose your centerline, and you will be defeated.”

Fei Long nodded quietly with great respect. He knew every word his da shi said was true. But it
was the first time in his grown up life that he was accused of still being a child. Needless to say, the criticism went right under his skin.

“Whenever something troubles you, you lose sight of what’s really important. This is why you’ve never defeated your brother. Yan Tsui strikes with a clear and dedicated mind. While you always allow your movements to be dictated by your emotions,” the old man added and lowered his gaze to the scar on his student’s chest. “Does it still hurt?”

Taken aback by the question he wasn’t expecting, Fei Long paused a little before answering. “… No, da shi,” he replied with a tone of uncertainty. It no longer hurt physically, and he was sure it was what his da shi meant. But somehow, his words suddenly lacked confidence.

“And yet, you continue to guard it when you fight.”

“It wasn’t my intention,” Fei Long explained. He was never aware of the fact, nor has any other trainer picked up on it.

A heavy sigh escaped the old man’s lips as he closed his eyes and opened them again. Truly this was still the same boy he knew when they first met a student who took every lesson with utmost dedication and never forgot his errors.

“Learn from your mistakes, Long Er. Don’t live in it.”

Fei Long took a deep breath as he listened. It was normal of Chong De da shi to see through him with just a brief look at his performance. Whenever something troubled him in the past, the man was the first to know. Perhaps he was also right this time; he was still that same child from decades ago.

“The way of Wing Chun is the way of life. The only place you look is forward. Only then you will find your centerline,” he added with a calm and concerning tone. The youngest son of Liu senior had always been the most talented one in the family, but even now he wasn’t able to bring out that talent. There were always walls around this child that he could not penetrate, something the boy he knew twenty-three years ago built to contain his pain and suffering in order to survive. Twenty-three years later and those walls were still intact, along with every pain and every scar he nurtured for decades.

“There are things you must learn to leave behind, or sooner or later you will lose something that is closest to your heart,” he added before turning around to walk away. “Until then, you are wasting my time.”

It was the first time Wong had seen someone walked out on his master that way. And all Fei Long did was stand quietly in front of the training equipment, as if he too was a lifeless piece of wood. He wanted to say something to wake his master from his thoughts, but decided it wasn’t his place to interrupt. Perhaps it was what his master needed silence, and time to allow those conversations to sink in.

The schedule for the rest of his master’s day was packed with meetings and business events that even Wong found exhausting. Just reading the two-paged list of things that required Liu Fei Long’s presence left him spent. As always, the head of Baisha went through it with unfailing dedication, never showing a hint of fatigue in public. Even when he was riding in his own limousine at the end of the day, the image Wong saw in the rearview mirror was that of a man sitting with his back perfectly straight and his chin held high, as if that was another place he must conceal all his weaknesses, be it physically or emotionally.
Fei Long closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh, one that wouldn’t be noticed unless one was paying close attention. Despite his unaffected appearance, he was exhausted enough to sleep for a week, except sleeping was something he could hardly control himself to get enough. For the past three weeks he would wake up in the middle of the night feeling suffocated, and then it was impossible for him to go back to sleep again. There was also the constant headache, which came and went several times a day, that was making him more exhausted. He knew he needed a break, but at that moment, no matter where he went, he felt tired and somewhat…caged.

“Laoban,” Wong couldn’t help but asked the inappropriate question. “Are you all right?”

“I’m just tired,” Fei Long opened his eyes again and admitted, still trying his best not to show it in his expression.

“Is there anywhere you would like to go?” Wong asked, hoping that perhaps there was a place a beach or a park where his master could relieve some stress. It was the least he could do.

Fei Long thought for a moment, surprised that despite his efforts to conceal his state of mind, his relatively new bodyguard still somehow noticed it.

“A place I’d like to go,” Fei Long repeated with a sarcastic smile. He wondered if there had ever been one. Ever since he could remember, there were places he was required to be and things he had to do. Where he wanted to go was a question he couldn’t answer with certainty. “Have I ever wanted to be anywhere, Wong?”

“No, Laoban,” Wong replied after a brief moment of recollection. “But there must be a place that makes you smile.”

A place that makes me smile, Fei Long thought. The answer to that question wasn’t a place, it was a person one that had already gone too far out of his reach.

But then again…

“Perhaps there is a place you can take me.”

***

Fei Long paused in front of the building’s entrance and looked up at the sky; it was getting dark. His meetings had turned out to be much longer than he’d expected. And while he knew with his fatigue he should head back to Baishe to rest, however, the only place that could have put his mind at ease wasn’t home. It was there, in the penthouse at the very top of this building.

He stepped into the private elevator and punched in the security code his fingers knew without thinking. But, the screen notified him that the code had been invalid. Confused, he punched in the numbers again and again, until it became apparent that something must have gone wrong.

He reached for the phone in his suit’s jacket and dialed the one man who would be able to answer his question the one he was still allowed to call.

“Alexei,” he said as the call was picked up. “I can’t get into the penthouse.”

There was a brief silence from the other end of the line before a heavy sigh was heard a sigh that indicated the man had full knowledge of the situation, but the explanation was simply difficult to utter.

“I can’t let you in,” Alexei answered, the usual playfulness missing from his tone.
Fei Long paused for a few seconds at the response he didn’t expect to hear. At that point, his exhausted state of mind couldn’t make out the true meaning behind those words. “…He asked you to change the code?”

“No,” Alexei replied half-heartedly. He didn’t know how to deliver the news he’d been keeping for weeks. Even to someone like him, the situation wasn’t easy to explain, especially when he knew Fei Long would take it badly, whether or not it was his brother’s intention. “It’s been sold.”

He didn’t know how long he stood there unconsciously holding his breath, or how long it took for him to fully grasp the situation, but for the first time in his life he didn’t know how to respond. The answer was direct, right to the point and its meaning clearly understood without any explanation. Mikhail had truly made up his mind to leave it all behind and destroy all evidence of him in his life. Everything, along with the memories he’d decided to keep, with or without Mikhail’s consent.

“Fei Long,” Alexei called. “Are you still there?”

“… to who?” he asked in almost a whisper, clenching his teeth as he felt his lungs constricted. The headache he thought had gone away that morning returned, with an intensity that felt like he was being struck by lightning.

Alexei sighed again, this time with obvious frustration loud enough to be heard over the phone. “Don’t even think about it. He’s going to kill me.”

“I have every right to buy it and you know this, Alexei,” Fei Long demanded with anger rising in his tone. He knew he was taking it out on Alexei, who probably had no choice in the matter, but at that point the pain in his head prevented him from making any logical judgment. He no longer possessed the strength to hold anything back.

“For god’s sake, Fei Long, just let it go,” Alexei stood his ground. Whatever Fei Long thought he was doing wasn’t going to help. It would only make things worse for the two of them and he refused to be the one stuck in the middle of this mess. “I really can’t help you.”

The connection was cut from the other end, and Fei Long found himself hurling the phone at the wall, shattering it into pieces. Broken, just like everything else in his life.

He stepped out of the building in an attempt to leave the place he was no longer allowed to enter, feeling a mixture of anger and hopelessness. Before crossing the street, he turned and looked up at the penthouse that had never been his home, but his refuge somewhere he could go whenever things were too troublesome to handle. Up there, in that penthouse, contained things he wouldn’t let anyone else touch or remove, places he refused to see anyone else occupy, and memories he would never let go. And now that this place, too, had slipped through his fingers, the world seemed to have closed down upon him on every side. And once more, he was back in the small, dark prison cell he had locked himself in seven years ago, only this time it was without his consent.

Fei Long looked up at the sky again as a drop of water landed on his cheek. It began with one drop, then two, before the whole sky seemed to have fallen upon him together with the cold, and heavy rain that pricked his skin like a thousand needles. He remembered such a rain, how it felt back then on his face, and how it tasted mixed with his own tears. Only now he had no more tears left to shed, and there was no Asami to envelope him with his warmth and carry him out of this darkness. This time he would be left here, on the side of the road, where his parents had intended him to be a place deserving of a child whose existence marks the evidence of a shameful and regrettable act.

He didn’t know how long he stood there in the rain, or how long he’d intended to stay, but the next thing he knew, he was interrupted by the sound of a powerful engine that stopped just a few steps
from him.

The bright yellow door of the Murcielago flung open to reveal the driver inside. Fei Long paused for a few seconds before smiling at himself in self-pity. He had to be one of the biggest fools of all to even think that the man inside might just be Mikhail.

“Get your ass in the car. I’m not going out there to get you,” Alexei said in frustration. He had a hunch Fei Long would still be here, but not in the middle of the rain, soaked from head to toe. It was pure coincidence that he happened to be in Hong Kong that day that he was able to be there so readily.

Fei Long took a deep breath, and sighed as he thought how ironic it was that the man who turned out to be his savior this time was Alexei Arbatov. He stepped into the car he’d been in countless times, only the person driving it was someone else. The car smelled different inside with a hint of tobacco that was never present before. Mikhail would never smoke in his Lamborghini. It was who he was. The man always took care of the things he loved, down to the very tiny details. And to the things he doesn’t, he would never lift a finger.

“Here,” Alexei said as he took off his jacket and tossed it into the long haired man’s lap.

Fei Long looked at the man behind the wheel, surprised at the gesture of compassion never seen before in the younger son of the Arbatov family, and returned the jacket. “Forget it. The thought of you having some decency freaks me out.”

“Decency? You must be hallucinating to think I have any,” Alexei replied, rolling his eyes at the implication and tossed the jacket back where it was the first time. “You’re dripping all over the seat. And buckle up. I’m taking you home before you get ill and die on me.”

Leaning back on the leather seat, Fei Long ignored the garment on his lap and closed his eyes, hoping the throbbing pain in his head would lessen and his exhausted state would improve. “I don’t want to go home.”

“Ok, your Highness. Where to?”

“Anywhere,” Fei Long replied, turning his head away to look out the window. He was too tired and too cold to think. But the last thing he wanted to do was go back to Baishe in that state, and worry Tao and his subordinates anymore than he already had in the past few weeks.

“Be careful, Liu Laoban. ‘Anywhere’ in my dictionary means on my bed in my hotel room.”

Under normal circumstances, the dragon would have lashed back at him somehow for the suggestion. But that day the man looked as though he no longer cared. And even though he would usually jump at the opportunity and take advantage of the situation, the look on that flawless face somehow gave him his long lost conscience.

“I don’t give a damn, Alexei,” Fei Long said with a heavy sigh. He didn’t want to think or care about anything anymore. There was nothing Alexei could do to damage the situation he was in more than it already was. All that was left within his was this void he didn’t know how to fill. “What do I have to lose?”

The last sentence, coupled with the expression on that pretty face, made Alexei sigh in defeat. He didn’t know how Mikhail had put up with it, this side of Fei Long that could turn the world into one unbearable place whenever something wounded him deeply. He’d always disliked people who dwelled in their pain rather than putting it behind them and moving on. But oddly enough, every
once in a while he would still find himself right here, fixated, and unable to look away from this man.

“What are you doing?” Fei Long looked up and asked as Alexei turned the car around and entered the building’s parking lot.

“Taking you up to that damn penthouse.”

***

The elevator door opened, revealing the living room’s entrance just as it was in his memory. Fei Long stood still in the elevator for a few seconds as the scent of musky aftershave reached his nose—the scent he had often tried to duplicate and failed many times before. They say perfumes smell different on each person. By then he knew, it wasn’t the fragrance of aftershave that he missed, it was the smell of it on Mikhail’s skin, the smell that still lingered in this room.

“I thought you said it’s been sold,” Fei Long asked as he stepped out of the elevator and noticed everything was still in its place, from the rows of liqueur at the bar, the unfinished jar of biscotti by the espresso machine, down to the pair of black Egyptian cotton slippers left by the door. It was as though Mikhail was still living there and had left just minutes ago.

“It has. But the new owner has yet to move in, and…” Alexei paused as he thought of the right way to explain. But the one he thought needed an explanation, however, seemed to understand it readily.

“He didn’t want to keep any of this, did he?” Fei Long said as he stood in front of the black lambskin leather jacket hung by the door, the one Mikhail wore the last time they were together. He reached for the inside pocket and found that the case of Treasurer Black was still there, along with the sterling silver lighter where his fingerprints still showed.

The obvious truth needed no confirmation, and so Alexei stood there quietly, watching the elegant fingers pick up a roll of cigarette and place it between his lips, before he lit it with Mikhail’s lighter. The expression on that beautiful face was hard to interpret. He wasn’t sure if Fei Long was enjoying dwelling in this room full of history, or if that was a spiteful smile he had on his face whenever his eyes caught a glimpse of something in that room.

“Why don’t you go take a shower while I go get us something for dinner,” Alexei said and walked back to the elevator without waiting for a response. The truth was, he simply needed to get out of that room.

You stupid bastard, Alexei cursed quietly at himself as the door closed. Was that butterflies in his stomach back there? He still didn’t know why he’d decided to cut short his meeting just to be here after that phone conversation. He didn’t know why, having already taken this man, twice to be exact, he still found himself overcome by desire every time he was in Fei Long’s presence. There had never been anyone in his life who could make him do things against his will quite like the head of Baishe. And should all this qualify as the unconceivable circumstance that he may have actually fallen for someone, why does it have to be this man, of all people, who happen to be his brother’s love of his life?

The elevator door opened again, prompting Alexei to close his eyes and quickly brush aside the thoughts in his head. He was sure whatever he felt was just sexual desire, and that he simply hadn’t had enough of the exquisite dragon. Fei Long was, after all, someone beyond extraordinary.

He returned to the penthouse again later that evening with dinner, only to find the living room quiet
and empty. At first he felt a kind of relief that Fei Long may have left the place, but then he noticed that his shoes were still there, by the door.

“Fei Long?” Alexei called as he entered the bedroom and paused at the sight of the man lying on the bed. Taking a few steps forward, Alexei found himself holding his breath as he stood over the unconscious body covered to the waist by the plush, down duvet. Fei Long was sleeping on his side in the black silk robe that was left there before Mikhail had put it out on the market. Unconsciously, he reached out to push away the still partially wet long hair that laid its length against the flawless face, and felt another strange sensation in his stomach the moment his fingertips touched the silky, smooth skin. For some reason, every little thing about Fei Long seemed to have an affect on him, from the small amount of skin of his neck that showed through the strands of ebony hair, the partially exposed collarbone that moved as he breathed, to the outline of a perfectly built body covered by the thin sheet of slippery black silk. The man lying on his brother’s bed was, to him, a temptation sent by the Devil – one he knew would send him to the deepest layer of hell should he succumb to it.

The thought made him hesitate as his hand hovered over the belt of the silk robe. Just one tug, and this temptation would have been his, right here, right now. To him, self-control had never been one of his virtues. But why did he hesitate?

Just then, his eyes caught a glimpse of something the Baishe leader held in his arms - a jacket that he had seen many times before. It seemed Fei Long had fallen asleep with Mikhail’s jacket, clinging to it as though it had been the man in the flesh.

He drew back his hand and clenched it into a tight fist. The sight somehow put an end to his craving. Even then, when Fei Long was lying there defenseless and exposed, and Mikhail had placed himself out of the picture, there seemed to be no more space for him in between the two. Still, it was beyond his comprehension why he suddenly lost the appetite when all he wanted from this man was sex.

“Alexei,” Fei Long called as he reached for the sleeve of other man’s shirt. He had been awake ever since Alexei entered the room but he was too exhausted to care. He knew exactly what Alexei wanted from him, but now, there was something he wanted from Alexei, no matter the cost. “I’ll sleep with you if you help me get it back.”

Alexei stood in complete silence for a moment, staring into those amethyst eyes as those words, for strange reasons, cut him like a knife. The truth was, he would have jumped at the offer had there been the slightest look of uncertainty on that face, or a hint that such an act would have some effect on his emotions. But despite the weakened state the man was in, the only thing those eyes conveyed was unshakable determination. There wasn’t a shred of desire in them other than the desire to take back the place belonging to another man. Fei Long was offering himself as payment with no strings attached, simply because the man had no intention to give him anything beyond sex. It wasn’t until that day that he realized how cold and heartless Fei Long could be, despite all the affection the man had for his brother.

“I know you probably find me despicable for what I’ve done, but if you think insulting me this way would get you any closer to your goal, think again,” Alexei said, his green eyes flashed with anger as he spoke. “You can sleep here, but get out before noon.”

Fei Long closed his eyes as he sat on the bed with arms wrapped tight around his legs and his face buried underneath the curtain of his hair.

“There must be a place that makes you smile,” Wong said. The truth was, there seemed to be nowhere else he could go that wouldn’t make him feel suffocated. Here in this room where he once
laughed and cried freely because Mikhail had been the only one to allow him to was the only remaining light in the darkness that surrounded him. It was the only thing he had left that he didn’t want to lose, the only thing he had left to hold on to.

“Father,” he murmured in almost a whisper. “Please… tell me what to do.”

*I need to explain this since it confused my beta *hugs* and it was my fault for not clarifying it. I had the pleasure of being assisted by a Hong Kong fan butterflysb who kindly named Fei’s kung fu instructor for me as Ma Chong De (Ma = family name, Chong = lofty, high, esteemed, noble, sublime, saintly, "De" = virtue.) We talked about how he should be called. She suggested that ‘sifu’ (teacher) would be appropriate only when Fei was little, but now that he’s the head of Baishe, Fei should call him da shi (means maestro, Taoist or Buddhist Monk) to be respectful and also to keep his own dignity. Therefore you will see Fei call him Chong De da shi or simply da shi. As for the da shi to address Fei, she suggested that I have him call Fei ‘Fei Er’ to not confuse the readers, which marks their relationship as close but keeping some respect, but generally in the Chinese way he would be called “Long Er”. Being as stubborn as I am, I’ve decided I want to go with Long Er which also sounds more correct for me being in the Chinese family myself.
No Fei this chapter, but I promise it’s for his own good. ^_^ My muse is being an angel, and updates should be fast while she’s kind.

Title: Retribution Two
Rating: PG-13
Warning: Major angst, drug use, adultery
Characters: Mikhail, Feodora, Alexei
Spoiler: None this chapter for manga, but spoiler for CI
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Notes: Thank you @angel0399 for the great beta job! I’m so sorry to have to burden you with this. Hugs
Previous Chapters: On the side bar of my lj
Note: No Fei this chapter, but I promise it’s for his own good. ^_^ My muse is being an angel, and updates should be fast while she’s kind.

The Egyptian cotton sheet rustled as the slender body underneath moved slowly from side to side on the spacious, king sized bed. Feodora opened her eyes slowly to the complete darkness of the bedroom, which told her there were still a few hours before sunrise. A sigh of disappointment and hopelessness escaped her lips as she turned to the other side of the bed. Empty just as it was when she went to sleep.

It was one of those times when she both feared and loathed the sight of the digital clock by her bed. The damned object hammered a truth she didn’t want to acknowledge in her heart. However, every time she woke up in the middle of the night, the truth was there: Mikhail wasn’t home. He’d spent another night clubbing, drinking, or being somewhere with someone else that was better than home and better than being with her.

Ever since he’d returned to Moscow nearly four weeks ago, her long absent husband had spent just a few nights at the house. Even then, he was sometimes startled awake in the middle of the night by a disturbing dream, and would spend the rest of it drinking alone by the bar until dawn. Other times, he’d get dressed and leave the house until late morning when he had to return to work. While she was glad to have him back home, deep down she felt it was better when he wasn’t there at all; at least she didn’t have to feel so useless and rejected everyday. But with all her pain and suffering, she knew that Mikhail wasn’t suffering any less. It was as though a certain memory would drive him into madness unless he occupied his mind with something else. The worst thing about it was that there was nothing she could do to help. That was the extent of her uselessness in his life, even though she had known him for nearly 30 years, and being, by title, his wife. Mikhail had shut out everyone from his life ever since he came back to Moscow. Just like more than a decade ago when …

She closed her eyes and clenched her teeth as the memory of that event resurfaced. She could still remember those images of him lying helpless on the hospital bed, as pale as a corpse. It was for that dreadful memory that she’d kept her mouth shut and contained her own pain. At that state, Mikhail could take no more pressure at least it would not come from her.
The alarm went off at six A.M. It was time to wake up and get ready for Vladimir Arbatov’s birthday reception – the day when all the prominent faces of the Russian underworld would gather along with the politicians in his own house. It was the most important date of the year. Still, Mikhail was nowhere to be found on the compound.

Taking a long, deep breath, gathering the strength she could hardly find within her at that point, Feodora rose from the bed and dressed herself to perfection, despite the lacking emotion she felt in her heart. No matter how broken the situation was, no one was allowed to see it. In their world, conflicts and weaknesses within the family meant death. It was up to her to hold things together, and she would die trying if only to prove she was the one who deserved to be by his side.

***

Suite 1103, Feodora stared at the sign as she stood outside a hotel room. She took a deep breath before inserting the keycard into the slot. It was one of those times when she had to assert herself more than she’d like to obtain it from the front desk... Bracing herself for what she was about to see, she entered with as much confidence as she could gather given the circumstance.

The door creaked a little once opened, and as she entered, the strong smell of alcohol blew in her face, telling her that the last bottle had been opened recently. She made her way through the living room, taking care not to step on the cigarette butts and empty glasses that scattered all over the floor from the entrance to the bedroom door. There, she stood in silence, looking at the sheets stained crimson with wine and a woman’s bra carelessly left on the foot of the bed. On it were her husband and an Asian woman with long, jet-black hair lying by his side, naked from head to toe.

She smiled sarcastically to herself at the scene she pictured this in her head, even before entering the room. However, she wondered why her stomach still turned at the sight. It was hardly her first time seeing Mikhail with someone else. Throughout their teen years and up until college, before they started dating, she’d had to drag him out from dorm rooms and hotels – among other places - to get him out from exams and wherever else his presence was required. Finding his location was her talent, and just minutes ago, she was sure that she’d gotten used to the picture in front of her. But the scent of another woman still made her nauseous, and the images that came to her mind as she walked through the scene still hurt, like a dagger through her heart.

Shaking away the dreadful emotions, she picked up a corner of the heavy duvet and flung it open in one forceful move, revealing the two naked bodies on the bed. The woman was immediately startled from her sleep, while Mikhail continued to lay there, fast asleep.

“Who the hell are you?” The woman asked in alarm and irritation at the unexpected intruder as she quickly covered herself with the sheet. It wasn’t until her high-pitched voice started screeching that the man by her side began to move, but still, without an attempt to be involved in the situation.

Feodora didn’t bother to answer; instead she pulled out a check book from her purse, wrote and signed it before handing it over by the tip of her fingers. No contact was to be allowed between her and the female embodiment of the man who ruined her life. Mikhail must have been rather desperate, for the woman was, at most, a cheap substitute for that Chinese man her husband was so infatuated with. “This should be enough. Put your clothes on and leave,” she said without a hint of emotion in her voice. It would be the end of the world before she found herself in the same position as these women, who allow themselves to be pissed upon as a man’s sexual relief, enough to see them as some kind of threat.

“I’m not a whore. How dare you?” she screeched at the gesture.

A sigh of irritation escaped Feodora’s lips before she tossed the check in front of the woman, who,
upon reading the numbers and the name on it, quickly removed herself and the check from the bed before heading to the door. Everyone knew Mikhail Arbatov’s wife wasn’t just some pinup girl he picked up from the street. She was a woman born into an equally powerful family—one with a reputation as bloody as the Arbatovs. Sleeping with her husband was one thing, but crossing this woman imposed more danger than just losing a big check.

As the woman left, Mikhail sat up on the bed with his face buried in the palm of his hand, trying to cope with the throbbing pain that threatened to split his brain in half. At that point, he could remember nothing, be it the woman’s identity, where they’d met, or how he’d gotten in that hotel suite. All he knew was that he had a few drinks, and then he woke up to find Feodora standing there by the bed, looking down at him with her usual disapproving eyes every time she’d come to get him out of bed.

“What are you doing here?”

“You father’s guests will arrive in 30 minutes. I suggest you get off the bed and clean up,” she demanded, yanking the curtains open all the way to let in the sunlight.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Mikhail groaned irritantly. It had been just a few hours since he’d gone to sleep, and in that state, he simply didn’t give a damn about some stupid obligations.

“Yes, you are. I’m not going to let you ruin your life over this,” she demanded. The reception was too important to be missed. Mikhail needed the connection if he was going to take over the family. “If not for yourself, do this for your father.”

Mikhail shut his eyes tightly as the headache grew stronger. Despite his efforts to control himself, the unbearable pain has ripped apart his patience. At that point, he wished everything would just stop: the loud and annoying sound of the heater, Feodora’s voice, his hangover, the pain in his stomach, the world and everyone in it. Everything. “You’re invading my privacy. Get out.” The last sentence was more than a request; it was a command, one that housed no room for discussion and spoken in the most brutal way possible.

“You know,” Feodora said, gritting her teeth at the severity of those words that proved just how unimportant she was to him. “I don’t care how you treat me or how many times you don’t come home. And I will live with the fact that you would sleep with just about any whore rather than your wife. But as long as you’re an Arbatov, you will uphold this family’s reputation that your father has worked so hard to build.” She paused to take a deep breath as she realized her voice was shaking. Whatever happened, she mustn’t cry. Not then, when Mikhail was sitting in front of her looking like a total wreck.

“You’re not alone in this world. And if you can’t even see what you still have in front of you, then you’re nothing more than a scum. Now, get up and pull yourself together.”

Pull himself together? Mikhail sneered at the remark as he covered his face with his hand, trying to cope with the headache that continued to grow stronger by the minute. Feodora was asking for something he didn’t know how to do. Everywhere he went was a place he didn’t want to be. Every sight he saw was plain and unappealing. The wine tasted like water; even the countless beautiful women he’d had sex with in the last few weeks didn’t fulfill his needs. He was running out of places to run away to. And the reality of what he’d left behind in Hong Kong was catching up with him.

Lighting up a cigarette someone left by the bed and placing it between his lips, he filled his lungs with smoke— he wished would ease some of the pain he was suffering. It didn’t do much, but it was better than nothing.
“Maybe I am scum. And maybe you should find a new husband. Because, frankly, I can’t see shit,” Mikhail said with a sarcastic smile as he rose from the bed. Perhaps he should go to the reception if only to keep himself occupied. Then, he could put on a mask and shut out the things that kept on haunting him ever since he’d returned from Macau.

Feodora stood in silence, feeling numb from head to toe, as Mikhail walked pass her towards the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. Nothing she said seemed to penetrate the wall he’d built to keep everyone out from the small space he’d locked himself in. And while she was glad to see that he’d decided to go to the reception, deep down, she knew nothing had changed. The man she knew and loved was disappearing by the minute and the worst, she feared, had yet to come all because of one man.

She made her way around the room, picking up the clothes her husband left on the floor, along with the rest of the evidence of him and everything that took place there the previous night with another woman, perhaps two or even three. It didn’t hurt that much, especially because Mikhail’s attitude had made it clear they were nothing more than his sexual reliefs. The one she had to worry about weren’t these whores, but someone over 4,000 miles away who possessed the power to destroy the man she loved without having to show his presence.

As she made her way to the living room to find the rest of his belongings, she paused at the sight of something on the coffee table a trace of fine, pure white powder left scattered on the glass. Her heart skipped as she made her way closer to see the substance she knew by heart without having to taste it. But she had to make sure, even though she knew she wouldn’t be able to swallow the truth with her wits and composure intact.

She reached out slowly, dragging her finger across the table as though it was the hardest thing to do in her life and brought it to her lips. Just one taste and she knew her most dreadful fear had been answered. Cocaine.

A firm footstep startled her from her thoughts. She turned around to see Mikhail standing by the door to the living room with a towel wrapped around his waist, looking at her with full knowledge of what she’d just discovered. There wasn’t an explanation, not a word spoken in an attempt to cover up an act he knew too well was strictly forbidden.

“How long have you been doing this?” she asked, her voice trembled as tears began to pool in her eyes. Not this… not again!

“It’s none of your business,” Mikhail replied without the slightest concern and continued to walk towards her. “My clothes,” he said, holding out his hand for the garment she held in her arms.

Without another word, she lashed out and slapped him hard on the cheek.

“How long have you been doing this?” she asked, her voice trembled as tears began to pool in her eyes. Not this… not again!

“It’s none of your business,” Mikhail replied without the slightest concern and continued to walk towards her. “My clothes,” he said, holding out his hand for the garment she held in her arms.

Without another word, she lashed out and slapped him hard on the cheek.

“Not my business? How dare you?” she said in a broken voice as tears rolled down her cheeks tears she had tried to contain ever since he came back home and treated her as though she didn’t exist. “I am your wife, and I will not let you throw your life away for him!”

At the end of the sentence, a strong, large hand snatched the slender neck and squeezed hard, lifting the delicate body clear off the floor. Choking as the grip grew tighter by the second, she thrashed her legs and attempted to pry off the hand that was strangling the life out of her with no success. Mikhail had lost it, and those blue eyes held nothing but fury.

“I don’t want to hear one word about him! Do you understand me?!” Mikhail warned, yelling at the woman whose life now rested in his hand. Something in him snapped the moment Feodora mentioned the very man he’d done everything in the past few weeks to erase from his mind.
Somehow, and in some way, his anger seemed to accumulate rather than lessen no matter what he’d tried, whether it was alcohol, sex, or even drugs. On that day, it was released in the form of violence against the one woman he’d tried to keep away from the hell he was descending to. But even with that awareness, he couldn’t stop himself, despite the tears that ran down her cheeks and the sound she made as she cried for her life.

The phone rang from somewhere near and startled him from the blinding rage that consumed his mind. Without thinking, Mikhail quickly released his grip and searched the couch for the phone.

For the next few minutes, Feodora sat there helpless and shaken with fear, watching her husband search desperately for an old phone he always kept with him – the one he refused to disconnect even when he’d switched to a new number. Tears continued to flow as she tried to catch her breath and saw his expression change before her eyes. For a moment, hope returned to those blue eyes that had been void of all emotions for weeks. But, all that disappeared the moment he saw the caller ID. It was a sight she’d witnessed many times since he came back, but she didn’t realize before how significant it was to him. She was still alive only because of one phone call – the one her husband thought it came from that man.

It was the first time Mikhail had used violence against her, the first time she’d seen him lose his cool and allowed himself to be consumed by such an uncontrollable rage. When he searched for that phone, it was as though he was searching for his drugs 15 years ago. He was aching for something he’d forbidden himself to touch as though he was going through another episode of withdrawal. Only this time, there was no cure or rehabilitation to help him through it. Despite everything he just said, deep down she knew a part of him still refused to let go, just as he refused to take off that gold bracelet that cuffed him to this madness, just as he continued to wait for the phone call that never came.

***

It was already dark when the plane landed. Alexei adjusted his tie as he stepped out of the helicopter that just picked him up from the airport a necessity to get him back to the house in time for the special evening. His father’s reception was an event that lasted from morning until late at night – one that involved old men talking during the day, and a real celebration at night over dinner. As always, being the younger son in the family excused him from having to be there in the morning, and he’d planned his flight to get him here only for dinner. But that day, he didn’t come just for the reception. He came to see Mikhail over something that had been on his mind for the past few weeks.

He stood in front of the game room on the second floor, looking at the partially opened door that revealed the minimally lit space that seemed to be empty. Perhaps he’d been given the wrong information regarding the whereabouts of his brother. But just then, he heard a noise a whisper that came from inside and decided to enter.

Lying on the couch was the man who was unmistakably his brother, but the woman straddling over him, whose dress had been pulled up to reveal the side of her thighs, wasn’t someone Alexei was expecting. He cleared his throat to announce his presence and the woman immediately looked up. Even in the dark, he could tell she was someone of high stature possibly someone’s daughter who was a guest at the event. It would explain why she showed embarrassment and shame when caught, prompting her to leave the room as fast as she could without another word spoken.

“Couldn’t you at least knock first, you moron?” Mikhail complained as he rose from the couch, ignoring the buttons on his shirt that had been undone half way down his chest.
“Hey, I’m not the one fucking another woman while my wife is right downstairs,” Alexei argued. While it was a scene he grew up with almost daily, it had been a while since his brother had last entertained himself with a woman. It was something Mikhail would never do while in a relationship with Fei Long. Apparently, they must have really broken up this time for his brother to return to his playboy self. But then again, Mikhail was never this heartless as to commit such adultery right under Feodora’s nose, considering that she had also been a childhood friend.

“I’ve been away for a month, and you already grow some conscience. How remarkable,” Mikhail rolled his eyes as he lit himself a joint. “That was the Minister of Defense’s daughter. She’s grown up to be quite a fine woman, hasn’t she?”

“Well, you know me. I’d be more interested in his son,” Alexei shrugged. To him, that woman wasn’t even as pretty as Feodora, and with Fei Long, she was no comparison.

“I forgot, you’re strictly gay,” Mikhail said with a laugh before walking towards his younger brother, throwing his arm around the other man. Somehow, seeing Alexei put him in a slightly better mood. Perhaps due to the fact that he needed something different in his otherwise plain and unpleasant days, or perhaps he was simply high. “Apart from the interruption, it’s good to see you. Come, have a drink with me.”

Taken aback by the sudden display of affection from a brother he’d often crossed, Alexei didn’t respond. He seated himself quietly at the bar, watching as Mikhail fixed them some drinks, and noticed the slight change in his brother. His hair, that had grown a little longer since they’d last met, was left loose and untidy, and it looked as though the man hadn’t shaved for a few days. No matter how irresponsible he was, Mikhail had always been neat and clean in his appearance. Something wasn’t quite right. But perhaps, it was a normal thing for a man to go through after a bad break up, especially when Mikhail had never been through one before.

“You all right?” Still, he couldn’t help but asked.

“Why the question?” Mikhail smiled as though it had been a joke, even when Alexei’s tone was anything but. It wasn’t everyday that his little brat brother would want to know how he was. In the back of his mind, he could sense there was something strange in the way Alexei had approached him that day, but he was a little too high on cocaine to figure it out.

“I’m just asking,” Alexei said with a quick shrug, as though he was just making conversation. Deep down, however, he wished Mikhail would answer the question.

“Come on, I know you,” Mikhail said with a knowing smile. “The last time you came to me with that face, you’d just fucked up a deal and I had to fly 10,000 miles with you to save your ass. What is it this time? I’m feeling rather charitable tonight, so tell me.”

Those words, coupled with the smile that almost seemed euphoric on Mikhail’s face, prompted Alexei to quickly reach for Mikhail’s arm, pulling the sleeve of his shirt up past his elbow without hesitation.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Mikhail asked irritantly, his eyes glared as he attempted to pull back his arm, only to find that Alexei’s grip had tightened.

“Are you high on something?” Alexei asked, staring straight into his brother’s unfocused eyes.

“Weed,” he answered, gesturing at the roll of marijuana in his other hand. Having just been through one with Feodora, he was in no mood to hear another episode of worries and panics from Alexei.
“Just weed?” Alexei confirmed, partially relieved that there were no marks or bruises on that arm. Perhaps he’d been thinking too much about it, or perhaps the man was just drunk on top of being high. After all, Mikhail had been more or less cleared of addiction for over a decade, except now, he seemed to have turned into a heavy smoker, be it pot or cigarettes.

“Fuck off.” Mikhail warned; he yanked his arm free and continued filling the glasses with ice, keeping his back to Alexei so his expression would not be visible. He had no need to explain himself to anyone. Alexei should know better.

“No, really, are you all right?” Alexei asked again, this time in a more serious tone.

Mikhail turned around again, placing the drinks in his hand on the bar table and looked straight into his brother’s eyes. At that moment, such a question got on his nerves the most. “Why don’t you cut the crap? What do you want from me?”

Alexei stared back at the other man, searching for the answer his only brother refused to give in words, and found nothing. There was no emotion on that face, and those eyes were just plain cold and empty. He’d expected to see some sadness or longing in them considering the situation, or perhaps something equally disturbing, like he saw in Fei Long’s eyes. But there was none of it. Either he was too good at covering it up, or he had truly gotten over the dragon. But since Mikhail wanted to press the issue, he might as well just give it to the man.

He picked up the drink, twirled the glass a few times before taking a sip from it with his eyes still fixed on Mikhail’s. “I want him.”

The room fell into a suffocating silence for what seemed, to both men, like an eternity. Those words didn’t need an explanation. Mikhail understood their meaning all too perfectly. At a moment like this, it was funny how even the purest cocaine he’d just snorted didn’t manage to numb the pain that suddenly struck him like lightning. While he had always been aware of Alexei’s attraction to Fei Long, it always had been something obviously shallow. But, the look in Alexei’s green eyes that day made it a confession that changed everything he’d always believed to be true. And all he could do was to stand there and swallow it all.

“You need to tell me right now if you’re in or out,” Alexei continued with no trace of playfulness on his face. Things were different before, when he’d taken the dragon out of lust, while he wasn’t aware of the extent of his brother’s love for the man. However, this time, he wasn’t playing around. He needed to know if Mikhail had truly decided to cut all ties. This time, he wanted to be fair.

Drawing the roll of nearly finished weed to his lips, Mikhail took a long puff on the joint and slowly emptied his lungs before his eyes navigated away from the other man to the drinks on the table. The question was one he’d already answered weeks ago on that casino ship. But somehow, it was sickeningly painful to drive the words from his throat, especially in front of Alexei, who was basically asking for permission to pursue the one man he’d ever truly cared for—the one he’d already decided to let go.

“Do what you want. He’s not my problem anymore.” He’d made a decision, and one day or another, Fei Long would be in someone else’s arms, whether it was his own brother, or that Japanese man he was so infatuated with. What difference would it make how much he hated himself for saying those words, or how much pain it was to basically deliver the man he loves to his own brother on a silver plate? The truth was he could tear out his heart, and Fei Long still wouldn’t be his.

He walked out of that room without another word, and Alexei, too, made no further comment. The
deal had been done, the confession was over, but somehow Alexei’s words kept echoing in his mind endlessly.

Soon, a dreadful memory from not so long ago entered his mind and he suddenly felt the need to vomit. He could still remember everything, down to the way Alexei answered the phone and told him Fei Long was lying on his bed, to the sound of his heart being snatched out of his chest the moment he heard. Why now, when after all this time he’d succeeded in putting all of that behind him, does such a memory come back to him like it had just happened yesterday? Why was he shaking like his heart was going to stop any minute?

His steps quickened as he headed towards his room. It has to stop. This suffocating feeling in his lungs that was making him gasp desperately for air, the images that kept running through his mind and were making him dizzy, and the unbearable pain in his stomach that felt like it was being punched from the inside. He needed something something strong, something fast.

The bedroom door flung opened as he entered and headed straight to the walk-in wardrobe. His hands shook uncontrollably as he rummaged through the drawers, desperately searching for something that would save him from the agony that was eating him alive. It was almost the same feeling he had long overcome the unbearable craving, the nausea and the restlessness that made his whole body shiver 15 years ago.

The next thing he knew, he was on the floor with a needle in one hand and a cigarette in the other, waiting for the next eight seconds that seemed like an eternity as he puffed on the cigarette, knowing it would prolong the effect he was about to get. And there it was, the rush that engulfed his whole being the intense pleasure going 300 mph that he hadn’t felt for more than a decade. He closed his eyes as he felt himself fall from the sky onto a bed of a million feathers, and the warmth that wrapped around him as euphoria kicked in. This was it: the same exhilarating pleasure of being in Fei Long’s arms, the butterflies in his stomach that were always present when Fei Long smiled at him, the orgasmic feeling he couldn’t get with anyone else. It was exactly what his body had been craving for weeks the craving that was now being fulfilled by a single shot of heroin.

Someone stepped into the room and was standing over him. He didn’t care to open his eyes and look, not for the sobs that followed, nor the warmth of the slender arms that wrapped around him so tightly, as though the object in its embrace would be lost otherwise.

“What have you done?” A voice sounded as though it came from a distance, even when the words were spoken right next to his cheek, now damp with someone’s tears. A pair of soft, delicate hands cradled his face as he felt a soft kiss on his forehead and a warm embrace that followed. Someone whispered something in his ear as he slipped into unconsciousness something he was too far removed to comprehend.

“What has he done to you?”

****

P.S. Sorry if there’s any mistake on the drug-related issue. I have 0 experience in it (I don’t even smoke ^^!) and the last time I asked a few friends who might know something about the effects of ecstasy when I wrote CI, they all freaked out for a week thinking I was going to try it or something. So this has been a result of Internet research only. And I am not trying to promote drug use/abuse in anyway.
“What do you want?” Fei Long asked, drumming his fingers on the white linen of the dining table as he looked straight into the cunning green eyes. It wasn’t everyday that he’d received a call from Alexei, much less being invited to join him for dinner. Despite all his advances when they happen to run into each other, the man rarely took that extra step to get truly involved. In a way, Alexei was the opposite of his brother, who had a tendency to dive into something he’s attracted to immediately without thinking. The younger Arbatov, however, enjoys playing but would never commit himself to anything that would require an effort to keep. For Alexei to call and extend an invitation meant there was an underlying reason one he’d yet to find out.

Alexei smiled. He reached for a thick envelope inside his jacket and tossed it on the table. “On the contrary, I have something for you.”

Fei Long reached for the envelope and held it in his hand unopened for a few seconds while his eyes carefully studied the other man’s expression. It was rather obvious that the content was meant to be a surprise, but given Alexei’s unpredictable nature, one could never tell if such a surprise would be pleasant. “What’s in here?”

“Open it” Alexei insisted, smiling to himself as he watched Fei Long’s amethyst eyes narrow in curiosity. For some reason, even the slightest change in Fei Long’s expression seemed to have a strange affect on him lately. Butterflies invaded his stomach out of nowhere, and by nothing more than a simple gesture from that flawlessly beautiful face.

Long, elegant fingers flipped open the envelope and unfolded the set of papers inside to read. For a brief moment, life seemed to return to those beautiful eyes as they looked up at the man across the table, surprised and obviously impressed. “I don’t understand.”

“Just sign on them, and it’s yours,” the young Russian added. The expression on Fei Long’s face at the time was that of a child who’d just been given a Christmas present. It was a sight that was well worth the price he paid for the content of one small envelope.

Trying his best to hide his satisfaction, Fei Long refolded the papers in his hand and placed them back on the table. It was funny how a few sheets of paper could give him so much pleasure. Finally, Mikhail’s penthouse was now resting in his hands, safe, and truly his to keep.
But at what cost?

“I thought you said it’s been sold.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t buy it back,” Alexei shrugged as he lit himself a cigarette. Buying the penthouse back was easy; keeping the transactions hidden from his brother, however, was remarkably difficult.

“And how much do I owe you?” Fei Long asked, signaling at one of his bodyguards to bring him his checkbook.

“What happened to ‘I’ll sleep with you if you help me get it back?’ ” Alexei countered with a mischievous smile, ignoring the presence of Fei Long’s bodyguard whose hand paused in midair for a few seconds at the information.

With a quick glare of disapproval at the Russian, Fei Long snatched the checkbook from his bodyguard and gave a signal for him to return to his post - somewhere out of range from whatever Alexei had to say next to ruin his reputation. Sometimes he wondered if shamelessness was a Russian virtue, or a characteristic that runs in the Arbatov family.

“It would help for you to remember that a man in my position doesn’t offer the same prize twice if you refuse me the first time,” Fei Long replied, peeking through his long lashes in a quick glance at the other man, asserting himself before he began to write on a check. “How much?”

“Perhaps I don’t want your money.”

“Unfortunately, it is money that I offer,” Fei Long confirmed with a smile, backed with the tone that showed no room for argument.

“Are you always this aggressive or just in business?” Alexei raised a brow at Fei Long’s intention to singlehandedly close the deal without so much as an opening for rejection.

“I was hoping you’d appreciate my generosity of forgoing the most important aspect of doing business called bargaining,” Fei Long replied with a criticizing look on his face as he emphasized the last word of the sentence.

“I do, except I’m not here to do business with you.”

“Every exchange is considered business by my interpretation.”

“Then consider it a gift.”

“On what occasion?”

“One should never need an excuse to give someone like you a present.”

Fei Long looked up, taken aback not by the words spoken, but the tone Alexei had used. He had hoped to see a hint of playfulness on that face, or something that showed it was nothing more than a joke the man loved to throw at him whenever he found the opportunity. Somehow, those green eyes that kept staring at him seemed strangely fixated and unwavering. Most of all, they resembled those of Mikhail’s, and it inevitably made him feel uneasy. Alexei was flirting with him, and it was beginning to feel more than a fling.

“What are you doing?” Fei Long sighed as he put down the pen and looked back into Alexei’s eyes with concern. He knew something was different the moment he’d received the call. The question
was, does the man know what he was getting himself into?

“I have absolutely no idea,” Alexei replied with a laugh. It wasn’t far from the truth. He had no desire to commit himself to a relationship, and the idea of being attached to someone seemed unbearably boring to him. The reason why he was sitting there and going through all this just to see Fei Long was beyond his comprehension, not to mention against his own rules.

“Don’t fall for me, Alexei,” Fei Long warned with sincerity in his tone. Alexei had become a good friend – one he didn’t want to lose. Not to mention he was in no shape or form to get himself involved with anyone at that point. As someone who had been there along with him and Mikhail, he should already know this.

“Well, you showing up here looking so damn hot certainly isn’t helping.”

For a brief moment, a genuine smile appeared on the Baishe leader’s face – one that made Alexei wonder what it meant. Fei Long had so many expressions and gestures that he’d yet to learn to decipher. In a way, it was rather irritating to think that Mikhail probably knew most of them, if not all. “That was the first smile I’ve seen from you in a month.”

Fei Long looked away, lowering his eyes to the wine glass in front of him as the smile slowly disappeared. “Has it really been that long?”

One month had passed, and the event on that ship still seemed like yesterday. He could still remember his heart beating fast as he kissed Asami and how it felt to see the man’s expressionless face in response to it. But most of all, he remembered the look on Mikhail’s face just before he walked away. Somehow, it was the only image of Mikhail that he could still remember with clarity. But seeing Alexei laugh just minutes ago reminded him of what Mikhail looked like when he smiled, and how it used to soften his heart every time he saw it. Even without the deed to the penthouse, accepting Alexei’s invitation wasn’t such a bad idea. They were brothers, after all, and Alexei did resemble Mikhail in many ways.

“Anyway, how was Moscow?” Fei Long asked. He’d suddenly remembered that Alexei had just returned from Russia a few days before. He had to admit, the question was somewhat different from what he truly had in mind.

Alexei took a puff on his cigarette and smirked knowingly. “You mean ‘How is he?’”

Fei Long paused. His heart skipped a beat from hearing Alexei speak out loud the question he’d tried to avoid. Somehow, even asking about Mikhail felt like a sin. But there was no use hiding it now. Alexei knew as well as he did how much just a mere mention of the man’s name meant to him. “Well, how is he?”

“I only saw him for a few minutes,” Alexei replied, casually knocking the ash off his cigarette before he continued. “He was high on pot and was cheating on his wife with someone’s daughter. Other than that, he seems fine.”

“I thought it was that singer from America,” Fei Long said with a smile; it was difficult to tell whether it was real, or if it was merely a mask he’d put on to conceal a certain unwanted emotion.

“Don’t believe everything you hear from the press. By the time it’s published, he’ll be doing another actress from another country,” Alexei explained, rolling his eyes at what he considered normal for his brother. “But you wouldn’t know this, of course. He was head over heels for you.”

“While it lasted,” Fei Long added. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know the extent of Mikhail’s affection
for him. He’d always known what he had, and it was his stupidity alone that allowed someone like Mikhail to slip through his fingers.

For a while, Alexei sat there quietly, watching the expression on Fei Long’s face change from regret to self-pity. It wasn’t an easy sight to stomach, especially when those delicate fingers continued to endlessly stroke the surface of that white envelope as though it would bring him the comfort he needed. It was impossible for anyone to know the true magnitude of the pain the man contained behind that calm and controlled façade he was wearing. And yet Liu Fei Long still stands, with his head held high and his back straight, going about his business and duties in the kind of perfection that was uniquely his own. He’d never seen such strength, and perhaps it was this strength that had both intrigued and saved his brother, who was also broken in many ways.

“Let’s get out of here,” Alexei decided to break the silence. “As for the penthouse, unless you want to rethink your first offer, you can start paying me back by picking up tonight’s check and treat me to a few drinks.”

“That would be inappropriate,” Fei Long narrowed his eyes and gave him a disapproving look. “You ask me out for dinner, you pay for it.”

Taken aback by the unexpected answer and a hint of playfulness in Fei Long’s tone, Alexei paused for a few seconds before he realized it wasn’t a joke. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

“I’m Chinese, sweetheart, and this is China,” Fei Long replied with a slight grin. He had to admit, something that night managed to improve his mood a little. Perhaps it was the wine, or the thoughtful present, or the way Alexei reminded him so much of Mikhail that did it. Whatever it was, he had Alexei to thank for lifting some of the weight in his chest.

“But as a gesture of gratitude, I will treat you to a few drinks in my new penthouse that you so generously paid $38 million for.”

“You mean $39 million.”

“He was going to sell it to me for $38 million. You have been ripped off,” Fei Long smirked.

“Considering it’s the most expensive gift I’ve ever given someone, being ripped off for $1 million isn’t that bad, is it?”

“Then perhaps you should know,” Fei Long said, lifting his chin slightly and fluttered his unreasonably long lashes. “Your brother gave me a blank check the first time he took me out for dinner. You have pretty big shoes to fill. Pick up the check, I’ll wait outside.”

***

Fei Long sighed in relief as he opened the door. The penthouse was just as he’d left it one week ago. It seemed Alexei understood why he wanted the apartment and had made sure nothing would be removed from it. He picked up the universal remote and turned on the lights, remembering Mikhail’s favorite preset for a night like this – a night when they’d shared their first kiss.

At the press of a button, the living room lit up just enough to create a warming, dreamy atmosphere, while the rows of fluorescent blue lights illuminated the outdoor pool to perfection. Fei Long smiled as a certain memory came back to him; he once stood right here, admiring the superb lighting job of the apartment and the quality of the stereo system playing Ella Fitzgerald. But which song was it?
“You read my mind.” Fei Long turned around towards Alexei as the same hauntingly sweet sound reached his ears.

“I would love to take the credit, but the play list is under your name,” Alexei replied as he put down the music controller. Only his brother would think of details like this – saving a play list for Fei Long or setting up the lighting control to suit a certain date. He’d never had patience for such things. But perhaps such patience was needed to get close to the dragon, whose walls are obviously high and seemingly unbreakable.

“He took me here after our first dinner together. And I made fun of him about his choice of music.” Fei Long turned away and walked towards the floor-to-ceiling window where he once stood with Mikhail right behind him, recalling the event of that night he’d always remember. The room smelled so much like Mikhail then, and he remembered how his heart pounded irregularly as he thought about what being with the man would be like.

Alexei’s footsteps approached him slowly from behind, and Fei Long tried to hide his smile as he realized how much they resembled his brother’s. Perhaps it was the wine at dinner that helped create such an illusion, or perhaps it was the penthouse itself that held so much memory. Here, Mikhail touched him for the first time, kissed him for the first time, and wrapped those arms around him for the first time.

“And what did he do?” Alexei whispered, feeling his own words tremble at the captivating sight of Fei Long in front of him. He wondered if this was how his brother felt when he stood right here, in Fei Long’s presence – bewitched and maddeningly desperate. Maybe it was the way he saw them together that caught his interest. Maybe it wasn’t just Fei Long, but the relationship he had with Mikhail that he desired. That could explain why he didn’t mind tracing his brother’s steps right then, just to experience the same kind of rush that nearly destroyed Mikhail.

“He stood right behind me, breathing down my neck,” Fei Long continued and closed his eyes as he felt Alexei’s warm, uneven breath brushing the side of his face. “And told me now embarrassing it was for his image that he actually likes this stuff.”

“Well, it is rather embarrassing,” Alexei commented, leaning closer to capture the sweet, intoxicating scent of the long, jet black hair he could touch all day. Fei Long made a little sound, though almost inaudible, as he stole a quick taste, or two, of the flawless skin on that long, elegant neck.

“I asked him what else he had hidden under his bed,” he said, hearing his own voice shake a little as Alexei kissed him again on the side of his neck. Mikhail’s lips were coarser, rougher; they could almost scrape off a layer of his skin when dragged along his body. Harder, he almost slipped out the word, but his vanishing conscience managed to stop him just in time.

“What did he say?” Another kiss, and Fei Long slipped out a moan.

“He said, ‘Why don’t we find out?’” Fei Long recalled and held his breath as Alexei said those words to him with the same thick, Russian accent – the way Mikhail did that used to make his knees weak every time. “Then he ran his fingers through my hair…”

“Like this?” Alexei asked, feeling his breath quickened as he stroked the soft, delicate strands that were strangely intoxicating. He wondered how did he miss all this when he had the dragon in his arms, why it felt like he’d never touched this man before, and why his heart didn’t beat this fast
when he held this man down and forced him into submission back then.

Fei Long tilted his head back and closed his eyes. Even though he remembered Mikhail’s hand being bigger and stronger, Alexei’s touch was enough to remind his body how it used to react to Mikhail’s fingers. He missed those hands that felt rough against his skin, how they used to handle him without fear that he would break apart like some porcelain doll. Mikhail had never considered him to be weaker or more fragile. The man enjoyed pushing him to his limits, as much as he enjoyed being challenged. When he was gentle, it was because he wanted to be gentle, but never because he thought it was required.

“And then he kissed me…” his voice trailed off as Alexei captured his lips gently. “Harder.” This time he said it out loud, pressing himself closer, demanding that the feelings he once had would be relived and remembered. “Kiss me as if you’re going to die if you stop.”

Pushing himself harder against the dragon, Alexei couldn’t help but think how appropriate those words sounded. Fei Long’s lips were burning to the touch. He was going to die if he’d stopped. Did Mikhail go through this every time the two of them had sex, or was it just him that felt so weak and defenseless in the presence of this man’s overpowering sexual desire? Whether he ended up on top or bottom, the one holding the reins surely wasn’t him.

Suddenly, Fei Long’s body stiffened. Somehow, a certain memory he didn’t wish to keep also resurfaced. Just like that night with Mikhail, when they were kissing, he remembered Asami.

“Fei Long?” Alexei asked as the expression on the other man’s face suddenly changed into something disturbing. “What happened?”

What happened...

“I pushed him away,” Fei Long replied. His eyes looked past Alexei’s shoulders into the darkness that suddenly fell upon him, confused and, in a way, full of regret. It didn’t just happen on that ship. It’d happened a long time ago from the very first day Mikhail stepped into his life. Even now, with Mikhail gone and Alexei was standing in his place, the dreadful memory still haunted him just as much. “Because that kiss reminded me of Asami.”

Yes, it did. It was the first time he’d been kissed by a man. He could still remember how he enjoyed that warmth he’d long yearned for, how good it felt to be desired by someone, and how the back of Asami’s hand felt so affectionate and tender when it caressed his cheek. Asami had caught him in his most vulnerable state, and he’d embraced all of it without a single doubt, out of desperation.

“I let him kiss me and fooled myself that it meant something,” Fei Long said, gritting his teeth as the truth he’d tried to deny slowly surfaced. It wasn’t Asami that continued to haunt him, it was always his own weakness and stupidity that brought about the death of his father that he’d never be able to forgive. And for years, he’d been too much of a coward to face his own failure. For years, he clung blindly to the possibility that Asami may have felt something for him, that what he believed wasn’t entirely a lie. He’d dragged it along far enough for it to ruin everything Mikhail had worked so hard to build for them. “I took that hand and believed that the kindness was real.”

Alexei held his breath as the strong yet delicate hands grabbed the fabric of his shirt hard enough for him to feel Fei Long’s pain rippling under his own skin. The body in front of him was trembling in a mixture of rage and self-damnation while tears began to pool in those amethyst eyes.

“I did it,” Fei Long said. Every word that came out was slicing his throat open like a blade, and he cried as though each drop of tears that ran down his cheeks stung like acid. “I killed my father.”
He didn’t know how long he stood there with Fei Long in his arms, wondering if Mikhail had ever seen him cry like this, and how he would deal with it. Some time later, Fei Long passed out on his shoulder. He changed the man into his black silk robe and tucked him into bed. It was beyond his comprehension why he found himself sitting there, staring at the one and only man who’d ever affected him so much, without the slightest desire to take advantage of the situation. Fei Long was beyond broken, and he knew nothing good would ever come from touching this man who had already ruined his brother’s life. But still, somehow, against his will, he simply didn’t want to leave.

***

The next morning Fei Long was awakened by the sound of metal clashing against one another. Someone was in the living room, perhaps arranging something on the table or making something in the kitchen. He looked around and realized that he was still in the penthouse, covered with just the black silk robe and nothing else. His heart skipped a beat as the memory of what happened the previous night came to mind. He remembered kissing Alexei, and then he ended up crying on his shoulder. He didn’t know why he’d told Alexei those things, or why he’d allowed himself to appear so weak and helpless in front of a man he couldn’t say with certainty that he trusted. Perhaps Alexei was just there at the right time, in the right place, when he was at his limits. But as embarrassing as it was, what happened that night allowed him to breathe again with less difficulty. The only regret he had was that he’d never told Mikhail these things when he should have…much sooner, and more than anyone.

He rose from the bed and stepped outside to the living room. Alexei was sitting by the bar, reading a newspaper with room service breakfast laid out before him. It was a sight that almost seemed like a dream. Every time he woke up in that penthouse, Mikhail would be there like this, reading the newspaper while waiting for his coffee to brew to perfection. The whole room would be filled with the smell of espresso, and Mikhail would turn around, with his curls hanging disorderly over his face, smile at him and say…

“Good morning.” Alexei folded the paper roughly and placed it on the bar table.

“I suppose the Arbatovs have all been taught to wake up early,” Fei Long teased, trying his best to hide his smile as he sat down at the bar. He’d always considered himself a morning person, but somehow Mikhail seemed to wake up before him every time they’d spent a night together. And just like this, breakfast would be ready, as though the man knew exactly when he’d wake up. With Alexei, it had to be a coincidence, and the way his light brown curls fell over his face in all the right places must be a coincidence too.

“Not really,” Alexei replied, obviously in somewhat a worn out state. “I didn’t really sleep.”

Sleep. The word inevitably brought up an issue in Fei Long’s mind. The room fell into complete silence for a few seconds; he tried to decide whether to ask the question that mattered to him just as much as it was difficult to inquire. Somehow, Alexei understood and was giving him time to make a decision. “Did we…”

“No,” the answer came as readily as the playful smile on Alexei’s face. He was rather pleased with himself that, for once, he’d successfully read Fei Long’s mind.

The head of Baishe sighed in relief. In reality, it wouldn’t matter if he’d slept with Alexei for the third time; especially when the chance of him and Mikhail getting back together sounded like an idea too farfetched to even dream of. Still, it was something he hoped would not happen. For one reason, Alexei had become a good friend, and for another, he resembled too closely to his brother – one he should try his best to forget.
“Don’t sigh,” Alexei said as he lit himself a cigarette. “We can still have sex if you’re so disappointed.”

“Believe me, you don’t want to,” Fei Long replied with a faint smile on his face. He was done using someone else as a substitute for the man he couldn’t have, least of all Alexei.

It was meant to be a joke, but Alexei wasn’t laughing. Instead those green eyes looked straight at him in a way that they almost seemed insulted. “Don’t tell me what I want or don’t want to do.”

Taken aback by the reaction, Fei Long adjusted himself as he realized what those words implied. At that point, he knew everything was not to be taken lightly, and it was about time they had a real talk before going any further. “Well, what do you want?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No,” Fei Long replied firmly. Alexei needed to ask himself the right questions before even suggesting the idea that was, to him, an impossibility at that point.

“Do you want sex? Fun? A relationship? A friend? A lover?” he asked, staring back into those sharp eyes. “Which is it, and how prepared are you?”

Alexei sighed and ran his hand through the already ruffled curls of his hair. It was a difficult question to answer, even though he knew as much as Fei Long did that he must. He didn’t know what he wanted from Fei Long, nor had he thought of the consequences. All his actions had been based entirely on his desire of the moment, including this. The answer to that question would take more time for him to come up with, and he wasn’t the type to bother making up some beautiful lies to rectify his behavior.

“The truth is, I don’t know,” Alexei replied openly. “Last night, I just didn’t want to leave. I wanted to stay and see how you look in the morning. I want to know how you take your coffee, how you like your eggs, what you’re thinking when you bite your lower lip and narrow your eyes,” Alexei explained. Those words came easily as though they were something ordinary and simple. He didn’t sound overly sweet or try to back it up with a romantic gleam in his eyes. He was just being Alexei – somewhat insensitive and unquestionably blunt.

“And while I try to find out the reason I want to know all these things, instead of picking up some inexperienced boy toy for your sexual release while you figure out whose life you want to fuck up next, why don’t you take me out for a test drive and have yourself a real man who can perform?”

Fei Long sat quietly, listening to what had to be the most flattering confession he’d ever heard, especially when spoken so casually by a man who had not a shred of sensitivity or conscience. In a way, Alexei seemed almost like a child, and the way he sat there, messing up his hair even more with his fingers, was certainly adorable.

“Tea,” Fei Long said, trying not to smile as he continued to stare at those curls that must be as soft as Mikhail’s.

“I’m sorry?”

“I drink tea, not coffee,” he added. “I like my eggs over easy. And as for performance,” Fei Long paused as he rose from the stool and headed back towards the bedroom, turning around before he entered. “You should’ve seen first what your brother can do.”

“He’s that good, huh?”
Fei Long smiled, closed his eyes and purred. “You have absolutely no idea.” He had to shamelessly admit, having sex with Mikhail was one of the things he found most difficult to live without. “That said, I’m going to have myself a cold shower,” he murmured and noticed a brief smile on Alexei’s face as he left the room.

He closed the door and began to untie the belt of his silk robe as he headed for the shower. Something fell on the floor just before he took off the robe – something small and shiny. His heart sank as he realized it was the pendent Mikhail had given him – the one he’d refused to take off even now. He didn’t believe in fate or some mystical sign. But that day, the way the pendent fell, for the first time since he began wearing it, made him question his faith, or lack thereof.

As he knelt down to pick up the Love key, the sound of a helicopter approaching prompted him to turn to the window in alarm. Something wasn’t right. Hong Kong’s sky was always filled with helicopters, but never this close to a building.

The next thing he knew, the whole penthouse shook from the loud, deafening sound of machine guns coming from the direction of the living room. Someone had ordered a hit from the air, and it was moving fast towards him.

Without hesitation, Fei Long quickly grabbed the pendent and ran for cover. The floor-to-ceiling glass panels exploded one by one, the broken pieces shot at him like a storm of a thousand blades. He ran to hide behind the far side of the bed as bullets continued to shatter every piece of furniture in that room, destroying everything in sight and leaving no possibility of escape.

“Shit!” Fei Long swore as he realized he’d been shot in his left arm, in addition to the numerous cuts on his body from the shower of sharp, broken glass. He wiped off the blood that was dripping into his eyes and interfered with his vision. He needed all of his senses working, even when all he could do was wait for the attack to be over.

The helicopter flew past the bedroom, and for a moment, the firing stopped. But the sound of the rotor was still too loud, too close to the window.

“Son of a bitch!” Fei Long cursed as the same chopper returned for the second round of attack. Whoever ordered the hit meant to kill every living thing in that apartment. It was the first time someone had tried to kill him in his own personal space and with such madness. No one else would dare attack him this way in his own territory - no one but that arrogant prick Phillip Toh!

The attack lasted less than a minute, but it was enough to destroy everything in the penthouse that he cherished with all his heart. He stood up slowly when he was sure it was truly over. Gritting his teeth to the pain in his arm and the rage in his chest, he made his way through the broken glass with his bare feet towards the living room.

“Alexei,” Fei Long called before he realized he was still temporarily deaf from the sound of the machine guns. He held his breath as he looked around the room for any sign of the other man. But all he found was a trail of blood on the floor leading to the area behind the bar.

A sudden surge of mind-numbing pain hit him as a certain memory from the past projected itself on the wreckage of that penthouse. His blood turned cold and he could feel neither his fingers nor his toes as he stumbled across the living room. It had to be a dream. It must be! This must be his father’s house, and outside had to be dark, and raining.

“Alexei!” Fei Long called again, wishing that his own voice would wake him from the wretched dream. He was certain the broken glass that pierced through the soles of his feet was just a fragment of his imagination, and on the other side of that bar table, at the end of that blood trail, he
would find his father’s body.

Someone was kneeling on the floor next to a body, dressed in black from head to toe. For a moment, he thought it was the mythical figure he’d seen many times in the storybooks his father had bought him when he was little. Upon realizing his presence, the man quickly turned around and let out a long, heavy sigh of relief.

“You’re all right. Thank God.”

He didn’t know why, when or how Yoh had gotten into the penthouse. But the fact that he was there had slapped him back to reality. They were in Mikhail’s penthouse, it was still morning, and at Yoh’s feet laid the body of a man who was Mikhail’s only brother.

The expression on his face must have given away his question without him having to utter a word. It was Yoh, after all – someone who knew him better than anyone, and the one with the right expertise to answer such a question with absolute certainty.

“He was already dead when I came in.”

***

P.S. I know you want to kill me (or maybe not for those who hate Alexei), but this has been a very difficult decision for me to make, but necessary for the angst to come and for the future plot. I am the saddest one of all, in a way, since you know how much I love Alexei. I’ll miss writing him... a lot. He’ll always be in my heart, and I hope yours too.
Chapter 4

Title: Retribution Four
Rating: PG-13
Warning: Major angst
Characters: Fei Long, Yoh, Mikhail
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese and Polish translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

The air was slightly chilly, yet humid, that morning it had rained all night until the break of dawn. The stone-floor courtyard of the Toh Residence were full of puddles, some as deep as an inch, others shallow enough to get by without wetting one's shoes. In the middle stood a tall, well-built Chinese man in a brown kung fu outfit. To his left, right, and front stood three men dressed in black, with a red crane stitched on their chests. The man in the middle raised his arms up slowly in a smooth, controlled motion, taking a step back into a stance. His right arm reached forward as his left protected the body at chest level. With his feet dug firmly into the wet ground, he gave a signal for the match to begin with a firm flick of his right wrist.

His opponents took turns attacking, one by one at first, and then together as he had proven to be too fast and skilled to beat individually. Every advance was anticipated, and every blow was guarded by a perfect balance of strength and flexibility.

From a corner, Phillip Toh stood quietly in a plain white silk cheongsam with his arms behind his back, watching his guest’s combat training. The three men were among his best bodyguards, all of whom had been efficiently trained by a famous sifu he’d handpicked for them. Unfortunately, they’d proven themselves useless that morning. Liu Yan Tsui may not look like much, but his Wing Tsun skills had turned out to be surprisingly exceptional.

But he wondered…

Tugging up his sleeves, Phillip Toh approached the scene as quietly as a snake sneaking up on its prey. The first strike was a quick blow from his right arm that missed Yan Tsui’s neck by an inch, thanks to the man’s acute sense of reflex. The second, a sweeping kick aimed at dislodging the opponent from his balance, was successfully dodged. By that time, the bodyguards had halted their attacks and stepped aside as to not interfere with their master's training.

The match continued without a word or a moment of pause. Yan Tsui’s strikes turned quicker and deadlier than before, but every time they drew close, Toh slipped away effortlessly without so much as his silk being touched. The guest of the house spun around, drawing his leg in a circle before kicking up a good amount of water into the air to distract his opponent and move in for the kill. A small drop flew into Toh's eye, but the man didn’t blink. Yan Tsui aimed a deadly blow to
his opponent’s neck, but it was caught in midair. His arm was turned and twisted behind his back, just inches away from the point of breaking.

“Impressive,” Toh complimented with an approving nod as he released the other man’s wrist. After brushing away the water in his eye, he moved on to straightening his silk cheongsam. “Tell me, is your pathetic little brother as good as you are?”

Yan Tsui’s lips curled up into a sarcastic smile as he tried to steady his breath. “My brother’s technique is good, but he is as you’ve described, pathetic,” he replied. Fei Long had never been able to defeat him in combat not once, even when the man was quicker and more precise. *His mind is weak and confused,* their sifu once said, and he couldn't agree more. When it comes to Toh, who could defeat him in less than five minutes with one hand behind his back, Fei Long would never stand a chance. Up until then, there were many things Yan Tsui found annoying about Phillip Toh, but his Wing Tsun had to be on top of the list.

“I thought he was the family’s best assassin,” Toh asked, narrowing his hawk-like eyes as he judged the authenticity of that statement. Pride and prejudice were clearly Yan Tsui’s weaknesses, and as such one could never take his words as the whole truth. But there was something useful about such flaws it made the man relatively easy to control and manipulate.

“He was the best assassin,” Liu Yan Tsui confirmed with a sneer. “Surely you don’t expect me to get my hands dirty over a subordinate’s job.” As a true heir, he had been raised to rule. Fei Long, on the other hand, had been raised as their weapon a position the boy seemed content with, until that man came along and destroyed everything.

“Pity,” Toh replied with a look that disagreed with his word. “I would have loved to put that to the test.” The satisfaction of beating up that pretty face would have been something he remembered for life.

“You’ll get that chance soon enough,” Yan Tsui reminded him, shaking his right arm. The persistent throbbing pain told him that it would take a few days to heal completely. Phillip Toh may have the same feminine features as his brother, but to believe he was without venom would be a fatal mistake. The man was intelligent, manipulative and cold to the core. But in his coldness, one could sense a fire burning somewhere within as a source of energy he fed on and lived off. In a way, Toh was almost the decisive version of Fei Long the kind of man one would think twice before making an enemy.

“Oh, I doubt that,” Toh replied with a cunning smile.

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you heard?” The master of the house raised a brow. “Arbatov’s penthouse in Hong Kong was completely destroyed this morning while our little brother was in it, of course.”

Without thinking, Yan Tsui snatched a handful of the white, silk cheongsam and nearly lifted the slender man off his feet. “What did you do?” he scowled.

“Giving you back what belongs to you,” Toh replied calmly as he looked at the crease that began to form on his chest in disapproval. “And you will remove your hand before I decide it does not.”

“He was to be captured unharmed. That was the plan!” Yan Tsui reminded with a voice that grew louder by the minute. He'd never wanted Fei Long to die, and Toh had promised to bring in his brother alive. He wouldn't have agreed to cooperate with the plan otherwise.
Toh grabbed the other man's wrist and, without further warning, twisted it clear off his cheongsam, earning a low groan from the older Liu brother. “It would be wise for you to remember that your obsession with my bastard brother is not my priority, nor is your safety.”

As the tension grew, a servant girl interrupted them with urgent news. She bowed quickly and offered the white envelope in her hand to Toh. “Lao Ban, a message for you.”

Brushing away the crease on his cheongsam as though it had been tainted, Toh took the envelope and read its short and efficient content quietly before he handed it back to the girl. “Pathetic as he may be, our little brother has proven hard to kill,” Toh said with the same expression he had a few seconds ago—one of annoyance. Surprisingly, there wasn’t much disappointment on Toh’s face, only a trace of displeasure shown by the slight tightening of his lips. In a way, Toh had a hunch he would not succeed so easily, and somehow he felt relieved that the task remained a challenge. It seemed whatever mercy he had at the time he decided to give his bastard brother a quick and painless death didn’t quite agree with fate after all. However, he couldn’t really say the attack was a total loss. “It looks like I’ve killed an Arbatov instead. How unfortunate.”

Yan Tsui could hear himself sigh in relief. Fei Long was still alive. He would still get a chance to have that boy back where he belongs by his side, obeying his every command the way it used to be. Still, he couldn’t help having a bad feeling in his stomach over the latter news. “Your madness has created an enemy bigger than you can handle,” Yan told him in concern. To have both Baishe and the Russian mafia on his back seemed like a perfect plan for suicide. The death of an Arbatov will send the Russians hunting to the ends of the earth for vengeance.

“Ah, but you forgot to ask the most important question of all,” Toh said with a grin, his tone resembled the hissing of a venomous snake. “What was he doing there with the wrong Arbatov?”

Yan Tsui paused for a few seconds as he realized the back up plan his host seemed to have had all along. Toh knew exactly what to do in the case that he failed even before ordering the attack. Fei Long’s relationship with Mikhail Arbatov had never been much of a secret. The answer to that question does change everything. “You knew they would be there together.”

“I knew indeed,” Toh replied, narrowing his eyes as a victorious grin appeared on his lips. When he knew Mikhail had put his penthouse up for sale, he’d made sure it would fall into his hands even when it required a great effort in keeping himself anonymous. The penthouse was meant to be used in favor of future negotiations with the Arbatovs. It just so happened that the place turned out to be of more importance to Fei Long. As soon as the news of the Baishe leader returning to the apartment to spend a night had reached him, he’d made sure he could see and hear everything that happen in that place before putting it back on the market as bait. Fortunately, it was Alexei Arbatov who took the offer. The attack was possible because he knew exactly where they were and what happened that night. “Alexei Arbatov died having spent a night with Fei Long in his brother’s old penthouse. If that isn’t enough to sever the ties between the two organizations permanently, I’m sure my evidence will be quite persuasive.”

“It is Vladimir Arbatov who runs the family, not his son,” Yan Tsui reminded. From what his late father told him, that old man was never to be trusted, and the Arbatovs rarely do the conventional.

“Vladimir has a serious heart condition,” Toh explained, rubbing the tip of his index finger along his lips as he revealed his plans further. “The news of his son’s death will most likely give him a stroke, and should he survive, he would be crippled on a hospital bed long enough for his enemies at home to take an advantage of the situation. Our brother’s handsome knight, whether or not he severs the ties with Baishe, would be forced to return to Russia and stay until things quiet down, giving us the opportunity to do as we see fit with Baishe.”
“Fei Long will be easy to break,” Yan Tsui said thoughtfully. His little brother had never been able to handle emotional distress well. Phillip Toh certainly did his homework, knowing exactly how to rip Fei Long of his wings and where to strike. Soon enough he would have it all back — Baishe, his family’s fortune, the power above all of Hong Kong, and, yes, Fei Long.

***

The room felt stuffy and smelled of blood and alcohol — the same smell that made his stomach turn just weeks ago when he was being interrogated in that small room five floors down from where he was now. Yoh closed his eyes, held his breath and looked up from the tile he’d fixed his gaze upon for the last ten minutes just to avoid looking at the scene in front of him.

An hour ago he’d helped his former boss back to Baishe to avoid the media. Unfortunately, the police had arrived at the scene sooner than he’d anticipated and had put them down as witnesses to the crime. Knowing who Fei Long was, the cops had allowed them to return to Baishe to tend to his injury on the condition that he would be questioned as soon as they’d finished with the crime scene. As they left, Fei Long didn’t say a word or made a sound. He didn’t ask why or how Yoh was there. The only thing he said was, “No,” when the men at Baishe pointed their guns at the traitor and tried to shoot him on the spot. What one word did for some, the hand that refused to let go of the traitor’s sleeve did for others. He didn’t know if Fei Long had done what he did consciously, or whether the man knew who he’d dragged with him into the room where his wounds were to be tended. None of it mattered to Yoh. He knew he had to stay, especially when the real nightmare begins.

Fei Long was sitting on a couch on the opposite side of the room, still in the black silk robe, facing him but not looking at him. His eyes were lost somewhere in the palms of his hands covered in blood, Alexei’s blood, that had begun to clot. Fei Long had held on to the corpse, shaking it over and over again, convinced that his soul would return. But there were no words from Alexei, and Fei Long kept on trying as though there were more to death than losing life. In a way, it was true. Death has consequences that change everything and everyone, and a piece of that evidence was sitting in front of him.

"No," Fei Long said as the doctor tried to give him a shot of anesthetic in order to remove the bullet from his arm.

"Laoban, it will hurt," the old man objected. His eyes were full of concern, his expression demonstrated clearly the meaning of his last word.

"No," Fei Long repeated. It was the only word he'd spoken since the incident.

Not knowing what to do, the doctor turned to Yoh for a decision. A traitor he still was, but if there was one person in the compound who would know Fei Long’s will beyond what he says, it was Yoh. It was the truth that made the men loath him more than the others of his kind. Anyone can betray Liu Fei Long of Baishe, just not him.

Yoh looked at Fei Long then turned to the doctor and nodded. There were times back in jail when he saw Fei Long take his beatings as though they were some kind of drug. Sometimes he did it to feel awake, other times he welcomed it as punishment. He remembered how Fei Long had once spoken of being beaten in his childhood as a mean of discipline. It seemed ever since Liu senior had passed away, Fei Long had taken the role of his father upon himself to punish each and every wrong he'd done. Yoh thought that perhaps it was to remember his father, or perhaps it was the only way he knew how to live.

A short cry escaped Fei Long’s tightly gritted teeth as the doctor tried to find the bullet that buried
itself deep in his flesh. Fei Long's hand was on his thigh, his fingers dug deep into his skin to take away some of the pain by inflicting it on himself elsewhere. It did hurt, and only Yoh knew the rejection of anesthetic wasn't an attempt to act tough. Fei Long needed to feel pain. Somewhere on his face that twisted in agony one could see satisfaction. Yoh had been there long enough to know the Baishe leader was the kind of man who could not move on without being properly punished for his mistakes. He also knew that this time, the punishment would not be brief.

Another loud groan caused the doctor to bite his lower lip as he tried to take hold of the bullet. Knowing that the only way to stop this self-torture was to end the procedure as soon as possible, the old man kept on working. As for Yoh, a part of him wished it would prolong a little more than necessary. Being who he was, Fei Long would never allow himself to express his feelings openly, no matter how painful. He was one of those people who had to find an excuse to express pain. Somehow, hearing him cry and groan felt strangely deliberating. Fei Long seemed to know this as well as evidently he didn't make an effort to keep it in.

_Hell._ The word suddenly appeared in Yoh's mind. When they were in prison someone had asked Fei Long why he had chosen to stay in this hellhole when, with all his power and money, he could have gotten out anytime he wished. “This isn’t hell,” Fei Long told the man with a smile. “I have been in hell since the day I was born.” There wasn't a day in his life that he’d forgotten the expression on Fei Long's face when he answered that question. Hell was where the Baishe leader dwelled. Hell was the expression written on his face the day Alexei Arbatov died.

In the end, the doctor had removed a bullet from his arm and pulled out thirteen pieces of broken glass from the soles of his feet. The wounds were not deep, just numerous, and he would be able to walk without pain in a few days. For now, the men at Baishe had allowed Yoh to stay on the premises to tend to the boss' needs. Fei Long had left them no choice but to turn a blind eye to his injuries, not even Tao. Yoh thought perhaps because he was there also that Fei Long had seen him as an accomplice to whatever crime he thought he'd committed. Or perhaps he just needed someone who knew what he wanted without being told, so he doesn't have to speak. Whatever it was, Yoh knew he had to stay. The men seemed to understand it too, even though they weren't so secretive about wanting to shoot him between the eyes when all this was over.

The police had been kept away as an order from a certain powerful figure on Fei Long's list of allies. The head of Baishe was not to be disturbed until his injuries became manageable. The doctor had slipped a sleeping pill in the boss' tea as per Yoh's request. Whether or not he was disturbed, he knew Fei Long would not allow himself the luxury of sleep. To Yoh's relief, the pill seemed to work. Fei Long had slept through the night and woke up just before noon. He still didn't say a word, and after a couple of hours of being lost in his own thoughts he turned to look at Yoh for the first time.

"I want to see Alexei," Fei Long told him in a tone that left no room for discussion.

Yoh simply nodded and left to arrange for it. There was no use arguing with Fei Long when he had that expression on his face. Whether or not he complied, the head of Baishe would find a way to drag himself to where Alexei’s corpse was, even with thirteen fresh wounds on his feet.

It turns out Alexei's body had been held in the hospital's morgue, waiting to be identified by the next of kin, who was not in the country. With some persuasion from Baishe's personnel, they had promised to allow Fei Long an off-the-record visit. Once more the Baishe leader was in a wheelchair, a sight that made Tao’s swollen eyes tear up again as he was told to wait at headquarters.
The helicopter reached the hospital just after twelve, but they weren’t alone. There were two choppers already on the helipad. Fortunately, Fei Long didn't seem to notice the writings on the sides that bothered Yoh enough to cause his expression to change. The wise thing to do was to convince Fei Long to turn around and do this some other time, but he knew it would never happen, even if he’d begged on his knees.

The elevator opened and Yoh rolled out the wheelchair into the corridor with an uneasy feeling in his stomach. There were whispers, numerous enough to be heard as they began to turn the corner and ran into a small crowd gathering in the hallway. He didn't mistake the crest on the choppers’ doors—the Russians had arrived.

There was a woman among them, beautiful and slender, dressed in black from head to toe. She turned around and paused for a moment as she saw them, her eyes flashed a murderous rage enough to make Yoh reach inside his jacket for his gun. The look on her face told him she was ready to kill them with her bare hands, and something told him that she could. He didn't recognize her at first, but as she drew near he recalled seeing her in a photograph a few times. It was Mikhail Arbatov's wife—the child Vladimir Arbatov had taken into the family some twenty years ago.

Feodora strode down the hallway with long, heavy steps, her heels clicked mercilessly on the hard, cold floor. She stopped in front of them, took off her lambskin leather gloves and, without a word spoken, slapped the head of Baishe across his cheek that was aimed at inflicting disgrace rather than pain. There wasn't a man Yoh knew who would dare treat Liu Fei Long that way, much less a woman. But then Feodora was someone who was born into an equally powerful family and raised among the Arbatov children as one of their own. The fact that her enemy was in a wheelchair and badly injured made no difference. The Russians show no mercy—no even if their enemy was in a coma and lying on his deathbed.

"Leave," she demanded. Her tone was as hostile as her action, her teeth gritted so hard her jaws ached. How dare he show himself in this place after what happened! She would have this man out of her life and away from her family, even if she had to gun him down herself. "You are not welcome here!"

"I must see Alexei," Fei Long said without a change in expression. Feodora's feelings would not make him change his mind, nor the way she looked at him, like he was some kind of parasite. What made a difference, however, was the fact that she was there at all. The meaning of her presence had made his heart race and his breathing quicken. Fei Long's eyes couldn't help but wander past Feodora's shoulder to the group of men in the corridor, searching for a figure that didn't seem to be among them. He had hoped...

"How dare you?" Feodora questioned, her body shook in fury as tears pooled in her eyes. "When will you be satisfied? Our brother is dead because of you, and God knows what will happen to Vladimir when he hears of this news!" Her voice grew louder as she continued to pour out her hatred. She no longer had it in her to hold back her feelings. Alexei was her brother as well everything in her life was falling apart because of this man. "You destroy everything you touch! My husband is a wreck and is back on drugs because of you. I will not have you here causing more damage than you've already done, you..."

"Feodora." A low, baritone voice echoed from the hallway leading to the elevator. It was a voice Fei Long knew by heart, but its tone was harsh enough to drain the colors completely from Feodora's cheeks. "Enough." The latter, said in a razor sharp tone and as loud as thunder, was spoken as the last warning. It did work, for Feodora quickly adjusted herself and wiped the tears from her face as though she was in the presence of someone she respected and feared. The man she saw behind Liu Fei Long and his bodyguard was not her friend, her brother, or her husband, but a
man who stood at the top of the Russian underworld one who must be obeyed.

The same voice that silenced Feodora made Fei Long stiffen, and for a moment he could not feel his limbs. Mikhail was standing right behind him, no more than a few steps away, and yet he didn't have the courage to turn around and look. But what difference would it make? Mikhail was there to collect his brother's body, and Fei Long was the last person in the world he wanted to see. It would have taken a stupid man to miss the hostility that hung heavily in the air.

The sound of Mikhail's slow, heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway as he proceeded towards the morgue. Fei Long could smell the familiar scent of aftershave he had come to love as he moved closer and walked right by him without so much as a glance in his direction. He traced his eyes along the outline of those strong shoulders he once admired and realized at once that Feodora's words were true. Mikhail had lost a generous amount of weight, and even those golden curls seemed to have gone dull and unruly. Fei Long wondered if it was just the drugs that affected him so much, or was it Alexei's death that changed him so dramatically. Whatever the reason, the picture he saw in front of him was a sight he would not forget easily.

Fei Long watched quietly as Mikhail disappeared into the waiting room with his subordinates, followed closely by Feodora. A few minutes later some of the bodyguards were dismissed and ordered to wait elsewhere, while one approached him and brought a message that he could see Alexei after they'd finished identifying the body, and that the boss would like to have a word with him when it was over a proposition that Fei Long accepted.

They were taken to a waiting room next to the room that housed Alexei's body. Three bodyguards still remained in that room, waiting for their boss and his wife to finish the procedure. For two hours Mikhail had stayed there, long after the hospital staff and the police had left. Through the glass panel and the gap between the curtains, Fei Long could see Feodora standing near the door, crying quietly in the corner. In the middle of the room, Mikhail sat on a stool next to the bed and stared at Alexei's body, still as a statue. There was no rage, no tears, not even grief on his face. Mikhail stared as if he didn't feel anything, or, perhaps he couldn't feel anything. Somehow, even with Feodora there with him, the man in that room seemed so far away and alone. Mikhail had retreated into a place where no one was allowed to enter. Feodora seemed to understand this and kept a distance. It seemed that the only way out was to have Alexei come back to life. But life is never that kind, and miracles never happen to people like them.

The sound of the doorknob turning stung like a death sentence. All of a sudden the air seemed stuffy. Mikhail stepped out into the waiting room with Feodora, prompting the bodyguards to rise to their feet and assume position. The Russian lit himself a smoke, a common white one that lacked the smooth, well-bodied fragrance of his usual black and gold cigarette. Pausing a moment to fill his lungs with the toxic smoke, he turned to the Baishe leader with an expression of a man facing a complete stranger.

"As of now my father doesn't know about this," Mikhail said in a firm and rigid tone, pausing in between to take another puff on his cigarette. "We've done everything in our power to keep it off the news until I return with Alexei's body and can tell him in person. I would appreciate it if you cooperate, as a gesture of compassion."

"A gesture of compassion," Fei Long thought. He would have answered it with a sneer if the damn words didn't hurt so much. At that point all he could do was nod, and it seemed that was exactly what Mikhail wanted him to do listen and nod.

"I've also been informed that my brother has given you the deed to my penthouse," he continued, his blue eyes were blank and had turned almost grey. "I would like it returned to me. My assistant
"The deed will be on your desk by tomorrow morning," Fei Long replied readily, *as a gesture of compassion*. He had hoped for many things in the event that they did see each other again – a word of hello, or maybe a smile that didn't have to be directed at him. But now that they were standing just a few steps away from each other, Mikhail had seen to it that the promise of never seeing or hearing from him again was fulfilled. In front of him stood a man whose eyes showed only a reflection of Liu Fei Long of Baishe, and not a glimpse of the man he once held in his arms with unfathomable affection. In that moment, Fei Long knew everything they once had no matter how deep and profound had been lost. Still, he owed this man more than he could ever hope to repay. "If there's anything else we can do..."

"This is our war," Mikhail cut in before Fei Long could finish the sentence. "I will have no interference from Baishe and ask that you stay out of this as much as you can. Do we understand each other, Liu sìn sàang*?"

Fei Long closed his eyes and tried to swallow what had to be the final and deliberate strike at whatever hope he had left for them. He couldn't say he didn't see it coming, but he'd never thought Mikhail would go so far as to deny him the privilege of being called by his name. *Liu sìn sàang*. No words had ever hurt so much or cut so deep. Mikhail knew how to strike just as well as how to win him over. One day the memories of the latter would also fade, and all that remained would be scars.

"We understand each other perfectly," Fei Long replied firmly with a faint smile.

Once upon a time they knew each other, and that is where it ends.

-----------------

*sìn sàang - Mister*
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Some parts of this chapter has been rewritten and modified to save your sanity from my junk after it has been beta-ed. Any grammatical mistakes are my stupidity alone and has nothing to do with my poor beta. I just don't want to overwork her on this ^^! And my apologies if it still sucks. I must have rewritten this about 5 times. I can't do this anymore. T_T It's a very difficult chapter for me.

Title: Retribution Five
Rating: NC-17
Warning: Descriptive rape scene (and not of yaoi style), major angst
Characters: Fei Long, Yoh, Mikhail, Feodora
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese and Polish translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Some parts of this chapter has been rewritten and modified to save your sanity from my junk after it has been beta-ed. Any grammatical mistakes are my stupidity alone and has nothing to do with my poor beta. I just don't want to overwork her on this ^^! And my apologies if it still sucks. I must have rewritten this about 5 times. I can't do this anymore. T_T It's a very difficult chapter for me.

The ride home was long and quiet despite the deafening sound of the helicopter’s engine. Seated behind the pilot, Mikhail stared blankly out of the window. Ever since the news of Alexei’s death there had been few words spoken from Mikhail Arbatov, all of them lacking emotion. The only times he spoke was to issue a command and each time it would give the men a jolt. The tension within the organization had grown to the point that allowed no one to breathe freely. It was one of those events that affected everyone and changed everything. Feodora could see the anxiety written clearly on the men’s faces as they looked to their boss for a decision. Even then, Mikhail had not made any significant moves nor revealed the slightest hint of his plans. From the moment he'd learned of his brother's death, her husband had disconnected himself from everyone, including her. He sat through the long flight from Russia without a word spoken and barely moved from his seat. There had been no tears, no anger, nothing, just the same blank expression that was suffocating everyone around him.

The helicopter landed twenty minutes later at the Arbatov villa in Macau. Mikhail stepped out and headed towards the house, his pace quick and hurried, leaving a trail of bodyguards behind him. With every step he could feel a certain craving, a thirst, or perhaps hunger that needed to be fulfilled. His heart was beating violently, as though someone was punching his chest from the
inside. Many times a day his brain would manifest several flashes of events. Sometimes it was something that had happened in the past, other times it must have been his pure imagination. Lately, he could hardly tell the difference. But these visions had been far apart and blurry, only after the moment he saw that face was when they'd become increasingly frequent and as clear as day.

*Stop*, he said to himself as the flashes occurred again. There he was, Fei Long smiling at him, or was it at Alexei? He closed his eyes and tried to blink the vision away. The images were gone for a second, and then it was replaced with that of Alexei lying in his own blood.

*Stop.*

He hurried inside as the sharp pain in his chest grew stronger. He needed something, anything, to keep these flashes under control. It wasn't clear to him which room he'd rushed into, nor did he care. His hands were trembling as he searched through the drawers, yanking them down and scattering their contents on the floor. There had to be something around he could use, something quick and strong, before the flashes come back again.

‘*Do what you want, he's not my problem anymore.*’

Did he say those words to Alexei, or was it just another manifestation? Did he give his brother the permission to go after his lover? Did he ... *Stop.* He shook away the thought before he could finish the dreadful question, hurling yet another drawer off the cabinet in hope that it would distract him from these visions and flashbacks. He couldn't care less if they were real. *Just fucking stop.*

When there were no more drawers to search, he turned to the bar and grabbed the first bottle he could get his hands on. The lid sliced open the palm of his hand as he struggled to open the drink. Infuriated, he cursed at the pain and the open wound before he gulped down the liquor as if it was water. When he realized it wasn't working as fast or as well as he'd hoped, the bottle went flying across the room and landed on the wall near the entrance.

Under the door, Feodora stood as still as a rock, staring at the broken glass at her feet and the content that spilled onto her clothes. Mikhail was in one of those moods again, when there was something happening in his head that he felt the need to respond with an outburst of violence. It had been occurring more and more often lately, but that day she could almost predicted it considering who they'd just ran into at the hospital.

She made herself look up at him even though she was afraid to look. By the bar, Mikhail stood with his hands on the table to support his weight, his chest heaved up and down as a sign of his heavy breathing. He stared at her from across the room like a wolf marking it's prey, his blue eyes turned a frightening silver. It gave her a chill running down her spine but she managed to ignore it and moved towards him. *I am not afraid of him,* was what she kept repeating to herself. After all, she had known him for over twenty years. Yet at the same time she couldn't help questioning her own words. For one thing, the look in those eyes was of a stranger, for another, Mikhail had been on drugs and his rationality had been somewhat impaired.

She did manage to make her way to where he stood. Holding her breath to keep her anxiety in check, she reached out to touch his cheek. "Talk to me," she said. "Let me help you." The truth was, at that moment, she wasn’t entirely sure if it would lead to him crying on her shoulder or beating her until she bled out whatever pain he was holding inside. For the past few weeks Mikhail had been increasingly violent, and she had taken it as the only way he could release some of the anger. Most of the time, it was a half-conscious reflex. But it was those few events that frightened
her the most, when he was fully aware and would not stop until he could put a bullet into someone’s head. As a result she had grown increasingly fearful of his unpredictable state of mind. But there was no one else to rescue him from this hell he’d thrown himself into. No one to put an end to this madness.

He looked at her quietly, tracing the outlines of her face as if he had never seen it before. Slowly, he raised his hand to her cheek and began to caress it, softly at the beginning and growing harder at each stroke. There was something in his eyes that she could not make out then - something that gave her an uneasy feeling in her stomach. Ever since he came home, Mikhail hadn't touch her in that fashion, not once. When he needed sexual release, he’d go look for someone easy and eager to be his whore, but never her. She was his wife only in name, but his regard to her as a friend had not changed - at least while he was conscious. But as much as she longed for him to touch her again like he used to, the way his hand caressed her cheek then was more frightening than affectionate. She could feel the anger rising inside him as the hand on her cheek became more and more forceful to the point of being brutal. She whimpered as he tugged at her hair, securing her in place with his iron grip. It was then that she realized something was wrong.

"Be quiet," he whispered sharply against her cheek as if he could read her thoughts, his voice as cold as a murderer threatening to cut her throat if she disobeyed. The way he looked at her made her limbs frozen and stiff. She bit her lower lip as he began to undo the buttons of her shirt. It all happened slowly, but there was something sadistic about the way he moved. He undressed her as if he was carving away the flesh of his victim, and every time his fingers touched her skin it felt like a blunt blade being dragged across her body.

"Please... don’t," she begged, her voice trembled at the thought of what was going through his mind. Deep down, she knew exactly what he was about to do - something she couldn’t and wouldn’t forgive.

"I said be quiet," he repeated as he jerked her hair more violently, making sure she'd heard him this time around. At that moment she knew, the man in front of her was indeed a stranger. And as she looked at him again, she realized the reflection in those cold, vicious eyes was an image of someone else - someone she knew and despised with all her heart.

“Get away from me!” In an instant, anger and detestation overcame her fear. She threw a punch at his face and struggled to break free. She would not allow herself to be used as a whore, much less a substitute for that man.

But all it did was added fire to his fury. He grabbed her arm with the force that made her yelp in pain and spun her around onto the table violently, holding her down by the back of her neck. Her cheek slammed so hard against the cold marble of the tabletop she could feel her skin crack opened. She shut her eyes and bit down her lower lip as she heard him undo his belt buckle. This is it, she thought, this is the moment of shame she would have to live with for the rest of her life - when the last remaining bit of her pride gets stripped away from her, never to be restored.

He slid his hand under her skirt and pulled down her underwear, ripping them apart in one forceful tug. The sudden movement made her jerk up from the bar whimpered. He shoved her head down again, this time she could taste blood seeped from her lips. When he entered her, she didn’t make a sound, only her shallow, constricted breathing escaped her tightly gritted teeth. Be quiet, she remembered his warning. A part of her wanted to scream, the other told her he would make her pay if she did. She didn’t make the right sound, didn’t have the right voice, and hearing it would bring him back to the reality that he loathed with every inch of his skin. The evidence of it was right in front of her, in the mirror behind the bar. There was no pleasure on Mikhail’s face, only the agony of a failed attempt at escaping the nightmare that was catching up with him.
Hold on, she told herself again and again. *It will soon be over.* But every time he thrust into her the word ‘soon’ seemed like an eternity. Sometimes it would seemed that he didn’t feel much, other times it appeared something in his mind was driving him to slam harder into her, as if doing so was going to make it go away. What frightened her the most was the fact that it wasn’t really a sexual release that he wanted, but the need to inflict his pain onto someone else. In a way it almost felt like punishment, and whether it was meant to be upon her, himself, or the person she was substituting for, Mikhail held nothing back. By the time he was done, her lips were bruised and bleeding from being smashed repeatedly on the table and her neck ached enough to make her whimper every time she tried to move.

She waited until he’d stepped away before she pushed herself up from the bar. For the first time in her life her limbs felt heavy and weak, and she lost her footing as she tried to stand up straight. When she’d managed to hold herself upright, she could feel his semen dripping down the inside of her thigh. The smell of it mixed with her own blood made her nauseous, but she forced herself to swallow it back down her throat. Even then, she’d hoped that when it was over Mikhail would come back to his senses and there would be a look of guilt in his eyes, as was always the case when his temper had gotten the better of him. But that day it didn't happen - the expression on his face hadn’t changed. His eyes were still blank and empty when he poured himself another drink and lit a cigarette as if nothing had happened. Yet, there was a trace of frustration on his lips that showed he was far from fulfilled. Feodora looked at him, now with eyes full of hatred. She was no fool- she knew exactly why he did what he did, and who it was Mikhail thought he was fucking as he slammed into her a few minutes ago. The only thing about it that gave her a little satisfaction was the fact that Mikhail didn’t do it out of desire for that man- it was out of spite.

Gathering what little strength she had left in her, Feodora turned to face him, adjusting her dress and wiping away the blood and tears on her face as he continued to watch in silence. When her breathing became more stable, she lifted her chin and slapped him across his face. She couldn’t care less if he would decide to strangle her now. All it would do was put an end to her misery. “I’m not your whore,” she spoke loud and clear to make sure the words were understood. What he did that day would stay with her like a plaque in her memory. She would never get over the fact that in the end, she’d turned out to be nothing more than one of those women he’d pissed upon before moving on to someone else. For a moment she wondered if he would ever do this to Fei Long. She wanted to ask if he’d seen this side of Mikhail- the monster he had created. She decided that she wished he would, and when it happens, she’d be there to witness it.

Mikhail didn’t care to answer her outburst. Instead, he took a puff on the cigarette and blew smoke in her face with the same absent look in his eyes. It was just noise to him. Everything was.

She reached over for the pack of Marlboro he kept inside his jacket and lit herself one. Drawing a breath from the cigarette, she showed a hint of detestation to the taste in her mouth. It was apparent Mikhail no longer cared what he put in his mouth or injected into veins. Looking in the mirror, she came to realize the resemblance in their reflection. They were the same now more than ever-damaged and broken beyond repair. Her pride, her husband’s sanity, and Alexei’s life, all of it stripped away from them because of one man.

*You will not take one more thing from me,* she swore to herself. Now was not the time to break, not when everything was at stake. They had to pull themselves together, whatever it took. She had been through worse things in her life at a much younger age and if she could survive it then, she told herself she can survive this now.

"Have you checked the background of Alexei’s men?” she asked, adjusting her voice so that it sounded as normal as she could, even though her lips seeped blood and her hands still trembled.
One of the things Vladimir Arbatov had taught her was to never feel sorry for herself. *You will lose sight of your enemy, and then you will lose everything,* he told her on the day of her family’s funeral twenty years ago. They still had enemies, and she still had something to lose.

Mikhail moved to sit down on a couch with his legs crossed and his head tilted back towards the ceiling. "No," he replied in almost a sigh. He was too tired to think about those details.

"Who do we trust?"

"No one you don't know," he said irritatively, closing his eyes for a moment before forcing them open again. He knew just as much as she did that some things had to be done quickly, and in a way, it would keep him busy enough to avoid some of the thoughts that had been keeping him awake at night.

"Are you going to do the cleaning or am I?" she asked in a tone that was strictly business. Information had been leaking, and that leak had to be dealt with as soon as possible if they still wanted to keep things under control.

"Someone will have to take over Macau while I'm gone," he explained. It would have to be soon before his father learned the truth about Alexei from someone else. "Can you manage?"

Feodora gave him an offended sneer as she took her time breathing out the cigarette smoke. "Can I? The last time I checked Vladimir Arbatov raised me as he did his sons, if not better." Her foster parent had taught her everything he taught his children and put her through all the same classes and training, most of which she’d finished with higher scores than the boys. Can she manage Macau? She’d been Vladimir Arbatov’s right hand since Mikhail left and Alexei decided to be unemployed for five straight years.

Mikhail nodded in acknowledgement. He knew she was capable, but he had to check whether she was up for it. "Under the bar and on your right," he told her, pointing at the spot with the burning cigarette in his hand.

Feodora reached under until she felt the cold metal on her fingertips and tugged it free from the holder. She placed the gun on the table.

"Can you still shoot?"

Her answer came readily enough as the glass he’d placed on the nearby coffee table exploded. Mikhail turned to look at it briefly, then turned back to her and nodded. "Good," he said and rose from the couch to pour himself another drink. "I will have Dmitri send you the list of Alexei’s men. Line them up in the courtyard tomorrow morning. Pick two, and shoot them," he told her. It will give her the authority she needed in a short period of time.

"And the rest of the moles?" she asked, tracing her eyes along her husband’s facial structure that had become more prominent lately. Mikhail seemed dehydrated and tired, and she knew that he hadn’t slept since the news of Alexei’s death had reached him. There were also more needle wounds on his arms since they’d left Moscow- ones that she secretly peeked at when he changed his clothes. She wondered which drug he had been using and how much, but asking him was simply not a possibility. She’d promised herself to go through his belongings to find the stash later. But considering what just happened, she wondered if she would ever worked up the courage to interfere. And if she ever does, she asked herself if she would be able to survive him.

"How you kill them is your choice," he replied, sipping his drink in between. "Depending on how things are, I will return as soon as I can to deal with whoever ordered the attack. Meanwhile, try to
gather information and keep things together. You will have access to all my accounts. Confide in no one, not even Dmitri."

She nodded slightly. “When will you leave?”

“When you’re ready,” Mikhail replied, his eyes grew increasingly fatigued.

“Give me three days,” she told him. It wasn’t Macau she was worried about, but what would happen back home. Mikhail had intended to take Alexei’s body back to Moscow on his own. Looking at the state he was in, she wasn’t sure how long he could hold it together. In fact she wasn’t sure how he would make it through another day. It wouldn’t matter how many times he abused her or how much heroin he took. Mikhail needed something else that would give him the will to break through this loss before it’s too late. In her mind were questions that kept eating away her strength: What if he overdosed? What if they lose Vladimir too? Is she supposed to go through it all over again? It seemed to her that the real nightmare had yet to begin, and still, there was nothing she could do to stop it. She had three days to settle into Macau and to make sure that Mikhail would go back to Russia as a different man than the one sitting in front of her that day, or everything would be lost.

***

The Baishe headquarters had become increasingly noisy with whispers and gossips that were heard on every floor. Some were furious about the attack on the boss, some questioned the way it happened, but most had a thing or two to say about a traitor being admitted back into the compound. Yoh couldn’t care less about what they said. As always, he did what he had to do, with or without permission.

It had been three days since the attack, and Fei Long had locked himself in his room most of the time. The reaction was quite normal considering what he’d just been through, but Fei Long wasn’t a normal person in any way nor was he allowed such a privilege. Unless he starts making moves, things were about to get ugly. The incident at the hospital would soon be heard by all, and this feud between Baishe and Arbatov would be a golden opportunity for many to step up and take action. As far as Yoh was concerned, Fei Long was not prepared to deal with yet another threat to the organization. The man didn’t have time to grieve, no matter how much he needed it.

He stood in front of the door to Fei Long’s quarters and knocked. When there wasn’t an answer, as there had not been for the last few days, he opened it without permission. Fei Long was sitting exactly where Yoh had left him that morning, in the dark, by the window. The Baishe leader held a piece of gold jewelry he’d saved from the penthouse- the pendant he always wore that now appeared to be a burden. Many times Fei Long would stare at it as though it was something he must get rid of, other times his hand would close around it so tightly it would be impossible to pry his fingers open. He could see it clearly on Fei Long’s face- the agony of choosing between what must be done and what one's heart desired. He understood it more than he wanted to, and perhaps that was one of the reasons why Fei Long had allowed him to be there.

Yoh moved quietly towards the Baishe leader and placed a small object on the table next to him. “I found this at the penthouse,” he explained. “Among a few dozens others.”

Fei Long looked up from the Love Key and glanced at what seemed to be a small microphone.

“It was bugged?” he asked in a tone that showed he already knew the answer. It made perfect sense, after all. How else would they have known when and where to launch the attack so
precisely? For a short moment there was anger on his face, and then it slipped away behind the mask of indifference he'd been wearing since they'd returned from the hospital.

“The question is, by whom?” Yoh said in a riddle. In truth, it was something he could have found out on his own, but this was something that Fei Long had to act upon by himself, for himself.

“What difference does it make?” the Baishe leader replied with a sarcastic smile. “I’m not supposed to interfere.” Mikhail had made it clear, and he’d given his promise. Because of him Alexei had died. If only he’d let the penthouse go. If only he didn’t invite Alexi up for a drink. If...

“Since when have you become such an obedient puppy?” Yoh said with his usual, expressionless face, even though the words were potent enough to interrupt his thoughts and made Fei Long glare at him in a mixture of disbelief and irritation.

"You will watch your mouth when you speak to me," Fei Long warned. It wasn’t everyday that someone would dare call him a puppy, much less his subordinate- or even an ex-subordinate. The man had crossed the line and must be put back in his place.

"In case you forgot, I no longer work for you," Yoh responded and lit himself a cigarette, knowing it would infuriate the man even further. Smoking was something Fei Long had strictly forbidden his subordinates to do in his presence. Yoh had learned such a trick back in prison. No matter what state he was in, Liu Fei Long of Baishe was never one to stand for insults. "But I'm here to help you and it requires listening to whatever I have to say."

Fei Long closed his eyes and tried to control his temper. He'd always known the stubborn streak of Yoh's personality, but until then it had been somewhat contained, being his subordinate. For the past few days the man had been quiet and would speak only when spoken to. However, on this day it would seem Yoh had had enough of silence. "Why are you here?" Fei Long asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. In the past few days he wasn’t in the mood to ask about the oddity of Yoh's appearance, but today it was time he found out. "Who sent you?"

"Someone sent me, yes," Yoh replied, pausing to take a puff on the cigarette before he continued. "But it's not Asami Ryuichi, if that's who you think it is." After all this time and all that had happened, it seemed the Japanese man still lingered somewhere in Fei Long's mind. Just as his existence would never be separated from his former boss, Fei Long would never forgive nor forget what he'd done. It wasn't so much the act of deception itself, but Fei Long had taken him to be the evidence of his foolishness, his ignorance, and his incompetence as the head of Baishe. For as long as he and Asami Ryuichi lived, Fei Long would never stop punishing himself.

"And you honestly think I would listen to you, knowing you're here on somebody's errand?"

"I'm here because my new boss lets me do as I please, so long as I protect you from harm," Yoh replied readily. For once he was on a job where he didn't have to lie, and he was beginning to like it more and more, especially for the position it puts him in front of Fei Long. "For your own good, you would find it profitable to listen to me."

"And who might my mysterious guardian angel be?" Fei Long asked in a mocking tone, when in truth his patience was nowhere near the point that allowed him to take a joke.

"I think you already know," Yoh replied, his eyes glanced down at the pendant in the other man's palm and lingered there long enough for the truth to be realized. He'd never stopped caring for you, he wanted to say, but that would be beyond his job description. That fact, once told, would profit his new boss too much than he'd been paid for.
A part of Fei Long seemed to understand, and for a short moment its implication made his expression soften. Still, there had been too much doubt left in him, and the betrayal and deception in the past had left scars too deep for him to trust someone so easily.

The truth was that Yoh found it a predicament that Fei Long still wanted to trust people at all, even after everything he’d been through. As bitter as he was, there was still a child within the Baishe leader that had never given up on love or trust, no matter how many times they had hurt him in the past, and no matter how difficult it was for him to do either. It was the strength unique to the man-one that gave Yoh no choice but to surrender his heart, among other things.

"How long will you continue to lie to my face?" Fei Long asked. He’d had enough of lies and deception to last him a lifetime. The man must have thought him a fool to show up and expect him to believe in such a story - a fairytale in fact. "You and I both know he'd rather have me die in his brother's place," Fei Long said with a painful smile. You were there, you saw it. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"If that's all you saw, then you are a fool," Yoh replied more sharply than his tone had ever been. "A selfish, self-centered fool at that!"

The answer had caught Fei Long off balance, and he could only part his lips to defend himself before Yoh cut in abruptly.

"You think you're in pain, but the truth is, it's not always about you. Have you ever considered how this is affecting Tao? Have you spared a thought for your subordinates? Do you have the slightest idea what that man is going through?" Yoh continued without giving the other man a chance to speak. Despite the meaning of his words he was calm and controlled, as always, and that made it sink deeper than coming from any other person. "You're sitting here, drowning in your own sufferings and mistakes when you should have gone out there to fix it."

"I am trying to fix it," Fei Long countered irritatingly. In truth, he wasn’t sure if it was Yoh he needed to convince or himself.

"Then fix it," Yoh replied without a moment of pause, pushing the tiny microphone forward with his right hand. "Fix it, Fei Long. Or you will lose everything."

The Baishe leader stared at the small device, his words stuck in the back of his throat. For the first time in his life he felt completely defenseless and at a total loss for words. Whether or not Yoh had been sent there by Mikhail, what he said had held some truth.

"You can stay here and lock yourself up in your own prison, or you can move on and be the man I know is in there somewhere," Yoh continued. It was time someone told Fei Long what his problem was. He figured it had to be him- someone who had nothing more to lose. It didn’t matter if Fei Long would end up hating him for this, or if he would be killed this time for saying these things out loud. He owed it to himself just as much as he owed this man to say the truth. "Tao needs you, your men need you, and he needs you, now, more than ever. It's your turn to save them. The question is, will you?"

For a long time the room fell completely silent. Yoh knew it would take some time for those words to sink in and take effect. Fei Long looked at him for what seemed to be an eternity, then the revelation came gradually as his eyes became more focused and intense. Rolling the pendent between his fingers, Fei Long smiled.

Yoh found himself holding his breath at the sight before him. There was a certain sense of tranquility about Fei Long that day, one Yoh had never seen in the head of Baishe. Ever since the
day they’d met, it had never been his looks that captured Yoh’s heart, and until then he had been rather immune to it. In that moment, for the first time, Fei Long’s beauty took his breath away.

"I should have just pulled the trigger when I had the chance," Fei Long said with a sneer, one that Yoh knew better than to take too seriously.

"You may still get another chance yet," he said, blowing out the smoke from his cigarette as he headed for the door. The butterflies in his stomach were beginning to bother him more than he could stand, and for once, he was maddeningly jealous of Mikhail Arbatov. Lucky bastard, he wanted to say, only he knew it was far from luck that had gotten the man this far. There wasn't a single person Yoh knew who would have tried harder and suffered more for Fei Long. Even he could not abandon his pride and beliefs to stand by the man he’d served and come to love for seven years. Yoh had often asked himself what would happen if he’d chosen to betray Asami Ryuichi and turned himself to Fei Long. The answer was always the same, that he would never be able to live with himself, much less be the man who deserved to stand by Fei Long’s side. While he would willingly die to protect this man and was certain no one understood the Baishe leader more than he did, it simply wasn’t what Fei Long needed. What Fei Long needed was someone who can give him the affection he’d never had, someone with the will and stamina to pull him out of whatever hell he believed he was in. He could only point Fei Long the way, but the man who can give Fei Long the will necessary for him to move on was Mikhail Arbatov.

"Yoh," Fei Long called, and then he remembered. "Is that even your real name?"

Yoh turned around and shrugged. "I have many names, most of them mean nothing to me," he replied with indifference. "But I like the one you call me with well enough." It wasn't a lie. The name he’d taken for the past seven years held more meaning to him than others, just as those years were the most important ones in his life. He would not have Fei Long call him any other way.

The answer forced Fei Long to hide a smile. Perhaps the man had learned a thing or two from his new boss about flattery, or maybe it had been there all this time and he just never had a chance to see it. "If I can make it so, will you come back to Baishe?" This time for real.

"And put up with your tantrums again?" Yoh asked with a hint of sarcasm in his voice, lifting his chin slightly. "Not a chance in hell. He’d had enough being Fei Long’s subordinate. From now things were going to change, he’d promised himself that when he resigned from his old boss’ employment.

The Baishe leader chuckled softly at the unexpected response. He'd decided that he liked this new Yoh much better anyway. "What is he paying you?"

"A job I would have done without getting paid," Yoh replied with a nod. He was growing more and more fond of this job after all, the way it puts him near Fei Long without having to obey his commands, the way he could call Fei Long just Fei Long.

Once more, the Baishe leader found himself smiling. He still couldn't trust this man completely, but it was a good start- a fresh one.

"And you were wrong about one thing," Yoh said before he disappeared through the door. "The only reason he's still standing is because you survived."

***
Title: Retribution Six
Rating: PG13
Warning: Angst
Characters: Fei Long, Yoh, Mikhail, Feodora
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese and Polish translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

Fire.

There was fire as far as her eyes could see. The flames danced from one armchair to another and leaped onto the coffee table where she’d left her favorite doll - her mother had given it to her last Christmas. The living room turned red, like her mother’s new dress that she’d worn to the party last Friday night. Standing on the top of the staircase, she could feel her cheeks burning from the heat down below. As the fire burned through her doll’s baby blue eyes, she cringed at the way it left a trail of smoky tears down the sides of its face, before its body, too, began to melt. The flame twirled faster and higher like a red ballerina spinning across the stage, burning everything she touched. From the middle of the room, her mother’s scream rang sharp and torturous like the sound of a violin, while her brother’s and father’s had already faded. They were cuffed together by their wrists around a wooden column, surrounded by the flame that rose as high as the ceiling. Her mother looked straight at her with tears streaming down her cheeks as she continued to scream. She took a step back, covering her ears to the sound that was as painful as a siren going off in her head. In the fire, they’d all stopped moving, but the screeching sound just kept on ringing louder and louder! Her heart was pounding in her chest so hard and so fast that she’d found herself struggling just to breathe. The pain in her head grew stronger by the minute with the scream that refused to go away. "Mommy," she whimpered and begged. "Mommy, stop. Please stop."

****

Feodora jolted up from the bed with her eyes wide open, her heart raced as heavily as her breathing. Realizing that it was just a dream, she’d tried to steady her breathing and wipe away the perspiration on her face. It had been more than ten years since that nightmare had last haunted her - she’d almost forgotten how real it was. Almost. Feeling her stomach turning, she pushed herself up and rushed into the bathroom. It didn’t take long before the contents of her stomach were emptied into the toilet. “Damn it,” she swore to herself as she rested on the floor, feeling exhausted and helpless. Twenty years had passed and she could still smell their flesh burning. When is it going to stop?

Suddenly, there it was again, the screeching sound of that night - it’d rung in her ears loud enough to blind all her senses. She’d whimpered, at first, in response to the pain in her head. Then, she’d
cried louder, convinced that if she could hear herself scream it would drive away whatever manifestation her brain had created. With her palms pressed hard against her ears, she forced her eyes open to remind her where she was. In front of her was a wooden cabinet where fresh towels were kept, and next to it was the sliding door that led to the bedroom. She was in Macau, in the bathroom of the family’s villa, and the only sound there should be was the hum of the air conditioning.

Still, the scream didn’t go away.

On the cold marble of the bathroom’s floor she curled up against the wall, choking on her tears. Her whole body rocked back and forth as she struggled to breathe. "Enough," she cried as she tried to remember how she’d dealt with it in the past, when the nightmare used to haunt her even when she was awake. How did she do it? How did she make it stop? And then it came back to her in a flash, in the midst of the deafening scream that seemed to grow louder by the minute.

The question wasn’t how- it was who.

"Mikhail!" she called, but there was no answer. Back then, there were times when she had woken up in the middle of the night and found herself in the corner of the room, suffocated by the same dreadful memory. Every time it happened, Mikhail would be there to chase it away. He would hold her in his arms and tell her that it wasn’t real. “I won’t let it happen to you again,” he would say, and she would always believe him. He was the big brother to her and to Alexei, and he’d make everything all right. But he wasn’t there for her that night, and she knew he would not come, no matter how many times she called for him.

Still, she kept on calling his name. She didn’t know how many times or how desperate she must have sounded. In the end she resorted to shutting her eyes tightly and tried to fool herself that he was there, holding her hands the way he did back then, and telling her to stop crying.

Somehow, even the thought of him made the screaming stop. Although she was still shaking, she could now breathe more freely. As pathetic as it may seem, Mikhail’s presence in her life had made too strong of an imprint in her mind that he could make a difference without being there physically. She would have laughed at her own dependency on a man who no longer cared for her, if only she had another way out of her dreadful past.

I won't let it happen to you again.

Liar, she swore to herself. It was all happening again. Was it not Alexei’s dead body on that table? Did she not just lose yet another brother? Didn't he just use her as if she was some common whore? But what lied at the bottom of her heart weren’t these spiteful questions, but an honest and persistent one: Where are you now?

She closed her eyes to the pain in her heart. After all that he'd done, Mikhail remained her savior - the light and warmth in her otherwise damned and miserable existence. She despised herself for staying, for wanting to have him in her life when she had to swallow her pride doing it. But the undeniable truth of it all was the fact that he was the only one who could chase away her nightmares, the only one who could make her feel safe and secure. Mikhail was more to her than a lover or a husband. While it was Vladimir who took her into his family, it was Mikhail who stood in front of her, holding out his hand with the promise of a new and bearable life. It was Mikhail who held her hand so tight when she wanted to cry and told her everything would be all right. She could hate him to eternity for the shame he’d put her through, but she could not leave him. He was her family, her home - one that didn't burn.

She opened her eyes again and looked at her reflection in the mirror on the sliding door. There she
saw it, the red flame flashing before her eyes, and Mikhail standing in the middle of the fire with his back to her.

She stumbled backwards against the wall so hard it must have given her a few bruises. Holding back her scream, she blinked a few times until the fire was gone and all that remained was her own reflection. The nightmare was catching up with her, threatening her as if it had been a curse that was left unfulfilled. And there Mikhail stood - burning like her family had burned that night.

In place of fear, her anger began to rise. With her back driven up against the wall by this cursed fate, she realized she had nowhere else to run. “Fight or die,” Vladimir Arbatov once told her. “You’ve survived for a reason. Make it count.”

With her heart full to the brim with anger, she pushed herself up from the floor and headed for the sink. She picked up an empty glass and hurled it at the mirror, shattering it into pieces. She’s had enough of running. No matter what happened, this time she would not stand there and watch anyone in her family die like a helpless eight-year old she once was.

Make it count.

She made her way out of the bedroom and down the corridor where Alexei’s room was. For the past few nights she knew Mikhail had been sleeping there. It would have been all right if he’d only slept. But that night she’d found him exactly how he was last night and the night before- stoned on heroin.

She stood by the bed, staring quietly at her husband. Mikhail was in his robe, lying on his back with his eyes closed. The rubber strap hung loose on his left arm that showed several signs of injection, and the syringe was clutched in his other hand. She pried his fingers open and tossed it in the garbage bin, along with all the other paraphernalia that she’d found in the room. It seemed Mikhail didn't even try to hide them, believing that there was nothing she could do to stop him, and until that night she didn’t think that she could.

“Fight or die,” she remembered Vladimir's words and the vision in the mirror as she clenched her fists.

There will be no more death in her family. Not on her watch.

***

The next day.

The sound of an approaching helicopter's engine was enough to startle the whole villa. Feodora looked up from the stack of paper on the desk in alarm and quickly stepped outside the study. Two bodyguards who stood behind the door readily acknowledged her presence and quickly straightened themselves.

"Is that one of ours?” she asked, her voice as sharp as lightning.

Without wasting any more time, one of them radioed out for an answer. The boss' wife tolerated no false information, and they knew it would be their heads if they'd given out one. Ever since the attack, Mikhail had left the villa and all it's management to his wife. To the men who had served the family in Russia before, working with Feodora Arbatov was nothing new. To the recently acquired staff and bodyguards, it had taken them some time to get adjusted. The high-class and immaculately dressed Russian woman seemed, at a glance, an obedient wife to her husband. Yet her humble predisposition seemed to end at about a ten-foot radius from Mikhail. The woman who
was fashionably refined and slender in her calf-length pencil skirt and high heels was nothing short of an Arbatov. On the first day she assumed management of the villa, she had personally shot two guards and ordered the execution of four more. By the next day she’d replaced half the staff with her own men flown in from Moscow, all of whom were trained to obey her without question. While it goes without saying that she had yet to gain loyalty and respect from the old staff, it was also clear that by the third day she’d earned their fear. Apparently, it was quite enough for her to secure a leadership position.

One thing Feodora Arbatov did not possess was patience. Without waiting for the reply that took too long to acquire, she proceeded to the door leading outside. The guards rushed behind her quick, long strides trying to keep up with her four-inch heels, speaking into the radio as they walked. By the time they’d received the answer - it wasn't one of their own - she was already outside heading towards the helipad.

"I want ten guards armed with automatic weapons and something big enough to bring down that bird if we need to," she commanded as fast as her steps. "Is there a mark on the chopper? Have they requested permission for landing?"

"The chopper is unregistered and they’re not responding to our warnings," said the guard with the radio before relaying her orders to the control room. Within a few minutes, the helipad was surrounded by ten armed men, one of them holding a rocket launcher on his shoulder.

"Tell them they have thirty seconds to identify themselves or we will shoot them down," she commanded, her eyes fixed on the helicopter that began to descend. Whoever they were, they sure didn't want their presence announced on the radio. But unless they found a way to communicate their intentions, she would have no choice but to blow it up before it became a threat. She couldn't risk having the villa under attack considering the trouble they already had, and it would be a good practice to show that their security remains impregnable.

In less than fifteen seconds the helicopter door opened to show the men inside. While it was usually too far to identify the passengers without binoculars, one of them happened to possess features unique enough that allowed him to be distinguished from even a mile away.

"Stand down and hold your fire," she commanded with even more hostility in her tone than before, despite the meaning of her order.

The propeller whirled a gust of wind around the aircraft as it landed. Feodora stood firmly in her place, watching the uninvited guest step out of the aircraft. Long, black hair tied back neatly in a ponytail lifted and danced in the wind, like a dragon's tail that stood proud before her. The head of Baishe was dressed in a black pinstripe suit with a steel-colored silk tie - a formal look signifying a formal visit. Being accompanied by only one bodyguard was also a sign of trust and respect. A waste of effort, she thought.

By the chopper, Fei Long stood quietly, waiting for Feodora to make a move. He’d taken a big risk coming here, knowing that his visit would not be welcomed in the least. Had he tried to contact them, he would’ve been denied permission to land, not to mention risk having his intention known by their enemies. There were eyes and ears everywhere since the incident, and everyone was eager to know where Baishe and Arbatov stood in terms of their relationship with each other. How he was received in public could change a lot of things, and since it was Feodora who had come to receive them, he could only hope that Mikhail had picked more than just a pretty woman to be his wife.

"Put down your guns," she gave out the order. The guards did as they were told at once without question. She walked towards the Baishe leader, showing none of the hostility that was present just
a few minutes ago, save for the hatred in her eyes that only her two guests could see. She stopped in front of him, reached out and gave him a friendly embrace.

"Keep your mouth shut and follow me into the house," she whispered as she faked a smile. He had some nerve showing up at their door and forcing her to welcome him that way. There were still spies within the organization. The man must have known this and knew that she would have no choice but to pretend that he was well received. No matter what Mikhail said to Fei Long, no matter how much she despised him, the fact was Baishe and Arbatov must remain allies. For once, she wished Mikhail had picked someone dumb and ignorant as his lover.

Fei Long nodded in response and followed her into the house. Not just a pretty woman after all, he thought. The woman knew exactly what she must do and carried it out to perfection. Even then he still felt a little insecure about that knife she had strapped to the inside of her thigh, not knowing whether she would turn around and try to gut him alive the moment they've gained some privacy. It wasn't his own safety he was worried about - only hers should the need to defend himself arise. He had been trained to notice these things, but even if he hadn't, Feodora's hostility was quite enough to put him on guard - it was never subtle or hidden.

She stopped in front of the game room Mikhail always used for discussing important business he couldn't risk anyone overhearing. Not only was it sound proof, but it also housed a snooker table. The life and death of unfortunate men had been decided right here during a game of snooker by Mikhail who always claimed he could think more clearly when he played. It must have been a big habit, since Feodora seemed to know this too, having chosen the room for discretion.

She led them inside and locked the door with the utmost care, making sure no one would enter without permission.

"State your business and leave my house," she said with an expression that matched her words in hostility.

Ignoring the sudden change in attitude, Fei Long simply nodded. "I won't take much of your time," he replied formally. The truth was, in her shoes, he imagined he would have been much worse. "May I?" he asked politely as he moved towards a couch.

"No, you may stand," she insisted bluntly. "The sooner you leave, the better."

Yoh turned to look at the other man’s reaction, anticipating some display of anger, irritation, or at least a glare. Surprisingly, he just nodded and did as he was told. To his curiosity, Fei Long seemed like a different man then - one more focused and calm. Somehow the man stood a little taller, and the fact that he showed no reactions no matter what she said made his presence more profound. There was an air of superiority around him now that could not be missed.

"I understand," he replied. "I'm here to offer information on the attack at the penthouse. If it's not too much trouble I would like to speak with Mikhail."

"My husband is currently indisposed," she said, emphasizing the word husband to make sure he was addressed correctly, and that he remembered who she was. "He's left me in charge of this house and all our businesses in Macau until he's able to resume. If you have information, you can leave it with me."

The answer made Fei Long's heart heavy. He wondered if something had happened to Mikhail or if he was just busy. Was it Feodora's decision to not let him see Mikhail, or was it the man himself who'd officially forbidden it? Either way, Feodora had left him no opening.
"We found this at the penthouse, among many others," he told her as he placed the small microphone on the snooker table. "As far as I know, the penthouse was in an outsider's possession at one point..."

"Find out who the buyer works for, and we'll have the real culprit," Feodora cut in sharply after taking just a quick glance at the device. "We've already started working on it. Is this all you have to say?"

Fei Long paused a little, looking back at her in silence as if to underline his presence and its significance to the situation. She must have felt the tension well enough, judging from the way her posture stiffened a little, even though she didn't look away from his gaze.

"I'm here to offer information and my assistance," Fei Long continued. "Considering this evidence, there is a possibility that the attack was aimed at my life. If this turns out to be true, I want him to know that I have every right to defend myself against my enemy."

"And if it's not?"

"Then I still have every right to offer help, from Baishe to Arbatov," he insisted. "No matter what happened between Mikhail and me, Baishe will remain his allies. This is what I’ve come to say," Fei Long said with the tone that showed respect, sincerity, and most of all determination. He had hoped to be able to tell Mikhail this in person, but with Feodora managing the property, that wish had turned out to be impossible.

Feodora listened quietly and gave him a sarcastic smile at the end of the sentence. "And why would I tell him this, when it would likely lead you back into my life that you've so successfully ruined?"

Fei Long gave her a smile- one that had more gentleness in it than mockery. "You will tell him, because you love him," he said.

It was a fact that couldn’t be disputed. He knew without having to be told from the way her expression softened in Mikhail’s presence or at the mention of his name. He knew because he had seen it countless of times on Mikhail’s face whenever those blue eyes looked at him in the past. Mikhail had the word love written all over his face every time they met...before Alexei had died. It must be love, he thought. It was the only expression his father had given Yan but never him, and it was the same expression on Asami’s face when he held Akihito in his arms.

"And you?" she asked. "Do you love him?"

Taken aback by the question, Fei Long paused for a moment. It was a question he’d never had to answer, nor had Mikhail ever asked him. Did I love Mikhail? Somehow, the answer did not come as easily as he’d hoped, and perhaps it was why Mikhail had yet to ask him- knowing that he would not be able to say the word wholeheartedly. The most painful thing about it was that it didn’t matter to Mikhail whether or not he could ever return that love. It was a game they played that was doomed to fail, with him taking that love for granted, and Mikhail ignoring the fact that it was not returned.

“I don't know what it's like to love someone,” Fei Long replied with a hint of sadness in his tone. “But I do believe he’s the only one who can teach me how,” he confessed. He had been taught how to survive, to kill, to command and obey, but no one had ever taught him how to love. His father was kind, but towards him there had never been the same pride in his eyes than when he looked at Yan. His brother taught him that being a part of the family had to be earned with absolute obedience. With Asami, all he ever saw in those eyes were pity, and even Tao would always look
up to him with expectations. All of them made him feel suffocated, as if there was always someone else he had to be, something he had to change. With Mikhail could he breathe more easily, and in those blue eyes, he could not be anything more or anything less.

“And yet you left him for that Japanese man,” Feodora said, lifting her chin as she sneered. His confession didn’t soften her heart— it only made her despise him more.

“Is that what he told you?” Fei Long asked, a little surprised that she would know this much, and partly agitated about the invasion of his privacy.

“Surely you jest,” Feodora laughed. “Everyone in the Asian continent knows about the infamous incident on the casino ship.” Mikhail didn’t have to tell her a thing. She only had to ask her maids and her guards to know what went on that sent Mikhail back home with a drug problem.

The answer made Fei Long glare at her in irritation. He wasn’t sure what bothered him more: the fact that she dared to ask about something private, or the mere mention of Asami. Either way, he wasn’t there to talk about this issue. “What happened on that ship is a private matter,” he warned.

“If it’s just rumors you’ve heard, I suggest you stay out of what you don’t know.”

“I know enough,” she replied with an equally intense glare and continued without allowing him to interrupt. “You have been born with beauty beyond perfection and raised amongst power and wealth. You stand at the top of the Hong Kong underworld with countless men at your feet, and you have the love of a man who would throw away everything he has and even die for you. And yet you act like you’re some kind of victim, moping over how miserable your life is,” Feodora said with a sneer. She wasn’t afraid of him, and since he was shameless enough to walk into her house, she would give it to him in the face.

“You think I hate you because he chose you over me? You think I despise you because I’m jealous? I have seen him take countless of whores to his bed long before you two have met, and you’re just one of them!” she ranted. “But people like you who have everything and still find it inadequate truly disgust me. You feed on other people’s lives and destroy everything you touch just to satisfy whatever it is you think you lack. You speak of being taught how to love. Well, here’s something you should know. Until you start being a man and stop wailing over your pathetic little problem that makes everyone else suffer, you don’t deserve to be loved!”

It was the truth. It was why his existence irritated her more and more. She couldn’t care less about what he’d been through in the past. There was no excuse for ruining other people’s lives because of one’s own problem. Everything that has happened was due to Fei Long’s refusal to let go. The man was feeding on Mikhail’s love and at the same time found no shame in chasing after another man. When Mikhail had had enough, he found it appropriate to move on to Alexei. She couldn’t even begin to imagine how Mikhail must have felt about this, on top of having lost his only brother. But what disgusted her most of all was the fact that he had the guts to stand in front of her and demand to see him, acting as if he was the victim in all this. It had to be a joke if he thought it would earn her sympathy.

“You want to see him? I’ll let you see him,” she continued with sarcasm in her voice. “And then you can try to live with what you’ve done to the only man who could have taught you how to love for the rest of your life.” She’d decided the man should see the result of his own doing, and she’d love to see the expression on that face when he does. But deep down she also wanted to know what effect his presence would have on Mikhail. As much as she hated the fact, there was no one else who might have made a difference on her husband’s state of mind, and at that moment, Mikhail’s state of mind meant everything.

“That won’t be necessary,” Yoh cut in abruptly. “We’re leaving,” he said, reaching for the other
man’s arm to escort him out of the room. While there was some truth to what she just said, he didn’t like the disrespect in her tone, and Fei Long didn’t have to stand there and listen to such an insult.

“No,” Fei Long replied. He didn’t need Yoh’s counsel or protection. He could handle the situation and was perfectly capable of dealing with a direct insult. Somehow, he wasn't angry, and those words didn't hurt like they should have. It was as if he'd known it all along but refused to face it until she'd forced him to. There was a reason why he hated his own skin most of the time, and he didn't know what it was until then. Asami's pitiful eyes hurt so much because they'd seen past his act to the pathetic being he'd tried so hard to hide. He knew this, but instead of trying to become a better man, he'd blamed Asami for making him feel inadequate. No matter how hard it is to accept the ugly truth, and no matter how many excuses he had for being this way, only a coward would choose to ignore and hide from it. He had been a coward, but that day would be the last time he counted himself one or he would not have the face to stand in front of this woman and tell her that he was there for Mikhail- that Mikhail was *his*, not *hers*.

Still he had to admit, deep down he appreciated her decency to say to his face the things not many people would dare. She was, after all, the woman Mikhail had picked to be his wife.

“I want to see him.”

***

She led them to a door on the second floor, one that opened into a lavish living room. Inside was another door that had been locked from the outside, guarded by three strong men who looked as though they hadn’t slept for weeks. On the couch was the man Fei Long recognized as the resident physician, and next to him was an opened case full of syringes and medicines. The atmosphere gave Fei Long an uncomfortable feeling, and he liked the expressions on the men’s faces even less.

Feodora stopped in front of the second door and inserted the key. Hesitant, she turned around to look at Yoh. “This has everything to do with the safety of our organization,” she said to Fei Long. “Can your man be trusted?” She had to be careful. Should one word of this gets out, all hell would break loose.

“I wouldn’t know,” Fei Long replied as he took a glance at Yoh. “He’s on your husband’s payroll.”

The answer made Feodora pause for a second before her eyes narrowed in comprehension of those words. She’d heard about this man before from the other subordinates, how he used to work for Fei Long and that Mikhail had made some kind of deal with him. For some reason, she could never track this man down no matter how hard she’d tried. But if Mikhail trusted this man, she would not question his judgment. "You must be Yoh," she asked.

Yoh nodded quietly as a response, even though he’d already made up his mind that he would accompany Fei Long into that room no matter what. Seeing the tension in that room and the bruises on the guards’ faces, he could tell whatever was behind that door couldn’t be good.

Feodora turned back to the room and turned the key. Fei Long could see how her expression became more troubled as she opened the door, holding her breath as she pushed it open. It was evident whatever was in that room was something she dreaded seeing ... or even feared.

The door opened into a bedroom, or what resembled one since the space had become barely recognizable. There was broken glass near the entrance, among whatever items that used to be on the table and what was left of them. Cabinets had been emptied and drawers pulled down onto the floor, their contents scattered on the carpet stained deep red with wine. The entire room looked as
though it had been robbed, only nothing seemed to have been found or taken. On the floor by the headboard of the four-poster bed was a man Fei Long nearly didn’t recognize. His right hand was cuffed to the bedpost, his wrist bruised and bleeding from trying to break free. Mikhail was in a robe that hung loose over one shoulder, showing a few scratches and a trace of blood on his chest. Fei Long felt his heart drop as he examined the man’s face. His hair that used to curl neatly and sparkled like gold, was now dull and tangled, falling unruly around the hard edges of his face and covering most of his eyes.

“What happened?” he asked. He couldn’t take his eyes off the man he remembered to be exceptionally handsome and full of life, whose skin had turned pale and as white as a corpse’s.

"I threw his stash away. All of it," she replied, leaning forward to pick up a broken picture frame from the floor and place it back on the cabinet nearby. "Then it was murder for anyone who stood between him and getting more of those drugs. It took four men to bring him down so we could cuff him to the bed. And then the withdrawal symptoms kicked in," she said. Her voice trailed off at the end of the sentence as if she could not bear the thought of describing it out loud.

"And you just left him here?" Fei Long asked, feeling anger rising in his chest at the picture before him.

"Don't try to judge me for something you've done," she countered in irritation to the accusation in his tone. If it wasn’t for him, Mikhail would not be there in the first place. "We're setting up a treatment room as we speak. He is to undergo a rapid detoxification as soon as it's safe to uncuff him without an incident."

The answer disturbed Fei Long more than he could stand. "I assume you know the risk of such procedure," he said, agitated that she had made such a critical decision on her own, especially when it could lead to his death.

"I assume you have another alternative?" she bit back sarcastically. "People have been asking how he’s dealing with this, and what am I suppose to tell them? That he’s on a two-month vacation while we wait for him to recover? I can’t keep the news of Alexei’s death from his father much longer. It’s either this or the whole organization will fall. By then you can be certain, he will die, that is if he hasn’t overdosed himself beforehand.” She didn’t want to take this risk, but she was running out of choices and time.

Fei Long ground his teeth as he listened. He knew what she said was true. They had no time to waste. Should one word of Mikhail’s condition get out, their enemies would descend upon them like vultures. Still, without the will to overcome his addiction after detoxification, Mikhail would relapse sooner than anything could have been accomplished.

“I need a few minutes with him,” Fei Long demanded as he looked at Mikhail again with an irrepressible ache in his heart. “And I insist on being here during the procedure. You will comply or I will do whatever is necessary to take him back with me.”

***
Retribution Seven

Title: Retribution Seven
Rating: NC-17
Warning: Angst
Characters: Fei Long, Yoh, Mikhail, Feodora
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, and newly added Spanish translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_dracon went through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

The sheets smelled like semen.

There were clothes on the floor leading towards the bed. The white duvet made a shuffling sound as the bodies underneath moved against one another. The man on top kissed his lover, trailing his lips down the side of the other man's neck as the jet-black hair danced seductively on the pillow and on the nakedness of his chest. Long, thick lashes fluttered a little as he closed his eyes and moaned to the touch of those lips, now brushing on the sensitive area of his inner thigh. The man on top smiled and took the throbbing cock into his mouth, earning a louder moan from his lover underneath whose long legs began to thrash in excitement on the sheets, his fingers wound tight around the pillowcase.

"Come inside me," Fei Long said, pulling him back up and kissing him passionately, wrapping his legs around the other man's hips.

Soon, the two bodies collided in rhythm. Their skin rubbed against one another with nothing but the slick, salty sweat in between that seemed to lubricate their movements. His hard, refined muscles rippled across his back as he pushed himself deeper into his lover. The soft, delicate lips parted, and in the midst of the loud moans and groans of pleasure, a name slipped from Fei Long's mouth.

Alexei.

Mikhail instantly forced his eyes opened, his hand wound tight around the robe wrapped around his waist. "Fuck," he swore as the pain in his stomach struck him like someone had punched him from the inside, once then twice. The third time he choked and threw up on the carpet. Nothing solid came out - just stomach acid that burned and tasted like cheap wine, and a small amount of blood from a cut inside his mouth.

He’d fallen asleep. Why did I fucking sleep?!

"Fucking wife," he cursed again, yanking at the cuff around his right wrist until the sharp edge of the metal dug deep into his flesh and made a few incisions. At that point he would have traded all his Lamborghini's for just one shot of something that would stop his brain from working, anything. Despite his dry throat, he pressed his lips together and swallowed, tasting the salt of his blood once
again. His goddamn guard had punched him so hard in the face that his jaws ached like hell and his lips cracked opened both inside and out.

A groan rumbled in his throat as he tried to sit up right. His whole body ached like he'd been in some sort of a bar fight, which wasn't a surprise, considering the fact that he'd recently wrestled with five of his strongest bodyguards Feodora had sent upon him. Resting his back on the edge of the mattress, he realized he was so damn tired he could sleep for a week. With his stomach turning constantly and his head spinning every time he tried to move, the wise thing to do was to climb into the bed and sleep it off. But despite his restlessness and the insomnia - the wonderful gifts of his forced heroin withdrawal, thanks to his bloody wife - the idea of sleep dreaded him more than anything. It was bad enough that his brain found it appropriate to manifest those flashes of events to attack him in his wake, but every time he'd closed his eyes those flashes would play like a movie in extended version. Sometimes he would see himself as a child sled racing with Alexei by their lake house in winter. Sometimes he would be back in the barn, feeling the crack of Yuri’s whip slice his back opened. Other times he would see himself holding Fei Long in his arms, kissing him and feeling a strong yearning for the man in his stomach. All of those memories he could manage just fine, but the rest made him want to puke his guts out every time they appeared. And without the drugs, they'd become more unmanageable and painful than the withdrawal itself.

The rest, Mikhail sighed and ran his fingers through his badly tangled hair. The rest weren't even memories, they were pure manifestations of real events he didn't witness, and nightmares that replayed themselves over and over in his head like a broken record. He'd never seen that Japanese bastard rape Fei Long, smirking at him while doing it. He’d never seen Fei Long squirming and moaning in Alexei's arms on his bed, in his bloody penthouse where they'd spent their first night together. He’s only seen Alexei's dead body with eight bullet holes in it, but never how they'd pierced through his flesh, one by one, and sent him lying dead on the floor of his kitchen. He’d never seen any of these things, and yet they haunted him, hitting him with the force of a speeding truck. Every time they would play, it felt like a heavy punch in his stomach, and he would suffocate like something had been dislodged in his throat.

Don't you sleep! Don't you fucking sleep..., he told himself as his eyelids became heavier and his strength was giving way to his fatigue.

He must have slept, because he heard the door clicked open, and Fei Long's voice was somewhere inside the room. He was talking to someone, probably Alexei again, and then he didn't have to guess what would happen next. They'd kiss, and they'd fuck. Then he would wake up with the same pain, and throw up more of that disgusting acid in his stomach.

Somehow, this dream turned out to be a little different. In the previous ones, he would only get to watch and Fei Long would never notice him. This time he could hear the man's footsteps approaching before they stopped in front of him. "Mikhail," Fei Long called him softly as he reached out his hand and caressed his cheek.

How grand, he thought with a sneer. His fucking brain must have found a new trick to strike with. Maybe this time he would be included in the experience. Perhaps this Fei Long would then kiss and touch him, and squirm in his arms so he could feel the action on top of seeing it. And then he'd open his mouth and called him with his dead brother's name.

"Fuck you," he swore at the wretched manifestation of his lover that his brain had created in astounding perfection. He could even smell the addictive scent of that hair and feel the warmth of those fingers against his skin. But this time before he woke up, he swore he'd have the satisfaction of ending it with his own hands. He'd had enough of this shit - enough of puking his guts out from seeing Fei Long fuck his dead brother.
Swiftly, he snatched the elegant neck and squeezed it until he could hear the other man choke. "Get the fuck out of my head!" he said, tightening his grip harder as he spoke.

Just before he could choke the life out of his manifestation, someone punched him hard in the face and his hand slipped free. He struggled up on his knees, cursing as he flung his arm at his attacker and lost his balance. His damn legs were so weak he could hardly stand, much less fight, and all he could do was struggle. The man caught him at his wrist and twisted his arm back, pinning him faced down on the floor.

"Get the doctor!" he shouted. "I can't hold him much longer!"

*Great, now Yoh was in his dream too,* he thought. The doctor rushed in quickly with a needle, accompanied by the guards. As it buried its length in his arm, Mikhail stared at the man on the floor a few feet away from him. Fei Long was looking back at him, his eyes red and brimming with tears from suffocation. There was sadness and shock in those eyes, so intense it didn’t seem like the same Fei Long he saw in those dreams. Before he could understand the strangeness of the situation, his vision became blurry. Everything went blank after that, and for once, he was relieved to see nothing but darkness.

***

“Are you all right?” Yoh asked as he helped Fei Long up from the floor, wincing at the wounds on his knuckle. He realized he might have punched his new boss a bit harder than necessary. But Fei Long would have died if the blow hadn’t been hard enough to make the man let go.

Fei Long didn’t answer, he just stared at the unconscious body that was being carried up on the bed as if he’d just seen a ghost. Yoh could feel the Baishe leader tremble as he supported the man by the arm. Fei Long had been attacked more times than he could count, but being attacked by Mikhail of all people with an intention to kill was something Yoh imagined he could not swallow nor forget so easily. At that point he seemed to notice nothing, not the commotion in that room, the sound of his voice, or the trace of satisfaction on Feodora’s lips, only the fact that Mikhail had tried to kill him, and almost succeeded.

“We should leave,” Yoh said and tried to urge him out of the room. Fei Long was not safe here, nor was he welcomed. It didn’t seem like there was anything he could do for Mikhail, apart from provoking more anger and putting himself in danger. On top of this, he wasn’t sure how long he could continue beating up the head of this household should the need arise again without earning a bullet in the head.

Somehow his request made Fei Long snap out of his vision and compose himself, his eyes narrowed and focused the way they always did when the man had decided on an action. With that look on his face, Yoh knew he was about to do something reckless. “Tell my men I won’t be going home for a few days,” Fei Long said as he moved closer to the bed where Mikhail lay unconscious.

Yoh sighed¾ sometimes he hated being right. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's my idea," Fei Long confirmed with authority, almost wondering why Yoh would question his command.

"And I don't work for you," Yoh replied with a straight face.

"That's right, I forgot." Fei Long bit back sarcastically. Why did he even pack this guy along with him? "Would you please call them?"
It appeared Fei Long knew how to make him comply with or without putting him on the payroll. What was he going to do? Force the man to beg? It was disturbing enough hearing him say *please* even though the look in those eyes was far from pleading. Seeing that no force on Earth was going to drag Fei Long out of that house, Yoh gave up and took out his phone. Working for Fei Long or not, disagreeing with the man was a waste of time and energy. The man must have known this, too, and that fact annoyed Yoh most of all. "Should I tell Tao to pack you some clothes?" he asked.

"Even with *my* permission," Feodora asserted herself in the middle of her uninvited guests' conversation about staying in her house that excluded her entirely. "I don’t think he wants you here."

Fei Long turned to Feodora and gave her a look that made even Yoh uncomfortable. He then chose to ignore her comment and replied to Yoh's question instead. "There’s no need. Mikhail keeps a closet full of *my* clothes in his bedroom."

*He said that on purpose, of course,* Yoh thought. When Fei Long wanted to bite, he does so with precision … and a generous amount of venom. Even though he was sure Mikhail must have kept a number of Fei Long’s clothes in all his properties, telling his wife about it was another issue entirely.

The expression on her face was hard to describe, and Yoh couldn’t help but anticipate some kind of physical confrontation between them for the time Fei Long remained at the villa. And as if that wasn’t enough, the man didn’t quite stop there.

"You don’t need to worry about setting up a room. I’ll sleep here with him," he said as he sat down on the bed next to Mikhail. In truth, he didn't want to add fuel to her fire, but the moment she’d cuffed Mikhail and left him in that room her authority had come to an end, or he would make it so.

Feodora lifted her chin and tried her best to stay calm, even though the fire in her eyes would show the complete opposite. She could have thrown him out of the house, but that would create a commotion, which wouldn’t be overlooked by the moles on the property. Considering what just happened, she might as well have him stay and see him suffer by Mikhail’s hand as retribution. "Fine. Just know that it will not be my responsibility if you die," she said before turning around and headed to the door.

"Mrs. Arbatova," Fei Long called. "The key to his handcuff."

She paused for a moment without turning around to acknowledge the request openly. Having had enough of her husband’s lover for the day, she slid her hand in her pocket and tossed him the key before heading out the door without another word.

Fei Long had asked to be alone in that room after the doctor had finished checking on his patient. Sitting on the bed next to Mikhail, he reached out and tidied the mess of blond hair from his face. While it was disturbing to see him in that state, with his skin so pale and his face hardened due to dehydration and fatigue, Fei Long could feel his heart flutter at the thought of being this close to Mikhail again. He’d missed it all, the roughness of those hands, the warmth of his body, and even those long, thick golden lashes that used to brush against his cheek when Mikhail kissed him.

Removing the cuff from his wrist, Fei Long’s brow narrowed at the wound around it. Mikhail must have tried to free himself very desperately to get such a deep cut. As he cleaned the wound with a damp towel, he took a glance at the other wrist and felt his heart skipped. There it was: the glittering gold bracelet that matched his key - the *other* cuff Mikhail had put upon himself and still had not taken off.
How far would you go for love?

How far indeed, Fei Long thought with a bittersweet smile on his face. How many times have they pushed each other away? How many times have they decided to end it all? And even now when both of them must have thought everything they ever had was lost, this bond between them had not been broken. Mikhail would not take off this bracelet, just as he would never remove the pendent from his neck.

I belong to you, and you alone hold the key to my heart.

Fei Long closed his hand around Mikhail’s and held it tight, hoping that he could transcend even the smallest measurement of what he felt in his heart to heal the wounds he’d inflicted upon this man. “Come back to me,” he said in a whisper. “Come back to me and I promise everything will change.”

***

The sunlight stung his eyes as he opened them. He wondered if one of the maids had come in to open the curtains or if it was just another dream he was having. As he moved, he realized someone was holding his hand. He turned to see and blinked a few times at the man lying by his side whose long, delicate fingers wound tight around his even as he slept.

It has to be a dream, he thought to himself. But somehow the atmosphere in that room didn’t make him feel uncomfortable like in his nightmares. Serenity hung in the air, similar to the days he woke up with Fei Long by his side when they were still together. It used to give him a sense of fulfillment - a euphoric feeling that said there was nothing more to be had in life and nothing was missing. He liked that feeling, liked it enough to give up everything else just to feel it everyday.

He looked around and realized that he was exactly where he should be in reality – in the room Feodora had locked him in, not back in his penthouse. There were no signs of Alexei or Yuri, no trace of blood; nothing his brain had been force-feeding him with for the past few weeks. There was only Fei Long on his bed, sleeping like a baby and holding his hand so tight it would be impossible for him to move without waking him up. Even if it was just a dream, it didn’t feel like one of those nightmares or that it would soon turn out to be.

As if the man could hear his thoughts, Fei Long opened his eyes slowly and smiled at him. “You’re awake,” he said as he pushed himself up slowly.

Mikhail didn’t answer, but his eyes lingered on the bruise around Fei Long’s neck that came into view when he tilted his head back a little.

“Don’t try to strangle me again. My neck still hurts,” Fei Long said jokingly, pushing back the strands of black hair that fell disorderly around his face and tied it back up into a loose ponytail. He knew he should be on guard, since Mikhail still looked at him as if he had been some kind of an illusion he did not welcome, but somehow he didn't feel the threat.

Kneading his eyes with his thumb and index finger, Mikhail sighed in irritation. "Get out of my house," he said coldly. Whether or not it was real, Fei Long had no business being there.

“Don’t even try. Your wife wanted to get rid of me and it didn’t work,” Fei long replied as he rose from the bed to wash his face. When he returned, he stood in front of Mikhail with a warm towel. “This will help.”
Hesitated, Mikhail looked at the wet towel for a few seconds before snatching it out of Fei Long’s hand. He wiped his face irritatingly, even though the warmth of the towel felt good against his skin. That moment he just wished Fei Long would leave. The longer the man stayed, the harder it would be for him to tell between his illusions and reality. And he knew his nightmares would come back to him with a vengeance, the way they had right after their hospital visit. Just the thought of it made him want to throw up again. Or perhaps he was simply suffering from the heroin withdrawal. Whatever it was, seeing Fei Long there made him feel sick.

“Please … just leave,” when there was nothing else he could think of, he pleaded.

Fei Long sighed. He'd expected just as much, but it did hurt just the same. Some words were painful enough hearing just once, but Mikhail had said them time and time again. The man had never been subtle when he wanted to hurt someone, but Fei Long had never been on the receiving end until lately. Even when spoken as a plea, it still hurt more than a thousand pitiful sneers from Asami. “If you really want me to go, I’ll go,” he said as he sat down next to Mikhail. “But there’s something I must tell you before I leave.”

Mikhail didn't reply and neither did he move. He just sat there staring at the floor, letting his hair fall over his eyes and cover most of his face in a way that made it difficult for Fei Long to see his expression.

“Nothing happened between me and Alexei that night, and I will not try to explain myself for something you may think I did that I didn’t do,” Fei Long said, fixing his eyes on the wall in front of him. "I understand your wish to have me out of your life and I will try my best to stay away." He paused for a moment to swallow the lump in his throat that was making it difficult for him to speak. What he needed to say wasn’t easy for him to utter, but Mikhail must know this, and he needed to get it off of his chest.

“I’ve missed you,” he confessed. "I’ve missed us." Despite himself, he sounded like he wanted to cry, but with Mikhail sitting right next to him, no amount of strength was enough for him to pull off an act of indifference. “I will leave here today if you want me to leave. But know that I’m here whenever you need my help … and I will be eternally grateful, if you would let me see you every once in a while.”

There was so much more he wanted to say, and he couldn’t describe how much he wanted to reach out and touch Mikhail’s hand, even if that would be all he was allowed to touch. But Mikhail just sat there, still and quiet as if he wasn’t even breathing. After a moment he began to tremble, and Fei Long could see his hands close into a tight fist that made his whole body stiff.

“He… asked me if he could go after you,” Mikhail said, his voice coarse and broken. “And I told him that you were not my problem anymore.”

A single tear drop landed on his fist as he clenched his hands tighter and tighter, until his whole body started to shake. “I killed him,” he confessed, the words were strained as if it had taken all his strength to utter them. “I killed Alexei.”

He had sent Alexei to die out of spite. He knew the risk, he knew the pain that Alexei would have to go through, and yet he’d pushed his brother in that direction. Did he want to punish Alexei for wanting his lover and pursuing him, or did he want to see Alexei fail, just like he did, to make him feel better about himself? Was it Alexei’s death that was giving him nightmares, or the fact that he died fucking Fei Long? They were questions he feared to answer. But they all came down to one thing - it was he who killed his brother.

Fei Long reached out his arms and held Mikhail tight in his embrace. It was always disturbing to
see a grown man cry. But that day Mikhail cried like he’d never cried in his life. He cried as if his tears were blood and that he wanted to die from it, as if it would absolve him. He bit his lips as Mikhail’s fingers dug deep into his arm as he choked on his tears. He remembered how it felt the night his father died, how much it hurts to lose someone you love, and at the same time, convinced that you’re responsible for it. But what brought tears to his eyes wasn’t his own tragic past, it was the fact that Mikhail had blamed himself for Alexei’s death, when it was his fault alone that led to it.

“You didn’t kill him,” Fei Long said as he held the other man’s face in front of his. “I did.”

_I should have never let you go._

He didn’t know how long he stayed there, with Mikhail crying in his arms. No matter how many times he kissed those tears away, they just kept streaming down his cheeks. Mikhail had always been the stronger one between them¾ the one who could and would hold their relationship together. He wondered how long and how much the man had kept all of this hidden behind that flawless smile and hated the fact that Mikhail had never let him see it. But the truth of it all was that he’d never cared to know. It was the reason why he’d avoided asking about those scars on his back, the same reason why he’d been too busy chasing after Asami and never once looked back at how Mikhail would handle it. From the very first time they’d gotten together he had never once been there for Mikhail.

_You selfish, self-centered bastard._

_You don’t deserve to be loved,_ Feodora said. He didn’t realize how true it was until then. He was feeding off Mikhail’s love like a disgusting leech. But it was going to end that day. He swore it would!

At one point, Feodora came into the room and saw them. She didn’t say a word and just left quietly. Some time later Mikhail slipped back to sleep, and from the look on his face, this time it seemed he didn’t dream.

***

The detoxification procedure went smoothly. Fei Long did as he said he would - he stayed from the beginning to the very end and until he was certain that Mikhail would recover safely. The next time he awakes, the drugs will have been flushed out of his system, and Mikhail will have a chance of becoming himself again. The only problem that bothered Fei Long was whether he would relapse, how quickly it may happen, and what would happen if it occurs in Moscow.

Fei Long sighed at the thought as he exited the treatment room where Mikhail still slept and closed the door quietly behind him. Mikhail needed his rest, and he needed breakfast. He hadn’t eaten anything since the small lunch he had the day before, and it was having an effect on his strength. It was just after six in the morning, and the sky was still dark. Chances were high that breakfast would not be ready at that point, but perhaps he could find something in the fridge and make himself a cup of coffee.

_Making coffee._ The idea almost discouraged him. He could make tea like no other, but coffee was Mikhail’s specialty, not to mention the gigantic machine the man had in his kitchen looked like it should come with a built-in barista to operate. It was never a problem before since its owner had always woken up early to make him some, refusing to allow anyone else to make his coffee or so much as touch his espresso machine. Fei Long thought of instant coffee or even one of those
brewed from automatic machines and immediately gave up on the idea altogether. Just like tea, once one have tasted a cup brewed to perfection, anything less is not considered the same substance and would not fulfill his craving. Wonderful, Fei Long thought. On top of being addicted to Mikhail’s touch, he was now addicted to the man’s espresso.

Mikhail had two kitchens in his house, one for the cooks and the other that was more elaborate and spacious for his personal use. Being someone who loves to cook, the personal kitchen was almost an obsession. The man had every tool Fei Long could think of and many that he couldn’t. He used to love looking at how professional Mikhail was around his stove and the way he handled his knives like they were priceless samurai swords. The memory made him smile as he made his way to Mikhail’s Sub-Zero to get himself some bread, only to find the refrigerator empty when it was always full. It was a sight that would tell anyone who knew the man that something wasn’t right, and it made him sigh more heavily than before. Just as he reached for the loaf of bread, someone’s footsteps startled him.

“I’m about to bake some scones if you want something to eat,” Feodora said as she entered and took out some flour. “He loves freshly baked scones with his coffee,” she added.

Fei Long studied her expression as she continued to prepare her baking tools. She was wearing a white, sleeveless linen dress that hung just below her knees under a simple clean-cut beige apron. The casual clothing made her appear somewhat more welcoming than her usual aggressive and formal style. But it wasn't just the clothes that seemed strange. For some reason, Feodora had been treating him differently since Mikhail’s detoxification. She seemed less hostile, though not entirely friendly, and she had kept her distance whenever he was near Mikhail. It made him wonder why, and what she was thinking.

“You always bake for him?” he asked just to start a conversation he hoped would turn out to be civilized.

“When he’s around, yes,” she replied without showing her emotions. “Mikhail can be very discriminating when it comes to food.”

“Well, with clothes, cars, yachts and planes as well,” Fei Long added as he rolled his eyes.

Feodora smiled. “He goes for the best and the hardest to get - always. You should be flattered,” she said with a hint of spite in her tone. The fact that Mikhail picked Fei Long meant that he saw something rare and precious in the man, and she knew it was precisely because he was hard to conquer that Mikhail dove right in like a moth to a flame. The problem was that Fei Long’s book never seemed to end as she’d hoped and Mikhail never seemed to get bored.

It was indeed flattering, and Mikhail’s best weapon had always been his straightforward and blunt style of flattery. Feodora seemed to notice this too. Of course she would. She’d been there with him longer than he’d known Tao or Yoh, Fei Long thought. Despite her attitude towards him, he had nothing against this woman… nothing serious anyway. On the contrary, she made him curious.

“How do you do it?” he asked, wondering how she could go about her business as if everything in her life was normal.

“How do I do what?”

“Live...like this?” He never understood why she would continue to be with Mikhail after all that he’d done to her. The man had never even tried to make his affairs a secret, nor had he ever shown any guilt while he was cheating on his wife. On one hand the concept made Mikhail a man despicable to most people, on the other it could be considered an act of honesty in the way that he
would never conceal his feelings or act for the sake of morality or guilt, but always in the interest of his heart’s desire. But when it comes to Feodora, who didn’t seem to gain anything from it, he wondered why she would stay and endure.

She didn’t answer him right away and proceeded to measure her ingredients for the dough with extreme precision. The woman was a perfectionist and her discipline was astounding. It was remarkable how she could survive her husband’s irresponsible, unpredictable, and unreliable nature.

“My whole family was murdered when I was eight. I saw them burn to death with my own eyes,” she said flatly, as if it was something that happened to someone else. “Vladimir was a friend to my father and took me into his family, and since then they have become my own.”

She went on kneading her dough the same way Mikhail used to. Fei Long could tell who had taught her to bake, and in a way it made him a little jealous that she had spent so much time with him, knowing him even when he was just a little boy.

“I must have fallen for him the moment he smiled at me,” she continued, remembering how the little boy used to beam at her with a head full of glittering blond hair like an angel she once read in her story books¾ only she found out soon enough that he was as much mischievous as he looked innocent. “But I’ve always been nothing more than a sister and a friend to him,” she said, this time with a hint of sadness in her tone before her lips stretched into a sarcastic smile. “I grew up watching him take other girls to bed. Sometimes he would ask me what I thought of his new date, other times he would come to me when his heart was broken by someone else.” She’d been his friend and sister long before she became his wife, but she was never his lover. Mikhail loved her, but never in that fashion.

“And you married him anyway,” Fei Long said. He would never understand a woman’s heart – why some would endure so much to be with a man who simply didn’t care. But most of those women he knew were weak and dependent. Feodora, on the other hand, could easily survive on her own, and even survive better than some powerful men he knew.

Feodora laughed quietly, remembering why she did what she did. “Vladimir was forcing him to marry to get rid of you. I would sooner rot in hell before I give him up to some dumb, ignorant slut,” she replied with a sneer. She thought then that if he wasn’t going to marry for love they might as well get married. It wasn’t going to change a thing in her life. “I’ve been in love with him for more than twenty years, and he asked me. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Still, it must hurt,” Fei Long said. “You could have walked away and let go.” Why stay when all it does is hurt you?

“Could I?” Feodora looked at him almost accusingly. “Could you?”

Could he? Fei Long found himself at a loss for words. He wanted to say yes, but it would taste like a lie. In a way, he was no different from her. He had been chasing after Asami the same way Feodora had been chasing Mikhail. “I try,” he replied. The truth was, he wasn't even sure if that much was true.

“Have you ever wondered why that bodyguard of yours still hasn’t left your side?”

Taken aback by an unexpected reference to Yoh, Fei Long didn’t answer. He wondered if Mikhail had told her about it too, or was Yoh’s feeling that apparent.

“Did you know he stood in front of your door the whole time you were with Mikhail?” she asked,
knowing that the answer would probably be a negative one. She knew it wasn’t duty. No. It was something else entirely. “You want to know if it hurts? Ask him. And while you’re at it, ask him why he stays.”

It was something Fei Long had never thought about – how Yoh must have felt after all this time of being so close to him, watching him with Mikhail or with Akihito. If it had hurt, the man sure didn’t show it. It was as though he’d never expected anything more and had somehow decided not to. Perhaps it was the same reason why Feodora had never seemed to be jealous of him, and all she’d ever shown was anger that he’d hurt Mikhail so badly.

“You’ve already given up on him,” he said in a form of confirmation rather than a question. He knew he was right. He could see it in her eyes.

“A long time ago,” she replied with a sad smile as she rolled out her dough and began to cut them into small rolls. She had already given up on Mikhail to return her feelings, but she could not walk away, no more than that bodyguard could walk away from Fei Long. “I’m here because I thought he needed me ... because it was my shoulder he used to cry on,” she added as she put down the knife and looked straight into his eyes. “This time he picked yours.”

It was an event that changed everything, including the way she felt about Fei Long. No matter how much pain this man had caused her and her husband, it was his shoulder that Mikhail had picked to cry on. After all this time that he’d refused to cry or accept the truth of Alexei’s death, Fei Long was the only one who could save him from the hell Mikhail had thrown himself into. As painful as it was, she owed Fei Long some gratitude for saving him. Unlike most people, she knew exactly what it’s like to lose someone close to her heart, she’d learned it the hard way and overnight. Between having Mikhail break her heart for the thousandth time and seeing him die, she’d go through every pain and suffering all over again. Fei Long had saved his life - that was an indisputable truth.

“Of course, I’m agitated, but the most important thing is that he cries,” she told him. *The most important thing is that Mikhail survives.*

“However, you should know that this changes nothing between us,” she said coldly, picking up the knife again and plunge its tip deep into her cutting board to make her point. “You hurt him again and I swear I will strike at you much better than the incompetent jerk that killed Alexei. Do we understand each other?”

Incompetent. Fei Long smiled sarcastically at her choice of word. She sure didn’t care to hide the fact that he should have been the one who died. He’d decided he liked her, after all. The woman had never seemed to feel sorry for herself, and in return, left no room for anyone to feel sorry for her. In a way, she almost resembled Mikhail in her bluntness and her crude way of showing honesty.

“Before you threaten me with Mikhail’s knife, which, by the way would infuriate him if he knows you’ve been handling it without care, why don’t we talk about your divorce?”

Feodora’s eyes narrowed into a calculating gaze. She was surprised to hear such a proposition from the man who wasn’t even sure of his own intentions just two days before. That morning Fei Long stood in front of her with eyes of a man who knew exactly what he wanted to do and was rather confident about moving into her spot. *Unbelievable.*

“I let you stay for two nights and now you think you can move into my house?” she asked in a firm and rigid tone.
“I’ve practically moved into his house and apartments a long time ago. If you don’t need to keep him as a husband, you might as well leave yourself some dignity,” he countered.

*He’s mine,* she could just hear him say it through his eyes. From the look on Fei Long’s face, the conversation had turned out to be a business proposal – one that sparked her interest. She straightened herself and crossed her arms above her chest.

“A divorce will not get me off your back,” she told him. Her marriage to Mikhail didn't mean anything from the beginning, and undoing it would not change much, just her last name.

"I'm not trying to get you off my back, I'm trying to get rid of you as his wife," Fei Long replied readily. It sounded cruel, but anything less would be an insult to this woman. "I will not consent to being his mistress." His mother was one, and he wasn't going to give anyone a chance to say 'like mother, like son.'

"It gives me pleasure to see you suffer that reputation," she said sourly. "Why would I give you the satisfaction?"

"Money," Fei Long replied, looking straight into her eyes to confirm his intention. "I want him back. And when I do get him back, you can wait for him to divorce you then and leave you with nothing but shame, or you can take my offer, divorce him now, keep your reputation and walk away with enough money to build youself a syndicate. Your choice."

Feodora stared back at him quietly for a few seconds, deliberating over the proposal. “I’m expensive,” she declared.

“And I’m rich,” Fei Long replied without hesitation.

She had to admit, it was a good offer. As much as it pained her to accept the truth, should Fei Long want Mikhail back, she had no doubt he would accomplish the task. Mikhail would divorce her the moment Fei Long asked for it and leave her with nothing more than a ruined reputation. But divorce him now and she'd get to rip off this man and go back to live the way she was - as a daughter to Vladimir, a sister to Mikhail ... and yes, there was also that other thing she'd almost forgotten about which would secure her position in the Arbatov's family more than ever. "What about that Japanese man?" she had to ask, for Mikhail's sake.

Knowing she had been successfully bought, Fei Long grinned almost victoriously before his expression softened a little as he gave her an answer- one she gave him just minutes ago, "perhaps it's time I give up on him too."

Just then, one of the maids came in and interrupted the silence. She walked over to her mistress and whispered her message, to which Feodora responded with a weary look on her face and an obvious scowl irritation on her lips.

“I like this proposal. But there’s something I must attend to at the moment,” she told him as she
took the knife out of the cutting board, wiped it clean, and carefully placed it back on the table. “Don’t tell him about the knife. He’d kill me.”

“Anything I can do?” he asked after noticing the sudden strain on her face.

Feodora paused for a moment to consider and decided that there was something he could do.

“What do you know about John Wong?”

***

P.S. I enjoyed writing this chapter the most in Retribution. I hope you like it. And BTW, a good chunk of it has been added after it was beta-ed so any mistakes are my fault. Oh, a Sub-Zero is an insanely expensive professional fridge made for the filthy rich I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing one in RL lol. Anyway, like it, hate it, please comment or my muse will go into hiding again (for 6 months?)

P.P.S. Translations status, German version of C.I. Is taken by Tradij. ^_^ Thank you sweetie.
Retribution Eight

I’m so sorry for the lateness of this chapter, not to mention it’s really short for my standard. I hope it’s not too bad.

Title: Retribution Eight
Rating: PG-13
Warning: Nothing really. Does boredom count?
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Feodora
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I’m afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, and newly added Spanish translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

Insufferable, deceitful prick!

Feodora faked a smile as she remembered Fei Long’s description of her newly arrived, uninvited guest and his bodyguards. John Wong was an old man in his sixties who seemed to believe having a penis made him superior to all those without. The man stood to about her shoulder in height, and while his face was in serious need of Botox, his body could benefit from a few less spring rolls. He was as ugly as Fei Long was beautiful, and she couldn’t help but to feel amazed at how the two men shared the same race.

According to the information Fei Long had given her, Wong was a business partner that Mikhail never fully trusted, but he’d kept for certain benefits. She’d remembered how the man had been persistently inquiring about Mikhail’s well being for the last few days. It seemed he wasn’t quite convinced of the answer he’d been given and had to see for himself if she’d lied about her husband being “busy” with funeral preparations. As a rule, she didn’t trust anyone and had told them all the same lie. It appeared to be a wise decision, since Fei Long had also told her that the Wongs had been suspected of working behind Mikhail’s back to take over some of their businesses in Macau. The fact that they were there meant they must have heard some rumors. But what had they heard exactly? she thought.

“To what do I owe this pleasure, Mr. Wong?” she asked politely in English. Her Cantonese was far better than Mikhail’s, but there was no reason to let them know she could speak, read and write the language. From the looks of it, the old man had considered her to be Mikhail’s ignorant little wife. Good, she thought. It meant that he was as dumb and ignorant as he was ancient, and she preferred to keep her enemies that way.

“I just came to offer my condolences,” Wong replied, trying to stand as tall as he could in front of her. “Where is your husband?”

Feodora just smiled. “As I said before, he’s very busy and has asked me to make sure he is not disturbed.”
Wong’s lips lifted into a sneer that made him even uglier than he already was as he sat down uninvited. “I would suggest you fetch him if he’s just busy. We have important business to discuss.”

For a moment, she had to wonder if anyone was capable of “fetching” Mikhail Arbatov against his will - an action that even Vladimir had failed most of the time. “My husband has left me in charge of his business. If there’s anything you would like to discuss, please do not hesitate to speak to me,” Feodora replied gracefully, accompanied by a gentle smile. Honestly, she was secretly thinking if her right or left stiletto would look better in the old man’s eye, and how much she would enjoy punching it through.

“To leave his business to a woman... the rumors must be true.”

**Perhaps both,** Feodora concluded.

“I assure you, he’s fine. I’m looking after his affairs while he’s occupied with the funeral. For now please leave your business here with me.”

“It’s not something I’d discuss with a woman. I’ll wait here for his return,” Wong replied as he eyed her, showing his irritation. Women should be kept in their places, and should never be allowed to interfere with business. Arbatov should know that sending a woman to receive him was considered an insult. But perhaps the rumors were true, and the Russian had no other choice.

According to his sources, Mikhail Arbatov has been struggling with severe drug problems which is why his wife has been keeping him out of the public at all costs.

“Perhaps you would like to discuss it with me?” a silky-smooth voice sounded from behind.

Wong looked over his shoulder and immediately recognized the tall, elegant figure leaning on the door frame. “Liu Sin Saang?”

"Good morning," Feodora quickly greeted. "You slept well, I hope?"

"I did, thank you," Fei Long replied, feeling a little irritated at her last sentence. By making an appearance he’d simply hoped to state Baishe’s position as Arbatov’s ally to help secure Mikhail’s power. Feodora immediately pick up the hint and had decided without his consent to expose the fact that he’d slept over, elaborating in one simple sentence the closeness of his relationship with Mikhail Arbatov. Not to mention the way she said it gave him no room to twist the fact around. Goddamn witch!

"As he said," she turned to Wong with a victorious gleam in her eyes. "You may also discuss the matter with Liu Fei Long of Baishe. My husband trusts him with all his heart," she humbly suggested. Fei Long’s timing was impeccable and he’d just saved her favorite pair of Jimmy Choo.

Fei Long could see the grin on the old man’s face quickly faded. With Baishe’s full support, Wong would never dare make a move against the Arbatovs, regardless of the state Mikhail was in. And since there was no use denying their personal relationship, thanks to his wife, he might as well underline this alliance. "Mikhail is still asleep. You can discuss your business with me, or wait until he wakes up. Would you like to join us for breakfast?"

"That won't be necessary," Wong grounded his teeth as he answered. "It can wait. Please give him my condolences and let him know I stopped by." It was a mistake Liu Fei Long shouldn’t have been there! The ties between Baishe and Arbatov should have been severed, according to his information.
He was quickly escorted to his limousine by Arbatov's men. As the car left the gate, Wong took out his cell phone and made a call, cursing quietly to himself. That stunt of his was complete waste of time, and it would seem that his sources’ information was incorrect. Their alliance should have been obliterated. Or at the least, Liu Fei Long should have been out of the way.

A woman answered the call after a few rings. Wong quickly spoke into the phone, "Get me Phillip Toh."

****

“I want thirty percent of your shares in the Macau casino.” Feodora continued their earlier discussion once they were back in the kitchen as she tended to her freshly baked scones.

“You might as well suck my blood while you’re at it,” Fei Long replied with a chuckle. Feodora may be the kind of wife who bakes for her husband, but she was clearly better at cooking up business deals than scones. He’d expected a number, not a percentage. “Unfortunately, my reputation doesn’t cost that much. Ten percent is as close as it gets.”

“You are depriving me of the right to the entire Arbatov fortune, and this is me being kind. Twenty percent and a million dollars in cash.”

“It’s only a matter of time when that right will be forfeited from you. I can just wait for him to divorce you and not pay a cent.”

“Of course,” Feodora lifted her chin and smirked at the threat. “You are forgetting the fact that I may sue.” She had plenty of evidence, enough to rip off a good chunk of Mikhail’s fortune if she wanted to. Of course, she would never do that to Mikhail but that was a fact Fei Long didn't need to know.

“Whatever happened to love?” Fei Long had to wonder. He could tell that she was bluffing. But then again, a woman's mind tends to change by the minute.

“Sex has nothing to do with love, neither does money,” she said with mockery in her tone. “A woman does what she can to survive.”

Twenty percent of my casino shares is more than surviving, you bloodsucking witch, he wanted to argue. Yet Fei Long could feel his stomach turn at the thought of having to deal with a woman over a lawsuit, especially this woman. “Fifteen percent and a million dollars in cash on the condition that you agree to not sue him, in writing.”

“Agreed,” she replied quickly. “I’ll send over my lawyer.”

Just then, a heavy footstep sounded from the hallway, prompting the discussion to pause as they turned to see the intruder. Mikhail entered the kitchen in his crisp white linen shirt and a pair of pale khaki trousers. His blond hair had been carefully combed back to reveal his striking blue eyes while his beard had been shaved neat and clean as it used to be. Fei Long held his breath at the hint of seeing Mikhail returning to his old self again. Perhaps the rapid detoxification did work better than he’d hoped. But somehow, the way Mikhail looked at him that morning made him feel out of place and uncomfortable.

"Good morning," Feodora said, her eyes lit up at the sight of her husband and suddenly the witch had turned into a teenage girl. "How are you feeling?"

Mikhail walked past her to the drawer on the other side of the kitchen island without a response. He took out an opened pack of Marlboro, lighting himself one with a cheap lighter he’d stashed
inside the pack. The choice of cigarette and the way he smoked were enough to tell he was still far from being his old self. Feodora seemed to notice that too, judging from the way her smile suddenly faded.

After a brief moment of silence, he turned to Feodora. "Excuse us," he demanded with a tone that left no room for objection.

With that look on his face, she knew she had no choice but to comply. "Try to eat something. You must be hungry," she said before leaving through the dining room door.

The room fell into suffocating stillness when she left. Fei Long stood quietly, watching Mikhail take another puff on the cigarette, and waited for the conversation to be initiated. They hadn't talked since the night Mikhail broke down and cried in his arms. For all he knew the man may not remember a thing, and their relationship may still very well be the opposite of what he'd just led John Wong to believe. In a way, those cold eyes had already confirmed his fear.

Mikhail knocked off the ashes from the cigarette and looked at him as if he was about to pass a death sentence. "Which part of I don't want see you or hear from you ever again do you not understand? Liu..."

“Don’t,” Fei Long cut in before he could finish the sentence. "Don't you say it! At that point he could bear anything except the way Mikhail had chosen to call him lately. Hearing it once was more than enough to leave a scar. "My wound still hasn’t healed from the first time you called me that. Must you inflict another?"

Mikhail paused for a second before his lips curled up into a smile that was filled with self-pity and spite. "Did you ever hesitate when you gave me mine?"

_Did I?_ Fei Long swallowed the question with difficulty. It must have been a question that had plagued Mikhail’s mind for quite some time. But the worst thing about it was the fact that Mikhail had already known the answer a long time ago, and had somehow decided to accept such treatment, at least until now.

"It was never intentional," Fei Long replied. "You know this. You know me.” That much he was certain.

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m done knowing you,” Mikhail replied with a voice that sounded coarser than it had ever been. He had hoped that what happened the other night was just a dream, that when he woke up he wouldn’t have to see the face that gave him nightmares. It appeared Fei Long was really there and must have stayed over since then – a revelation that only gave him a bitter taste in his mouth. The rapid detoxification worked on the heroin, but it did nothing to flush the man out of his system.

Fei Long closed his eyes to the pain as those words tore at his heart. Mikhail had not forgiven him. _Why should he?_ For all the damage he had done to this man, he had done nothing to earn forgiveness nor proven himself worthy to stand by him. It was only fair. Mikhail had wounded him no more than he’d wounded the man.

_It’s time._

Slowly, he reached up to the gold chain around his neck and slipped it off. “Give me your hand,” he asked, gesturing at the one with the gold bracelet around the wrist. Mikhail hesitated a little but soon allowed him to take hold of it.
“When you gave me this, you never told me what it meant,” Fei Long said as he positioned the key on the bracelet and began to turn the screw. “You put this around your own wrist and made me wear the key without an explanation.” When one side of the bracelet came loose, he moved on to the other. “There is a reason why the Love Bracelet cannot be worn or taken off by yourself. You can’t surrender your heart to someone who does not want it, no more than you can take it back without the other’s consent.”

Fei Long paused just before the second screw came loose. This was it. One more turn and he would free Mikhail from the bondage they had forced upon themselves prematurely. He’d made up his mind to do this two nights before when he’d last held Mikhail in his arms, knowing that it had to be done. But despite his resolve, he suddenly lacked the strength to turn the key for the last time. He gritted his teeth and made himself try, but his hand was shaking too much to finish the task.

It was then that he felt the warmth of Mikhail’s hand around his, holding it tight and steady, as if to stop him from turning the key, or so he hoped. But the words he wanted to hear were never spoken and that hand did not try to stop him. Fei Long closed his eyes and tried to swallow the lump in his throat as the roughness of Mikhail’s hand pressed against his skin, bringing back the memories Mikhail wanted him to leave behind - a request he could not and would not comply. He would always remember how it felt to be loved and treasured by this man long after it had come to an end.

_I will always remember us._

He took a deep breath and turned the key. The bracelet fell off Mikhail’s wrist and into the palm of his hand. “You should have told me what it meant.” Fei Long said with a faint smile on his face - the only kind he could force himself to give. “And I would have told you that you had it all wrong.”

_It was always you who held the key to my heart._

"There is something I must do in Japan. Something I must finish before I can stand here in front of you and beg you for forgiveness." He closed his hand tight around the pendent once more before placing the chain around Mikhail’s neck. “When I return, I want you to ask me that question you’ve always been afraid to ask,” Fei Long continued, looking into those blue eyes as his hand caressed the gold jewelry on Mikhail’s chest. It was a question Feodora had asked him earlier - one he wanted more than anything to be able to answer. But right now it would not be fair or truthful to Mikhail. Not until he’d gotten something out of the way.

“When that time comes and you can find even the smallest measurement of your heart to forgive me, I hope that you will put this bracelet around my wrist with your own hands,” Fei Long said as he pushed Mikhail’s hand to close around the jewelry. “Where it belongs.”

Mikhail just stood there silently, listening to everything he had to say without so much as a change in expression. And when his strong hand closed around the jewelry and tore away from his touch, Fei Long felt his heart being ripped away with it. Everything had gone the way he’d expected it to, but there was still a part of him that wished Mikhail’s heart would soften the way it did countless of times before. But that day it didn’t happen, and he was sure it was for the best. "Have a safe trip back to Moscow, and come back soon," he said before he’d decided to turn around and walk away. The longer he stayed, the harder it would be for him to leave.

"Fei Long," Mikhail called.

The sound made his knees weak. Hearing Mikhail called him by name made that damn lump in his throat swell up again, and this time it was impossible for him to hold back the tears that he’d tried so hard to hold in. _Stop it! Don’t you cry in front of him._
"You're welcome to join us for breakfast before you go," Mikhail told him in a rigid and formal tone. They were just words of courtesy, but even then it didn't stop him from wanting, aching to stay.

**Pull yourself together!** Fei Long took a long, deep breath and wiped the teardrops that managed to get away with the back of his hand. He turned around to face Mikhail, who now stood a few feet too far from his reach, and made a gesture of measurement with his thumb and index finger. "I’m this close to pinning you down on the floor and fucking you senseless,” he said with a playful smile, even though his voice still trembled and his cheeks were still damp. “If I stay I will never leave.”

It was just a simple joke he said to keep himself from appearing so pathetic, but at that moment Mikhail suddenly looked away for a second. Fei Long noticed his cheeks turned a little red as his lips lifted into his signature, playboy grin. “I do have that affect on people sometimes,” he said with a shrug, and for a moment that lasted too soon, the same alluring sparkle returned to those blue eyes.

The sight nearly threw Fei Long off balance. It had to be the first time he saw Mikhail blush like that, and it made all those memories of having the man stripped naked in his bed rush straight to his groin. If he’d known Mikhail would be so adorable when he blushed, he would have teased him much more often when he had the chance.

“Oh shut up,” Fei Long hushed, feeling a good amount of weight lifted from his chest to see Mikhail returned to his old self, even for a split second. He may have lost the Love Key, but there was a good chance he would not lose Mikhail to drug relapse, given what he just saw on that handsome face. The most important thing was that Mikhail survived through this, and survived well.

As Fei Long exited the room, Mikhail lit himself another cigarette and knotted his brows as the coarse, disgusting taste reached his tongue. He had been smoking any cigarette he could get his hands on for the past few weeks and didn’t notice how horrible it was until that day. Perhaps the detoxification had also brought back his sense of taste and smell, or maybe it had something to do with the fact that he felt suddenly hungry.

“'I’m this close to pinning you down on the floor and fucking you senseless,'” a voice sounded from behind. Mikhail turned around and found Feodora standing by the door behind him with her arms crossed over her chest.

“I don’t even have to look and I know you must be as hard as a rock,” she said in a criticizing tone before she tossed him a brand new pack of Treasurer Black. “Enough with the cheap cigarette. I can’t stand that awful smell.”

Mikhail glared at her annoyingly for a second before crushing the white cigarette in the nearby tray and lit himself a black one. While he didn’t like her eavesdropping on him, he was rather thankful for the smoke. “By the way, what were you discussing behind my back in the kitchen?” he suddenly remembered.

“My divorce,” she replied without hesitation.

*Her* divorce. She said it as though it had nothing to do with him. "Without my consent?"

“Why? Would you have made a bigger offer?”

Mikhail rolled his eyes and sighed. Sometimes he wondered if she could make someone bleed just
by talking. “Why would Fei Long want you to divorce me?”

“A man’s pride can be a costly thing,” she replied, intentionally omitting the details about Fei Long wanting him back. It didn’t benefit her for him to know, and she doesn’t do things without a profit.

“What did he offer you?” he asked curiously.

“Fifteen percent of his casino shares, and a million dollars in cash.”

Mikhail raised a brow. “For giving up access to my bank account? Did you suddenly develop a sense of compassion while I was asleep?” He could understand the fifteen percent of shares, but a million dollars in cash? Considering Feodora’s spending habits, it wouldn’t last her more than a few weeks on Via Condotti.

“He is the man you love,” she said sarcastically. “But considering that I’m getting the better end of the deal, I’ve decided to be kind and require only a little compensation for the pain he’s put me through. Call it retribution, if you will.”

Mikhail narrowed his eyes suspiciously. She was already managing most of the family’s fortune for his father. The amount she was speaking of was miniscule in comparison and definitely not the better end of the deal. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

Feodora smiled. “I’m three months pregnant, and in my womb lies the only heir to the entire Arbatov fortune.”

***

P.S. Sorry for being so late with this chapter. I’ve rewritten it so many times and I hope it’s all right. Please let me know your thoughts. I’m really insecure about it >_< On a second note, I’m working on another project which will be a multi-chapter Mik x Fei fic, illustrated by a pro mangaka who decides to be kind and offer me a fic-art trade. This will slow everything down, but on the bright side, there will be many more Mik x Fei to come, fic-wise and we’ll get to see some Mik x Fei drawn by a pro!!! *OMG* And Jelly is working herself sick on the second part of the DJ, it being some 30 pages long *gets bricked by Jelly for humongous script*
Retribution Nine

I took a really long time to update, but I made it up in length. Enjoy.

Title: Retribution Nine
Rating: NC-17 (yes, NC-17 and no, they're not back together)
Warning: Oh hell...where do I begin? Adultery, intentionally lame intercourse...and I wrote A x A for the fist time in my life (ok, now is the time you run and save your sanity).
Characters: Asami x Fei (yes, by all means, stone me to death), A x A, Mikhail, OC (Vladimir Arbatov)
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, and newly added Spanish translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

Special thanks to sunflower1343 who helped talk me through the Asami part (even though it probably sucks still, I finally worked up the courage to write it out) ^_^

It was snowing the day his mother died. His father always said it was the cold that took her life. "That's why Alexei can never stand the cold," he claimed. While Mikhail was never convinced of the reason, that fact about his brother was undeniable. Alexei never did like the cold. As a boy he would spend all day in front of the fireplace during winter, doing absolutely nothing like a bear in hibernation. When he was old enough, he would jet off to a tropical island somewhere before it began to snow, returning only when the spring officially started.

'What a shame', Mikhail thought as he caught the falling snow in his palm. He wished it hadn't snowed. Alexei would have liked to come home when it wasn't so cold, and that much he couldn’t do for his brother. Time was definitely not on his side, and he knew their father would never allow him to leave Alexei’s body anywhere but home.

Mikhail brushed away the snow that landed on the bridge of his nose. He could hardly feel a thing in this weather. The cold had numbed most of his senses and spared only the ones he wished it didn't. The growing weight in his chest didn't help either and only made it increasingly difficult for him to breathe.

He looked up at the house and held his breath as a familiar figure appeared by the window- his father had been expecting him. He had ordered all direct phone lines to be cut and made sure everyone understood that no one was to have direct contact with the boss. But Vladimir Arbatov had eyes and ears everywhere with or without the cooperation of his own men, and he wondered if his father already knew and was simply waiting for a confirmation from him. The thought made each step even more difficult than it already was, and by the time he'd reached the front door, it felt like he was dragging along the dead bodies of everyone he'd ever killed in his lifetime.
It would be the second time his father lost someone dear when it snowed, and he knew the memory of his mother's death would only add to the grief. Vladimir Arbatov had always been openly proud of his firstborn, but those who knew him personally knew Alexei was his favorite - one who had always managed to get a loving smile out of Vladimir and warmed his heart. And now that son is dead by the other's doing. What will his father say? Will he be mad, sad, or disappointed? He wished they had switched places. Alexei would know better what to say if it had been him lying in the coffin. Unfortunately, death was a luxury he couldn’t afford- not now anyway.

He dragged himself into the house and up the stairs to the second floor toward the library. The family's doctor, who had been waiting in the drawing room with two assistants, stood up to greet him. He nodded in acknowledgement and proceeded to the door. As hard as it was, he had always preferred to get things out of the way rather than carrying the weight on his shoulders. It was easier dealing with consequences. Having anxiety exhausted him more than anything.

The library was dimly lit that morning, as was always the case when his father occupied the room. Vladimir Arbatov prefers reading alone in the dark with just one or two lamps lit nearby, only that day he wasn't reading. Mikhail found his father standing by the window, his face concealed by the shadows that filled the room as if it was housing a hundred ghosts. The only thing visible was a pair of silver blue eyes that pierced through the darkness like those of a Siberian wolf. Mikhail hated seeing the glow in those eyes, he always had. It made him feel as though all his secrets and thoughts were about to be plucked out of him, with or without his consent.

"I thought you had died driving one of your stupid cars," Vladimir said sharply with no humor in his tone, his expression still well hidden from the light.

"Unfortunately, no," Mikhail replied, thinking to himself how it would have been a good way to go and if he would be fortunate enough to die without a single bullet in his body. Alexei should have had that luxury. Up until then he had nothing much to do with the family's business.

"I assume you’re here to explain why my phone lines have been cut and all my visitors have been turned away?" As always, Vladimir Arbatov never asks, he demands an answer and then puts you on the stand for judgment.

Mikhail swallowed the bile in his throat as the tension in that tone crept right under his skin - the way it used to when he was little and had been caught doing something inappropriate. “Dad knows everything”, Alexei used to say. “He knows everything but will make you confess anyway.” His father must have understood there were secrets everyone was keeping from him and realized it was significant enough to allow it to go on until his son decides to break it to him. He wondered if his father already knew and had been preparing himself for the confirmation. Or could it be that his father was just as vulnerable as any other man and had been trying to delay the revelation until the very last minute?

"Feodora is pregnant, you're going to be a grandfather," Mikhail told him. Perhaps that fact would lessen the pain and give the old man the will to live. For a split second he thought those eyes had softened a little, but that softness disappeared much too soon than he'd hoped.

"The other news, Mikhail." There was disappointment in the tone he used, and that deep, resonating voice trembled slightly as he spoke. Mikhail bit his lower lip as he realized it was a mistake. Vladimir Arbatov was no fool. The old man saw through him as if he was still six years old. All that revelation did was increase the intensity of the bad news to follow.

He stepped closer and took his father's right hand in his, squeezing it tightly the way his father used to do for him whenever he needed assurance. Still, it wasn't the same. His hand was trembling, and it lacked the confidence and stability of his father's grip. He wanted to appear tough
and reliable, but deep down he may still be the one whose hand needed to be held. Who was he kidding? By that time he had failed to keep the only man he'd ever loved, lost the only brother he'd ever had, and was facing the possibility of losing a father who was also the only family he had left. Even then, Mikhail knew he'd probably live through all this. But to what end? He asked himself. Is there anything still desirable in this world?

“They killed Alexei,” he said it as clear as he could to avoid having to repeat the words. It was a lie, but he had always been good at telling lies. The truth was he did it. He killed Alexei - through all the red signals he ignored, the warnings he decided not to listen, and through his father's attempt at preventing the foreseen tragedy that he stubbornly went up against in pursuit of the one man he knew from the beginning he couldn't have.

His father’s body swayed back a little before he quickly gained back control. Other than that slight gesture he seemed strangely calm - too calm for Mikhail's liking. Vladimir slowly turned back to the window in the way that made it impossible to see his expression. He stood looking out through the shower of snow without a word for what seemed to Mikhail an eternity before he finally decided to speak.

“Tell me how and why,” he asked quietly, but the way he said it felt like a death sentence to his son.

In a way, it might very well be his death sentence. After all, the hardest part wasn’t telling his father his favorite son had died, but precisely how and why he had to die. The answers to those questions were the hardest to give and even more difficult to swallow.

“There was an attack at my penthouse,” Mikhail replied after taking a long, deep breath. His throat went dry as he tried to explain what had happened while his mind continuously attacked him with the dreadful manifestation of the event he did not witness. “It wasn’t meant for him.” There it goes, the cold, hard edges of truth. “Fei Long was...there.”

That name seemed to be the last straw. He could sense his father breathing heavier and faster at the revelation from the movements of his shoulders. “Dad,” Mikhail said as he reached out to touch the wool of his father’s sleeve. Vladimir didn’t respond nor did he show any obvious movement, but Mikhail could feel the small yet violent tremble that prompted him to call for the doctor.

The team rushed into the room within seconds. As they tried to help, the old man struggled and angrily brushed them aside.

“Get away from me!” his father yelled at them. It was the first time everyone had heard him raise his voice that way, the first time they'd seen Vladimir Arbatov lose it. “I’m not going to die and give that backstabbing bastard the satisfaction!” he yelled again, slamming his fist hard against the desk nearby as he struggled to regain control of his collapsing body.

In all that chaos, Mikhail stood a few steps away, watching everything that happened as though the event had already taken place and he was seeing the replay of it all. He asked himself if he should be yelling, crying or feeling anything at all, but his brain didn’t seem to function. All he could feel was the familiar yearning - an unquenchable hunger that made the veins in his arm throbbed to be fed with something he knew would give him the way out of all this madness. Quietly he slipped out of the room without a single person noticing him leave.

***

Fei Long stood quietly in front of the door and took a long, deep breath before pressing the button on the intercom. A few minutes past with no answer but he continued to wait, knowing the
The apartment was occupied and that he was most likely being watched. He couldn’t blame them taking their time. After all he was the last person who should’ve appeared at their door and no doubt the most unwelcomed.

The door clicked open slowly and hesitantly, revealing the familiar face he had come to know and care for.

Takaba Akihito looked up at him as if he had seen a ghost before his expression changed to resemble someone who had been caught cheating. It was then that he realized the boy had opened the door for him without his lover’s consent, perhaps even without his knowledge.

“What are you doing here?” Akihito asked in a whisper. He didn’t quite know what to do, knowing that he couldn’t just leave the triad leader standing out there. On the other hand he wasn’t sure how Asami would react to the unexpected visit. It had to be unexpected - Asami would never invite Fei Long into his personal space to meet. The last time they met, they nearly killed each other.

“Is that the Japanese way of greeting a friend, or has he already infected you with his rudeness?” Fei Long replied with a smile. It was just like Akihito to go out of his way to avoid conflict. The boy had a good heart and it was a pity for him to be involved with the likes of Asami … or him for that matter, he admitted.

“That’s not funny,” Akihito forgot himself and scolded the Chinese man. “You know he wouldn’t like to see you here.”

“Am I that insignificant? Or is he just pretending he doesn’t care?” Fei Long thought to himself, despite a part of his conscience that told him to ignore such a reaction or the lack thereof. “I don’t remember inviting you into my life either. Let’s call it even, shall we?”

“I didn’t do it, if that’s why you’re here,” Asami said abruptly, exhaling the smoke from his lungs as he spoke. He’d been informed of the shooting at Arbatov’s penthouse and had somehow half-expected Fei Long to show up one way or another. The man liked to blame him for everything bad that happened whether or not it made sense.

Fei Long snorted at the remark. As always, the man had immediately assumed him to be that ignorant and stupid.

“What a pity you didn’t. I would have loved to see the Russians hunt you down.” If Asami had ordered the attack, Mikhail would have tried to kill the man faster than he could shoot heroine up his arm. If that ever happens, between Asami’s calculating intelligence and Mikhail’s unpredictable madness, he could never tell who would walk out of it alive.
“If it was me you would have been dead as intended,” Asami smirked with the cigarette still hanging between his lips. "And it would have taken just one bullet." Fei Long should know it wasn’t his style to kill so loudly.

"Of course," Fei Long replied as he stepped inside uninvited and seated himself on the sofa, staring back into those golden eyes that grew more irritated by the minute. He had to admit there was a strange fulfillment to irritating Asami Ryuichi, and he was sure Mikhail couldn’t agree more. "You've always preferred a more personal approach."

“It was always business, never personal,” Asami declared as though he was speaking to a clueless child. At least it was what he wanted it to be, until Fei Long turned everything personal. “Why don’t you cut through the crap and get to the point, Fei Long? I have a life even if you don’t.”

'The only reason I don’t is because of you, you selfish bastard,’ Fei Long thought of saying it out loud, but he hadn’t come all the way to Japan that day to fight. He’d come to leave something behind and move on.

“We need to talk,” Fei Long replied, ignoring the insult that the other man seemed to enjoy throwing in his face every time they meet. “Indulge me.”

***

The bar they’d picked was half empty - just like that night seven years ago when underneath his coat was a shirt ripped to shreds and his lips were bruised and bloody. How pitiful I must have looked that day, Fei Long thought to himself and allowed a faint smile to surface as he took a sip of his bourbon. He could still remember so much - the taste of alcohol mixed with blood in his mouth, the song that was playing while they talked, even the faint smell of Marlboro that came from the man sitting next to him. Apparently, that smell had not changed.

“How is Arbatov?” Asami asked. It was an attempt at killing the silence, although he had to admit he was also curious about how the Russians were holding up after the incident. There will be war, that fact was obvious enough to anyone with common sense. The question was when, and how he could profit from it.

The glass in Fei Long’s hand hung in the air a few seconds before he took another sip of the Bourbon. “Which one?” he asked as his lips stretched out into a rather pitiful smile. The name Arbatov brought back painful memories of not one but two men, and he felt like paying tribute to the one he’d killed.

“The one you’ve been fucking,” Asami replied with an edge to his voice. He didn’t like explaining himself. Apparently, as always, the Chinese man liked to create the occasion. It was one of the things that prevented him from looking at Fei Long as an option for a lover. The man would demand an answer or an explanation to everything, sometimes with his action, other times with just a look on his face. The idea alone made him suffocate. He admitted that physically it was difficult for anyone to not feel some kind of attraction toward the Chinese man. Fei Long was a picture of perfection that had excited him on more than one occasion in the past. But the emotional baggage that came with him was a nightmare to Asami. The man was a lot to handle, and he possessed no patience nor will to tackle the task, even if he had more than once played with the idea of having such a beauty in his bed.

Even now, that possibility still lingered like a stubborn stain that won’t wash off. As they sat having a conversation, Asami could feel himself being drawn to that smooth, elegant neck as Fei Long tilted his head back and his long, jet-black hair parted to reveal a generous amount of skin. The man looked at him from the corner of his eyes as he realized he was being watched and
allowed it to continue without changing his position. Whether or not everything was intentional, Asami had a feeling soon he would need to rush home and ride Takaba until dawn.

"Haven't you heard? I've been fucking both," Fei Long said with a melancholic smile and a hint of guilt in his eyes. It was his scarlet letter, and somehow he felt like making a confession to someone, even if that someone was as far from being a priest as possible. On the other hand, he may have said it out of curiosity as to how Asami might react to such a statement.

For some reasons beyond his comprehension, Asami found himself frowning at those words. It might have been the way Fei Long said it, or the underlying meaning that, despite everything the man had done to make his life miserable, there actually were two other significant men in his life that irritated him to no end. It wasn’t jealousy - he knew that for certain. If anything, it may have been possessiveness. After all, he’d always had complete power over Fei Long’s emotions, but something about the man that day was proving him wrong. There was a sense of certainty about him that wasn’t there before. The lost and confused boy he knew seven years ago had turned into a man - confident, decisive, and not so easy to move, not to mention having the sex appeal to end all.

"Who you fuck is none of my business," Asami replied sharply. "As long as you stay away from Takaba."

Unexpectedly, the expression on Fei Long’s face changed slightly at the end of the sentence. For a moment Asami thought he saw the naive young boy he’d met seven years ago through those bright, amethyst eyes again. It brought back memories he didn’t like to keep - how he’d once allowed his emotions to interfere with work and ended up ruining everything - along with something that resembled a butterfly in his stomach.

"Is he really that important to you?" Fei Long asked, looking straight at him in the way that allowed no room for deception.

"Yes," he replied. The boy was his sanctuary - a breath of fresh air he'd never had, and needed. Fei Long should know he would never run around rescuing people he didn’t care about.

"Was I?"

It was the kind of question that suffocated him like a noose around his neck. If there was anything Asami hated the most it was having to bare his heart. It was why he'd never committed to anyone in the past. Even now that he’d just admitted Takaba's significance to his life, he still had never been asked to commit. That was why he treasured the boy above others. Takaba Akihito had never demanded his precious space, in fact he had never demanded anything from him. There was no guilt, no restrictions, and no obligations being with the boy, all of which was always apparent with Fei Long, every minute, every day. The Chinese man liked to corner him, making him do things he would usually not do, and guilt him into explaining his actions. That night was yet another example, and he dealt with it as he always had in the past - he brushed it aside and demanded the subject be dropped immediately.

"Whatever I felt back then is finished. I don't see the point of digging it up again."

"The point is that it's not over for me," Fei Long replied and decided to finish his drink and asked for another. He needed the alcohol to keep his head cool and the truth flowing out of him. "Have you ever thought that I needed to know whether or not it was all a lie?" he asked, trying to keep his tone as even as he could. It was never a good idea in the past to bring in his emotions. They always ended up fighting or throwing words of insults at each other. That night he didn’t want to fight anymore, and he wished Asami would feel the same way.
“I need to know that I haven’t lost everything over a mere illusion that you felt something for me,” Fei Long continued. “You think everything is over the moment you left Hong Kong, that everything is finished when you say it is. There are consequences to every action and two sides to every story, Asami. It’s not finished. Not for me.”

There, he said it – the questions that had haunted him for nearly a decade. It was never about revenge - he was too smart to know Asami didn’t kill his father - it was always about finding closure. He could swear to his grave that he had been fooled and manipulated by Asami, that everything was all a lie, but there would always be a part of him that doubted it all. There would always be a part of him that believed it wasn’t all for nothing, that Asami did care, that it was possible for someone to see him for who he was and accepted him for it. That part of him had carved a hole in his chest that was as ugly as the scar his real father had inflicted, and it would never be filled until he knew the whole truth.

Asami twirled the glass in his hand as he listened before finishing his drink. He admitted he may have tried to take the easy way out and leave behind all the evidence of his failure seven years ago. He had sent Yoh to clean up his mess afterwards, to keep an eye on Fei Long and make sure he survived. The purpose was to have control over Baishe after Fei Long had returned to take over the triad, but it may have very well been an excuse he used to deal with the guilt of having messed up the young man’s life to that extent. After all, while he had all the secrets from within Baishe through Yoh, he’d never once made use of them. And now Fei Long was sitting next to him, demanding that he reopened the case and fix everything by telling the truth about his feelings back then. It was a simple question - one confession would have done the trick and he would be able to move on and finally leave everything behind. The only problem was, he did not know the answer, and perhaps that night there was a way to find out.

“Then let’s finish it,” he placed down the glass and rose to his feet. “Tonight, once and for all.”

***

Akihito found himself in the kitchen trying to chop up some vegetables for dinner as he accidentally cut himself. “Shit!” he shook his hand and cursed before he ran for the sink. Washing off the blood from his finger, his mind went back to the thought he had been trying to suppress the moment Asami had left.

It wasn’t the first time Asami had gone out during the night, and it was never a problem with Akihito. The problem this time was that he’d gone out with Fei Long. He had been told nothing about their relationship, and he’d never allowed himself to ask. As with everything else about Asami, he’d convinced himself that it didn’t matter, that he didn’t need to know, or that it was better to not know. While they were basically living together, the distance between him and the older man hadn’t decreased in any way. There existed a certain area in Asami’s life that was off limits to him and moving in with the man had changed nothing. Asami would keep him tailed at all times but would never get himself involved, and Akihito would never ask a question about the older man’s whereabouts because it wasn’t his business. It didn’t bother him that much to have that kind of relationship with Asami...until Fei Long showed up at their door.

He turned off the faucet and wiped his hand dry. It was still bleeding but somehow the pain he felt came instead from his wrist - where the mark of Baishe used to be. Asami had the tattoo removed a long time ago and the wound had already healed. But every once in a while he could still feel the sting that reminded him of the dreadful event. From what he knew, Fei Long had been fixated on Asami, perhaps even in love with him. And even though Asami didn’t seem to feel the same, there was always a certain bond between the two of them that anyone with eyes could see - the kind of bond and understanding he never had with the older man. He may be the one sharing Asami’s bed,
but Fei Long was the one who’d shared a part of Asami he may never see. Yes, he was threatened by Fei Long. Who wouldn’t be? The man was sex on legs any way he looked at it, and Asami’s appetite for sex was beyond human. What if…

He sighed and looked at the digital clock on the wall. 11:45 pm. It had been four hours since they’d left. He wondered if they were still talking, and what they were talking about. Will Asami come home or will he spend the night in a hotel somewhere? Will Asami sleep with Fei Long? Would he ever sleep with someone else while they were in a relationship or has he? What bothered him wasn’t quite the outcome of the event, but the fact that, after all this time, he still could not answer any of those questions with certainty.

*What am I doing here?*

He closed his eyes and shook his head to be freed from such nonsensical thoughts. It wasn’t like him to be so dependent. He would not worry about something that hasn’t happened.

*Or has it?* Akihito asked himself as he took a glance at the clock again.

***

The chime of the elevator nearly made Fei Long jump out of his skin. Somehow he’d allowed himself to be led by Asami to a hotel room where they would have sex. After seven years of not knowing what the nature of their relationship was, he was about to be treated as the man’s lover for the first time.

As always, Asami glided out of the elevator in a cool, unaffected manner, as if what he was about to do was something as trivial as having dinner. Fei Long wondered if he was aware at all of the fact that he was about to cheat on Akihito. It probably didn’t matter to him. A man like Asami does what he wants, and anyone who has a problem with his actions will be eliminated from his life - the same way he was cast aside almost a decade ago.

Fei Long waited quietly as Asami inserted the key card into the slot. The light turned green quickly as if to prevent him from changing his mind. Asami opened the door with no hesitation, nor was he in a rush. If there ever was the need to rush, the man sure didn’t show it.

As he stepped inside, Fei Long realized that it was just a standard hotel room. There was nothing fancy about it - no flowers on the table, no turn down chocolate on the bed - just a simple room for a single purpose of sleeping, or in this case, sex. Mikhail would have picked the best suite in the house where a bottle of champagne and a selection of caviar would await them. And while Fei Long had never cared too much about all those excessive luxuries, he also couldn’t deny the fact that it did make him feel special. With Asami, sex was just sex. It seemed to be something he does everyday like clockwork and nothing more.

Asami took off his jacket and placed it neatly on the desk before putting out his cigarette. Fei Long did the same with his without much reluctance. It may have been the alcohol that made him care less about the surroundings or his own image, or maybe he truly thought there was nothing more for him to lose. Somehow he was more anxious than excited about the idea of having sex with Asami, and instead of his heart accelerating at the thought, he found himself on the verge of suffocation.

There wasn’t a single noise in that room and he could hear every sound Asami made as if someone had cranked up the volume to the maximum: the shuffling sound of Asami’s clothes as he moved, the heavy yet constant breathing as he drew near, and the sound of his hair being caressed between the older man’s fingers. When Asami kissed him he didn’t blink or close his eyes. He wanted to see
and feel everything the same way he did seven years ago.

The moment their lips touched, Asami paused for a second. The sweet scent of Fei Long’s hair gave him the confirmation that there was indeed a butterfly in his stomach, perhaps even several. Those soft, delicate lips were just as he remembered them, yet this time the kiss felt different. He had to admit to being genuinely surprised about the way Fei Long responded to the kiss, pushing his way through with his tongue as if he had been starved and wasn’t being fed enough. It was different when the man had kissed him on the casino ship. He didn’t feel anything then except maybe desperation. But that day there was an overpowering heat from Fei Long’s kiss he didn’t know existed - the kind of heat that sent a rather strong message to Asami’s groin. Someone had taught Fei Long to release his venom and it wasn’t him.

They made their way to the bed and he pushed the slender body onto the mattress, taking off his shirt as he straddled himself on top of the Chinese man. As he looked down, he saw Fei Long buried in the blanket, his form-fitting silk shirt stretched tautly against the muscles of his chest as if to test his patience. When he began to undo the buttons, the Baishe leader arched his back in anticipation and titled his head backwards onto the pool of his insanely erotic hair. It was then that Asami realized how it felt to be seduced. He had always been the one who initiated all the actions in the act of sex. That day he found himself doing precisely what Fei Long wanted him to do, and even knowing this, he couldn’t stop himself.

*Seduced,* Asami thought. Who was he kidding? One look at Fei Long’s expression - or the lack there of - and he knew the man wasn’t even trying to seduce him. It was the natural reaction of his body or simply the way he moved in bed. Even so, it was enough to make his groin ache and his cock weep. He bent down to lick the soft, pink nipple that stood erect and waiting the way he did seven years ago that made the man twisting and turning to the pleasure, only this time Fei Long responded by arching his back more and pushing his chest harder against Asami’s lips. It was as if nothing he did was enough - that Fei Long had expected more intensity, more passion. Just... more.

Fei Long held his breath when he heard the clinking of the belt buckle as it was tugged down together with his trousers. His cock twitched as Asami took it into his hand and began to stroke up and down his length, the same way he did that day. Back then it was the first time he had been touched by a man, and the unfamiliarity alone could have finished him off in just a few minutes. He suspected that it was the reason why this time he could not climax so easily. Somehow he found himself having to push harder into Asami’s grip to heighten the sensation and even then, instead of pleasure, he felt more and more suffocated. He told himself it was what he wanted and everything was right. *But why does it feel so wrong?*

When Asami entered him he could hear himself groan to the pain that ran up his spine. That was all there was - pain and discomfort. Soon, he found himself staring blankly at the ceiling - at their reflection in the mirror above. There was a stranger on top of him - a stranger with straight, black hair.

It should have been blond, and there should be curls that wrapped softly around his fingers when he touched it. It should have been...

“Fei Long?” Asami stopped as he saw the Chinese man’s face. Fei Long was lying on his back staring at the ceiling with tears running down his cheeks.

“I don’t want this,” he said as he covered his eyes with the back of his forearm to hide the tears, but the way his voice trembled made all his efforts go to waste. “I want him.”

After all this time he thought he still had feelings for Asami. After all this time he thought this was what he wanted. But now that the man had accepted him it did nothing to fill the hole in his heart.
He was never in love with Asami - he knew that now. He was in love with a ghost - an illusion of a man he’d created to have someone to cling to, and he had placed that image upon Asami and refused to see the truth for seven years. He had taken Asami’s kindness and turned it into something it wasn’t, and when everything crumbled to the ground he’d blamed it on the man because he couldn’t live with his own failure. His father died because he was never strong enough to stand up to Yan Tzui. He had been shot because of his incompetence. Everything he’d come to believe had been illusions his mind conveniently created.

The only thing that has been real was Mikhail.

Asami closed his eyes and sighed as he rose from the bed to get a cigarette. It was one thing being turned down in the middle of sex, but failing to compete with another man-intentional or not- in the act of having sex was an entirely different blow to his ego altogether. But the way Fei Long looked that day told him it wasn’t at all about skills. He had been held with emotions. It was the kind of pleasure Fei Long needed the most that he could never give - being loved. And in that aspect, to Fei Long, even he knew Mikhail Arbatov wins hands down. Now that Fei Long seemed to realize that too, he had a feeling he no longer had to worry about the Baishe leader interfering with his life anymore. That thought brought a rare smile to his face, and he immediately felt like going home.

“I’m sorry,” Fei Long said. “For everything.”

“Why don’t you sleep it off for the night,” Asami suggested as he dressed himself. “I have some place else to be.”

“Tell Akihito I’ll make it up to him.” He owed the boy a lot for this - for having led Asami to cheat on him and put their relationship at risk.


With his eyes still closed, he heard the door clicked open and Asami’s footsteps moving towards it. There was a brief pause before the door was shut.

“And Fei Long,” Asami called.

“What?” he asked.

“I did care.”

Under the shadow of his forearm that covered most of his face, Fei Long’s lips curved up into a smile.

I know.

***

When Asami opened the door he found the boy sleeping on the sofa, still in the same clothes he wore before he’d left. He stood over his lover quietly for a few seconds, thinking how Takaba must have troubled himself all night over the fact that he’d left with Fei Long, or else he would have been sleeping soundly on the bed as usual every time he came home that late. Akihito was jealous, and that pleased him.

He leaned forward and took the boy in his arms to carry him to bed. It was then that Takaba woke up and looked at him with somewhat swollen eyes.

“You’re back?” Akihito asked, surprised. He didn’t know when he’d gone to sleep. He
remembered waiting on the couch. He remembered thinking about Asami and … “Where’s Fei Long?”

“I got him a room,” Asami replied as he carried the boy into the bedroom. “He won’t be bothering us now.”

He sat on the bed watching Asami took off his clothes. He didn’t understand what it meant and he couldn’t care less. He was busy searching for some kind evidence on Asami’s body – any trace of him having been with Fei Long in an intimate manner. He could have asked, but if he had, would he receive a straight answer? And if he did, would he be able to handle the truth? Subconsciously he knew exactly how it would all end if he’d asked. Asami would have brushed it aside as usual and ride him into forgetting everything. It was for this reason that he’d kept his mouth shut, even though deep down he wanted to yell it in the other man’s ear until it did some permanent damage.

To his surprise, Asami turned around and seated himself on the bed, staring at him with a strange look on his face that Akihito had never seen before.

“Ask me,” he said.

Akihito looked back at him, dumbfounded. It had never occurred to him that Asami could read his mind or even cared to. And even if he could, he’d never expected the man to welcome such a question. But there he was, sitting next to him with a strange grin on his face, just waiting for him to pop the question.

“…Did you sleep with him?” he decided to ask as he covered half his face with a pillow, as if it would help lessen the brutality of the answer in any way.

“Almost.”

“What the hell do you mean almost?” This time he found himself yelling at the older man.

Asami rolled his eyes and shrugged with indifference. “He quit on me.”

The answer made Akihito’s face turn red all the way to his ears. “You mean you would have done it if he hadn’t. You bastard!” He cursed, throwing the pillow at Asami’s face and headed to the door with tears pooling in his eyes. He’d had enough of this – of being treated like some kind of pet Asami found amusing to come home to. He had feelings, damn it, even if the sex-obsessed robot doesn’t!

Just as he reached the doorknob, Asami yanked him back by the wrist and kissed him. There was something about the kiss that made Akihito pause and allowed it to go on, not that he would have any other choice if the other man decided to not give him one. There was no lust, no hint of the older man wanting to initiate sex as usual. It was as if Asami just wanted to kiss him, nothing more.

He broke away from the kiss and looked down, trying to avoid seeing those golden eyes that had always managed to erase everything that mattered to him, including his pride.

“Were you jealous?” He asked, as if it wasn’t an obvious reaction.

“Of course I’m jealous, you insensitive prick!”

Unexpectedly, a strange smile appeared on Asami’s face - one that softened Akihito’s heart and made the ache in his chest less painful. He’d never seen that kind of warm and loving expression from Asami before. Something must have happened with Fei Long, and perhaps it had something
to do with “he won’t be bothering us anymore.”

The older man reached up to cradle Akihito’s face between his palms and planted a kiss on his forehead. “Well, I am with you, right here, right now Akihito.” This was his sanctuary, his home, and he would always come back here at the end of the day. It doesn’t matter if Takaba understood. He would never let go of this boy, ever.

Akihito cursed at himself in his mind. It was amazing how a few words from Asami could undo so much, or perhaps it was him who was so easy to sway. Whatever it was, it worked.

“What happened between you and Fei Long seven years ago?”

Asami smiled at the question and proceeded to undo the buttons on the boy’s shirt.

“Ask me tomorrow, and I’ll tell you.”

***

Fei Long woke up to sunlight that nearly blinded him; he’d neglected to close the curtains the night before. He blinked a few times to adjust to the brightness of the room and looked at his watch. 9:45 am. It had to be a joke. He couldn’t have slept that long.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he studied his reflection in the mirror in front of him. He was still wearing the clothes from last night and his hair was a complete mess. He could never sleep comfortably under such condition. But last night, he slept well. There were no nightmares, no dreams, and he’d awaken with the kind of energy he’d not felt for a long time.

Looking around the room, he realized everything was the same only it wasn’t. There was a sense of tranquility in the air that heightened his senses. Everything seemed to look better, smell better, and feel better. The standard quality bed linen he was sitting on felt surprisingly soft and the sound of traffic on the streets below didn’t bother him like it usually did. Even the smell of someone else’s breakfast being rolled past his room made him hungry.

Fei Long rose from the bed and opened the curtains all the way, bathing himself in the warm, delicate sunlight. His body felt so light, as if he’d grown a pair of wings that could lift him off the floor anytime he wished. He didn’t remember the last time he felt this way, if he’d ever felt this way - that everything was as it should be, everything was all right, and he could breathe like he’d been given a pair of brand new lungs.

He pushed away the strands of hair that clung to parts of his cheek and rubbed his fingers on the side of his neck, giving it a brief massage while he stretched out his muscles. The reflection on the windowpane revealed the upper part of his chest where the bullet scar was. It used to make him wince every time he looked at it. Strangely, that day he could stare at it without feeling anything.

Fei Long took a deep breath as his lips curved up into a smile. That hole in his heart was gone along with the pain and the weight he’d been carrying with him for decades. He was alive, and he could feel himself living with every breath he took. And the first thing he wanted to do, the one thing he wanted to do the most at that moment, was to see Mikhail.

He went to the bathroom to wash his face. He didn’t want to waste time over a shower since he planned to take one on the plane. If he could take off before noon, he would be in Moscow by night. They could take a few days break, perhaps spend a night at the lake house, before returning to Hong Kong together.

Together. The word made Fei Long pause and smile to himself before he headed out the door.
A black BMW was parked near the hotel’s entrance. Fei Long looked at the license plate and smiled as he recognized it was the car he’d taken to Asami’s apartment. He could always count on Yoh to know exactly where he would be, even when he’d decided to be somewhere on a whim and couldn’t bother giving instructions.

“Take me to the plane. We’re going to Moscow,” he said as he stepped inside.

Fei Long didn’t notice how the man behind the wheel was a little bigger than Yoh, or that he was wearing a navy blue suit - not black. It had slipped his mind that Yoh would never park the car so close to the entrance, or that it was customary that his ex-right hand man should have noticed him first and opened the door for him. By the time Fei Long noticed the familiar, pungent smell inside the car and realized he’d walked himself into a trap, his consciousness was already slipping away.

***

A/N: I deserve rotten tomatoes, I know. But even then give it to me. XD First time I write A x A and I know I suck, but I figure many of you must have skipped it anyway lol. Still it was begging to be written. I'll be in Africa for about ten days a week from now with no internet connection. If I miss any comment and I haven't been eaten by a lion, I promise to come back to reply!
Retribution Ten

Oh hell, I haven't updated since November. It's unforgivable! I'm so sorry. I'll try to start the next chapter soon.

Title: Retribution Ten
Rating: PG-13
Warning: None
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Yoh, Asami, Akihito, and OCs
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish, and newly added French translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

Special thanks to sunflower1343 for the insights to A x A ^_^

Retribution Ten

Fuck.

Yoh cursed as he propped himself up against a wall and pain shot through his body like an electrical current. Two bullets were still embedded in his body, one in his stomach, the other in his left shoulder. The bruises they gave him before he’d managed to fight them off and escape didn’t really help either. He usually considered himself pretty handy against a few foes, but there were five of them and each one was a well-trained assassin equipped to the teeth with professional weapons. Not to mention they had been ordered to kill.

Fuck. He threw a punch at the wall, and when it didn’t help he punched it again and again until there wasn’t much skin left covering his knuckles. How could he not have known someone was tailing him? Why the hell didn’t he insist that Fei Long take more men with him? How could he have let this happen on his watch? Somebody sent five assassins upon Fei Long and all he could do was watch them speed him away in the back of a car!

He hurled at the wall again and this time a loud groan forced its way out from the pain in his shoulder. His entire body felt like it was about to fall apart, although his control had long shattered the moment he realized Fei Long had been taken. He could not remember the last time he swore so much. Panting heavily, Yoh closed his eyes and counted to five.

One.

It had been far too long since the last time he’d lost control that he no longer knew how to deal with it. His pulse was racing, his heart was pounding so hard it made his wounds ache twice as much, and he could not stand still no matter how hard he tried. Calm down. Think. Think fast!
Two.

His hands balled. He tried to stop them from trembling. Both of his palms were slick with a mixture of sweat and blood. *Stop shaking. Stop.* They took Fei Long. They didn’t kill him on the spot. That means he should be safe – for now.

Three.

Wiping the blood from his brows, Yoh closed his eyes for a few seconds and opened them again. That knife wound on his forehead was going to need at least ten stitches. But compared to what they would do to Fei Long, if he was still alive, it would be considered a scratch. That thought alone made him want to throw up. *Fei Long is alive. He has to be.* He bit down on his lip, his muscles hardened and strained as he continued to gain back control. His heart was still beating too fast and his head throbbed like it was about to explode. He needed to be able to think straight.

Four.

*Breathe, you piece of shit. Breathe.* If he could figure out for sure who ordered the attack, he would know where they were taking him. What did they look like? They were covered in black from head to toe and they all wore masks. Did they make a sound? What was their accent? From their built and style of fighting it was likely they were Asians. Was it Toh or was it someone else? No Chinese could make a move like this in Tokyo unnoticed. Someone had helped them or had been paid to turn a blind eye. *Was it the Chinese at all?*

Five.

To Yoh’s relief, his pulse had slowed down and his breathing was somewhat normal. But the pain in his stomach grew by the minute and his head was spinning. *Damn it!* He was losing too much blood.

Ignoring the bullet wounds and the fact that he could bleed to death in that deserted alley, he fished out a cell phone and stared at it for a full minute. But who could he call? Mikhail was in Russia, and for all he knew Baishe’s men could no longer be trusted. He couldn’t risk leaking the information that the head of Baishe had been kidnapped either. No, he couldn’t make a call. Before his body shuts down, he had to get himself to safety and track the kidnapper down before it’s too late.

Gathering whatever strength he had left, Yoh placed a hand over the wound in his stomach to help delay the bleeding and wobbled over to a car parked ten paces from where he stood. Making sure no one was looking, he threw a rock at the window and opened the door. It was the only way he could get out of there without being seen by the public. He was, after all, covered in enough blood to go in tomorrow’s newspaper.

Having to drive with one hand, it had taken him a little longer than he’d anticipated to get to the only place he could think of that would answer his questions. Buttoning up his jacket in an attempt to conceal the blood on his shirt, he stepped out of the car and tidied himself up the best he could as to not draw attention.

When he’d managed to drag himself to the building’s entrance, Yoh pushed the button on the intercom and prayed the man would be home.

***

A drop of freezing cold water fell on his forehead and rolled down the side of his cheek. Fei Long
opened his eyes and blinked a few times until his blurry vision became clearer. The small, worn out room was dimly lit by a single light bulb in the middle of the ceiling. The air smelled like a mixture of sewage and rusting metal. The concrete floor beneath him was cold and damp, and to his right stood an old, empty chair that looked like it had been thrown against the wall too many times. On the wall behind him, running all the way up to the ceiling was a number of rusting steel chains permanently fixed into the concrete.

In the middle of the room, Fei Long had been suspended from the ceiling by the wrists, which would explain the stiffness he felt in his shoulder blades when he first gained consciousness. His toes barely touched the ground to support his weight, making his wrists ached and burned from the cuffs every time he moved.

*An interrogation room or a torture chamber?* Fei Long knew these rooms like the back of his hands. He knew how they looked, how they smelled, and how they were put to use. He knew the deep brown stains on the floor, the promise of pain, and the whispers of ghosts that usually lingered. But the distinction between the two was never that obvious.

Still a little dizzy, Fei Long shook his head to clear his mind and tried to get a grip on the situation at hand. He remembered it now. Someone had drugged him in front of that hotel as he was leaving, and they’ve taken him here. But who, and why? As the head of Baishe people usually want him as an ally or want him dead. Kidnapping him, on the other hand, meant that it was either the work of a suicidal idiot who thought he could earn some big bucks and live to spend it, or a very daring move of a man who had some very personal issues with him. Because the way they had taken him was far too well executed to be the first, it leaves the latter as the only sensible possibility. And there was only one man he knew who would take immense pleasure in torturing him to death.

He closed his eyes and began to laugh hysterically. It echoed back and forth in the room as if the spirits of past victims were laughing at him too. It sounded like his life all right. He had locked himself up in his own emotional jail for as long as he could remember and made damn sure all the happiness in the world would never find him. When he’d decided to come out and go for it, here he was, back in prison, waiting for execution whenever his enemy had had enough of hearing him scream. When he gets out of this mess he would seriously have to consider believing in God. Only a divine intervention could fuck up his life so much. *If* he ever gets out, that is.

He didn’t know how long he’d been unconscious. They’d stripped him bare and put him in a pair of black filthy trousers that seemed to have been worn again and again, possibly by too many dead men than he’d want to imagine. His watch and all jewelry had been removed to make sure he carried no tracking devices. For once, he was glad to have returned the pendant to Mikhail. They would have taken it too, and an object that means so much to him would have been in possession of some scum who would pawn it away for a little sum of money.

The next thing he knew he was awaken by a bucket of ice cold water that stung him like a hundred needles all at once. That was how he knew he was not being held in Hong Kong. That water was naturally cold and there had been no ice in it. Hong Kong never gets that cold in winter and the air smelled different.

When he opened his eyes two Chinese guards in black were standing in front of him in a formal stance with hands behind their backs. Behind them stood a tall, slender figure in white cheongsam with an embroidered dragon that stretched from his right shoulder to his left hip.

“I was beginning to think you didn’t have the guts to show up here,” Fei Long said with a sneer, his voice trembled from the cold that pricked mercilessly at his skin.

The blow that followed swiftly on his right cheek felt like someone had slammed a chair at his
head. Fei Long had never realized the man was that strong or that fast. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one whose strength often gets underestimated due to his appearance. A little harder than that and he would have lost a few teeth.

“Don’t give me a reason to rip out your tongue prematurely,” Toh said, shaking his hand a few times before wiping the blood off his knuckles.

*Oh but you won’t. Not until you’ve heard me scream and beg for mercy,* Fei Long thought. “No, that wouldn’t be too much fun, would it? You’ve been waiting for this chance for what? All your life?” Probably longer than he’d been obsessed with hunting down Asami at least, thanks to his goddamn mother who had to seduce Toh senior and get herself knocked up with a bastard in her belly. From what he’d heard, it had driven Mrs. Toh mad enough to hang herself in front of her own child. And that wonderful mother of his still had the nerve to get him adopted by a rival family who in turn raised the bastard up to finish off his own father. His existence had ruined two entire families - three if he were to count the Arbatovs. *Isn’t that something?*

Another punch landed on the opposite side of his cheek, this time by one of the guards. It didn’t hurt as much as his boss’ initial strike, but the knee in the stomach that followed did hurt quite a bit, and the force made him throw up on the floor.

Phillip Toh stepped around the mess with disgust and moved closer to the prisoner he’d long dreamt of getting his hands on. “What was it they say about you? The pretty and graceful Liu Fei Long of Baishe, was it?” Toh said, lifting the other man’s chin with the tips of his fingers. “Not so graceful now, are you? Although, I have to say you’re still very pretty. You have your mother’s eyes, did you know that?” Yes, he could still remember that woman’s face so vividly. It was the kind of beauty that could steal any man’s heart, and her son did not fall too far from the tree. “Don’t worry, we’ll fix that later.”

Fei Long spat the mixture of blood and bile on the floor and sneered at the remark. “Why wait?” he asked laughingly. What Toh had given him so far was no more painful than what he’d endured in the past as the family’s assassin. His training had been harder than this, and it wasn’t the first time he’d been captured by his enemy either. Although, he had to admit not being beaten to a pulp for a decade did make it difficult for him to hold back his breakfast. “Still trying to figure out what you’re going to do when you’ve finished me off? You do realize you’ll have to go to war with Baishe while the Russians hunt you down like a dog,” Fei Long said with a smirk. By that time, Baishe would have known of his disappearance and the Russians would never let the golden opportunity of revenge slip through their fingers.

Toh’s lips curved up into an ugly smile as he listened. It pleased him immensely to know his plans had not been leaked and he was anxious to see that beautiful face twisted in agony once he reveals it.

“You’re right about one thing,” Toh said as he stepped forward, making sure he was heard loud and clear. “I will finish you off. Although, your resignation will be acknowledged long before your body turns up in a dumpster. I’d be surprised if by that time anyone at Baishe still gives a damn.”

It was the most ridiculous thing Fei Long had ever heard. The man must have lost his mind. “What makes you think I would resign?”

“Oh, but you already have,” Toh replied with a triumphant smile. “As of today you have left Baishe and have presumably gone off on vacation somewhere with your Russian boyfriend.”

Fei Long would have laughed if his lips didn’t hurt so much. Damn, that first punch still hurt like hell. “And you think anyone will believe that crap?” The entire organization knew he had no
reason to resign and would never do something so foolish.

“Perhaps you’ve already forgotten, my dear little brother,” Toh said, his eyes sparkled in delight. “You are my father’s bastard. There isn’t a single drop of Liu’s blood in your body. That throne you’ve been sitting on has never been yours by right.”

“As of yesterday, while you were too busy fucking that Japanese man in Tokyo, Liu Yan Tsui has returned to Baishe and reclaimed his birthright – with your letter of resignation, of course.”

The realization suddenly struck him like lightning. Fei Long didn’t have to look at himself in the mirror to know the expression on his face at that moment would give Toh tremendous pleasure. He had neglected to consider that possibility that the moment Yan Tsui returned to Baishe, he would have to resign whether or not he was willing to. It was a perfect excuse for his disappearance and while many might find it questionable, over time such doubts would easily be forgotten. Until then Yan had been a suspect in hiding, but if someone like Toh wanted the case forgotten it would be too easy to accomplish with so many politicians in his hands. He had forgotten all about Yan and drowned himself in his personal issues. If Yan Tsui was truly working with Phillip Toh and Baishe was under his control, no one will even look for him.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” Toh said with a sarcastic smile. Seeing blood drained from that face he’d despised with every breath he took brought him so much satisfaction he could hardly contain.

“And as for that charming prince you were counting on,” Toh continued slowly, taking an ample pause between his words. “Unless he has a change of heart, your knight in shining armor will just have to go down with you.” Oh he had plans for Mikhail Arbatov – ones that will make Fei Long toss and turn in his grave long after. “It will be too easy, with you in my grasp and him willing to sacrifice anything for you.”

Until then Fei Long had felt only spite and irritation in his heart, but the moment Toh mentioned his other plans, an uncontrollable rage consumed him. Fei Long lunged forward violently, tugging on the chains above him until the cuffs dug deeper into his flesh. “You son of a bitch!” he growled, gritting his teeth until his jaws ached as much as the pain on his face. “You leave him out of this! Your quarrel is with me.”

The reaction from his prisoner pleased Toh to no ends. Fei Long had been trained to endure physical pain to a great extent, so he thought the only thing that would truly tear the man apart was an attack aimed directly at those closest to his heart. Apparently, he was not wrong.

“Did you really think that I’ve kept you alive just to hear you scream over a few missing fingers and toes?” No, it would take more than that to satisfy him, much more. He would have Fei Long’s face twisted in agony the way his mother’s was every single day since that woman entered her life. He would have the man taste the pain he had to endure for years listening to the sound of her madness. He would have this bastard son of a whore die with the same agony on his face as his mother had the way he remembered her choking to death by a rope around her neck. “Make no mistake, Fei Long. I will strike at everything you love and treasure, and you will sit here and watch in hopelessness and despair. By the time I’m done with you, I will have you cry tears of blood and swallow hell.” This time he would be the one to destroy all that this man held dear. This time he would have his retribution.

“Give him twenty lashes. Wait one minute in between and dress his wounds afterwards. If he dies or tries to kill himself I will see to it that your entire family suffers the same fate,” Toh instructed one of his guards before he headed out the door.
The sound of footsteps echoed from the hallway. Mikhail looked up and stared into the darkness that filled the distance between him and the door, waiting for a revelation that will change his life. For the past 28 hours he had been locked up in his room with minimal contact from the outside for fear that he may attempt to escape. The men had been instructed long before he’d arrived in Moscow to never allow him to leave the premises, and that should he try, he was to be confined in his room until Doctor Stefan says otherwise. He had taken comfort in the fact that they had locked him up in his own room where he could still have what he wanted, until his goddamn wife had proven just how well she knew him. The bitch had turned his room inside out the first chance she had and removed even the stash he’d hidden inside the mattress. It shouldn’t have surprised him. She had been through all this before even though it had been almost two decades ago - she and Alexei.

It seemed like yesterday that Alexei was sitting right here, threatening to shoot the same drug up his arm if he didn't quit. "Do it, and remember that my death will be on your conscience for the rest of your life! Because that's how I'd feel if you were to die," Alexei had told him with tears brimming in his eyes. He had never seen his little brother so frightened of anything before, save for that night in the storm. “You wanted to save me, you save me all the way!”

He’d managed to pull through his addiction then. But Alexei died anyway and his brother’s death was certain to be on his conscience for the rest of his life. Soon enough, when that door in front of him clicked open, his father’s death also, will be.

Doctor Stefan entered soon after with two armed guards behind him. What the hell did that old man think he would do? Stefan was an old family doctor who had helped his mother through the childbirth of both her sons. He was family - possibly the only family he would have left if the news he’d been expecting was true.

The old man entered reluctantly and seated himself on the bed, taking the younger man’s hand and squeezed it tight. He’d known Mikhail Arbatov since he was a baby, watched over him through countless colds and flu as a child and helped him through his drug addiction during his teen years.

The last time he saw Vladimir’s firstborn with that expression on his face was the day before he was sent to the hospital from a heroin overdose. When Feodora called and told him to make sure Mikhail had no access to drugs, he had not been able to breathe freely or sleep soundly since.

“Mishenka.”

“Is he dead?” Mikhail asked, fixing his eyes on an empty spot on the floor. The old doctor would only call him that name when he was about to say something that might affect him emotionally.

“No,” said Stefan. The man he’d helped raise was still as direct as ever. When it comes to something important, Mikhail Arbatov never beats around the bush. “His blood pressure is still quite high and he has a fever that goes up and down that we need to monitor quite closely. But other than that, Vlad should be ok.” For now. Seeing how things stand, one would never know what might trigger another heart attack.

Mikhail let out a sigh that sounded as if it had been released after a lifetime of suffocation. Stefan placed an arm around him and gave him a firm embrace. A grown man he may be, but deep down he knew his Mishenka still needed much reassurance during a time like this. He steadied himself as the younger man rested his forehead on his shoulder and squeezed his arm tight. As a boy he would always do this to stop himself from crying. At least that day he knew those unshed tears were tears of relief.

“He just woke up and has asked for you,” Stefan said, cradling the other man’s face between his
wrinkly hands and slapped it softly a few times. “Clean up before you go in. Don’t let him see you like this. Don’t talk about Alexei, and don’t let him know about your drug problem.”

Mikhail nodded. For a moment there he thought he saw a strange look on the doctor’s face - one that told him the old man had more to say. “What is it?” he asked.

The doctor hesitated. “Nothing. Just go to your father.”

***

Vladimir Arbatov was lying on the bed with an IV line attached to his left arm. Mikhail seated himself by the bed and took his father’s wrinkled hand and noticed that it felt a little cold. His heart sank as he looked upon the man whose expression he had always remembered to be handsomely bold and commanding. He had never seen his father looked so old and frail. Even those deep blue eyes had turned almost grey.

“Do I really look so awful?” Vladimir asked, his voice coarser and drier than usual.

Mikhail smiled and shook his head. “You just seem...tired.”

“Don’t even bother lying to me. I can see it in your eyes. You were never as good at it as Alexei.”

*Don’t talk about Alexei.* Four decades of service and Stefan still didn’t know his father well enough. Vladimir Arbatov would be the last man to avoid talking about his dead son due to some kind of denial. The man had had his sizable share of sufferings and tragedies ever since he was born and had emerged victoriously as hard as a rock inside and out. Still, nothing would hurt a father more than losing a son. “Dad, don’t.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to die and leave you to deal with all of this mess,” Vladimir said as he closed his hand around Mikhail’s. It had been so long since he’d held his son’s hand or gave him an embrace. He could not remember when his boy had grown into such man - with hard edges around his face and his grip as solid as his own. He could not remember if Alexei, too, had become a proper man before he died. At that moment he could only remember his younger son smiling when he’d gotten his first bike for Christmas or when the boy cried over a scraped knee. It seemed to him that it wasn’t so long ago when he was still balancing Alexei on his shoulder, and now...

“They’ve killed one of my sons, I will not let them break the other.” he said, gripping firmly the hand that held his. Mikhail was still alive - somewhat broken, but still alive. His life still had a purpose.

“I’m not that easy to break,” Mikhail replied with a faint smile as he stroked the back of his father’s hand. Even now, old, helpless and weak, his father still thought of him as a child he had to protect. As ridiculous as it sounded, and as much as he wanted to argue with that fact, deep down those words made him feel safe and protected, just as they had when he was six years old. Vladimir Arbatov lived for his family, never once losing sight of what was most important to him.

“That Liu Fei Long of Baishe... I should have known you would have never stopped until you had what you wanted. You’ve always been that way since you were a child.” As a boy, Mikhail had never given up on anything he’d set his heart upon. While Alexei would pounce on anything new and immediately disregard the old, his older son had his favorites no one was allowed to touch or part from him. Once he’d found an object he was fond of, no other toys in the world-- no matter how expensive or magical-- would get his attention. He should have seen his boy’s eyes when he looked at that man and realized that Mikhail would rather die than have anyone else. It was his job as a father to know, and he had failed at the task.
“I haven’t been the father you needed me to be. And for that Alexei paid for it with his life.” If he had been half the father Mikhail deserved, he would have supported the decision his boy so confidently made. Instead he had turned to the enemy and conspired against his own blood. Yet now the only son he had left was sitting here, blaming himself for his brother’s death when it was the result of his doing all along. He didn’t have to be told to see the guilt his firstborn was trying to swallow. When it comes to something or someone he loves being lost, Mikhail had always viewed it as his failure to protect. “Your brother’s death was not your doing, it was mine.”

“From now on you will always have my support. You have my word as your father,” he continued, his dry, rough hand trembled as it squeezed Mikhail’s tighter. Perhaps he, too, needed the strength from his own son. “I ask only one thing, and you will do this for me, for your mother, and for Alexei.”

“Put an end to your drug problem,” Vladimir demanded, his voice broken as tears rolled down his cheek. There would never be a day when he would forget the image of his son lying on the floor with his face as pale as a ghost’s, and he’d sworn to not let it happen again for as long as he lived. Somehow, somewhere he had lost sight of his own son and now he could no longer remember the last time he had seen Mikhail smile. His boy had been driven so close to that edge he’d once fallen from and he didn’t even notice. “You were such a beautiful and spirited boy. I will have my son smile again.” His time was running out, and he wanted to do at least one thing right.

It was the first time he had seen his father cried. Even when his mother died all anyone ever saw was the redness of his eyes that prolonged weeks afterwards. Mikhail felt his throat constrict as he realized his father must have known all along of his recent addiction problem, but by that time they had grown too distant over their quarrel to have a chance to sit down and talk about it.

Mikhail reached out his other hand and rested it on Vladimir’s arm. “You have my word as your son,” he said, his voice trembled as he tried to appear strong for his father. “For you, for mom, and for Alexei.”

Blinking away his tears, Vladimir Arbatov reached out to his son and ruffled his soft, blond hair. The last time Mikhail had cried in front of him was when he was thirteen years old. That boy was still there, and the sound of his sobbing was still pretty much the same. “Now, wipe those tears off your face and act like a man,” he slapped that face mildly and straightened his own expression. “Tell me everything I need to know.” They had powerful enemies at their doorstep and they must be dealt with quickly. He had no time to be lying helplessly on his sick bed.

“I’ll fill you in on that.” Stefan-- who had been in the room with them from the beginning-- cleared his throat and interrupted. “For now, there’s something else you need to know.” It was about time he gave Mikhail the news.

Mikhail winced at those words. He didn’t like the sound of it, and the look on the doctor’s face gave him a bad feeling in his stomach.

“Feodora just called. Apparently, someone has just taken over Baishe and shot all our moles. She wants to know where Liu Fei Long is, and was hoping you’d know.”

“He may be in Tokyo,” Mikhail replied blankly, still trying to process the information that had been thrown in his face so abruptly. “What do you mean taken over? Who?”

“Someone claiming to be Liu Yan Tsui - Baishe’s rightful heir.”
"Shit!" Akihito swore as he accidentally cut himself - again. His concentration had been off ever since Fei Long showed up at their door. And now that Yoh had just followed his boss' footsteps and had shown up too-- only with bullet holes, bruises, and knife wounds-- he hadn't been able to stop pacing back and forth and think straight even once.

What made him even more anxious, however, was Asami's reaction. The man had not said a word since Yoh passed out and the way he occasionally chewed on his cigarette told Akihito he was definitely not in a good mood. But then again, why would he be? From what he knew, Yoh had worked for Asami for a long time before Fei Long, and the first thing the man did when he showed up was shove a gun in Asami's face, saying that if he had anything to do with Fei Long being taken he would shoot him right here and now. Asami, as expected, just stood there with his eyes flashing an intimidating amber, staring the man down without a single explanation. And if Yoh knew anything about Asami at all, he would have understood the look in those eyes that the man had nothing to do with it, and that he'd found the accusation quite suicidal. Luckily, Yoh had collapsed from his wounds before the consequence of his action could be realized. To Akihito's surprise, there was a strange look on Asami's face when Yoh jabbed the gun at his chest before he passed out in Asami's arms. It was as though the event reminded him of something disturbing Asami did not like to remember. It wasn't just anger Akihito saw at that time, it was something else - something more like a mixture of irritation and regret. He wanted to ask about it more than anything, but Asami would never tell him, and that added to the pile of things Asami pissed him off about every time he thought about it.

Whatever it was, the atmosphere in the dining room where Asami had seated himself for the past three hours smoking and making calls felt like a crime scene he was forbidden to enter. The newspaper sat untouched just as his breakfast and he was already on his second pack of Dunhill. Akihito stole a glance or two every time he walked by and overheard him talking to Kirishima on the phone about an airstrip, Baishe, and someone called Toh. But the way Asami treasured his words-- like he was losing profits for each one-- made it difficult for him to put things together without being included in the conversation. The way Asami stopped talking every time he was around also made it obvious that his involvement was strictly forbidden, which flung to the top of Akihito's pissed off pile considering that he knew both Yoh and Fei Long quite well.

It was lunchtime and Asami still hadn't moved from the spot or said a word. Akihito took it upon himself to make a quick lunch and laid it out on the table. It was then that a noise from the living room stirred Asami from his thoughts.

"No, don't get up. You will bleed again," Akihito rushed toward Yoh and supported him by the arm. Asami had called in a personal doctor to tend to Yoh's wounds within half an hour after he'd collapsed, but the man was in no shape or form to be walking around.

"I need to find him," Yoh said, his face twisted from the pain in his stomach that grew every time he breathed. A quick glance at the clock on the wall made him swear to himself. He'd been out far too long. By this time there would be no trace of Fei Long to track. That realization would have driven him to throw a few punches at the wall again, only this time he could hardly lift his arm.

"You're not going anywhere until you're strong enough to walk, and then I will see to it that you get back to Hong Kong safely, if that's what you want," Asami said, his voice a little harsher than usual.

"Was it Toh?" Yoh asked after a brief moment of silence. If Asami had no hand in it - and from the man's reaction Yoh had a feeling he wasn't involved - he should at least know who ordered the
ambush. He’d worked with the man for as long as he had with Fei Long, nothing happens in Tokyo without Asami Ryuichi’s knowledge.

“Told to,” Asami nodded slightly as he tapped the ash off his cigarette. Kirishima had tipped him about some movements from the Chinese near Ginza, but he had paid it no attention and thought he would deal with it later. Things might have turned out differently if he had known beforehand that Fei Long was in Tokyo. It was foolish of Fei Long - having had enemies on all sides - to come to see him with so little security measures.

Yoh turned pale at the confirmation. Asami Ryuichi does not give out information he was not certain about. If the man said it was Toh, he must have had some solid evidence to back up his conclusion. He had prayed that it was someone else’s work - someone with less of a motive to hurt or kill Fei Long for the sake of it. But if it’s Toh... “I have to go,” Yoh said as he shook himself free from Akihito’s support. The longer he waited, the harder it would be to find Fei Long, and he had to find Fei Long before it was too late.

“Kirishima tracked down a jet that belonged to one of Toh’s subsidiary companies. It took off four hours ago. By this time he could be anywhere in China. You will not find him by foot,” Asami explained. The truth was, with Toh’s money and power, it would take weeks, if not months to find him - if they find him at all.

“Can’t you track where the plane landed?”

“I don’t have enough authority in China.” It was the Chinese government they were talking about. Information did not come easily if they didn’t want it known, and Toh had half the politicians in China in the palm of his hand.

Yoh could feel the strength being sucked out from his limbs just hearing those words. His legs gave out first, and he would have fallen on his knees if Akihito didn’t hold him up and urged him to sit down at the dining table. If Asami didn’t have the authority, the Chinese should. Baishe should have the power to get some information. However, Fei Long had left Hong Kong unofficially; they probably didn’t know what had happened. “I have to tell Baishe.”

“Liu Yan Tsui has taken back Baishe this morning with a resignation letter from Fei Long. That’s how I know it was Toh,” Asami said, pausing to take another puff on the cigarette. “You show up anywhere near Baishe and they will shoot you on the spot.”

“Who’s Liu Yan Tsui?” Akihito asked. By that time he’d realized the seriousness of the situation and could no longer stand being left in the dark. If he’d heard correctly, some powerful mafia named Toh had kidnapped Fei Long, on top of it all someone had snatched Baishe from him since he’d gone missing.

“Fei Long’s older brother. Liu senior's true heir,” Asami gave Akihito an irritated look as he replied and turned back towards Yoh, who now looked even more pale than when he'd first showed up.

“What are you going to do?” Akihito asked. He didn’t like the fact that Asami just ended the conversation as though the man had no more to say. Fei Long was in grave danger, and the man was just sitting there smoking his goddamn cigarette!

“Since when does this have anything to do with me?” Asami said with irritation clearly etched in his tone. He didn’t want Takaba to hear all this and get involved in the mess, especially this mess between Toh and Fei Long that apparently had not ended after seven years.
Akihito stood dumbfounded as he heard. He didn’t expect to hear such an answer, even though he’d known Asami to be cold and merciless under some circumstances. But with Fei Long, who the man had known for a long time, not to mention how they had “almost” slept together last night, he’d expected much, much more of a reaction from Asami. The anger he was feeling up until then had doubled due to that statement alone.

Yoh’s expression turned bitter as he realized the other man clearly had no intention to be involved. “I knew you didn’t care for him, but I didn’t know you would be this heartless.” To think that Fei Long had tortured himself over this man for seven years made him regret ever working for him.

Asami took a long draw from the cigarette and slowly blew out the smoke from his lungs as he showed no intention to respond. It didn’t surprise Yoh. Asami Ryuichi does not explain his decisions nor does he ever allow himself to be compelled to. “Never tell anyone what you’re thinking,” the man once taught him. It was a wise thing to do. But does anyone truly possess such control over his emotions to that degree? Does the man truly feel nothing for Fei Long or was it just his unshakable control?

“Will you at least help me keep Tao safe?” Fei Long had brought the boy along and left him at the hotel. If Yan Tsui had taken over Baishe, Tao would no longer have anywhere to go, especially anywhere safe enough for him to hide. If he was going to find Fei Long at all, he could not afford to look after the boy.

Asami took another puff on the cigarette and exhaled as he considered the request. He’d heard a lot about Fei Long’s squire from Akihito. Apparently the boy was considered dear to Fei Long and obviously would be in danger for that reason alone. “I can bring him to a safe place.”

“You know the only safe place for him is here,” Yoh said, staring back at those sharp, golden eyes, knowing ahead of time that would be the answer from the other man. Tao had to be kept here. Toh would not risk crossing someone like Asami Ryuichi, especially in his territory.

“I’m not going to babysit someone’s squire.”

He should have ended the conversation right there, but at that point, Yoh no longer cared what would happen to him. “You owe him that much.”

Asami’s eyes flashed a burning gold. “I don’t owe him shit,” he replied, slow and with a sharp edge to his tone. Every time he gets involved with Fei Long his life turned into one big mess, and according to that last incident, it was Fei Long who owed him for kidnapping Akihito and put the boy in danger.

That last sentence made Akihito snap. He kicked his chair back and stood up abruptly, staring at the older man with eyes full of conviction. “Then I will take care of Tao and go with him to Hong Kong.”

“Akihito,” Asami said with the tone that could have made a grown man shit himself. “Sit. Down.”

The entire room fell suffocatingly silent as Akihito continued to stand and stared back into those golden eyes.

“No,” the younger man said with his chin up and his voice ringing loud and clear. “Whether you like it or not, Tao is my friend and Fei Long was nice to me. I’m not going to sit here and do nothing while my friends are in danger.”

*Nice?* Asami would have laughed at that statement if only he wasn’t so agitated by the defiance in
the boy’s tone. “Perhaps you forgot, he kidnapped and repeatedly raped you.” That was one thing he would never forget nor forgive Fei Long over.

“And you didn’t?!?” Akihito threw those words back in his face without a moment of hesitation. “Look to thy own ass first, Asami. I’m going to help Fei Long. And you’re not going to stop me.”

“And how exactly are you going to help him?” Asami said with a sneer, even though all he wanted to do at that point was to shoot the man who’d brought this into his house in the first place.

“I don’t know,” Akihito replied firmly, despite the meaning of his words. “But that doesn’t stop me.”

It may have been his imagination, but for a moment, Yoh thought he heard the older man growl. And Asami Ryuichi does not growl at a nuisance, he eliminates it.

“I will not have you involved in this,” Asami commanded with a glare that gave Yoh a chill running down his spine. When the boss uses that tone, everyone knew it was final.

Apparently for Takaba Akihito, it wasn’t.

“Of course not,” the boy countered swiftly. “You’ve never involved me in anything you do unless you need a fuck.” It was true, and he’d tried to swallow it until he could swallow no more. He was too sick of always being kept in the dark and it was about time he was treated like a person, not a sex toy. He wanted to be included. He wanted to know more about the man than how well he can fuck. It pissed him off to no ends that everyone including Fei Long knew more about Asami than he did, and he was living with the man, goddamn it.

“Unless you get off your ass and do something about it, I’m going with him. And you can go fuck yourself instead when you need to.”

Yoh held his breath at the silence that followed. Perhaps his ears had malfunctioned due to being beaten up earlier that day, but did he or did he not just hear someone tell Asami Ryuichi to go fuck himself?

And then he saw it - the reason why Fei Long would never succeed or come close to making this man his. As infuriated as he was, Asami Ryuichi took out his phone and called Kirishima.

“Go to Park Hyatt and pick up Fei Long’s squire and bring him to me. And tell Suoh to get my jet ready. I’m going to Hong Kong.”

When he hung up the phone, he turned back to the boy with a glare that could peel paint off the wall.

“And you, Takaba Akihito. You are going to pay for this.”

***

P.S. I know I don't deserve it for taking this long to update, but if you're still reading this, please let me know your thoughts. From now I'll be writing a lot of Asami and Aki, but not much about their relationships, it'll more about their role in helping Fei Long. So for those who don't like Ax A, don't freak out. XD

P.P.S. this is for my translators, I have been utterly ungrateful even though you all have helped spread the Mik x Fei love into 7 languages and I have not updated my sidebars or thank you enough. I promise I will do that as soon as I can.
FOR THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW, THERE WAS A FEI BIRTHDAY FIC CONTEST LAST MONTH AND THE POLL IS UP RIGHT NOW UNTIL THIS SUNDAY AFTERNOON FOR YOU TO VOTE. I AM NOT SEEING A LOT OF FEI FANS VOTING. IF YOU'RE AROUND PLEASE MAKE THE DEADLINE AND VOTE. SHOW YOUR LOVE FOR FEI OR ELSE WE MAY NEVER GET TO SEE HIM AGAIN. PLEASE TAKE THE TIME AND SHOW THE WORLD WE ARE STILL HERE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO VOTE FOR ME, JUST VOTE (OR VOTE FOR MIKHAIL XD). THE POST IS HERE: http://yamane-ayano.livejournal.com/2397011.html. THANK YOU GIRLS.
Retribution Eleven

A relatively fast(er) update given my life at the moment. I hope you guys are still here.

Title: Retribution Eleven
Rating: PG-13
Warning: None
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Yan
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish, and newly added French translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

The room was as silent as a morgue when they’d left. He could still recall how the softest of sounds were amplified ten folds in such a room - how every step he’d made towards Alexei’s lifeless body landed as loud as thunder, and how the shuffling of his clothes made him wince every time he’d moved. Even the sound of his breathing being held momentarily when he’d felt Alexei’s cold, stiff hand could not be missed.

You go and finish what you’ve started, and when you’re done, you come home.

It wasn’t the last thing Alexei said to him, but it was something that kept echoing in his mind. The home he grew up in had already been destroyed the night his father died, and he had never thought it was possible to rebuild or replace such a home. He’d remembered Alexei’s strange smile that day when he offered him another, welcoming him into their family. And since then he had imagined, time and time again, going back to that home Alexei had promised - a place that smells of freshly brewed coffee in the morning and Mikhail’s cooking at night, where Alexei’s laughter could be heard and his brother’s disapproving gaze could be seen thereafter, where he could sleep like a child as Mikhail’s hand gently plays with his hair, a place he would always regret having to leave and count the days when he would return.

He had finished what he’d started, but he was not going home. Ironically, he was being suspended from the ceiling in a room that would soon double as his mortuary. It certainly felt like one - the silence, the darkness, and the haunting calls of the dead that hung in the air. All he could hear was the sound of his blood dripping on the floor, constant and deliberate like the ticking of an old clock. The chains that held him above ground chimed so loud it threatened his sanity every time he moved. No, he was not going home, and in time it would be him lying cold and stiff like Alexei in that morgue, only no one would come to identify or claim his body. No one would even know that he’d died.

Abandoned at birth and deserted at death. How appropriate.
With that thought Fei Long began to laugh, only to find himself growling in pain seconds later from the movements that made his wounds sting. *Wait one minute in between*... He wished he’d thought of it during his own interrogation. It was one hell of a way to maximize the pain and he’d had to grit his teeth until his gums bled to not cry out every time the whip stripped off a good chunk of his skin. He wondered how his back looked at that moment and whether it resembled Mikhail’s now. “What a pair we make,” Mikhail used to say. How so very true, especially now that their scars would match.

They came for him some time later to heal his injuries so that they could give him more. The physician was an old man possibly in his seventies, not too different from how his own family doctor looked. The man had both arms behind his back and held himself regally with no effort despite his age. From the way he dressed Fei Long could tell the man was a high-ranking physician, not some random lackey who knew how to apply a bandage. It wasn’t clear to him why Phillip Toh would send someone so important to see to his wounds, but by that time the pain on his back didn’t really allow him to care.

The old man approached him with two guards and paused a few steps before him. Fei Long looked up and saw something in those narrow, dark brown eyes as they studied his face. It looked like recognition, but he was certain they had never met before. The man gave him a faint smile when their eyes met but said nothing before he turned to walk away.

“Take him down and bring him to my room. I can’t dress his wounds like this,” he told the guards as he left.

They took him down as instructed and dragged him along the dimly lit hallway into an elevator. Fei Long stole a few glances and realized he was being held on the basement level in a building that had just two floors above ground. They took him up to the first floor and pushed him out into another hallway. The traditional Chinese decoration and layout of the area made Fei Long realize he was being held inside one of Toh’s many residences. The fact that they spoke mainly Mandarin meant that they were likely in a house in Mainland China. Having been raised in Hong Kong, he couldn’t quite place their accent, which might have helped him pinpoint his location. But at that point, where in the world he was wasn’t the problem. The real problem was getting out of a house he expected to be guarded like a fortress.

The room they took him to was a medicine room with tall, antique chests of drawers that covered two entire walls and smelled of Chinese herbs and incense. It would have been an environment he could relax a little in had the wounds on his back been a little less painful. By the time they sat him down on a wooden stool he could hardly feel anything but the sting on his back.

“Leave us,” the doctor instructed the guards who promptly complied. Fei Long could hear them waiting on the other side of the door, along with the other guards that patrolled the area not too far from where they were. *Five, maybe six,* he listened and made a mental note.

“Take this,” the older man said as he offered a cup of what appeared to be some kind of herbal tea. “It will help with the pain.”

Seeing the hesitation from his patient, he gave Fei Long a smile that was both warm and yet strangely stiff in a way. “Don’t worry,” he said with a calm and soothing voice. “If you die I will be dead too. And I intend to live a while longer.”

*It made sense,* Fei Long thought. Given the fact that Toh would never let him die for a longer time than he’d prefer to live under such torture, killing him now would be a saintly act according to his half brother and would have never been allowed. On top of it the man would have taken pleasure in doing it himself, with his own hands. And so, after deliberating over it for a few more seconds, Fei
Long decided to take the tea.

“They told me you look like her, but I never thought you’d resemble her this much,” said the doctor as he began to clean the wounds. When he’d heard about who young master Toh had taken captive, he had to see for himself. The first time he walked into the room he thought he’d seen a ghost. It became clear to him then, why his young master found it so hard to forget or forgive.

Fei Long’s lips stretched into a sarcastic smile as he realized the answer to the riddle. It was indeed recognition he saw back then. The man knew his mother, which was why he’d taken it upon himself to treat the prisoner’s wounds when anyone else could have done it. Until that time he’d forgotten completely that some of them might have seen or known his mother, not that it would have made a difference to his captors - or him, for that matter.

“And you’re here to tell me how beautiful and kind she was?” He asked with a mocking tone. A long time ago he might have given a damn about what his wretched mother was like, now he couldn’t care less. The woman had ruined his life in more ways than one, and even now he was paying for the wrongs he did not do, thanks to her. As far as he was concerned he had no mother. He’d never needed one, especially one that didn’t want him.

The old man paused for while as he sensed the sarcasm in the other man’s voice. He realized then, how little the young man in front of him knew about his parents. “No. I am here to tell you a story that may set you free.”

“And why exactly would you want to do that?” In his world, nothing ever comes for free, ever.

“Because all of this madness has to end.”

Madness, Fei Long sneered. What an appropriate use of word. There had been nothing normal about his life since the time of his birth, and everything that had happened up until then had indeed been a result of a madness that was both contagious and never-ending. It might actually be interesting to know, after all, about the true source of all this - the woman who gave birth to him.

“She was beautiful, but I don’t think kind is the word to describe your mother,” the old man said as he began to clean the wounds, trying to ignore the uneasiness he felt within him. As a doctor, it wasn’t easy healing an injury that he knew would appear again as soon as it was healed. It was just like this with her before she was with child, and just like then, there was nothing he could do.

“The first time master Toh took her home, the mistress had called her a whore in front of the servants. Your mother punched her hard enough to leave a huge bruise on her cheek for two weeks. I don’t think anyone would ever forget that incident,” he recalled. Chen Mei Ling had made it crystal clear on the very first day that no one would get away with calling her names. What worsened the situation, however, was the fact that master Toh had allowed her to do whatever she pleased, except leaving the premises.

“What did he do? Had her whipped just like this?” Fei Long asked with a chuckle. They were father and son, how different can they be?

“Whipped? No. Master Toh loved her. He was obsessed with her. Mei Ling was untouchable.” In a way and except by him.

Mei Ling. Hearing her name spoken made Fei Long’s throat constrict. Until then he had managed to deny her existence so that it would not trouble him. Now that she has a name, it would be impossible for him to completely erase her from his mind. And now, the question that he’d always convinced himself to be insignificant had resurfaced and demanded an answer. “If he’d loved
her... why did she give me away?"

The doctor paused a little as he began to apply the medicine over the young man’s back and realized how even his skin was just like hers, despite being marked from the beatings. Those sharp, amethyst eyes, too, had the same fire that could make the entire room suffocate. Mei Ling was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, and also the most vicious he’d ever come across. He could see a lot of her in the man sitting in front of him - his looks, his hair, the way he carries himself, and how stubborn and haughty he appears to be. There was so much resemblance between them that was more than physical, even though she never had the chance to raise her son.

“Because that love was never returned,” he explained. He did not know how they’d started out, but by the time he had taken her home, not returning his love was an understatement. “I have never seen so much hatred in a woman. Your father...”

“He’s not my father,” Fei Long interrupted, quickly and bitterly. It was enough having a mother who abandoned him; he didn't need a father who was willing to kill him without a second thought.

The doctor paused momentarily after realizing the hostility in that tone. He had forgotten what the man in front of him had once gone to jail for. Once he’d thought his master’s death was an accident, now he was not so sure. "Master Toh," he corrected himself, “was obsessed with her in ways that could not be restrained. Unfortunately, the longer she refused him, the more it grew to the point that he would stop at nothing to have her."

He could still remember it well, the bruises that kept appearing on Mei Ling's otherwise flawless face, the self-inflicted wounds on the mistress' arms, and the madness that nearly destroyed the house of Toh - all because of one woman. It was the kind of rumors and gossips everyone knew about but didn't dare speak out loud. The guards whispered about it in the dark, the maids exchanged awkward glances in silence, and he'd treated reoccurring wounds without question. With several changes of servants and management, the story had somewhat been lost in all those years, but to him it would never disappear, especially when the madness apparently had not ended.

"They were best friends from childhood, did you know? Liu Laoban and Master Toh," he told the young man. "But it all turned to history when she came along. She was Liu Laoban's betrothed - young and beautiful enough to steal every man's soul. And Master Toh wanted her...enough to break that friendship."

Fei Long felt his heart sank as he listened to the truth his father never once uttered. He must have wanted to avoid talking about her at all costs, to the extent that Fei Long had always assumed they did not know each other. It would also mean that he’d loved her dearly, and thinking about her must have been painful for him to keep it untold to the day he died. But there was something else too that warmed his heart with such a revelation - the fact that he wasn’t just an adopted child to his father, after all. He was her son.

"What happened?" By that time he had to know. It was his father's story, his pain, his loss, and his love for the mother he never knew and had always despised.

"No one knows for sure, now that all three of them are gone," he replied, his tone filled with regret and a barely noticeable hint of grief. "All we know is that some time later the engagement between her and Liu Laoban was broken off because another woman was carrying his child. Liu Laoban married her instead and seven months later she died giving birth to a boy."

"Yan Tsui," Fei Long said quietly in comprehension. It sounded like marriage for the sake of pregnancy, and he couldn't help but feel that there was some conspiracy behind it. Yan Tsui was his father's heir and true son, and yet at times even he could see the harshness in his father's eyes...
when he looked at Yan. He often wondered what it was, and now he knew. And at that moment he had to wonder if Yan Tsui had known any of this, and if it had been the reason why his brother had never once shown any affection towards him, even though they did grow up together. Perhaps after all this time, Yan Tsui, too, had been struggling as the unwanted child, an accident. Perhaps to him, he had been the son his father should have had - her son.

"Soon after her death they became close again, Liu Laoban and Mei Ling. And that was when Master Toh ... interfered."

"Interfered?" Fei Long asked, noticing the restraint in the older man's voice that told him the truth was far more extreme than what it implied.

"We were all surprised when he brought her home, since everyone knew she was Liu Laoban's woman. From her hostility it was obvious that she had been forced to comply, but by what means exactly no one truly knew," he explained and paused as his memory resurfaced. It was a mystery why a man as powerful as Liu Laoban had allowed it to happen, and how Mei Ling, who clearly wasn't the kind of woman one could dominate or control easily, could be forced by Toh to leave her lover for him. No one could explain it - no one but those residing in the compound who were fortunate enough to overhear certain conversations.

"You do," Fei Long, sensing something from the old man's voice, pressed on.

"Some of us heard ... things. I cannot say I know for certain," the doctor said as he continued to wrap the gauze around the other man's body. "There were threats and evidences. They fought, sometimes loud enough to be heard by the entire house. And he'd yell at her, reminded her of the reason why she had to obey him. He knew things - secrets about Liu Laoban that she would die to protect."

Blackmail. Fei Long's fist tightened as his blood began to boil. It was obvious. As childhood friends his father must have trusted Toh and shared many secrets with him. Among those secrets he could imagine there were many that could have compromised his father's position or put him in jail if they were made known publicly. The fact that she allowed herself to be blackmailed meant that she must have loved his father, and loved him enough to sacrifice her own freedom and pride to save him. 0But was it just freedom and pride?

"Did he hurt her?"

The doctor shook his head slightly. "Master Toh treated her kindly...most of the time. But some nights we would hear her scream, not in torture, but in hate, when he would force himself upon her. The next day I would be summoned to see to her bruises. They were results of her struggles though, not from abuse, never from abuse," the doctor recalled. There was something else everyone also noticed - the affection Master Toh had for her, his own torment when she looked at him in disgust, and all his efforts to win her favor that she coldly discarded like trash every time and without fail.

"For two years she had lived with us, and no matter how many times he had taken her, your mother never once gave in. To the very last minute, she did not yield.” Mei Ling was one hell of a woman, he had to admit. She had a presence that burned itself permanently into one's memory - a woman beautiful enough to blind. But such beauty should never be possible in this world, and she had paid for it with a price no one should have to.

"She became more manageable when she found out she was pregnant. We all thought she had finally given in. But the day you were born she had you snuck out of the house and placed in front of the Liu residence, knowing that once he took you in Master Toh would never be able to get you back," the old man said, his voice trembled a little at the end as he recalled the events that
followed.

"She was in her room, dressed up in her most beautiful qi pao when he went to her, furious about the treacherous act she had carried out to perfection. I followed him, hoping that there was something I could do if he were to strike her in his anger," he paused momentarily, taking a deep breath to steady his voice. His fingertips had gone cold as the dreadful memory returned – images that had haunted him in his dreams years afterwards.

"And there she stood, looking prouder and more beautiful than she had ever been, laughing triumphantly in his face. 'Look and remember,' she said. 'You never had me, and you never will!'" He could still remember the look on her face and the way she radiated as if she was a divine being they could not touch. She was blindingly beautiful, but in a deadly way that made one's hair stand on end. Even in his rage, Master Toh had found himself speechless and unable to move.

"She hurled the lantern she had been holding at her feet. Before we knew it the entire room was on fire...," his voice trailed off as he found himself lost in his own memory. What he didn't say was that they might have been able to save her had they acted sooner. But they had found themselves nailed to the floor at the sight of her in that room. He would never forget the way her face glowed brilliantly in the fire that caught on to her hair, how her eyes seemed to have turned red like the flames that surrounded her body when she looked at the two men in front of her as though they were two powerless creatures in the face of a goddess. And indeed they were powerless. She was untouchable, unreachable, now in the flame that was meant to claim her life and set her free. In the midst of Master Toh's scream, she continued to laugh. And had he not been strong enough to hold his master back she would have taken his life with her as retribution.

"We all witnessed the madness that consumed Master Toh for years after her death. But it was the mistress and her son that paid the ultimate price. He would dress her up in Mei Ling's clothes and used her as your mother's substitute. Convinced that her death resulted from the fact that she had you, he could not stand the sight of a child, including his own, and he would beat up young Master Toh, sometimes for just being there," he explained. He could still feel the pain in his heart as he recalled the little boy that clung to his mother's dress, shaking with fear, even though he knew better than anyone the extent of her helplessness against his father. She was his only protection, no matter how defenseless she truly was. But she, too, deserted him.

"Soon, the mistress became more and more unstable. Until.." the doctor paused momentarily as he recalled the day another tragedy happened. "It was young Master Toh who found her. She'd hung herself in your mother's room, wearing your mother's clothes."

Her son, he recalled, only six years old at the time, was found curled up in the corner, staring at her without making a sound. He was in shock, everyone thought, for the boy did not cry - not then and not after. Only he seemed to see it - the burning hatred in those eyes that grew in intensity day by day. He had managed to distance the boy from his neglectful and abusive father, hoping that the child might learn to forget all the tragedy that happened years ago. And for decades Phillip Toh had lived quietly in the shadows, until words reached him that Master Toh was considering taking his other son, Mei Ling's son, back as heir. The look on the young master's face that day was impossible to forget, and he knew it was not remorse that was displayed on the young man's face as he stood above his father's corpse, but a form of gratification that was both bitter and dangerous. He knew then that the madness would not end with the death of Toh senior - the last of those three. The curse had carried on in the blood and soul of young Master Toh, and now, of Liu Fei Long of Baishe. How many more lives must be sacrificed before it was over - this hatred, betrayal, and vengeance? For how long must it continue?

"The shadows of Mei Ling has been haunting this family like a curse," he said as he finished
bandaging the other man's wound, his voice turned suddenly cold as he continued. "Now is where it ends."

"The tea...," Fei Long said quietly, his expression hidden in the curtains of his jet black hair. He'd noticed his breathing becoming difficult a while ago, and now his stomach was beginning to burn inside.

"It's a very old recipe, passed down for generations in my family," the doctor explained as he rose from the chair. "I'm surprised it has taken this long to affect you. Death should have been painless - that much I wanted to give you. But since your body doesn't seem to react normally to it, I'm afraid you will suffer quite a while before you die. Unless..."

A strip of fabric was slipped across his throat, and in the split of a second before it tightened, the leader of Baishe grabbed the hand that held the silk belt and twisted as he spun himself around. The cracking of the old man’s bones was the only sound that could be heard before a surgery knife was buried all the way in the doctor's neck, eliminating the possibility of the victim making a sound from the attack.

Fei Long stood over the old man who was now lying on the floor, gagging from the knife and blood that began to pool in his throat. His eyes turned as sharp as the knife he had flung just seconds ago.

"The reason my body doesn't react normally to it is because I am immune," he declared. Ever since he was a child, he had been given small amounts of poison by the family doctor who was convinced that he was at risk, to make sure he would not die from it. What Fei Long did not say, was the fact that he was immune to some, not all poisons. The substance, whatever it was, was affecting him to a certain degree. He could tell it was slowing him down and would soon lower his precision. And at that point he could not say for sure if death was just delayed or that the substance truly could not kill him. All he knew was that he still had time.

The doctor struggled and attempted to speak, but the knife did not allow him to. Fei Long leaned forward, close enough for the man to see the expression in his eyes and whispered slowly but surely, "You are right. This madness has to end, and end it I will – with Toh’s blood, not mine," he said, firmly gripping the knife’s handle with his right hand. "I am my mother’s son, and I. Will. Not. Yield!"

On his last word, Fei Long twisted the blade with one quick motion. He waited until the old man stopped struggling before pulling out the knife. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he rose to his feet and straightened himself.

He did not want to kill the old man, and had it been a few weeks ago he might have felt some compassion for Phillip Toh. But the moment the man had decided Alexei’s life was expendable and intended to use Mikhail as a tool to hurt him, he no longer had room for compassion. No, he could not die. He must not die. Not when his mother had paid for his life with hers, not while Mikhail’s life was at stake. He did not care if he had to butcher the whole world to get out of there. No one was going to take anything from him ever again. Not this old man, not Yan Tsui, and especially not Toh.

***

The room smelled like Fei Long.

It was the first thought that entered Yan Tsui’s mind when he stepped into the penthouse at Baishe’s headquarters. Even without being told, he could instantly tell that it had been his brother’s
personal space and one he’d used excessively. Fei Long’s taste had not changed, and everything about the room confirmed his presumption - the antique furniture, the delicate silk upholstery, the books that could always tell him which chair Fei Long liked to sit on, the air that smelled of jasmine infused oolong tea mixed with the fragrance of his brother’s hair, and a sense of tranquility that felt as though the world had come to a complete stop.

It was this last aspect that Yan Tsui despised the most.

The world had never come to a complete stop for him. Everywhere he looked someone was getting ahead of him, someone had been praised more than him, someone had achieved more, and someone had been…loved more. There was always judgment in his father’s eyes that served as a reminder, that the moment he stopped, everyone would walk by and over him. All his life he had pushed himself to excel in everything he had ever been told or expected to do as heir to the Liu family. This he had succeeded in ability, but they had never loved him.

And there he was, Fei Long, his little brother who had always won everyone’s heart effortlessly. Fei Long, whose heart had been too weak to rule, and whose martial arts skills could never match his own, had always been the one they’d cherished ever since he was young. Father’s disapproving eyes were reserved only for him, and forgiveness only for the younger, adopted son. People smiled when they saw his little brother and swooned over how beautiful he was. With him they were only there to judge. As a child, to him, Fei Long had always been a pebble in his shoe, especially when their father looked at that boy with much affection in his eyes and gently stroke his hair.

His father never touched him.

Somewhere along the way he’d discovered how to eliminate the pain and anger that plagued his heart for years. Somehow, he started to feel better when he could gain control over the source of his irritation, when he could make his little brother do things for him or because of him. Fei Long was to smile only when he’d allowed him to smile and to cry whenever he wanted him to cry. He remembered how good it felt to know that everyone’s favorite boy was at his mercy. Fei Long had everything, and Fei Long belonged to him. By the time they had reached their teens, he could not stand seeing anyone having an influence on his brother but him.

He poured himself a drink and seated himself behind the desk he knew his brother had used on a daily basis. The leather upholstery of the chair had been worn down to a certain degree through excessive use. He remembered how Fei Long had liked to sit behind a desk working or reading for hours each day. The man liked his solitude, and Yan Tsui hated it, for it was during these times that Fei Long had retreated into his own world where he could not touch.

But other than those times he’d always had complete control over his brother, and Fei Long had never stood up to him...until that man came along. He could still feel it now – the pain that resembled a punch in the stomach when he’d heard that Fei Long had disobeyed his order, the way his blood boiled to see the defiance on his brother’s face – all for the sake of that man. Someone was gaining control over Fei Long, threatening to take away from him his most prized possession – a living proof that he was stronger and more deserving of that recognition they had never given him. He had tried to prevent it at all costs, even when it meant ending the old man’s life prematurely. And just as he thought, to the last minute of his life, the man had looked at him as nothing more than a pebble in his shoe.

In the end he’d lost it all – the triad, the acknowledgement, and Fei Long. But things were going to change, now that he was the one sitting on his father’s throne – a position that was supposed to be his and his alone – and Fei Long was back within his grasp, in his control. He’d show the old man, even now in his grave, that he was the one who deserved it all, that Fei Long was just his puppet,
that he was a better man, that he was a better son.

A commotion from the hallway startled him from his thoughts. From the sound of the footsteps, a man was approaching the door followed by a group of men he assumed to be Baishe’s guards. A few seconds later the door flung open, revealing a stranger – a European man in his thirties, blond with blue eyes, a strikingly handsome face and a bold, strong figure that stood almost a head taller than all the six armed guards who were trying to catch up with him.

He kept himself seated as the man approached him slowly but confidently, ignoring the guards that apparently did not quite know how to handle the situation. He had to admit the expression on the man's face was difficult to read whether he'd come with hostile intentions or was just there for business, but either way, he should have never been allowed to barge into the boss’ private quarters in that manner. The man had both hands in his pockets and appeared to be unarmed, although, if he was not mistaken, the bulk underneath the leather jacket told Yan Tsui otherwise. Incompetent fools. *They didn’t even frisk him.*

“How did he get in here?” Yan Tsui asked one of his men disapprovingly while keeping his eyes fixed on the intruder.

"He...had level one clearance from Fei Long-sama, … we weren't sure if...," the man stuttered and stopped mid-sentence when he came to realize the mistake in that logic. With new management comes new rules, and they should never have let the man stroll into the building so easily. But then again, knowing who the *intruder* was, attacking him was a decision too big for them to make on their own.

Level one clearance was reserved for family members, Yan Tsui recalled as he continued to study the man in front of him. *Russian,* he thought. At first glance, the man seemed a little too young to be of high importance and the fact that he showed up dressed like some kind of biker did not help. But then again, small time gangsters and bikers don't usually own a $17,000 Franck muller conquistador, not to mention sporting a ring with a blue garnet the size of a small thumb around so casually. From the information he’d been given, he had an idea who it might be, but the manner in which the man appeared at his door was nothing short of a surprise.

The man stared back at him, unaffected by the way his presence had been ignored and reached inside his leather jacket casually. The Russian merely raised a brow as the guards promptly aimed six automatic guns at him from every direction of the room and continued to take out a pack of Treasurer Black to light himself a roll. When he decided to speak, it was in Russian. "We need to talk."

"Mikhail Vladimirovich Arbatov," Yan Tsui cited aloud the name he'd heard over and over again from Phillip Toh. Now he could see why the man had attracted so much attention. His overly loud appearance alone would stick out like a sore thumb anywhere he was, while the Russian’s daring attitude gave his presence an air of in-your-face confidence that almost seemed insulting depending on how one looks at it. The man had basically waltz into his lair alone, lit himself a smoke in his office without permission, and intentionally spoken to him in Russian - not Chinese or English, both of which he should be able communicate with more than fluently. Fei Long had gotten himself a good catch, that is if the man managed to live long enough with that reckless attitude.

"I see my little brother's taste has changed quite a bit. You are his new boy toy, are you not?" he asked deliberately in Cantonese.

"I am no boy," Mikhail responded without care as he seated himself uninvited and threw one leg over the other casually. "But whether he toys with me, that is strictly personal, and I’m sure you
Yan Tsui stared at the man across the desk quietly, trying to make out his true intention. The man must have known about Fei Long to come to him so quickly, but he’d expected a different attitude from Mikhail Arbatov, who, at that moment, appeared too calm and collected considering the situation. If not for that certain something he glimpsed in those vivid, wolf-like eyes, he would have thought the news about his brother's relationship with the man were simply rumors. But that something was enough to tell Yan Tsui that he indeed did not want his men standing around for the conversation to follow.

“Leave us,” he ordered the guards. He could not risk the truth about Fei Long’s false resignation to be out. From the lips of his lover, his men could find it more credible than any other evidence and could stir up much trouble.

When the room was cleared, the new leader of Baishe rose to pour himself another drink, ignoring the usual etiquette of offering one to the guest. As far as he was concerned, the man did not count as one. "Go on," he said to the Russian who was still sitting at the desk, seemingly unaffected by his movements around the room.

There was a moment of silence before the response came, and Yan Tsui could sense clearly the tension in Mikhail Arbatov’s shoulder as he fixed his eyes on the desk. The Russian was still smoking, but each puff seemed excessively long and heavy. His cigarette hand trembled a little as it moved, and while his expression did not show much emotions, if at all, the tightness of his jaws told Yan Tsui the words about to be spoken were threatening to cost the man more than he could afford.

"Is he alive?" The Russian asked after taking another long draw on the cigarette, his expression turned as hard as a rock. It was simply too difficult to tell if he was straining to hold something back or if he no longer cared about the answer.

The rightful heir of Baishe raised his brow to the directness of that question. He had anticipated it to come up eventually, just not so soon. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“Answer the question,” Mikhail Arbatov demanded, his eyes flashed a blue flame that could very well burn a hole in the desk as he spoke.

It was then that Yan Tsui realized the man did care, and cared deeply. It was clear to him then, how much effort it took for Mikhail Arbatov to restrain himself from leaping off that chair to break his neck, and how little he cared for the consequences. The previous did not worry him, knowing it simply could not be accomplished. The latter, however, made the man much, much more dangerous than he'd anticipated. That Japanese man Fei Long had picked was reasonable, rational, and careful, making him predictable to a certain degree. Mikhail Arbatov, on the contrary, appeared to have switched from reckless to cunning to aggressive in the past few minutes since he'd walked himself into the room. He could not tell for sure when the man was wearing a mask and when he wasn't, or if he had one at all to begin with. He was too unpredictable and Yan Tsui found himself compelled to tip toe around this man a little.

“Yes,” he nodded, keeping his answer short and neutral. “For now.”

The Russian did not sigh as he'd expected. He just sat there smoking as though the answer, no matter what it turned out to be, had been anticipated and a course of action had been planned accordingly a long time ago. It made Yan Tsui wonder, though, what the outcome would be had he answered “no.”
"What will it take?" Mikhail asked after a moment of silence, still keeping his poker face intact.

*He wants to negotiate,* Yan Tsui thought, surprised. It appears the man was not all reckless and suicidal, after all.

“The question is,” he said, toying with the glass in his hand as he spoke. “What are you willing to offer?”

“My continued support for Baishe and a large sum as compensation,” Mikhail replied.

The triad leader sneered. “Should I tell my brother how cheap your affection for him truly is?”

“My shares in the Macau casino,” he added.

“I’m sure he’s worth much, much more than that,” the Chinese man said with a cunning smile. It was intriguing how much this man was willing to give up for Fei Long and how much he could gain just by keeping his little brother captive.

Mikhail rose from his seat and walked towards the other man, pouring himself a glass of bourbon before he replied effortlessly, as though it had been a decision that came easily for him, “Everything I own in China.”

Yan Tsui smiled. The Arbatovs owned enough business in Macau alone to match nearly half of Baishe’s total income. It would have been the largest ransom ever paid if he’d agreed. “You do realize that my position is compromised if he returns. The way I see it, there is nothing you can give me that will worth as much as Baishe.”

“You can keep Baishe,” Mikhail confirmed readily. “I will make sure of it.”

“And make yourself his enemy?” *Interesting.*

There was a strange look in the Russian’s eyes that appeared for a split second before the man reclaimed control of his emotions. “That’s my problem.”

With that response, Yan Tsui began to laugh. Fei Long had had many men and women who were obsessed enough to do stupid things for him, but this Russian had to be the craziest one of all. “Let me get this straight. You’re willing to lose all your businesses in China to save him, knowing that without Baishe, he is just a man with a pretty face and no worth, and that he would end up hating you for it?”

“You are mistaken,” Mikhail said, staring straight into the other man’s eyes with unwavering conviction. “I am willing to lose all my businesses in China for a man who is worth more than everything I own *and* Baishe. Whether or not he hates me is irrelevant.”

The way he said those words felt like an insult, and Yan Tsui found himself clenching his teeth in anger. No matter how much time had passed, Fei Long was still the one they treasured - with or without power. *You are as worthless as he is valuable to me* was what they all thought when they looked at him in the past with respect to his brother, just as Arbatov was looking at him now.

“On the other hand,” the Russian continued as he placed his drink on the bar and leaned closer to the Chinese man, enough for the hostility in his eyes to be seen and felt underneath the skin. “If you refuse and allow Toh to kill him, know that I will bring it all down - Baishe and everything you ever own and treasure. You will die a worthless street dog, this I guarantee.”

And then Mikhail Arbatov smiled.
“But I know you won’t allow it, would you? After all, you feed off his failure, not death,” he continued, slapping the other man’s cheek firmly to make it sink in. “Think about my offer and let me know.”

***

P.S. I apologize for the time it takes to update, and that when I do the plot still does not move. But this has been something I've really longed to write: Fei's parents and what really goes on in Yan's head. I hope it's not too boring. Please let me know what you think ^^! I'm always open to any kind of comment.
I am so sorry for this long hiatus. My life is so busy I have had no time to breathe. But the next chapter has already been written and is being beta-ed, so that is definitely coming soon! If anyone is still reading, that is *cries*

Title: Retribution Twelve  
Rating: PG-13  
Warning: None  
Characters: Mikhail, Asami, Aki, Kirishima, Yoh, Tao, Yan, Toh, Alexei(I WISH!!)

Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc  
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.

Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish (COMPLETED! OMG!), German, and French translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

Akihito looked quietly at his watch for perhaps the twentieth time that afternoon. One more hour to go, he thought and sighed heavily. The flight to Hong Kong was to last approximately four hours, but the past three hours, to him, felt like three days. Asami was just sitting there quietly by himself reading reports and answering emails as usual. Had he not known the man better, he would have felt angry with Asami for appearing so unaffected about the situation. But Akihito did know the man, and the mere fact that he had chosen a seat two rows away told him something wasn't right. Asami was not an affectionate man, nor does he talk a lot. As a couple - if he had the right to describe their relationship with such word at all - they don't cuddle, hold hands, or embrace each other unless during sex. Not to mention that Asami tends to avoid intimate conversations with more efforts than he does bullets. But no matter how cold and distant their relationship may be out of bed, the older man had always, without fail, positioned himself nearby whenever they were together. Everyone knows Asami Ryuichi does not watch TV other than for news, but one would find him on the sofa just the same when Akihito watches the series or game shows, just reading his reports or the newspaper. When he cooks, Asami would be in the kitchen. When he sleeps, he would always wake up to find the older man doing something in the bedroom long after he has awakened. That was the level of their unspoken intimacy that kept Akihito from running too far away. The only few times when Asami kept himself distant was when something truly affected him emotionally. That was how he knew something was wrong.

Akihito found himself sighing once more. He must have done it a hundred times in the past three hours. The more he looked at Asami, the more suffocated he felt. Every once in a while the man would look up from his report, stare into the empty space in front of him for a minute or two as though an unwelcome thought had disturbed him, and inhale a lung full of air he had neglected to breathe when he decided to drive the thought away. It made him wonder what went on in the older man’s mind. Was he planning a strategy? Was he thinking about the past? Or was it the thought of Fei Long that caused the periodically tightening of his jaws? Despite his expression that never changed, Akihito could tell the event was affecting him enough to throw a man like Asami off balance. And from the thin veil of stress on Kirishima’s face, he knew he was not wrong.
It was during times like these, that Akihito was reminded of the true distance between them. Asami does not and will not confide in him no matter what he has to go through. There was a wall around him that was off-limits and unbreakable, and at the end of the day, Akihito was just one of those people on the other side of that wall, like everyone else. He maybe the closest one to Asami physically, but emotionally, no one was allowed to get that close - except maybe Fei Long.

Every time Fei Long entered his life Asami would be like this. It was as if the Chinese man had made a crack in Asami’s otherwise indestructible defense system and saw something he was not supposed to. Just as Fei Long had never moved on from whatever incident that happened eight years ago, Asami, too, had never managed to erase completely whatever mark that past left in his heart. He was close enough to notice the twitching of Asami’s brows every time Fei Long was mentioned, even though it appeared only for a split second. He was close enough to hear the difference in Asami’s breathing pattern every time Fei Long appeared before him. He doesn’t have to know the whole story to see that in Fei Long’s hand lies a part of Asami Ryuichi that was indeed vulnerable - something Akihito was not allowed to touch or have a glimpse of. And perhaps that was why Asami had always tried to avoid being involved with the Chinese man. Fei Long brings out a part of Asami no one else gets to see - the part he can’t control. It was this fact about them that had been a pain in his heart for months, and it was one of the reasons he’d wanted to get involved in this situation. Fei Long was someone he cared about enough to risk a lot to save, but he also needed to know the content of Asami’s heart. If he didn't do this, Asami would never allow himself to be directly involved with Fei Long again, and he will never have a chance to know. The problem was, can he stomach the truth when it hits him in the face?

If all this wasn’t enough to make him want to throw up his lunch, the other two guests on the plane would soon make it happen. Tao, now sleeping on his lap, had been sobbing periodically for hours since he’d found out what happened to Fei Long. Yoh, who had refused to eat since he woke up this morning, had barely spoken a word to the boy except for a short, merciless explanation of, "Fei Long has been kidnapped. We need to move you to a secure place." After that he has retreated into a world of his own. Not a word of comfort to the boy was spoken no matter how hard he cried, not one answer was given to a single question the boy asked. For three hours he stared outside the window, his right hand clenched so tight around the armrest that would leave scars on the leather. His eyes were burning with so much anger that Akihito wasn’t sure if it was meant for his enemies or for himself. The wounds on his knuckles seemed self-inflicted, and for some reason he had a feeling they would not be the last. He had never seen Yoh that way. Even Asami had stopped asking him questions after a few times when he’d refused to answer.

When the plane landed, Asami’s men were waiting for them with a limousine. Akihito took a deep breath in hope that the knot in his stomach would go away. He was back in Hong Kong - a place full of memories he wished he had forgotten. It was the last place on Earth he wanted to be and suddenly he found his feet too heavy to move at the thought. He felt a light touch on the back of his shoulder and looked up. Asami was standing next to him, reassuring him with a subtle gesture that was almost a natural reflex, his eyes focused cautiously on the car and his surroundings. That was the man’s way of saying, “There’s nothing to worry about.” Despite his cold and heartless façade, Asami Ryuichi notices more than he appears, and in his own ways, was warmer than he leads one to believe. Knowing this, he took comfort in that brief, casual contact and forced his legs to move. If Asami Ryuichi tells you there’s nothing to worry about, you believe him.

He removed his hand as his cellphone rang. Akihito saw the slight knot of his brows as he looked at the caller ID. He switched his focus to Yoh in the way that made everyone froze and held their breaths, and then answered the call.

“Asami,” he announced in a sharp, irritated tone.
“Did you have a good flight?” The voice on the other end sounded highly amused.

“What do you want?”

“Just to welcome you and your company. That little boy there looks familiar, by the way. He’s not Fei Long’s personal squire, is he?”

“The boy is under my protection, Toh. Be careful whose path you decide to cross,” Asami warned as he continued to look at Yoh, whose face, by then, had turned as pale as his fists.

“I would not dream of crossing Asami Ryuichi in Japan, don’t worry. But welcome to China, and take care of yourself. I’ll see you around.”

The conversation was brief and short, but its effects would last for hours to come. “He’s on to us,” Asami said as he bit down on his cigarette a little harder than usual, his eyes flashed a murderous glow. His decision was simple. “We need a change of plan.”

Asami’s reaction may be subtle and brief, but Akihito knew the result of that phone call would cost someone something in the near future. Asami Ryuichi is a patient man, but not forgiving.

“He has eyes and ears everywhere in Hong Kong. I had hoped that he would not be able to penetrate your network,” Yoh said with his usual, poker face, but the concern in his eyes gave him away.

“If we’re already being watched, nowhere in China is safe. We don’t have enough men here to protect you,” Kirishima added as he continued to scan the area around them with a gun already in his hand, safety removed.

“Not quite,” Yoh said with reluctance in his tone. “There is one place in China Toh’s men cannot and will not enter.”

“That’s not an option,” Asami replied deliberately without giving it a second for consideration. “We’ll find another place to work with or we go home.”

“I’m not going home until Fei Long is safe!” Akihito said firmly, clutching Tao tightly in his arms, before turning to Yoh and asked, “Are you sure we will be safe there?” He did not fly all the way here to turn back around, and he just knew Asami would use this opportunity to turn around.

“Yes.” From Toh, was what he meant and decided to leave out.

“Then we go there.”

“We are not going anywhere unless I say so,” Asami warned with a look that implied an argument would not be taken without consequences.

By that time, Yoh was far from worried about any consequence that would fall upon him. “If you leave now, he will have successfully chased Asami Ryuichi out of the country with just one phone call. If you stay elsewhere, you put not only Tao, but Takaba in danger. I will make this work. Trust me.”

The irritation on Asami’s face gave Akihito a chill running down his spine. Somehow he had a feeling if he doesn’t interfere the man would shoot Yoh again and make sure no one patches him up this time around. But he did not come all this way for nothing, nor was he the kind of man who gives up so easily. “Asami,” he tugs at the other man’s sleeve. Akihito rarely allows himself to appear so pitiful, but between his pride and two lives that were at stake, he didn’t have to think twice. “You know I rarely ask you for anything. Do this for me.”
For a moment, Asami’s eyes softened a little, even though his tone was still sharp and unwavering. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Takaba.”

“You're right, I don’t,” he said, looking straight into the other man's golden eyes, suppressing the urge to add that it was not his fault that he was never told anything. “But you’re here. You can protect me.” He wasn’t sure if he would be safe, but this time it was different. This time Asami was there with him.

Asami stared at him for a while, deliberating over the request he knew that doesn’t come often, and then turned to Kirishima. “Get us a helicopter,” he ordered before returning his gaze to Akihito. “And don’t even think about complaining to me later.”

Takaba Akihito raised a brow. “Why? Where are we going?”

Asami took a puff on his cigarette and crushed the rest with his foot, ignoring the question as he went back into the limousine.

Knowing exactly why Asami said what he did, Yoh looked at the boy with a hint of sympathy in his eyes as he answered, “Macau.”

***

The rooftop garden at Baishe headquarter hosted a large, beautiful plum tree. Under it was an antique stone table with four stools, one of the few pieces of furniture Fei Long had taken from their father’s home. Just moments after Yan Tsui seated himself, a maid appeared with a pot of tea and a small selection of what Yan remembered to be Fei Long’s favorite desserts. His brother must have done this as a daily routine, and it didn’t surprise him. It was like Fei Long to be so sentimental. Father liked having his tea in his garden full of plum trees in the afternoon. Sometimes he would ask Fei Long to play the guzheng as he watched the blossoms, his expression turning more and more delicate as the strings continued to be plucked effortlessly. It was one of the few, rare things Yan Tsui enjoyed when the three of them were together. And it was the first thing he decided Fei Long would do for him when his brother returned to Baishe.

“Your guest has arrived, Laoban,” one of the guards entered and informed him. There was a trace of disapproval on the man’s face as he spoke that Yan Tsui decided to ignore, for now. It was understandable, given the nature of his guest’s relationship with Fei Long and knowing how loyal the men still are to his brother.

The guest - a spitting image of his brother - was not in his cheongsam as usual, but in a sleek, black tailored suit with Chinese collared shirt and no tie. The man would have reminded him of Fei Long, had he moved with more grace and held himself with more elegance. Phillip Toh was a picture of perfection from head to toe, but one that does not carve an imprint on those who look upon him. The man was cold and lifeless - a walking doll if he had to describe it more graphically. If Fei Long's color was red, Toh's would be a muddy grey. But while his presence was as muted and subtle as a slithering snake, his venom was deadlier than the creatures themselves.

"Your brother has good taste, I’ll give him that," Toh said as he slowly made his way to the table, stopping along the way to admire the antique decorations strategically placed around the garden. "And quite a temper, I might add."

The corner of Yan's lips lifted into a sneer. His guess was that Fei Long had given them a good fight when he was captured. If Toh thought that any boy his father had raised would agree to captivity so easily, he would soon have to pay for that mistake. "He has always been quite a cat when angered."
Toh chuckled at the description as he seated himself, signaling the maid to serve him tea with a tap on the pot. “Leave us,” he told her after she was done.

Yan Tsui caught the girl’s reluctant gaze and nodded. He was glad, for her sake, that she had the sense to look at him before obeying an order that did not come from her master. Phillip Toh expresses his authority blatantly with anyone, anywhere, regardless of whether he was in his own territory. But Yan Tsui would not have stood for such display of disrespect so quietly had the circumstances been different. Not yet, he told himself. There will be time for pride. “What did he do now?”

Toh sneered as he sipped his tea slowly. "Your cat has single-handedly killed fifteen of my guards, after finishing off the poor old doctor that delivered him from his mother's womb.” His men had alerted him on the phone earlier that morning, how Fei Long had tried to escape and almost succeeded. He was armed with one small surgical knife to begin with, so they told him, and had ended up with not one, but two automatics that he’d managed to accurately shoot with both hands. “He was too fast”, they said. Apparently, he must be, since none of his armed, fully-trained guards were able to stop him from reaching the gate. If he hadn’t collapsed from the poison shortly after, the man would have gotten away and his plans would have all failed. At least the doctor did something right, he smirked at that thought.

"Seeing how relaxed you are, I take it to be a failed attempt?” How relaxed Toh was actually chilled him to the bones. The news didn’t surprise him-- Fei Long was the family’s best assassin who has been known to kill even more on some assignments. What surprised him was how there had been no anger or irritation in Toh's voice. He spoke of it as though they were all his lab rats and he, having learned what his prey can do, was enjoying every moment of it. It occurred to him then, that the man had plans for Fei Long - plans of torture that would be thrown at him in perfect timing, one at a time, but for a long, long time. He wasn't just cruel, he was sick, and the more he spent his time dealing with Toh, the more he was uncertain of the outcome.

"Fortunately, the doctor managed to poison him before he had his throat slit. The problem is, your little brat brother just won't die. How very amusing."

Yan Tsui suppressed a sigh of relief as he heard, remembering how Fei Long was immune to most poisons. "What will you do?" Surely some kind of punishment was in order.

"What indeed." The corner of Toh's lips lifted into an amusing sneer. For now he had ordered his prisoner to be moved to his home in Hong Kong. If Fei Long should escape from his cell again, at least he would be around to deal with it, seeing how his men were so incapable of doing so. But how to punish him where whips, knives, and poison could not break the man, that is a whole different story. "I heard you had a visitor earlier today." It was the reason he came to Baishe, after all.

"News travel fast, don't they?" How many moles exactly does Toh still have inside the building, he wondered.

"They travel at the speed I require. What did he want?"

"What goes on in this building is no business of the Toh family," Yan Tsui replied firmly with his chin slightly raised, followed by a smile of courtesy intentionally displayed as protocol. "With all due respect."

There was a pause from Toh that lasted just a short moment, but its effects did not fall short of frightening. Yan Tsui felt the air solidified in his lungs as he stared back into the other man's dark, hawk-like eyes and reminded himself how he was the leader of Baishe, not Phillip Toh's underling.
It had to be made clear, even though with it comes risks he should not take.

Toh broke the eye contact and took a sip of his tea. Placing the cup down on the table slowly, he smiled. As quick as a snake's bite, the man reached for Yan Tsui's wrist and, with a speed too fast for his opponent to react, plunged a knife he had taken from the dessert plate through the back of his hand until the tip of the blade clinked loudly on the stone table. The Baishe leader yelped a short, but agonizing sound before he swallowed the rest of that pain quietly in an attempt to uphold whatever was left of his dignity.

"Your brother once gave me this wound for Mikhail Arbatov's honor," Toh said, twisting the knife a little until the piercing sound of metal against stone filled his appetite. "I want to know what he or anyone your brother loves or so much as looked at from the corner of his eyes want." Another twist earned him a muffled groan. "And you, whose power I restored through my good graces, will tell me what I need to know, or I will take it all back and make sure you suffer every wound I have intended for your little brother. Am I understood?"

Through tightly clenched jaws, Yan Tsui gave him an almost undetectable nod.

Toh twisted the knife again. "I can't hear you."

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "Take out the knife… I'll tell you everything."

The knife stayed in place. "I will remove the knife when I see fit. Now, what did he want?"

"...A trade," he stuttered.

"For Fei Long? With what?"

"Everything he owns in China."

Something in Phillip Toh’s eyes changed dramatically at the news, while a smile of victory slowly crept upon his face. “Well, what do you know?” He said as he removed the knife from the other man’s hand, wiped the blood off on the napkin, and cut out a piece of moon cake with it. “All you need is love.”

It was the opening he had been looking for. After Alexei Arbatov’s death, his brother had declared, in public, that he would not have anything to do with Fei Long or Baishe ever again. John Wong had told him about Fei Long’s unexpected presence in Arbatov’s villa, but then the man went back to pursuing the Japanese man afterwards. Until now he was unsure whether Mikhail Arbatov was still of any use to him. But considering Fei Long’s reaction when he mentioned the Russian’s name and what Yan Tsui had just told him, all he needed was to pick up an old pawn - one he happened to enjoy immensely.

Yan Tsui groaned quietly as he wrapped a napkin around his hand and applied pressure to the wound. “If you kill Fei Long, the Russians will not hesitate to go to war. He’s made that very clear.”

Phillip Toh licked his lips in response. “Why would I kill Fei Long, when alive he can give me so much pleasure?” His sworn enemy in captivity, and Mikhail Arbatov at his beck and call, the thought alone made him salivate.

***

The helicopter landed on top of a 20-story building in Macau. Akihito stepped off after Kirishima and Asami, who had made sure the area was secured. There was no one on the helipad Asami’s
men had discreetly prepared for them. Kirishima had arranged for them to be picked up and driven
to the Arbatov villa as soon as they’d arrived. “He doesn’t have a helipad in his villa?” Kirishima
had asked as he arranged for the car. Yoh, though his face remained the same, answered with a hint
of sarcasm in his tone, “He has two. But at this time they will shoot us down before we even see
one unless we have gained clearance one week ahead of time.” What Yoh didn’t say, was that
Feodora had literally ordered anything from hang gliders to Air Force One to be shot down the
moment it enters their airspace unless clearance has been acquired. As a matter of fact, he was still
working out how to drive them safely to the front gate. It was unusual for him to act without
having planned everything to the T, but every minute lost could be at the cost of Fei Long’s fingers
or toes – a thought that made him want to cut off his own just for the sake of lessening the anger in
his heart.

They stepped outside the building and found a black Mercedes Benz waiting for them. Before they
reached the car, a black Range Rover, flanked on all sides by four black BMWs pulled up next to
their ride. Kirishima and Suoh reached for their guns as they instinctively placed themselves in
front of Asami and Akihito. Yoh looked at the cars quietly for a few seconds and placed his hand
on Kirishima’s arm to signal a stand down. “Bratva,” he whispered. Range Rovers and BMWs with
no license plates were the Russian’s trademark in Macau. The lack of a Lamborghini meant that the
man himself was not present. He had been counting on this the moment they landed. Mikhail
Arbatov may appear to be an impulsive, carefree young man with too much adrenaline than his
body can contain, but when it comes to something close to his heart, even the tiniest detail could
not escape his notice. Mikhail should have had Asami under close surveillance from the first time
Fei Long uttered his name, and consequently would know they were coming that day. The one
thing he was not sure of before was whether Fei Long was still close enough to his heart,
considering their relationship of late. Apparently, his instinct was right.

Seconds later, bodyguards in black suits with no tie stepped out of the cars and surrounded them.

“They don’t look like his men,” Kirishima said in Japanese suspiciously. The last time he saw them
on the casino ship, they were punks in leather and jeans.

“They’re not his,” Yoh replied and glanced at their hands to make sure. Black leather gloves.
Feodora’s men. Mikhail’s guards did not wear uniforms, however, the lady boss demands
discipline, order, spotless manner and precision from her underlings and made it a rule that they
appear so. They were professionals, trained by the very tip of Feodora’s rifles, and from what Yoh
knew, came prepared to lose more than body parts should they fail their mission. Sometimes he
wondered if Mikhail has a soft spot for ferocious, stubborn bed partners, which would explain a lot
about Fei Long and Feodora. “They’re his wife’s. She has been in charge of the household for
some time now,” he said, turning his head towards Asami. “There is no safer place on Earth than in
that car.”

The standard option of all Mikhail’s vehicles includes bulletproof glass, state-of-the art weapons
under the seats, hand grenades within reach and one rocket launcher in the trunk. Fei Long used to
roll his eyes and sighed, “Russians.” whenever he saw them. From Yoh’s perspective, however,
and especially now, it was one of the extremely few things he agreed with Arbatov. If only he had
all these on him, Fei
Long would not have been taken in the first place.

“We have orders to take you to the villa,” one of the guards spoke in English with thick Russian
accent as he held the door to the Range Rover open.

Kirishima turned to his boss for approval, and Asami nodded. Tao, Akihito, and Asami shared the
Range Rover with Yoh in the front seat next to the driver. Kirishima and Suoh were guided to one
of the BMWs. Yoh could tell they wanted to object to the seating arrangement, but Asami had given them a look that sealed their lips.

It usually takes no more than twenty minutes to reach the estate from where they were. On that day it had taken them half an hour. Feodora had installed five checkpoints along the small street that led to the villa. It was a public street by definition, but Mikhail had bought all the land on either side of it for a three-kilometer stretch from the front gate to the main road, turning it automatically into his private property. Most powerful men take privacy seriously, but Mikhail Arbatov, by reputation, would go one step further than many to make sure he doesn’t have to share. That was why he had two helipads in the compound, and why he most likely wouldn’t be able to stand the sight of Asami Ryuichi in his home. For all he knew, it could have been a trip to Asami Ryuichi’s execution. Yoh was hoping the circumstance would make a difference and had given his former boss a promise that they would be safe. A big part of him still doubted it, but that was a fact the man doesn’t need to know. One could say he was risking a lot. But no risk was greater to him than that which concerned Fei Long’s life. A part of him also knew, with Mikhail Arbatov, if anything or anyone would be an exception to the rules of his universe, it was Fei Long. It was the one thing they’d shared in common, and this understanding had made Yoh agree to work with the man in the first place.

The gate opened to reveal a driveway that seemed to be guarded with more guns than a fortress. One could not blame them. The Russian mafias at home declared war on each other with bombs and enough automatic weapons to annihilate a small town. Feodora was used to this and had spared no expense for security. After all, Mikhail was the only heir left to a sick father.

They were frisked both by hand and metal detector prior to entering the house. As they progressed, Akihito felt his hand growing colder by the minute. The guards, armed to the teeth, all with eyes no less cold than Yuri’s, wore identical black leather gloves like assassins who were prepared to make the kill whenever and wherever necessary. Along the way, he must have passed by at least twenty of them from the front gate to the corridor leading to the second floor where their boss presumably was. *Countless cold-blooded killers under one man’s command,* Akihito thought. To think that he had yelled at this man more than once made him feel suddenly sick. For once, he had to admit Asami was right-- he had no idea what he was talking about or had gotten himself into. While Asami would’ve had him beaten up as punishment for snooping around before they were together, and Fei Long had promised to sell him off as a male prostitute to be passed around if he did not behave accordingly, from the looks of it, the Russians would have shot him for even trespassing on the grass without leave from the boss. It was then that he realized the extent of his privileged position with Asami and Fei Long. It was the only reason why he was still alive, not because of any of his abilities, as he had previously believed. From what he remembered on the casino ship, Mikhail Arbatov had looked at him as nothing more than an insignificant fly he would not bother to squash by his own hand. There would be no privilege given to him here among the Russians. Akihito edged a little closer to Asami at the thought without knowing. At the same time, another kind of anger began to rise in his heart. Asami should have explained all this to him a long time ago. But no, he was kept in the dark, confined to the man’s apartment to do no more than be there, get fucked and make dinner. Worst of all, he had agreed to such condition without too much thought.

The guard who had led them to a room on the second floor told them to wait outside while he announced their arrival. Soon after they were allowed to enter. There were two more guards inside and one woman standing near the desk behind them. She was tall, slender, and beautiful. Her dress, black, cleanly cut and form-fitting, pressed meticulously to the last inch looked as sharp as her four-inch needle heels. She had a presence that made one feel compelled to straighten themselves by reflex just to not ruin her picture of perfection – a feeling much like walking into a place one doesn’t belong.
She looked up, first at Yoh and then the rest of them, keeping her eyes on Asami at the end as she measured him from head to toe. Akihito wondered what was on her mind. Most women's gaze lingered on Asami for a long time, drinking the sight of him as their cheeks turned warm. This Russian woman, Mikhail Arbatov's wife he presumed, had an expression that was as hard as a statue and in her eyes a hint of distaste in place of esteem. He could almost see a sneer that she decided not to show.

“He’s been waiting for you,” she said in fluent English to Asami. “I suggest you choose your words wisely. I have enough people to kill as it is.” The way she said it didn’t sound like a threat but rather a chore she would rather not do. For once, he was glad he did not tell Asami what had happened during his captivity on that ship, or else Asami would choose his words extremely well and they wouldn’t get out of there alive.

Asami, who had been increasingly irritated at the fact that his presence was expected virtually everywhere by everyone, just lit himself a cigarette and said, in Japanese, “Stop wasting my time and tell him that I’m here.”

She narrowed her eyes at the response in the way that Akihito could tell she understood the language and didn’t like the fact being known, least of all by Asami. What she didn’t know was that Asami always knew his enemies and allies from the inside out. He must have read her files the moment the Arbatovs came into contact with him and remembered she understands Japanese.

“Before we proceed any further, allow me to explain something to you,” she responded intentionally in English. “In case you are ignorant, I am the lady of this household, and I am not here to do the dishes or please my husband when he comes home as you may have been used to,” she paused and leaned back on the table behind her, raising her chin slightly. “I am here as my husband’s second in command. The only one who gets to order me around is the man sitting inside of that room. Should it amuse me to waste your time, I will waste your time. Now, he has been expecting you so I will let this slide. But the next time you feel like threatening me with your pathetic male hormones, you’d better beg him to let you live, because he is the only one who can save you. Have I made myself clear, or do I need to repeat that in Japanese?” She could not pinpoint exactly why the man irritated her so when too many men like him had tried to dominate her in the past and her patience did not always break. Perhaps it was the fact that he was Asami Ryuichi, the man who was responsible for sending Mikhail into fits of rage for the past few years that was the true reason behind her distaste for him. She had long wanted to know what this man was like to have Fei Long fall head over heels for him, even when he had been given all of Mikhail's love, and she hadn’t. When he turned out to be just another egotistic Asian man brimming with self-importance who doesn’t think twice before discriminating against a woman, she could swear the bad taste in her mouth was going to make her throw up sooner or later. In comparison, Fei Long had never shown a hint of ego and had always regarded her as his equal from the beginning. She began to understand why Mikhail loves him so. But the fact that Fei Long had picked this man over him was something she would never understand or forgive for as long as she lives.

Akihito could feel a drop of sweat forming on his forehead after hearing what she said. He had been trying to improve his English since they had come back from Hong Kong through lessons and home study, but at the moment he wished his lessons didn't work so well. It wasn’t her threats that sent a shiver down his spine, but the thought of how Asami would respond to being threatened that way given the circumstances. He wanted to say something to break that tension, but at times like these, he couldn’t even move to wipe the sweat from his brow.

Surprisingly, Asami looked at her with his usual, unaffected expression. When he began to reach inside his jacket, before the guards could fish out their guns, Feodora had snatched one from under
the desk Akihito realized she had never moved away from. It was aimed right between Asami's eyes before he finished pulling out the pack of Dunhill. He didn't have to know how to shoot to know she wouldn't miss, seeing her solid stance and the sharpness of her eyes. Asami looked at the silver glock, disregarded it, and continued to light his cigarette, taking his time as though nothing was wrong with that situation.

"I'm impressed," he said, smiling a little as he blew out the smoke. "Tell me, what is a woman like you doing with a spoiled brat like Mikhail Arbatov?"

Akihito could almost sigh in relief. He had forgotten just how composed and in control Asami was. Of course, he was too smart to do something stupid and most likely knew precisely how to handle the situation to his advantage. Besides, a man like Asami does not allow himself to be affected by petty insults. It was then that he began to feel safe again, knowing who was there with him.

But like Asami, Feodora kept her composure. She lowered the gun and returned it to its place under the desk, her movements now almost seemed too graceful to handle a weapon. She smiled amusingly at his words, as if she knew something he didn't. "How or why I chose him is not your concern, but when you insult my husband you insult my decision. That I don't overlook twice. You'd do well to remember this as my last warning." She was a proud woman, and prouder of her choices. Before they'd arrived on the villa, Akihito had hoped that Asami’s quarrel with Mikhail may be alleviated to a certain degree by the help from his wife, assuming that as a woman, she may not enjoy the conflict. Now that he'd met her, he realized from just a few words she had spoken, that the only side this woman would take was her husband's regardless of all reasons and circumstances. The answer to Asami's question, though unspoken, was clear. A woman like her would not devote such loyalty to a simple spoiled brat.

Without leaving them any chance to respond, she turned away and pushed opened the door to the inner room. Akihito noticed how delicate her movements had become, and how her eyes turned a little soft when she stepped into the shadow of that room. It could be just a feeling he had or a hunch for he was certain she did not show it on her face or in her voice when she said, "Just you," to Asami to make sure only he was to go in. Akihito nodded quietly to say he would be fine and watched Asami entered the room with a heavy heart. They say Mikhail Arbatov would do anything for Fei Long. That moment he prayed that it was true. He may not understand a single thing that was going on between the Russian, his wife and the Chinese man, but what he did understand was that their lives depended on the validity of that statement alone.

The dimly lit room smelled like a mixture of coffee and cigarettes. Feodora stepped closer to the large mahogany desk that had been turned to face the monitors that covered the entire length and height of the wall. Just as she had left him, Mikhail was still standing over the desk, staring at those monitors as he switched the view back and forth on the keyboard. His lunch, barely touched, was still sitting nearby and the wine had never been poured. She was certain the black leather chair by the desk had never been used since she left. She had known him since he was just a kid. When something bothers him that much, if one forced him to sit still or rest he would go mad.

It was not how she wanted him to be seen by his sworn enemy, with his unruly hair and his linen shirt so heavily wrinkled. But during times like these, when he refused to cloud his judgement with even a drop of wine, nothing anyone say or do will ever get his attention. If one of those monitors could reveal Fei Long's location, she knew Mikhail wouldn’t move from it until they do. Phillip Toh owns more than 500 properties in China, and they couldn’t tap into the security cameras of all of them. It could take months or forever to find him this way, but she knew he would do it, on top of everything else he could do, until he got what he wanted. It was why Asami Ryuichi had been brought here, even when the entire world knew how much Mikhail detested this man.
He turned around slowly when he heard their presence. There was no hostility in his gaze, only fatigue when he looked quietly at the Japanese man. Mikhail always sees the big picture and knows his priorities. It was the reason why, given his reckless lifestyle, he had survived this long in their world. She knew her husband wouldn’t be the one to start a fight given what he had to lose. The question was, does Asami Ryuichi possess the same maturity and restraint? She would prefer to not kill him here and now. They had enough things to worry about and too many enemies at their gates.

"You're never going to find him that way," Asami said when he realized what the monitors were showing. While it was a good idea, he doubted Toh would be so careless as to let Fei Long’s location slip so easily. But looking at the Russian now, he could tell the man was fully aware of that fact. He had never seen Mikhail Arbatov in that state. The man looked completely drained of energy, and energy was something the Russian was never short of.

Mikhail shrugged indifferently at the comment. "It kills time," he replied and lit himself a cigarette, his blue eyes fixed on the other man's as he asked, with the tone that lacked all traces of playfulness or spite, "Why are you here?"

Asami considered the question for a moment, knowing immediately the way it was spoken demanded a straightforward, businesslike response. It was one of the reasons why he used to like doing business with the Russian. Mikhail Arbatov was always direct and quick to make a point, never wasting time for pretentious ceremony. "You need my help."

"Do I?" Mikhail cocked his head to one side in curiosity, but the playful smile that usually appeared with the gesture did not show. "I need someone who has a history with Toh, someone who knows his organization inside and out with moles still active and alive. Most of all, I need someone I can trust that will not betray Fei Long." He paused to knock the ashes off the cigarette before returning his gaze to the other man, looking straight into the golden eyes, ready to catch whatever lies that might surface. "Are you that man?"

Asami responded with a knowing smirk before taking another puff from his cigarette. "Is that not why I'm here?" Information gathering was one of Arbatov’s strongest assets. It was often what he’d used to trade with them for. From what he knew of their capabilities, the Russians probably knew exactly what his uses were before he’d even decided to hop on a plane to Hong Kong. "You must believe in it enough to leak my itinerary to Toh to make sure I would end up here." The moment they had been picked up in Macau he knew the whole thing had Mikhail Arbatov written all over it. It would not only force him to cooperate without being the one to beg for the favor, but it would also give Toh a message that he was on the Russian’s side. Apparently, even after going through all this mess, Vladimir Arbatov’s heir hadn’t lost his touch. The man was as manipulative as Fei Long was sincere, and it was the reason why he had always avoided getting involved with them beyond quick business transactions.

If it had been another time, Mikhail would have smiled amusingly at how his plan was so quickly discovered, but then he just nodded. "I believe in your usefulness. But the question is why should I trust you? After all, you have betrayed him once before."

It was a good question, but one no answer would satisfy, given the nature of its seeker. The rule of dealing with Mikhail Arbatov, he used to tell himself from time to time, was to remember that he trusts no one, and to never trust him.

"The way I see it, you either brought me here because you already do, or you're willing to take the risk. Why don't you quit wasting our time with questions you already know the answer to?"

"You're missing one more option. I could have brought you here to kill you."
Asami responded with a smile that did not quite reach his eyes as he moved closer to the other man and tapped his cigarette on the ashtray. "Fei Long would consider that an option. The Mikhail Arbatov I know would make use of me first and kill me later," he said, standing face to face with the Russian, making sure the man understood he could not and would not be threatened. "I know who you are and how you think as much as you know me. That was how it worked before you decided to overstep your boundary and mess with my personal life." They’d had a good business relationship, one without trust but with a certain unspoken understanding of each other’s boundaries and limits. But Fei Long had to come along and made him an enemy out of an existing powerful resource he once considered Mikhail Arbatov to be. He’d never liked the idea of them together from the beginning, and he disliked it even more now that he’d been dragged into such a mess this way.

"Fair enough," Mikhail replied without a hint of emotion in his tone. "Based on the fact that I do know you, what do you expect to get out of this? Surely you're not here for the sake of the boy or Fei Long." Asami Ryuichi doesn’t do anything for free, that much he was certain and has known for a long time. But, especially then, it was the way he wanted it to be - strictly business. When the situation changes, he would not owe the man a damn thing.

Crushing his smoke on the ashtray, Asami gave the younger man an approving grin. He had come here for many reasons, and Akihito's request was just one of them. As a rule, he doesn’t make a move unless it is in some ways profitable. Mikhail Arbatov saw through it in an instant, although Asami had not expected any less from him. He often wondered if Fei Long actually knew what the man was capable of, and how they’d managed to last this long given the Chinese man's regard for honesty and the Russian's tendency to never follow a straight line. Was it possible, having mastered the art of manipulation, that Mikhail Arbatov had never shown Fei Long the ugly side of him?

"Based on the fact that I do know you would do anything for him, I have the leverage to name my price when I see fit, which is not now. Let's make this simple. I do this, and you owe me one. Do we have a deal?" Having someone like Mikhail Arbatov owing him a favor could become hugely profitable. The satisfaction alone was big enough.

The room fell dead silent for a few minutes as the two men stared at each other, attempting to read the other man’s mind. Feodora who had been listening to the conversation quietly until then shifted her weight uncomfortably. Mikhail hated owing anyone anything unless the person was dear to his heart. But apart from his personal preference, it was generally a dangerous move to make a deal without knowing the price, especially with someone like Asami Ryuichi. Had it been her choice, she would never agree to it. But where Fei Long, who had singlehandedly driven Mikhail into all kinds of madness and suicidal behaviors many times of late, was concerned, there was no telling how far he was willing to go or how much he was willing to risk to save the man's life.

"You can use the guest rooms in the west wing," Mikhail said after breaking the eye contact and turning back towards the screens. "My wife is in charge of the household. She will brief you on the rules that will keep you from being shot at by protocol. I suggest you follow it because they’re her men, not mine."

Feodora squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to brace herself for what was to come. Knowing nothing she could’ve said would have made a difference, she decided to stay quiet and proceeded to open the door to show the guest out, signifying that the conversation was over. As Asami exited the room, Mikhail called her to stay.

"Put five guards each on the boys. Tell the men to shoot on sight if they try to leave without permission but keep them alive. And get Yoh in here."
Feodora nodded. Hearing the word boys made her feel suddenly relieved. He didn’t just mean Tao. “You didn’t trust him for a second, did you?” Mikhail was as sharp as ever, perhaps even more so now that he has decided to put all his emotions aside.

“He’s not the only one with leverage. Keep that Japanese boy here and make sure he doesn’t get himself killed.”

“And Fei Long’s boy? I was under the impression that you were fond of him.”

“I am fond of him,” he replied. “But I will see him or anyone in this house dead before he becomes a liability to Fei Long. Keep him safe from Toh, or kill him if you can’t.”

She looked into his eyes and remembered the meaning of that gaze. He doesn’t often ask her to do anything for him, but for the few times that he did, he would look at her like this, in his eyes was written a message that was loud and clear, "You are the only one I can trust." She may not have his love, but what she had not even Fei Long would earn anytime soon, if not ever. For it she would do anything, even if it meant killing an innocent child in cold blood. "I've got you covered. You just do what you need to do."

As she left the room, her steps came to a pause momentarily. Something about the deal with Asami Ryuichi had slipped her mind then. She looked back over her shoulder to the man who resumed his previous task like nothing had changed. As though he could sense her question, Mikhail turned to her briefly and gave her an almost unnoticeable grin - the one only she and Alexei could read. Smiling back, she shook her head disapprovingly.

He never said yes.

***

P.S. I know, I know, no Fei. It's blasphemy! He'll be back in 13. Hell, the entire cast is back in 13. Let me know you're still reading and what you think of this chapter (rotten tomatoes are welcomed, I need inputs, guys) so my beta and I know if we actually have a cause to update fast XD *evil laugh*

P.P.S. For those who don't care for AxA, I'm sorry I just have to write them. The only reason I don't like AxA is because I don't think their relationship works as is in the manga, so this is my take to understand them better, like them better and I find it interesting to write them as a couple that I can like. Feel free to skim if you need to, but I just have to do this ^^! But this is also my chance to make Asami come clean with what he feels toward Fei Long, my chance to make Aki a character with more depth, and to give Asami a heart so bear with me on this ^^!

AND OH!!! PLEASE TELL ME YOU’RE ALL EXCITED ABOUT FEI'S NOVEL PROLOGUE IN THIS MONTH’S GOLD!!! I kid you not, people, if it's Mik x Fei, you can ask me for anything!!
Retribution Thirteen

No, you're not hallucinating and this is not a repeated post of that chapter I put out last Saturday. It is a new update, believe it or not. But this is what I call a muse attack, and this chapter she attacks..hard.

Title: Retribution Thirteen
Rating: PG-13
Warning: violence, violence against a child(but he's not that young?), incest (but they're not related!), cliffty, torture, threats, tense jumping, bad English, and well, me writing AxA seriously (meaning I torture them too,sorry).
Characters: EVERYONE except Alexei(yes, I am still mourning him!!), you name it. AxA, MikxFei, YanxFei and just about every other relationship you can think of and those you can't think of. XD
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA sensei.
Beta: angel0399
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish (COMPLETED! OMG!), German, and French translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_dracon has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

The Arbatov estate in Macau consisted of four detached buildings, a main villa for the Arbatovs' personal use, a guest villa, the staff quarters, and an armory that was also used for security control. They had been housed in the west wing of the main villa, and as Kirishima had explained, it was the smallest and the least escapable place on the property. "I had hoped we would be placed in the guest villa, but it appears he wants to keep a closer watch on us," he added when Asami had asked him about the infrastructure of the estate. Kirishima told him that they have a copy of the villa's blueprints, but from what he had seen so far, they had changed it so much from the original design that it might be useless.

"He gets bored often and moves things around on a regular basis," Kirishima explained with a sheer veil of stress in his tone. "I could try to get the renovation plans and work them into the original one."

"Boredom? I doubt it." Asami smirked at those words. With Mikhail Arbatov, one could never tell if any given action was based on impulse or an elaborate plan of epic proportion. The man was unstable, unpredictable, unreliable and yet has proven too many times that he was completely capable of executing a sophisticated, carefully thought out strategy to perfection. He was more inclined to believe that the Russian intentionally renovated his homes on a regular basis just so no one would possess a completely accurate blueprint of any of them.

"I'm willing to bet he never uses the same contractor twice, and that all of the renovations were done within two years at random times. Don't even bother with the blueprints." Most likely, by the time anyone had gotten a hand on one of those plans, he would have renovated it again already. It
was because of this that no one, including him, could predict Arbatov's decision and use it against him. Fortunately for him, under the circumstance, Fei Long had changed all that in becoming the one and only predictable thing about Mikhail Arbatov. Vladimir had foreseen this, and it was why he had gone through so much trouble to tear them apart. It wasn't because Fei Long was the head of Baishe that made him dangerous; it was the fact that Mikhail's obsession with him would one day be his downfall, and that fact has already been proven to a certain degree. Anyone who had seen the way he raced and gambled would know-- Mikhail Arbatov was the kind of man who would risk everything to get what he wants. And Fei Long happens to be the kind of man who requires never ending proof of love in order to trust. He had to admit, with their powers combined, it would tip the scale of balance in the underworld and put him in a difficult position. But that could only happen if their relationship works. He could just guarantee it, whatever Mikhail Arbatov was willing to sacrifice, Fei Long would find a way to fuck it up sooner or later. No one knows Fei Long better than he does, and no one could control the man better than he can.

_Love is blind._ It was true, and that was the reason why he had always made sure it would never apply to him. Takaba Akihito was perfect. The boy was content with the line he had drawn where others would one day want to cross it. He would not deny that what happened on the casino ship had made him reconsider their relationship many times, but it was no fault of the boy. If anyone was at fault, it was Fei Long and his own mistake eight years ago - the mistake of allowing someone to get close enough to interfere with his judgment. He should have let Fei Long die that night. If only he could’ve left him there, none of this mess would have happened. There were many things he should have done that he ended up not doing. He had never bothered to figure out if it had been the man's nature, some kind of bond they had, or simply pity that got to him, but he liked to believe it was the last. Pity should be the limit of his flaws.

Akihito felt his stomach tied in knots at the irritated look on Asami's face. He could just tell Fei Long and the past had resurfaced in his mind again, judging from the way his jaws tightened and the way he stared at the coffee table absentmindedly. It was the only time Asami looked like he wanted to curse at himself, and everyone knows the man usually doesn’t let emotions get to him.

Akihito reached out to touch him on the sleeve of his left arm and hoped that it would bring him some comfort. Instead, Asami turned and looked at him in a strange way. He could not be sure, but for a second, he had a feeling the man had seen him as some kind of a mistake or a deal he was hesitating over. It suddenly occurred to him that he’d crossed the line and had gotten too close than he was wanted.

Before he could withdraw his hand, Asami rose from the sofa and headed to the balcony, shutting the door behind him to smoke a cigarette. Akihito understood in an instant that he wanted to be alone, and the cigarette was just an excuse. Asami couldn't care less if he had a gun to his head or if he was standing in a palace, if he wanted to smoke, he would do it where he was and when he needed it. Despite what he wanted to do, Takaba decided to stay where he was and give the man the space he required. Still, at the back of his mind he wondered, _if it had been Fei Long, would you have done the same?_ He would have been able to talk to Fei Long about business and its complications, whereas the only thing Asami would talk to him about was something one would say to a child. He couldn’t understand why he didn’t care before. Now, it just keeps attacking him.

“Don’t worry,” Kirishima, who probably felt the tension in that room, said to him. “Everything will be fine.”

Akihito looked up and caught his eyes. “And yet you seem uncomfortable saying it. Why?” He may not be good at what they do, but he could sense these things better than most people.

Kirishima paused for a few seconds, deliberating whether to discuss his personal concern with the
boy especially when it could have been just a hunch. But despite Asami-sama’s effort to keep Takaba out of it, he had always felt it was more practical if he was more well-informed. After all, they were all in it together. “This is what Asami-sama has always tried to avoid. If anyone could beat him in a poker game, it was Mikhail Arbatov. He has already done it a few times in the past.” It was the only time he could not be sure how far ahead of the game his boss was with regard to the Russian, and it was bothering him to a certain degree.

“How long have they known each other?” Akihito’s curiosity suddenly peaked.

“Five years, give or take a few months. They’ve been dealing on and off ever since until lately.”

“Were they friends?”

Kirishima almost smiled at the remark. “They hung out a few times outside of work, but I wouldn’t use the word ‘friends’ under any circumstance.” Asami Ryuichi does not have friends-- he has work, underlings, and bed partners. Takaba Akihito was the first to last so long and become somewhat more than the latter. “He used to say that sharing a few drinks with Arbatov could be entertaining, but he wouldn’t do business with the man unless he was the last resort. Now we’re not just doing business, we are fully involved.” They were knee-deep in it as a matter of fact, and he could hardly predict what was going to happen. “Just be careful around him. Don’t believe in anything he says, and don’t tell him anything.”

Akihito suddenly understood why Kirishima had hoped they would be accommodated in the guest villa. It would’ve been easier for them all to have minimal contact with the man. But to make matters worse, Feodora just told them that they were expected to share breakfast and dinner at the main dining hall. According to Asami, that was to keep them close and constantly checked out. He didn’t have to guess that she would probably be acutely aware of the simplest gestures they make if something was out of the ordinary. Just thinking about it made him want to yell at something just to relieve the stress.

They had been left alone until a butler came knocking on the door to announce that dinner was ready. When he entered the hall with Asami and Tao, he found that Feodora was already at the table talking to the chef about dinner. She looked up and nodded in acknowledgement when she heard them coming, and went back to giving instructions to the chef. The butler showed them to their seats, which, had already been decided and marked for the duration of their stay. Looking around, Akihito realized the entire villa was operated like a royal household that he’d seen only in movies, with strict rules and every detail planned to perfection. The napkins were starched and folded like a five-star restaurant. The table setting, with more cutleries than he could have named, could easily matched one at a black-tie event. From the weight, he bet they were all real silver and would sell for a very high price if taken, but he was pretty sure stealing a spoon was also a death sentence around here. That woman probably knows the exact count of everything in this house on top of everything. If Asami had been a woman, he would’ve been exactly like this, Akihito thought.

“We’ll wait for Mikhail,” she said with the tone that told them it was protocol. She had the wine and bread served while they waited, but didn’t extend the courtesy of making conversation as most hosts would probably do. The room had an atmosphere that made one think twice before clearing your throat or made you wish to God that a fork wouldn’t drop during the meal. Asami didn’t seem to care much, as expected, but Tao was clearly having a hard time sitting next to her. The poor boy had been crying so much that his eyes were noticeably swollen, and now he was placed in a very uncomfortable surrounding near a woman that could easily make a crying baby shut up with just one look. He could tell that Tao was praying for his savior, and he really wished there was someone to make him feel more at ease.
The door from the drawing room opened, and Mikhail Arbatov walked in with Yoh. If there was one thing in that room that was unforgivably out of place, it was the master of the house himself. He was wearing a white linen shirt with the top three buttons undone, its sleeves rolled up roughly to his elbows, and a pair of faded blue jeans with some tears shown around the knees. If his appearance wasn’t disturbing enough for a space Akihito would confidently classify as a ballroom, he strode over casually ahead of Yoh and dragged the chair out carelessly and loudly. Without a word spoken, he sat down at the head of the table, threw one leg over the other, and picked up the glass of water already poured for him. The moment the water hit his tongue, his brows knotted.

"Ice," he said in a disapproving tone. It got about three people running around to fix that water as though he was timing them with a stopwatch. Akihito realized then what Asami meant when he used the word “spoiled brat” to describe the Russian. It was hard to imagine that he would be Fei Long’s type, unless, of course, he acts differently around the Chinese man. That made him wish, more than anything and for once, that Fei Long was there with them.

He had thought Tao would burst out crying at the sight of Yoh. Surprisingly, it was Mikhail Arbatov who had brought tears back to his eyes. Looking at the boy, those cold, ice blue eyes seemed to soften a little. Akihito knew then that they had been quite close, which was understandable, given the fact that Tao was always around Fei Long and the Russian was supposedly in a rather serious relationship with him for a while.

"Come here," Mikhail sighed heavily and called for the boy.

Tao went to him, sobbing harder the moment he was standing in front of the man. “Please tell me you’ll get him back, Mr. Arbatov. I’d do anything. Please save Fei Long-sama!” he cried and begged with all he had. From watching them, Akihito could tell how much Tao trusted this man, and how he believed he was the only one who could save Fei Long, not that it was too far from the truth.

What Mikhail Arbatov did after that was difficult to forget, and even Asami and Feodora seemed taken aback by a display no one had anticipated. He slapped the boy with the back of his hand; hard enough to send him stumbling back to his eyes. Looking at the boy, those cold, ice blue eyes seemed to soften a little. Akihito knew then that they had been quite close, which was understandable, given the fact that Tao was always around Fei Long and the Russian was supposedly in a rather serious relationship with him for a while.

“Come here,” Mikhail sighed heavily and called for the boy.

Tao went to him, sobbing harder the moment he was standing in front of the man. “Please tell me you’ll get him back, Mr. Arbatov. I’d do anything. Please save Fei Long-sama!” he cried and begged with all he had. From watching them, Akihito could tell how much Tao trusted this man, and how he believed he was the only one who could save Fei Long, not that it was too far from the truth.

What Mikhail Arbatov did after that was difficult to forget, and even Asami and Feodora seemed taken aback by a display no one had anticipated. He slapped the boy with the back of his hand; hard enough to send him stumbling back from where he was standing. The way Tao looked at him that day, with eyes full of both shock and hurt, made Akihito want to leap out of his chair and strike the man down with his own hands. But precisely at the moment that thought occurred in his mind, Feodora gave him an expression that pinned him back down on the chair and sealed shut his lips. Through her eyes she spelled it loud and clear, touch Mikhail Arbatov, and you die. And he was more than certain she had at least one pistol on her somewhere.

“How old are you?” The Russian asked. When the answer did not come immediately, he repeated with a tone that nearly made Akihito jump. “HOW OLD ARE YOU?!”

“Th…thirteen,” Tao quickly answered, the look on his face told Akihito he wanted to do nothing but run.

“Grow up and start acting like one or go back to the streets where you came from. You have no place beside Fei Long if all you can do is cry and make him tea,” he said to the boy, his words as sharp a knife aimed at cutting deep enough to leave a scar. “I am not here to babysit you while your master is being tortured as we speak. Do you understand me?”

Akihito swallowed hard as he heard the words that seemed too cruel to say, even to a grown man. But despite the horror on his face, Tao seemed to take it better than he’d expected. Instead of crying harder as Akihito expected, he was struggling hard to hold back his tears and swallow the sound of his sobs. Still trembling all over, he sucked in a lung full of air, straightened his shoulders and looked directly at the older man. After a moment of silence, an understanding seemed to have
been reached between them. “Yes,” Tao said, raising his chin as he answered softly at first, then repeated the word again with more determination. “Yes, Mr. Arbatov.”

That moment, Akihito thought he saw a different boy – a boy with an expression that matched his master when he was determined to do something. Surprisingly and beyond everyone’s expectation, perhaps except for Mikhail Arbatov’s, Tao had the maturity to understand that the one person in that room who cared for him and his master the most was the man who had just slapped him on the face. That day he looked like someone Mikhail wanted him to be – someone who deserved a place beside Liu Fei Long of Baishe, the man who’d personally raised him.

“Sit down and eat your dinner. If I hear you cry one more time I will throw you in a nursery,” the Russian said, his voice turned a little softer at the last sentence. For a moment that lasted too soon, Akihito thought he saw Feodora smiled adoringly at her husband. Later that night he asked Yoh if Mikhail was always this hard on Tao. Yoh replied with his usual expressionless face, “They used to play Wii together until two in the morning,” and walked away.

They finished dinner without much conversation afterwards. Mikhail kept to himself most of the time, picking the food in front of him absentmindedly with an apparent lack of appetite. When the plates had been cleared and dessert was being laid on the table, a bodyguard came in with a small box and whispered something to his master. Mikhail nodded, put down his drink and opened the lid. He looked at the contents for a few seconds, closed it and continued what he was doing without a word or change in his expression.

“Get me whoever delivered this,” he instructed the guard, who promptly acknowledged his command and exited the room. “I need to track Toh’s location. Tell me you have someone on the inside to plant a bug,” he asked Asami, his voice more tired than agitated.

“What’s wrong with yours?” Asami asked casually, swirling the wine glass in his hand. For all he knew, the Russian had more moles than he did everywhere, but whether or not any of them were as competent was another story.

Mikhail didn’t answer. Instead he carelessly tossed the box in front of the other man.

Asami looked at the box and then opened it slowly with the tips of his fingers. What Akihito saw almost brought his dinner back up right on that table. It was a good thing Tao wouldn’t be able to see it from where he was seated. The contents consisted of what Takaba figured to be what Takaba figured to be was tracking device they’d just mentioned, along with two thumbs that had to belong to one of the Russian’s moles. They were freshly cut—the blood was turning brown.

While he turned away to stop himself from retching, Asami just raised a brow and casually picked up the note that accompanied it.

*For identification purposes. With compliments, Phillip Toh.*

“Apart from missing both thumbs, what do you think?” Mikhail said casually, though his eyes did not quite match the subtle tone of his voice.

Before Asami could respond, two guards entered with the man who’d delivered the package. He was Chinese and appeared to be in his twenties. The way he wailed made Akihito thought he was about to shit himself.

“Take the boy upstairs,” Feodora told one of the butlers.

“Let him speak for himself,” Mikhail said and stopped them. Facing Tao, he asked with the tone
one would use with an adult. “What do you want to do?”

“Mikhail.” For the first time, Asami decided to voice his opinion. “He’s thirteen.”

“I made my first kill when I was fifteen, Fei Long did when he was twelve. While his master is away, I am his guardian, and if I say he is old enough to stay, he is old enough to stay.” He knew Fei Long wanted to keep the boy safe, but it was time that Tao learned how to survive in their world, or he had to be sent somewhere far away from them all. And from what he saw in the boy’s eyes, the latter simply wasn’t an option. “This is what we do, who I am, and who your master is,” he turned to Tao, looking straight into the boy’s big round eyes that told him he was listening to every word. “Do you want to go upstairs?”

Tao took a deep breath, pulled back his shoulders and shook his head. “I want to stay.”

As if to assert himself on the opinion previously given, Asami turned to Akihito. “You should go upstairs.”

If there ever was a time when he wanted to beat the crap out of Asami, or felt as low as he could about himself, it was that day. Tao, a boy of thirteen, has been accepted, included and respected as “one of them” while Asami had the nerve to tell him to leave. Who did the man think he was? No, not who, what? There was a reason people call him Asami’s boy toy, and that was precisely how Asami treated him. It was going to end that day, all of this “keeping him out for the sake of his safety” bullshit. Tonight, after this, he would give the man a piece of his mind. “I’m staying.”

The moment he heard, Asami looked at him with burning golden eyes that spelled “murder.” He knew he shouldn’t have questioned the man’s authority in front of the Arbatovs, but Asami had to know he should be treated with no less respect than Tao.

“Very well, then. Feodora.” Mikhail broke the silence and reached out his right hand. She took out a gun from under her dress and placed it on his palm as though it had been her natural reflex. He rose from the chair, dragging it back casually and walked towards the deliveryman. Akihito braced himself for an interrogation that would’ve made him regret his decision but decided to work up his courage and remain in that room. Fei Long wouldn’t have run from this kind of situation, and Tao was still sitting there—he too had to be able to stay.

He made himself watch as Mikhail Arbatov tugged up the sleeves of his shirt and approached the man. The Russian pointed the gun to his head, and, just when Akihito was expecting a threat, pulled the trigger. The next thing he knew, he was staring at what had to be bits and pieces of the man’s brain sliding down the pale marble wall of the dining room. By that time, Akihito could no longer feel his fingers or toes.

Mikhail Arbatov seated himself back down at the dining table and gestured for his coffee cup to be filled. Meanwhile he took out a pen and wrote something down on a piece of paper Feodora handed to him without asking. “Cut off his thumbs and put them in a box with this note. I want it at his front door in the morning,” he instructed to one of the guards, handing him the note before they took the body away.

You sick fuck. Akihito cursed in his mind, all the while he could feel himself shaking uncontrollably at what just happened in front of him. But seeing Asami just sitting there, sipping his wine as if nothing had happened filled him with disgust he had never before felt towards the older man. He had seen men shot before, and he himself had recently shot a man. But he was nowhere near prepared for an execution in the middle of the dining room, with desserts still on the table, not to mention that everyone else but him not having a problem eating while someone’s brain was still stuck on the wall. What about Tao? He quickly looked across the table. The boy was still
there, as still as a rock, his chest heaving up and down from his accelerated breathing as he continued to stare at the blood left on the wall. His little hands, clenched tight around the tablecloth, were trembling, but that was all the weakness he allowed himself to show. One thing he was certain of, no matter how afraid the boy was, he wanted to be there. What about you? He asked himself in his mind. Having seen what he had seen, it dawned on him that the question wasn’t when he would be included in Asami’s world, but rather if he wants to? Could he still live with Asami, knowing this other side of him and the world he belongs to?

As though his thoughts could be read, Asami placed a hand on his thigh and squeezed it reassuringly. Without thinking or meaning to, Akihito flinched from the touch, prompting Asami to look at him in a strange way. They were too different. He would never understand, Akihito thought. And I would never fit in.

Deciding that there would be time to deal with this later, Asami turned back to Mikhail. "Even if I have men on the inside, you’ll never be able to plant the bug without being caught," he replied to the previously unanswered question. For now, there was business at hand, and the faster he gets it over with, the faster they could all go home.

Mikhail raised a brow. "Why not?"

"Because I set up the standard security check for his father, which is still being used today, if not more strictly."

Mikhail cocked his head to one side and narrowed his eyes. "Every system has its flaws."

"Not mine," the answer came readily with unquestionable confidence.

With Asami Ryuichi, most people would say that claim could very well be valid. But he was not most people, nor did most people understand how Asami Ryuichi thinks. "That might be true. Except that you would never design a system you can't break." There are no true friends or eternal foes in business. The Japanese man, above all, owed his success to that rule and as such would never do something to close his own doors.

Asami sneered openly at the remark. He used to think the Russian had potential when he was just a rookie, but he was beginning to regret having allowed the man to reach it. "It’s impossible," he said, lighting a new cigarette as he leaned back on the chair. “You need to get personally close, and unlike his father, Phillip Toh doesn’t entertain himself with occasional lovers.” His system was flawless, but he could have breached it without much effort had it been Toh senior they were dealing with. With his son, it was more difficult to execute. Phillip Toh was too careful and has never been seen doing anything that would impair his judgment. He never gets drunk enough, never gets angry enough, and never lusted over anyone or anything enough to leave an opening.

“Fei Long has truly created himself a tough enemy to break,” he added, his hand absentmindedly flipping over the card that came from Toh. It was then that he noticed the writing on the other side.

"There’s a phone number written here."

***

Fei Long found himself in an unfamiliar cell when he woke up. This time the room was brightly lit, and the floor was clean. It consisted of four empty walls, except for one that was fixed with what had to be a large, bulletproof one-way mirror. He realized Toh had put him in an empty box made of concrete. There was nothing here he could have used as a weapon and nowhere to hide. The steel door had no lock to pick – it was electronic and probably indestructible. He was hung up as before but this time his feet had been chained. They had learned from their mistakes and had
improved security. Escaping wouldn’t be as easy as before, especially when he was certain someone on the other side of that glass wall was watching his every move.

He wondered how long he had been unconscious. The last thing he’d remembered was the pain in his stomach when he passed out in front of the gate. The effects of the poison were almost all gone now, which meant that he’d been unconscious for at least a day. They must have kept him sedated until they finished moving him here, which was understandable, given how many he had killed.

*How many I’ve killed.* He looked up at the dark brown stains around his fingers and in the middle of his palms. He could still remember everything, from the filth of blood that splattered on his cheek when he slit the doctor’s throat, the coldness of the surgery knife against his hand as his grip tightened, and the softness of human flesh at the time it was punctured and sliced open. He remembered how he’d welcomed all of it, how his heart had beat so steadily like the rhythm of a battle drum, how every vein in his body had throbbed as blood rushed through it, fueling his every move as though his limbs were mechanical parts. It all came back to him naturally. He knew when and where to strike, which angle would make the most damage, and where an opening would present itself to him.

The first guard he’d killed with a knife throw—he was finished quickly and silently. He’d taken the gun from the corpse, and held it with his left hand, ready to shoot whenever the knife failed him. Guns had always drawn too much attention for his liking, and as such he usually kept it as the last resort. The second and third guard he’d managed to finish off with the same knife, but the fourth had spotted him from a few meters away and forced him to shoot. The entire grounds echoed with gunshots soon after, and he could no longer remember or count the number of men he had shot beyond that point. Somewhere near the front gate his conscience was slipping away and he’d ended up here, in this empty cell.

Fei Long closed his eyes and felt a strange kind of energy rushing through him. For the first time in a very long time, he was fighting with his own hands, by himself, for himself. It felt like living, and it tasted like freedom, both of which he had never truly experienced. It was funny how Toh had gone through all this to break him, and instead all it did was make him feel stronger and more awake.

The door made a loud, creaking sound when it opened. He looked up and saw Phillip Toh come in with another man dressed in black cheongsam. From the distance and Toh’s shadow that casted on his face, he shouldn’t have been able to identify the other man. But the outline of his figure and the way he moved gave him away the second Fei Long’s eyes focused on him.

"What's wrong, Toh? Are you all out of ideas?" Fei Long asked with a sneer clearly written on his face. He could almost laugh at how predictable Toh was. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's nothing he can do that I have not endured."

"Unfortunately, you're quite right," Toh said as he moved aside to let Yan Tsui approach his brother. "But he's not the star of my next show. I thought I'd bring him here to see you. Perhaps it will," he paused and gave his prisoner a cunning smile, "lift your spirits?"

"That’s an expertise of his," Fei Long replied, his voice laced with sarcasm. What did Yan ever do better than “lift his spirit”? "It's been a while, hasn’t it brother? Did you miss me after all this time, or have you found someone else who can make you feel like you actually have balls between your legs?"

A heavy blow landed on his stomach and Fei Long coughed a few times from the pain before he looked up and caught his brother's eyes. "Tell me, was that as much fun as killing your own father?" He would never let Yan Tsui forget what he had done, just as he would never forget what
had happened that night.

Without responding to the remark, he turned to Toh. "May we have some privacy?" It was a family matter now, and no one else should be around to hear their conversation.

Toh nodded. "You may do anything to him, but I need him conscious and able to talk and listen afterwards. And don't bruise his face too much, I want to be able to recognize that pretty face when I get to work on him."

Toh left the cell soon after, although Fei Long didn't have to guess that he would position himself very comfortably on the other side of that glass wall. Yan Tsui stepped closer and gave him another punch, this time on his face. Fei Long remembered that blow by heart-- he had received it one too many times to forget. Yan Tsui loved punching him in the face. Perhaps Yan thought it was something he treasured the most, or perhaps he just hated it. But the man had always enjoyed seeing the bruises on his cheek days after, that much he was certain.

"I didn't kill father," he said in a collected manner. "You did, the moment you let that Japanese man come before family."

Fei Long sneered at those words. Family? When has Yan Tsui ever considered him as family? As far as he could remember, he was always the "puppy father picked up from the street". "You mean come between you and your disgusting thoughts about me? What happened then? Did father find out your dirty little secrets? Is that why you killed him?!" There were many things he might be able to forgive and forget about Yan Tsui, but pulling the trigger that day wasn't one of them. He would have to pay for this one way or another. I would make sure of it.

At the end of the question, Yan Tsui snatched a handful of hair from behind his head, tilting it up to face him. Fei Long wanted to crawl out of his skin when his brother's breath brushed against his cheek as he leaned closer to speak, making sure he would hear every word. "You have the nerve to call me dirty? Why don't you tell me how many cocks you've sucked in the last eight years, including that Japanese man's who left you to rot in jail, you little whore?"

If only his hands were not tied to the ceiling, he would've knocked out every single tooth from the man's mouth for that insult. But his hands were indeed tied, and all he had were insults that he hoped would torture the man in his sleep for a long, long time. "What really bothers you, brother?" Fei Long asked through tightly gritted teeth, "The number of cocks I've sucked, or that yours wasn't one of them?" That earned him another blow on the face. It did help a bit to concentrate on the pain on his body rather than the anger in his heart. He spat the blood that had accumulated in his mouth on the floor carelessly. It was nothing to him. Yan should know he was wasting time and energy trying to beat him into submission. It had never worked before, and it sure as hell wasn't going to work now.

"Remind me to put that on the list of things you will do for me when you return to Baishe," he said, smiling at the way blood suddenly rushed to his groin. Nothing had ever turned him on like the thought of seeing Fei Long on his knees with that pride torn off his beautiful face. That satisfaction would be much greater now, seeing how defiant he had become. When he’d left eight years ago, Fei Long was just a softhearted little boy who knew his place and was content with it. And while he had seemed much more determined and mature when they’d met again at Toh's residence recently, he was still a far cry from this confident, proud, and self-assured little brat in front of him. Even when he was all bruised and beaten to a pulp, with his hands and feet clasp in irons, once again, Yan Tsui felt powerless against his brother. That day he had expected to walk in and see Fei Long in a helpless, pitiful state like the way he was the night their father had died. But there was no trace of helplessness or defeat in those amethyst eyes, not even a hint. As far as he was
concerned, the man had to be put back in his place immediately.

He stepped around the perfect form that almost seemed to be hung up on display just for him. Roaming his eyes on Fei Long’s bare torso, he realized his little brother had indeed grown into a proper man. With strong, broad shoulders and a beautifully toned body, it was a sight no one could take their eyes off. The bruises and the blood just excited him more.

He reached out to trace his hand along the curves of that heaving chest, and suddenly his heart accelerated the same way when he had first touched that skin. “Come to think of it, I’ve never finished teaching you that lesson we started eight years ago.” He pressed himself up against the younger man’s back as he slipped his hand under Fei Long’s chin, lifting his face up and back until he could see his expression. “I think it’s time we continue. Let’s see if I can wipe that smirk off your face by the time I’m done with you.”

Fei Long closed his eyes and tried to steady himself with whatever strength he had left. He was already trembling in anger at the memory that suddenly resurfaced in his mind, but the way Yan Tsui pressed his hardened shaft against his backside, he could swear he literally felt his blood boil underneath his skin. Taking a deep breath, he began counting silently in his mind to retain control, ignoring the way his brother’s hand rubbed against the skin of his chest and paused at his nipple. “You and your indecent body,” Yan Tsui whispered against his brother’s cheek, and traced his lips down the side of the elegant neck as he spoke. “It must be very handy for you as a tool to get what you want, isn’t it, Fei Long?” he said, feeling the pain in his groin grow the closer he pressed his hip against the other man. He swore he almost came the moment he sank his teeth into the delicate flesh near his collarbone. At the same time his hand twisted the soft nipple hard, earning him a madly satisfying muffled groan.

It was the last thing he remembered, before the agonizing pain on the side of his head blinded all his other senses. Fei Long, having waited for the precise window of opportunity to present itself, had turned around and bit his ear with all the intention to see it severed from his head. Had the guards not entered fast enough to separate them, it would have been a part of his ear Fei Long was spitting out afterwards instead of his blood.

“You son of a whore!” Yan Tsui’s curse echoed loudly in that cell, but Fei Long thought it was still not as loud as his scream had been just a few seconds ago.

“You son of a whore!” he said, his amethyst eyes flashed a frightening gleam like those of a demon. “But remember this, you pathetic, disgusting low life undeserving of calling yourself a Liu. I am not your obedient little brother anymore. You can try to stick your little cock inside me until it rots off, but you will never break me so long as I live. And I will outlive every single one of you worthless scumbags. Mark my words!”

He had been broken once the night his father died. He had been through losing all hope and will to live in that prison. For years he had lived without a purpose other than to seek revenge. There was no future for him, no light at the end of the tunnel. But he had something to live for now. He would get out of there alive and live the way his mother had died to let him live - free and proud of who he was. He owed her that freedom, he owed Mikhail every smile he had taken from that face, and he owed himself for the happiness he had turned away from for as long as he could remember.

He couldn’t count the blows that followed afterwards. They were still beating him up long after Yan Tsui had fled the scene. Fled. Fei Long smiled at that thought. He had never seen his brother so frightened before in his life. Those eyes looked at him as though he was a stranger, a monster he had never believed existed. There was hatred on that face too, and Fei Long knew Yan Tsui would make him pay for what he did later. It didn't matter. Go ahead and try. I will survive.
All the while Toh, who had entered with the guards, stood nearby to watch and stop his men whenever they were going too far. Fei Long didn't like what Toh had meant when he said to leave him conscious and recognizable. It meant that the man had some very important plan for him later. The real pain, he could tell, has yet to begin.

A cell phone rang. Toh reached for it inside his suit jacket. He took one look at the caller ID and smiled in what appeared to Fei Long a very strange smile he hadn’t seen on the man before. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand on end when Toh shifted his gaze at him, knowing that call would be the start of his new game of torture. He wasn’t afraid of anything they could do to him physically, but Toh had always known the best way to get under his skin was through people he cared about. He was beginning to regret ever knowing his recently discovered source of strength. Having something to live for also meant that he had something to lose.

He told the guards to clear the room and stepped closer to his prisoner. Holding the phone in front of him, he pressed the button for the speaker.

"I was beginning to think you missed the note on the back," Toh said smilingly.

"What do you want?" said the man on the other end.

Fei Long's throat constricted the moment he heard the sound that threatened to bring tears to his eyes. It felt like years since he had last heard that deep, baritone voice. Just a few seconds ago he thought nothing could get to him, that he had no weaknesses. But now that Mikhail sounded as though he was just a few steps away, the strength he had fought so hard to build suddenly disappeared. Somewhere on the other side of the line was where he was supposed to be. Home.

He squeezed his eyes shut to the hollowness in his stomach and tried to chase his memories away. They were threatening to bring out the weakest part of him - the part that wanted nothing more than to be back in those arms again, to feel the warmth of that skin, to taste those lips that could always make his knees weak. He couldn’t afford to think about that now, no matter how much he wanted to. In the back of his mind he knew what was at stake. Mikhail sounded tired and lifeless saying those words. He must have been under a lot of stress over the last few days, on top of everything else he had been through as of late. There would be more pain to come. That was what Toh's expression was saying to him as he continued the phone conversation.

"Did you like my present?" Toh asked, his eyes locked on his prisoner's face as to not miss the tiniest reaction.

"I'm sending you a thank you gift. Why don't you tell me tomorrow if you like mine?"

"You have to stop sending men to be slaughtered, you know? It's just as impossible for you to track me as it is to find him. And even if you do find out where he is, do you really think that I would let you get him out of here alive when I could kill him with a snap of my fingers?"

There was a pause on the other end, as if he was listening for something else apart from those words. Fei Long tried his best not to make a sound. The last thing he wanted to do was put Mikhail through the pain of knowing he was right there, listening to their conversation.

"You put me on speakerphone. Why?"

Toh looked at him, his grin grew uglier the moment he saw Fei Long bite down on his lower lip. Sometimes he really wished Mikhail was as incompetent as he chooses to appear.
"Why do you think?"

Mikhail's breathing became heavier. It was loud enough for him to hear through the speakerphone. He didn't have to be in the same room to know how Mikhail looked at that given moment. There would be a slight frown on his face, his lips would be pressed tight together, and his face hardened from clenching his jaws. He knew the difference in Mikhail's breathing pattern by heart. He knew even when these gestures would appear. It didn't occur to him until then, how close Mikhail had been to his heart.

"Put him on the phone," Mikhail said. "Just him. Then we’ll talk."

Turning off the speaker, Toh smiled and held the phone to his prisoner’s ear. He was more than happy to oblige. The more that bond between them is strengthened, the more painful it would be for Fei Long when it is destroyed. What was it that he just claimed? You will not break me. He would be the judge of that later. “He’s all yours.”

Fei Long held his breath as he heard the noise from the other end. A part of him wanted the fling that phone against the wall, the other was craving for just one word spoken by that voice. But the choice wasn’t his. It was Toh’s, and whatever Toh wanted him to do, it would not end pretty.

"Fei Long," Mikhail said, his voice coarser than usual, as though it was difficult for him to utter the name.

How long had it been since he had last heard his name called with such gentleness by that voice? The last time they parted he was still uncertain about their future together, and Mikhail's words had been much harsher and less affectionate then. Hearing it again, he suddenly realized how naked his neck was where the weight of a gold chain used to rest. There had never been a day when he’d wanted that piece of jewelry to return to its place more. Have you forgiven me? He wanted nothing more than to ask the question, but if Mikhail had answered No, would he still have the strength or will to survive all this?

"Hi, handsome," he croaked and, upon realizing that his voice was trembling, quickly adjusted himself. "Did you miss me?" he joked. It was all he could do to keep from turning into a big mess in front of Toh, something he would never forgive himself over.

Mikhail sighed heavily from the other end of the line. "Are you okay?" There was some restraint in his voice, and Fei Long immediately knew why. Mikhail didn’t want to come off too soft or too concerned, which would have made him feel even more pitiful about himself.

"Apart from the broken heart you left me with? Sure, I've never been better." He tried to laugh as convincingly as he could, hoping that Mikhail would not be able to hear the shortness of breath that came from the tightness of his throat. What was he suppose to say? That his body was covered in bruises? Or that the ropes around his wrists had cut themselves almost to his bones? That his brother's filthy hands had touched him and now he awaits his return to finish the job? By the time, and if, they would see each other again, he wondered how much of him would Mikhail remember. What would you do if you knew what had happened to me? Would you still want me then?

He had expected Mikhail to voice some kind of disapproval. Instead there was a short moment of silence, a deep breath taken, and held. "Do you remember the note I had sent you when I returned the key?"

"Yes," Fei Long replied without hesitation. Do I remember? The note, the handwriting, the texture of that card, and the scent of him that somehow found its way onto the paper – yes, he remembered. He remembered it all, from the coldness of the key in his hand, down to the salt of
"I still am."

It was just one word that people use mindlessly - one word that you hear everyday but Mikhail had made it a promise and sealed it with the love key.

_I still am._

He closed his eyes and let those words echoed in his mind over and over again. It was in that moment that those memories came rushing back to him, crashing upon him like waves in a raging sea. One by one, his walls came crumbling down, walls that he had built to keep himself in, untouched, unreachable, and unloved. But through every lie, every doubt, and every pain, Mikhail was still here, still trying, still _his_. For the first time in a long, long time, he wanted to love again, to trust again, to live again. _Yours_. Mikhail had written twice, and confirmed it everyday through those unwavering blue eyes. "I know," he replied, his voice broken by the tears he refused to show. _I have always known._

"That's enough chit-chat for today." Toh took the phone away shortly after, and turned back on the speakerphone. Fei Long didn't like that grin on his face any more than the look in those eyes. He had been given an opportunity to talk to Mikhail, and the price was about to be revealed to him.

"What do you want?" Mikhail sounded impatient. Fei Long could tell he knew it too. As always, he doesn’t delay the bad news.

"How about a trade? Say, for your sweetheart's days off, a promise that no one will harm him physically for a week."

There was a pause from the other end of the line as the deal was being considered. Fei Long wanted to scream his objection, knowing that nothing good would ever come out of it. But whatever he didn’t want happen, Toh would see it done. The best thing to do, was the only thing he could do – nothing.

"How will I know if you've kept the promise?" At least there was some skepticism. Double-crossing was an art Mikhail happened to master. As a result, he doesn’t trust easily, if ever. Fei Long had never thought it to be useful until that day.

"A direct video feed of Fei Long's cell? You can see for yourself, though I don't guarantee you will like the content."

"How will I know it's live?"

"Oh I'm sure we can settle that later, if you agree to this. What do you say?"

"In exchange for what?"

Fei Long bit his lips. He knew what it was that Toh wanted. He had known for a long time. _Don't do it! Don't even listen to that answer._

"You," Toh replied, his eyes flashed a devious gleam. "For one week, day and night, I get to do with you as I please. Or you can send me that little boy he loves so much. Your choice. But take a pick, or I _will_ hack off a piece of him for every day that you don’t, and send it to you as souvenir."
P.S. Kill me, I have not written a single word for 14. See you in 6 months. (50 comments might help. 100 and you will get it before the end of August :D <--now I am truly getting killed)

P.P.S. I have a feeling a few people are going to be upset about Tao. I should say that I don't support physical abuse on a child and I don't hit my own children, however, apart from the earth-shattering love in this fan fiction that obviously does not exist in RL, I intend to write these men as they should be - mafias - without the fluff. So sorry about that ^_^!
Retribution Fourteen

Sorry for the really late update (at least I didn't take six months). I'm not sure about the quality of this chapter since my brain may still contain some toxin from the recent you-know-what. But if I don't try to get this out, I may just quit this fic altogether. I usually edit a lot more times than this. Sorry.

Title: Retribution Fourteen
Rating: R
Warning: violence, rough hand job, ghosts, OOC (if you agree with Finder No Rakuin), AU (if you agree w/ FNR), but for those who disagree: CWC (Canon? What Canon?)
Characters: EVERYONE even Alexei(yes, mommy still loves you baby!)
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All characters belong to YA.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish (COMPLETED! OMG!), German, and French translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_dracon has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

"Go fuck yourself!" Mikhail Arbatov barked into the phone. The device then flew across the room and landed hard—shattering into pieces - on the other side of the table just behind Asami, who did not so much as blink at the event. The Japanese man, if anything, looked a little surprised.

The room fell into deadly silence afterwards. Akihito wound his hand tight around the back of his chair, feeling the air in his lungs solidify as the tension grew by the second. Like Toh, the phone conversation on their end had also been put on speaker per Yoh’s suggestion. “More heads are better than one,” he had said, just in case some information had slipped. While Arbatov had tried to be discreet when he’d spoken to Fei Long, knowing that they were all listening, the tenderness on his face as he’d said those few words was impossible to hide. He didn't have to know the man for a long time to realize the extent of the power Fei Long had over him. Everyone in that room seemed to know this too, which was why his answer came at a surprise to all of them, knowing what it would lead to.

Before Akihito could voice his protest, Yoh, who had been sitting quietly, leapt off his chair, yanked Mikhail up by the collar, and slammed the man against the wall.

“Call him back and tell him you’ll do it!” Yoh demanded in a tone as lethal as a gun to the other man’s head, his words muffled by his tightly gritted teeth. He couldn't care less who he was talking to. Mikhail may just have cost Fei Long a finger or an arm over his stupid pride and temper. For all he knew, Toh may very well be working on him as they speak. “NOW!” His rage tripled the moment that thought entered his mind.
By that time, Feodora had already had her gun pressed hard against Yoh’s skull. The sound of her cocking the semi-automatic was meant to be the last warning. All the while, she kept her eyes on her husband, waiting for the signal. One nod from Mikhail and a bullet would punch through the man’s skull, its precision guaranteed by the determination on her face and the firmness of her hand.

The nod never came. Instead, Mikhail grabbed the arm that pinned him to the wall and twisted hard, earning him an opening for a heavy punch below the ribs, causing Yoh to stumble back a few steps.

“Stay back!” he barked at Feodora, his words harsh and final and was followed immediately and precisely. “This has been long overdue.” The man had one job to do and had fucked it up. If it hadn’t been for his failure to protect Fei Long, none of this would have happened. Toh wouldn’t have tortured Fei Long and he wouldn’t have had to listen to a fucking proposition that had made his blood boil. He had thought he could deal with the man, but now, Toh had already blown his patience and control to bits.

As Yoh tried to regain his balance, Mikhail charged forward, leaving neither room nor time for anyone to interfere. Another blow landed on the other man’s face, this time sending him crashing back against the dining table where Tao was sitting. The boy jumped out of the way just in time and managed to avoid being cut by the broken plates that resulted from the attack. The look on Tao’s face was more shock than fear, Akihito thought. It was understandable. No one had anticipated Yoh to ever lose it this way. Not even Asami, judging from the way he looked at his former spy, and how his cigarette was hanging loosely on his lips.

When Mikhail grabbed him again by the collar, Yoh kneed him in the stomach, followed closely by a punch to his face. The blow may not have been as heavy as the Russian’s given their difference in size, but the bruise was going to last at least a week.

“You think he’s not going to do it?!” Yoh slammed the man back against the wall once more, his voice nearly shouting. “You will have his hand on the table tomorrow morning in return for your fucking ego, and you know it!”

“My fucking ego?!” Mikhail slammed his palms against the man’s chest, shoving him back furiously. “It was your incompetence that got him in this situation in the first place! It was you who betrayed his trust for that piece of shit! And for what? So you can go to sleep at night having kept you precious pride?! Don’t fucking talk to me about my ego! What have you ever done for him?" He looked at the rest of them with eyes that could draw blood. "What has anyone in this room ever done for him?!"

Now panting heavily from the anger that filled his chest, Mikhail curled his fingers into a fist to keep himself under control. Everywhere Fei Long had turned someone was there to stab him in the back. Everyone he’d trusted betrayed him. If it had been his choice, half the people in that room would have been dead a long time ago. As far as he was concerned, none of them had the right to even talk about what he should or shouldn’t do for Fei Long.

Every one of them should just fucking die, starting with that Japanese prick. Why Alexei? Why did it have to be Alexei?

Yoh snatched a handful of his shirt and yanked the man closer, staring straight into his eyes. "Why don’t you tell me how you will sleep at night when his head gets served to you on a plate?"

Mikhail’s eyes flashed deadly white at that precise moment when the last thread of his control had finally snapped.
The sound of his rage was deafening. He only had to raise his voice a little louder and Akihito thought the crystal chandelier would shatter right before his eyes. He had been told briefly about what had happened to Arbatov’s younger brother by Kirishima, but had forgotten that detail up until then. It seemed to him that everyone, even Feodora, had been concentrating so much on Fei Long that they had forgotten it too. Mikhail Arbatov was still drowning in that loss. The pain in his voice was almost too much to witness-- even Yoh seemed to have calmed down to realize what he was asking the man to do.

"Then you will lose him too," Yoh said much calmer now than before, even though his expression remained the same. He might have felt a little sympathy for the man who was facing a proposition no one should have to endure, much less a man in Arbatov’s position. But in the end, it all came down to what Mikhail and him stood to lose. Fei Long was the only thing left in the world that mattered to them. Mikhail could not afford to lose him even at the cost of doing this, just as he would cut out his heart if it ever stood between Fei Long and his life.

“I don’t care what you have to do. But if he wants you to get down on your knees, crawl on all fours and suck his cock, you will do it. Because if you don’t, he is as good as dead.” It wasn’t an easy thing for him to ask. He had been there to witness what Alexei Arbatov’s death did to Mikhail and even Fei Long was cast aside in the event. The bond between the two of them was as deep as the scars on the man's back. But he was hoping—praying-- that Fei Long’s worth to Mikhail would be enough to make a difference.

“You were right-- in all of his life, no one had ever sacrificed anything for him,” Yoh said quietly the words that pained him like a blunt knife through his heart. For seven years he had felt like a cripple by Fei Long's side, and now that he was free to do what his heart desires, the power to save Fei Long was still not his. Yet now there was something he could do, words he could say to make a difference. What he couldn’t sacrifice for Fei Long before - his pride, his integrity of having promised his loyalty to Asami Ryuichi before him - he would ask Mikhail Arbatov to. “You are the only one who can.”

It wasn't a pretty sight to witness, seeing a man like Mikhail Arbatov swallow his pride and submit to something he would rather die than consider. But when the rage in those eyes subsided, Yoh knew he had hit a homerun. Mikhail may have been more than ready to die with Fei Long than succumb to such an unimaginable request, but he was not ready to be yet another man who failed Fei Long, especially when he was the last remaining one the Baishe leader could count upon. It was unspeakable of him to use this as his weapon against Arbatov, knowing what he was asking the man to do, but this time, at least he would sacrifice the integrity whose value he’d once held higher than life itself for Fei Long. It was what he could do, and he would not fail him a third time. He would get Fei Long out of there, even if it had required him to become a monster.

Akihito could feel the tension between them electrify the air as they stared at each other in intense silence. Mikhail Arbatov stood as still as a rock, as if those words had completely paralyzed him, while Yoh's immovable dedication nailed his feet to the ground. They exchanged no words in that suffocating stillness, but the battle of will that took place that day could have caused the ground to rumble beneath their feet. Yet somewhere in the middle of all the hostility, a certain kind of bond that linked them together was also apparent. It was then that Akihito understood why the two of them had joined forces given all the odds. Together they’d shared one thing in common and knew the kind of understanding and trust between them would never be reached by any other way. For as long as Fei Long lives, their paths, although may never entwine, would be forever paralleled. They both were aware of this, especially since Arbatov had clearly opted to let the other man live after such an assault.
Mikhail took a long, deep breath and closed his eyes for a second as he exhaled. His rage had dissipated and his control seemed to have returned, only the tightness of his jaws told Akihito the tension was far from over. *How could it be over?* Akihito thought. The consequence of his decision that day was something the man had to bear and bear alone—most likely for as long as he lives.

"Call Toh and tell him he'll have my answer in the morning," Mikhail said in a slow, emotionless tone. It was difficult to tell from his expression whether he had already made a decision or if he was just going to consider it. Knowing what he knew, Akihito could not help but worry for Tao. Sending the boy didn't seem to be an option for the Russian then, which was probably why he had given Toh that answer. But being pushed to the edge with the truth in Yoh’s words that way, nothing was certain anymore.

Mikhail Arbatov went back to the monitor room alone after that without another word. It was the first time Akihito had seen Yoh sigh that way after all the time he had spent at Baishe. As Yoh straightened his clothes and wiped the blood off his lips, Feodora approached him quietly. She paused at a distance close enough to be called intimate, yet the hostility in her eyes sang a completely different tune. He adjusted himself to the unexpected invasion of his personal space, and yet she gained an inch nearer, until her words, spoken in a near whisper, could be heard loud and clear.

"The next time you turn against him," she said, pausing for a second to allow the words to sink in, "I won't wait for permission. Do I make myself clear?"

Surprisingly to Akihito, Yoh stood his ground and stared down at her, his eyes turning ice-cold as he spoke. "Considering that I've just saved your husband's life, you might want to show a little gratitude."

"By forcing him to submit to his enemy?" she said with mocking smile. "I forgot, that was what you did for Fei Long, wasn't it? Better to stab him in the back than put him in danger." She had been kept completely out of the loop concerning Fei Long’s past, but because of the efficiency of her network, she was able to find some tidbits that even Mikhail might not know. "Have you ever asked him how he sleeps at night?"

Yoh paused for a second, surprised at the amount of information she seemed to have gathered. It would be a lie to say those words didn't get right under his skin, but pain was something he had lived with ever since he could remember. Pain was something that was always apparent when he was around Fei Long. He had grown too accustomed to pain to not let it interfere with his decisions, especially when there was so much more at stake. He could not afford to make room for his own problems, the same way Feodora could not afford to waste time concentrating on what he had done or was about to do.

"Open your eyes woman," he said. Surely he wasn't the only one who saw it - the hopelessness in those pale blue eyes that lacked their usual liveliness and intensity. The reason Mikhail had ended the conversation the way he did and crushed the phone in that manner wasn’t just rage or pride. The man had been pushed to his limits, and was inches away from breaking.

"If Fei Long dies, he will not live."

***

The night was long and unbearable. Akihito shifted on the bed from side to side, trying to sleep and constantly failing. He looked at the half-opened door that opened to the living room and saw that Asami was still sitting out there, going through his second pack of cigarettes as if he needed them to survive. It was enough to tell Akihito that he, too, was being affected by
what had happened in the dining room earlier that evening. But the fact that he was in here and Asami was out there, stressing about the same thing, bothered him like never before.

He got up and went into the living room, making enough noise on purpose to make himself noticed. Asami was sitting on the couch alone, with his back turned to Akihito.

“Go back to bed.” He stirred a little but did not turn around when he’d spoke.

Akihito was done taking orders. He took a long, deep breath and planted his feet firmly on the floor. “Tell me about Fei Long.”

“Not now.” Asami brushed it aside without a moment of pause.

“Now!” Takaba demanded. “You can’t keep me in the dark any longer.”

***

The clock struck once, followed closely by the lightning that had brought him back to consciousness. Mikhail looked at his watch and exhaled heavily. 1:00 AM. He must have fallen asleep on his desk while watching the monitors. Recently—yet understandably-- he had lost track of when he last had a full night’s sleep. The only thing he could remember was that the last time he’d tried, he had forced himself up from the nightmares that kept haunting him night after night. The voices in his head had not stopped since then, they only grew in frequency and number during the day whenever he tried to take a break. His headache grew with them like a bad hangover that just wouldn’t stop.

“Him. I want him.”

The sky flashed brightly before the lightning struck again. He looked up and saw Alexei standing in front of the monitors, looking straight at him with his green eyes as bright as emerald, his soft brown hair glowing subtly in the dark.

“I want him.”

Mikhail shut his eyes for a moment and opened them again. His brother was gone now. A child now stood in his place, holding an old basketball in his hands, beckoning him to play. Slowly, a memory he didn’t know he had retained came back to him. He was twelve and Alexei was ten. They had broken their father’s antique vase playing ball in the house. “Don’t worry,” Alexei said, smiling his usual mischievous smile with so much confidence. “Daddy loves me, I’ll just say I did it.” It was how his brother was, and their father did love him. He did too, so much that there was little Alexei could do that he couldn’t forgive, even when he was asking for the one thing closest to his heart.

I want him. That was his last wish, and he had come back to lay his claim.

The lightning struck again, and this time the boy was gone. A trail of blood slithered along the floor from where he once stood to the back of the room like a fiery red serpent that glittered in the dark. At the end of the trail, amidst the pool of blood, his brother’s corpse appeared. Mikhail jolted back, knocking his chair over and stumbling backwards. He looked again and the body was gone. But the air he breathed suddenly smelled like the stench of that morgue, and the voice in his head suddenly escalated to a shriek, dragging him closer and closer to the edge of madness. He pressed his hands tight against his ears and willed it to go away, failing, time and time again. It sounded like his father's rage the day his mother had died. It sounded like the siren of an ambulance that he
kept imagining he'd heard when they'd taken Alexei away. It sounded like Fei Long screaming in pain somewhere he could not see.

Then you will lose him too.

He smashed his fists on the desk to bring himself back to reality. As Yoh’s words continued to echo in his mind, Mikhail hurled himself repeatedly at the polished oak to drown out the sound of that scream. He couldn’t afford this madness right now. That son of a bitch had killed his brother, and he was not going to let the same man kill Fei Long too!

But the voice in his head kept on ringing, all the while his skin crawled at the thought of agreeing to Toh’s terms and what it would do to him, to Fei Long, to them. It was a win-win situation for Toh that he would never consent to had Yoh not reminded him of what was at stake. Between living with that much pain and dying, he would have picked the latter in a heartbeat. But did he have the right to pick for Fei Long, when the man’s life rested in his hands?

A knock on the door came and suddenly the voice vanished. He looked up, took a deep breath and said, “Come in,” without thinking. Perhaps that was what he needed - a distraction, some human interaction that would pull his mind away from his ghosts.

The door opened slowly, and a boy stepped into the room. For a moment, Mikhail thought it was his brother’s ghost again, until he noticed that his hair was black, not brown.

“Tao?” Mikhail sighed and rubbed his forehead. He was so close to going mad. “What do you need?”

Tao walked over reluctantly to the older man through the darkness of the room. Mikhail Arbatov was sitting behind a desk, staring at the screen quietly when he approached. Even Tao could tell his mind was elsewhere while his fingers fumbled around a small object he was holding. His blue eyes seemed tired, and the man looked more and more like a ghost every time Tao saw him since he’d arrived at that villa. Only the bruises on his face from the fight earlier that evening told Tao otherwise.

“I’ll go.”

Mikhail looked up and saw a pair of brown eyes that could rival some of his hit men during an assignment. There was no explanation needed. His conviction was strong and clear in the tone he used that day.

“I’m of no use to anyone. Fei-sama needs you more than me. I’ll go.” His voice was shaking a little as he spoke, but it would be a lie to say that he was not afraid of the consequences of his decision.

For a moment, Mikhail stilled as he looked quietly at the boy whose hands wound tight around the fabric of his pajamas, as though the action would give him strength. “Sit down,” he said, dragging a chair from nearby over and tapped gently on the seat.

“Sir…” Tao began and was stopped by the gesture of the older man’s hand.

“Do you know what will happen to you if you go?”

The boy swallowed. “... I might die?” He had been prepared for this before he had come downstairs. He had decided he owed Fei-sama his life one way or another, and it was time for him to repay his master’s kindness.

“He will hurt you instead of Fei Long and will torture you until you can no longer scream. You...
The way Mikhail Arbatov looked at him told him it was not a threat, but a fact he should know. He could feel blood drain from his face and his fingers had turned cold from just listening to those words. He had been prepared for this, to say he doesn’t care what would happen to him and that Fei-sama’s life was more important than his. Now that he was facing it, all he could do was stand mute in front of the other man. His decision had not changed, but he could no longer voice it as he’d hoped.

“Are you willing to go that far for him?”

Tao nodded. It was easier to do at the time.

“I need you to say it.”

“I am.” It came out reluctantly and in a whisper at first, but seeing the look in the older man’s eyes, he straightened himself and repeated, this time with no more hesitation. “I am, sir.” He paused and continued with a certain firmness that was not there before. “I want to be the man who deserves a place by Fei-sama’s side. I want to be a man like you.”

A man like me.

The older man rested his large, strong hand on Tao’s shoulder, squeezing it firmly. “Fei Long would be proud of you. Go to bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

His remark had left no room for argument, and Tao exited the room soon after. Mikhail leaned back on his chair and stared blankly at the ceiling. Dawn was approaching and he would soon have to make a decision. The gold chain felt heavy in his hand, the Love key dug deep into his flesh as he squeezed his palm closed.

Are you willing to go that far for him? His own words echoed relentlessly in his mind like the constant call of Alexei’s ghost.

***

The air was damp and heavy. His palm was slick with sweat when he searched for his last cigarette. He had gone through the entire pack not remembering when he had finished a single smoke. It was the only thing he could do that kept him occupied long enough to survive the wait.

The lighter failed him on three attempts. Yoh wiped his hand on his black shirt and tried the lighter once more. When it failed him the fourth time, he tossed it into the darkness down below.

“Here.” Someone offered him a lighter from behind, already lit. He accepted it, bent over and took a few puffs on the cigarette until the tobacco caught on fire. The man then lit himself one and joined him on the balcony.

He glanced over his shoulder toward his new company. Mikhail Arbatov was standing next to him, staring into the same emptiness before them quietly. He swayed a little while he stood, as if he couldn’t quite plant his feet firmly down on the ground. It was a strange sight to see, and anyone who has ever been around the man would immediately know something was wrong. Being always overly confident, Mikhail Arbatov had always been sure-footed and firm in his stance, his footsteps could be heard and recognized from a room away. That night, his usual presence that prompted people around him to remain cautious and careful was nowhere to be found.

The man took a long draw from his black and gold cigarette and exhaled, his breathing obviously
uneven and constricted from the broken trail of smoke that came from his lips. His expression may not say much about how everything was affecting him, but the way the cigarette shook in his hand betrayed his perfect poker face.

“He’s going to die, isn’t he?” It was a rhetorical question, but the way he said it confirmed Yoh’s intuition that the man was already giving up and making plans for that particular future. He did not understand it until earlier that night, how Arbatov could remain as calm as he had. The answer was simple - he had no intention to stick around to suffer the outcome of this event should they fail.

Only failure was something Yoh could not allow this time.

“He doesn’t have to.”

Mikhail paused for a few seconds, trying to believe in what he had previously failed to convince himself to. The lack of sleep was already taxing him, and his focus was beginning to deteriorate. Every time he closed his eyes he was back in that morgue, with Alexei lying lifeless and cold in front of him. And then every once in a while Fei Long would be there, too, standing on the other side of the bed, looking as pale and as lifeless as his brother. Sometimes the image of his mother would also return, together with the sound of her screams the day she’d given birth to Alexei.

They all die.

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook away the sound of his conscience that had been haunting him for days. He needed some sleep to regain his strength. He needed his head clear in order to think straight. Only right now, he could accomplish neither. “I don’t know how to save him.”

“Yes, you do.” Yoh took a step closer until they were standing face to face. “We can’t get him out playing by the rules. If we're going to win this game, we need to do it your way.” He grabbed the other man's collar and tugged on it firmly, closing the distance between them. "I need you to pull yourself together and tell me what to do. Think. If it wasn't Fei Long, what would you have done?" There has to be a way to turn things around that they haven’t considered, and the most cunning man among them all was Mikhail Arbatov, if only he could somehow get the man back on his feet again.

If it wasn’t Fei Long...

Mikhail stilled for a moment, searching his mind for the answer to the question he had somehow overlooked. Suddenly his breathing steadied, his blue eyes focused, returning almost to their usual shade.

That did not escape Yoh’s notice. “Tell me.”

There was a pause from the man that seemed like hesitation, even though the look on his face told Yoh it had already been decided.

“You may not survive this.”

Yoh smiled. “Sounds like a good plan.” He had offered his life to Fei Long once, and as far as he was concerned, the offer still stood. “What will you do?”

“Get personally close,” Mikhail said, his blue eyes turning ice-cold as he spoke. “I’ll keep Toh... occupied. You get him out.”

“How will we find out his location?”
Mikhail took a long draw on the cigarette and put out the fire, tossing whatever was left of it off the balcony. There was a way out of this yet that he had failed to see, risky, but not something that he could not or had not accomplished before.

“By tracking you. I’m putting you in there with Fei Long.”

Yoh didn’t see it at first, but it soon became clearer to him. “As proof of life?” Toh had said that he would consider such proof. Still... “Even if you can get me in there with him, I can’t break him out on my own.” It wasn’t something that they could accomplish from the outside even with the knowledge of where Fei Long was being kept, given the fact that Toh could order his execution the moment before they could fire their first shot. And knowing how careful Phillip Toh was, the man had to have placed enough guards around the area to make damn sure it could not be accomplished from the inside, if Arbatov manages to get him in there at all.

“You can’t, and you’re not going to.” Mikhail said with a hint of smile at the corner of his lips. “The only man I know who can break out of that kind of prison is already in there.”

***

The meeting place was a Chinese restaurant on the top floor of a skyscraper owned by one of Toh’s subsidiary companies. The floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic, bird’s eye view of Hong Kong and its harbor. Phillip Toh was standing with his hands tucked neatly behind his back, watching the streets and the bustling crowd down below when his guest had arrived.

Ten minutes after the agreed meeting time, Mikhail Arbatov stepped into the private room, flanked on each side by Toh’s bodyguards. Fashionably late and attired, as always, the Russian turned up in a pair of black leather pants and a black lambskin leather jacket thrown over a white V-neck T-shirt. Because of the tempting sight, Toh couldn’t help but to allow his gaze to linger a little longer than necessary. Fei Long had gotten himself a fine catch, only that catch was about to become his prize and trophy. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone or anything had made him feel this good, aside from torturing his bastard half-brother.

“Good morning.” He sat down on the chair near the window, brushing the crease on the sleeve of his cheongsam as he spoke. “Would you like anything to drink?”

“I’m not here to drink,” Mikhail replied as he removed his jacket and tossed it on the table. He took the chair across from where the other man was and threw one leg over the other, leaning back on the cushion with his usual carefree attitude. The look in those wolf-like eyes, however, was anything but carefree. They focused on him like a predator waiting for a chance to tear apart its eternal enemy. “He is alive and well?” He asked, brief, and as always, right to the point.

It might have slipped other people’s notice, but Toh could see the way the Russian sized up the three guards he had placed in that room. The last remaining heir to the entire Arbatov fortune was no rookie. He was willing to bet that the man had already known what his guards were packing - including the ones in the adjacent rooms. A lot of people seemed to be fooled by flippant mask the young Russian likes to put on, but he could tell from the first time they’d met that the man was not to be taken lightly. Mikhail Arbatov, on his own, could already stir his appetite like no other, but the fact that he belonged to Liu Fei Long of Baishe had made him salivate every time he thought of about getting his hands on the man.

“He is, and I suggest that you begin to heed my words if you’d like him to continue to be,” Toh replied as he called over a serving girl with a slight motion of his hand. Slowly, as if to make sure the action would not escape the other man’s notice, he slid the half empty glass of wine in front of him over to girl. “For the gentleman.”
The pale blue eyes turned razor-sharp when the serving girl placed the glass in front of him. Toh smiled at his first reward. “Drink,” he insisted, rolling the word on his tongue and enjoying immensely the way it tasted. All the while his eyes locked on his prize, allowing no reaction or emotion to escape his notice. It all added to the satisfaction, knowing just how much he could control one of the most powerful Russian mafia family just by using one man as a bargaining chip.

With his eyes remaining on the man across the table, Mikhail picked up the wine glass in a slow motion. He gave it a twirl that lasted a little longer than needed, and raised the glass to his lips. Feeling butterflies invading his stomach, Toh found himself swallowing at the anticipation. The moment that the liquid would touch those lips, it would seal the deal that would make Fei Long wish he could crawl out of his skin. The idea alone was making his knees weak. But a second before the wine had reached his lips, Mikhail paused.

“We haven’t discussed the details of my payment,” he said, putting the glass back down in front of him.

Toh swore in his mind he would make the man pay for this. “Perhaps you’ve forgotten you don’t hold the necessary cards to negotiate with me.”

“Relax. It’s only a matter of the fine print.” The Russian cocked his head to one side and smiled amusingly, his hand fiddled with the wine glass as if to taunt him with it. “What you’re asking for is expensive, and for that I expect to be paid properly.”

Toh pressed his lips firmly together in irritation. Considering his position, he should not allow the man to make a single demand. But somehow, a part of him enjoyed playing this game with the man a little too much. It wasn’t everyday that he would find a worthy opponent that could whet his appetite and excite him like Mikhail Arbatov.

"Let's see what you're up to."

"Go on."

"I want him moved to a cell with a clean bathroom and a comfortable bed where no one is allowed to touch him without his permission for the duration of our agreement."

“That can be arranged.” It really didn’t matter. He had all the time in the world to put the man back in his misery.

"I want all his wounds and injuries tended to properly, and he is to be given proper food and water to recover."

"Fine." He had been doing that anyway, to make sure the man doesn’t die on him.

"I want a live camera feed from his cell to make sure you’re keeping your word."

"As I’d said before, I’d be happy to provide."

Mikhail nodded and paused momentarily, picking the glass up again and gave it another twirl. "As proof that it is a live feed, I want my man in there with him."

Toh stilled, his hawk-like eyes focused sharply on the other man. “You’re planning something.” He could feel it, even though he could not quite guess what it was the man had hoped to accomplish. He would no doubt search Arbatov’s man from head to toe to make sure he is not carrying any tracking devices or weapons. One man couldn’t possibly get Fei Long out of his cell, and even if the Russians had learned the location, Fei Long would be dead before the first bullet could be fired.

“Maybe,” Mikhail said, raising the glass to his face and sniffing the wine tauntingly. “Maybe not.”
“You do realize this man is not getting out once he’s in.” Not alive anyway.

A cunning smile grazed his lips as Mikhail drew up a brow. “Maybe I just need to get rid of him.”

“You can just kill him.”

“I can,” he replied, looking straight into the other man’s eyes. “But considering his ties to Fei Long, I’d rather have him die differently.”

Toh’s eyes narrowed at the remark. “Who is he?”

Mikhail placed the glass down and reached for a small object in his jacket. “See for yourself.” He placed it on the table and pushed it over to the other man. “I’m sure you’ll oblige me.”

Picking up the thumb drive, Toh turned it around in his hand as he considered the request. He was pretty sure the man had just lied through his teeth and was definitely hiding something. But the identity of this man intrigued him nonetheless. Perhaps there was something else he could use that had just presented itself to him. And while the wise thing to do was to not risk it at all, the thought of beating this man at his own game was a temptation he could not brush aside easily. Still… “I have a hard time believing you would do anything that benefits me, even if it’s for your own good. I’m afraid it’s too much of a risk.”

“Let me put it this way,” Mikhail said, looking straight at Toh and smiling. “You can force me to comply to your wishes unwillingly, and you’d be entertaining yourself with a fraction of what he has, or you can take this risk in exchange for my willingness, and get the real thing while you’re at it. Your choice.”

“Your willingness?” Phillip Toh raised a brow and gestured for everyone else to exit the room, leaving just the two of them behind. The truth was, he was not really counting on the pleasure itself when he had asked for this, only the satisfaction of making his brother suffer. But the idea of getting Fei Long’s mere leftovers was beginning to irritate him a little too much. Some how the sly Russian had figured out his weakness and knew just what to say. But even knowing that he was being manipulated, now that he had heard those words, it would not be easy to remove the insult from his conscience. Clever bastard. “You’re saying that if I grant you this, you will please me like you’ve always pleased him?” Fei Long’s suffering would increase, and he would enjoy using this man much more at the same time.

“I’m saying that if you grant me this, I will fuck you like you’ve never been fucked before in your life. And when I’m done, you will be begging me for another deal.”

Phillip Toh bit his bottom lip to keep from making a sound, feeling as if his blood had suddenly rushed to his groin all at once. There was something about Mikhail Arbatov, perhaps that overflowing confidence or his extreme bluntness, that told him the man was not boasting. If that was not enough, the fact that he had been secretly attracted to this man for a long time made him shiver at the thought.

He rose from the chair and made his way to the other side, taking his time to enjoy the mental image that was exciting him too much for his own good. Pausing in front of the Russian whose cunning eyes remained on him at all times, he reached out to touch that handsome face, trailing his fingers around the hard edges of the perfect jaw line. The ache in his groin was almost unbearable, now that he could just imagine what it would feel like to touch the rest of the skin that covered the man’s tight, masculine body.

“You seem so sure of yourself,” he said, moving closer until he was standing directly over the
other man, who had not made a single movement. Tracing his fingers along the Russian’s face again, he brushed his thumb across the man’s lips and felt his erection push hard against the silk of his cheongsam. “Perhaps a little demonstration is in order before we continue this discussion, don’t you think?” He pushed his hips forward, and almost winced to the pain that shot through his body when he guided the man’s face where he wanted. “I wonder… Is your mouth as good as the words that come out of it? Hmm?”

Mikhail didn’t blink at the request. He reached up to the hand under his chin slowly. The moment they touched, before Toh could grasp what was happening, the man had twisted his wrist and spun him around, face down on the table.

“Don’t move,” he heard Arbatov whisper right next to his ear. Just when he was about to positioned his foot where he could gain a window to set himself free, the man moved his other hand forward and down between his legs.

It was the moment when his need clashed with his instinct to survive. With his skills he could break free from this inferior position at any time, but being held down in that way by this man was making his pulse raced like never before. The anticipation of what was to come and the growing pain in his groin made it near impossible for his head to come up with a logical decision. One call from him and his men would be on the Russian, but did he want this to end?

“What do you think you’re doing?” He asked, almost panting to the merciless beating of his own heart.

“Giving you a demonstration,” Mikhail said. “That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

The hand around his wrist was removed as soon as he ceased to struggle. Instead, the Russian had wound it firmly in his hair, tugging his head backwards until he let a short, muffled groan slip out. His other hand pulled on the ties of his pants forcefully, yanking the knot free with just a few tugs.

There was nothing delicate about it, from the hand that pulled hard on his hair, and the one that was tugging his pants down. The man was brutal, his movements harsh and to the point that it bordered on rape… only he found himself somehow willing. The heat on his back coupled with the sting on his scalp excited him, knowing that it was also dangerous given the circumstances. With one easy twist, the man could easily break his neck, and yet at the same time, the promise he was given made him crave for it. “It’s not what I asked for.”

The man closed his hand on his erection, pulling from him a surprised groan from the contact. He could feel pain and anticipation racing up his spine as the rough, strong hand wound tight around his member, yet refused to move.

“There’s one thing you need to understand before we continue,” Mikhail whispered, yanking his hair back harder, until he could feel the man’s breath brushing the back of his earlobe. “My willingness means that I control this, not you. The pleasure is mine to give however I want to give it. I will hold up my end of the deal so long as you hold yours. Are we clear?” He tugged harder on the ponytail and let go of the straining organ in his hand. It nearly made Toh cry out something unacceptably desperate from the sudden deprivation.

“Are we clear?” Mikhail repeated, still hovering his hand over the erection but not touching.

“Yes,” Toh replied in a desperate and irritated groan. “Just finish it, you’ll get what you want.”

“Good.” The hand closed in around him again. The heat from those fingers that stroke him up and down, pausing in between long enough to make him cry for it, shot through him like he was taking
a bullet, one after another. He pushed his hips forward to get what he needed, and every time he did, the man would tug hard on his hair, and let go of his cock. It was a battle of will that Toh had fought and constantly failed. The moment he decided to let go of all his control, and the Russian was satisfied, the hand around him quickened, tightened, and began to wring him dry. He grabbed the edge of the table as his knees gave in, crying sounds he didn’t know he could make as he was brought closer to climax. When he reached it, the Russian let go a few seconds too soon, leaving him aching and straining on purpose.

“It’s always better to leave something for the next round,” Mikhail said as he let go and picked up a napkin, wiping his hand clean.

Toh swore in his mind as he pushed himself up from the table and began to dress himself. It was just a fucking hand job, and he had never before been brought to the edge of madness that way. Had Fei Long been given this every single night he spent with Mikhail Arbatov? He could not tell if the thought irritated or excited him. Perhaps both.

“I’ll send my man over later today, and when I have that camera feed, we’ll talk,” the Russian said as he picked up his jacket and headed to the door.

When Mikhail had left the room, Toh leaned back on the table where they had been minutes ago and straightened his cheongsam. Still trying to catch his breath, a smile appeared on his face as he reached for the wine glass he had previously offered the man. For the first time in his life, he had just met a worthy adversary. He could see a lot of himself in Mikhail Arbatov, and the attraction he felt for the man had just tripled in the last hour. More and more, he was beginning to like the game the man had thrown at him, thinking that he could win.

*We’ll see, he thought, grinning amusingly as he emptied the glass in his hand. We’ll see.*

***

A/N: I am not skipping the important explanations that is missing from this chapter like you-know-what. They will be clearly explained and justified in 15. BTW, I am off to Egypt and Jordan from 5th - 20th November, so if I don't answer your comments then, I am likely on a camel or camping in the desert somewhere XD But hopefully I can come back with some plot bunnies. MikxFei in the desert, anyone?

P.S. I will be posting in my lj only from now on. So here's your chance to hit that post tracking button or just friend me. I'll try to friend everyone back in case I end up locking any future posts. So if you're not on my f-list and want me to add you without friending me, it's fine, just drop me a line and I'll add you ^_^  

P.P.S. I am really really devastated by the novel at this point, and I'm not sure how fast I can update. But I promise I will finish this fic if you're willing to stick around with me a bit longer. Thank you MxF fans who have shown me you are not giving up and kept me going. If there are more of you guys out there, please drop me a line. MikxFei FOREVER! will do. I need it, desperately! *hugs*
I promised I would update on Fei Long’s birthday, did I do good or not? XD So sorry for the unforgivably late update, but hey, at least I managed to get back into the fandom. I didn't have much time to edit so sorry for all the crappy stuff. I hope you all enjoy and join me wishing Fei a very happy birthday!

Title: Retribution Fifteen
Rating: PG-13
Warning: violence, OOC (if you agree with FNR), AU (if you agree w/ FNR), but for those who disagree: CWC (Canon? What Canon?)
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Yoh, AxA, Feodora (OC), Tao
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All VF characters belong to Yamane Ayano.
Beta: angel0399
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish (COMPLETED! OMG!), German, French, and newly added VIETNAMESE! (thank you everyone!) translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

“I don’t like it,” Feodora said with an expression that looked like someone had put too much sugar in her tea. Yoh doubted that such an event would ever happen, although her not liking Mikhail’s plan probably occurred a lot, if not every time.

“You don’t believe he can pull this off?” Yoh placed his espresso down on the saucer. The doubt on her face had somewhat ruined his appetite. A woman’s intuition was usually right, especially if it’s someone like Feodora’s. The woman had, after all, survived an entire family of Arbatovs—that had to account for something supernatural.

She shook her head slowly, still deliberating about the issue in her head. “Mikhail can pull off any scheme he dreams about. It’s what happens afterwards that he never seems to take into account.” One fine example would be getting involved with Baishi from the beginning. She was willing to bet her husband never saw trouble coming when he had set his eyes on Fei Long. Living like there’s no tomorrow had always been the core of his personality and it’s what always had drawn people to him. Even she knew she would not have loved him so much otherwise. “Can we not just kidnap one of his bastards for an exchange?” Feodora sighed in defeat. She knew the answer to that question, only it still sounded like a good idea.

Yoh stilled for a moment—he didn’t know that she had come across that information. Phillip Toh had two bastard sons that he didn’t acknowledge, and only few in his organization knew about them. “They’re toddlers.”

“You speak as if that’s the reason you haven’t brought it up.” Feodora sneered. She saw the kind of man that he was the first time they’d met. That stubbornness of his could dominate any moral issue that got in his way—an attribute that would make him the most valuable subordinate… if one
could capture his loyalty. However without that loyalty, he would be the biggest threat to the organization and would have to be eliminated immediately. It was an issue she had to find an answer to quickly, considering what Mikhail was planning.

“As a pregnant woman, shouldn’t it be yours?”

The surprise she showed on her face was slight, but in her mind the man had immediately put her on guard. She had to be more careful around this man—the former mole was better at his job than he appeared. “As a pregnant woman, my priority is the survival of my child.”

Yoh nodded in acknowledgement. In her position, it was hard enough keeping everyone in her own family alive. A normal woman probably has it in her to care. A woman who has had her entire family murdered overnight probably couldn’t afford to. “They lack the significance to be used as pawns,” he said. “At this point, we need to make sure we have enough man and fire power to pull this off. Mikhail needs your cooperation.” He knew that she was the only one who could make things happen in her husband’s absence. The only problem was getting her to agree with the plan.

“We don’t,” she said with the kind of certainty in her tone that made Yoh wish he hadn’t asked. Something in her eyes, however, made him listen on. "Not with Baishe backing them." They were already at war both in Russia and China. If Toh sensed an attack, one phone call from him to Baishe could initiate an attack on their territory that they would not be able to counter. It was too risky.

The last sentence was spoken with conviction, not out of despair. She had a plan. If you kill Liu Yan Tsui while Fei Long is missing, Baishe would crumble from the internal conflict. I can’t let that happen, neither would Mikhail." Baishe was the most important thing to Fei Long—sacrificing it wouldn’t be any different from killing the man with their own hands. But Baishe was a problem, this, she was not wrong.

"I’m not going to kill him," she said, her eyes glittered sharply. "He just needs to be put away." For now.

"It's not going to work.” Yoh shook his head skeptically. “Toh has too many connections.” Not to mention that he must have already used them to get Yan Tsui back into Hong Kong.

“So do we,” she smiled.

Her confidence over the situation was remarkable. Still... “You will need some concrete evidence, which we don’t have.”

Feodora placed her teacup down slowly and leaned back on the soft leather cushion of her armchair. “Why do you think Asami Ryuichi is here?”

Yoh didn’t know whether to congratulate her for coming up with the idea, or to pity her for dreaming of something impossible. He knew Asami Ryuichi; he had worked for the man for more than a decade to know he would never expose himself publicly at any cost. "The only reason he has survived this long and this well is because he’s always kept himself a mere shadow in the underworld. He would never testify.”

"Won't he?” She smiled again, and Yoh felt an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. "Phillip Toh is not the only one who knows how to utilize a hostage, which is why I have two Japanese guests in my house.”

Arbatovs, he almost said it out loud. The Russians have always been the experts at kidnapping and
taking hostages. Silently, Yoh cursed himself—he’d been too focused on saving Fei Long to think carefully about his former boss. Asami was the only one who witnessed the murder of Liu senior and could be counted as solid evidence if he decides to cooperate. Still, she shouldn’t think that the plan wouldn’t come with serious consequences. "You touch Takaba, and you will find yourself at war with Asami Ryuichi. This I guarantee." If the Arbatovs couldn’t handle both Toh and Baishe, there was no way in hell they could handle Asami Ryuichi’s vengeance on top of it all.

"Asami Ryuichi is just one man who lives in his own shadow. You said so yourself," she calmly said while examining her flawless manicure. Then, her eyes refocused on him. "Do you think that I wouldn't kill a man in my own home, or do you think that I couldn't?"

She wasn’t wrong. Keeping a virtually invisible profile comes at a cost—no one notices or misses you after your death. His former boss only had to die here with his own two bodyguards, also conveniently held in the villa, to completely disappear. Should he refuse to testify, Takaba will pay the price. Should he comply, the Russians could still eliminate him right after to avoid dealing with the man’s vengeance. Either way, it was what Yoh considered a nightmare. "And you think it's safe to tell me this, knowing I once worked for the man?"

"I have nothing to lose." She crossed her arms in front of her chest and threw one leg over the other. "You, on the other hand, would be the one to suffer all of the consequences of your choice, depending on the path you choose."

"Here is option one—you can run to tell your former boss and betray Fei Long once again. In which case you'll leave him to rot wherever he is and I'll be rather happy. Or you can pick option two, where you'll keep your mouth shut and go along with the plan to save your precious Fei Long. Asami will have to sacrifice his anonymity and stronghold by testifying, saving his pet in the process. But he will most likely die right here, unless by some miracles he chooses to forgive and forget all this." She paused to lean forward. "Who are you willing to sacrifice this time? Fei Long or Asami Ryuichi?"

As the scenes played out in his head, he could feel her eyes measuring every breath he took, every twitch of his brow, and every second he hesitated. If only Mikhail had loved her, there was no limit to what they could conquer together. That said, if she had insisted on winning back her husband, Fei Long would have had to deal with a problem much bigger than Toh. "You still haven't answered my question," he said without a change in expression. "Why are you telling me this?"

She straightened herself haughtily as her smile slowly receded. "What you're asking for has consequences that I would pay with my blood to prevent," she told him, her expression suddenly hardened, her words full of venom. "If I am to do this, you'd better be willing to sacrifice more than your life."

Not waiting for an answer, she rose from her chair and placed a brown envelope on the table. "You were in Hong Kong working for Asami Ryuichi the night Liu senior was killed. Sign these papers to confirm his whereabouts before you go to Toh, and I will take it from here."

"It’s so ironic, isn’t it?" She turned around once more before leaving the table. "He lets you live, and now you get to decide if he should die by your hand."

***

The wounds have already healed, but the pain had never been too far away.

That was another day when he felt it - the burns that stung like someone had lit his back on fire, the roughness of the hand that dug deep into his flesh afterwards. He remembered nothing, not visually
anyway. All he recalled was the pain, the stench of that attic and the feeling of utter disgust on his own skin. The pain he could deal with, it’s the stains that were the hardest to wash off.

The sound of running water used to quiet his thoughts. The heat used to make him feel like he was able to strip his skin bare. That day neither made a difference. His skin still crawled, his stomach still turned, and the smell of dried semen still lingered somewhere he couldn’t escape. That day the stain didn’t go away, not after he’d rubbed his skin red and sore washing it for the tenth time.

“Mikhail.” Feodora called him reluctantly from behind. He didn’t know how long she had been there, or what she had seen. Slowly, she reached out to touch him on his shoulder and he jumped at the contact. “Stop,” she pleaded, her voice soft and quiet like the times she had begged him to quit the drugs. “Just stop.”

He wanted to, but it won’t come off. “It won’t come off,” he told her, scrubbing his hands again and again under the scalding hot water. Memories were racing to catch up with him. He had to get rid of the stains before they swallowed him whole. He couldn’t allow himself to break, not when he was so close to getting Fei Long out. It had to come off. It had to!

It was exactly as she had feared. Feodora had seen him like this before, when he was still suffering from the trauma that had later led to his drug addiction. As if he couldn’t stand his own skin, Mikhail had insisted on cleaning himself repeatedly every time something triggered his memory until he bled or until someone interfered. She didn’t know what he had done during that meeting with Toh, but it wasn’t so hard to guess. Her husband was the master of disguise—he could hide his pain like no other when he needed to. For decades, he had never spoken of the events of that night, and those who knew had prayed that it was because he had put it all behind him. That day, for Fei Long, he had opened that door once more by forcing himself to service an enemy. The thought of what it might trigger and what it might do to him frightened her more than her own nightmares. She knew what he was going through. She had been there before, time and time again.

“It won’t come off,” he repeated, cursing under his breath at the stain only he could see. Despite his composure, the fact that he said those words was enough to tell her how close he was to losing it.

“You don’t have to do this.” She forced him to look at her, hoping that it would bring him back to reality. Alexei was gone, and she was the only one left who had seen him go through this. The only problem was whether he would let her in. “Do you hear me? You can’t do this, and you know it!” She bit down on her lip to hold back the tears. In a way, she knew it was a waste of time. Mikhail had no choice, and he was not the kind of man to back out under any circumstances. But that day was just the beginning—who knew what Toh would put him through under the circumstances. It had been over two decades and she could still remember his fright when he saw the marks of bondage on his wrists. For five years after, his trauma would return every time he was forced to be near a pair of handcuffs or a whip, and he had dragged himself to therapy for years before he could handle them again. Facing the same situations, coupled with his new sobriety, and all that he had worked so hard to overcome would resurface. If she couldn’t bear to go through that again, what would it do to him?

Mikhail clenched his fists as he listened to the words he knew were right. He knew what he was at risk of. He remembered better than she did what it did to him. Even if he could get Fei Long out, their relationship would never be the same. Fei Long would never look at him the same way again, and there wouldn’t be much of him left to fix if he relapsed. There would be no hope for the future afterwards, but the other outcome, to him, was not an option. “I can’t lose him, Feodora.” It was not an option. “I won’t lose him.”
There were times when he was in his most vulnerable state, when he had his back to the wall and nowhere to run, times when she was the one he would seek out for comfort. Those days seemed like a hundred years ago, and she had always known she would sacrifice every drop of her blood to be that shelter for him again. That day he looked at her as he once did, and she immediately knew that it was the point of no return. Why did it have to be over this? He was asking her for support on something that would lead to his self-destruction, and she didn’t have the strength to refuse him. Mikhail had only needed to ask, and she would die to fulfill his wish if that’s what it took.

“There’ll get him out.” If this was what fate had in store for them both, then so be it. There wasn’t one part of her that wanted to save Fei Long, but if this was what Mikhail had chosen to turn to her for, then she would see it through even if she had to live with dire consequences afterwards. When he has to relive his nightmares, when Fei Long abandons him for what he was about to do, Mikhail should know he could count on her to be there for him. “We’ll get him out.”

There was a hint of relief on his expression when he heard those words, before the loving arms she once knew wrapped around her body, pulling her close. His hands dug into her back until she felt sore, less to give her comfort and more for his own. As he laid his head on her shoulder, she bathed herself in the scent of him, the aftershave he had been using since he was eighteen, the rosemary mint conditioner that she used to adore, the faint smell of espresso that clung to his clothes, everything that linked her to him for the past three decades. It had been a while since she had last cried in the warmth of his embrace. He was her friend, her family, her savior - the last remaining person in the world to live for. There was no limit to what she was willing to do for him. She wanted him to know this. She wanted him to believe in it. _Always._

Yoh was standing by the bedroom door when she walked out. She was certain he had been there for a while and had heard the conversation. After all, it was what the former mole was specialized in.

“I’ve made my decision.” He handed her the brown envelope, his expression remained stoic as he spoke. “What’s yours?”

She reached for the documents and found that they had all been signed. If Yoh had hesitated, it certainly wasn’t for long. “Why are you all doing this for him?” Fei Long was pretty, but men like Yoh and Mikhail wouldn’t sacrifice so much for just a pretty face.

Why was a question he had never had to answer. What was it that drew him and Mikhail to Fei Long and had forbidden them to leave? For him, things had started to change at a certain point when they were back in prison. He had almost forgotten what it was but now that she asked, he remembered.

“If there is one man who never gives up on what he believes in, despite having failed and lost everything he had ever loved and cared for in the past twenty-eight years, that man is Liu Fei Long.” He wouldn’t change, no matter how many times he had been knocked down, betrayed, or cast aside. He would still trust when no one else would trust, and love when love had scarred him time after time despite all his efforts to refrain from it. In the face of misery, when everyone would try their best to forget or put it behind them, Fei Long would live in it, day after day, tasting every pain as if it was the very thing that kept him alive. Some people had called it a weakness - the way he’d allowed his emotions to dictate his life. To Yoh, it takes an unimaginable amount of courage and strength to live that way. But it was who he was—Fei Long would live, love, and suffer with every breath he took and every bone in his body. Yoh was certain Mikhail had seen this too, perhaps even Asami, which was why he had once allowed Fei Long to get under his skin. The man could deny it his grave, but the mess that he had left behind almost eight years ago does not lie.
“Fei Long lives for what we all lack the courage and strength to live for. If he does not make it, then there’s no hope for any of us.” He wouldn’t expect anyone who has never suffered a day in his life at the hands of another to understand, nor would anyone without a heart. For someone with a past like Feodora, someone who can see beyond the surface of things, it was just a matter of knowing him.

For the first time, she began to understand why Mikhail and Alexei had been so drawn to the Chinese man. Perhaps if she had had more time to get to know him, under different circumstances, she too might have wished to see him survive. For now, it didn't matter. Mikhail had asked this of her, and she would stand by him, all the way.

"We have to do this quietly and quickly, before Toh gets a wind of it. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

In their world, quietly and quickly meant drastic measures. In Feodora's dictionary, it probably meant the extreme end of it. He knew there would be no time for smooth-talking now, not that it would help anyway.

Yoh nodded. "Tell me what to do."

***

Asami had been in a bad mood since that night. Akihito had an inkling that it was due to the fact that he had overstepped his boundaries and pressed for answers, even though it had proven to be as fruitless as before. All he had gotten out of it was yet another rough night that left him wobbling for two days after. Sex was the only way Asami knew to make things go his way. He would strip your control bare with his touch, and expect you to forget whatever happened in the morning. Most of the time he could let the issues go and not think too much afterwards. This time, every bit of it stayed. The truth about Fei Long had long troubled his heart since he’ed met to Chinese man, and it was one of the main reasons why he had decided to come to China. He had made a decision that this time it would not end with sex, and judging from the irritation on his face, Asami had probably sensed this too. He’d like to fool himself that it was because he cared, but Akihito knew that expression by heart. A “nuisance” would be the perfect way to describe Akihito’s pain according to the older man. Asami liked his life simple, predictable, and in control. Still, he had allowed Fei Long to get close enough to mess up every rule. Why?

The older man glanced at him from across the room as he discussed something in English with Arbatov and intentionally ignored the glare that Akihito gave him. The man probably thought that he needed another good fuck and then it would all go away. He had to admit, there wasn’t a single day in his life when he’d wanted to fuck the man over as he did in that moment, if only to teach him a lesson.

“Do you know what they’re saying?” Tao whispered to him from behind. The boy obviously hadn’t been included in their previous conversation about the plan to get Fei Long out, but he seemed to have picked up that something was about to go down.

“They’ve made a deal with Toh, and Yoh is going to go to Fei Long to get him out.” He patted the boy’s back. It was the simplest explanation he could come up with to not worry the kid.

“Why doesn’t Mr. Arbatov get him out?” The boy gave him a look that was pretty clear he didn’t like the idea.

“Because he has another job to do,” Akihito cleared his throat as he tried to explain. “Which has to do with helping Fei Long, of course.”
"I don’t trust Yoh. He’s betrayed Fei-sama before."

“Don’t worry,” said Feodora, who had just entered the room and overheard their conversation. “This time, if he does I’ll let you shoot him. He will be your first kill, that I promise you.”

Tao nodded, and Akihito found himself at a sudden loss for words. The woman didn’t sound like she was kidding and neither one of them took it as a joke. Tao had been training under her supervision for the last few days, but Akihito was expecting him to be able to shoot, not turn into another Arbatov. Honestly, he didn’t like that Tao had learned how to handle a gun in the first place, but in a way, the boy had the right to choose his own path. He doubted Asami would ever allow him to.

“Gentlemen,” she turned to her husband and his guests, waving a small piece of paper she was holding between her fingers. “I have the server address and the password from Toh. He had someone dropped them off just now.”

There was a brief exchange of look between Arbatov and Yoh that was more stressful than eager. At first, he thought that they both would be glad to be able to see the direct CCTV feed from Fei Long’s cell, instead they both looked like they were about to walk into a field full of landmines. Akihito couldn’t blame them. Fei Long had obviously been tortured with God knows what for the last few days. If the thought of what he looked like now made his stomach turn, what would it do to them?

When no one made a move, Feodora took the initiative. “I’ll set it up,” she said briefly before heading to the monitor room.

They all entered afterwards, one by one, and it did feel like walking into a room full of landmines. The monitors went blank for a few seconds, before it revealed a room with white walls and no windows. The cell seemed to be clean enough from the distance, and was equipped with a washbasin and a shower with privacy glass door. In the middle of the room, against the wall was a twin bed covered in what appeared to be fresh, new sheets. On it was Fei Long, sitting with his arms around his knees and his face buried behind the curtain of his jet black hair.

Silence took over the room like Death had just descended and swept it clear of life. Akihito held his breath as he watched the Chinese man from the monitor, waiting for a movement, any movement to be made. Mikhail and Yoh stood as still as two statues cemented to the ground, their eyes focused on the exact same spot on the screen for what was hidden beneath the disordered hair.

Feodora moved forward and touched a button on the keyboard. The camera moved to a different angle at the stroke. Like instinct, Fei Long lifted his head and looked straight at them from the monitors, each one of them revealed the face of a man Akihito did not recognize.

The two bruises, one just above the right cheekbone, the other near the left corner of his lips, had already turned dark purple and did their part well in disfiguring the once-perfect face. The inch-long row of stitches above the right brow did too. But what had truly rendered the man foreign to him was the pair of sharp, dark eyes that shone from underneath the pool of hair. Akihito found himself cold at the fingertips. He knew Fei Long could be scary at times, but the way he seethed with hatred that day told him even Tao’s tears wouldn’t get through to the man.

"He knows," Feodora said, her eyes fixated on the screen. She had expected to see a helpless, bruised and battered being from the video feed. The man was bruised and battered all right, but helpless was far from being the appropriate word to describe what she saw. The fact that Fei Long seemed to be burning with vengeance in every breath could only mean that he knew what was at
stake and dreaded the idea as much as she did. In a way, she was glad to see it. *The man is worth saving after all.* “You’d better get him out of there before he chews through the concrete and initiates a massacre.”

Akihito knew she wasn’t kidding. He didn’t know who Phillip Toh was, but he was certain the man was going to be in a worse situation than Asami, *if* Fei Long gets out, that is.

There was a strange kind of silence surrounding the three men and the kid, all of whom had a long history with the Fei Long. He had expected Tao to cry, but judging from the tightness of his jaws he was more furious than sorry for his guardian. Asami was staring quietly at the screen with an expression that often came up when something from the past was bothering him. But what had surprised Akihito the most were the two men who mirrored each other in reaction, despite all of the differences in their personalities. Mikhail and Yoh both had a look of relief and hope on their faces, and in that moment he understood what Fei Long had truly meant to them. The most important thing was that Fei Long was alive. It was love beyond pride and possession, beyond vengeance and ego. The two of them would sacrifice anything for Fei Long. Would Asami have done the same for him? He had to wonder.

"You ready for this?" Mikhail asked, not that he needed to hear the answer. There was no going back now. Ready or not, the plan must go into action.

Yoh nodded. "Get the microchip. We have to get moving. *Now.*"

***

The microchip was an undetectable, remote-controlled tracking device that was only five millimeters in length and three millimeters in width. It was designed to be injected under the skin and completely invisible under any kind of screening known to man when it’s not transmitting a signal. According to Feodora, it was developed by the Russian military and top secret. The catch was that it was in the testing phase and there was a certain degree of uncertainty about its functionality and range. Knowing this, Yoh didn’t think twice when he rolled up his sleeve.

"As soon as we see you on-screen with Fei Long, I will turn on the transmitter from here and coordinate an air strike to give you an exit," Feodora explained as she readied the microchip injector. "You will be dropped some weapons to help get you both off of the premises. Since we won't know where you will be until the moment the transmitter is turned on, you won’t have a getaway vehicle. From then onwards, you will be on your own."

Yoh nodded. “How will you fly over without being shot down on sight?"

“We’ll use a stealth fighter to go in. They won't be able to detect it under their radar ahead of time, and it’s too fast to shoot at from the ground."

"That means getting a fighter jet in two days. How?" It’s not like there’s one available on Ebay.

“We don’t have to get one,” Feodora replied as she pressed the injector on Yoh’s arm and punched in the microchip. When the man didn’t wince, she smiled. “He has one in storage.”

“He has what in storage? An F-35?”

“T-50, 4th generation,” Mikhail answered. “It’s a little old but it’ll have to do.”

“Why?” For Baishe’s security reasons, he had to ask. Even though he was certain Fei Long and Asami could have gotten one if they wanted to, there was never a need for a state-of-the-art military stealth fighter.
“Because my 5th generation is in Moscow,” Mikhail replied irritatingly. He didn’t quite understand why the man needed the newest model.

Yoh suddenly gave up the will to interrogate. Fei Long can do that later. “Even then, you can’t expect to fly a Russian fighter jet in China without being shot down.”

“Mikhail has clearance to play with most of his toys,” Feodora replied, rolling her eyes at her husband.

“Okay.” He still didn’t quite understand how Fei Long could have dated the man for so long. “I assume that you have a pilot you can trust to fly this thing then?”

“She doesn’t have a license, but yes, you can trust her.”

“She?” Yoh looked up at Feodora who was standing over him, checking the microchip's signal on a GPS. “You can fly a fighter jet?”

“I’m married to Mikhail Arbatov, in case you haven’t noticed. He does not settle for second best,” she replied before turning off the transmitter and putting the GPS away. “The microchip seems to be working. Now we need to make a move on Baishe to make sure everything goes as planned.”

"What about Baishe?" For the first time, Asami had a question. It was something no one had discussed with him before.

"With us all gone, it only takes one phone call from Toh to Liu Yan Tsui to attack us. We have to deal with Baishe before that happens," Feodora explained. "I've made the necessary steps for the police to take him into custody, we're just waiting for some documents to be signed." She placed a small stack of paper on the table and pushed it towards the Japanese man. "That's where you come in."

With his usual calmness, Asami flipped through the documents casually and placed them back on the table. "No." His answer was short, simple, and absolute.

Feodora took a glance at Yoh. He gave her an almost unnoticeable nod. But before they had made their moves, Akihito rose from his chair and cut in.

"Please sign it," he said, pushing the documents closer to the older man. "I know everything now. It's the only way." What Asami had refused to tell him, he'd heard it all from Yoh the day before. He had waited long enough and tried hard enough for Asami to open up to him that he had decided it was time he figured things out on his own. It wasn't right, but something had to be done, something had to change. First, this unfinished business with Fei Long had to come to an end, once and for all. "You owe him this much."

The look on Asami's face that day told Akihito that he had done it. He remembered that expression by heart since the day on the casino ship, when the man had pointed a gun at Fei Long with every intention to kill. It wasn't an easy thing to stomach, knowing exactly who it was he was sharing his bed with at night. But he had ignored that truth long enough and was now ready to face it.

"This is the last time you’ll get to interfere with my business,” Asami warned using a tone he'd never before used with the boy. For years he had tried to keep Takaba away from his work. It was the only way to protect what was, to him, an oasis to come back to. Takaba Akihito was never to be involved with all of this, especially with Fei Long. That day would be the last day they remained in China, this he'd decided and would see it through. "My answer is no, and it's final."

"I thought so," Feodora said.
By the time Asami saw the revolver, she was already aiming it at Takaba. "Come here," she told the boy, dragging the chair next to her out from under the table.

Akihito looked at his lover, whose eyes had turned a frightening shade of gold, and understood what was happening—he was being taken hostage… again. Only this time, he understood why. He did what he could to draw whatever courage he had inside of him to do the right thing. He took a step back, and then another, moving away from the man and closer to the Russian.

When Asami reached for him, a shot went off somewhere near the boy’s arm and punched a hole on the wall between them.

"Don't move," Yoh said. In his hand held a gun with a smoking barrel.

"You will die for this," Asami warned his once faithful subordinate. He didn't let the man live for this, and he would not make the same mistake again.

"I once said I would always be your faithful subordinate, that’s not a lie," Yoh told him without an intention of backing down. "But given no choice, I would willingly die for him. You know this. You always have."

As much as it pained Akihito to move towards Feodora, he knew he didn’t have a choice. But he also knew that if this didn't push the man to come clean and include him as a part of his life - a real part - no amount of love would have mattered. There was a wall he needed to break to get close to the man, and he wanted that to happen so much. If this was what it took, then so be it.

"You know this will never get you anywhere," Asami addressed them all with the kind of calmness that told Akihito a storm was coming. "You kill him, and you will lose everything."

"True," Feodora said before she forced the boy to sit down on the chair. "But just to demonstrate the level of my seriousness on the issue, let me entertain you with a game, shall we?"

With professional efficiency, she unloaded her weapon and picked up a bullet from the table. "I'm sure you are familiar with this game," she smiled as she pushed the bullet into the revolver. "But I am an Arbatov, and two is the tradition." Another bullet was added without delay. Before Asami could voice his objection, she snapped the barrel in place, spun it around and pulled the trigger.

It was the first time Akihito had learned the reason why men wet their pants in situations like this. The revolver made a clicking sound that taught him what miracle meant. The first shot was too quick for him to have had enough time or understanding for it to really get under his skin. But it was the second time, when she held the revolver against his temple, that every inch of his body became aware of what was about to happen. His heart was slamming against his chest loud enough that he could hear nothing else, not even the sound of his own breathing. This is it, he thought. Right here, right now, his life was about to end. And the only man who could save him was sitting across the table, contemplating whether he was worth the sacrifice.

"I swear to God, if he--"

Before Asami could finish the sentence, she spun the barrel and pulled the trigger once more, and this time Akihito found himself in tears as another click sounded in place of a bang.

"I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make sure my family is safe," Feodora said, her eyes revealed every intention to fulfill her promises. "Your pet means nothing to me, and I will sleep soundly tonight after putting a bullet through his head. You ask yourself now how much your anonymity is worth, and how you will live from this point onwards knowing he died for it."
She pressed the revolver harder against Akihito's skull. "I will count to three. Sign it, or die right here with him. One." She had no time to waste, and if Asami had truly loved the boy, he would have needed no time to decide.

Akihito could see Asami’s chest heaving with every breath he took. His hands curled tight into fists on the table as he stared the woman down with eyes that could set ice on fire. It was possibly the first time the man had been cornered that way, and the first time his love for him was truly put to the test.

“Please,” Akihito pleaded as tears continued to pour down the sides of his face. A part of it was certainly fear, but the other part was the knowledge that Asami had waited this long to decide.

_Is this all I’m worth to you?_

“Two,” the Russian woman didn’t wait for long. Akihito didn’t have to look at her to see the expression that must have matched her husband’s on the casino ship, when Akihito had been taken hostage and treated like nothing more than an object. To these people, his life was as insignificant as a fly’s. They could kill him and Asami at any given time, without hesitation, without remorse, and without fear of the consequences. Asami was right, he didn’t know what he was walking into when he had brought them all here.

It was the first time Akihito had seen Asami tremble in anger. He looked at the documents, and then to him. The sound of Yoh cocking his gun echoed loudly through the room when Asami reached inside his pocket. That moment, despite his surprise, he had no doubt Yoh was more than ready to shoot his former boss. The man, too, had been cornered. He would never let Fei Long die by doing nothing.

There was a click that came from Mikhail’s direction when Asami had finished signing the papers. Akihito saw a surprised look on his lover’s face as he placed his hand over the nape of his neck. In matters of seconds, the man collapsed on the table.

Forgetting the gun on his temple, he turned around and saw Mikhail Arbatov standing at the back of the room with what appeared to be a tranquilizer gun.

Another click sounded. Akihito felt a needle prick his arm before his conscious slipped away.

***

Mikhail was standing with his arms crossed behind his back in front of the screens when Yoh entered. The man didn’t move at the sounds he made, perhaps because he was lost too deep in his own thoughts, or perhaps he had come to recognize Yoh’s presence.

“We put them in separate cells down in the basement. She’s going to keep Takaba drugged and dependent on life support until everything’s cleared.” To make sure that everything clears, as a matter of fact. That way Asami had no choice but to comply with everything she needed done. “Your wife is,” he tried to think of a word...and failed. “Indescribable.”

“She has been my father’s right hand man for ten years, much longer than she has been my wife.” There was a tenderness to his tone when he spoke of her, even though it was not with the same kind of affection as when he did Fei Long. He should not have expected any less from the man. Mikhail Arbatov would have had to be an idiot to not see the value of this woman, and Fei Long would not have fallen for an idiot.

“She’s worried that you’ll snap when you go to Toh,” Yoh said as he moved to stand next to the
man where he, too, could see Fei Long clearly in his cell. She didn’t have to tell him, and she wouldn’t have. He could see it in her eyes every time she looked at her husband. He also could sense that Mikhail had been under stress since he came back from the meeting. The plan needed both of them at their best to be accomplished. “I need you to hold it together until I get him out. How do I know you won’t snap?”

Mikhail stilled for a second at the question. He glanced at the other man from the corner of his eyes as he removed the cigarette from his lips and placed it on the silver ashtray. A long, deep breath was taken and held before he reached for Yoh’s collar and pulled him up into a kiss.

It lasted only a few seconds, but it was enough to drive a point through.

“Do I look like I’m about to snap?” The Russian asked when he pulled away.

“Considering that you’ve just kissed the second man you’d rather see dead, you have a point,” Yoh replied. "Let's just hope you do as well when you go to Toh."

Mikhail pressed his lips together in distaste. "I need a cigarette."

"I agree," Yoh added without a second thought. After that unexpected...demonstration, he needed one as much.

Mikhail picked up the rest of his Treasurer Black from the ashtray, before offering Yoh a new one from the pack.

Together they stood in absolute silence, looking at the man who sat alone on the bed, unmoving. Fei Long had been there for hours since they’d first received the camera feed, either lost in his thoughts or planning something in his head. Every once in a while he would look up at the camera, and, having been by the man's side for more than seven years, Yoh could tell that stress and anger kept multiplying by the minute in the Baishe leader’s heart. Ex-leader to be exact, Yoh corrected himself. Fei Long was being imprisoned and tortured by his own blood, he had lost everything he had and was about to lose the only man that he had come to treasure with his life. If that doesn't push a man to the edge, he didn't know what will.

"You do know he would rather die than to see you do this, don't you?" Yoh asked, nearly wincing at the thought.

"I doubt it," Mikhail replied with a hint of sarcasm in his tone. Perhaps also with a trace of pain somewhere that he'd refused to show.

"And if you're wrong, what then?" He knew Fei Long better than anyone to be wrong. He had been observing everything the man did for almost a decade, every second of every day. "What do I tell him?" He was not good with words, nor did he possess the power or enough influence to change Fei Long’s mind.

"If I am wrong," Mikhail said, pausing to take another puff on the cigarette, his eyes focused at the screen as if his words could be heard on the other side. "Tell him I want him to live, that for everything I have done for him, he is to give me this in return."

There was another pause, but the way he held his breath told Yoh he wasn't finished. There was still something he wanted Fei Long to know, and he needed to gather his strength to say it, without showing his true weakness in front of another man.

"Tell him," he said, choking momentarily on his own words as Fei Long unknowingly looked up and caught his eyes. "That I have something that belongs to him, that will always belong to him,
and I want him to come back for it. I want him to come home.”

It had been a while since something had made Yoh smile. While it was undeniably painful to witness the strength of their relationship, the point was that he had witnessed it all. Apart from the two of them, only he knew the meaning of those words. He knew what was written on the card that came with the key. He knew the significance of the piece of jewelry Fei Long had always worn close to his heart. He had seen everything, every smile, every tear, and every look Fei Long had upon his face when he touched it. It was why he knew how much the Russian had meant to the man - something that Mikhail would never truly understand. Like Feodora who had held a place in her husband's heart Fei Long cannot touch, he too had a place by Fei Long's side that cannot be taken away. It was in that moment that he understood how she had endured it all so well. Was it not, in a way, what he had always wanted? To be given the privilege to witness what Fei Long would not allow others to see?

"What time is it?"

Mikhail tugged at his sleeve and looked at the watch. "8:15, why?"

Yoh smiled an almost unnoticeable smile as he turned to leave. "Nothing."

There was a sparkle of something gold on that other wrist. Mikhail Arbatov was ready, and so was he.

***

P.S. I hope it wasn't awful and that it was worth the wait. Even if it was, please drop me a line and let me know. Or if you don't know what to say, how about supporting the rest of Fei fans that are still here and wish him a very happy birthday! It would be so warm to see how many of us are still around ^_^ Thanks again for reading and keeping me going.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY FEI LONG!
5 AM. Yoh looked at his watch and rose from the bed. He hadn’t slept all night and had been waiting impatiently for morning to come. Surprisingly, it wasn’t the anxiety that had kept him up--it was the thought of seeing Fei Long again under the circumstance that did. He couldn’t help but find it amusingly odd that they had first met in prison, and now prison would likely be the last place they would meet. Only this time he would walk in there as a free man - free from someone else’s orders and the obligation to finish his job, free to be completely honest with Fei Long. It was a second chance; a new beginning that rarely came to those in his profession. This time he would make it right, even if it would cost him his life.

He put on a plain white t-shirt and a pair of worn out blue jeans. He knew Toh’s men would make him change into something else, to make sure he wasn’t transporting anything into Fei Long’s cell, but it felt like a good start to be out of uniform.

He could hardly remember the last time he had done something for himself, based on his own decision. Mikhail didn’t give him any instructions, not even a suggestion of what had to be done. The man knew as much as he did, that there was not a single thing he wouldn’t do to make sure Fei Long made it out of there alive. Their interests were mutual, and despite everything Yoh had done to Fei Long, Mikhail had trusted him on this task and regarded him as more of an ally than a subordinate. It was the kind of relationship he wished he’d had with Fei Long during the years he had spent at Baishe - something that simply wasn’t possible while working undercover.

A sweet, warm smell of freshly baked bread and cinnamon reached his nose as he headed to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. Feodora, he thought. It had been a while since she had last baked for Mikhail. Once, he thought it was a strange hobby for a woman who could handle the mafia business so impeccably. Lately, he had come to realize that it was something she liked to do as an
outlet whenever she felt stressed and exhausted.

That morning he’d found her in the kitchen wearing her white apron over a black tank top and a pair of skin-tight black exercise pants. Her hair was pulled tight into a high ponytail that made her look more like an average girl than a woman who didn’t blink during a game of Russian Roulette she’d initiated. Just an arm’s length from her, Mikhail was sitting at the island with an empty cup of espresso, watching absentmindedly as she took the cinnamon rolls out of the oven. Yoh realized he wasn’t the only one who couldn’t sleep that night, not that he should’ve expected otherwise.

For a while, he stood silently in the hallway, watching the two of them together in that kitchen share a moment they seemed to have had a hundred times before. He took one more step back and disappeared completely into the shadow. Yoh didn’t want them to notice his presence—not until he allowed it.

Feodora picked a roll from the tray and removed the outer layers before placing it onto Mikhail’s plate. The rest she placed on hers as she sat down on the opposite side of the island, nibbling on the leftovers of her husband’s roll with her fingers.

“You should make these for dad when you get home,” Mikhail said. “He loves nothing more than your cinnamon rolls.”

“Alexei hated them.” She smiled and then remembered. “Hated them.”

The memory of happier times long forgotten had struck her hard enough to bring back the tears. Mikhail looked up and reached over for her hand, cradling it in his as he offered no words of comfort. She answered his touch with a squeeze of her fingers and nodded, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her other hand.

“He hated everything with cinnamon,” Mikhail said, playing with the pastry on his plate as he spoke. “On a morning like this, he’d complain for hours because of the smell.”

She sniffed and then smiled. “You’re beginning to sound like an old man.”

“Well,” he ran his fingers through his hair and rose to make another cup of espresso, “considering Alexei, I may never have a chance to get old. I might as well play the part now.”

There was a hint of fear on her face as she watched him from behind, as if it was the last time she would ever see him make his coffee. From a distance, Yoh saw the cup in his hand shake a little, and he saw that Feodora noticed it as well. She got up slowly and wrapped her arms around him from behind. He didn’t stir at the touch, nor did he try to pull away. It must have been something they had done too many times before, or perhaps Mikhail Arbatov had needed some kind of comfort before facing his worst nightmare.

“You’re afraid,” she said in almost a whisper. “Tell me.”

He took a sharp breath and exhaled. “I’m afraid,” he paused, “of losing him. I’m afraid that things won’t be the same when I get him back. I’m afraid,” he hesitated and took another deep breath, “of falling and not getting up this time around. Dad’s sick, you’re pregnant, and...”

“Mikhail, look at me.” She spun him around to face her and cradled his face between her palms. “You won’t lose him. I will make sure of it,” Feodora said with absolute certainty.

To Yoh, it’d never seized to amaze him how far this woman was willing to go to love a man who wanted no more than her friendship, and yet he could understand her dedication as clear as if it had been his own.
“When you fall, I’ll catch you. Vladimir will be fine; I can take care of him. Your child will be all right, because I’m his mother,” she paused and tightened her grip on his face reassuringly, “and if Fei Long can’t stand you when you get him back, pregnant or not, you can bet I’ll be there to beat the shit out of him until he grows some intelligence.”

Mikhail raised a brow in surprise before he began to laugh. It was still a half-hearted laugh, but it seemed to have brightened his mood a little. “Why can’t I just love you?” He said in a somewhat melancholic way and shook his head.

“Because you’re a dumb fuck. I’ve known that since you were a kid.”

“Fei Long would agree on that,” Yoh stepped into the room and revealed himself, “for ever doubting him.” The Russian clearly had no idea how fiercely Fei Long loves. Either that, or he truly was a dumb fuck for still not knowing how much Fei Long loved him. That said, he had to admit it takes a really big man to admit to a woman he’s afraid.

“Here comes your rat,” Feodora snapped at the intruder. “The next thing you know, he’ll be listening to us having sex.”

“You’d be surprised at the amount of information I get from the other side of the bedroom door,” Yoh replied nonchalantly. “Have you talked to Toh?”

“Does that work every time?” Feodora asked as she moved back to the island where her cinnamon rolls were.

“Does what work?”

“Changing the subject after dropping suicidal comments.” She placed a roll in front of him.

“Apparently,” Yoh replied and pushed the plate back towards her. “I don’t eat in the morning, thank you.”

“That’s interesting.” She pushed the plate back. “Sit down and finish it, and if you eat only the center of the roll like he does I’ll shoot you. And yes, I’ve talked to Toh.”

Yoh seated himself and began to eat as instructed, trying to picture in his mind how the woman would handle a newborn baby when it arrives, then decided it was better to focus on the bigger problem. “And?”

“You and Mikhail will meet him at noon today at one of our casinos. His men will take you to Fei Long, and as soon as you appear on screen, we’ll move in,” she explained. “The police will be standing by for my signal to take care of Yan Tsui. At the same time I’ll take the jet out to wherever they’re holding you and Fei Long and create a diversion for you two to escape. I’ll drop you weapons and communication devices from the air, and I’ll walk you through the safest way out. Once that’s done, our men will take out Toh.”

“Assuming he doesn’t find out first and have someone put a bullet in Fei Long’s head before you get there.” Yoh said. He wasn’t pessimistic in nature, but the worst-case scenario had to be addressed before they got into action.

“Hopefully Mikhail will keep him...,” she paused reluctantly to think of the right word, “...occupied long enough to find out much too late.”

“You do realize that if he fails, then we’re all dead - Fei Long, him, me and it’s likely he will also shoot you down with the jet.”
Feodora smiled and replied with humor in her eyes, “Never trust Mikhail Arbatov with his shirt on, trust him with his shirt off. That’s what the girls used to say in college.”

Yoh looked at her and then at her husband who stood not too far away. He would’ve doubted the man had he not have seen his seduction of Fei Long succeed before. “Do you think that’s still true?”

Mikhail raised a brow. “I don’t know, would you like to try and find out?”

It was said with the tone he often used with Fei Long, which gave Yoh a glimpse of hope that this shameless master of deception could still pull off the stunt and lie through his teeth under the circumstances. “I hope you’re right.” He turned to Feodora.

“I’m never wrong,” she replied.

Somehow, for the very first time, Yoh thought her expression didn’t quite match her words.

***

Phillip Toh stood with his hands behind his back watching the Cotai strip from the floor-to-ceiling window of the hotel’s owner suite. Any view from the 69th floor of a building anywhere was always expectedly nice, but the room was so strategically positioned that it had managed to capture the most spectacular view of the bays of Macau. It was as though the entire building had been built for the suite - a concept too irrational to be executed in most cases. He may have thought it was sheer luck had he known a little less about the property’s owner. When it comes to handpicking the absolute best for himself, Mikhail Arbatov has been known to never spare any thought for reason. It had always been why the man had captured his interest from the first time they had met, and why his hatred for Liu Fei Long had doubled, when he learned of their infamous relationship.

The door clicked opened. Toh took a glance over his shoulder to find his host entering the suite, followed by Fei Long’s former right hand man and a bunch of Russian goons in casual attire. From the way they presented themselves, these had to be Arbatov’s most trusted subordinates.

“Do you always keep your guests waiting, or have you lost track of time running around making plans to stab me in the back?”

Mikhail Arbatov looked at his watch and raised a brow. “I was watching tennis, and no, I don’t need to make up plans to stab anyone in the back, especially when that person has come to me to be,” he paused as if to make sure he had the right word and smiled, “stabbed.”

For a moment, Yoh thought that their plans had been exposed. It must have been one of Toh’s tactics to catch a scheme against him, judging from those hawk-like eyes that fixated on his host’s every reaction. Fortunately, Mikhail happened to be too good of a player, and he had perfected his poker face to let anything slip. Still, that snake certainly didn’t come to the exchange thinking everything was going to go as agreed.

“I’m sorry you think so little of me.” Toh grinned as he stepped closer to his host, stopping just an inch away to make sure his next words could be felt on the other man’s lips. “I’ve come here for much, much more than that.”

“Is that why you’ve brought such a large audience?” Mikhail counted six of Toh’s men in the room. “I thought we’d agreed on four.” It being his territory, Toh had secured himself the right to string along his bodyguards, but the number just wasn’t right.

“The other two are here to escort your man to Fei Long’s cell, of course. I’m sure you have
foreseen this,” the Chinese man said and glanced at Yoh from the corners of his eyes. “Is that him?”

“That’s the man.” He nodded.

“Very well.” Phillip Toh nodded to two of his men who promptly stationed themselves left and right of the new hostage, both with a gun in their hand. “Take him away. Search and scan for tracking devices at headquarters before taking him to the cell.”

“In a hurry, are we?” Mikhail commented with a smirk as he quickly exchanged a look with Yoh before they took him away. From then on, should one thing fail to go as planned, Fei Long would be dead. He knew this, and was glad Yoh seemed to know this too before they parted.

“I like to have my payment immediately upon delivery,” Toh reached out and played with the collar of the Russian’s black leather jacket. He had to admit that leather and Mikhail Arbatov were a pairing that could whet his appetite anytime.

Slowly, Mikhail reached for his phone and held it in front of the other man’s face. “Delivery is when I see him on screen with Fei Long. Now we wait.”

***

“Get off,” one of Toh’s men pushed him out of the chopper from behind. Yoh stumbled forward with his blindfold still wrapped tight around his head and both his wrists cuffed behind him. They had already taken him to a room, stripped him bare and scanned him for tracking devices. Luckily for them, the chip Mikhail had used had proven to be too advanced for standard scanners to detect. They flew him here afterwards in a helicopter - a place he estimated to be about half an hour away from the Cotai strip by air.

He blinked a few times to adjust to the light when the blindfold was removed. They were in front of an old, one-story building that seemed to have been abandoned for decades. It was surrounded 360 degrees by the sea and the strong waves that crashed loudly upon the cliffs as high as a two-story building. More than likely, Fei Long had been kept on an island just off the coast of Hong Kong or Macau to make sure he had nowhere to go should he escape from his cell. It was a good thing that they had decided to strike with a fighter jet, or else the window of escape would be too small for them both to come out alive having to cross the sea to get to the mainland.

There were 12, no 15, men armed with machine guns around the entrance to the building alone, and that was all that he was allowed to see. They took him inside and down a long corridor leading to a series of old, empty prison cells. At the end of the hall was an automatic metal door with a finger scan system that seemed, in every way, out of place given the severely dated surrounding. One of the men that escorted him used his thumb to scan and the door immediately opened. Inside was a locker room where they kept supplies for the prisoners as well as the guards. This had to be one of the secret prisons triad leaders and mafias used to keep and interrogate their hostages and traitors. Baishe had a few of these all over Hong Kong.

“Change.” They uncuffed him and tossed him a uniform - a pair of dark green cotton trousers and matching short-sleeve shirt that smelled like it had been worn by a dozen men and had never been washed. He put them on without delay, knowing the quicker he gets into the cell they were holding Fei Long, the faster they both could leave. He had guessed the moment he entered the locker room that it was behind that other metal door where another two armed men stood guard as if the prisoner could escape at any minute. Phillip Toh certainly wasn’t taking any chance, or perhaps it was Fei Long that had given him cause. He’d heard from a mole in Baishe that their former leader had tried to escape, almost successfully, more than once. Not that it had surprised him in any way.
Standing in front of the metal door, Yoh looked at his reflection and couldn’t help smiling a little. There he was, once again in a prisoner uniform, heading into a cell where Liu Fei Long of Baishe was. He could still remember it then, the way the man stood out from the crowd like someone who didn’t belong, even in the same filthy uniform and with his hair trimmed short. How he had pitied that man then, so powerful, so much potential, and yet so crippled with guilt and regret that he’d allowed himself to be locked up among scum. He knew nothing of the man then, no more than what was necessary for the job. “Watch him and let me know if he makes any move,” Asami Ryuichi had told him to do just that much, and he had understood the underlying message in that order. Fei Long was to be watched over, kept safe and alive. If his former boss had wanted him dead, it would have taken one simple command that he had executed more than a dozen of times before. Asami Ryuichi never had a problem ordering a hit, but the one thing he had always avoided at all costs was to give the world, his subordinates included, the idea that anyone or anything mattered to him enough to be used against him. Fei Long had never realized this, but the truth he’d needed to hear had already been revealed the moment his cover was blown. Asami did care. He had worked for the Japanese man for more than a decade to know this for certain, and for seven years he had kept it from Fei Long to keep his position at Baishe, when the truth would have set the man free from all this hatred years ago. Still, he had to wonder, would it set him free from the bond that Asami was so determined to cut?

The guard unlocked the door and slid it open. The room was dark and the air smelled like it had not been ventilated for years. There, on the same bed he had seen from the camera feed, Fei Long was laying on his side with his face to the wall, presumably sleeping.

“Go on,” one of the guards said as he pushed the new prisoner forward. “The boss said you could do whatever you like with him. Just make sure we get to see some action, yeah?”

Yoh turned to look at the man and memorized his face. The scum would be the first to go, and he’d make sure the man doesn’t end up pretty.

The door closed from behind him and still Fei Long didn’t stir. Yoh stepped closer to the bed, his heart skipping a few beats as he approached, fearing the worst. A well-trained assassin like Fei Long would have been awakened the moment that lock on the door was handled. Something just wasn’t right.

Before he realized what had happened, he was on the floor, face down with his right arm twisted behind his back and Fei Long’s knee pinning him down to the cold, hard floor. He immediately understood then, how the man wasn’t sleeping— he was waiting for a chance to attack.

His arm was twisted harder, and this time Yoh groaned to the pain. It was the first time he had been attacked by Fei Long, and by gods, the man could have killed him in less time than he could say his own name.

It was that moment that Fei Long seemed to have recognized him and loosened his grip, even though he was still pinned to the ground. “Yoh?”

When he was certain, Fei Long lifted him off the ground and dragged him to the wall near the sink. Pushing Yoh’s face against the concrete with one hand around the back of his neck, his other hand kept his arm twisted behind him to make sure he was immobilized. “Keep your voice down.” The Baishe leader leaned forward close enough for Yoh to feel his breaths brushed harshly against his face. “Why are you here?”

The room had to be rigged with microphones, that much Yoh immediately realized. Fei Long must have spent his time scanning every inch of the cell to find the best way to escape and found a spot where he would least likely be seen or heard.
“Mikhail took the deal,” Yoh said in the softest whisper to make sure only Fei Long could hear. “I’m here to get you out. Save your strength. Stay away from the door.” He knew the aggression was for the show, but it was pretty clear the strength the Baishe leader exerted had a lot to do with his state of mind.

“How?” Fei Long tightened his grip. “When?”

Yoh looked up at the ceiling as a gesture. “Anytime now.”

Fei Long thought for a second, nodded and loosened his grip. For the first time in that cell, Yoh turned around and face him. The man was dressed in what he could only call rags, and on his face were bruises and cuts that made him nearly unrecognizable up close, and yet he was a sight that took his breath away momentarily. It was the first time he had wanted to laugh at his own foolishness. He had walked into this room, thinking that it would bring back memories of Fei Long when they had first met in prison, hoping that he would have another chance to start over again. But the man he once knew was nowhere to be found. It was obvious that there would be no second chance for him. Only one thing was on Fei Long’s mind and it was freedom, and his eyes only held room for one man - Mikhail Arbatov.

For the next 10 minutes, Fei Long paced back and forth in the room like a caged lion, mumbling something inaudible to himself. One might have thought that he was being impatient, but the tightness of those jaws told Yoh it was something far deeper than the need to escape. It didn’t surprise him. If there was one thing that Fei Long could never stand, it was the thought of someone he cared about being made to suffer because of him. As long as Mikhail was out there with Toh, there was no way Fei Long could possibly sit still.

And yet there was a certain calmness to him in that moment that seemed out of the ordinary. The usual Fei Long that he knew would have thrown a fit over the situation and filled his heart with guilt or regret. As furious as he was, that day his focus seemed to remain intact, if not sharper than usual. They say love can change a man better than anything. Somehow the change was painful for him to witness. Fei Long had become stronger, wiser, and more confident, when his existence had nothing to do with it. Nothing.

Just then, the Baishe leader shifted his glance to the ceiling. His acute sense of hearing had picked up a sound. "Are you ready?" He said, turning back to the other man in confirmation.

Yoh nodded. To die for Fei Long? Anytime.

The blast came seconds later. Yoh stood with both his arms spread out on the wall, shielding the one man he knew he was born to protect. He could sense everything with startling clarity - the debris that landed on his back and burned through the shirt onto his skin, the heat from the fire that erupted somewhere in the locker room, and the pungent smoke that filled his lungs shortly afterwards. For as long as he had worked in the field, it was the first time he had felt so alive, the first time he had such a clear vision of his mission.

A commotion could be heard clearly from outside. The door must have been successfully blasted through. Feodora's shot must have been remarkably precise, given the fact that both he and Fei Long were still standing mostly unharmed. But then again, he had not doubted her competence.

Fei Long was already by the door when the smoke began to clear, looking for the right opportunity to attack. In his hand was a metal bar that had been blown off from the door, or perhaps the shelves, he couldn't tell for certain. Only the first man that entered the cell was able to tell - when Fei Long gave him a taste of it. Yoh searched for another weapon from the wreckage and found another metal bar. It was a tad bit short, but it had to do for now. Fei Long had picked the best one
possible in less time than he could adequately scan the room. Feodora was right, the only man who
could get out of this place had already been in there days ago.

The first guard came through the blasted door and blindly fired a few rounds into the smoke.
Before he could have anticipated how and where the attack was going to happen, Fei Long moved
in and plunged the bar into the man's neck. It went through to the other side and was pulled back
with the same speed. The ex-assassin grabbed the gun from the dead man and threw it towards
him, making a gesture for him to stand guard on the opposite side of the door as he proceeded. He
ran to position and waited for the next signal. The protocols came immediately back to him like it
had been yesterday since they were fighting side by side. He was the shield, and Fei Long was the
weapon. It was the way they used to work together after they had gotten out of prison, when Fei
Long was just a man trying to take back what belonged to him, and he was still a trusted ally. After
all these years Yoh had thought the memories of those times had been lost completely to the
dragon. Apparently, Fei Long had remembered everything, down to their secret hand signals and
the correct timing at which they remain in sync with each other during an attack.

At a signal from Fei Long, Yoh moved forward into the locker room and fired a few warning shots.
Some movement responded. Fei Long leapt into the smoke and knocked someone over. The growl
of pain that followed told Yoh another guard had fallen. The hissing sound from his former boss
told him to press forward and clear the way. He proceeded and fired more rounds into the smoke,
keeping his mind alert as to where Fei Long was at all times.

The room fell into complete silence after that, save for the sound of furniture burning in the fire
near the blasted door. Fei Long sent a signal that the room was cleared and for him to proceed
forward.

"There were four of them in here," Yoh whispered as he reached the man’s side. "You killed two."

"There are two more corpses by the door," Fei Long replied as he searched his last victim and
found a knife and a half empty revolver. "Find a man with a working finger print or we won't get
out of here."

Yoh nodded and quickly checked the corpses while Fei Long continued to search the room for
more weapons. Overhead, the jet could still be heard circling around the island, only now it was
accompanied by a series of shots being fired into the sky.

"Who's flying the jet?" Fei Long must have seen the worried look on his face when he looked up
momentarily.

"Feodora."

The dragon bit his lips. "You let a pregnant woman fly that jet?"

This time Yoh had to give him a look. "Who was supposed to stop her? Mikhail?" Like that was
ever going to happen. "Here, this one's hand should work." He flipped the body over on its back
and began to drag it to the automatic door. They had no time to waste. Feodora was risking her life
every minute she continued to circle the island.

"Put him down," Fei Long said impatiently as he stood over the body. "Move."

A shadow fell over his head. The next thing he knew he was staring at an axe that landed a few
inches away from his fingers that he still had wrapped around the corpse's arms. He was wrong--
Fei Long’s lack of patience hadn’t improved one bit.
"Why the hell do they always put such a blunt axe with the fire extinguisher?" Another hurl on the axe was made to sever the hand completely off. "Grab that hand and find the right finger," he said as he yanked the axe off the ground and tossed it away. "We need more weapons."

"She will be dropping a case. I'm guessing the moment she sees us outside the building."

“Outside the building?” Fei Long paused to look at his former bodyguard and repeated. "You know they're going to fucking kill us the moment we open this door?" There was a hint of humor in his tone as he spoke, as if by then nothing could scare or discourage him anymore. It didn’t surprise Yoh. Fei Long had always been much more relaxed on the field than in the office. He’d always figured that it was the only time when the man had a chance to release all that pent up anger and stress. Management wasn’t really his strength.

"That's what I'm here for," Yoh replied with a slight smile that was nearly unnoticeable. "Stay behind me, find that case, and no matter what happens, you get yourself out of here. Alive. Do you understand?"

Fei Long looked at him quietly for a minute, and then gave him a playful smile that Yoh hadn’t seen in a long time. "Weapons that fall from the sky, and a human shield of my own. How very Mikhail Arbatov," he positioned himself by the door, checking his weapons as he spoke. “If we survive this, remind me to get you a big raise.”

“I’d settle for a big kiss," Yoh replied with a shrug while his eyes remained focused on the gun he was checking. He had to admit, seeing Fei Long that way made him feel more humorous than usual. It wasn't what he would usually do, but considering the fact that he may turn into one of these corpses in the next five minutes or less, he might as well remove that stick from his backside for once.

"Now that would certainly get you killed." Fei Long snorted and turned his attention to the finger scan. "Shall we?"

Yoh nodded and pressed the dead man's thumb on the pad. A buzz sounded, signaling a scan failure. He wiped the blood off the thumb with his shirt and positioned it on the scan again.

"Wait," Fei Long said, reaching over for a handful of his collar and yanked him away from the pad to his direction.

The kiss was coarse, brief, and lacking in intimacy on every level. In Yoh's perspective it was downright brutal in whatever meaning it was meant to imply. Still, something in the way Fei Long looked at him then made it impossible for him to stay mad for very long.

"Consider that an advance payment," Fei Long grinned. "Don’t die out there. You don’t want unfinished business with me."

Considering what had happened to his first boss, he couldn’t agree more. "You just said it would make me a dead man."


***

A beep sounded. Phillip Toh picked the phone up from his pocket and checked his messages. "It seems your package has been delivered," he said, smiling at the man sitting across the table. Mikhail placed his drink down and took out his phone to see the live feed. Apparently, Toh had
kept his end of the promise. It had been almost an hour since Yoh had left the building. Most likely Feodora could get to wherever the man was in 15 minutes with the jet, more or less. She had been monitoring the cell and the signal on the tracking device since Toh had arrived and was probably already on the move as they spoke. If everything goes as planned, he shouldn't have to distract Toh for too long.

"Now, about that payment," Toh reminded his host, "I hope it’s worth the trouble."

"We shall see." He rose to his feet and headed to the bedroom, lighting a cigarette along the way. Keeping the door opened with one hand, he turned to the guest. "After you," Mikhail said with a not-so-subtle playfulness in this tone before he turned to the guards - his and Toh's. "Don't be alarmed if it gets a little rough in there, boys. I am not known for subtlety."

"Don't worry," Toh said as he walked by the other man into the bedroom. "My men know I can handle three of you." The Liu brothers may be a bit of a handful, but a clumsy big Russian like Arbatov wouldn't last five minutes if the man was dumb enough to fight him. Besides, thanks to the host who overdoes everything, the room, as he immediately noticed, was sound proof to the extent of a professional theatre. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to worry about, not on his end anyway.

Mikhail sneered openly at the egotistic remarks and allowed it to slip from his attention. He needed to keep his cool to not blow the plan to pieces. Soon enough Fei Long would be on his way to safety. Everything else could be dealt with later. He closed the door and turned the lock. Nothing would leave or enter the room until all was done.

When he turned around, Phillip Toh was standing right in front of him, no more than an arm's length away. "Calm down," he told the man with a seductive grin. "We have all the time in the world."

As soon as he finished the sentence, his jaw was busted in by something hard that was too quick for him to see or dodge. He quickly raised both his arms in defense as his back crashed hard against the wall, only to find himself being kneed in the stomach before he could see it coming. The man punched him again and as Mikhail swayed, he was slammed face down on the floor. *Fuck.* He cursed in his mind as he realized he had been successfully disarmed. The man was too fast, too precise, and too good at this for him to even have a chance to defend himself. "You son of a bitch," Mikhail growled, for some part over the pain, but mostly for his own stupidity and carelessness.

"I'm afraid you have me mistaken with your lover," Toh said as he positioned himself on the other man's back, pinning down his opponent with his knee. He tugged the rope around his ponytail free, and began to tie both the Russians wrists behind his back, securing them with a dead knot he had perfected as a child.

"Do you really think," Toh leaned closer to his newly acquired captive and whispered near the golden curls that had become disordered from the attack, "that I would allow you to take control over me, and risk everything I've worked so hard for for decades, hmm?" It had taken him years of planning to finally get his hands on his little brother. it was foolish to think he would allow his physical desires to ruin it.

Toh yanked the man back on his feet by the hair, and forced him to sit down on the daybed nearby. Picking up the fallen black cigarette from the floor, he sucked in a long, steady breath through the joint and exhaled in obvious satisfaction. "I must admit-- your taste is very impressive," Toh said as he looked around the room that looked like it came from a cutting edge interior design magazine. "Bold, daring, extravagant, and bordering on madness, right down to the cigarette you smoke."
"And that's exactly what you're missing," Mikhail sneered at the Chinese man as he licked the blood off his upper lip. Keep your cool just a few minutes longer, he told himself, even though the combination of tasting his blood and being tied up was beginning to disturb him far too much for his tastes. "I thought you wanted to have some fun."

Toh smiled and made a soft hum in his throat. "Now you're the one in a hurry," he said, trailing a hand down from the Russian's collarbone to the middle of his chest, undoing the buttons along the way. "I know you're planning something, and until I find out the fun will have to wait. Didn't you just say we have all the time the world?"

Perhaps it was the pain he still felt from the attack, or maybe it was the anxiety that his plans may have backfired, but something was making it difficult for him to respond the way he usually would. He told himself it was probably one of the two, but the way his skin crawled at the man's touch was simply hatred for what he had done to Fei Long.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" He took a puff on the cigarette and held it between his fingers. "Although you do look a little pale. Did I hit you a little too hard, or does this bring back a certain," he paused and leaned forward, close enough to feel the man's uneven breathing on his cheek, "memory?"

Mikhail jolted back violently as the cigarette burned the skin on his chest. Something hard that had been growing in his throat had kept him from making a sound. His body had turned stiff from his fingertips to his toes. It was a symptom he had experienced before, only he could not quite place when or where it happened. Whatever it was, it must have also affected his tolerance for pain. It was just a damn cigarette, why did it sting like someone had poked him with a hot iron?

"You're shaking." Toh traced his eyes on the outline of the strong, broad shoulders that began to tremble a little. "Why? Did it remind you of how you got those scars? How old were you then? 16? 14?" He had read it in a file somewhere-- how the man had gone through therapy, drug addiction, detoxification and rehab as a result of that event. It was one of the reasons why the Russian had caught and secured his attention. Someone like him would know pain and understand it. They belonged to the same group of people - people who managed to survive despite a wretched past, and survive in flying colors. The man needed to be reminded of this fact, that he was stronger and more valuable than his half brother.

"I heard he was your uncle. That must be hard." He stepped closer and rested his knees on the daybed, straddling himself over his prize. With one hand on the man's chest, the other lifting his chin up to meet his eyes, Toh smiled and said in a whisper, "Tell me, what did he make you do? Did he make you suck him off? Was he rough? Gentle? Forceful?"

"Get the fuck away from me!" Mikhail cursed as he tried to struggle free from bondage, only to find himself being pinned harder into the cushion by Toh. Was the man that much stronger than he looked, or had he lost the control over his own strength just listening to those words?

A cell phone rang and Mikhail’s heart felt suddenly lighter at the sound he had been waiting for. That was his big break. Feodora must have already started the attack. “Maybe you should pick up that call.”

Toh paused and looked at him as he reached for the phone in his pocket. Whoever was on the other end must have fired the information before the man had a chance to say hello, and from the look on Toh’s face, things probably weren’t going so well for them. Still, he had expected a more extreme reaction. The man was much too calm for his liking.

“I don’t care what you do, keep the situation under control,” he commanded in a steady yet forceful
Hanging up the phone, Toh rose to his feet and stood at an arm’s length away, his eyes still fixed intensely on the Russian. From the way his chest heaved harshly up and down, Mikhail knew that whatever happened had raised his anger despite the calm and collected appearance. He stood still for a moment, as if he was trying to keep his emotions under control, before slowly undoing the leather belt at his waist and slipped it free. It was a gesture Mikhail recognized on instinct, backed by the way his body immediately froze from limb to limb.

He shut his eyes on reflex at the first strike that landed on his cheek. Had it been a whip it would have cut deep into his skin and left a scar. The next one came not so far apart, but seemed to have accumulated in strength. The next ones came faster and heavier, digging at his skin with the sound that rang like lightning in his head, stripping away his sanity each time it struck. The sting surged through his skin like an electrical current that kept on growing stronger. He could feel himself trembling as the smell of his own blood brought back the crave for needles that usually ended his suffering. Hold on a little longer, he told himself in his mind. All this would be over the moment his phone rang.

He could hardly feel his own skin by the time it had ceased, and Toh was standing in front of him panting heavily from the exertion. Just then a familiar ring sounded from his phone, Mikhail closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he began to laugh. “That would be my wife,” he said, sneering at the man still standing above him. “I told her to call once he’s safely escaped. It appears that your fun is over.”

Toh stilled for a moment, and Mikhail prepared himself for the next episode of beating. It didn’t matter now. Fei Long had made it; everything else would be meaningless from that point on. As far as he was concerned, the mission had been accomplished.

It was when the man began to laugh that made him reconsider his previous statement. It would have been better had it sounded hysterical, but the look on Toh’s face told him he had yet another card to play.

“That may be so,” he said as he wrapped the belt tightly around his hand, as if it was giving him comfort. “But you seem to forget that you’re the one being tied up with me holding the other end of the rope. The real fun, in my opinion, is about to begin.”

Mikhail laughed openly at the remark. The man must have been really out of his mind. “This is my casino, my territory. You kill me and you’ll never walk out of here alive. Unless, of course, your idea of fun is to join me in hell. We can certainly continue this down there.” Whether he ends up dead or alive, one thing he would make certain of is that Fei Long will have the man’s head served to him on a silver plate that day. It would be his last gift to the love of his life, the most elaborate one for that matter.

“That’s one way to look at it,” Toh said as he reached his hand down the pocket of his hostage’s trousers and slipped out the phone that was still ringing unanswered. “I wonder, though, what Fei Long has to say about that?”

Mikhail took a deep breath and tried to rise once more in hopes of stopping the phone from being answered. Toh responded by kneeling him again in the stomach, and this time he wound the belt tight around Mikhail’s throat, fastening it just enough for him to remain silent. “Stay, and find out how much your lover loves you,” he said and picked up the call.
A/N So there are two ways I can go about this, the short one and end this in the next two or three chapters, or would you guys prefer that I go the long way (and stick with me for a year longer? LOL). I've missed talking to everyone so much, please comment so I can see Fei fans again! That will certainly take the stress off work. *hugs*
Retribution Seventeen

I must have said sorry for a dozen times for not updating for so long, but at least I can guarantee you that I will finish this fic as long as there are still people willing to read. For those who are still with me, thank you so much for your support, i wouldn't have gotten this far without you. Without further rambling, here it is, the new chapter. I hope it's not too bad.

Title: Retribution Seventeen  
Rating: PG-13  
Warning: violence, OOC (if you agree with FNR), AU (if you agree w/ FNR), but for those who disagree: CWC (Canon? What Canon?)  
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Yoh, AxA, Feodora (OC), Toh(OC), Alexei (OC)  
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc  
Disclaimer: All VF characters belong to Yamane Ayano.  
Beta: angel0399  
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish (COMPLETED! OMG!), German, French, and newly added VIETNAMESE! (thank you everyone!) translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

The roar of the jet engine signaled that help was near. Yoh wiped his forehead with his free hand as he charged forward. He didn’t have time to check if it had been sweat or blood that was dripping into his eyes. He also didn’t know how many times he’d gotten hit, how many bullets still remained inside his body, or how many actually went right through. As long as he could still remain on his feet and Fei Long was still running behind him, everything was going fine, as far as he was concerned.

They found the case just right outside the main door. Feodora had bombed the entrance to bits just before the weapon drop, clearing the area long enough for them to get geared up. Yoh picked up the headpiece and flipped the switch as he watched Fei Long arm himself to the teeth with state-of-the-art artillery, hand picked by the Arbatovs themselves. He had to admit that some of those things he didn’t even recognize. Fei Long, however, seemed to have done his homework long after his assassin business had ceased. That, or his Russian boyfriend had been keeping him very well informed on his new toys.

“I’m on,” Yoh spoke into the headpiece. It had better work or else they were as good as dead. “Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear. Your location?”

He could swear Feodora’s voice had never sounded so sweet. “Still at the weapon drop.”

“There’s a helicopter around the back of the building. Can you get to it?”

Yoh paused and looked around for a second. The guards were highly concentrated around the area.
He counted at least 10 of them within sight, but from what he could hear, more were being called for backup. As soon as the smoke cleared, they’d most likely be surrounded by twice as many, and that would be considered fortunate since the entire compound could fit a number much higher. There was no way they could make a run that far, and in his condition, he would only slow Fei Long down. A decision had to be made quickly, and he could see no other way. “I’ll hold them off. Fei Long will meet you there. You make sure they don’t shoot him down,” he told Feodora.

“Bullshit,” Fei Long cut in and snatched the headpiece for himself, leaving neither room nor time for the former bodyguard to protest. “Did you pack a rocket launcher?”

“It’s in the black box at the bottom of the case, along with a dozen grenades.” Did Fei Long realize she actually grew up with the guy he’d been shagging? Mikhail was more likely to forget his car key than his rocket launchers.

“We’ll be there in five. Make sure the area is secure for take off.”

“Not a problem.”

Fei Long tossed the headpiece back in the case and quickly assembled the rocket launcher, wasting no time to glance at the other man, who had been staring at him with his mouth slightly opened. To Yoh, the plan may have sounded acceptable, but it would be a lie if he said he still knew who this man was. For the past eight years, Fei Long had never once taken matters in his own hands without at least taking his input into consideration. Even the way he was handling those weapons seemed different from what he remembered.

"When was the last time you’d fired one of those?" Yoh had to ask. It wasn't something Fei Long had ever stocked at Baishe, and Yoh seemed to recall the distaste on the man's face when he suggested they should.

"Never," Fei Long replied without looking up as he quickly slapped the parts together.

Great. "And?"

"He likes it when I play with his guns," the Baishe leader said, glancing playfully at his former bodyguard. "Among other things."

Yoh rolled his eyes. And he thought he was going to die because of the bullet holes in his torso. "Spare me the details." Seriously.

Fei Long smiled at the last remark and lifted the rocket launcher up on his shoulder, aiming right where most of the guards were and fired. The blast that followed created a thick curtain of smoke in the field ahead, shielding them momentarily from the guards that were still alive.

“Run!” Fei Long said as he half dragged, half carried his former bodyguard along, still holding on to the rocket launcher with his other hand.

More footsteps were approaching fast, and series of gunshots were heard behind them. Yoh looked back into the smoke and fired a few rounds from the machine gun he’d taken from the case, to buy them some time. Time. They were going to need a lot of it. He could hardly walk and it was going to take one hell of a run to get to the other side in five minutes. At that speed, they weren’t going to make it.

“Give me the rocket launcher,” Yoh said as they continued to push forward.

Having perfected their coordination during combat, Fei Long handed him the weapon out of habit
and without much thought. By the time he realized what he had done, Yoh had already freed himself and quickly taken a few steps back.

“Go.” Yoh said as he placed the rocket launcher on his shoulder. *This should be enough to buy them some time.* “I got your back.” I always have.

Looking at the man who was standing proud and strong before him once more, Yoh knew it was the right decision he was making. Fei Long had found his place in the world and the strength to protect it. His vision seemed clear, his every step determined. Things would be different from now on. The dragon of Baishe would be all right. If he had to die today, it would be without regrets.

Fei Long felt his fingers turn cold as he understood what was happening. Having known the man for so long, there was never much Yoh had to say to get his message across. They had worked together, side by side, every day and nearly every waking hour for the past eight years; Fei Long knew exactly what those words really meant. He also knew that look. He’d seen it before on the ship, when the gun was in his hand and Yoh stood just a little over an arm’s length away as he does now, just waiting for his fate to be decided, willing to accept any outcome. Only this time, Fei Long knew the decision wasn’t his to make.

Or was it?

Fei Long took a step forward and reached out for his former bodyguard, to which Yoh responded by backing away and aiming the machine gun at him.

“Stay where you are.” *This is how it has to be.* He had made a decision and no one was going to change it, not even Fei Long.

“You want to shoot me, shoot me.” Fei Long said and planted his feet firmly on the ground. Yoh should know that it would take more than a gun to move him from that spot. *Enough with the sacrifices.* He could no longer live with one more life lost because of him, for him. His existence had been nothing but a curse for everyone he’d ever cared about from the minute he came into this world. It had to stop. “Because I’ll knock you out and drag you to the chopper if I have to.”

Another series of gunshots sounded from behind, signaling that the guards were gaining on them. Yoh took a few more steps back, still holding the gun at his former boss. “You don’t get to decide my fate, not today,” he replied, as always, without the slightest intention to deviate from his own plans. “Go save him. He needs you right now.” *That should do the trick.* Fei Long finally had something to live for, and he wasn’t going to be the one who stood in the way.

The blow that landed on his left side of the face came too fast for him to anticipate. He swayed to the side and lost his balance. Fei Long grabbed him before he hit the ground, forced him up, and looked him in the eyes.

“Listen to me, you stubborn son of a bitch,” he said, making sure each and every word was heard loud and clear. “I’m not going to lose another person who means something to me. Not one more, and definitely not you! I want you to live, and you’re going to fucking live for me! Now shoot that damn rocket and get your ass to the helicopter, or we’ll both die right here, right now!” He’d never used that tone with Yoh, but his patience was running low and the fact that the man had the nerve to tell him to just walk away was pissing him off beyond measure. He had let the man live twice, despite the wimp he had to become in the eyes of his subordinates and the mafia world’s at large. Knowing that Yoh still didn’t have a clue about what all that meant made him want to smack the guy in the face again, just for the sake of it.

Looking at Yoh who stood there like an immovable piece of rock, Fei Long took a deep breath and
calmed himself down a notch. He’d forgotten that no amount of yelling would ever get through to Yoh once he’d made a decision. Still, the least he would expect was that the man had also known him well enough to understand and believe what he was about to say.

“You’re the only friend I have.” It wasn’t a lie. After everything they’d been through - the deception, the betrayal and all the damage that they had done to each other - Yoh remained the one and only man who truly knew and understood him - the only one from whom he had nothing to hide. “I need you.”

If time could pause, it would have that moment when Fei Long had finished the sentence. All Yoh could do was stare at him, his mind completely void of reasons and agendas he was sure he had a few minutes ago. I need you. There it was, the words that could make him surrender and give up everything - his life, his pride, his integrity - spoken by the one and only man who had the power to do so. Fei Long knew this, and had to pick this moment to say it. He wanted to damn the man for such a confession during a time like this, and yet deep down, he knew this was who Fei Long was and why his heart had been stolen in the first place.

“When all this is over, remind me to get another job.” Yoh sighed and fired the rocket launcher. “Let’s go.”

***

The jet landed smoothly at an airstrip on a private island just off the coast of Macau. Feodora rushed out of the cockpit and began pacing back and forth on the runway, waiting for the helicopter that shouldn’t be too far behind. She couldn’t make the call until she saw with her own eyes that Fei Long was safe and secure. Where the hell are they?

“Get another chopper ready,” she ordered the men who had been instructed to meet them at the runway, in case they were followed. “We leave as soon as they’re here.” At that moment, the only place safe enough would be the Arbatov villa in Macau, and the jet wouldn’t accommodate all of them. She had blown up all the helicopters and boats around the island where they were held. That should buy them enough time to get to the villa without being attacked along the way.

The sound of a helicopter approached from behind the airstrip. Feodora held a deep breath as she waited for it to land and the two men to come out. Fei Long had better step out alive or she would find herself a widow by the end of the day.

It would be the first time-- and most likely the only time-- that she felt deliriously happy to see that long black hair emerging from the helicopter. While the man had blood all over him, he was still standing. By his side was his former bodyguard, who seemed only half conscious as Fei Long supported him out of the chopper. It didn’t look good.

“He needs a medic, NOW!” was the first thing Fei Long said when he saw her.

“He’s already waiting on the chopper,” she said as she took Yoh’s other arm and placed it over her shoulder, leading both of them to the other helicopter. “Are you hit?”

“Nowhere serious.” He could count about three bullets that went right through and a few more that just grazed his skin, but none of them had hit him where it could be fatal. Yoh had made sure of it with his own flesh. “Where’s Mikhail?”

“Get to the chopper, I’ll brief you as soon as we’re in the air.”

There was reluctance in her tone that gave him a bad feeling in his stomach, and he decided to
brush it aside until they took off. The first thing to do at the moment was to move to a secure location and get Yoh to a doctor before Toh’s men caught up with them.

Within minutes, the chopper was in the air. Feodora positioned herself in the co-pilot seat, giving orders for her men to blow up the helicopter they’d stolen to destroy any tracking device and making sure their destination was secure.

“Where is Mikhail?” Fei Long asked again impatiently as he helped the medic tend to Yoh’s wounds. He had to admit, a part of him wasn’t thrilled to hear the answer.

“With Toh.” It was all Feodora said before she made another call. It rang unanswered long enough for her to look at Fei Long with fear in her eyes.

The moment it was picked up, from the way her fair complexion suddenly turned pale, he knew it wasn’t who she’d expected on the other end of the line.

“Where’s my husband?” She bit down hard in an attempt to keep her voice from trembling. Her worst fear seemed to have come true.

“Is he there with you?”

Looking straight at Fei Long, who seemed to realize the situation without having to be told, she decided there would be no point in hiding the truth. “He’s here.” Mikhail would hate her for this, but her priority was her husband’s life and Fei Long was the only leverage she had.

“Put the call on speaker. I want to talk to him.”

She gave him a gesture, and Fei Long nodded immediately in response. He didn’t have to guess who was on the phone and what the man had said. He knew Toh, and because he did, he also knew to brace himself for what was to come.

She hit the button on the phone, and for a moment there was only silence. He looked at Feodora, and she at him, sharing the same feeling that crippled both of them from the tips of their fingers to their toes. A sound came through, soft and quiet - a sound of paper rubbing against foil. Then a gentle tap followed, once, and then twice.

“Such a fine cigarette he carries, wouldn’t you say, brother?”

“I’m listening. Get to the point.” He could swear hearing that voice on the phone irritated him even more than hearing it in the same room.

“Good.”

Something, or someone, moved in the background. A suffocated cough followed, accompanied by sounds of a struggle that lasted longer than a normal assault. Without having to be in the same room, Fei Long could immediately picture what was happening. He had done it too many times to a few people. He looked at Feodora and from the way she bit down on her lower lip, she too saw what he could, if not worse. After all, the Russians’ ways of doing things had always been ten times more barbaric.

“That,” Toh said, dragging his voice in the exact same way he’d always done before initiating a strike, “was the sound of my belt tightening around his neck. And this,” he paused then a click followed, “is the sound of his lighter burning that fine cigarette.”

Feodora jolted from her seat. He grabbed her wrist and forced her back down, squeezing her
straining arm as he looked her in the eyes. Don’t give him that satisfaction, don’t you dare.

She understood it well enough and did what she could to remain calm and composed. Her eyes, however, would tell a completely different story.

He would never forget the sound that followed - a suffocated scream that pierced through his skin and crippled every nerve in his body all at once. His blood boiled as images flooded his mind, like grotesque movie scenes he was being forced to watch. It wasn’t much by way of torture-- he had done worse to his victims-- but the way Mikhail sounded told him the damage was far beyond physical. There were fear and dread at the heart of every kick and every breath he huffed, enough to send a shiver down Fei Long’s spine as he listened. Question after question raced through his head. Was this the sound he made some 20 years ago when the first marks were being carved on his back? How many times did he scream like this? For how long?

Another assault followed, and then another, and another. He squeezed the wrist in his hand harder as tears began to pool in her eyes and hatred swiftly replaced the blood in his veins. I will make him pay for this. I promise you.

“Tell me,” Toh said shortly after the last scream had ceased, “which would you prefer? Your name or your snake symbol on his skin?”

“Which would you?” Fei Long replied, calm and collected even when he knew his control was hanging on a very thin thread. He must not lose it. The minute he does, Toh wouldn't hesitate to get the most out of his victim. “My dagger in your heart or his wife’s grenade down your throat?”

“Perhaps we can discuss that when you’re back in your little cage...” He paused when another struggle sounded. Fei Long knew why Mikhail had reacted and what it took to put the man back in his place. “Stay,” Toh commanded his hostage, whose sound of suffocation suddenly tripled in intensity. Don’t. Please don’t fight him. Fei Long shut his eyes as he repeated those words in his head. The more Mikhail struggles, the further it drives Toh's appetite for violence. He’d seen the depths of his madness through those eyes and the void in it. There was no one to stop him from doing the unthinkable, not even when he wanted to stop. Phillip Toh was truly alone in the world, ruthless, suicidal, and full of hatred. He was the worst kind of enemy - one that had nothing to lose.

“Surrender yourself at my headquarters in one hour,” Toh continued, "Or you will have his beautiful blue eye in a box before the day is over."

"As for Mrs. Arbatova, I suggest you make sure he does exactly this, or I'll be happy to wrap you the remaining one with a little pink bow on top. One hour. Don't be late."

When Toh had hung up the phone, Fei Long could tell Feodora was already thinking about which knife to skin the man with and where to start. The question was how she would proceed to secure that chance. If it had been just him, the next course of action wouldn't be too hard to decide, but with Feodora involved, that decision may not be his to make. After all, in Mikhail's absence, it was her chopper, her guns, her men and her home he was utilizing. Having lost all control of Baishe, without these things, he was just one man, and an injured one at that. She could decide to trade him in pieces to get her husband back and there would be absolutely nothing he could do about it. From the look on her face, she also understood the extent of her power.

"Take me to Mikhail.” Fei Long held her gaze as he spoke, hoping that he was right about the kind of woman that she was. “I’ll get him out.” It was a promise, to Mikhail, to himself, and to her.
She looked at him in silence for what seemed to Fei Long an eternity of being held at gunpoint. After all, this was it - the moment that could change his life, Mikhail’s and hers. This was her one chance to get rid of him and reclaim her husband, once and for all. The question was, would she understand the true consequences of that decision?

Her eyes narrowed, like a hawk’s just before delivering the plunge of death on its prey. Fei Long held his breath and cursed Mikhail in his mind. There must have been hundreds of simple minded, beautiful women clawing each other’s eyes out to marry him. What kind of masochistic fuck would pick one who was more likely to skin him alive than bring him breakfast in bed?

“What’s your plan?” She asked in the tone that sounded more like an interrogation.

It was all he needed - a consideration, a chance. The moment she had given him that, he knew he had her.

“Arm myself to the teeth, go in through the window, and kill the motherfucker,” he told her. He could hardly wait to do just that.

She gave no signs of approval or disapproval as she considered the proposal, only a look of someone carefully going through the list of the pros and cons of such an action. Then something appeared in her eyes that he could not quite place. A glimpse of longing maybe, and perhaps a touch of sadness.

“What he did to Alexei?”

He’d almost forgotten how much Mikhail’s brother had meant to her. After all, she had been raised as one of them. His heart ached at the thought of yet another family he had ruined, and the memory of that morning when he witnessed its destruction. But there was no time for regrets or remorse. He had to save what was left of them, even if he had to die trying.

Fei Long nodded. “Like what he did to Alexei.”

She turned to the medic, who was now wrapping up Yoh’s wounds on the back of the helicopter. He should have passed out by now, but his head turned towards her and Fei Long with his eyes wide opened. Apparently he had been listening to the entire conversation.

“Grekov,” she called her medic. He looked up promptly, like a soldier being called to attention. Men do that a lot around her. “Is he going to die?”

Yoh knotted his brow at the question. Does she really have to ask that so blatantly in front of me?

“Why?” Grekov asked before Yoh managed to open his mouth and did the exact same thing.

“I’m not going to waste time to drop him off at the villa if he’s going to die anyway,” Feodora replied with a slightly irritated tone, but one that Yoh knew didn’t lack concern for his life. What it lacked was emotion. The woman was in combat mode and was simply being efficient. A perfect commander, in his opinion. “Is he or is he not going to die?

At this point, Yoh had to admit he was also curious about the answer.

“I don't know. I have to open him up to see for sure,” Grekov replied with his thick Russian accent and simple English, moving his hands in the air to illustrate the action needed. When she gave him a look that could probably shut up a crying baby, he straightened and fixed his answer. “I’ve stopped the bleeding and he’s still breathing. I’d say 50/50?”
Yoh turned to Feodora and began to pray that she would not demand proof by the method so elegantly proposed by Grekov. 50/50. According to him and Fei Long, that didn't sound so bad, but being new to the Arbatov’s protocols, he could hardly tell if that was considered a yes or a no by their standard. If he had to guess, for someone like Feodora, the usual passing percentage should probably be something like 80.

“We’ll need weapons,” Fei Long added. That should give her more reason to go back to the villa where Yoh could be dropped off for proper medical care.

“All our choppers come fully stocked in the back. Go knock yourself out.” She brushed him off quickly, but continued to consider the situation for a moment longer and then nodded to the pilot. “We’ll drop him off at the villa, then we head to the casino.”

Yoh didn’t know what had made her arrive at the decision, but asking her why might very well make her reconsider. At that point he couldn’t care less whether he lives or dies, but he’d prefer to stay alive at least long enough to know how it would all end, to see that Fei Long would end up unharmed - most of him anyway.

Luckily for him, he was still breathing when they reached the Arbatov Villa. Grekov took preliminary care of Fei Long’s wounds and gave him a change of clothing on the way, while Feodora made sure her men would be waiting promptly when they land to receive the patient.

“She wasn’t kidding about being fully stocked,” Fei Long emerged from the back of the helicopter wearing a black tactical vest over a black, short-sleeved turtleneck. His hair was tied up tightly into a ponytail with operation goggles strapped securely just above it. It was a sight that brought back a lot of memories for Yoh. He had to admit, he was a little pissed about not being the only man who had ever seen Fei Long in that getup any longer. The man really looked good in a special ops uniform.

“So, are you going to die?” Fei Long asked, mimicking Feodora's accent as he stopped to check on his former bodyguard. Most of the time her accent was sort of American, but he was beginning to notice her native tongue slipping through when she's under pressure.

“Do I have a choice?” According to the woman of the house whose time he shouldn’t waste under pain of death, he didn’t.

Fei Long laughed a little before placing his hand on Yoh’s shoulder. “I wish you could come with me. It would be just like old times.”

To Yoh, that was considered something worth staying alive for. “Give me a shot of adrenaline or something.” He was only half kidding. At that moment, if he could at least stand, he would never let Fei Long walk into the enemy’s lair all by himself.

Smiling melancholically at the remark, he took his former bodyguard’s hand in his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “You’ve done enough, my friend.”

“He’s right,” Feodora stepped out from the weapon room, dressed not so differently from her male counterpart and looked just as good. “This is no longer your show.”

It really wasn’t. This was Fei Long’s chance to save and protect the one he loved and finish his unfinished business once and for all - something that he wanted to, and should, do with his own hands. Feodora, however... “Should you really be going with him?”

“You bet I am.” She gave Yoh a look. “Your ex-boss here has fucked up one too many times for
me to trust him with my husband’s life.”

That could be one reason, Fei Long thought. He knew better why she had to go. To her, he was considered an important leverage - one that had to be put to use effectively when things go wrong. After all, Feodora had been taught and trained by none other but Vladimir Arbatov himself how to run the family, perhaps even more extensively than his own sons, who could barely sit still for longer than five minutes at a time. She would never miss such a precaution.

“Here,” she handed Fei long a small grenade launcher. “This should be small enough for you to carry around given your injuries.”

Fei Long pushed back the weapon respectfully. “That’s all right. It’s not really my thing.”

“Get used to it,” she insisted. “After all, you’re family now.”

Family. Fei Long felt something hardened in his throat at the word; he had never associated it with anything but the cold, judging treatment of Yan Tsui and the need to fulfil a duty or repay a kindness to his father. There was no expectation or condition present in the way Feodora had uttered the word. There was nothing he had to do or tasks he had to complete. The look in her eyes was the same one Alexei had when he had told him to come "home." He could still remember it, no matter how long it had been - the uplifting feeling of having a place to return to no matter what he had done, and whether or not he had failed or succeeded. If there was one thing the Arbatovs had taught him, it was the true meaning of the word "family," and being accepted by them as one was a gift that he would die to protect.

"Thank you," he told her in Russian as he took the rocket launcher, hoping that she would understand the depths of those words.

"You’re welcome," she nodded and replied in Cantonese.

She knows.

He had to take it back-- Mikhail wasn’t just a masochistic crazy fuck. He had picked one hell of a woman.

***

There was a thin layer of haze in the room, and the air felt as thick as water as he breathed. The air conditioning was blowing in his direction at full strength, and yet it was as if he had just taken an hour walk in the desert. The patch of skin on his chest where the cigarette had burned felt like it was on fire, and the scars on his back seemed to come alive every time he moved. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard despite the multiple wounds on the inside of his cheek. The taste and smell of his own blood was stirring the content of his stomach in a way that he could barely keep it down. It was bad enough being tied up and beaten to a pulp by his enemy; the last thing he wanted to do was throw up in the middle of all this. Still, the way his head had been spinning out of control wasn’t helping much.

Half-way through the beatings he could hardly hear or make out a word Toh had said. His consciousness had slowly slipped away to some place else - a place he didn’t know still existed in his memory. He could still see the hotel suite and the man in it, along with the Italian curtains and every piece of furniture he had hand picked himself. And yet, at times it sounded like rain when the sun was still shining in from the windows. The leather belt seemed to stretch itself out into a blood-covered whip every time it landed on his skin, and the sound it made was like a nerve-wrecking thunder, just like that then. Sometimes he would feel the sharpness of the cuffs, other times it would be replaced by the coarseness of the ropes around his wrists. He remembered throwing up that night in the barn, and how the taste of it made his stomach turn some more. It all came back to him now; one by one like a series of waves crashing upon the shore, one after
another, unstoppable and inescapable - the numbing pain on his back, the salt of his sweat, the
smell of blood, puke, and cum that had never been completely washed off, no matter how hard
he’d tried. For the first time in a long time he could remember exactly what he was wearing, what
was torn, where and how. His body also remembered how it had lost control, how it shook and
strained at every move, with every breath.

He couldn’t remember how long it went on that day in the barn - minutes, hours, or overnight.
Alexei had refused to speak of it and he had never cared to ask. That day too, in the hotel suite, he
had lost track of time somewhere between the punches and the lashings of Toh’s belt. After a while
the beating stopped, only he knew it was far from being over. The man just needed a break - they
all do at one point. Soon enough it would start all over again, like a cycle that increases in intensity
the longer it goes on. To wait and endure were the only two things one can do given the
circumstances. It wasn’t that hard. After a while you get used to it—everyone does.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw something moved by the windows - a shadow of someone that
wasn’t Toh. He looked up and realized the sound in that room had somehow disappeared all at
once. Someone was standing behind Toh with his back turned towards him - a man, tall, strong and
streamlined. His chestnut hair was tied up in a neat ponytail that hung just below his collar. At first
glance, he thought the man had looked familiar, and then he realized he knew the outline of that
body like the back of his own hands. He knew that scent that began to fill the room too - the scent
of his favorite aftershave.

Alexei.

He wasn’t sure if he had said it out loud or whether it was all in his head. It didn’t matter. His only
brother turned half way towards him and looked over his shoulder. He had seen Alexei many times
after he’d been gone. Sometimes in a dream, other times in a vision when he was alone. In all of
them, he had appeared covered in blood or as a boy from his memory. That day he was exactly the
same as when he’d last seen his brother at their father’s reception, down to the suit and the tie he
wore.

Alexei caught his eyes and gave him the same look he had that night. “Are you all right?” He’d
asked. It was funny how his kid brother had always been the one to worry about him, and yet all he
ever did was to send the man to his death. Even then, with Alexei standing just a few steps away,
he couldn’t step up to the man to give him one last embrace, to say he was sorry, to do something
for the brother who had singlehandedly pulled him out of his addiction. How many times had he
been through this? How many times had his hands been tied at the exact moment when everyone
he loved was being taken away from him? He could still remember the crippling feeling of his
uselessness when his mother had died during childbirth and all he could do was listen to her
screams. Where was he, when the enemy he knew would eventually attack was gunning down his
only brother? His selfishness had made him abandon the only woman he’d sworn to protect, and
now he had become the only thing that stood between Fei Long and his freedom. Was there anyone
in his life that he could save? Anyone at all?

“You saved me,” Alexei said with a smile on his face - the same reassuring smile he’d seen every
time he woke up in a hospital during his years of addiction. “That night, you did. You saved him
too. Now it’s time we save you. Pull your shit together, brother, and look to the sky.”

He couldn’t remember everything that happened afterwards with much clarity, half his
consciousness had already been gone by that time. His mind was jumping from place to place, most
of the time somewhere else and with someone else. What he remembered was the explosion in that
room that followed just seconds later. Alexei had turned towards him with his arms wide opened
and his eyes closed as the windows shattered all at once from behind. A curtain of broken glass
rained down on him like a thousand diamonds falling from the sky. It was beautiful, like Alexei’s eyes, his hair, his smile, and his entire existence. Beautiful.

It was when Alexei had disappeared that he realized gunfire was erupting all around him. He could hear people shouting in the next room as a series of explosions followed, one right after another. In all that madness, someone yanked him up and dragged him behind the sofa. “Get up!” the man yelled at him and pulled him up from the floor as soon as half the firing ceased. Something cold and hard was being pressed against his skull and he was suddenly brought back to reality. “Nothing clears your mind like the feel of a gun on the back of your head,” someone once told him during his first game of Russian Roulette. “Nothing makes you feel more alive than pulling the trigger with your own hand either.” It was true most of the time, just not then. That moment, he just wanted to hear the shot that would make it all go away. That moment, he just wanted it to be over.

Someone came in through the broken windows, dressed in black from head to toe, armed with a rocket launcher, a few grenades, a lot of guns, and a katana sticking out from the back of his shoulder. Either his mind was playing tricks again, or that an angel of death had come to give him his final ride. It was all that came to his mind at first, before his visions had cleared and he began to recognize the man he had come to know like his own reflection. Fei Long was limping a little as he walked, and his once flawless face was bruised almost beyond recognition, but the burning in those eyes could never be mistaken, and this time they were burning for him. He thought if that would be the last thing he saw before he died, then he would die fulfilled.

“Bravo,” Phillip Toh said with a strange humor in his tone at the spectacle before him. “I don’t know what you’d hoped to accomplish, but I have to admit I didn’t think you had the balls for such a big entrance.”

“Drop the gun. You know you have no chance of walking out of here with your life if you kill him.” Fei Long demanded, holding his piece firmly with an unshakable grip. There had never been a day in his life when he was more certain of his aim than in that moment. It had only taken one look at the man he had come to save to know the damage Toh had caused. It wasn’t the bruises on that face, or the bloodstains that covered almost every inch of his shirt, it was the emptiness in those blue eyes that had never once shown defeat. He knew that expression by heart. He’d seen it everyday in the prison mirrors. Some things had been taken away from him - things that may never again be restored. This was what Alexei and Feodora had always feared - a relapse they may not be able to fix the second time around.

Fei Long bit his lip as he tried to keep his control in check. There wasn’t a time in his life when he’d hated himself more. How many times had he been given a chance to end his feud with Asami and he didn’t? How many times had Mikhail tried to make him walk away when everything was still fine and he’d refused? How could he have allowed it to come to this when he’d had so many chances to avoid it? Why did I leave you?

“My life?” There was a certain kind of madness in Toh’s eyes as he said those words, perhaps even satisfaction in the possibility of such an outcome. “What makes you think that I would let such a petty thing get in my way? The way I see it, it’s his life you have to worry about, not mine.” It was almost too easy for him to see just how precious his leverage was to Fei Long. He should have realized this from the very beginning. The most effective way to torture his little brother was through his heart. “Allow me to demonstrate if your brain hasn’t yet caught up with the situation at hand.”

The shot that followed rang sharp and clear in Fei Long’s mind like the bullet that went through his chest eight years ago - a shot so clean and precise, delivered by the hand that knew no hesitation. He could still recall the way it felt, from the moment the gun was fired, to the way the bullet had
pierced through his flesh. Only that day it wasn’t his blood that was dripping on the carpet, it was Mikhail’s. Where the father’s bullet had missed by an inch, his son had made sure it hit with deadly precision. He remembered that feeling from years ago when his father was lying helplessly in his arms - how the sky seemed to have fallen right before his eyes, and its weight was crushing down upon him all at once. The mere thought of losing Mikhail had brought it all back, only this time everything was multiplied ten fold - the anger, the fear, the numbness that spread quickly through all his limbs and, most of all, his failure.

He should have taken that window to shoot his enemy, but all he could do was stand there staring at the two of them from across the room, breathless and shaken out of his mind. Mikhail was down on his knees, held up only by the grip of the other man on his collar, still with a gun pressed to his head. It was only when he began to move that Fei Long found himself breathing again. The bullet had gone through the back of his right shoulder and out just below his collarbone - a clean wound, given that the bleeding is tended to in time.

“I have nine more bullets to demonstrate my conviction,” Toh said, almost with a melodic hum in the back of his throat, “Every minute that you hesitate to surrender, he bleeds closer to his death. Why don’t you ask yourself, little brother, how many exactly can you stand?”

He didn’t have a problem surrendering himself to Toh all over again. It would be the kind of hell that was much less torturous than what was being presented to him now. Surrendering was the best choice given the circumstances and he had been prepared to do exactly that the moment he decided to suit up for the attack. Still, deep down he knew just as Toh did, that none of it would ever stop. Mikhail would never stop trying to save him, and Toh would never stop utilizing that fact to his advantage. The only person who could put an end to all this was him, and the solution was right there in his hand.

“It pisses me off that you think you know exactly what I can or can’t stand,” Fei Long said as he lowered his gun, playing with the piece absentmindedly as he spoke, “and yet you forget that I, too, know exactly what you are and what aren’t willing to sacrifice.” He raised the gun again, this time aiming at the real enemy that had been the source of every tragic event in his life for nearly three decades. “Let him go,” he pressed the barrel firmly against his temple, “or I will rid you of the one thing you’re willing to sacrifice your life for.” It was the only thing Toh had ever wanted - retribution by his own hands. Toh would never allow him to take his own life - he was willing to gamble with that assumption. It didn’t matter if he was right. Either way, if he dies, all this would come to an end.

“What makes you think I’d believe that you could or would actually pull the trigger?” Toh responded amusingly. He had to admit he was a little surprised.

“That’s my life you’re holding in your hand.” Fei Long said, gripping the gun tighter in his hand. Above all, Toh should know the price of his bargaining chip; it was the only reason why Mikhail had been brought into this in the first place. “If he goes, I go too. Only this way I get to piss the fuck out of you. Can’t think of a better reason to die at the moment, if you ask me.”

There was a hint of irritation on Toh’s face as his victorious smirk slowly faded. Had those words been backed by anything but those eyes that dared him with unshakable conviction, he would have found such a threat rather fruitless. Fei Long’s emotions may have been his most vulnerable weakness, but for the same reason, it was the source of his strength. There wasn’t a trace of hesitation to be found in those words or the finger that rested on the trigger. No amount of torture had ever driven the man so close to his limits like the shot he had just fired. That’s my life you’re holding in your hand. Looking at the man then, he knew it wasn’t a lie. For Mikhail Arbatov, Fei Long would pull the trigger.
“If you’re so eager to die,” Toh said, this time without the usual smirk on his face, “then let’s finish it. You and me, right here, right now. Drop your guns, I’ll drop him.”

It may have sounded like a lost cause, knowing full well the strength and skill of his opponent. Even without his existing injuries, Fei Long knew he had little chance of winning in a hand-to-hand combat with Phillip Toh. Still, a chance was a chance, and he could hardly deny the opportunity to beat the crap out of this prick. *Even if I have to die trying, then so be it.*

He took off the vest and tossed it on the floor, kicking it to the side where he carefully laid down the katana. The rest of what he’d packed went to the same pile soon after, except for the gun he was holding. “Your turn,” he said to Toh, his eyes fixated on the man who was still kneeling silently on the floor that had already been well covered with his blood.

*How far will you go for love?* Someone once asked him the question he didn’t know how to answer.

*Just stay with me a little longer. I’ll show you just how far.*

***

A/N: Hate it, like it? Please do leave a comment so I know people are still reading this. ^_^ Anonymous readers, don't be shy, I don't bite. See you next chapter and hopefully muse would be kind enough to let me update sooner. *hugs all* Now I have to run to my girl's basketball match!
Retribution Eighteen

I've wasted enough time not updating, and for that I deserve every brick, so without further ramblings, here it is, an update. Enjoy.---

Throwing tomatoes at me

Title: Retribution Eighteen
Rating: PG-13
Warning: violence, OOC (if you agree with FNR), AU (if you agree w/ FNR), but for those who disagree: CWC (Canon? What Canon?)
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Yoh, AxA, Feodora (OC), Toh(OC), Alexei (OC), mentions of Yan Tsui.
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All VF characters belong to Yamane Ayano.
Beta: angel0399
Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish (COMPLETED! OMG!), German, French, and newly added VIETNAMESE! (thank you everyone!) translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, a dear reader gryffin_draco has gone through the trouble of putting these in PDF files for download. Cruel Intentions and Revelation. Thank you so much sweetie.

Retribution Eighteen

The blow that landed on the left side of his torso drew a cry Fei Long had been trying to restrain. The bullet wound on the back of his shoulder throbbed like someone had put a knife through it and twisted the blade. Every time he breathed it felt like something was poking at his lungs-- possibly from a broken rib or two if he was lucky. Less than 15 minutes into it and his entire body already felt like a timer counting down to zero; it was approaching too fast for what he had to do.

What I have to do, Fei Long thought. He had done nothing so far but offered himself as a sandbag for the prick. Philip Toh was too damn good-- it was like fighting his sifu blindfolded.

“Surprising,” Toh said, panting heavily as he gathered his loose hair and retied his ponytail. “You’re so much better than your pathetic brother. I have to say, this would have been much more fun if you hadn’t been injured to begin with.”

Fei Long would have laughed if his stomach hadn’t hurt so badly. “Why don’t you put a fucking bullet or two in your chest to make it even?” The truth was, he’d have to put twice the bullet holes he had in Toh to make it even close to even. Strangely enough, unlike his past combats, his mind was as clear as a blank slate and his focus had never been sharper. For the first time, he knew what and whom he was fighting for.

“Now that would be considered just,” Toh sneered as he shook loose the tension in his shoulders, “I don’t do just. That’s something pathetic people like you do.” He returned to his defensive stance and beckoned his opponent to continue. “Come on, you’re not done yet, are you?”

“To tell you the truth I can barely stand right now,” Fei Long replied as he straightened and took a deep breath. “But no, I’m not done.”
The back fist that followed missed Toh by an inch. It was returned with a punch that Fei Long was fast enough to dodge and countered with a series of hand strikes and kicks. The speed at which they were executed caused Toh to misplace one of his steps and gave Fei Long an opening for a low spin kick that brought his opponent down on the floor. As he moved to secure Toh by the arm, the man recoiled with a strike that landed Fei Long right where he wanted - down on the floor with Toh’s hand around his throat. At that moment, he came to a realization that even at his best condition, there was no possible way to defeat the man. He’d barged in here in order to save Mikhail, only to be reminded that real life isn’t like kung-fu movies. The hero doesn’t always win. But then again he could hardly call himself one.

“This is it, brother,” Toh said, yanking Fei Long up on his knees. “This is where you get to watch the person you love the most die. This,” he tightened his grip as he forced the man to look at his lover as he bled closer and closer to his death, “is how it feels to know you’re powerless to save him.”

This is how it feels. Toh looked at the Russian, whose consciousness was slowly drifting away; his heart quickened as a memory resurfaced. He could still remember it like yesterday, the paleness of her skin that had turned almost powder white, the way her body swayed as the wind blew in from the window, and how cold she was when he wrapped his arms around her. It began to come back to him, the helplessness that suffocated him when he couldn’t get her down from the ceiling, the way his throat dried up from calling her back from death-- no matter how many times he had tried. She left him, his mother --his one and only protection-- the only person who was supposed to love him more than life itself. In the end she had picked her own way out, without him. The suffering they’d endured wasn’t his fault or hers—it was someone else’s. And he would pay for it-- take with him every beating, every hurt, and every wound ever inflicted upon them to his grave. It was the only way he could think of that would set him free-- The nightmares would be gone, so would the weight in his heart that had suffocated him for decades. This much he was certain.

Fei Long gasped for air as the hand around his throat tightened. There was a layer of insanity in those eyes that looked down at him then, and the reflection he saw upon them was someone else’s. Despite the fact that he’d been the one with victory in his grasp, Toh was trembling as though he was still fighting an enemy he couldn’t defeat. He knew that expression by heart. It was the same one he’d seen in the mirror so many times, the same one he’d also seen on Mikhail when his nightmares had caught up with him. It was madness. The three of them, locked up in a room, fighting each other over enemies from the past that had been dead a long time ago. It has to end, he thought to himself as he looked at Mikhail, who was about to drown in his own blood. All this had to end that day, at any cost.

“N--” Fei Long tried and found his word cut short by the hand around his throat. *Fuck.* He just needed one chance to say what he needed to say and even that wasn’t possible.

“I would love to hear you beg for mercy,” Toh said with a sneer. “Unfortunately it wouldn’t change a thing.” Fei Long had to feel it, and he had to witness it all. “You can scream and cry until your throat burns and your eyes bleed and no one will listen-- nothing will change. He will die and you will remember this moment for the rest of your life. You will wake up everyday to the way his heartbeat suddenly stops and his breathing ceases.”

Fei Long’s fingers clawed viciously at the hands that were wringing him close to death, kicking his feet as he exerted whatever was left of his strength to break free. One second was what he needed. Just one.

In the split second that Toh’s grip had loosened enough for him to make a sound, Fei Long screamed. “NOW!”
He couldn’t say how long the machine gun had fired into the room. He’d asked Feodora to wait for his signal through the earpiece he was wearing to fire from the helicopter. It wasn’t safe, but time was running out and he needed it fired. Mikhail was lying on the floor and would have the most chance at survival. He would live long after this and see his child grow. Feodora would take care of him. He wouldn’t like this outcome, but one day that beautiful smile would return to his face again. All this would come to an end. His only regret was that he would have loved to say goodbye, would have given everything to say “I love you” for a thousand times. But Mikhail would already know this. He had to. You know me.

The shots rang like a symphony of death that brought back memories from not so long ago. In his mind Fei Long could see Alexei, sitting by the bar, drinking his coffee, possibly smiling at the conversation they had left off that morning. “I want to know how you take your coffee”, he said, “how you like your eggs, what you’re thinking when you bite your lower lip.” It was that simple. He wanted to see. He wanted to learn. He wanted to live.

Fei Long wanted to live too, to stay by Mikhail’s side until they grew old and grey together. He wanted to see that smile again and be wrapped up in that gentle embrace everyday for the rest of their lives. He wanted a second chance at it, to set things right, to fight, to trust. At more than a 1,000 rounds per minute, he could see those moments shatter like the pieces of broken glass that flew around the room. How ironic it was, that one always realizes how much time they had wasted when there’s no more time to be had.

Something warm was resting against his back then. Perhaps it was his blood that was seeping from his wounds. Somehow he couldn’t feel the bullets or the pain they should have inflicted. His body was wrapped around by something soft, like feathers from the wings of an angel; only the wings were black, not white, and it certainly wasn’t an angel.

It was only a whisper, and yet through all the deafening sound of the gunshots, he could hear it.

Get up.

Fei Long looked up and saw him, still as beautiful as the last time they had shared that last morning together. His hair was messed up from the way he liked to ruffle it, and those mischievous green eyes were as bright as always. Alexei was there, his wings stretched out and around him, and smiling.

“He needs you,” he said, his finger pointing to where his brother lay.

Suddenly, everything went white. For a moment Fei Long thought that it was all over, that perhaps his body had already given in. Alexei was gone. The machine gun had also stopped, and the room was as quiet as a morgue. Only the faint, unsteady sound of his heartbeat could still be heard, like percussions in the closing act of an opera. He wasn’t dead-- not yet anyway. It was probably close, for at that moment he saw things in black and white, and everything seemed to move in slow motion, including his own limbs when he’d tried to rise from the floor.

Someone was walking on broken glass somewhere in that room. He looked and saw Toh wobbling towards a gun. The silk of his cheongsam was torn up from the bullets and revealed something black underneath-- a bulletproof vest.

“You have got to be kidding me.” He was beginning to wonder if this had been a horror movie where the psycho killer never dies. The only problem was that the credits didn’t follow soon after. The man was reaching for the gun, and Fei Long didn’t have to guess as to what he was going to do with it.
There was a gun close to him too. Fei Long reached for it, aimed at the target, and pulled the trigger. It didn’t even graze his skin. Dammit! His hands were shaking too hard from his injuries. In his condition, the bullets might end up hitting Mikhail for all he knew.

The shot had gotten Toh’s attention for a second. The man turned to him, and upon seeing that he was alive, the corner of his blood stained lips curled up into a smile that chilled Fei Long to the bone. Toh knew he was watching, and now he was heading towards Mikhail to get the job done.

Fei Long gritted his teeth as he willed himself up. Just one last time and he wouldn’t have to get up anymore. Feodora would soon enter the room and take Mikhail to safety. Get up, he repeated the words Alexei had said just minutes ago. Get up. It was Alexei’s last request and the last thing he could do to set things right. Wherever he was going after death, he wasn’t going to take Mikhail with him.

Toh was standing over Mikhail now. The man turned around again to make sure he was watching and cocked the pistol. His hands were also shaking, but at that range Fei Long knew he wouldn’t miss. He may be able to reach Toh in time, but would his strength be enough to snap Toh’s neck or bring him down?

Something glittered not so far away from Toh, and he ran for it. Move, he told himself as he willed his legs to pick up speed. Move, or he dies.

The shot rang sharp and clear like the one that killed his father, and Fei Long thought his heart had stopped as everything else in him seemed to have suddenly turned into stone. Something heavy fell to his feet, and yet all he could hear was his own scream that never made it past his throat. The katana in his hands felt as light as a feather. The blood that splattered on his face burned like acid on his skin that had turned as cold as ice. He could see nothing, but the way Mikhail lay on the floor-- as still as Alexei was that day, in a pool of blood that was running towards his feet.

***

It was spring and the garden was full of plum blossoms that filled the entire compound with its sweet, delicate fragrance. On a day like this his father would be outside by the stone table, drinking his tea and listening to Ku-Cheng playing in the background. Fei Long stood in front of the door to the courtyard and closed his eyes. He inhaled the scent that was his father’s favorite, bracing himself as he had done a hundred times on the exact same spot since Liu senior had died. No matter how long it had been, every time he pushed that door open, a part of him had wished he would find his father sitting there as before. And for every time that wish didn’t come true, the realization that he was no longer there felt like a punch in the stomach. He should have stopped opening that door. But how does one forget the moments that define one’s life as though it had been written down on paper? How does one let go of something that had engraved itself so permanently into one’s being, like learning how to walk, talk, or swim?

He placed his hands on the wooden door and pushed it opened. The plum trees rustled in the wind, and in it the loose petals danced delicately forming a swirl of soft, pink curtain. At the heart of it, two figures materialized at the stone table - a man in his twenties and a beautiful woman with long, straight hair as black as obsidian. She was playing his father’s favorite tune on the shiny black Ku-Cheng, and the young man’s eyes were fixed upon her as though nothing else in the world existed. He had seen that look before on his father when he played the same instrument, the same song over and over again.

She was what you saw, wasn’t it? Fei Long thought in his mind as he watched the two of them quietly from a distance, and came to a realization that every gesture of affection Liu senior had ever bestowed upon his son had been for her. Not so long ago the knowledge would have caused him
pain, but somehow that day, seeing that look on his father’s face had lifted the weight that had been crushing his heart for as long as he could remember. There were times when he would have done anything just to see that smile, but now he knew it was never his to acquire. For too long he’d seen the world with him at the center of it, but the truth was that it was never about him. His father had a story of his own in his book of life he had written, so did he, and so did Asami. He wished he could have gone back in time and lived his life all over again, but it was too late for that now.

This must be heaven, he thought to himself. His father was there with Mei Ling, and perhaps Alexei would be there too, somewhere in that garden.

As though his thoughts could be heard out loud, Liu senior looked up at him, his eyes conveyed something uncompromising and serious as they fixed upon his.

It’s not yours, he said without moving his lips, before averting his gaze to something behind the door.

Fei Long looked over his shoulder, and a tall, masculine figure materialized in the room.

Mikhail …

His eyes flew open to something bright and yellow. He blinked a few times to the light and regained his focus. The room was white and there was something soft against his back. It told him he was no longer in a cell, that he’d escaped, and that everything he remembered wasn’t just a dream. Everything he remembered…

Fei Long shut his eyes as he tried to recall exactly what had happened. His head throbbed as though he was having a major hangover and his mind seemed unable to focus on any particular event. The only thing he could tell was the pain that surged through his limbs like an electrical current every time he’d tried to move. It was impossible to tell how many bullet wounds he’d received or how many bones he’d broken. It wasn’t a problem. The real problem was that he was alive.

Something brushed softly against his hand—he looked and saw the fine black hair by his side. Tao seemed to have fallen asleep while watching over him. As always, the boy had insisted on never leaving his side during times of trouble. He once thought it was due to the boy’s loyalty and the kindness of his heart. But now he could see the real reasons behind Tao’s distress whenever he was in danger. He was the boy’s father figure, the only parent he knew. Losing him before he had a chance to find his own place in the world would destroy the very ground he stood on. After all this time, he never knew how much stress the boy must have gone through every time he’d thrown himself in the line of fire.

“You’re awake,” someone said.

Fei Long looked up and saw Yoh sitting in a wheelchair near him. Another man who insists on being there for me, Fei Long thought. Everything seemed to be normal, but is it?

“You’re alive too.”

“Unfortunately,” Yoh replied with his usual expressionless tone, and yet something in his eyes told Fei Long there was something more to say-- something he didn’t want to say.

“Is he?” Now, tomorrow, or the day after, it didn’t matter when he asked. The answer would not change. He was done running from the truth. He was done wasting time when time was what they all had so little of.

Yoh drew a sharp breath and exhaled. It took only a second-- to Fei Long it felt like a lifetime of
torture all crammed up in a heartbeat; like putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger, not knowing if there had been a bullet in the barrel.

“Not quite.”

The answer definitely got on his nerves. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“He’s been shot in the head. They’d taken out the bullet. He’s safe, but he may not wake up,” Yoh told him. “Ever.”

Ever. Leave it to Yoh to deliver bad news so efficiently and without a trace of unnecessary drama. It was exactly what he needed to hear - facts that come as swiftly as they go.

Fei Long took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled. “He’s safe.”

“He’s unconscious.”

“He’s safe,” Fei Long repeated. “That’s all I need to know.” There would be time to grieve, just not yet, not now.

It had been a while since Yoh had seen the fire in those eyes - one that had captured his attention when they were in prison together. Whenever Fei Long had that look on his face, no one and nothing could move him from the path he’d chosen. He would go to the ends of the earth to do what he had set out to do. Deep down he knew everything would be all right. There was strength in him now, perhaps more so than there had ever been. Dead or alive, conscious or not, Mikhail Arbatov still had influence over him.

The fact that Fei Long was also aware of this, and had decided to hold on to it with unshakable determination made Yoh realize something he’d never considered. After all this time he’d seen love as a form of weakness -- a nuisance that gets in the way of what should and needs to be done. Perhaps it takes a much stronger man to risk so much to hold on to so little-- to choose a path so fragile and uncertain, all to the call of one’s heart. He should have taken that leap too, a long time ago. Things may have turned out differently. It could have been him that gave Fei Long the strength he needed. Eight years, and all he had done was shut out his heart.

“Do you want to see him?” Yoh asked.

Fei Long turned away for a moment, his eyes fixed on something in the distance. “No,” he said, “Not yet.” There were things he had to do first, messes he had to clean and straighten before he sees Mikhail, before he had the right to be by his side. _Then, I’ll see you._

“Now tell me everything else.”

***

The room smelled like cigarettes, and for the first time it made Asami feel sick to the stomach. That bitch had been nice enough to throw in so many packs, either to keep him from developing some kind of irreversible madness, or for him to die slowly from lung cancer. Of all the people in the world to ally with, Fei Long had to pick the fucking Arbatovs.

_Akihito had better be safe._ It was all he could think about. He couldn’t come up with a solution about what he was going to do if Akihito wasn’t safe. His mind wasn’t working straight-- his control wasn’t there. Had they given him drugs or had he allowed himself to fall so deep into something he’d tried so hard to avoid without knowing? _Stupid emotions._ That must be it; emotions were why he was sitting there like a cripple when he should have already come up with a plan to
get out of here, and how he’d make them all pay for this when he does.

The door clicked opened-- it must have been his meal. It didn’t matter if he’d touched the ones before or not. The food just kept coming as though she knew he would not starve himself to death. She was right; he wouldn’t allow himself to die so pathetically. It pissed him off though that a woman could read him so effortlessly. He’d never liked dealing with the Russian, but he liked Feodora even less. She was too dedicated, almost like Fei Long; only she was also immovable on top of everything else when it comes to her husband.

Arbatovs. The whole family seemed to be driven by passion. People who allowed themselves to be so consumed by emotions were foolishly dangerous and unpredictable. Keeping work and play separated was his number one rule, and it should damn well have been everyone else’s that had anything to do with the mafia world. No matter how he looked at it, Akihito should have never been brought into this.

“I never thought in a million years I’d see you like this,” a familiar voice sounded from the door. Asami looked up and saw the last man he was expecting to see. Fei Long appeared by the entrance in a robe that was tied loosely at the waist, showing the bloodstained bandages that had been wrapped around his chest. From the way the man walked, Asami could tell the injuries were serious and numerous.

“You survived.” It was becoming more and more ironic. After all this time, Fei Long had managed to survive everything anyone had thrown at him, despite every act of stupidity and carelessness that he’d done along the way.

“I’m not that easy to kill,” Fei Long said smilingly, dragging a chair along before taking a seat in front of Asami, who was chained so helplessly to the wall. “You, above all, should know that better than anyone.”

“Cut the crap, Fei Long. Where’s Akihito?” At that point, his patience was running thin.

“Don’t worry about Akihito. He’s a friend and I will make sure he’s safe from harm,” Fei Long replied calmly as he looked at the rare picture before him. Despite that superior mask he still wore, the great Asami Ryuichi was a wreck. With his disheveled hair and worn out eyes that couldn’t hide the hours he’d been awake, even while they still burn so vividly, he seemed like a cornered animal on the brink of going mad. What the hell did they do to him? Fei Long wondered.

“Safe?” Asami repeated with an edge to his tone. “She shot at him twice, in cold blood, and you want to tell me that he’s safe.” For all he knew, Akihito could be missing body parts or being beaten half to death by now. The idea alone made his blood boil in ways he could barely contain, and he could always control himself in any situation.

Fei Long sighed as he answered those accusing eyes with sincerity. “I want you to know this was never my intention. I wouldn’t have brought you or Akihito into this and I’m sorry that you were.” They were not supposed to be involved, especially not to this extent. He thought he’d ended the feud with Asami. But now after having heard what happened while he was captured, ending this particular feud would not be easy.

“You all have what you want. Now let him go.” Fei Long had been freed. He’d signed himself up as a witness to get Yan Tsui out of the way. That should be the end of it for Akihito, even though it was by far not for him.

“Go where?” Fei Long asked. “You know as well as I do he would never leave here without you.”
Letting Akihito go wasn’t much of a problem; but without Asami, Fei Long could easily imagine the complications that would follow. Akihito would never just walk away. After all, the boy had come all the way here to save him who was just a friend. For Asami, there was no doubt how far Akihito would go. The question was, how far would Asami go for Akihito?

“And you can’t let me go either, can you?” Asami said with a touch of sarcasm in his tone. He wasn’t born yesterday. It was Arbatov’s territory and as such it was their call. From the way Feodora Arbatova ran the household, there was no way she would let him walk out alive and become a threat. Not to mention that Mikhail would have loved nothing more than to see him die. In their shoes, Asami would do the same.

Fei Long paused for a moment before he continued. What he was about to say wouldn’t be easy for the man to swallow. “It depends.”

Asami raised a brow at the possibility he had not anticipated. “On what?”

“On what you choose to do after hearing my proposal.”

“You got her to negotiate?” He knew Fei Long would have tried to save him, but that Feodora was willing to listen was indeed a surprise. The woman had balls possibly bigger than her husband’s. He couldn’t imagine her taking that chance over Fei Long’s pleading, or anyone’s for that matter.

“It doesn’t mean you’ll like what I have to say.” Feodora would not have negotiated over this, not unless it’s something that may benefit her more.

He reached for something in his pocket and held it for the other man to see. It was a small metal tube the size of a large pen, with a push button on one end and a small hole on the other. “This injector contains a vial of precisely 2 micrograms of poison dart frog toxin, enough to kill a grown man in less than five minutes. It’s designed to be injected under the skin, meaning you’ll likely be dead before you can finish calling your doctor. The vial is remote activated and equipped with built-in sensor, so we’ll also know if you try to remove it.”

“You were right about one thing,” Asami sneered half-heartedly. “I don’t like it.”

“That was sugar coated,” Fei Long said. “It’s activated by a satellite signal and Feodora holds the remote.”

It was indeed a problem. Based on what he’d seen, the woman could easily press the button during her manicure, and the only thing she’d worry about would be messing up her nail polish. If it had been Fei Long, he could have hoped for some hesitation.

“I can let you and Akihito go, right here, right now if you inject this into your arm and agree that this is where it ends; that you won’t seek revenge on me or my family. And by that I mean Liu and Arbatov.”

So they have officially allied, Asami thought. That would make them the most powerful figures in Asia’s underworld. There was certainly no shortage of bad news today.

“You know this means you and Arbatov will have complete control over me for as long as I live.” The idea was too absurd for him to even consider.

“I don’t intend to use this leverage against you unless you decide to become a threat to my family,” Fei Long assured him. “But I can’t answer for Feodora, Vladimir, or Mikhail.”

“And you really think that I would subject myself to this just to survive?”
Fei Long paused and looked at him in the eyes. “I had hoped that you may subject yourself to this for Akihito.”

Asami stilled for a moment at those words. Akihito. He’d somehow forgotten about him being in the picture. In that aspect it was the best way out for Akihito. They’d both have a chance to live, together, and things could go back to normal. The leverage the Russians would have over him wouldn’t affect his lover— only Asami and his business. It was either this or be killed in this cell, leaving Akihito unprotected. It sounded like a good deal, but was it a price he was willing to pay for the boy?

“She told me you hesitated,” Fei Long continued. “That it had taken more than one shot at his head to make you agree to testify. I think it’s time you answer the question you should’ve a long time ago. What is he to you? What are you willing to sacrifice to keep him away from the line of fire?”

“The line of fire?” Those words irritated him to no end. It wasn’t a question of why he’d hesitated-- Akihito wasn’t supposed to be involved in the first place. Without Fei Long, they wouldn’t be here. Akihito would still be at home, living his normal life, and worrying about his normal job.

“For your information, I had everything under control until you decided to interfere.”

“Had you?” Fei Long sneered. It was ridiculous how the man still had so much confidence after all this time. “The day I took him, he came to me. It wouldn’t have happened had he been informed of who I am. This wouldn’t have happened had he known what he was walking into.” The way he saw it, Akihito was an outsider who’d stumbled into their world unknowingly when he should have known better. The boy had been kept blindfolded in a room full of grenades, when he should’ve been efficiently warned and trained to avoid them.

“I don’t intend to have him involved with my business.” It wasn’t just dangerous, but it also meant allowing Akihito to become his weakness-- putting everything at risk.

“You don’t intend to,” Fei Long said in irritation. “What do you take him for? A pet you keep tied up by the bed whose sole purpose is to obey and please you? Do you really think that you can keep him on a leash? That he would be content at staying there with whatever you felt like throwing at him? Akihito loves you, and whether or not you like it, he is involved with everything you do, everything that you are and he has every right to. He will die from this, sooner or later, unless you’re prepared to put your life on the line and sacrifice everything to protect him!”

Asami had to admit there was truth in those words. It had become harder to control Akihito, and the more he’d tried to keep him out of it, the more Akihito had tried to venture deeper into his world. For a time he’d thought everything was going fine, but was it discontent he saw the boy’s eyes when he’d brushed those questions aside? Had he been blind to all this before? For how long?

To keep Akihito safe, Asami thought he’d only needed to keep him out of it, but whether or not he could had never crossed his mind. What if Fei Long was right? What if he couldn’t? To continue being with Akihito would mean putting him in danger with or without Fei Long in the picture. There were only two things to do-- let Akihito go, or drag him along into battle and hope that he would survive.

“What if I refuse?” Fei Long would try to keep him alive for as long as he could, and perhaps an opportunity may present itself.

“In hope that you may escape?”

Asami didn’t answer. He had to admit the Chinese man had gotten much smarter than he’d remembered.
"Perhaps that is also a possibility," Fei Long replied calmly. "If that is the path you choose, and if by extraordinary circumstances you do escape, I hope you remember the risk you’re taking and what you stand to lose." He stepped forward and placed the injector on the floor. It was close enough for Asami to reach while keeping himself at a safe distance.

“You two will be on the run for as long as you live, and should you also decide to seek vengeance,” Fei Long continued, his eyes suddenly narrowed and seemed to seep with venom, “know that I am prepared to hunt you down for the rest of my life if you try. And this time it won’t be for love or longing, I assure you.”

It was between injecting himself with a deadly poison or being hunted down by Fei Long for what could be another three decades. Asami couldn’t decide which was the worst-case scenario. With Arbatovs thrown into the picture, he was beginning to think it was the latter. The way Fei Long looked at him that day also gave him an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. For the first time, he couldn’t see a boy he could move at will. In front of him he saw a potential threat -- a man who wouldn’t hesitate to strike him down should the situation called for it. Instead of avenging himself, Phillip Toh had created a monster.

“Walk away, Asami,” he said firmly. “I’m giving you a choice you’d never given me - a chance to move on, to live, with him. Take it and walk away.”

_A choice I’d never given him_, Asami thought. Perhaps Fei Long was right. Maybe things would have turned out differently had he not ended things the way he did and given Fei Long cause to seek closure. Now that he was being confronted with the same dilemma, could he end it here as he’d often wished Fei Long would have? Could he walk away and try to deal with what he had left, or does he throw it away for pride and dignity, especially when Akihito’s life was also on the line?

“I will leave this here for you to decide. When it’s done both of you will be released.” Fei Long said as he headed for the door. “Grow a heart, Asami. Treasure the way it beats for Akihito. Be the man who deserves him before it’s too late.”

The door was shut with a soft, yet deliberate bang -- like a book that was closed after its final chapter was read. Fei Long felt the weight in his chest lifted, and his mind was as clear as a blank slate. Eight years of unfinished business had finally come to an end, at least on his part. Both he and Asami had paid their dues for what they had done to each other. Hopefully he wouldn’t have to go down that path again.

“Can you really trust him to not seek revenge one way or another?”

Fei Long looked up at Yoh, who had been guarding the door without his knowledge. “Can I trust you to shoot if he does?”

“You should already know the answer to that question.”

“Good.” Fei Long smiled. “Then there should be no problem, shouldn’t there?”

“There shouldn’t,” another voice sounded from the door of the adjacent cell where Akihito had been held. Feodora stepped softly into the hallway with an injector in her hand.

“You didn’t.”

“Why shoot one bird when you can shoot two?” She replied as she placed the injector back in her pocket. “It’s not like I can’t afford it.”

_Arbatovs_, Fei Long wanted to say. It would have been better had their only reason been money. He
knew exactly why she had shot Akihito with it. *Leverage and back up.* “You really take no chances, do you?”

“I can’t afford to.”

Fei Long looked into her eyes and then at the small pregnancy bump that was starting to show. “Neither can I,” he told her. It wasn’t just Mikhail he had to protect, but the child in her womb as well. He didn’t like the idea of putting Akihito in more danger, but she should know he had as much intention to protect this family as she does.

“What about Yan Tsui?” Yoh asked. “Don’t we need him to testify?”

“It’s a waste of time,” Fei Long said. “Yan has too many connections. He’ll find a way out, one way or another. I have arranged for him to leave Hong Kong. We’ll keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn’t return.” It was his last gesture of kindness towards his brother. After all, Fei Long had taken from him what was supposed to be his birthright, and no matter what the man had done, Yan Tsui remained the only brother he had known and his father’s blood. “Or I could shoot him with that vial of poison if you have spares.” He turned to Feodora with a playful grin.

“Really, why would you want to let him go?” She asked. “You could have kept him much longer, and made use of him the way he had used you.” She had to know Fei Long’s true intention, to be sure that it would not come back to hurt Mikhail again. “Why are you in such a hurry to end it now, after all this time?” Since he’d been out of the hospital, Fei Long had done nothing but run around to straighten everything-- from taking back Baishe to the issue of his brother, and now Asami Ryuichi. It was as though he needed to get it done, so he could do something or be somewhere.

Fei Long looked at her, and for a moment, she could feel the longing in those eyes that felt heavy against her heart.

“Because when he wakes up, I want to be able to assure him that nothing and no one will come between us ever again.” He wouldn’t allow it-- not this time. This time he was ready to do it all, to give it all for them the same way Mikhail had always done.

***

It had been two weeks since they had raided the penthouse suite, and since then Fei Long had yet to find the strength to enter the room where they’d admitted Mikhail. Perhaps it had been denial that had kept him away, or maybe he had been too afraid to face the truth. It was one thing to tell himself that he would hold on to hope no matter how long it may be, and another to face the reality that some dreams were never meant to come true, no matter how hard you try. Still, he had to face it sooner or later. This was where his heart would get put to the test, and he must not fail Mikhail.

He pushed open the door and entered. They had placed him a suite with a separate living room and a bedroom for the relatives. Feodora had two groups of five men, all armed to the teeth, guarding him 24 hours a day from the hospital entrance to the inner door. They nodded to him and moved out of the way without a word spoken. Feodora must have told them to expect him.

On the bed, with an IV tube connected to his arm, Mikhail was lying as still as a corpse, only the way his chest moved signified that he was still living. Fei Long took a deep breath and held it as he stepped closer, his feet felt as heavy as walking on quicksand. He’d felt it before-- at the morgue, when it was Alexei who had been placed in the middle of the room. This time it was Mikhail, and even though he was alive, it had taken all the strength he had just to pick up his feet. *He may not wake up,* they all said. What if they were right? What if he doesn’t? What if this image of Mikhail
that he was about to witness turns out to be the last one he would ever see for the rest of his life?

Standing over the bed, Fei Long watched with a heavy heart the man who had become the very center of his life. His head was wrapped in bandages, and only parts of his curls were showing. The bruises Toh had inflicted upon him was beginning to fade. He looked so normal, as though he was just sleeping and would wake up at any minute.

“Mikhail.” Fei Long reached out to push away the curls that hung loosely around the handsome face. The tips of his fingers grazed the pale skin and it felt warm to the touch, only Mikhail did not stir. “Misha.”

Good morning sweetheart, he would have answered. Those blue eyes would sparkle like sapphires when they look at him, and soon he would be wrapped so tightly in those strong arms.

“Where are you?” He whispered, willing for those eyes to open, praying that his voice would be heard, wherever Mikhail was.

Something bumped on his foot as he moved. He looked down and saw a small black wallet on the floor. It must have been placed near the bed, along with his cigarettes, lighter and other personal belongings he had on him that day. Someone must have accidentally knocked it over. Picking it up, he could imagine Feodora sitting there, touching his things as she waited for him to wake up. It must have helped. He would have done the same.

He dragged a chair over and seated himself by the bed, rubbing his thumb on the worn out leather. It was funny how one remembered little things without knowing, like the way he held his wallet, where he kept it, or how he liked to shove his notes in it without first straightening them out. Fei Long could still remember wanting to tidy it up every time he saw it, but he’d always feared it would be too personal. Now he realized how wrong he had been. You would have liked that, wouldn’t you?

Opening it up, Fei Long took out the notes and rearranged them neatly. When Mikhail wakes up, maybe Mikhail would notice it, and his face would light up like a boy who’d just unwrapped his present. That’d always happened when Fei Long did something surprising, like remembering how Mikhail took his coffee, or noticed breadcrumbs on his cheek.

A neatly folded piece of old paper peeked out from one of the pockets he was going through. Out of curiosity, Fei Long pulled it out and flipped it open. It was a check, written, signed, and torn in two. His name was on it, but the amount had been left empty.

I’d pay a million bucks to see that smile again. Wasn’t that what Mikhail had said that night? One piece of paper was where it had all began -- what had gotten him into Mikhail’s penthouse and opened a door neither of them could close. It was their first date, the very first time they’d kissed before he tore that check in two.

“You’ve always kept it here, haven’t you?” He said, his voice broken from the lump that swelled in the back of his throat. “You’ve kept us, from the very beginning to this day.”

How could he not know it? Through everything that had torn them apart, Mikhail had never intended to let go. The paper looked worn and crinkled, as though it had been taken out and handled a dozen times and placed back in its place. He must have tried and decided to keep it-- to keep them, over and over, every time.

"Wake up," he said as he closed his hand around Mikhail's. "Wake up and ask me again to come with you,” he told him. Where were they? Skiing in Switzerland, diving in the Maldives, or
counting stars in the desert? “We'll go to all those places you've wanted us to go. I'll stay as long as you want me to stay, longer if you'll let me.” This time he wouldn’t say no. This time they would see it together, laugh together, and risk it all together. “Hold my hand again and I'll never let go. Kiss me again and this time I won't pull away. Give me another chance to do everything I should have done for you, with you.” He squeezed the large hand tighter but it didn't answer to his touch as before. Wake up, and I will tell you a thousand times, those words you've been wanting to hear.

Some time later he must have fallen asleep by the side of the bed. In his dreams Mikhail was there as he always had been - by his side, so warm, and so alive. Memory after memory replayed in his mind like scenes from his favorite movies. He didn't know if it would make it harder, but he’d wanted to see them, to be reminded of them, to keep them where nothing could erase. I’ve kept us too. Right here, where I could see you, always.

***

“Fei Long,” someone called him, softly at first and then louder, “Fei Long.”

He opened his eyes and saw Yoh standing next to him, by the bed. He turned to Mikhail and sighed. Still no sign of consciousness. “What time is it?”

“It’s eight in the morning,” Yoh replied, holding up some clothes on a hanger. “You have a meeting at ten. I’ve brought your suit.”

Work. He sighed again. Life goes on even when you don’t want it to. “I need a successor.”

Yoh knotted his brow a little. “You’re not even 30 and you already want to retire?”

“I have enough money to live for 500 years. Give me one reason why I should want to work.” He should be out there, living whatever’s left of his life, with Mikhail. What is the point of being on top of the world when there is no one there to share it with?

“Because when he wakes up, your savings will last precisely 8.6 years, based on the amount you’d spent on your last vacation with him,” Yoh told him, as though he was holding a calculator and showing him figures on his bank account. “Unless you’re planning on freeloading on Arbatov’s assets, you can’t afford to retire. Based on the amount he and his wife spend, that won’t last long either.”

“When he wakes up.” Fei Long repeated the words that suddenly gave him the strength he needed. Coming from someone like Yoh, it did feel like a-matter-of-fact.

“When he wakes up.” Yoh nodded and gave him the suit.

“Thank you.” It was true. Mikhail wouldn’t have wanted him to give it all up just to sit here and wait.

Something dropped on the floor as Fei Long was heading to the bathroom. Turning around, he saw the wallet lying under the bed. Yoh was standing right behind him. He remembered placing it where he slept, right next to Mikhail.

How ...?

In a heartbeat, Fei Long rushed back to the bedside and grabbed his hand, squeezing it gently and then firmer. “Mikhail.”

Mikhail’s eyes moved under the lids that were still closed, and Fei Long held his breath as he
waited. They opened, blinked a few times then focused on Fei Long.

“Hi.” It was all he could say given the tears he’d tried to hold back. He wasn’t going to have Mikhail wake up to see him in tears.

It was like the first time they’d met. Those eyes looked at him with so much esteem, as if he was the only thing in the world worth looking at. His lips moved and Fei Long thought it had all been his own imagination.

“Who are you?”

***

A/NI: I don't usually have background music for my chapters, but this was what I felt appropriate and was listening to when I wrote the second half. I just feel like it should be shared.

A/NI: For those who have missed my previous announcement, go read the next chapter marks the end of this arc and this trilogy. It is finished and will be posted on the 7th anniversary of this fic which is May 14th. Please be there for on last round of group hug! * _ * As always, every comment helps get me going which will bring you more writing of this OTP.
Here it is, as promised, the last chapter with a bonus epilogue in the following post. Double update for once!! Enjoy.

Title: Retribution Nineteen
Rating: PG-13
Warning: angst, OOC (if you agree with FNR), AU (if you agree w/ FNR), but for those who disagree: CWC (Canon? What Canon?)
Characters: Fei Long, Mikhail, Yoh, AxA, Feodora (OC), mentions of Yan Tsui.
Spoiler: Spoiler for NT arc
Disclaimer: All VF characters belong to Yamane Ayano.
Beta: angel0399

Previous Chapters: For new readers, 'Retribution' is the third arc of a Mik x Fei trilogy that I've suffered my readers with since 2007. In order to make sense of it I'm afraid you will need to read 'Cruel Intentions' and its sequel 'Revelation' before you begin 'Retribution.' All the links are organized on the side bar of my lj kajornwan along with the trilogy's one-shot fillers. Russian, Chinese, Polish, Spanish, German, French, and Vietnamese! (thank you everyone!) translations by readers are also found here. To make life even easier, I have put them all in PDF format. Links can be grabbed from this post: http://kajornwan.livejournal.com/33060.html

Where do memories go? What happens to those moments, so full of emotions that fill our hearts to the brim or break it into pieces when they’re gone? How does something so permanently etched into our soul disappear into nothingness by something so physical? In the end, does nothing we do, touch, or feel in our whole lives mean anything at all?

Perhaps these images, too, will soon mean nothing, Fei Long thought as he watched them from a distance, images of Mikhail, awake, alive, and talking, with Feodora by his side; with him standing behind the opened door, out of sight, and away from those who had a place in his heart. He had been cast aside before, locked out on the other side of the door he was forbidden to enter, but he had never been forgotten. He had never been nothing.

Who are you? Mikhail had asked, and he could not find words to answer. Who was he, and how does he say it? That I'm your friend. Your lover. The person whose hand you liked to hold when we're alone together. Someone you liked to kiss in the morning before handing over the coffee you brewed to perfection. The one you used to treasure, who broke your heart too many times to count. The reason that your brother had to die.

It wasn't that he couldn’t say these things, only Fei Long couldn’t think of a single reason why he should. His existence had done nothing but put Mikhail through the path of torment and danger he didn’t deserve. If forgetting him meant forgetting all of it, forgetting why Alexei had died, forgetting the guilt, the pain, and the betrayal that came with it, could he be so cruel as to take away Mikhail’s chance to start anew just to bring back those memories? What does it matter how many unforgettable moments they had shared if Mikhail couldn’t remember any of it? No one regrets things they don’t know they’d lost. This was the point where he could walk out the door and never look back, and everything would turn back to normal. He could make it so they would never have to run into each other again. Mikhail would never have to know him. Everything that was never has to happen — everything that meant everything to him.
“Where am I?” Mikhail asked, his brows narrowed the same way they did when he had one of those headaches.

“You’re in a hospital in Hong Kong,” Feodora replied as she held his hand and squeezed it tightly. “There was an incident and you’ve been shot in the head, but you’re all right now. How are you feeling?”

“How am I feeling?” He repeated, kneading his temples irritatingly as he spoke. “My head hurts like hell and I don’t remember shit. More importantly, please tell me the fucker is dead.”

Fei Long smiled to himself at those words. *Just like you.*

She laughed softly and patted him on the shoulder. “You can see his head when you get out of here, hot shot. Take some rest. I’ll brief you when you feel better.”

“How long have I been out?”

“Two weeks.”

*13 days and 8 hours.*

“And you want me to sleep some more.”

“I want you to take it easy, or the things you don’t remember may never return.”

“I’m hungry,” he said, tugging her sleeve like a child bugging his mother for treats.

“I’ll bring you something. What do you want?”

He made a soft, purring sound in his throat and swallowed. “Your scones, with a lot of butter.”

“And seeded red currant jam.” She kissed him on the forehead and smiled, her eyes softened in a way she rarely showed anyone else.

“You’re an angel,” he told her before returning a kiss lightly on her cheek and sinking his head back on the pillow.

>You’re an angel,* Fei Long found himself smiling at those words. It was unmistakably Mikhail, throwing sweet words everywhere like Halloween candies to his loved ones and never once had it sounded cheesy. He was normal. Everything was, except to him.

Fei Long clenched his fists to the hollowness in his stomach, to the feeling of falling from somewhere high, only with nowhere down below to crash into. It should have been him. Bitter, egotistic thoughts kept repeating in his mind relentlessly. It should have been him holding that hand and squeezing it tight. It should have been him kissing that forehead and saying everything would be ok. Mikhail would have liked it. He would have wanted him to. But now there was no place for him where they stood, and nothing he could do would mean a thing.

Seeded red currant jam—was that Mikhail’s favorite? If it had been he didn’t know. It was the first time Fei Long had seen them together, so used to each other’s company, and without him standing in between. It must have been like this before, with Feodora knowing exactly what he wanted, and Mikhail knowing that he could always rely on her. She’d had almost 30 years of chances to prove her love, to help him up when he fell, to be there for him when he needed someone. He’d had two, where he’d done none of it, and now they were gone. All gone, like sand that slipped through his fingers and was lost in the wind. Was it the price he had to pay for his ignorance, for not holding
on to what he had until it was too late?

Feodora left the room soon after and gestured for him to follow. She closed the door behind her and turned to him. He noticed how her smile was completely gone, and how those eyes had regained their usual intensity.

“I must ask you for some time. He’s too exhausted right now to be under stress, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t need time,” he told her. What would he do with time? Remind Mikhail of every scar and hurt him all over again? “I need you to be there and make sure he’s ok.”

She paused for a moment when she looked at him then, her tone softened as she touched his arm lightly in assurance. “This cannot be permanent.”

Fei Long swallowed the lump in his throat that was getting in the way of what he had to say. The words felt heavy on his tongue, and heavier still against his lips. “Then make it permanent,” he said. “You’re married to him. You’re having his baby. You are his family. I don’t ever have to exist.”

“You’re giving up.” She glared at those words she didn’t expect to hear. “He would have never given up on you. And if you think that I would be content to have him this way, then you are more foolish than I thought. Have you no faith in him at all?” Mikhail had loved him. He had loved Fei Long enough to put everything on the line including his life and the lives of his entire family. She had witnessed it, every pain he’d put himself through for Fei Long, and every time he’d let it crush him to the point of breaking. It couldn’t have all been gone. “He can’t have forgotten you.”

“He has forgotten me.” He stepped up to her; his hand took hold of her upper arm and squeezed it tightly until his voice trembled with his grip. “It will remain so. You will tell him I had been nothing but an acquaintance, that we barely knew each other. When he asks you why and how Alexei had died, you will tell him that it was an accident. That it had nothing to do with him or with me. Do you understand?”

Alexei. Feodora found her breath cut short by those words. It hadn’t occurred to her that along with memories of Fei Long, the awareness of Alexei’s death also could have gone. There was no way she could have forgotten how it had affected Mikhail, how the guilt had nearly killed him, and how useless she had been to bring him back on his feet. Mikhail would have to relive those nightmares all over again, and if he doesn’t recover fully the feelings he’d had for Fei Long, then there would be no one to bring him back from the hell he would put himself through-- again. “No.”

“I can’t save him, not this time,” he told her. “He won’t survive. Mikhail will die because of me.” Just like Alexei did, like his father, like Mei Ling. Everything he touches burns to the ground, everyone he loves dies because of him. It had to end. Mikhail would not be one of them, even if he had to sacrifice everything to see it through.

She felt his grip on her arm tightened, as though he was about to crush her bone with it. Fei Long was trembling; his breathing was short and heavy, and his chest was heaving as though he was drowning in the very air he breathed. Still, in those eyes she saw nothing but unshakable determination. “It may still come back to him one day. He’d never forgive you. He’d never forgive us.”

Fei Long took a step back and looked at her, the conviction in his eyes was as unwavering as his tone. “That is a consequence I can live with. Can you?”
It was 6 A.M. The sky was clear, the air was clean, and the birds were singing; and still everything seemed to piss him off. Perhaps it was the fact that he’d been in the damn hospital for more than two weeks, that all he could get his hands on was instant coffee. Or maybe he just needed a good workout, which was out of the question. He turned to look out the window and cursed at how small it was. There was not enough sunlight in that room, not enough fresh air, not enough space, not enough of something he knew was missing but couldn’t figure it out. It was downright irritating, and it was taking a toll on his patience that was already running thin.

“You can’t smoke in here,” the doctor said as he saw his patient light himself a cigarette.

“Why?”

Feodora held her breath at the murderous look Mikhail threw at the old man and wondered if the guy knew he could be thrown out from the 36th floor for the wrong answer. Mikhail was in one of those moods that even she felt uncomfortable around, which meant that nothing she could say or do would get past that thick skull of his.

“There are smoke detectors in the room.”

Fortunately he does know what to say, Feodora thought. But then again, as a psychiatrist he should be well aware of how to preserve himself when confronting a spoiled rich kid who had been known to shoot at people for interrupting his workouts.

Without another word, Mikhail turned back to the window and forced it open before returning to his cigarette. Why the fuck does everyone have to make things more complicated than they are?

The doctor glanced at her, and she nodded quietly. You don’t want to know, she would have said had Mikhail not been in the same room. What really bothered her was how cranky he’d been since he’d woken up the second time. Mikhail had been pacing back and forth as though he was constantly looking for something. The way he kept fidgeting looked like he was on some kind of drug withdrawal, only it wasn’t drugs he seemed to have needed. She could only hope it was just the lack of decent coffee, or that he just needed a good workout after having been immobile for so long.

“Mr. Arbatov, I need to ask you a few questions to see if your injuries have affected your memory. Everything else checked out fine.”

“Ask and be done with it.” He needed to get out of there. There was somewhere else he had to go, something he had to do-- he just couldn’t remember where and what. Maybe it was just home. It was probably home.

“May I have your name?”

“Mikhail Vladimirovich Arbatov.”

“How old are you?”

“32, the last time I checked.”

The doctor looked at her, and she acknowledged it with a nod. He seemed to have lost two years of memories, precisely when Fei Long had entered his life.

“Where and when were you born?”
Mikhail took a long draw on the smoke and exhaled in complete boredom. “I remember my past just fine, right down to the license plates of every car I own. Move on, old man.”

“Your siblings?”

He sighed again. What was it about remembering his past did the man not understand? “Alexei is my brother,” he said before gesturing at Feodora, “and she’s adopted.”

Is. Feodora clenched her fists at what it implied. Fei Long was right-- the memory of Alexei’s death was apparently gone.

“Can you name some of your friends?”

“I don’t have friends,” he told the doctor casually. “I have enemies, leeches who want to steal my money, and victims.”

“And doctors,” he added with a friendly smile.

Mikhail glanced over his shoulder and smiled back. “They belong to one of those categories, eventually.”

The old man swallowed and adjusted himself before he moved on. “Girlfriends?”

He snickered. “I don’t keep girlfriends. I fuck.”

“Boys?”

“Occasionally. Would you like me to elaborate how I fuck them too?” Perhaps that was what he needed - a good fuck. He could probably get some when he gets home, then this thing that had been nagging him would be gone, wouldn’t it?

From the look on the doctor’s face, Feodora had to wonder if he’d actually been scribbling the answers down or listing reasons why he should find a new patient.

“Are you married?”

It was a question that had him pause for moment, as though he was unsure of the answer. He turned to her and his gaze lingered on her face skeptically. “I’m engaged… to her.”

“What was the last thing you remember doing?”

“I was attending a meeting in Macau… no, a wedding in Hong Kong.” It was all he could remember. What happened at and after the wedding he couldn’t recall. But something did happen, that much he knew.

“Do you remember the scars on your back and how you got them?”

Feodora braced herself as she cursed the doctor in her mind. Was it really necessary to bring it up on the first session? It was something that Mikhail had refused to speak about for decades and was trying his best to forget.

To her surprise, he turned to look at her and then at the doctor; the expression on his face revealed nothing but curiosity. “I have scars on my back?”

She drew a sharp breath and exhaled as the weight in her heart was lifted. They say there is a blessing in every curse. Perhaps it was true in this case. Without those memories, Mikhail can start
out again like a blank slate. The nightmares would be gone, along with the risk of relapsing back into the drug abuse that was a result of that incident.

“Car accident,” she told him abruptly. “I think we should call it a day,” she told the doctor and made sure he understood her gesture. She would need to talk to the psychiatrist-- in private-- about his condition and figure out how to make it permanent before more questions brought back unwanted memories.

The doctor nodded and closed his file. “We’ll do this again some other time. I suppose I can work with what I have for now.”

She approached him quietly when the doctor had left, and wrapped her arms around him from behind. “I’ll bring you some decent coffee. That’ll lighten your mood?”

He didn’t sink into her embrace as usual, and his body was stiff to the touch. There was a distance between them that felt like a room away, even though she had him right there in her arms. “What’s bothering you?”

She could feel his chest moving up and down heavily, and knew in an instant that the irritation she’d noticed was accumulating in intensity every passing minute.

“You’re keeping something from me,” he said. There was an edge to his tone that made her uncomfortable.

“I’m not trying to,” she replied.

“I can tell when you’re lying.” He turned to face her, his breaths felt sharp and heavy against her cheek that was just inches away from him. “Wife.”

The last word was spoken more like an accusation than a form of affection, and she felt like a child who’d just been caught lying. She swallowed as he wrapped his fingers around her throat, as though he could and would squeeze it should he find adequate reason. The hair on the back of her head stood at his touch. There were times when he’d shown violence against her, but never when he was sober and self-aware. It was as though he suddenly saw her as someone who was standing between him and something he wanted, and Mikhail had never had patience for those who stood in his way.

“Tell me,” he said in almost a whisper, but one that felt like a razor blade against her skin. “Why and when did we get married? Because I don’t remember giving you that ring. And while you’re at it, I want to know how and why my brother is dead, because I know he is, but I don’t remember any of it.”

He knows. Despite the fear that was creeping up her spine-- both from the way he’d reacted and the outcome that would surely follow-- she lifted her chin and faced him. Now was not the time for her weakness, that much she realized. “It was an accident. He was in the wrong place, at the wrong time.” It wasn’t a lie. She just hadn’t told him all the details. “As for when and why we were married, you can ask your father when you get back home. And take your hand off me. In case you’ve forgotten that too, I am carrying your child.”

Taken aback by the news he’d not anticipated, Mikhail took a step back and released his grip. “My child?”

“Your son,” she told him. It may not have been born out of love, but her son was unmistakably Mikhail’s blood. It was her one request when he’d asked her to let him go — to have his child, to
have something that was a part of him. All she had been given was access to his sperm bank, for the reason that he would not cheat on Fei Long at any cost while they were still together. The devotion at which Mikhail had given the man was beyond insane. It was probably why he could still feel it under his skin what his mind had chosen to forget.

Mikhail stilled for a moment as he tried to let it sink in. His son. He’d remembered nothing of it, but somehow, at that moment, he knew it wasn’t a lie. Whatever had happened along the way, she had become the mother of his child, and he had nearly hurt her over something he knew she wasn’t responsible for.

“I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes and kneaded them forcefully with his fingers. From what he’d learned so far, everything should have been normal. He was going to be a father. The grief over Alexei’s death was still lingering somewhere in his heart, but he could feel it had been something he had come to terms with. The enemy that shot him had been killed. But what was it that continued to irritate him to no end? “There’s something I want to remember,” he said, burying his face in the palm of his hand, “something I need, desperately, and I don’t know what.”

It was a craving, like there wasn’t enough air for him to breathe; the kind of hunger he couldn’t fulfill no matter what he did. His body was aching over something he needed to touch, to feel, or to hold in his hands. It wasn’t coffee, a cigarette, or an object he could see in front of him, but something else. Something that wasn’t there-- something he couldn’t live without.

It’s not that easy, Feodora wanted to tell Fei Long then. He can’t forget you, even if his mind has, even if you want him to. His feelings for Fei Long had become so much a part of him, that to remove it would leave a void no one else can fill.

Gently, she cupped his face in her hands in assurance. “Give it time,” she told him. “Let’s take you home so you can get some rest. Maybe it’ll come back to you or maybe it will go away. I’ll get the doctor to sign your release tomorrow and have you picked up.” Perhaps time will mend that void, or he’ll soon learn to live with it. “I’ll go get your coffee.” She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Feodora,” he called her before she left the room.

“Yes?”

“Who was that man I saw when I woke up?” He asked her after a moment of pause. “The one with long hair?”

She smiled. “He’s the one who saved you.” It was the best explanation she could think of that wasn’t a lie, nor would it require her to elaborate any further.

“Do I know him?” There was more to it. He saw the way those eyes looked at him. It was the piece of puzzle that didn’t fit anywhere and somehow it was bugging him in ways he couldn’t explain.

“I don’t know. You don’t exactly tell me about everyone you meet.”

“What’s his name?”

She hesitated for a moment, and realized her curiosity was getting the better of her. “Liu Fei Long.”

“Of Baishen?” He raised a brow.

“So you know him?”
It’s completely gone, she thought to herself, much like the scars he didn’t know had existed. Mikhail couldn’t even put his face to a name he already knew.

“I need to see him again.”

She scowled. This can’t be serious. “You still have stitches in your goddamn head and you’re thinking about fucking the first beauty that you saw when you woke up? Besides, that’s Liu Fei Long of Baishe. You’ll get another bullet in your head before you get into his pants.” She wasn’t lying. It wasn’t going to be easy for him to get even close, especially when Fei Long was so determined to not let that happen.

“Oh but you know me.” For the first time that day, a mischievous smile appeared on her husband’s face. “I’ll gladly take another bullet in the head just to get into his pants.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “If only it was your cock that had been shot.” If there’s such a thing as soul mates, can’t it be someone else? ”You’ll probably run into him again. You have a sizable share in his casino in Macau.” That is if Fei Long hadn’t done anything drastic to completely prevent it from happening, like selling out all of his shares, but Mikhail didn’t need to know that.

“Good,” he said with a smile. “Then let’s go home.”

***

The room smells different, Fei Long thought as he ran his hand along the new Egyptian cotton sheets. Feodora had asked him to help clean out the villa of his belongings to remove all the traces of him ever occupying the space before Mikhail returns. Everything had been replaced, down to the bed sheets and the draperies. Soon it would all be gone, everything and everywhere in Mikhail’s life in which his existence had left a mark.

“How are you feeling?” She asked as she watched him go through the last room in the villa - Mikhail’s bedroom.

“I feel nothing,” he told her with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Nothing,” she repeated, “not even while sitting on the same bed he used to share with you?” She had meant for it to be a joke, but the way he took it made her wish she could have been subtler. If anyone had suffered the most for Mikhail’s loss of memory, it was Fei Long.

“It was rarely on this bed.” He didn’t know why or how he could tell her with such indifference the things they used to share or do with each other. But by that time, there was nothing but numbness when he spoke of them. “It was usually in that penthouse, and it’s gone.”

“Still it must be hard to see,” she said, sweeping her gaze around the room, “little things that remind you of him.”

There was a pause from him, and a breath held for a moment too long. ”I can’t allow myself to feel anything about the little things. If I do, I will have to feel everything." And everything was more than he had strength to endure.

In a way, she understood it. There were times when she had to go through the same situation, when he’d left her for another, and not just for Fei Long. Mikhail had had countless of women, and all her life she had been there to witness it; the sweet words and flattery that didn't belong to her, the lust and desire in those eyes that never looked her way, his heart that was broken by someone else. But
at the end of the day she had been the one that he came home to, and he had always come to her to mend his broken heart. She had survived everything knowing this— that she had never really lost him, not so completely. With Fei Long, right now, it was a different story.

“Is it really that easy to shut out your heart?” Fei Long had been too calm, too quiet, and too content for her to be convinced that everything was all right. Mikhail had been there too, replacing his every pain with a playful smile, laughing when he needed to cry, and keeping his indifferent mask so firmly on his face when he was so broken inside.

“Is it really that easy for you?” He asked her in return. “Knowing you can't have the one thing you want the most? Seeing him with someone else when it should have been you?” It would come to that. Sooner or later Mikhail would find someone, and he would have to see it, and to live with it just as she had for decades.

She smiled and looked away into the distance. “It gets easier, when you remind yourself of what really matters.”

“And what really matters?”

“That he's alive,” she said, looking straight into his eyes to remind him again of that fact. She had been through those moments when she thought she’d lost him forever; when his heart had stopped beating, and hers with it, before it was once again brought back to life. "I remind myself everyday, that no pain was greater than watching him flatline that day, and nothing had ever given me more joy to see him survive. When you've been through something like that, nothing else matters anymore but the fact that he’s alive.” She could survive and withstand any pain, but not of losing him.

Fei Long took a deep breath and exhaled heavily, his fingers suddenly turned cold at the moment certain memory had come back to him. "I saw it,” he said in almost a whisper, "the gun that shot him. I heard the shot and I saw him fall. You're right, nothing else matters anymore.” Mikhail was alive and awake. What more could he ask for?

For a while, they sat next to each other on the bed in silence. The oddest company we are, Fei Long thought to himself. He'd never thought it would turn out this way— her getting Mikhail back, and him sitting there in her place, learning the hard way how she'd felt all along. He told himself that if there was such a thing as karma, then it would only be the beginning of what he had to pay. It was only just.

"How is he?” It was the question that lingered on his mind, one he needed answered before he could make himself walk away and never look back.

"He's ok. Everything checked out fine. Only parts of his memories are gone. Other than those, he claims to remember everything, right down to the license plates of his cars."

Fei Long laughed quietly at her reply. He could easily imagine that face as the man said those words. Mikhail Arbatov rarely takes anything seriously, and when he does, no one could beat him at his commitment.

"And the memories he’s lost?” It wasn’t a question that came easily to him, but he could not rest easy until he knew how much Mikhail had forgotten. Or rather, if there had been anything at all that he could remember about them.

She paused for a second as something entered her mind. "Did you meet him at a wedding?"
"I believe so. Why?"

"Everything from that moment on, he doesn't remember," she said reluctantly.

Everything about me. No matter how many times he’d reminded himself of that fact, it still stung like salt on an open wound. "Two years," Fei Long murmured. To him, those were the most precious years of his life. To Mikhail, they were probably full of nightmares. "Has he asked about Alexei?"

She nodded. "Strangely, he knows Alexei is gone, only he can't remember how and why. But he's taking it very well."

"He won't take it so well when he remembers," Fei Long said with a melancholic tone.

"He probably won’t." She didn’t want to say it, but perhaps Fei Long had been right. It was the guilt over how and why Alexei had to die that had driven Mikhail back to drugs, not his death itself. Forgetting all those events had made it easier for him to let go, especially when he could feel that loss had already been something in the past.

"Anything else?"

"His scars," she told him with a heavy heart, knowing how it would make him feel. "He didn't even know they were there. That's another memory he'd lost completely."

To her surprise, Fei Long laughed softly at those words. "The two most tormenting memories of his life. I should have known." The fact that Mikhail could remember everyone else but him was clear enough. He was a scar Mikhail would be better off without.

"Tormenting wasn’t the word he used," she said. "The doctor, I meant."

Fei Long smiled. "Dreadful, perhaps."

"The most life-altering experiences," she told him. "The truth is Mikhail had lost the memories of how he’d gotten those scars before, though not to the point where he was completely unaware of their existence. We were told that he might have pushed them back into his subconscious in order to survive. The problem is, those memories had never been gone. Certain events or objects often trigger them, and he would react to them as though they were a part of instincts he had been born with.

I could understand that his mind may have chosen to forget what had happened that night so completely this time, and it would be a blessing," she continued. "But the only explanation they had for memories involving you, is that they may have been stored in the same place as those scars."

"Don’t you see?" She placed a hand on his and squeezed it gently. "You reside in the deepest, most influential part of him that is most difficult to reach into and erase." It was painful for her to say, but it was the truth. Where Fei Long was in Mikhail’s heart she could not touch nor enter. She wanted to tell him that. Mikhail would have wanted him to know.

But he has erased me, completely. He took her hand and returned the same gesture. "I know," he said. "I’ve always known." It wouldn’t have hurt so much if he hadn’t. He would rather have been ignorant of Mikhail’s love, than having known it so well in his heart and still did the things he’d done.

"I saw the marks on his body when I walked into that suite. He was half naked, and Toh had a
leather belt in his hand,” he told her as he recalled the state Mikhail was in on that day. “I realized he was only barely conscious, that his mind had been somewhere else. That by then, he’d already been dragged into those nightmares he’d suffered so many times in the middle of the night.” He knew she’d seen them too, perhaps ten times more than he had. “I thought then, that I would do anything and sacrifice anything, so that he wouldn’t have to wake up in it. And now it’s all gone—all of it. Just as I had hoped it would be.” It was for the best. It had to be.

“If only it’s that simple,” she sighed heavily.

“What do you mean?”

“He remembers you. Somehow, somewhere, he knows something is missing,” she told him. “He’s been pacing around all day, as if he’s misplaced something important. Everything seems to irritate him, like there’s something he needs that he can’t get. It’s almost as if he’s forgotten you, but not the feelings he had for you, and it’s downright agonizing to watch.”

“He’ll soon get over it—eventually.” Everyone does.

“Will you, Fei Long?” She asked. For someone who’d seen the lengths they had gone for each other, and the bond they’d shared, she doubted it with all her heart. “Will he?”

***

Fei Long paused momentarily in front of the door to the meeting room; his fingers firmly gripped the folder of documents he was holding. In this room, he would have to let it go—his father’s last possession that he had been trying to keep safe since he’d passed away. But it wasn’t the only thing he would have to part with, and not the most difficult. Behind these doors he would have to face reality—one that would demand from him something he wasn’t prepared to leave behind.

He pushed the door opened and entered. At the long table sat nine board members. They were all waiting for him to take a seat at the far end of the room.

“Good morning,” he said as he headed towards his chair. He placed the folder down neatly in front of him and took a seat. “I’d like to thank you all for being here on such short notice. There are a few important things I need to announce today.”

Keeping his gaze between the folder and those seated near him, Fei Long braced himself knowing at the far end of the table was where Mikhail was, as the one holding the second largest number of shares to the casino. Still, Fei Long could see him from the corner of his eyes, and it was enough to put butterflies in his stomach. A few minutes ago he thought he could do it. He was certain he could face the man for one last time, to say his goodbyes and walk away with his dignity and his strength intact. At that very moment, with him in the same room, Fei Long was certain that he didn’t have what it would take to accomplish all that he’d set out to do that day.

Sooner or later you will have to, he told himself as he forced his eyes to look across the table.

And there he was, sitting comfortably with one leg thrown over the other, in the manner that looked like he owned the place, as always. In a room full of men in neat, tailored suits, Mikhail was in a black silk shirt, his sleeves neatly folded halfway to reveal his lower arms, and the top three button had been left undone. He was slick, radiant, daring, carefree, and inappropriately confident. Even with bandages around his head, Mikhail was as much his old self as he could ever be; like the first time they’d met, when there was nothing whatsoever between them. It occurred to him then, that he had almost forgotten what Mikhail looked like when he was happy, when Alexei was still alive, when those eyes didn’t look so troubled.
“Mr. Arbatov,” Fei Long nodded as he addressed him formally. Under normal circumstances Mikhail would have made him pay for calling him that one way or another. But that day, as it should be, the man had been indifferent. "I hope you’re feeling better."

Bright, blue eyes met Fei Long's as he smiled. "I'm not dying anytime soon, don't worry."

"I hope not," Fei Long replied, wondering to himself if the man could hear his heartbeat from across the table. He averted his eyes to the rest of the board members and cleared his throat. “You may have heard the rumors that I was selling my shares to this casino, and I understand that it must have raised a lot of questions. I’m here to tell you that all the rumors you’ve heard are true. I am moving temporarily to Shanghai for a new business opportunity, which will require my undivided attention. As one of the most powerful families in Macau, and one who has been most persistent in their offer to acquire my shares in the casino, I have decided that this part of my father’s legacy would be safest in the hands of the Arbatovs.”

A small commotion erupted at the table, and Fei Long had expected as much. None of them had ever liked working with the Russians, and most of them didn’t care to hide their dissatisfaction over the news, even while Mikhail was in the room. The man himself, however, was still leaning unaffected in his chair. If anything, their disapproval had added to his amusement.

“It has been done,” Fei Long announced firmly to quiet down the crowd. “I’ve signed the papers yesterday. With 65% of all its shares, Mr. Arbatov now has control over the casino and all its subsidiary businesses. Should you feel uncomfortable with this arrangement, please feel free to sell your shares to Mr. Arbatov and find your way out.”

The oldest of the board members, his father’s old acquaintance, was the first to walk out of the room with a series of not so subtle insults aimed at Fei Long for having sold his father’s business to a foreigner. The rest followed one by one with similar opinions. At that point it no longer matter to him. Without a successor of his own, there wasn’t anyone else he trusted more than Mikhail to run the casino. The Arbatovs owned three other casinos in Macau — among countless other businesses — and to say most of them were a success would be an understatement.

Soon after Fei Long found himself being left in the room with just Mikhail and a few guards to finish handing over the casino deed. The silence that fell upon the room then brought back into his mind images of the time he’d spent in prison, alone in his cell with nothing but memories he had wanted to forget and time he would do anything to turn back. It was somewhat different then, with Mikhail in the same room, he was imprisoned with painful memories he wanted to keep, and someone he could touch and take back but mustn’t. It was like seeing water in the desert when he was bound, hand and feet. After all, Mikhail had become what he needed to survive, and now he had to learn to survive without him.

Dismissing the guards in order to give them some privacy, Mikhail rose to his feet and walked towards him. Fei Long took a deep breath as he willed his heart to stop pounding so heavily against his ribcage. Every step that took the man closer felt like a time bomb counting down to zero. Soon enough Mikhail would be here, standing close enough for him to reach out and touch, and Fei Long could still find no strength to hold himself back, not with certainty. He looked down at the papers on the table and occupied himself with rearranging them, as if it would give him time to gain what he needed to confront the situation.

The footsteps ceased close to where Fei Long stood, and he gathered his control and looked up. At an arm’s reach away, Mikhail stood and looked at him with undivided interest, filling the room with the kind of silence that would make anyone uncomfortable in their own skin, as if the rules of society didn’t apply to him. It was one of Mikhail’s bad habits that Fei Long had never found out if
he’d done it consciously to manipulate people or if he was just being himself — an entitled prick who thinks everything and everyone exists for the sake of his enjoyment.

Oh, but you love me this way, he used to say whenever Fei Long reproached him about the issue. Mikhail was right. He’d loved every bit of it, from his unashamed honesty when he’d revealed his dishonest—sometimes unthinkable—actions to the pure arrogance on his face as he said those words.

“Looks like there’s going to be a tough time ahead of you.” Fei Long broke the silence that felt as heavy as the weight in his heart. The distance between them felt like a world away, when there used to be none. Mikhail had never stood that far from him. He was always indecently close, and his hands had always found themselves on him, intentionally or by accident. Why are you standing so far away? There was a voice within him that constantly asked, despite his efforts to chase it away. Why are you not touching me right now?

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” Mikhail replied, his eyes never moved from the man before him. “Shanghai, huh? Feodora didn’t tell me you were moving.” As the one who handled the transfer of ownership, per Baishe’s request, she had only told him that after their numerous efforts to get a hold of the deed, Fei Long had finally agreed to sell them his shares. The woman had refused to tell him anything else, under the pretense that she lacked the insight to their business in China. He wondered if she’d realized that he’d lost his memory, not his intelligence.

“I’m bored with Hong Kong,” Fei Long forced himself to smile. Stop me. Tell me to stay.

“Shanghai is a beautiful city, plus it’s a gold mine right now,” Mikhail said casually. “It’s a good choice. Good luck.”

Good luck. Fei Long found himself gripping the documents in his hand harder as he felt the ground underneath him disappear at those words. It was the reality he had to face. This is the world that he has to live in now — the one where Mikhail looks at him as a stranger, the one where Mikhail had no problems letting him go.

It was what he wanted, wasn’t it? For Mikhail to set himself free, to see the man start over without him in his life. Everything was going as he’d planned, and yet Fei Long felt like he was drowning in a pool of mud. Pull yourself together, he told himself. He picked up the deed and offered it to the man who would soon walk out of his life, and it felt like taking a knife to carve out his heart with his own hand. “Yours, I believe.”

“Give it to me some other time,” Mikhail said, keeping his hands tucked away in his pockets. “You look like you could hold on to it a little longer.”

It’s not the deed I want to hold on to a little longer. “I don’t trust anyone else to do this for me.”

“Give it to me yourself, but some other time.”

“Why?”

Mikhail smiled. “So I get to see you again.”

Fei Long clenched his teeth at the way those words crushed something within him. There were times when he’d frown at those flirtatious remarks and did what he could to avoid them. To hear it again was like driving a stake through his heart. It was being reminded that everything truly had been lost — everything that once belonged to them. Don’t flirt with me, Fei Long felt like throwing it in his face. Don’t look at me like I’m a complete stranger. But he was a complete stranger. To
Mikhail, he had become just that — an interesting face in the crowd.

You used to hold me, and tell me you’d never let me go.

“You really don’t remember a thing, do you?”

“No.” Mikhail shook his head before giving him a slightly embarrassed smile. “I’ve said that line to you before, haven’t I?”

Too many times. Dozens of pickup lines, hundreds more of flattery, thousands of words that tugged at his heart relentlessly, all gone like it had been a dream. And now he had to wake up to the world without them. “What makes you think you have?” He didn’t want to lie, but there was no way he could’ve answered that question without risking its consequences.

“Because I’ve lost two years of my memory, but I haven’t forgotten who I am,” he replied in a matter-of-fact kind of tone. “There is no possible way that I could’ve stopped myself from flirting with you at every single opportunity.”

Fei Long didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry at that statement. Mikhail had never had the slightest ability to control himself when it came to flirting with him, from the very first day they’d met to the last time they were still together. It was Fei Long’s main reason for selling his shares and moving to Shanghai. As long as he remained in Hong Kong or Macau, the chance of them running into each other like this would be too likely for him to prevent. It would be good for him too, to keep his head clear and the bond between them cleanly severed, if that was in any way possible on his part.

“You never could,” Fei Long said. “But then you’d never quite succeeded either.” It wasn’t all a lie—at least to Mikhail. Right up to the moment before he’d lost his memory, the man had never been convinced that he had.

“Hadn’t I?” Mikhail’s eyes focused on Fei Long’s face, his expression suddenly turned serious. “Why do I find that hard to believe?”

Because it’s not true. Fei Long bit his lip as he remembered what Feodora had told him. A part of Mikhail still remembered, and just now he could see the distress in the way Mikhail looked at him. It was time to walk away and close that book Mikhail was about to open, now and for good.

“Because you presume too much, you always have.” Thrusting the deed upon the other man’s chest, he forced it to be taken. “Goodbye, Mr. Arbatov,” he said before heading towards the door. The longer he stayed, the harder it would be for him to leave.

“Mikhail,” the man said from behind without moving from his spot, without trying to stop him. “Call me Mikhail.”

Fei Long stiffened at the way he said those words and what it implied. Mikhail wanted to know how it sounded from his lips, to hear how well it rolled off his tongue. It wasn’t going to happen. “What does it matter how I call you? It’s not likely that we’ll see each other again.”

The door felt heavy when he closed it behind him. Leaning his back against the polished wood, Fei Long allowed himself to remember the presence of the man standing on the other side of the door one last time. From now on he had to learn to live without this, to live without him. Deep down he knew it wasn’t possible. He had grown too accustomed to it, and like Mikhail, a part of him would always remember.

I will always remember you.
The cool night breeze caressed softly through his hair. Above the horizon, the full moon hovered brilliantly in the distance, casting its mesmerizing reflection on the gentle waves of Victoria Harbor. It was a spectacular view from the penthouse, and on a night like this Mikhail would be outside, on his lounge chair by the pool drinking something he’d just invented because he needed something new.

From the outdoor speaker, a hauntingly sweet melody played. Fei Long closed his eyes as he allowed his mind to wander off somewhere not so long ago; when *Moonlight Becomes You* was played, and the night was just as beautiful, if not more.

*Perhaps I’d just strategically put it on to seduce you because I know you like jazz.*

*How many spies did he have in Baishe?* Fei Long wondered. How many things did Mikhail find out and made sure he remembered, just to get him to come here, standing on this platform, sharing this million-dollar view?

*The moment I give in to you, you’ll find yourself on a plane back to Moscow for good.*

He remembered saying those words, and there were times when he was sure it would happen. But Mikhail never did, he never could.

Fei Long rubbed his fingers on the small piece of jewelry in his hand, feeling the smooth, delicate gold surface that used to rest on his chest. He’d taken the pendent when he cleaned out his belongings from Mikhail’s villa. It was the only thing that had brought him back into those arms time and time again, the only thing that had held them together despite everything that had tried to tear them apart.

*I belong to you, and you alone hold the key to my heart.*

Mikhail still wore the bracelet the last time he saw him, but that promise wasn’t true anymore. The bond had been placed upon him without his knowledge; one that had grown into something precious and irreplaceable over the years, had now been reduced to nothing. Without both sides understanding its meaning, the pendent was just an old piece of jewelry, useless and incomplete.
All it would do was hold him to something he could no longer have, to the man who would never be here, to memories that would soon turn into a dream that was never meant to come true.

Fei Long’s grip tightened as he tilted his arm back, aiming somewhere in the dark waters of the harbor.

“Before you throw that away, I’d like to hear how you got it.”

The deep, resonating voice that sounded from behind made his limbs freeze on the spot. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, calling upon his own strength before looking over his shoulder. Mikhail was standing by the patio door, leaning on the black frame, looking at him as if he’d been there for hours.

“What are you doing here?” Fei Long asked, his voice broken from the lump that suddenly solidified in his throat. He had made sure the penthouse would be empty and undisturbed when he’d asked Feodora if he could spend his last night in Hong Kong here. He was supposed to be alone— Mikhail wasn’t supposed to know.

“She’s not the only one with spies in the family.” Mikhail stepped closer to him, pausing to stand by his side as he fixed his gaze somewhere in the distance. “It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?” He said.

“Did I use to bring you here?”

From the look in those eyes, Fei Long could tell it was too late for lies. The very fact that he’d requested to be there, in Mikhail’s personal space, needed no further explanation. “Too many times,” he replied. Too many times they had been there together, lingering by the pool until late at night, talking, fighting, dancing, and being in each other’s arms. He wished he could have told Mikhail these things, but what good would it do if he couldn’t feel it?

They stood there in silence for a while, before Mikhail glanced at his hand and the object it was holding, and Fei Long began to regret his decision to be there in the first place. He should have just let it go, walked away, and never looked back. Being there, with Mikhail by his side was only going to make it harder.

“I gave you that pendant,” Mikhail said. It wasn’t a question, but a statement that the man was convinced to be true.

The lump in Fei Long’s throat grew at those words, and he couldn’t find it in his heart to lie. Stretching out his palm, he looked at it for the last time before dropping it in Mikhail’s hand. It was time to let go. “By mistake, I’m sure.”

Mikhail’s penetrating eyes looked at him then and Fei Long found himself unable to look away. Perhaps he knew it would be the last time he would get to see that face, or he was just waiting—hoping—for something to appear in Mikhail’s memory. Just one conversation they’d shared, one word whispered. Or one moment, even for a second, that belonged to them would be enough. He would walk out of there, taking just that much with him, to keep, to hold, to treasure for as long as he was still breathing. One.

Mikhail’s lips parted a little, as though he’d just realized something important. His blue eyes focused on the other man as he reached over to touch Fei Long’s cheek. “I loved you, didn’t I?”

Those words tore apart something within him that could never be mended. It was the cold, hard truth he had to swallow. Mikhail did love him, just not anymore. Swallowing the tears he was refusing to shed, Fei Long clenched his fists as he forced himself to smile. “It was just a fling, nothing more. Goodnight Mikhail,” he said as he turned away, heading for the door.
It was just his name, one he heard every single day. But from Fei Long’s lips it did something to Mikhail that he couldn’t quite comprehend. His skin pricked at the sound; suddenly an unquenchable need surged through him like an electrical current that spread quickly from limb to limb. Like instinct, his hands reached out for the other man, and in a rush of unstoppable desire, he pulled the slender body close, somehow knowing that it would put an end to his craving.

“Don’t--” It was the only sound Fei Long could make before hot, greedy lips captured his and threatened to devour him whole. Breathless and shaken, he pushed himself away in an attempt to escape. The contact pried from him every restraint he had, demanding that he bare it all in the open, to strip him naked from the layers he’d placed between them.

“Don’t…” Fei Long could hear his protest fading away; somewhere between the kisses that burned his skin like fire, and the beating of his heart that pounded heavily against his ribcage as Mikhail pressed himself closer, until there was no more space left between them. In that moment he could feel it all collapse and crumble to pieces — the control he was suppose to have, the strength to set himself free, the will to do what was right despite the constant call of his heart. For one last time he wanted to feel it again, the way his body was wrapped so closely in the warmth of Mikhail’s embrace. Once again he could feel himself drowning, sinking into the bottomless depths of those sapphire eyes that saw only him. He prayed then, that he would never have to wake up; for this dream to never end.

***

*But dreams always end and tomorrow always come.*

Fei Long stood over the bed as he dressed himself in whatever was left of his shirt, taking care not to wake the man who was sleeping soundly on the far side of the bed. It wasn’t the first time Mikhail had ripped his clothes apart just to touch him a few seconds sooner. The man had never had patience when it came to sex, but it was why Fei Long had found himself addicted to his touch. To be with Mikhail was to be wanted, needed, to the point of suffocation. Against this man he could never win, physically or emotionally.

He picked up a cufflink that had fallen on the floor, and reached over near his pillow to pick up the other. Fei Long paused as Mikhail shifted his weight on the mattress and rolled onto his side, facing him. His eyes were still closed when his hand took hold of Fei Long’s wrist, pulling it back softly.

“Don’t go,” Mikhail murmured, his eyes blinked a few times to adjust to the light.

Fei Long smiled. How strange it was, that just yesterday he’d wished with all his heart Mikhail would say the words, that when he did, it would be the one thing that stops him from leaving. But now that he’d said it, all it did was to remind him that it was time to go. “I can’t stay,” he said, looking at the man who was still lying on the bed, half asleep. He thought how strangely handsome Mikhail looked with his post sex hair—it made him want to run his hands through it for hours.

“Why?” It was a casual question. Mikhail didn’t get up as he asked. He just lied there, looking at him adoringly, as if it had been one of those mornings when they had hung around lazily in bed until noon.

_We could have had more of them_, Fei Long thought, if only he hadn’t made himself too busy to stay, if he had known what he'd had before it became too late.

“Because your memories may return,” Fei Long replied as he seated himself on the bed, reaching
over to run his fingers through the soft curls. It was a good morning, and he didn’t feel like keeping secrets or coming up with any more lies. After all that Mikhail had done for him, he thought he had owed the man at least that much.

Mikhail took his other hand, spreading it out with his, and began to fondle his fingers like a child playing with his favorite toy. “I want to remember you,” he said, the words hummed gently in his throat in a dreamy way.

Seeing their fingers intertwined reminded Fei Long how much he used to love the roughness of Mikhail’s hands, how they scraped lightly on his skin and made every touch feel so permanent. He could do this all day, caressing those hands.

“It would only give you pain,” he said. If Mikhail only knew how happy he looked at that moment, he would understand the true meaning of his words. It wasn’t easy for him to swallow, when all he wanted to do was to put that carefree smile on Mikhail’s face again and again, but he only seemed capable of doing was the exact opposite. Everyone was right-- his existence was a curse that destroyed everything it touched. But he wouldn’t allow it to hurt those he loved anymore, especially Mikhail.

“It’s only pain,” Mikhail replied, casually, and obviously without thinking. He was just like that-- always diving into temptation nose first, without thinking of the consequences. It wasn’t Mikhail’s style to be safer than sorry. The man would rather die living to his heart's desire than live a long time hiding behind a rock. Fei Long had always known this-- he had loved Mikhail for it-- but to live with its price was a different story.

“You’ll fall, harder than you’ve ever fell.” He couldn’t go through it again, seeing Mikhail drive himself so close to death, watching him wake up in the middle of the night by those wretched nightmares.

“Then catch me.” A playful smile appeared on the ruggedly handsome face as he spoke, his hand wound tight around Fei Long’s as if to make sure he could not get away.

Fei Long wondered how Mikhail had made it sound so easy, as if it were only a matter of will, as if he could never fail. He reached over to touch the bandage on Mikhail’s temple. The last time he’d tried had proven it all wrong, and the evidence was still there, wrapped around his head like a reminder of his failure. He would never forget the sound of that gunshot, and how it felt to lose him, even if it had been only a few seconds, even when it had turned out to be untrue. “You’ll die because of me,” Fei Long said, his voice broken from the images it brought back into his mind. It was something he could not live with, and a risk he could not take.

Mikhail took the hand that lingered guiltily on his wound and planted a kiss on the curve of his palm. His hot, gentle breath brushed against the back of Fei Long’s fingers as he spoke softly, “I’ll die without you.”

Why do they always come so easily, those words that tear down my walls in an instant, Fei Long held his breath as he thought. It was torture, hearing him say it, feeling the gentleness that Mikhail showered upon him like he had been born to do just that and nothing else, knowing that he could not stay. “Don’t make this any harder for me than it already is. You don’t know what you’re walking into.”

“I know these hands.” Mikhail looked up at him, reaching over to caress his cheek softly with his thumb. “I know the taste of your lips, the scent of your hair, the softness of your skin. I crave them like they were a part of me. I crave you like I’ve never craved anything in my life. I know this. I can’t survive without it.”
Fei Long found himself leaning into Mikhail’s touch knowing it was wrong, knowing it had to stop. How was he supposed to leave when everything felt so right? “You will get over it, sooner than you think.” He hoped it would happen, even though to him it simply wasn’t a possibility.

“I know what I want, Fei Long, I always have,” Mikhail said with a hint of irritation in his tone, his brows narrowed. “If you think running off to Shanghai would stop me from getting what I want, then you don’t know me well as you think you do.”

“Understand,” he added, “that I will chase you down to the ends of the Earth if you run. Either way, we’ll end up right here. You might as well save me the trouble.”

Do I know Mikhail? Fei Long couldn’t help asking himself that question. How many times had he pushed the man away, just to see Mikhail force himself back in, refusing to let go at whatever cost? It was who he was, and deep down Fei Long should have known nothing he could do or say would make a difference. They would end up exactly where they’d started, with Mikhail chasing him, barging his way in, and rounding him up by some unspeakable methods until he ended up in those arms.

“You persistent bastard,” Fei Long said as tears began to pool in his eyes. Somewhere along the way he’d completely forgotten, that against this man, he could never win or escape. Little by little Mikhail would make him bend to his wishes, against his will, and against all reason. And at that particular moment, Fei Long could find neither will nor reasons good enough to resist him.

Pushing himself up on the bed to sit next to him, Mikhail cradled his face in his hands. “Stay,” he said, this time in the tone that felt as lasting as a confession. “Stay with me. It will be ok. If you don’t want me to know something, I won’t ask. If you don’t want me to remember, then I won’t ever have to remember.”

It would be ok if Mikhail doesn’t. They could just start over again, carefully. Whatever had been lost may be completely gone if they try. But could he live with what it also implied? “That means something else too, doesn’t it?” Fei Long said, his voice coarse and broken. He didn’t know where the tears had come from, but they rolled down his face and he couldn’t stop them, no matter how hard he’d tried. “You will never remember me.”

The hands on his face held him tighter, pulling him close until the bridge of their noses touched. Mikhail caressed his cheeks as he leaned closer to kiss away the tears, his lips hot and tender against his skin. “Then tell me,” Mikhail whispered. “Tell me everything I said, everything I did, everything that made you laugh, everything that made you smile. Tell me, everything I did for you and with you.” He paused and lifted the beautiful face up to look at him. “Stay, and I will do it all over again. I will love you all over again.”

I will love you all over again.

Fei Long closed his eyes to the sound of something that suddenly came crashing down inside of him. He cried he’d never cried before in his life, as if tears he’d refused to shed before had come pouring down all at once. It wasn’t what he wanted to do, but if there was anyone who could remove the weight he’d placed upon his own heart and hold him up so high, it was Mikhail.

“I’m alive, Fei Long. Right here, right now,” he said, running his hands through the silky black hair. “For every memory I’ve lost, I have a lifetime to make new ones. We have a lifetime to make new ones.”

It was true. Deep down, he knew Mikhail would do everything he said, every word of it. Mikhail was right, they had a lifetime to get to know each other and make new memories — ones that
would be remembered for as long as they lived, as long as he was right here, with the one person who had always been his heaven on Earth, from the very first time he’d been held in these arms. They were wrong, all wrong. His existence wasn’t a curse— it was a blessing. Everything that had happened had led him here, right where he belongs. “What did I ever do to deserve you?” Fei Long looked up and did his best to sniff away his tears.

Mikhail didn’t answer. He simply smiled and stretched out his palm. “Give me the pendent, I know you have it.”

Removing the key from his pocket, Fei Long couldn’t help throwing him a glare over an assumption that happened to be true. Mikhail could always read people like he was sitting in their minds; it was why he’d always been impeccable at manipulation. The man must have known that Fei Long never had the strength to throw it away from the beginning.

“Do you love me?” Mikhail asked.

It was a question Fei Long knew the man had always been afraid to ask, but now he could do it effortlessly. “Too much, and more,” Fei Long replied without a moment of pause. He knew that now. He was sure of it, as if it had been his sole purpose in life all along.

Mikhail placed the pendant around Fei Long’s neck and whispered softly in his ear, “I belong to you,” he said, “and you alone hold the key to my heart.”

The kiss that followed didn’t last long, but it would be remembered for a lifetime.


****************************************************************************** THE END ******************************************************************************

And now, ladies and gentleman, is the where you go back to the beginning and read it all over again. XD Happy CI Triathlon!!

****

Special Thanks

I know this is unconventional, but due to time we’ve spent together worshipping this pairing, I feel I owe you guys a few words.

First of all, thank you my betas, hsyang wherever you are, I will always treasure your comments and your beautiful writing, angel0399 for working herself to death to do all my edits even though she has about 100 different jobs to do (that pays). Thank you my best friends on lj, new and old, who were involved in this fic: doujinsangel, miershyk, trimethoprime, char_comet, delwynmarch, silke_chan, jelly_rie01. Alex (I will always remember you), and of course, my betas, for being there, sometimes with a whip to get me going, and never hesitating to throw tomatoes when I mess up. Thank you sunflower1343, without whose help I wouldn’t have survived writing Asami. To my translators in all seven languages, who had done a job I can never accomplish to help spread the love of this pairing all over the internet! To amazing VF authors, whose writing inspired me to start writing fan fiction for the first time and taught me so much over the years. To Yoh xFei fans who have been nice enough to open your heart to this possibility and allow me to take you on a ride. To the mods who had put up with my tantrums for the past 7 years (and I know that takes a lot of energy!). Thank you YA sensei for creating these gorgeous characters and leave me with so much to write.
Most of all, thank you my readers whether or not you have ever commented for allowing me to take you on a ride until the end even though it takes me so long to update each chapter. For every essay-length comments that are priceless to me, because of them I have discovered my strengths and weaknesses, as well as the realization that I can accomplish this seemingly impossible task. I must have said this a hundred times, but without your words, I may have dropped this a long time ago and leave it unfinished like everything else I’ve written. So thank you, and double thank yous for those whose comments exceeded the character limit (gosh I love those)! I am honored to be read by such amazing individuals. I will try to bring you more Mik x Fei short stories if you guys still want some more, and I hope that you will enjoy my original story I will be posting from now on. Until then, my dear Fei fans, please go bug the #$%^ out of thegreymoon for Dire Consequence, and delwynmarch for Rise.

Now if you don’t mind, please let me know what you liked about the story, who was your favorite, which part/scene(s) did you enjoy the most, and which you found most disturbing? This will help me improve my writing in the future and it’d be a fun discussion before we say goodbye, no?

*hugs all*

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!